

Must-Have Technologies and Tech Skills for Independent Agents in 2023

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Does your agency have a documented technology strategy heading into 2023? If you answered no, you're not alone. The "2022 Applied Digital Agency Annual Report" revealed that only about half (51%) of insurance agencies currently have one.

While it may have been okay not to have a digital strategy in past years, having one is now imperative. Agencies that implement and optimize a few key solutions will be well-positioned to improve efficiency, serve current customers and attract new clients. Those that don't may fall behind.

Let's look at the most common reason digital disconnects exist within independent agencies. Then we'll explore the must-have technologies and tech skills that should sit at the core of an agency's digital strategy heading into the New Year and beyond.

The Tech Skills Gap

When our team at SIAA asks member agencies about their current level of technology acumen, we get a wide range of answers. Some agency principals and staff are tech-savvy. Others need to improve their proficiency.

Agency owners don't have to be experts in every technology. But they should make sure their team has access to core

technologies and that they have the tools they'll need to optimize them.

This knowledge gap is often the biggest pain point for agencies, and it's sometimes caused by technology vendors themselves. While most do an admirable job of building high-quality solutions capable of transforming the way agencies do their work, some are lacking when it comes to training and support. That's why agency decision-makers should ask vendors direct questions about the level of training their staff will receive whenever choosing a vendor.

Top Five Tech Tools

One potential barrier that stops agencies from advancing their digital strategies is cost. While more advanced solutions, such as customer relationship management (CRM) tools, carry higher price tags, other essential digital tools are low cost or even free. And more expensive tools may pay for themselves if they can deliver efficiency gains and agency growth. Let's look at the top five tech or tech-related tools independent agents must have in 2023:

1. Create a Google Business Profile

Creating a Google business profile is 100% free, and it's one of the best ways to help current and potential clients connect with your agency. Google profiles help to

improve local search engine optimization (SEO). That means your agency will appear closer to the top of search results when people type queries such as "insurance agencies near me" into the Google search bar. For the best results, fill out as much of your Google profile as possible. Include a description of your agency's main offerings, your address, office hours, phone number and a link to your website. You can also encourage clients to leave a review on your profile, which will help build trust with your clients.

2. Utilize a Professional Website and Email Address

While this sounds like table stakes (and it is), there are still independent agencies without a website today. What's more, some agencies still use Gmail, Hotmail or AOL accounts to send business emails. And while those free platforms technically work, they can lead clients and business partners to believe you're unprofessional. Today, website hosting is a relatively affordable (\$20 to \$200/month) and essential expense for agencies of all sizes. Nearly every hosting company offers business email accounts, so you can begin sending emails that carry your agency's name and brand (@independentagency, for

example) and raise your level of professionalism.

3. Have and Use an Agency Management System (AMS)

You need a central place to organize and manage all of your policy-related data. An AMS solution will help you do just that. But simply having an AMS is only half the battle. The other half is knowing how to use it to make your business more efficient. A best practice is to establish standard operating procedures that will define the way your agency staff documents coverage, downloads data and reconciles data within your AMS. Establish these standard operating procedures before you start working in the system so you can avoid inconsistencies that could cost your agency money in the long run.

4. Utilize a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System

While your AMS hosts your policy data, your CRM system will house all of your client data. As such, your CRM may be more important than your AMS. That's because your CRM will help you retain current customers, engage new customers and form deeper relationships with your insureds.

While high-profile companies like Salesforce and HubSpot are CRM market leaders, most independent agencies will be better served by choosing a CRM that's purpose-built for the property-casualty industry. Look for CRMs designed to support the workflows you use on a day-to-day basis. Once you implement a CRM, establish clear policies to keep customer data reconciled, standardized and updated.

5. Employ Remote Work Tools

Whether or not your agency includes remote workers, you will still need several collaboration solutions to connect with your clients and business partners. Must-haves

include videoconference solutions like Zoom or Teams, digital (VoIP) phone solutions like RingCentral or 8x8, and e-signature tools such as DocuSign, RPost or Dropbox Sign.

You may also consider video proposal solutions such as Advisor Evolved and Forge3, which offer both website and video proposal functionality, or PandaDoc, if they can help you grow your book of business.

Choose and Implement Tech Wisely

Another common barrier to digital transformation for independent agencies is analysis paralysis. Agencies have thousands of solutions and hundreds of vendors to choose from, and they don't want to make a mistake.

If you reach this impasse, it's time to start networking with other independent agents who have shared your journey. Industry-focused technology and innovation conferences are an ideal place to start. So, too, are membership organizations, which connect peers with one another and help them solve common problems.

Another trend emerging industry-wide is brain-share events. These planned, invite-only events feature two-dozen or so industry leaders who spend a day or two focusing on one particular topic.

The bottom line is that the best source of information about digital transformation will come from people within the industry. The more opportunities you create to connect with other agency owners, ask questions and get referrals, the better the chance you'll have at forming a forward-thinking digital strategy.

Three other best practices for selecting solution providers and training agency staff:

1. **Hold your vendors accountable.** Understand the training resources

they will provide, and make sure they deliver.

2. **Consider a consultant.** Once you choose a solution, ask if there are additional third-party experts who can help your team get up to speed quickly so you can maximize your investment.

3. **Keep tech in its lane.** Technology serves agencies best when it helps owners work *on* their business not *in* their business. Hone your workflows before you implement new solutions so your AMS, CRM and other platforms will truly drive efficiency and serve your customers.

What's ahead?

While they're not a "technology," virtual assistants — independent contractors who provide specific functions to agencies — are rising in popularity.

In coming years, we expect technology vendors will begin perfecting integrated, end-to-end platforms that roll up AMS, CRM and other tools into one solution. Data platforms are also evolving and may hold future promise in helping smaller agencies punch above their weight class and get real-time insights.

No matter what the future holds, independent agents should prioritize their digital maturity in 2023 and beyond. By networking with other agents, sharing your pain points and brainstorming solutions, you'll create a digital strategy that will elevate your agency right now. ■

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