

Commit to training

Agencies can build a competitive edge

By Phillip J. Hildebrand

Many professional insurance agencies have entered 2011 with the goal of gaining a competitive advantage that will deliver immediate results in improved agent productivity, recruiting, retention and morale, while also properly managing liability. Often, one of the first areas considered is product: “What can we offer that isn’t available from other sources?” Agencies also may consider using compensation as a key differentiator and motivator.

While these options can improve results, I believe the long-term solution—and the one that can have the greatest positive impact across all areas of the agency—is a commitment to training. This commitment has been made even easier given the evolution in training strategies, processes and resources.

When looking to implement internal training programs, or to improve existing programs, “best practices” that factor in current science on how adults learn and retain information, I recommend making sure that the content is *relevant*, *real* and *readily available*, while giving agents a competitive advantage in the changing marketplace. Even minimal improvements collectively can deliver significant results for an agent and an agency.

Make it relevant

To fully capture the value training can provide, agencies must first make it immediately *relevant*. I believe that no matter what the subject, to be relevant, the content must enhance the agent/client value proposition.

I define the agent/client value

proposition as any activity that establishes the agent as a trusted adviser for the client. Relevant training would include content that enables the agent to more confidently provide:

- knowledge to assist the client appropriately in the decision-making process;
- insight to improve client understanding of the range of products providing solutions over a lifetime;
- timely assistance to questions or issues; and
- strategic client touch points that further the relationship and create referral opportunities.

All aspects of your training process should be easily recognized by your employees as being *directly* tied to this proposition and that, by applying the training, they gain an immediate benefit. If you can’t relate the product or business process training to this value proposition, get rid of it or rework the content so that it becomes relevant in today’s marketplace.

Make it real

The next component in creating value-added training is making it *real*. Making training real isn’t solely about the content being presented. What makes training real is how it is delivered.

When most people think of training, they envision an instructor-led classroom setting with a PowerPoint presentation and handouts, or perhaps sitting at a computer viewing a Webinar. While there is value in utilizing these methods to deliver training, to make it real there needs to be a hands-on, real-world component.

For example, when an agency provides training on its technology tool, the focus shouldn’t be on the technology. The training should be focused to show how the tool integrates with the sales process and delivers its agents a competitive advantage. Make it real by providing participants with training scenarios where they can enter information and navigate the system, find tutorials and explore and gain confidence with shortcuts they can implement immediately to improve the agent/client value proposition.

Outside of technology training, I believe the value of role-playing when training on new processes, products and concepts cannot be overstated. Role-playing is the best way to make new information, concepts, business processes and technology and tools stick with employees. As an added benefit, it allows participants to share experiences and best practices with each other; develop critical thinking skills; and problem-solve in a safe environment that builds confidence for real-world application.

Make it readily available

The last consideration when developing a training program to deliver value is factoring in learning styles and making it *readily available*. Learning styles are unique to each employee, so it is important to create and provide a variety of delivery channels and multiple opportunities to access the training.

Schedules are tight and agency personnel are busy, so the availability of training and resource materials should be 24/7 whenever possible. Consider offering self paced, e-learning

opportunities for repeat training exercises, reinforcement and refreshers. Also consider recording Webinars and Q&A sessions and posting them online for employees who were unable to attend.

One of the biggest challenges for agents dealing with multiple insurance carriers is managing the variations in underwriting approaches and guidelines. While agents usually receive some process-oriented training from the carriers they represent, agencies should strive to create a single point of access for carrier-provided online tools related to this critical function. Providing constant access to these carrier tools enables the agent to submit applications properly and manage the underwriting process and client expectations in way that builds strong relationships between the agent, the carriers and ultimately the agency.

Another option that is indicative of the evolution of training tools is the increasing number of specialty vendors and your PIA association that supply industry-specific materials and courses. There are several companies delivering agency specific, pre-recorded materials online and in a user-friendly format. This option is especially helpful for targeted training on specific topics, such as “How to effectively ask a client for referrals at the point of sale.” Agents can view the training before they leave for their appointments and refresh their skills. This front-of-mind awareness makes it more likely the agent will use the training and ultimately have success with the particular skill or information.

Creating and maintaining training programs that are *relevant, real* and *readily available* will deliver a competitive advantage—a key to the overall success of the agent and the agency. To help ensure what you are delivering provides value and meets the agent’s needs, build in a feedback loop and make adjustments as necessary.

Also, take advantage of training already available, either from the carriers you work with or within the industry. Supplement training with internal expertise—utilize experiences long-term agents have accumulated and, wherever possible, incorporate them into your training programs. And, don’t discount

the value of the “teaching moments” that occur every day and only require a couple of minutes of time, but can make a difference at the point of sale. Consider collecting these and using them for weekly staff meetings and for role-playing during training events.

As you create a culture that values training opportunities, you will see the shift in attitude from “*I have to go to training*” to “*I get to go to training*.” That positive attitude, and the culture that supports it, pays dividends across the agency. When the agency culture is focused on training and industry change occurs, such as national health-care reform, receptivity to new processes and products already is in place and new best practices bubble up easily and

can be communicated quickly for easier transitions.

The ultimate reward is that more quality recruits and experienced agents will be attracted to your organization. At the same time, you will build valuable partnerships with the insurance carriers you represent and establish an agency with a solid foundation that serves your community by meeting the evolving needs of your clients for many years to come. ■■

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