

Reinforcing a Positive Self-Image

It was already apparent by the end of the eighties that agent retention and improving productivity would be the industry's most critical issues for the coming decades. It was also clear that these issues were not isolated problems. While we would have fewer candidates to choose from, retaining them would be influenced by meeting their continually rising expectations. In a competitive environment, candidates would have to make more money sooner in order to say "no" to offers from other employers.

It seemed sensible to me to learn more about the reasons why retention and productivity problems existed before trying to find solutions for them. This led to a quite revealing research project that I conducted a few years ago. I surveyed 110 agents—62 were low producers, and 48 were first-year failures who left the business. I wanted to find out what caused the failures to leave the industry and why the low producers failed to get better results. In interviewing both the agents and their managers, I got multiple reasons for each question; however, for the purposes of this survey, we considered only the primary reason that each agent mentioned.

Not surprisingly, the No. 1 reason for low productivity was insufficient prospecting. As expected, those who failed in their first year and left the industry had prospecting problems, as well, but the primary reason they gave for leaving was the *lack of self-esteem* they experienced as insurance agents.

Many psychologists regard self-esteem as our strongest drive. The image others project of us has a potentially significant impact on how we see ourselves. An affluent society, as ours is considered, does not prepare people to cope with the rejection and other negative experiences they have to face up to in their daily routine as insurance and financial services representatives. Many of them come to see themselves through the eyes of today's hardened consumer as a self-serving, manipulative salesperson, motivated only by the desire to earn a commission.

This distorted stereotype not only causes agents to leave the industry and look for a more benign work experience; it also takes a toll on the surviving producers.

As a manager, your daily affirmation of the importance of the contribution that each agent makes can enable agents to sustain their positive self-image and to combat the rejection they receive from their prospects. Your positive reinforcement, combined with becoming their clients' advocates and approaching their job as a "mission," will help your agents to succeed faster. It also will lead more of them to stay in this honorable profession for life.

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