

What has happened to quality service? We all know it is getting worse every day with most companies.

However, recent articles and TV shows have been reporting that some companies – Nordstroms, SteinMart, Cadillac, Lexus, Home Depot, even WalMart – do everything they can to make doing business with them a pleasant experience.

As I understand it, the basic premise of those companies is to keep customers coming back by providing quality merchandise at a fair price as well as strong service.

When I hear these reports, I naturally begin thinking about how the insurance business treats its clients, including its senior clients. My conclusion: “Much like the rest of American businesses.” That is, a few companies excel, but most do a pretty lousy job.

While the Insurance Marketplace Standards Association process is a cute idea, it is basically intended to encourage agents to be honest. Some companies ask agents to sign an honesty pledge. This can be compared to asking the President of the United States to be honest by swearing an oath. If the basic nature of the President or an agent is to be dishonest, oaths never have much effect.

It would be nice to see cards, signed by companies, pledging they will treat their clients as they would their mother, rather than as some faceless adversary.

As I see it, all of us in the insurance industry, including the companies, need to do everything we can to treat our clients with respect and appreciation. And we need to make it easy for them to do business with us.

For the most part, insurers try to do a good job in this respect, but

many times there is great room for improvement. Since *National Underwriter* is focusing on the senior market this week, let me illustrate with a 76-year-old lady, who has been a client of mine for over 20 years.

This woman recently called to say she was in a nursing home and wanted to surrender her annuity with a value of \$5,300 because she needed the money to pay some bills.

Her annuity was with a large, technically advanced company that had been touting its ability to provide insurance forms online. That made me think it would be simple to get the surrender form online, so I could mail it to her.

But when I went to the word search block and entered “surrender,” there was no response. Ok, I thought, I’ll try “cash in.” Also, no response. Then I tried several other words, but all had no response.

So I finally called the home office to ask what it called a surrender form. The answer was, “a financial transaction form.”

Next, I went back online and brought up the form. To my amazement, it was six pages long, with four pages of blanks to fill in and two pages of instructions.

My question is, “What if that sweet old lady had received a six-page form and had to fill it out by herself? Could she do it? Of course she couldn’t. I had trouble understanding all the questions, myself.

How long will it take for her to receive her money? Who knows? I’ve seen companies take one to six months. Why take so long? Because the company said it needed more forms filled out, or because the client filled the form out incorrectly and had to redo it. Our industry really

needs to do a better job of creating a friendly, easy-to-get-along-with atmosphere.

If you are CEO of an insurer and if you want to know how “client friendly” your company is, here are five short tests you can give to find out:

1) Give copies of your sales brochures to a 72-year-old and a 5<sup>th</sup> grader and ask them to read it. Then ask them to explain to you what they have read. If it was clearly understood, you have a good brochure. If not, redo it immediately!

2) Give an application or service form to the same two people and ask them to complete it. If they can fill it out correctly, without help, it’s a good form. If they can’t, redo the form.

3) Ask two people to try to call your home office through the client service line. Better yet, you make the call. See how difficult or easy it is to find someone to help you.

4) If you can get through to client service, ask the department how to change a beneficiary or withdraw some money from a policy. If it’s a pleasant experience, congratulate your staff. If it is a frustrating nightmare, fix it.

5) Find out how your clients feel after dealing with your company. Do they want to come back, or do they vow to hate you forever? If it’s the latter, take corrective action – now.



**In a nutshell, our clients are our most valuable assets. We should treat them that way!**