

# AN AGENCY BRAIN TRUST



*Camaraderie, networking, learning—Greenwich Group does it all*

By Dennis H. Pillsbury

**A**nyone who has had the privilege to attend a Greenwich Group meeting could very easily be fooled by the apparent light-hearted banter that characterizes some of the social events and breaks and even the occasional interruption of a speaker. But then, when one analyzes what occurred at the day-and-a-half meeting, it is impressive indeed how much is accomplished and how businesslike the atmosphere becomes when this group of successful entrepreneurs starts to listen carefully to the ideas being propounded. The remarks and questions change character completely—going from comical and occasionally profane to insightful and penetrative.

I had the good fortune to have written about several of the agencies in the group, so I already knew that I was dealing with some of the best agencies in North America. (Three of the members are from Canada. In fact, it was one of those agencies that invited me to the

meeting.) What I did not understand until I attended this September meeting in Chicago was why these guys needed to meet. They were already very successful. What could the meeting possibly offer?

And the answer is quite simple—ideas.

The group is composed of highly intelligent, motivated individuals who are looking for new ideas that will help them make their agencies even more successful. To that end, the group brings top-notch consultants to each meeting to speak about matters that were previously identified by members as areas of concern. At this September meeting, one of the featured speakers was Roger Sitkins.

## The cost of average

In his presentation on the cost of being average, Roger pointed out one of the problems facing agency owners was that “average is pretty good in our business.” Many “average” producers make six figure incomes, so it’s easy for them to plateau and sit back and enjoy the fruits of their renewals while their efforts to bring in new business



decline. But that certainly doesn't satisfy the agency owner(s) who are looking to grow their business and reach a level of profitability where new blood can be brought into the business and perpetuation plans can make certain the agency is sustainable into the future.

Roger pointed out that owners need to find out what the producer's currency is—i.e., what is so important to that individual that he or she will be motivated to strive even harder. In some cases, Roger quipped, "the currency is currency," but others may not be as concerned about money. Time away from the office may be more important. Some may want to build on their legacy by training young producers. Everybody's different, he pointed out, as are their hot buttons.

And the same applies to agency owners. They can be average and still make a good living. But the cost of that is the future viability of the agency. "You have to decide whether you want to be average or go beyond that and become a great agency," he concluded.

### The driving force

But the real secret sauce lies in the participation of the members. At each meeting, certain members are required to bring in "one great idea." And this is

where practical solutions meet theory and show not just what can be done, but how and why.

And, quite often, the "one great idea" has emerged after a long period of research, cogitation and trial and error. It's not just accidentally putting peanut butter on your chocolate bar.

Michel Drouin of Charlebois-Trepanier & Associates, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada, introduced a great idea that had started as a germ of an idea 14 months before the meeting. And, like many great ideas, it grew out of a problem—his producers were unable to obtain enough first appointments to keep the agency growing. They were stuck in the "process and service" trap.

So Michel decided that the agency needed to hire a person who would make those first appointments—someone who would make certain that there was a steady stream of qualified prospects lined up to meet with the agency's producers. Once the decision was made to hire what the agency called its Business Development Coordinator, the management team spent the next nine months researching the attributes that such a person would need to have. They read books by well-known authors on the subject, as well as researching relevant topics on the Internet. Since this person would be soliciting

appointments over the phone, they worked on and tested scripts.

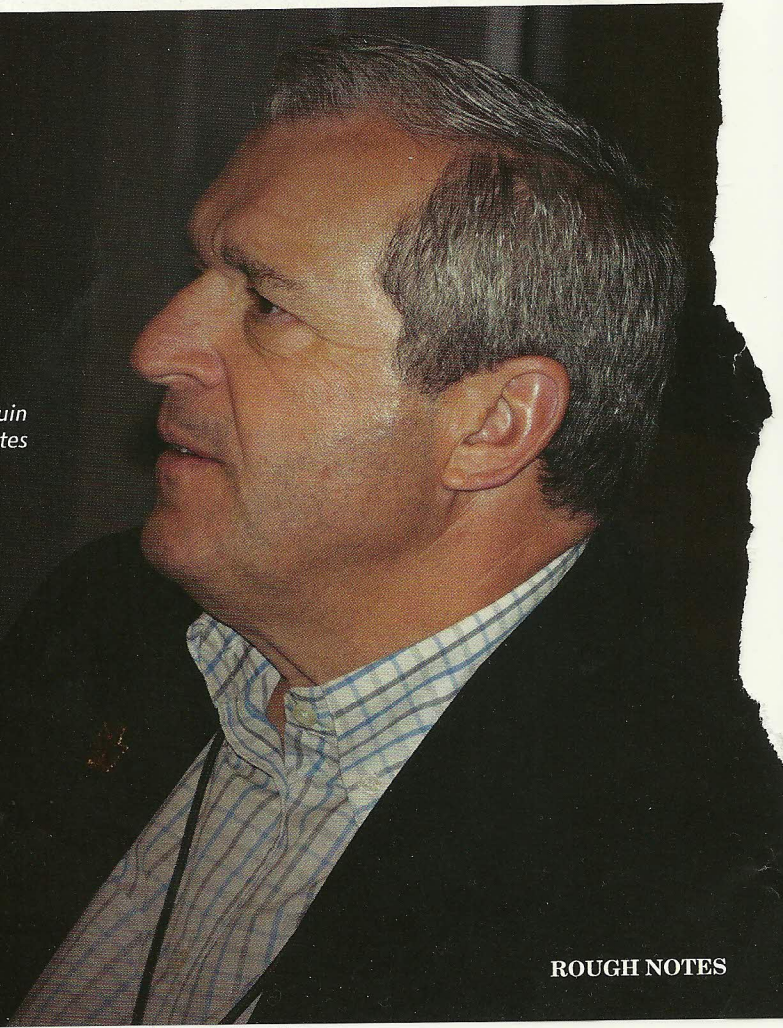
Once they had decided on the attributes needed and the research had allowed them to decide on exactly what the job would entail, they began a search for the candidate. It was a long, but worthwhile project, which he described in greater detail at the meeting. And the results show just how great an idea this proved to be:

In the first five months, out of 500 contacts, the BDC obtained 160 appointments that took place during that period and another 140 that were to be secured at a later date. And, Michel pointed out, he has a potential new and successful producer-in-training. "Of course that means that we'll probably be looking for a new BDC in a couple of years, but that's a nice problem to have," he concluded. "We've created a dynamic, growth-oriented sales culture that is designed to perpetuate itself."

Chris Paradiso of Paradiso Insurance, Stafford Springs, Connecticut, as his "one great idea" gave a brief primer on the use of social media that had members implementing several of his ideas on their smartphones, tablets, and laptops. He discussed numerous ways to make certain that your agency winds up high on the search list and pointed

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out some of the new things that are coming down the pike that will influence search engine optimization in the future.

All the ideas presented represented weeks, months and even years of work and research to get them to the point where they were workable and each presenter was perfectly willing to share what he had learned with the group, thus allowing each member to implement the idea without having to reinvent the wheel. The meeting very much reminded me of those ads that talk about the price of certain things, like the exceptional dinner we enjoyed at Gibson's Restaurant, but then talks about things that are priceless. And that's what the roundup of ideas and the group discussions, as well as the one-on-one networking that occurs during the meals and the breaks, really are—priceless.

In its mission statement, The Greenwich Group describes itself as 'a progressive national organization of innovative insurance professionals operating in a cooperative atmosphere with a high degree of integrity in our relationships with our clients, insurance companies, and among ourselves.' That "cooperative atmosphere" was very evident at the meeting, where all were willing to get into the specific details of their operations so that others could join in their success. It certainly makes it clear why the balance of the mission statement says the group is focused on "insuring profitability of our members and stability of service for our clients while seeking products that are both competitive and comprehensive within the marketplace thereby creating a rewarding and challenging environment for ourselves and our employees."

One of the principal reasons for the group's success is that it selects members in key geographic locations where there is no overlap of marketing territories, so members are supporting rather than competing with each other. Because its members are located in key cities throughout the U.S. and Canada, members can call on each other when they have clients that need local market knowledge in those areas.

At the same time, thanks to its strong commitment to profitability, Greenwich Group members enjoy access to the markets they need. Chairman Tim Longworth, CEO of Cornerstone Insurance in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, reports that "being associated with Greenwich Group and with Sitkins/InCITE Performance Group has assisted us in not only garnering the markets that

we required, but also has prompted more than half a dozen insurers to approach Cornerstone, unsolicited, to write for them. It's a nice turn of events for us."

From my admittedly limited viewpoint, Greenwich Group resembles a fraternity in the best sense of that word. The members indeed exhibit the camaraderie that characterizes the brotherly society brought together for mutual aid and benefit. I will admit that there were lighthearted moments when these comrades engaged in

frivolity that closely resembled "Animal House," but that simply added to the charm and further displayed the closeness that has made this group successful.

The group still is looking for a few good agencies in certain locations to further enhance its marketing reach, but only those agencies that come armed with good ideas will be considered. ■

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