

AGENTS AND THE “NEW NORMAL”

By Tom Wetzel



THE PANDEMIC HAS HIT everyone hard though PIA agents have a way of seeing beyond the disruption to adapt to the new “normal.” Their thoughtful insights demonstrate both realism and resilience.

“The lockdown has amplified the need for us to deliver value-added risk management consulting beyond just the policy,” says Kurt Hetherington, President of James Greene & Associates of Sherwood, Arkansas. “We went from limited use of Zoom and Microsoft Teams to a thirty-fold increase. What has changed for us is the number of touches we can have with clients who are now used to online meetings where they were not before. And there is a benefit to being able share content on our screen with them.”

“I find Zoom to be a very effective way to communicate, and we will continue to offer that option in the future,” says Sam Evans of Evans Insurance in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. “As soon as you get more than four people, though, it becomes a chaotic mess unless you have a well-set agenda, and someone is facilitating. It works well for small meetings, and for some it’s a lot more convenient than driving to our office or having us visit them in their home.”

A FEW DOWNSIDES

Many see the benefits of online meetings but also recognize drawbacks, particularly in certain situations and with some clients.

“It just doesn’t feel the same as sitting across from someone,” says Brian Bernth of Laven Insurance in South Bend, Indiana. “We do a lot of face-to-face meetings and prospecting, especially with Medicare season coming up. It’s going to be a challenge dealing with older folks who don’t use the internet. Having said that, I don’t want to return to normal. I want to take this opportunity to streamline our operations and do more with less. Our staff working from home for three months proved we can do more with less.”

Hetherington adds “that online group meetings force a singular focus on a topic, which is not a bad thing, however with in-person meetings it’s easier to break away one-on-one to ask about the family or an unrelated business issue.”

Diana Moinot, Managing Partner of Houston-based Moinot Insurance Group says online meetings “are fine with established relationships. but what’s being lost are the handshakes, hugs, the additional reinforcement of the location of the meeting and the indirect activities associated with making the meeting, such as the smells and temperature. I will say, though, that going online enhances productivity time because it takes away drive time. I have hired a virtual assistant and implemented various automation tools to enhance productivity and am working on scaling at least half of my operations.”

To compensate for the weaknesses of online meetings, Moinot uses virtual backgrounds and being authentic saying “I am new at this” or “nobody is perfect at Zoom calls” to which many people can relate. Before calls, she raises her energy with deep breaths, jumping jacks or push-ups, then reminds herself on the purpose of the meeting and the outcome she wants.

NO CHANGES TO BOOKS

Many agents said they were not making changes to their books because of the pandemic.

“If anything, the pandemic has provided more new business opportunities as people have had more time to look at their policies and come up with questions,” says Jeremy “Rit” MacDonald, of Mid-Michigan Agency in Alma. “Early on it was extremely busy, and then in June auto reform started front and center in our state so that has kept us extremely busy.”

One principal in Indiana who wished to remain anonymous



said the agency is “rethinking the smaller monoline accounts and added that clients that need “hand holding” may not fit our mold moving forward,” adding that “we need to do better with use of tech tools already available.”

Bernth of Laven Insurance said that while the agency is not rethinking its book, “we are seeing loyal clients leaving over a few dollars savings. Price has never been such a factor as it is now.”

One fascinating insight on the convenience factor comes from Lynne McChristian, longtime consultant at the Insurance Information Institute and now the Director of Office of Risk Management & Insurance Research at the University of Illinois.

“We went to online learning in March and quickly learned that being effective online requires considerably more preparation. I miss the in-person interaction, but to my surprise, being available on Zoom appears to be a more encouraging environment for students to visit. They may not have trekked across campus to talk but they do not hesitate to drop by via Zoom call.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

“I see many on our sales team returning to normal as quickly as possible,” says Andrew Campbell, President, Worldwide Insurance Network, Smart Choice. “We will have travel and meetings with carriers but in our corporate office, I believe we will not ever return completely to all in office. What this pandemic has taught us is that a lot of high quality work can be done from home and many employees view that as a nice perk when possible so we will allow much more of that remote work after 2020 than we did before.”



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McDonald says he’s “seen a shift in people learning about our carrier’s websites and apps where they can conduct specific transactions. We always try to strike a balance between what’s there for the customer from a technological standpoint as well as what we can provide as a benefit to having an agent they can reach out to.

Steve “Woody” Woodworth, VP Southwest Region, Affordable American Insurance says that says that going forward, we need to ask ourselves honestly what more can we do to assist our current and prospective clients and at what cost? Convenience for the client must be a top priority?”

PIA is also looking ahead. PIA created a series of programs to provide more assistance to PIA member agencies and is working with state and regional affiliates and industry partners to assist them in the new COVID environment. Industry partners have stepped up with funding, including Progressive Insurance, National General, State Auto, and West Bend Mutual, enabling individual PIA members to use PIA programs and receive up to \$500 in reimbursements.

On Capitol Hill, PIA pushed for legislation to ensure emergency support for employees and businesses including independent insurance agencies. In a three-step initiative, PIA first supported bills to provide immediate relief, including the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (Families First) and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Second, the Association advocated the creation of a COVID-19 Recovery Fund, patterned on the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, to provide increased liquidity to affected businesses. Finally, PIA is engaged in work on developing legislative proposals to guard against future pandemics.

Finally, the most accurate, heartfelt statement on what to expect post-pandemic comes from the anonymous Indiana principal.

“Normal is whatever we choose to be our new process. Change is the only constant.” 

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