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Shining Starr

Corporate values, employee education and risk reduction services keep The Starr Group on top

WHO WE ARE



Mary Starr (middle row, left), executive vice president, and Tim Starr (middle row, right), president and CEO, come together with employees. The Starr Group requires high education requirements for its employees: Agents must achieve CIC and CRM accreditations within 5 years of employment.

Agency Success

Although its doors have been open for more than 50 years, The Starr Group, Greenfield, Wis., is thinking young. After dissolving a 20-year partnership 2 years ago, the agency has started fresh by analyzing the values and beliefs that frame the new Starr Group, leading the agency to push for new ideas, efficiencies and best practices. The agency has spent immense effort stripping the company to its core and rebuilding The Starr Group to the risk reduction driven business it is today.

“We believe that staying true to our values will help us push for excellence in our daily interactions and accomplishments, which will allow us to stand out from the competition,” said Mary Starr, executive vice president of The Starr Group.

As part of the rebuilding process, all 27 employees went through a 7-week introduction course that pioneered the values of Starr Group, along with using Starr’s core values, called the “I-PREACH” (integrity, passion, respect, excellence, acknowledgement, communication and honesty) program, in its interview process, annual employee reviews and bonus payouts. Maureen Arndt, director of operations, takes the I-PREACH values to the customer level by conducting value audits of sales and service phone calls, where teams listen to each other’s phone calls and evaluate them on how well they support the agency’s values by recognizing strengths and suggesting improvements.

I-PREACH represents the core values of The Starr Group, and the agency believes if it builds a team of character, it can accomplish what others cannot.

WHERE IT BEGAN

Robert Starr founded Starr Insurance Group in 1956 from his home office in Greendale. Robert’s son, Tim Starr, joined the company in 1981 after graduating with a degree in risk management from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His wife, Mary, joined the agency in 1985. Fifty years later, under the ownership of Tim and Mary Starr, The Starr Group has grown into one of the most progressive agencies in Wisconsin.

The Starr Group’s targeted specialties include construction/contracting, technology, progressive care, refuse haulers, hospitality and personal lines group sales. The Starr Group is active in associations affiliated with its niche markets.

INVOLVEMENT

The Starr Group is active in associations affiliated with its niche markets including:

- National Assn. of the Remodeling Industry
- South Suburban Chamber of Commerce
- Professional Insurance Agents of Wisconsin
- Independent Insurance Agents of Wisconsin
- Society of Certified Insurance Counselors
- Society of Certified Risk Managers
- Independent Business Assoc. of Wisconsin
- National Assn. of Insurance and Financial Advisors
- International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans
- The Executive Committee Assocs.
- Marsh Berry and Assocs.
- Certified Employee Benefit Specialists
- Certified Insurance Service Reps.
- Wisconsin Health Care Assoc.
- Wisconsin Assisted Living Assocs.
- Wellness Council of America
- YMCA Corp. Wellness Partnerships
- Applied Systems Client Network
- The Milwaukee Network Exchange
- Special Olympics of Wisconsin

Risk reduction services include human resources, COBRA, safety, defensive driver training and MODhammer, an analysis of workers’ compensation claims.

The agency’s business split is 28 percent personal lines business, 54 percent commercial lines business and 18 percent in group benefits. The Starr Group represents West Bend, Secura, Frankenmuth, Acuity, Chubb, Indiana, Travelers, United Healthcare, Anthem Blue Cross and Humana. In addition, the agency began offering captives in 2009 for large accounts.

The Starr Group is committed to protecting its clients by strategically aligning its resources and expertise with their needs. “Our best customers are those whose risk bearing tolerance is aligned with our risk reduction capabilities,” said Tim Starr, president and CEO. “Our vision statement says it best: The Starr Group vision is to lead in the creation and delivery of insurance and risk reduction services for our customers producing a measurable difference.”

“The new Starr Group helps businesses, individuals and families evaluate their insurance coverage needs and identify solutions tailored to their own unique situations,” Mary Starr said. “We consider ourselves insurance counselors rather than just producers. It is our goal to provide our customers with guidance that will ensure their business and their families’ risks are properly managed.”

The Starr Group practice includes constant internal coverage review of existing customer coverages and roundtables with agents and staff on prospective accounts.

Many customers, especially at claim time, have been the benefactor of that “rolling up of the sleeves” behavior. Personal lines business is treated with the same effort and enthusiasm. Replacement cost coverage is available to all customers who purchase new vehicles. In one situation, a personal lines client was caught in a Nashville flood. The Coast Guard saved her, but her car was totaled. The client had the special coverage, and received a brand-new car instead of the Blue Book value of her totaled vehicle.

Through this type of customer care, The Starr Group boasts a 92 percent customer retention rate. In addition, the agency was recently honored as one of only four in the state to be recognized as a 2010 Best Practice agency as selected by the IIABA. In addition, The Starr Group has been named the 2010 runner-up for the Wisconsin Better Business Bureau’s Torch Award, which honors companies that demonstrate excellence in ethical practices, service excellence, reputation, honest advertising, peer recognition, management practices and employee training in ethical behavior.

EDUCATING EMPLOYEES

Starr’s staff includes 27 highly trained professionals including insurance counselors, account executives and support personnel. The agency requires high education requirements among its staff to provide better client service.

It is not only necessary to hold a state insurance license for all of Starr Group’s sales and service associates, but com-

mercial property and casualty agents also must become a certified insurance counselor (CIC) and certified risk manager (CRM) within 5 years of employment.

The Starr Group provides its employees with technology such as dual monitors and desktop faxing to improve efficiency. Ongoing communication is important to The Starr Group for its employees to understand and share the agency's vision. The agency holds department and all-agency meetings regularly, and shares the agency's benchmark comparisons with all staff members. As a member of Marsh Berry's Agency Peak Performance Exchange (APPEX) The Starr Group chooses to use the comparison statistics of the best agencies in the US as its primary benchmark.

"We firmly believe that employees who feel appreciated and respected have greater job satisfaction," Mary said. "In turn, this positive outlook shines through to our customers, our co-workers and our companies. By investing in our team, we are investing in our business."

It is critical that all of its employees uphold The Starr Group commitment and core values which include putting customers first, acting with integrity, treating people with respect, being honest and passionate, showing appreciation and gratitude, actively listening and responding and pursuing excellence to raise standards of performance.

DEALING WITH THE MARKET

The Starr Group's focus is to be different. "When you are different, you do not have to be just another member of the herd with a low price," Tim Starr said. The agency practices:

- Marketing to niche markets
- Growing outstanding, knowledgeable sales agents
- Supporting accounts with risk reduction services
- Reminding customers why they do business together.

"This formula takes on an energy that does not care what type of marketplace we are in and still produces the desired results," Tim said. "Insurance premiums represent only 20 percent of the cost of risk, so it is our job to focus on the other 80 percent. This is where our concentration on risk reduction services aptly applies."

Changes in the marketplace make it a different selling environment. The Starr Group has an increased responsibility to provide its agents with an environment where selling, not administration, is their primary function. This focus has allowed the agency to grow 4.8 percent in 2009, with 2010 being on track to outperform 2009.

The agency has taken proactive steps to establish its business as a resource for its prospects and customers, educating them on the insurance issues that impact them directly. The agency develops and mails quarterly newsletters to its commercial, group and personal lines customers and offers seminars and webinars to clients on relevant topics.

Starr has found success despite the soft market in three areas: increasing retention, reducing its servicing costs and increasing the hit ratio in new business.

"In spite of strained budgets, we feel that marketing is extremely important and critical to the success of our sales efforts," Tim said. "We built what we call track marketing, which allows for nine automatic touches by our agents, including automatic defaulted phone calls for our agents. We firmly believe in a heavily automatic marketing behavior."

GIVING BACK

The Starr Group believes it is important to give back to the community. The agency voted for The Special Olympics of Wisconsin to be its corporate charity of choice. Over the last 3 years, Starr has sponsored The Special Olympics' largest fundraiser, the Polar Plunge, raising more than \$25,000 for the cause.

The agency has also incorporated giv-

ing back into day-to-day business. "In recent years, we have focused our efforts on creating insurance programs for associations and groups that we feel can benefit from specialized programs," Tim said.

The Starr Group Insurance Program for Milwaukee/NARI, for example, creates a direct benefit for the Milwaukee/NARI Foundation by membership participation.

The Foundation benefits every time an account is written and renewed. This financial aid helps related entities with scholarships and educational opportunities; as of today, Starr Group has donated more than \$23,000 to the organization.

The Starr Group also includes charity volunteer efforts through its Fit4Life wellness program that was created by its Best of The Best committee. The wellness initiatives include proper nutrition, adequate exercise, minimized stress and a tobacco-free lifestyle.

The Fit4Life program has been recognized by United HealthCare, featured in Fortune Magazine in 2009 and was recognized as a platinum level fit-friendly company by The American Heart Assn. in 2010. It was a second place finalist in the YMCA America on the Move Challenge 2009 and was recognized as a corporate wellness award finalist by BizTimes in 2009 and 2010.

The Starr Group holds that successful companies focus their efforts strategically, and has designed a strategic plan that outlines the established steps to reach its defined success. Trustworthiness has the greatest impact on a company's ability to work with and affect their customers and employees on a daily basis.

"As the level of trust increases, so does the level of associate engagement and satisfaction," Mary Starr said. "As this level of associate engagement and satisfaction increases, so does our productivity; thus portraying how trust plays an integral part in the overall economics of our entire organization." AA&B

