

COVID Connections

SELF-INSURANCE PROFESSIONALS
FORCED TO BECOME NIMBLE AND
CREATIVE ABOUT STAYING IN TOUCH
WITH CUSTOMERS AND COLLEAGUES



Written By Bruce Shutan

Just prior to the pandemic, Alecia Nash was looking for office space to better accommodate her growing InsurTech/stop-loss consultancy, which brought on two new employees in August. But the founder of HippaWare, LLC decided to maintain her telecommuting model when COVID-19 hit hard. She ended up using her own proprietary software and Trello, a web-based list-making application that helps organize and prioritize projects, to not only survive but thrive.

For Todd Martin, COVID lockdowns weren't exactly a shock to the system. "Being in Buffalo, we have always prepared for a 100% remote work environment" because of frequent snowstorms, says the chief sales officer for Nova Healthcare Administrators. "So we were ready to flip the switch in early March."

Although located 373 miles from New York City, which was the nation's coronavirus epicenter early on, the TPA's operation has been subject to statewide restrictions on both business and personal activities. "When we went to a 100% remote environment, we also put a lockdown on travel," Martin reports. "In the beginning, it was stressful being one of the first areas locked down. Many of our competitors were in fact traveling."

FROM AUDIO TO VISUAL

COVID triggered a massive shift from audio to video communication when in-person contact became rare or impossible. As such, virtual meetings were the norm for maintaining business relationships in 2020 and are expected to continue across many workplaces post-pandemic.

“There’s almost the expectation that we don’t do conference calls anymore,” observes Lorraine Byrnes, assistant vice president of captive program services for Berkley Accident and Health, a member company of W. R. Berkley Corporation whose risk-management services include stop loss, managed care, accident and group captive programs.

Her group captive business typically involves one or two face-to-face member meetings a year as well as several conference calls. But given travel restrictions, every touchpoint occurred in a video call. “It’s so easy to turn on your webcam, so why not talk to the person and engage them?” Byrnes suggests. “You gain a lot from seeing the facial expressions and seeing where people are at... I actually have had more face time with our customers this year than I have ever had. It’s been an interesting outcome of the pandemic.”

Paul Fallisi, president of Windsor Strategy Partners, Inc., says nearly every communication he has had during the pandemic is on Zoom or Teams – video conferencing platforms that he finds much more efficient than when he traveled one or two days a week. As a result, he expects about 80% of all client work to stay in the virtual realm with face-to-face visits reserved for more special occasions.

While working Americans have cottoned to videoconferencing, he insists “there are some items that you just can’t replace getting in front of somebody and hashing things out. The one thing I miss is going out to dinner, having a nice glass of wine with a client.”

Still, adjustments have been made. For example, some clients that have later afternoon video calls scheduled will share a glass of wine virtually. “We call them ‘wine-downs,’” Fallisi says.

In many respects, COVID has humanized business communication to a point where the self-insured community has grown closer than before. He says it’s not unusual for young children to interrupt parents or seeing pets dart around in the background, noting how his business associates have grown accustomed to seeing his 80-year-old mother. “I think people are just oblivious to that now,” he quips. “They’re comfortable. It’s no big deal. This is the new norm.”

While lauding Zoom meetings as a great tool for maintaining face-to-face contact, Martin says there’s still no substitute for in-personal human interaction when it comes to landing new business.

Concern mounted when it became clear that several industry conferences, including SIIA’s 40th annual national event, would be virtual summits in 2020. “We thought it was going to be a major setback,” he recalls. “A lot of times, that’s where we meet new vendors and have the ability to continually educate ourselves.”

KEEPING PEOPLE ENGAGED

The challenge of virtual meetings is a need to find new strategies to maintain engagement when there are important topics to discuss. Methods have included conducting surveys and using the hand-raising icon to illicit the same level of input and engagement, according to Byrnes.

Another approach involves tighter agendas. It’s difficult enough to hold people’s attention and stay focused when everyone is gathered in the same room and there’s three hours of content to cover. “So we’ve had to recognize up front that longer meetings need to be broken up in shorter sessions,” she explains. “This has been effective with the brokers we work with, and we have even applied this strategy to our annual member meetings for our group captives.”

Keeping in touch during the pandemic has been predicated upon understanding that customer needs have changed. For example, Byrnes says some are tethered more to their computers and expect more frequent communication. Others are harder to reach because they’re experiencing more disruption to their business and end up putting out fires, she adds.

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In one particular case, Byrnes had a hunch something wasn't right when a manufacturing client who always responded promptly to her emails didn't get back to her. After sending a follow-up email and finally connecting by phone, the client lamented an inability to read emails because they were too busy ensuring that all production-line processes complied with COVID safety protocols. From that point on, she decided to call and leave a voicemail vs. using email.

Byrnes has discovered that more attention is required on presentations, noting how virtual meetings aren't as effective without important visual cues. While she might distribute handouts at a face-to-face meeting, virtual gatherings require "creative condensing" into slides and visual aids to keep participants engaged.

In response to COVID, Nova has recorded its open enrollment meetings, which can be distributed in an email format for people to watch at their convenience. Also, to help build relationships, the TPA has participated in many webinars wherein the discussion transcended products to include different types of patterns or strategies that are working well for the groups it serves.

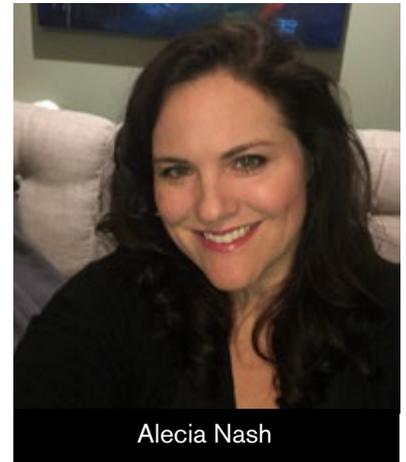
Adapting to the new normal appears to be paying dividends. "We actually won a lot of opportunities doing remote presentations," Martin notes. "We've been very productive and efficient, and I think that it goes to show that there sometimes can be a lot of wasted conversation or time within the office."

HUMAN TOUCHES

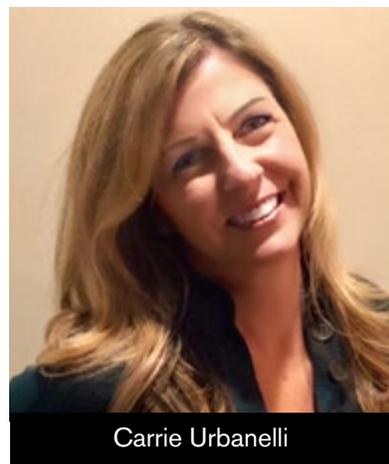
COVID-19's enormous impact is being felt across the self-insured marketplace. New stop-loss cases have plummeted with a reluctance to make significant health plan changes, resulting in many passive renewals, according to Nash.

"I've had groups where it's like, 'here's \$200,000 in savings,' and I get a decline," she says. "I have nicknamed this the "COVID decision" staying with the incumbent and taking an increase, even when not necessary. This year everyone is off the mark for new sales, so we have had to be creative and use technology in new ways to overcome the fear in the market by increasing transparency and communication between the stop-loss market and the customer."

At BRM Specialty Markets, client-relation touchpoints involve little gifts and outreach that ensure key contacts "we still care and we're available," reports Carrie Urbanelli, the MGU's chief underwriting officer. She checks in regularly by phone, and in some cases, local TPA friends were open to having lunch outside. "I'd offer, even if they were like three hours away, just to get out of the house," she says.



Alecia Nash



Carrie Urbanelli

Knowing that many TPA clients have struggled to write new business during this time, Urbanelli notes how the initial fear of furloughs morphed into concern about losing coverage or being re-rated. But the fact is that many of the traditional underwriting approaches and procedures had to be abandoned and replaced by creativity.

For example, if there was a change in the risk or even a potential new group that they were trying to write that didn't neatly fit inside the box, she says some enrollment fluctuation contingencies could be waived. Another tack could be to "get as aggressive on the rating as we can just because people don't really have a lot of money right now. And so, it's a balancing act."

The pandemic has taught Urbanelli to continue finding new ways to do things and be flexible. "It can't always be about what you're selling or doing that particular day," she explains. "It has to be about what's good for the long term and really forging those relationships and making sure that you have everyone's best interests at heart."

Nash says she has been "nose to the grindstone" since signing a national contract with S&S Healthcare Strategies, a technology platform and back office TPA service provider, to market her online platform and services, which help insurance agencies and TPAs manage a higher volume of work more quickly and accurately, as well as specialty quoting.

"We haven't missed a beat, and the reinsurers love it because we only send the complete submission that they can work with," explains Nash, whose software-as-a-service tames the inherent complexity of self-funding that many fellow brokers find a resource drain and source of frustration. "It was really revealing for me to learn from several MGUs and carriers that they are in some cases sending back 50% to even 90% of submissions from some TPAs and brokerage firms as 'incomplete' submissions, meaning an underwriter will not even lay eyes on it until it gets fixed."

Mindful of 2020's personal and professional challenges, Nash routinely stays in contact with her foot soldiers to gauge their stress levels and ask if they need any assistance. "I have always been a huge proponent of checking in and mental health, but I ratcheted it up," she reports. "That's a core value, frankly... We wanted an environment where people were happy and healthy."

LONG-TERM EFFICIENCIES

Working through the pandemic has made Martin much more of a morning person, knowing that rising earlier helps him avoid household challenges. "Even when you are isolated, there still is that bit of distraction when you're working at home

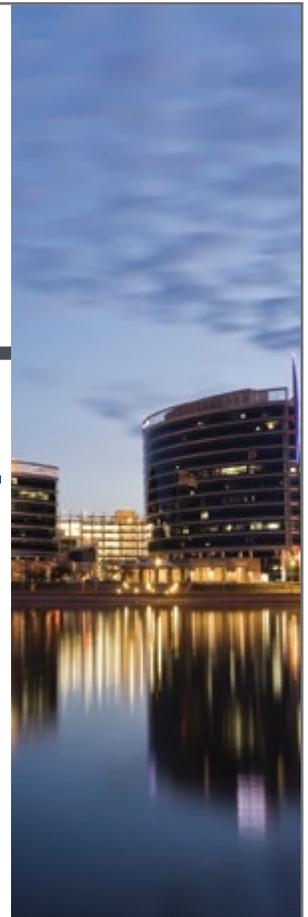


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Todd Martin

and you have other people around,” he says. Moreover, his laptop is now open 24 hours a day.

He has white-knuckled his way through much of 2020. “Some days, I look at my schedule, and it’s literally nonstop,” he confides, “and I’m working from home. I’m struggling to find time to go to the

bathroom or make a sandwich. If one Zoom meeting runs two minutes over, you’re already two minutes late for the next one.”

One silver lining has been the February 22 birth of his nine-month-old son who his mother has been able to watch upstairs since his wife returned to her job as a registered nurse in their local hospital. “He came a month early, which got us in and out of the hospital before this huge uptick in COVID,” Martin notes, breathing a sigh of relief. “I’m in the middle of remodeling my basement because it just needs to be more comfortable. I don’t know when we’re going back... I think there’s a lot of people that would like to go to the office because they can focus better and don’t have distractions with children.”

There’s little doubt that some practices over the past year will likely stick around post-pandemic. “I don’t think I’ll ever go back to traveling the way that I was,” enthuses Martin, who used to spend four nights in a hotel each week. “As long as I have my laptop, cell phone and Internet I can do my job from anywhere in the world now.”

Going virtual has enabled Byrnes and her team to be nimble in maintaining business relationships. As a result, they will likely carry these new strategies and unexpected benefits into the firm’s post-pandemic toolbox. “They say when life gives you lemons, you’ve got to make lemonade,” she says. “I believe that we’ve made our fair share of lemonade.” ■

Bruce Shutan is a Portland, Oregon-based freelance writer who has closely covered the employee benefits industry for more than 30 years.