

CHAPTER 11

SUCCESS AS A YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR

BY ELIZABETH ROOK

My father has had an extremely successful career as an Allstate Agent for over 30 years. I guess you could say I was born into the insurance business. I can remember being a little girl, sitting in a huge conference room, spinning around in the desk chair and pretending to write insurance. It wasn't until college that I actually started working for my dad. It was just a part time job to help pay my rent and car note. I was bored to tears being stuck in an office all day while my friends were hanging by the pool. Between the paper applications and policy information, the insurance business was a snooze fest. I grew up in a small town where my dad was practically a local celebrity. My opinion of his business started to change. I realized that he was not just an insurance salesman; he was actually providing a service. I was intrigued by the amount of respect people had for my father but never in a million years would I have dreamed I would follow in his footsteps.

In 2000, my dad asked me to come to work for him full time and manage his new second location. It wasn't until then that I actually took an interest in my job. I started going out "calling on businesses" and attending networking meetings. I did everything I could to meet people from other business who could send me referrals. One of the biggest challenges I have faced over the years is with people not taking me seriously. I don't know what was worse, that I was young or that I worked for my dad. Working with family wasn't always peaches and

cream. The whole situation gave me a fierce determination to prove myself. The more people underestimated me the harder I worked. I studied all of our policies and underwriting guidelines. I listened to my dad talk to customers and memorized what he said verbatim. I practiced, studied and practiced some more. It took me several long years to earn my father's respect, but we became a great team. After the purchase of his second location, we tripled the size of his agencies. We won multiple company sales awards every year including the 2011 Allstate Agency of the Year in Tennessee.

GROWING MY BUSINESS

Now here I am 16 years later with my own agency, which I started from scratch. I have continued as a family owned and operated business. We are located in a suburb just outside of Memphis in Lakeland, Tennessee. We also recently opened a second location in Covington, Tennessee. My cousin, Benjamin Rook, whom I previously worked with for five years at Allstate thankfully came with me. Our agency primarily represents the Erie Insurance Company, which I cannot say enough great things about. However, we are independent agents, which allows us to have direct contracts with multiple companies. Being independent gives us the ability to find the best company based on what is most important to the customer, whether it be price, service, stability, or a combination of all three.

HERE ARE 14 TIPS TO HELP YOU ON YOUR ROAD TO SUCCESS:

1) Your Reputation is Priceless, Don't Damage It

There are so many factors that can make or break you in business. Your reputation plays a significant role in the customers search in finding a company and agent they can trust. Over time, your reputation is the most valuable currency you have in business. It's the invisible key that either opens or closes doors of professional opportunity. Especially in an age where everything is forever recorded and accessible, your reputation has to be guarded like the most sacred treasure.

2) Network, Network, Network

In business, it really is all about who you know. Knowing the right people is what gets you ahead in business. Surround yourself with successful and positive people. If you are surrounded by people who

are meeting their goals, it will help motivate you to achieve your own objectives. Regardless of how busy you are, you need to make time for networking. There is no such thing as too many connections. Take advantage of the opportunity to attend trade shows, conferences and meetings. Network with other insurance professionals in your field. Meet and stay connected to lots of folks, and invest your time developing as many of those relationships as possible. Begin networking with local businesses that complement your insurance business. Be sure to leave plenty of contact literature behind in case people have follow-up questions.

3) Community Involvement

My dad taught me the importance of giving back to your local community. We are heavily involved with the local schools and athletic programs – as well as many other non-profits such as volunteering for the Red Cross. I estimate that 75% of our marketing budget goes directly to schools, athletic programs, churches, and other nonprofits. The rest of our budget is spent on networking with other local business owners, direct mail and ads in our local newspapers. You are more likely to receive referrals when people see you as more than an insurance agent and see you out participating in events.

4) Captive versus Independent Agent

I started my career as a captive insurance agent. If anyone is just starting out as an insurance agent, a captive company is the way to go. Some captive insurance companies include Nationwide, Allstate, State Farm and Farm Bureau. As with any job, there are pros and cons. Here on some of the advantages: The companies usually provide free on-the-job training to the agents and their staff. There are already established systems in place needed to run your agency. Another huge plus is that you don't need a large marketing budget since companies already spend a small fortune on advertising. The companies can even negotiate your local marketing opportunities which reduce the cost. Here are a few of the disadvantages: You can only sell the insurance that is offered by your company. As a small business owner, you basically have little to no control over what products you can sell. At any point the company you represent can stop selling a particular line of business, which can result in loss of clientele. Whereas being an independent agent allows you to have contracts with several companies. When you're an IC, you're your

own boss, with all of the risks and rewards that entails. You can choose how, when, and where to work, for as much or as little time as you want. If you plan to start your own independent insurance agency, you need knowledge and access to plenty of liquid capital.

5) Don't sell on price

It does not matter what company you decide to work for, your customers will always be able to find insurance cheaper somewhere else. I understand that pricing will always play a huge part in the sales process, but if you honestly believe people buy on price alone then you are mistaken. Oftentimes, people don't realize how important insurance is until they need it or worse when they need insurance and don't have it. This is where you, as the agent, come in. Since insurance is not a tangible item that you can purchase and take home with you, you need to remember you are actually selling yourself. You are selling your superior customer service.

6) Talk Less, Listen More

A lot of complaints about insurance agents are that they're overly persistent. I learned early on that high pressure sales are not my thing. Luckily there is another way to do business without compromising your integrity. To succeed in the insurance industry, you must love your job and believe in the products you are selling. You cannot be just an agent. You must be a sales professional – which means making the customer's needs primary. Instead of collecting information and spitting out figures, we ask questions about their lifestyle, family, and concerns for the future. Understand that each situation is different. Before you can make proper recommendations you need to know what exactly your client is looking for.

7) Find a Mentor

Find an experienced and successful agent with similar values to mirror yourself after. I am sure whoever you choose will be flattered that you asked. I was fortunate enough to have my father as my mentor. He was able to teach me things that can only be learned by working out in the field.

8) Create a Standard Operating Procedure

Successful people live disciplined lives and set their priorities. They don't procrastinate. They are busy, productive and proactive.

Systems will help you establish credibility and will help you make fewer mistakes. In a business that revolves around multi-tasking and paperwork, organization should be a top priority. If you need help getting your agency running smoothly, I highly recommend Joe Hagen's Freedom Through Systems™ Program for Insurance Agency Owners.

9) Become an Expert

Know your strengths and work on your weaknesses. Devote some time each day to improving your sales and marketing techniques. There are so many different formats available. You can attend webinars, read business and marketing books or take college refresher courses. A few years ago, I was struggling with speaking in front of groups. I needed help so I took a public-speaking class at the local college and it made all the difference in the world.

10) Follow up after the sale

You have earned your client's trust when they decided to have their insurance written by you. You can maintain that trust by keeping in touch with them regularly. Handwrite thank you cards and always ask for referrals. I cannot stress this enough! Your clients can also be a source of future clients. Create a customer referral program that offers some sort of incentive for your existing customers to refer new customers to you. Things such as gift cards work really well. Don't just take referrals, give them also. It helps strengthen your connections and will come in handy in the future. Word of mouth advertising is free, and referrals have a better closing ratio than cold-call telemarketing.

11) Be Accessible

With the advancements in technology, communication and accessibility is more important than ever before. A work day no longer fits between the hours of 9:00 am – 5:00 pm. This generation has become more of a phone call, email and text message society. I am always working. Not only do I not want to miss out on a sale, but I also want to be the first point of contact in case someone needs to file a claim. Otherwise, they might as well be insured with an 800 number.

12) Brand Yourself

Your personal branding campaign should be primarily centered on the goal of marketing yourself as a celebrity within your industry. The key phrase here is “within your industry.” Establish yourself as a go-to resource in your community for all things insurance. That involves branding yourself both as an expert and as an *interesting* individual. Why interesting? Because it’s not good enough simply to be considered good at what you do, you also need to be memorable. You need to stick in the minds of potential clients, so that when they need your services, you are the first person they think of.

13) Social Media

Now, making an unforgettable first impression *in-person* is no longer the only way to establish your brand. Another great way to build relationships and brand yourself is through social media. You can connect in real time with clients, colleagues and friends; and build relationships across the globe. This will form stronger relationships with customers as well as getting your name out to potential clients. Keep the content interesting and unique. Remember your clients want to do business with insurance professionals they trust. Facebook and Google Business Pages are good for reminding your friends about what you do for a living. LinkedIn is for networking with other business professionals. I have also seen quite a few insurance professionals with YouTube channels and blogs. You can use these sites to announce upcoming promotions and events.

14) Maintain confidence in your abilities, relax and enjoy the ride

Regardless of your career path, there will always be roadblocks and distractions along the way. To survive in the competitive world of business, you have to be able to deal with rejection and still remain optimistic. My final piece of advice is to read or listen to the book *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill. It completely changed my perspective on life and hopefully it will help you as well.



About Elizabeth

At the age of 34, Elizabeth Rook has become one of Memphis's most successful businesswomen in the insurance industry. She attributes her success to having worked with and being mentored by her father, Ron Rook, for over 15 years. Her father was an extremely successful insurance agent, who owned two of the most successful Allstate Agencies in the country. She was involved in the sales, management and marketing of their family business and learned a tremendous amount about every aspect of the insurance industry from him.

After leaving Allstate at the end of 2012, Elizabeth decided to branch out and open her own company, Elizabeth Rook Insurance. Although it was definitely a leap of faith, she believes that her partnership with Erie Insurance Company has been her best career move to date. She opened a second location in her first year with Erie Insurance. She has recruited some of the most knowledgeable and successful insurance agents in the Memphis Area. Her agency services multiple lines of insurance, including home, auto, life and all types of commercial policies. She has won dozens of business and insurance awards throughout the years. She was awarded Small Business Woman of the Year at the age of 29. Considering she started her insurance agency from scratch, her proudest achievement so far was being awarded "New Erie Agent of the Year - 2013."

Elizabeth also understands the importance of volunteering and giving back to her local community. Being a mother of two young daughters, Taylor and Jaime, she is extremely passionate about education and helping children that are less fortunate. She is a Red Cross Volunteer and her company makes significant financial contributions to the local schools systems and athletic programs. Elizabeth and her team members are also heavily involved with many organizations focused on building strong businesses throughout the community. The purpose of her agents are to be respected professionals and trusted advisors.

"My family and I grew up in a small town about 30 miles outside of Memphis, Tennessee. Here in the south, I was raised to mind my manners, respect my elders and have a genuine, down-to-earth attitude. Basically it is just Southern Hospitality. I take pride in the fact that the majority of my business comes directly from referrals. When people tell their friends, family and colleagues about you, it's one of the best compliments your business can get."

For more information about Elizabeth Rook Insurance you may call 901-867-SAVE
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