

SPECIALTY LINES: AMATEUR ATHLETICS
BENEFITS AGENCY: GEORGIA AGENCY GOES NATIONAL
YOUNG PROFESSIONALS: MENTORSHIPS AND DESIGNATION CREATION

Rough Notes[®]

PROPERTY & CASUALTY AGENTS

AGENCY MARKETING • INSURANCE MARKETS • NEW PRODUCTS

APRIL 2016

AGENCY OF THE MONTH:

**CALIFORNIA AGENCY
PUTS PEOPLE FIRST,
PROCESS AND
PROMOTION FOLLOW**

ALSO: INSURANCE FOR ADULT COMMUNITIES



AGENCY OF THE MONTH

PEOPLE COME FIRST



“One of my proudest moments was at a recent staff meeting (our entire team gets together every Wednesday) when I asked a new team member her impression of the agency during her short stint. She responded that she was impressed by the fact that ‘everyone on the team puts other people’s needs first,’” says Mike Stromsoe, president of Stromsoe Insurance Agency, Murrieta, California.

One of the core concepts that Mike instills in his team is to always “put yourself in the customer’s chair first, then make the decision about that customer’s risk management needs. It was gratifying to find that our newest team member felt that everyone at the agency already operated in this manner.”

Mike ventured into the insurance business on December 1, 1986, after growing up in the restaurant business and working in that industry for many years. “Originally, I was working for my dad, Jon Stromsoe, and that meant that I had to work harder than everyone else to prove that I deserved to be there. But after starting our family in my early 20’s, I also found that the demands of the restaurant business meant less time for my family. I wasn’t able to spend enough time with my young family.

“My dad had started Stromsoe Insurance Agency in 1977 and then purchased Fallbrook Insurance Center in 1982 and merged the two organizations, with both located in Fallbrook. When I started in 1986, I began by selling homeowners insurance out of the Gold Book, an annual that was published by every county in California showing all information about residential property. I helped my Dad grow his agency until 1998, when, by mutual agreement, I ventured out to start my own scratch agency. When left to my own devices, I discovered how critically important the third ‘P’ (Promotion) was going to be to my success, if not my very existence.”

Mike continues, “I discovered I was somewhat of a natural at marketing and that was the key.”

A simple business?

“When you think about it,” Mike says, “the insurance business is really pretty simple (and is essentially the same as every other business). You need to get more clients and keep the ones you get. That’s it in a nutshell. To be successful at this, you must design

***Guided by the three
Ps—People, Processes and
Promotion—this California
agency grows in all markets***

*Mike often makes appearances as
“The Insurance Doc” where insurance
prescriptions are routinely handed out.*

Photography by Nick Judy

The agency's executive team includes, from left, Raimie Brown, Executive Assistant; Gil Coronado, Protection Coach; Mike Stromsoe, President and Lead Protection Coach; and Andrea Wyatt, Marketing Director.



and implement ways to serve the client better than anybody else.”

Of course, while the concept is simple, the implementation is a bit more complex. “You need to understand clients so well that you can sit in their chairs and imagine the risks that they face in both their business and personal lives and then determine the optimal way to mitigate or transfer that risk. And no one person can do this on their own. I recognized early on that I needed to build a team of people who would complement each other’s abilities so that our agency could provide the best protection, help out when claims occurred and be constantly proactive, presenting new ideas and risk management concepts that helped us stand out from the competition. In essence, the agency started with me, but I knew it had to end with us.”

Out of that simple concept, Mike developed the three Ps—People, Processes and Promotion—as the credo around which the agency was built.

People first

Development of the team comes first, Mike opines. “Recently, I’ve been studying leadership to find the best way to optimize teamwork at the agency. About seven or eight years ago, I realized that a big part of developing a team was fun. People don’t wake up saying, ‘Wow, I can’t wait to be managed today.’ They want to come to a place where they can do a job that satisfies them and that’s fun. One thing we did was build a ‘wheel of fortune’ that each person could spin once for every goal reached or exceeded. Prizes vary every month, so it doesn’t get boring or predictable. Spontaneity is important. One month, one of the prizes was a dozen roses; another month we offered dinner at a favorite Italian restaurant. We also have gift cards for every spin as well as donations to the employee’s favorite charity.

“We also welcome new ideas. Our office is full of white boards where people can express their ideas or simply put up a phrase or word for the day. And, of course, we have our goals there as well so that everyone on the team is on the same page.”

The latest program instituted to help improve teamwork and overall morale is a one-on-one meeting between Mike and each team member. “We discuss skills, knowledge, educational needs, and making the right things happen. I always ask: ‘How can I help you get to where you want to go?’ and then implement. If an idea makes sense, we’re all in. We also use TINYpulse (a system in which each team member can contribute feedback privately on an anonymous basis). This is a weekly email that asks each employee a simple question to determine how they feel about the ‘pulse’ of the entire agency operation. It’s a great tool for me and for them and we were thrilled when our agency

recently received TINYpulse's Happiest Company Award for our industry. The fact that our staff is happy spills over into the way that they treat our clients."

Must-have tools

Of course, a successful team must have great tools to accomplish its goals. "That's where the 2nd P, **Processes** comes in," Mike points out. "We invest heavily in IT and are constantly looking for ways to make it work better for our team members. In fact, IT is the third largest item on our P&L statement. We take it very seriously.

A, B and C.) It's proof that we need to write the entire account. We know that intuitively, but this helps to drive the point home."

Must be known

"If you have the best people in the world on your team, using the most efficient and effective tools, and yet nobody knows you exist, you have a real problem," Mike notes. "That's why you need the third P, **Promotion**. Without promotion, you can't move forward and grow. And if an agency is not growing, it's dying.

"When I was 38 and struggling to build the agency, I earnestly started listening to people who were succeeding. This was a real turning point for me. I simply sought out people who had more experience than I had and knew more than I did. Then I just listened intently. I'm an avid implementer. The more I listen to smart and successful people, the wiser I get and the more proficient I become at promoting the agency. We learned by doing what works and by having fun. Consequently, over time our team has created a unique and special culture within the agency.

"One of the things I did was create a persona for myself called The Insurance Doc™. I visit clients and prospects wearing scrubs, a stethoscope around my neck, and carrying an insurance prescription pad. It sounds silly, but

Helping the agency's commercial lines customers are, from left, Danielle DeBolt, Business Protection Coach; Christy Totten, Director of Welcome; Shauna Bell, Business Protection Coach; and Crystal Pritchett, Business Protection Coach.



The agency's personal lines customers are assisted by, from front, Sarah Long, Personal Support Specialist; Maritza Ganime, Personal Protection Coach; Georgina Juarez, Personal Protection Coach; and Erica Gates, Personal Protection Coach.

"One of our team members mentioned that it would help if, when a client calls, the computer would recognize the number and automatically pull up the client's file. Our management system couldn't do that, so we went to our IT person and had it built.

"We have been in the cloud for three years and have fully-mirrored redundancy so that our people can operate from anywhere in the world just as if they were in the office. Our clients don't care where we are when they call, they just want an answer—and they get one. Our senior commercial lines CSR is remote three days a week."

Another important part of the process is the weekly meeting. "Part of the meeting involves going through a list of clients that we lost. Then we talk about why we lost them," Mike says, emphasizing that the purpose is not to find out who to blame but to learn. "We almost always find that it is a single-A client with just one coverage. (All our clients are 'A' clients. We have triple-A, double-A and single-A. We think that's a better message than

Through this door walks
the most PASSIONATE agency
team in the world



Building fun into the agency, Mike and the team came up with spinning a wheel for prizes, as team members accomplish goals set forth to help increase sales, referrals, and good will in the community.

Must be well thought of

"Of course, simply being known within your marketplace is not enough in and of itself," Mike concludes. "You have to be known as the company who cares. You need to have a servant's heart in this (or any) business. We're proud that we never consider the commission rate when we make a recommendation to a client. We put the client first, provide the best coverage for them and place them with the most appropriate insurance carrier for them. In the end, money follows trust, not the other way around."

"Another way we try to 'live out' our servant's heart each and every day is via the agency's support of local charities. For instance, when the agency receives a referral from anyone, that person's favorite charity receives a donation and the referrer is eligible for a reward as well."

The list of charitable organizations who benefit from this now numbers in the hundreds, including the annual agency support of the local Rod Run. The Rod Run supports a charity dedicated to helping disabled and troubled youth, among many others.

The Stromsøe Insurance Agency doesn't just talk the talk. It walks the walk each and every day. We are pleased to recognize Stromsøe as our Agency of the Month. ■

White boards surround the production area of the office, where vision and motivational statements are displayed to encourage team members to see things others can't and to encourage big goals and self-improvement.

people remember us and, if we write the best insurance prescription for them, they remember and recommend The Insurance Doc to their friends.

"We've also developed 27 different ways to contact people every year. That's right, each of our clients hears from us at least 27 times each year. These include fax blasts every month, four voice broadcasts a year, snail-mail and electronic newsletters, monthly nurturing messages and on and on. We also play in all forms of social media to 'top of mind.'

"Our marketing software gauges the open rate for all our electronic efforts so we can tweak things that aren't working and expand on things that are. This may sound like overkill, but we've studied this and found that the large number of contacts keeps our agency first and foremost in the minds of our marketplace. This approach also plays right into the fact that 80% of sales are made on the fifth to 12th contact. This explains why agencies that give up after three or four attempts are constantly missing out on a ton of potential sales."

It must be working. The agency enjoyed good growth even during the recent economic downturn. Last year, the agency enjoyed better than 19% growth.

