

The Digital Agency of the Future Is Fast Approaching: Are You Ready?

Making Small Changes Today Can Transform Your Business in the Years Ahead

WORCESTER, MASS. — There are a lot of discussions about what independent insurance agencies may look like technologically in the next five years. Independent agents need to take steps to evolve their digital footprint today to remain relevant in the future, according to panelists at the SAN Group's annual business meeting.

The phrase "digital agency" means different things to different people. For some, it centers on social media, websites or agency management systems, while for others it revolves around tracking key performance indicators (KPI) or communicating with customers. The fact is, truly digital agencies encompass all of those factors, and agency principals and other insurance professionals need to understand what each of these things are and how to implement them in their agency, noted Matt Masiello, president and CEO of the SAN Group.

While he initially thought of digital as an umbrella term encompassing anything electronic, Paul Murphy, president of Paul T. Murphy Insurance Agency in Malden, Mass., now thinks of it as how he uses technology to manage and market his agency.

Chris McCarthy, owner of the Insurance Outlet in Laconia, N.H., has a broad definition of the term with three main components:

1. Creating a digital footprint for the agency, which means having a solid website, an active Facebook account and a Google profile, so the agency has an online presence. "When someone is sitting at home searching the internet for insurance, that is your business card. You need to exist digitally," said McCarthy.
2. Utilizing tools and technology to be more efficient. Technology can help free up more time for prospecting or servicing the existing customer book.
3. Making sure that all data are available at all times on all devices with the help of cloud computing.

"Technology is freedom. It increases efficiency overall, keeps you in touch with your customers and gives you a competitive edge," said Robert Maul, project manager at EZLynx in Lewisville, Texas. "The tools are there in agency management systems, you just have to know how to use them."

For carriers, digital is about the technology itself as well as processes, according to Julio Martinez, regional vice president, Travelers. For Martinez, a digital agency is one that is focused on improving operating margins, optimizing agency management systems to improve workflow and amplifying branding, marketing and sales efforts by leveraging social media. "Try to find out where there is leakage and where there are opportunities," he said.

Getting Staff Onboard

It can sometimes be a challenge to get employees to buy into and adopt technology. Murphy's tactic is to lead by example. He writes down the agency plan, sticks to it and expects his employees to follow it. "If I'm the only one doing it, that doesn't do any good. My staff needs to do it, too."

A digital native himself, McCarthy makes sure he knows what computer skill sets prospective employees have before he hires them. "Tools are out there and are built to be easy to use, so everyone — staff and clients — will use them." At McCarthy's agency, he and his employees use their agency management system and comparative rater, have collected email addresses for 80%

of clients, use a voice over IP phone system that converts voicemail into emails, post monthly blog content on the agency website, regularly post on Facebook, has a formal process in place to ask for online reviews, use Google analytics software for graphic design to make sure Google and Facebook posts look professional and use Google drive for shared documents.

Millennials and younger generations are both future employees and future clients, so older generations need to learn how to work with and adapt to them, noted Masiello. “If you bring younger people into your agency, they will help make your technology better. If your agency doesn’t have technology, why would someone who’s a digital native want to work there?” asked Masiello.

A major component of becoming more digital is making sure that data are being put into the agency management system. Masiello said the SAN Group is often asked to help value agencies, and one of the first things a buyer looks at for valuation is whether the agent is using the agency management system, how much data are included in it and if the data are accurate.

Three key performance indicators (KPI) that agency principals should be tracking are new business growth, retention and policies per customer, according to Maul. “The more policies you have per customer, the stickier that customer is. The more accounts you round, the more customers you retain,” he said. The goal of using agency management systems to their fullest is to increase efficiency and get a better return on investment, noted Maul. If agents have questions about their agency management systems, they should get in touch with their vendor, who can answer questions and/or offer tutorials.

Shifting to Self-Service

More customers are looking for self-service capabilities, either those offered by carriers or by the agency management system platform, noted Masiello. While some insureds prefer to do as much as possible by themselves, others prefer to receive the white-glove treatment. Many insureds fall somewhere in between these two categories,

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SAN Group President/CEO Matt Masiello moderated a discussion with panelists Paul Murphy, Julio Martinez, Chris McCarthy and Robert Maul.

according to Maul. “We have to play in all spaces, so we’re not going to tell you how to run your business, but we’re going to give your customers every option to choose from because we’re customer centric.”

It is okay to make the transition [to digital] slowly as long as agents recognize that they do have to move in that direction.

Carriers are finding that a growing number of insureds are enrolling in self-service portals. Travelers recently conducted a year-long study profiling 4,000 millennials. Travelers found that less than 40% of them want to transact business on the phone. They want other options, like self-service. In addition, they spend several hours every day consuming digital media, whether that be work, news, TV shows, games, etc. “That’s why it’s so important to be online. We’re trying to use data like this to build a framework to make sure we’re addressing strategic needs going forward,” said Martinez.

Over the past year, McCarthy’s agency made it a priority not only to collect insureds’ email addresses but to make sure he and his employees provide the addresses to the carriers to prep clients for self-enrollment. For McCarthy, having email addresses but not putting them into the carrier site created more work for his team when insureds called look-

ing for a copy of the declarations page or identification cards. “Technology is not there to replace us as the agent, but to help subsidize us and make us more efficient,” he said.

Although Murphy appreciates the technology and some of the self-service capabilities carriers are offering, he is reluctant to rush into signing up for all of it. His concern is that if agents hand over an increasing number of servicing responsibilities to carriers, it could create issues for both employees and insureds. He thinks it would make it more difficult to train young employees to become good agents if the carriers are handling tasks that they would traditionally have taken care of. In addition, Murphy said he respects the fact that his insureds choose to do business with him and thinks he and his staff should provide service to them personally.

According to Murphy, his agency fields 250 calls a day. “I know that handing them over to a service center would save me money, but I have a hard time with it. So, I’m going to take this slowly. Servicing is part of my plan. I also believe that every single phone call is an opportunity. We check that we have their email addresses, the number of policies they have, and we try to upsell them,” he explained. “I know I probably need to get there, but I’m not there yet.”

Masiello said it is okay to make the transition slowly as long as agents rec-

ognize that they do have to move in that direction. His motto has become execute today and evolve tomorrow. He explained that while carriers often get blamed for moving the industry in a certain direction, in reality, it is the customer that does it.

“We are one of the last industries that will become customer-centric. We can’t be the agent that the customer doesn’t want because they will go find the agent that they do want,” he cautioned.

Masiello thinks a service center can be an end to a means to help with the digital transition.

“Most of you don’t open at 7 a.m. and stay open after 5:30 p.m. Over time,

customers will want to do some level of self-service, so we have to provide different levels of services to start to develop that plan.”

Martinez agreed that agents have to do what is right for them at the right time; however, he noted that 25% of calls to Travelers service center occur off-hours — on holidays and over the weekend, so that is something for agents to think about.

Masiello added that as agents struggle with attracting new talent, call centers can help alleviate some of their staffing issues.

Knowing where to start can be one of the biggest challenges to adopting more

technology. It depends on where you are now digitally, according to McCarthy.

“Everyone needs an agency management system and to be doing carrier download. If you’re not doing that, that’s where you start. Everyone needs an on-line presence with Google reviews. Some weeks Google reviews are my number one producer. Work on that, then expand to SEO [search engine optimization]. Start small, do it consistently over time and watch it snowball and build,” he said.

“If you have the opportunity to enhance the customer experience while driving down operating costs and improving your margins, run to it,” said Martinez. ■

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