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My best is yet to come: A Q&A with Al Schiebel

Al Schiebel is CEO and founder of Schiebel & Associates, where he helps individuals and medium businesses with their insurance and benefits needs.

By Paul Wilson | May 04, 2022



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How did you get your start in the benefits industry?

Early in my career, I worked for a food broker and was working from home. It was one of the happiest times for me because I didn't have to go into an office or deal with having a boss. My wife used to work for a local county in a government office, and a guy from Aflac showed up at her office one day. She said, "You know, Al likes to help people, he likes to talk to people; I think this would be a great career for him."

So I started with Aflac. I was initially scared to death of 100% commission, but I made it work. The first year was tough because you're building a book of business, but things progressed. Then, after about a year, I went to a training class and this guy came to me and said, "I have some groups that have Spanish speaking employees

and I can't reach them because of that language barrier (<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2019/01/11/light-bulb-moments-tips-to-engage-spanish-speakers/>). Can you help me?" And I said "sure" because it was a new opportunity for me. After a while, he said, "Can you help me manage these medical groups?" So we started splitting the business and I sunk my teeth into that. Little by little, I have grown and evolved through the years.

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Because of changes like the ACA, I have had to adjust some things over the years. My practice is now in three "buckets," if you will: I do employee benefits, where my groups are typically between 10 to 200 employees, at least. I help with medical, dental, vision, disability, ancillary/voluntary benefits, the whole gamut.

The next area is that I've kind of evolved into a Medicare expert (<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2022/03/03/more-employers-shifting-retirees-to-private-medicare-advantage-plans/>). A lot of people who are entering Medicare are very confused, so my sales process is mostly just education. An educated consumer is more likely to make a good decision, so if I facilitate that educational process. To be honest, I hate to sell. But if you educate people, they usually appreciate it. A colleague of mine, who unfortunately passed away a few years ago, always said "You're professionally helping people make a buying decision." And I like that a lot.

That has become a very fast-growing piece of my business because a lot of people in the industry don't want to touch Medicare. It's growing; every week, I get more referrals. The last lane that I'm in is individual coverage. If one of my clients has an employee with a child who is turning 26, I help them with that. Or if someone is retiring and they're in between employer coverage and Medicare, I help them with that. I also help people with life insurance, disability and LTCI.

What are the unique challenges or opportunities in your part of the country?

Atlanta is such a diverse city. You have big corporations and all kinds of other industries, as well. There's a lot of manufacturing in the outlying areas, and a lot of international companies because the airport is nearby. It's very diverse, so I don't concentrate on one type of industry, although I'm trying to work my way into finding a niche market. But it's hard when you get referred by a previous client to a group of 30 employees. If it lands in my lap, I'm going to work with them.

People ask me whether I do business outside of the area and, while I'm licensed in a few other states, most of my group business comes from Atlanta because the metro area alone has something like 5 million people—that's pretty strong. But there are also a lot of brokers, so the competition is tough.

How has your journey so far shaped who you are, your perspectives on benefits, and your role as an advisor?

The first thing for me is the importance of having a solid foundation. I believe in God and that's my biggest source. On top of that is the importance of a happy relationship—I've been married to my sweetheart for 36 years and I have a wonderful marriage. I have a great relationship with her, I call her "Saint Julia" because she puts up with me. We're best friends and she makes my life complete and that allows me to have something to shoot for. Right now, I'm figuring out how much I can work and how hard I can work so I can spend more time with my wife in retirement. Most of our friends have the same philosophy and have been married for a long time and have a stable family life. That really helps.

We also have a wonderful son who is our pride and joy. He's smart, hardworking, and very responsible. Sometimes I work late and my wife is very understanding; she knows I'm working very hard for the family and that's so important to me.

The other thing is the importance of having a lot of fun. I'm a goofball and I love to laugh a lot. I get energy from laughing and making others laugh. You have to have boundaries, of course, but if you're laughing and smiling, that's a good thing.

What's it like to own and work in a smaller agency in today's environment?

We've been fortunate because, despite COVID, we've been able to come into the office here. I have three members of my team besides me. One is brand new and will be taking over account management and another is an office manager, and then I have a marketing guy who is very creative.

I'm also part of a super agency—a group of competing agencies that got together here in the Atlanta area. By combining, we have access to opportunities that we wouldn't otherwise have. That has been in effect for almost 10 years; I'm one of the founding partners. We have a non-compete agreement with each other and it's like a mastermind group of competitors. It makes me appear to be larger and I have access to a lot more business. It's been a very good thing.

We have certain philosophies: We have to have the same value system and want to do what's best for the client. Of course we're in it for the money, that's how we make a living, but we have to keep the clients' interests at the top. We've walked away from potential partners because we didn't feel that their thought process was the same. We go through a vetting process; we're all competitors, so we have to have the ethics to say, "If I run across a partners' client, I'll walk away and do the right thing."

What are the biggest challenges/opportunities you're seeing these days?

There are a lot of changes happening. Since the ACA emerged in 2009, we've seen community-rated plans that are guaranteed-issue for small groups between 2 and 50. Little by little, that has become the high-risk pool. Groups that can't get underwritten have stayed there, so it's kind of like a death spiral. Small groups that have some medical conditions can't move out to plans that can be underwritten and are seeing significant cost increases every single year.

Among groups that are relatively healthy and that can be underwritten, we've seen a migration into level-funded plans. Five years ago, I couldn't spell level-funding and now I have a lot of groups who are doing that because it's such a nice step between fully insured and self-funded. The other thing is that technology continues to become more prevalent. For example, I have benefit administration and HR software for my clients that help with enrollment, as well as other agency software.

We've also evolved to use social media to promote ourselves. It's funny, I preach this to everyone I get in front of, but many people still don't do it. We have a Youtube channel and have created some different landing pages focused on Medicare and other areas where people can learn and request information. We have over 100 videos and my marketing person has all kinds of great ideas.

I hired a company to do my social media so we have new content every single day. All of this takes some time, though. I was in a meeting a few weeks ago and people were talking about LinkedIn as the solution to everything, but it's not. It's an incredibly useful tool, but you have to be consistent, just like with advertising.





We've been doing it consistently for about 18 months and my Medicare business has exploded as a result. We're also trying to focus it more on group insurance and I'm hoping it will be successful there, too.

A lack of consistency is probably the biggest weakness I see with a lot of agencies. They come to me and say, "You're doing all these great things," and I tell them, it comes down to consistency with social media. Going to LinkedIn once a month isn't going to do it. We're in a good spot and as we continue to do this, we keep gaining followers and connections and it's eventually going to reach critical mass and generate by itself. The credit goes to my marketing guy; all I do is agree. I figure I'm the eye candy of the organization!

Many advisors tell me they struggle to filter through all of the options and noise and figure out the best partners and solutions. How do you manage that?

It's an everyday battle, because there are a lot of shiny objects out there. I have other agents who I can sound off with, which is very important. I'm also part of Q4i, where I participate in monthly calls and hear what other people are doing across the country.

I'm also part of a local study group with other agencies; it's always good to have sounding boards. I feel really sorry for the person who is sitting in their basement alone, not communicating with anybody. That's tough. I'm a talker and I always ask questions, which is a great way to learn about things. And then after you do your research, you have to pull the trigger and then keep evaluating and assessing.

How are conversations about innovation and change going with clients and prospects right now? Are you getting more buy-in?

It's often a price-driven conversation. I just had a client whose association plan price increased 18% last year and another 17% this year—that's 35% in two years. I was able to reduce the 17% increase to a 1% increase by shifting them to a level-funded plan. So instead of going in and leading with all the mechanics of level funding, I first had to see what the need was. They needed me to lower the cost. OK. So what if we can lower the cost and keep similar benefits? That's a win-win. And then you can get into the details about how the sausage is made.

People seem to be very open to these ideas. There's one group I'm going to call today who told me "my broker has only been showing me one option, one plan." To me, that's laziness. Q4i teaches a process where you strive to understand where prospects and clients are coming from and where they want to go, what's working and what's not working. You then offer insurance and non-insurance solutions.

One of my favorite questions to ask is, "If we're sitting here three years from now and we're celebrating that we've had a good relationship, what has to have happened in the meantime for you to think it was a success?" If I ask that question, they have to think about it. My best clients are people who say, "You know what? I appreciate you asking me that." And then I just shut up and listen.

We talk a lot about how the health care system is broken. How do you stay motivated and positive and not become overwhelmed or discouraged?

I do get overwhelmed and discouraged. Sometimes I get angry or unhappy. But I always have the attitude that my best is yet to come. I have an insatiable desire to grow and learn. Money can buy you nice things, but it's not my motivation. My motivation is mainly using my talents to the max. Sometimes, I feel like I've done very well and other days, I think, "Oh man, I just want to hide under a rock." There are ups and downs, but I always tell my son, "My best is yet to come." Hopefully, I will say that until the day I die.

What are your favorite things about your job?

Some of my favorite experiences are with my Medicare prospects and clients. You might have a couple come in and say, "We don't know anything about Medicare, but we have a bunch of stuff we got in the mail. We're confused; can you help?" And I break it down into bite-sized pieces and I put in a little bit of humor and answer their questions. I don't have an agenda to sell them anything. And they walk away saying, "Thank you. Now I understand what I'm trying to do." That is something I can't put a dollar sign on, but I sleep well at night because I helped somebody understand something they were confused about.

Zig Ziglar used to say, "If you help enough people get what they want, you'll get what you want." A good friend of mine a long time ago had a principle: If you do the right thing, you're going to sleep well at night. I try to keep that legacy going and do the right thing. It upsets me when someone questions my integrity because all I try to do is help people. I'm not perfect, but I try to help people.

What's one thing you know now that you wish you'd known when you started your career?

If I spend a lot of my time doing administrative stuff, I'm not prospecting and growing my business. Here is the "Philosophy of AI," OK? Your business is like a tomato; it's either ripening or it's rotting. Ripening means you're bringing new prospects, new clients and new blood into the business. But that's not going to happen by itself. You have to take action. If I don't dedicate time specifically to prospecting, my business isn't growing. In the book "Radical Prospecting," Jeb Blount writes about having your golden hour. This is regularly scheduled time specifically dedicated to prospecting; I'm not there yet, but it's what I strive for.

If you want to meet with a doctor, you set up an appointment and nothing interrupts it. How about making a daily appointment with yourself to do the things that will help grow your business? If I could go back to when I was a young buck in the business and do it all over again, I would dedicate an hour every day to prospecting, and not be so haphazard about it. If I was 20 years younger, I would focus far earlier on doing more things to grow my business.

How can the industry do a better job of attracting new talent, while becoming more diverse and bringing in young people to keep its momentum going?

That's a very tough question. According to NAHU, the average age of a solo practitioner is in the early 60s. We've seen a lot of mergers and acquisitions and the problem is that a lot of the solo agencies don't have a succession plan. I talk to so many people who say, "I'm just going to ride off into the sunset." That's a big problem because then they're really ripe for someone to come in with a fire sale offer.

If I was talking to an association like NAHU, I would suggest providing more information about succession planning. Establish a plan so that if something happens to you, you'll know who will take over your business.

The other thing is that there aren't a lot of colleges out there focusing on benefits. If you major in Risk Management, a lot of the focus is on property and casualty. To the best of my knowledge, the University of Georgia doesn't teach employee benefits or anything in that area. When I was president of the Atlanta Association Of Health Underwriters, we were looking for scholarship recipients at local colleges and we had such

a hard time. We ended up giving most of them to people in the P&C space; we couldn't find anyone on the benefits side in the three major colleges in our area. We were literally giving money away and it was really difficult to find anyone. So part of it is the system.

People who are over the age of 60 in our business have a lot of wisdom that can be transferred to younger people. But we have to make the industry more attractive to younger people, and I don't necessarily have an answer for that.

Finish this sentence: The key to success in this industry going forward is...

Never stop seeking. Don't get stuck in a rut that says, "I only do this." You have to be open to learning and growing. Take risks and always ask, "What if?"

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