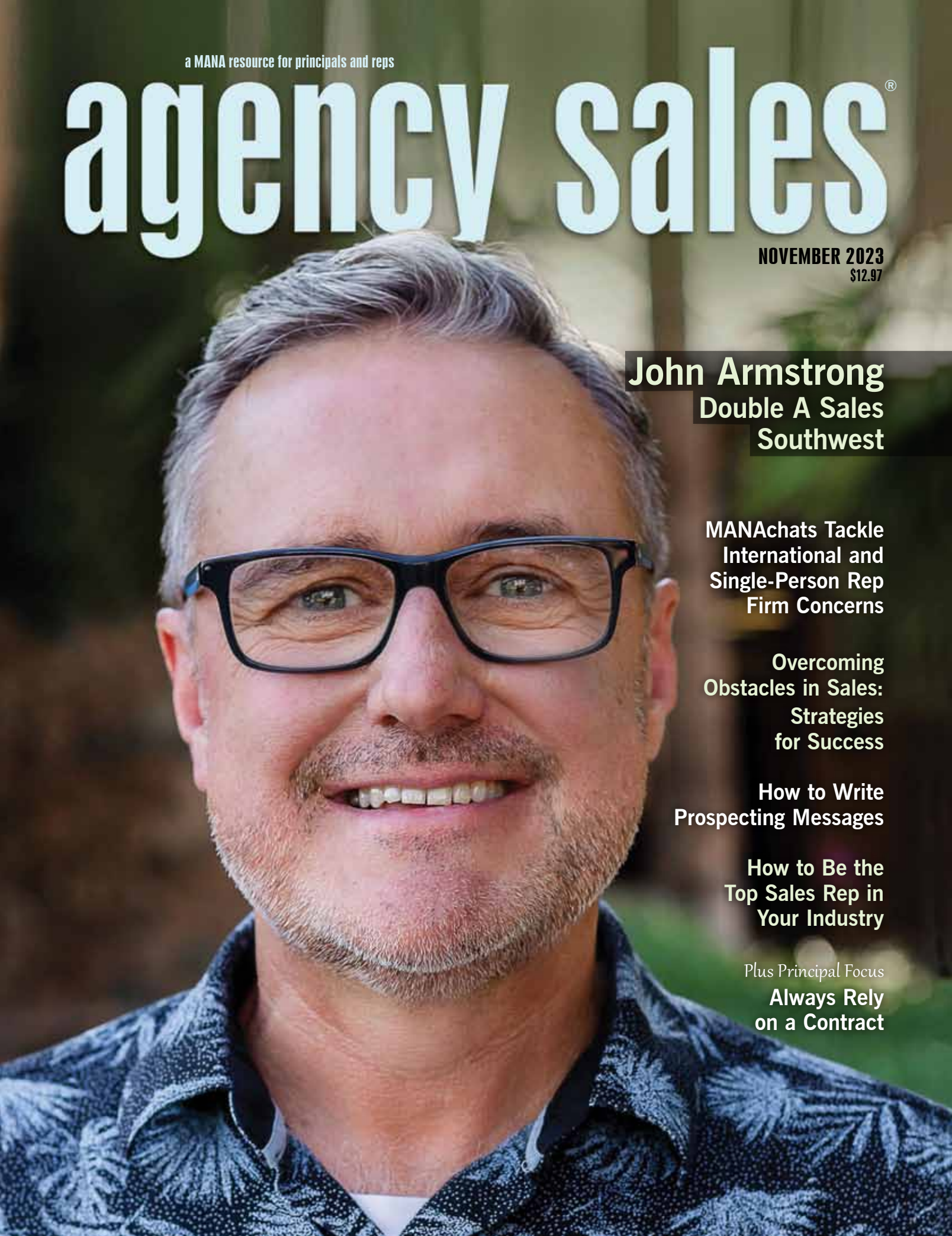


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A close-up portrait of John Armstrong, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a blue patterned button-down shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery.

John Armstrong
Double A Sales
Southwest

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Finding Warmth in the Southwest

BY JACK FOSTER

It was a desire to get out of the wet and cold of Oregon more than 20 years ago that led John Armstrong to make a move to Arizona and ultimately to open his own rep agency.

According to Armstrong, “Since he got out of the Navy in World War II, my dad was a plumber. He also was an apprenticeship instructor for many years. Following in his footsteps, I completed the plumbing apprenticeship program in 1991. It was at that time that I thought to myself ‘This is not a bad gig.’ I turned out of the apprenticeship program and got my journeyman card and worked in the trade until I started my own company, Armstrong Plumbing, in 1995. I continued working as a plumbing contractor in Oregon but after awhile, I simply got tired of working in the wet and cold of the Northwest.”

Following a visit with a friend in Arizona in 2002, Armstrong made the move to the warmer climate of that state the next year. “I loved the sunny weather and decided to relocate. I landed a job as an outside salesperson with one of the top manufacturers’ rep firms in the state. In late 2014, I received a phone call from a manufacturer that wanted to work with me, signed a rep agreement with them and started Double A Sales Southwest in 2015.”

With that as his start, today Armstrong heads the three-person operation headquartered in Phoenix, and serving Arizona and Nevada. Included in that three-person staff is his wife Dena who, like her husband, left one career to follow another. Dena, who was nominated for Business Woman of the Year in 2013, holds a Masters’ Degree in Education, an Associate Broker Real Estate License, has owned two retail stores, and is a seasoned entrepreneur. According to Armstrong, “Dena’s diverse background lends itself to representing some of the finest manufacturers in the country.” He adds that her experience speaking in front of large groups of people as well as her ability to identify different learning styles are especially valuable to the agency. “She conducts a number of presentations for engineers as well as handling all of our social media and CRM responsibilities.”

Rounding out Double A’s personnel team is Ron Ward, an experienced rep who can boast of more than 20 years in the business.



The Double A Sales Southwest team:

John Armstrong (above left) opened the agency in 2015 and now represents nine manufacturers in the United States.

Dena Armstrong, who was nominated for Business Woman of the Year in 2013 and holds a Masters Degree in Education, conducts a number of presentations for engineers as well as handling the social media and CRM responsibilities.

Ron Ward has worked as a manufacturers' representative in the plumbing industry for over 20 years.

Armstrong says that he's anxious to grow the size of the agency both in terms of adding personnel and principals. As to how he identifies prospective principals, he explains that he largely depends on referrals and networking opportunities through his membership in AIM/R and MANA.

Growing Up in Plumbing

As he views his previous experience as a plumber, Armstrong maintains that "I literally grew up in plumbing so it's all I know, and I love it. My experience as both a plumbing contractor and journeyman plumber in the field brings a unique perspective and expertise to my business. I understand the intense competition in the construction industry and the importance of doing things better, smarter and faster."

If the aforementioned offers a snapshot of Double A's history as an agency there's still plenty to occupy Arm-

strong's attention moving forward. As he looks to the future, and as he takes a look back over his career and the years spent with his own agency, Armstrong is asked if he would he have done anything differently. "That's a tough question. I think everyone has regrets when it comes to certain decisions and directions they decide to follow. I never received an instruction manual for running a rep agency so most of what I have accomplished has been on instinct — good or bad — and there has probably been both. I do have a couple of great mentors I bounce ideas off; but overall, my career experience has been rewarding, challenging and humbling. The fact is, we're still here and excited for the future!"

Then, in answer to a question related to his relations with manufacturers, Armstrong is asked if there's anything about what reps do that he wishes manufacturers were a bit more appreciative of. His answer is as follows: "How much

Armstrong checking an installation of one of their grease interceptors at the Footprint Center in Phoenix where the Suns basketball team plays.



“I literally grew up in plumbing so it’s all I know, and I love it. My experience as both a plumbing contractor and journeyman plumber in the field brings a unique perspective and expertise to my business.”

space do you have, LOL! I’m sure they have their opinions and they have heard it all before. The fact is we’re the boots on the ground and in the trenches. We eat, sleep, live and breathe with our customers. We are the ultimate ‘middle-man’ (in a good way and sometimes from our perspective, bad). We have to be the fireman, friend and counselor. We are the pioneer, diplomat and negotiator. We fund our retirement, cover the majority of expenses and switch hats 100 times a day with contractors, manufacturers, wholesalers and AHJs. And, we do it all a lot of the time by the seat of our pants on a 30-day contract. Having said all that, we love every minute of it!”

Continuing to look to the future, Armstrong admits that he shares many of the same concerns his fellow plumbing reps and reps in other industries face. “Just like our peers, we’re always concerned when it comes to growing and retaining lines while at the same time keeping our contractors and wholesalers happy.”

Surviving Covid

Among the “concerns” that he and other reps faced recently was that of surviving the impact of Covid — and its aftermath. “I think that the area where it affected us most was with our engineer customers. I’d say of all the areas that we deal with, they were perhaps the most cautious during the pandemic. While most of them worked remotely during Covid, the majority are back in the office today, even though there’s still a handful that continue to work outside the office. One thing we had to get used to was the use of Zoom and Team remote meetings. That

was certainly something that we had to travel a learning curve on; but it was a pretty fast learning curve, and we didn’t have much difficulty with it. As I look back, things began to open up quite a bit after just the first few months.”

As to whether there was any lasting effect from the Covid experience that he’s going to have to deal with in the future, Armstrong says that not much has really changed since pre-Covid. “Presently, we’re able to work a bullpen of engineers and get to see as many people as we want. Just as before, most of our business is gained face-to-face and we simply continue to promote our product features and benefits and customer service.”

Finally, when he’s asked whether he’s had any experience when it comes to receiving retainers or shared territorial development fees from manufacturers when it comes to conducting pioneering work, Armstrong notes that over the years he hasn’t had much success. “When we’ve taken on pioneering lines in the past, I’ve got to admit that I feel a little bit like Lewis and Clark during the exploration of the Louisiana Purchase. In general, you take on a line for a specified period of time for something like six percent. It was only fairly recently that I discovered the use of such fees from AIM/R and MANA. I think they’re a good idea. I’ll admit however, that I’ve only spoken to a relatively few manufacturers about them, and haven’t had any luck. Having said that, I think they’re a good idea.”

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

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