

Critical thinking separates advisers from mere sellers

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Are you an insight-driven organization? Are you translating information for your clients? Are you helping them cut through noise and glean the most important ideas to help them make better business decisions and achieve stronger results?

Take an honest reflection. If you're not doing this, are you really advising? Or are you just helping to select products? Advising should be a holistic business, and product selling is done regardless of the context.

Benefits advisers should research the industry and keep clients and prospects informed about issues that impact their business. Managing employees should be right in your wheelhouse. And you should spend the majority of your time working either reading and analyzing or talking about that work with colleagues, clients, and prospects.

Insights sell

Consider this from a chief learning officer: "Insights have been referred to as the new currency of business, and today's economy is often referred to as the insight economy. Consultancies and think tanks have made it clear: To compete today, companies must rely on critical-thinking experts sharing insights."

Again, are you one of those insight-driven organizations? If not, you're losing out on tremendous opportunity.

You need critical thinkers

Not everyone is cut out for this style of business. To do it effectively, you need people on your team who have the skills to interpret information and glean insights through writing, video and speaking. You need to have critical thinkers on your team who are willing to share their ideas openly. Such thinkers can be leaders, sales people, account executives, or specialists (those in HR and compliance).

If you don't currently have at least someone like this on your team, you're going to find yourself falling behind. These are the most critical skills needed for organizations.

Why benefits agencies resist being insight-driven organizations

1. It's too much work

Encouraging critical thinking in benefits agencies also impacts processes and workflow. As agencies shift from sales of products and service to consulting and comprehensive management of employees and compliance, behaviors need to change.

- Sales people need to engage in more listening and less talking, ask more questions and lessen off-the-cuff replies.
- Marketing must create more insight-driven content and do less promotion, more interpretation of information and less pushing of easy-to-share content.
- Account management must listen more for intent and unspoken needs and limit transaction-only conversations. There should be more questions asked and less orders taken.

If you read this and are thinking, “No way that’s gonna happen,” then you’re likely not cut out to be an adviser. If researching and finding quality insights and answers for your clients is too difficult, or if you think it takes too much work and time, then you should stick with product sales.

When you work with clients in a consultative way, it will take time. And brainpower. And writing skills. And having probing conversations and patient listening-for-intent sales skills.

You need to be able to take what the client has told you and return a plan of what you believe they most need. And what the client most needs doesn’t necessarily coincide with what they may want. You need to learn how to balance those two things. Education for yourself and for the client are at the heart of this work.

2. They’re afraid

There are some who love to share their opinions and ideas and can’t wait for the next opportunity to educate their audience. And then there’s most of the rest of the benefits industry. Sharing ideas and opinions in public seems to terrify people the most.

And really, it’s no surprise. Having a business where everything comes from the carriers – from the products to the pricing to the messaging to the billing and the service – it’s no wonder agencies never gain their own voice.

But doing so is a critical step to moving from product selling to advising. It requires that you have an opinion and share advice and recommendations based your knowledge, insights, and experience. If you can’t get comfortable with this, you can’t be an adviser.

Insight-driven companies don’t spend tremendous time and resources developing analysis and interpreting information because they want to sound smart. They do it because clients are attracted to companies that ARE smart.

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