

Mediating the Message

However, the receiver need not be present or aware of the sender's intent to communicate at the time of communication in order for the

act of communication to occur.

Sounds complicated, but this is accurate. In a heavily regulated industry like insurance, quality communication is imperative and often complicated. Omitted, misinterpreted or misplaced communication may have dire consequences for all involved.

For brokers, the challenge is significant. Various forms of communication come from all angles — staff, insureds, prospects, companies, vendors, competitors and so on. How to gather it, where to store it and what to do with it are important questions.

The average broker focuses on three primary means of communication: telephone, mail and face-to-face. Email is an emerging contender. The industry as a whole is not typically an early adopter of new technology. How many years have we been trying to solve the broker-carrier communications issue when the technology has long been available to do so?

BROKEN TELEPHONE

The scary fact is that consumers are communicating using means other than those used by the industry as a whole. For example, I recently re-

Consumers are increasingly communicating using methods not used by brokers and insurance companies.

Our digital economy, especially for consumers, is high-contact, multi-touch and often intrusive. Consumers receive between 246 and 3,000 marketing messages a day, depending upon the source consulted. Thus, it's important to know the different contact points and ways in which you have the greatest impact on your audience. How do you ensure you're communicating in a way that meets the recipient's expectations, breaks through the clutter and adds value?

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Wikipedia defines "communication" as a process whereby information is enclosed in a package and is channeled and imparted by a sender to a receiver via some medium. The receiver then decodes the message and gives the sender a feedback. All forms of communication require a sender, a message and an intended recipient.



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ceived my post-reform Ontario automobile insurance renewal in the mail. This was the first piece of communication I received from my broker since my last renewal. The paper-rich information package was generally vague and certainly didn't help advise me. [The language in the renewal notice was required by the provincial government, and was developed in consultation with

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reform stakeholders including insurers and brokers.] I opened the mail after the brokerage was closed, so I went online and Googled 'Ontario auto reform.' The first and only seller of insurance listed on Page 1 of the search result was RBC. A few others appeared on Page 2 (State Farm and Intact, for example), but my instant-gratification Google habits hardly ever take me past Page 1. My broker's Web site had no meaningful information either.

Here was a perfect opportunity for my broker to have demonstrated value as a trusted advisor. Instead I lacked meaningful communication, which in turn sent me researching elsewhere. A simple worksheet, invitation to a Webinar, personalized email, newsletter or phone call would have met my expectations and fostered trust with my broker.

According to a study commissioned by RSA Canada and posted on Canadian Underwriter's Web site, "nearly 70% of Ontario drivers do not understand the impending auto insurance reforms or how the reforms will affect their auto insurance coverage." Although this example is specific to Ontario, at claims time, brokers across Canada are likely to have heard: "I didn't know I wasn't covered." Insurance is complicated and consumers need to look to their brokers for guidance. Cultivating a trusted relationship will help keep the business from going elsewhere.

PICKING THE RIGHT METHOD

You may be thinking: 'We don't have time to contact all policyholders.' But I would argue, with the right technology, you could. Start by defining your communications objectives as they relate to your overall business strategy. To enhance retention rates, how often should policyholders hear from you and in what format? If you don't know what format, all you need to do is ask them.

Keal conducts an annual satisfaction survey in which we ask our clients where we are doing well and in which areas we might improve. Based on specific criteria, clients are contacted to discuss their survey answers. Honest feedback can sometimes be hard to hear. But in these conversations, trust is developed and learning happens on both sides. Over the past three years, satisfaction levels have increased significantly and spurred development projects as a result.

Next, adjust your workflows and configure your broker management system (BMS) to support your communications strategy. Use the client file to indicate each policyholder's preferred communication method; respond according to their liking. Purposefully gather and store the necessary demographic information and policy details to run reports that build meaningful campaigns. Send out reminders to clean fireplaces and woodstoves in the fall, Christmas scheduling reminder to high-end clients to cover potential new treasures or fire safety tips for Christmas trees. Use your BMS as your first tool for lead generation, run monoline lists and cross-sell umbrella policies for already-rounded accounts. But do so using the client's preferred communication method.

INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

Our consulting team works with successful brokerages across Canada to increase productivity. Although specific needs vary, often the challenges are incredibly similar. Many realize they could be doing things more efficiently but don't have the time or information to know where to start. Often there is a significant difference between what

management believes is happening at various levels within the brokerage and what really is. Internal communication strategies require planning and purpose, too. In a call-recorded environment, reviewing calls, coaching during calls and measuring productivity can bridge the gap between corporate policy and actual practice.

Technology should be an enabler and Canadian consumers are tech savvy. According to Statistics Canada, 80% of Canadians aged older than 16 (21.7-million people) used the Internet for personal reasons in 2009, up from 73% in 2007, when the survey was last conducted. According to Forrester Re-

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search, almost eight out of every 10 Canadians use social media at least once a month. More than 62% of Canada's online users are on Facebook, placing us among the most-frequent users in the world.

How easily will clients and prospects find you online? What about the next generation of consumers? They don't know a world without texting or social media. Between your employees and/or their children and friends, you could likely gather enough Generation Xs and Ys to conduct a focus group on their thoughts and expectations about insurance in general, as well as their preferred communication methods.

You'll probably discover they expect to do everything online without speaking directly to anyone, and likely after business hours. Finding a way to provide adequate guidance and coverage will

require rethinking many existing communication strategies. This is where online videos, social media presence and interactive tools may help.

For example, one broker, Staebler Insurance Brokers, has developed an online driving game to engage their Facebook visitors. This drives leads to their brokerage Web site. Online gaming is a \$15-billion dollar market. The average gamer is 25-44 years old. Fifty-eight per cent are male, 42% female. A gamer's annual income is between \$35,000 and \$75,000. Think of them not just as teenage boys, but rather prospects.

Focus groups can be revealing. Last spring, we invited 27 brokers from eight provinces to join 14 Keal employees for three days to discuss future developments of our BMS, sigXP. The results helped us validate and prioritize development projects based on user need, which greatly benefits our clients. This was also an opportunity for both sides to understand each other

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better. Critical enhancement requests from some brokers were useless for others. Peer-to-peer communication offered an opportunity to share best practices and a better understanding that one size doesn't fit all across Canada. This is especially the case with online adoption.

Integrating your Web site directly into your broker management system can not only provide prospects with real time quotes, but even 24/7 issuance online. Web traffic can be tracked using Google Analytics, a free tool, to measure online advertising return on investment

(ROI) based on page views or sales. Want to close the loop? Include voice recording or electronic signatures for completely paperless, straight-through processing.

As consumer demands evolve, so too will online 'self-serve' service for insureds. Pushing data from the BMS to the broker's secure Web site will allow consumers to access their information when they want it, and in their preferred format — and not just when the brokerage is open. The technology to do this exists now.

Traditional ways to communicate will not vanish anytime soon. My Dad will always call or visit his broker. I, on the other hand, would prefer to leverage technology to research and communicate with service providers at my convenience. In today's world, that could mean anytime or anywhere, from the convenience of my mobile device, and not just when their physical doors are open. ☰