

Agencies Cite Tech As Key Growth Factor

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Published 11/9/2009

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They're located in Canada, Florida and a Mississippi Gulf Coast town still reeling from Hurricane Katrina. They have as few as 10 employees and as many as 250. One of the only things these three independent agencies have in common is success based on smart use of their automation systems.

In an informal roundtable discussion at last month's Applied Systems Client Network (ASCnet) TENCon, the annual meeting of the Applied Systems users group, three agency principals—all heavily involved in ASCnet—talked about their growth strategies and the central role automation plays in the process. These are their stories.

• **Treutel Insurance Agency Inc. (www.treutel.com):**

Based in the Mississippi town of Bay Saint Louis (population 8,000), Treutel Insurance is a third-generation, 10-user TAM agency.

Vice President Angelyn Treutel recalls how high-tech automation saved the business in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck the region—and the area still has not completely recovered from the disaster.

However, the fact that the agency runs TAM Online means they can literally conduct business from anywhere during a disaster—a key element in the business's survival beyond Katrina.

Treutel's high-touch method of customer contact includes the ability to chat live with customers online via the LiveChime Internet link. The agency also maintains a strong social media presence through Facebook and Twitter, further enhancing its ability to deliver its local brand to a global audience.

Technology enables the agency to maintain a high level of profitability and provide superior service to meet the ever-increasing customer demands of speed and convenience, Ms. Treutel said.

Ms. Treutel is actively involved in promoting agency automation, chairing the Agents Council for Technology (ACT)—launched and supported by the Independent Insurance Agents and Brokers of America—and co-chairing the Retail Agent to E&S Market Joint Industry Initiative.

She is also past president of the IIABA affiliate in Mississippi and past chair of the Southern Agents Conference Technology Committee, and is a regular speaker on real-time technology, social networking, workflow efficiency and disaster preparedness.

• **Brightway Insurance (www.brightway.com):**

Founded six years ago by brothers David and Michael Miller—with only David having had an insurance background—this Jacksonville, Fla., insurance retailer used a franchise business model to grow from a single office to more than 55 locations throughout the state, said Michael Miller, chief operating officer and co-owner.

Today, Brightway has more than 250 associates in the agency. The Brightway model allows all retail offices to focus on sales and building relationships, while all other

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aspects of the agency are centralized in the corporate office.

All retail locations are staffed only with producers—no customer service representatives, receptionists, accountants, renewal processing, or other non-sales functions. These tasks are handled at Brightway's corporate office, which provides "quicker, more accurate and value-added services than any of the locations could have provided if they were set up as a traditional agency," Michael Miller said.

The business began when the oldest Miller brother, David, purchased a Nationwide agency and later went independent. In that time, Michael has overseen the new technologies, centralized service center and unique processes that differentiate Brightway in the Florida marketplace.

Michael's background in sales and technology inspired him to apply what he learned to the insurance model. Before launching Brightway, he worked in ADT's national marketing center in the Affinity sales group; with Cendant Mortgage doing the outsourced mortgage business for Merrill Lynch Credit Corp.; and was partners in a mortgage brokerage business, which he left to launch Brightway.

Brightway uses Applied's TAM Online agency management system which, coupled with the agency's 120 carriers, enables the agency to compete with the direct writers on their own turf. With 90 percent of its business in personal lines, the retailer offers its customers a full range of insurance products and prices. The result is a 93 percent retention rate and aspirations to take the Brightway business model national.

Because Brightway provides franchisees with a turnkey operation—everything they need to run their businesses—automation plays a critical role. Using a combination of Applied Systems technology, integrated desktop faxing, Web site integration, comparative rating software and VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) telephony makes this possible, Michael Miller said.

• **Insurance Portfolio Inc. (www.insuranceportfolio.com):**

This 83-year-old, third-generation brokerage, based in Toronto, Canada, is co-owned by Chris Gory, and is a 32-user TAM agency. Mr. Gory worked for Applied Systems as an early WinTam support technician before making the move in 1997 to his in-law's property and casualty insurance brokerage.

In 2000, the brokerage spun off its employee benefits department into a separate company, and Mr. Gory became owner and president. Four years ago, his wife and brother-in-law bought the p&c brokerage from their parents, and the owners decided to expand the businesses to several Canadian provinces.

Over the past two years, Insurance Portfolio has started expanding further across Canada. The brokerage also is increasing its program business through affiliations with the Canadian Franchise Associates and engineering groups, Mr. Gory noted.

None of this growth could have been possible without automation, which has streamlined workflows and integrated customer information across multiple lines of business. Even in a recession, the brokerage averages 93 percent retentions, has increased staffing, and has experienced increases in both premium volume and policy count in all but two months, according to Mr. Gory.

The real value of technology lies in its ability to free up users for true customer service, he said. "Social networking and other high-tech marketing techniques are great, but they can't replace the personal touch," added Mr. Gory. "Technology frees you up for that."

Laura Mazzuca Toops is Editor in Chief of *American Agent & Broker*, part of Summit Business Media's P&C Magazine Group, which includes *National Underwriter*.

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