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# The Future Role of Company Sales Managers and Real Time

Real Time – referred to in the past as “SEMCI” (Single Entry Multiple Company Interface) – has been a goal within our industry for almost 30 years now. While this initiative has gone through a number of iterations, our fundamental industry goal has remained constant: to provide agents the easiest and most efficient methods of writing and servicing business. One thing that has noticeably accelerated is the pace with which technology has made advancements possible.

Everywhere the consumer looks, there are examples of how technology is delivering easy-to-use, instant services. This drives customer expectation levels and has put a premium on execution – both for carriers and agencies. The Real Time initiative has gained a strong foothold within the insurance industry.

Thanks to promotion and educational tools by the Real Time/Download Campaign (GetRealTime.org), ACT, AUGIE and ACTTech.org, as well as vendor and carrier adoption, we can take a measure of pride in where we’ve come, especially in the past few years. Real Time has become a reality - but it’s certainly not where it needs to be yet.

I’d like to take some time to discuss some of the keys to more fully driving the advancement of Real Time, including what I feel is one of the crucial points – the role of the Company Sales Manager/ Agency relationship in advancing the understanding and use of technology.

## The Carrier’s Role

There are four crucial elements to maintaining strong, profitable relationships with the best agents. These are not nice-to-haves, but must-haves. These days, they are the price of entry.

1. **Strong Product Set.** As carriers, we must provide our agents with a breadth and depth of product. By depth, I am talking about continually creating features and benefits unique to the industry to help set the company and its agents apart. In effect, this is to de-commoditize the business.
2. **Competitive Price.** It doesn’t have to be the lowest, but it has to align with the perceived value of your product by the agent and customer.
3. **Compensation.** You must pay the agent fairly and fully.
4. **Being easy to do business with.** The carrier absolutely must be easy to work with. This means the carrier is easy to communicate with, is flexible, and provides a well-designed process to place business. Of course, technology – while not the only important element – is a crucial component.

At the end of the day, being easy to do business with is the most critical of all four elements. If you have the reputation among the people placing business in an agency (CSRs and Producers) as being easy to work with, that can transcend many perceived shortfalls in other areas.

With that as a background, let’s talk about why Real Time is so important for both agents and carriers.

## Industry Importance

The next generation of agents, and certainly customers, will demand to do everything instantaneously, primarily using some form of Web application. We know that customers are increasingly quoting and comparing online. However, they are also relying on agents to understand their needs, and they demand rapid service. The agents, in turn, want to service their customers’ business quickly and offer value-added services to differentiate themselves.

Thus, Real Time is invaluable to agents for several reasons. It allows them to provide ease of doing business functionality, save time, keystrokes and errors, provide the best service to the customer, and bridge the gap of different interfaces provided by carriers. The impact of all this is better margins and more earnings for the agent.

For carriers, Real Time is a business imperative. It can help streamline internal processes, speed up transaction processing windows, minimize reliance on call centers and help desks, and increase profits. In the not-too-distant future it will be very difficult – or even impossible – for carriers to compete without robust Real Time functionality.

Bottom line – In the current business climate, it is essential to make doing business easy for agents and customers. We know that when all other aspects are even close to being equal, agents will do business with carriers that make their processes easy and error-free. Even more important, most agents will choose not to do business with carriers that fail to provide “ease of use” functionality.

So, if it’s obvious that Real Time is a good thing for all parties, why is the industry still struggling with it?

## The Challenges

First of all, the vendor market is quite fragmented, which causes a serious challenge for agents and companies. From the agent perspective, this fragmentation creates confusion over which tools are appropriate for a specific agency. Of the many choices out there, some are Real Time. However, some are not. Some of the carriers are on board with Real Time for some of the vendors, some are not. This adds complexity and time to agency workflow.

For carriers, much of the challenge lies within prioritization – prioritizing different vendors in different geographic areas. Which are the “impact” vendors? Prioritizing the differing workflow needs of the agents also plays a part. Some use management systems. Others rely on comparative raters. Still others go directly to carrier Web sites to quote, bind and service business. At a higher level, it is the reality of balancing resources for new Real Time functionality with necessary internal carrier system enhancements and regulatory requirements.

## Business/IT, Other Key Partnerships

My company understands that offering Real Time technology is not only table stakes, but has made it a priority to deliver the best functionality in the fastest way. To this end, we realized we needed to make some changes to our internal structure and communication strategies that better align our infrastructure with the Real Time initiative. A little over 18 months ago, we formed a dedicated team with members from both the business and IT, whose sole purpose is to position us as a leader in Real Time and to keep us there by researching and understanding the marketplace and creating new and more efficient ways to get us to market faster.

Externally, we recognize how crucial it is for carriers to support and participate in numerous industry councils and organizations. It is important for carriers to be involved with ACT, AUGIE, Power of Change and the Real Time/Download Campaign – which is seeing excellent success since its inception a little over one year ago.

Perhaps one of the most crucial partnerships is the Agency/Company Sales Manager relationship. We are now beginning an education process with our field management team so they can add more value to our agents around technology advice.

## The Future of Company Sales Managers

My feeling is that the Company Sales Manager of today – and the future – must understand and support the technology direction of both the industry and the company. The Sales Manager must have the knowledge to actively assist agencies in effectively implementing Real Time technology. Some agency aids could include:

- Help agents get more out of their management systems and better leverage their technology
- Help set up procedures to ensure staff compliance
- Provide model cost/benefit analysis
- Create awareness of the resources available to agents.

As agency advocates, Sales Managers should be able to be active conduits for agents to provide feedback on carrier and industry technology, help resolve issues and speak to future direction. The future Sales Manager should also be able to clearly advocate the producer impact of potential carrier strategies.

As a carrier, we are devoting significant time to technology training with our Sales Managers in 2008 and beyond. They have a strong working knowledge of our proprietary system and an awareness of the Real Time issues agents face. But, to be frank, most industry Sales Managers are not yet ready to clearly advise and assist agents in their decision-making or workflow design. Along with internally developed training, we will be leveraging some of the excellent industry tools such as the AUGIE “Productive Agency Visits” guide, ACT reports and AUGIE’s “Power of Change,” as well as AUGIE’s Real Time Calculator and Cost Savings Calculator tools.

## Conclusion

At the end of the day, agents and carriers will be more successful when they involve well trained Company Sales Managers – those who not only speak to carrier technology direction, but also support their agencies by helping them understand and fully utilize Real Time functionality. This will benefit the agencies by helping them to minimize duplicate entry, and help them serve their customers in the best way possible.

Putting in place Sales Managers who can actively obtain and accurately relay agency Real Time feedback to the carrier management will help improve the carrier’s Real Time implementations, increase its ease of use and generate more business from its agents.