

a MANA resource for principals and reps

agency sales[®]

JUNE 2024
\$12.97

Building a Rep Firm Johnny and Laci Davis

Group Tackles Single-Person
Agency Concerns

Principal Focus: MANAchat Takes
on Challenge of Finding Reps



Building a Rep Firm

BY JACK FOSTER

Talk to husband-and-wife Johnny and Laci Davis about their growing rep firm and the word that surfaces the most is “grit.” That shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise given the agency name. But it’s important to understand how they came upon that name and what it means as they continue to grow their agency.

In 2022, after a 16-plus-year career in the pool and spa industry, Johnny Davis, the agency’s CEO and co-founder, together with his wife Laci, made the decision to build something of their own.

According to co-founder and Chief Content Officer Laci Davis, before they even knew they were going to become a firm, the couple were influenced by a TED Talk presentation by Angela Duckworth, an American academic and psychologist, on the subject of “grit.” Laci maintains that they found themselves continually coming back to some of Duckworth’s words, in particular “...one characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success. And, it wasn’t social intelligence, it wasn’t good looks, physical health, and it wasn’t IQ. It was grit.” With that as the couple’s starting point, they knew whatever venture they chose, they’d have to have serious grit to even be in the game. And The Grit Game was founded.

For the first two months, The Grit Game was solely a

business consulting company. But after a manufacturer asked the couple to rep their products across the entire United States the company made a pivotal shift. According to Laci, “We certainly knew what reps did since so many had been calling upon us previously. We even had some of our reps in attendance at our wedding.”

Building a Rep Team

Armed with a knowledge of what services reps traditionally provided, the couple was faced with the challenge of putting together their own rep organization now on a national level. According to Laci, “From day one we were wholeheartedly dedicated to doing a good job for our principals because they believed in us so much. As a result, we began game planning with the philosophy that you ‘win in the draft.’ In order to be successful as quickly as we needed to be, we knew we had to hire a team of veterans, sales pros with not only the industry knowledge and the network to be turned loose, but with the value alignment



According to Laci, “We certainly knew what reps did since so many had been calling upon us previously. We even had some of our reps in attendance at our wedding.”

Johnny and Laci Davis founded The Grit Game in 2022.

“Even though we felt we had to grow overnight, we were extremely selective in who we started conversations with.”

to run their own territories remotely and still embrace the culture we were striving for.”

In order to hit the ground running, according to Johnny, “We already had years of experience and relationships in our industry, so we drafted our dream-team personnel list. Even though we felt we had to grow overnight, we were extremely selective in who we started conversations with. We only had one chance to get this right.” He continued that “Most of the people we approached had decades of experience under their belt. So, to say that more than a few were skeptical about coming to work for a new firm less than a couple of months old would be a pretty big understatement.”

Some of The Grit Game’s team echoed the skepticism that Johnny referred to when they described why they ultimately joined the agency:

- Gina Harris, vice president of business development, maintained, “I was hesitant about coming on board for

many reasons. It was a new company; there were concerns about security, financial stability, stepping out of my comfort zone and the unknown. Plus, I always said I would never work for an independent rep firm. Despite these hesitations, the allure of being part of something groundbreaking was compelling.”

- According to Michelle Elmers, senior accountant, “I would typically base an important career decision on the track record of the organization or how long it’s been in business. However, from the start, I could sense how The Grit Game was going to take off. I absolutely didn’t want to miss out.”
- Tony McBride, Pacific Northwest Regional Sales manager, noted that “I had one foot into retirement but the thrill of contributing to something new, special and exciting got to my head and my heart.”

Within the little more than a year that The Grit Game has been in business it has grown to more than 22 seasoned employees with 15 partnering principals, five of which are represented on a national level.

Today the agency describes itself as ‘So much more than a rep firm’ as it offers a wide variety of services beyond product representation. A visit to the rep’s website (www.thegritgame.com) lets visitors know that while it’s certainly a traditional rep firm, it also offers business consulting, an agency suite of services that includes Netsuite administration and development, website design and hosting, and full marketing services to anyone in the backyard leisure space who wants to grow their business.

The Grit Game also has a warehouse located outside of Huntsville, Alabama. That facility offers third-party logistical service for manufacturers, complete with a sprinter van for making local deliveries through their warehouse on wheels.

Rep Challenges

In the short time they’ve had their agency doors open,



The Grit Game’s mobile warehouse also serves to advertise their sister marketing company that serves the pool and spa industry.



Left to right: Gina Harris, Johnny and Laci Davis, and Tony McBride at the International Pool & Spa Show in Las Vegas, Nevada.



Thomas Flake (left) and Johnny Davis run a Gather Grill presentation at the Southwest Pool and Spa Show held in San Antonio, Texas.

The Grit Game has encountered many of the same challenges and concerns that all reps face, not to mention the challenge of starting a business venture on the tail end of a pandemic. Included in the challenges the agency met and overcame were:

- Covid — “It’s hard to build a business in a good economy,” explains Johnny, “but it’s exponentially more challenging in difficult times. Many of the companies we dealt with were still on an inventory freeze from Covid. We simply couldn’t get new products into our distributors. Looking back at what we had to overcome, however, made us much stronger as we continue to build our brand and get creative for our manufacturers.”

- Pioneering — On the subject of taking on lines when the manufacturer has no existing business in a territory, Johnny leans into the philosophy that these types of principals have to believe in true partnerships. “With a pioneering line, I negotiate higher commissions so our return on investment is viable. At the same time, when I get a line where there’s no existing business in the territory, I make sure I receive a commission advance explaining the costs associated with this kind of line and what it’s going to take for my team to champion it on behalf of the principal. Depending on the brand reaction to this logic, I can gauge a great deal on what it will be like to work with them and how serious they are when it comes to growing their business.”



“I’m always looking for synergy in the lines that I represent, which comes in the form of at least three cross-sale opportunities.”

- Potential principals — While explaining that his agency’s line card is getting full, there are still times when potential lines have to be considered. According to Johnny, “When I look at a potential principal there are a number of things for me to consider. For instance, I’m not sure I want to be in business with a company that doesn’t have existing post-sales expertise for when concerns come up. Another important consideration is what value their product line brings to not only my customers but also to my current manufacturers. I’m always looking for synergy in the lines that I represent, which comes in the form of at least three cross-sale opportunities. I can’t see us taking on a line where there is no cross-sale opportunity.” Laci adds, “Before taking on a line, just as we do with interviewing people we’re considering hiring for our organization, we use our initial discovery meetings to see if we have core value alignment. We’re choosing to keep a limited line card, so we value being just as selective on the lines we take as the personnel we hire.”
- Principal appreciation — *Agency Sales* magazine has made it a habit of asking MANA reps if there is anything they wish their principals were more appreciative of regarding what their reps do for them. When asked that question, Johnny Davis immediately responded with the desire to have more communication. “I believe that one of the greatest problems in the relationship between rep and principal is a lack of understanding of what the rep should and shouldn’t be doing on behalf of their principals. Ultimately, we need to educate our principals more on what the partnership means and how to be the most effective together. We believe both parties need to set proper expectations and provide the necessary resources for the other to be successful; both of which start with more intentional communication.”
- Future — While Johnny and Laci Davis are obviously pleased with how quickly and successfully their agency has

grown, at the same time Johnny maintains, “Our world is changing quickly. As a result, I don’t honestly know what we’re going to look like in the near future, much less in the long term, but we’re really excited about what it *could* look like. We keep adding services that our manufacturers express that they need in order to be more successful. Our staying fluid and striving to be their go-to partner for business growth is what’s fueling the fire of innovation and continued growth of The Grit Game. Looking down the line though, we have some major dreams to expand globally. I would say that in five years we’d like to have 100+ employees, with at least one rep working with us in all of the lower 48 states. At the same time, we’d like to have a presence in Canada, Latin America and Europe. Our brand is hot and it’s going to stay that way.”

- MANA and association membership — Visitors to The Grit Game’s website will see that the agency is a member of MANA, the Pool & Hot Tub Alliance and the Pool & Spa Association. Speaking to his belief in the benefits of association membership, Johnny Davis explains that “The rep industry is a fairly tight-knit profession and I believe in the value of reps helping each other. That’s why we belong to MANA and the other organizations — to learn from others. These organizations have helped us personally when it comes to how to build your business, how to protect your commissions, the value of joining and participating in rep councils, how to handle pioneering work and what to consider when writing contracts. But there’s so much more to learn from one another to make our profession and industry that much better as a group. With a bit of collaboration, and a healthy dose of grit, those playing the rep game can be poised for unparalleled success.”

MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.

Members of the Grit team (left to right): Gina Harris, Eric Wall, Johnny Davis, Laci Davis, Jennifer Hills, Jennifer Eschbach, Tony McBride, and Thomas Flake attend an event hosted by a principal.