

The Key to Becoming a Digital Agency? Getting Started

There has been a big push for independent agents to become more digital in an effort to enhance the customer experience. With a wide array of choices to make when adopting technology, it can be difficult to know what to do; however, the most important part is simply to start, according to a panel of agents who took part in SIAA's IA Evolve virtual conference.

"It's not really important what company or solution that you're using — it's that you're working on achieving those things because every agency is different. There's no one-size-fits-all solution," said Aaron Sims, co-president and chief executive officer, Mountain Empire Agency Alliance.

In the last few years, Gordon Coyle, principal, the Coyle Group, said his agency has taken a "deep dive" into video, including proposal videos. They reach out to clients regularly outside of renewal season, with many messages embedded with video, to keep in touch. The videos are repurposed on social media, and Coyle is active on LinkedIn.

The Coyle Group has invested both money and time into growing its presence on YouTube. Coyle estimated that

approximately 30% of new business comes from YouTube and his website, and the balance comes from referrals.

Joel Dunham, president, Ovation Insurance, started working at the agency in 2009 after he graduated from college and was shocked to see that transactions all took place on paper. He set up the agency's first website and bought the business in 2016. During his first six months as president, he rebranded, bought a new agency management system and a rater, went paperless and changed every single agency process. He quickly proceeded to lose nearly all of his staff. "I would not advise that, but we got it done," he joked.

Ashley Mastowski, owner/agent, First Choice Insurance, embraced technology soon after she started her agency three years ago. Feeling as if she had to "do everything and wear all the hats," she turned to technology to help lighten her workload. "I was losing sales because I was paying bills or marketing and doing everything, so I just started, and it was a little overwhelming with all the really cool things out there."

She found a system that she liked and built processes around what it was capable of doing.

One simple tech tool that Mastowski particularly likes sends an automated text message to people whose calls she missed because she is on the phone. The text reads that she is busy with another customer but will call right back. She has received positive feedback from clients on it.

"When you're a one-man show and trying to grow, you need to find help. Technology can really assist with that without having to fork out huge payroll numbers," said Mastowski.

In addition, she encourages agents to use systems that have an open application programming interface, so they can communicate with one another to avoid duplicating work.

John Young, principal, A. Young Insurance Agency, was motivated to adopt new technology as his agency was growing. He joined a lead generation company to learn how to generate leads but soon realized that he needed to be able to track what was happening with them. That motivated him to contact a colleague who was well versed in technology and ask for tips on where to start. "Listen to what other agencies are doing. Go join an agency group on Facebook. Everybody wants to help ev-

everybody out. It's a huge collaboration. I've sat on many panels in groups where everybody wants to share ideas about what they've learned," said Young.

The road to becoming more digitally capable has its bumps. All of the panelists have made mistakes along the way, but that is to be expected when trying new processes. Dunham recalled setting up a cross-selling campaign for life insurance that was meant to send out a text, then an email follow up after a certain amount of time. When he launched the campaign, the texts and emails went out

simultaneously to every client. It created havoc for employees. Although he closed a lot of life insurance policies, he has not made that same error again.

"Even the mistakes can work out for you if you keep a good attitude about it and apologize when someone gets mad," said Dunham.

Young did something similar and, although it was embarrassing, he encouraged agents not to be afraid to make mistakes. "Just don't repeat them. That's the trick."

Regardless of which technology you choose, the key is to balance personal touch with automation.

"What we're seeing in our industry is huge competition from our own carriers that are marketing directly to our clients or prospects. We're seeing Insurtechs make inroads into our client base. Clients need help. They have questions. We have the answers. They have situations; we have solutions. When you can marry the two things together — the technology and the personal expertise — and deliver to the client, it's a win-win," said Coyle.■

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