

Customer Satisfaction Through Training

In 2008, American Family insurance set out to reinvent their New Agent Training Program. A team of over 150 were trained in 4MAT to create a common language between design and delivery.

To renew its commitment to customer service, American Family Insurance turned to its education division to revamp internal training with the goal to provide a better customer experience.

During the past several decades, American Family Insurance has changed names, geographic scope, offerings, assets and corporate ranking. But its commitment to customer service has remained the same.

Founded in Wisconsin in 1927, the organization — then known as Farmers Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. — started out with just three employees, 346 charter member policyholders and a vision.

Today, American Family Insurance employs more than 8,000 employees, in addition to a network of approximately 4,000 independent American Family insurance agents. Betty Bergquist, vice president of education at American Family Insurance, said the business affiliation between the company and its insurance agents is a unique partnership. Even though the agents are independent contractors, they have an exclusive relationship with American Family Insurance and solely represent the company's products and services.

Given the customer-facing nature of their jobs, these agents are required to go through a rigorous training program that better prepares them to achieve their objective: helping customers achieve financial security.

Redesigning Training for New Agents

Last year, the company revamped and completed rollout of the New Agent Training Program (NATP) to more effectively prepare new agents for customer interactions. Bergquist said the new program, considered one of the company's most successful learning and development initiatives, achieved its objective by creating a more practical professional experience and simulating realistic working conditions.

For instance, the old method of training would typically cover a 9-to-5 shift and failed to reflect the hours a professional agent actually worked.

“If you buy a restaurant, you’re going to work a ton of hours,” Bergquist said. “This is the same thing. We start them at 8, they have homework every night and they also have contacts with future clients that they have to make.”

It’s important for them to commit to the same number of hours they would have as independent contractors running their own businesses, Bergquist said.

In addition, the education department took steps to move beyond what was primarily a lecture-based format.

“When we redid [the New Agent Training program], we steered away from that and implemented a process around [human performance improvement] and performance-based learning,” Bergquist said.

“Our division did a lot of research on what behaviors were important for agents to know when they started in their agencies. We built the training curriculum around those key behaviors, and we used the principles of human performance improvement, performance-based learning and 4MAT to develop a strong curriculum.”

The 4MAT model is a means of designing and delivering curriculum that engages multiple learning styles. Instead of new agents attending class, receiving handout materials and being lectured on the subject matter, the new process engages them in interactive and hands-on learning, an approach that Bergquist said better prepares them to hit the ground running.

“We describe what it is they need to know, we show them how to do it [and] we have them do it,” Bergquist said. “And then we expect that they’ll go into the real world and try it on their own time and come back to us and tell us about any challenges they’ve run into and overcome. [The process is] much more ‘see and do,’ over and over.” Another component missing from the previous program was some type of metric or measurement system that would track progress and show tangible results. “In the past we would give

[the agents] information and either assume they would retain it or know where to find it,” Bergquist said. “Now we actually have assessments at the end of each module so we know for sure the information has been learned.” New agents are required to log on to the American Family Insurance Web site and essentially prove their knowledge. Furthermore, they will have to reveal where they found the information — whether it pertains to underwriting, quoting or the sales process, Bergquist explained.

Even though the company is unable to show concrete sales measurement at the present time because of insufficient data, Bergquist said the anecdotal feedback from the management group that oversees the agents is positive. “We hope that the outcome from the group of agents who have been through this program will be more sales more quickly and a stronger relationship with our customers,” Bergquist said.

Enhancing the Customer Experience

With the company’s mission to become No. 1 in customer satisfaction in mind, the education department partnered internally with the claims group to provide curriculum for other employees who regularly interact with customers.

After restructuring the New Agent Training Program, the company trained approximately 4,800 of its other customer-facing employees, agents and staff in a nine-week period. “The idea was trying to share information around how to be better at the customer experience,” Bergquist said. “We used successful examples and testimonials as part of the [training] and then created discussions in the classroom.”

For instance, the trainees would volunteer responses to questions such as: “How would you like to be treated” and then proceed to discuss ways to incorporate the suggestions into their day-to-day customer-facing work.

“When a customer comes to see us, no matter what part of American Family they touch, we want to provide a similar experience,” Bergquist added.

Keeping an Eye on the Big Picture

One of the most significant business challenges faced by American Family

Insurance is the arduous task of living up to its corporate mission to be the most trusted and valued service-driven insurance company, said Bergquist.

“It’s a major effort, a major challenge,” she said. “I have no doubt we’ll accomplish it, but it has become a very big focus, and a lot of effort has been put into that.” In turn, the education division has responded by increasing flexibility on its end.

“Our process for how quickly we can deliver materials and curriculums has shortened,” she said. “Because we have a disciplined way of developing materials, we’re able to alter it [easily] to fit different audiences.”

This has led to positive outcomes such as increased efficiencies and cross-divisional work.

“We don’t directly drive revenue, so we need to be as strong a business partner with the other divisions and the other parts of the organization as possible,” Bergquist said. “Because we touch every part of the organization, we have a unique opportunity to connect people, and I think we have learned to do that more quickly and more efficiently.”

Looking to the Future

The next project on the horizon for the education division — and one that Bergquist and her colleagues have already begun to work on — is to move away from relying merely on anecdotal feedback and establish a more concrete system of measuring progress, she explained.

In addition, the education division is gearing up to work with one of its business partners, the Field Agency Force, to increase the use of technology as a tool in various forms of training.

Finally, the team has expanded its scope to include a focus on leadership learning and development. Because the vast majority of the company’s leadership is generated internally, Bergquist said it is imperative to focus on preparing employees to take on future leadership roles.