

WHO DO ASSOCIATIONS SERVE?



As the year draws to a close, I am naturally drawn to review the past year's accomplishments and failures. I'm extremely thankful that the year has passed without another significant surety company or national bail program imploding on the national stage. I'm saddened by the passing of one of our industry's legends, Phil Konvitz. Jack Whitlock shares his thoughts on Phil inside the magazine. Suffice it to say that the world is worse off for the loss and our prayers and thoughts, in that order, are extended to the Konvitz family.

Any number of local, state and national gatherings of the bail industry have taken place in the past year. Each designed to provide a forum in which concerned members of our industry could gather, share ideas and plan strategies which would expand, protect and advance our industry in their respective markets. Any successful association will have as its basis the commonality of an idea or likemindedness.

I must admit, however, to a certain degree of disenchantment and even disillusionment, when I seriously attempt to evaluate these efforts. In 1986, when Jack and I started, we dreamt of an industry solidly united against its foes. National, State and Local associations well-versed in the vital roles they play in the protection and betterment of our markets. An enormously effective grassroots-based organization which could capitalize on the political power of the individual bail agent. We wished for a cohesive band of agents and companies whose power, when combined, far exceeded the power of an unorganized group of single businesses.

We are only part of the way there. We continue to plod and stumble due in part to our inability to coalesce into a unit capable of conveying a unified message for our industry. Financial insecurity, (a less offensive term I guess I use in the place of greed), on the part of both surety companies and bail agents, both property- and surety- backed, continues to plague us. In-fighting provides clear evidence of the harm we suffer in a self-inflicted way. A general sense of malaise seems to have comfortably settled onto our shoulders.

These competitive divisions inhibit our ability to present a unified voice when trying to convey the core purpose for the bail bond industry's existence; the provision of an integral component of public safety. Why else are we here? The single most effective means of showcasing our worth to the criminal justice system happens every day, our clients appear in court. If

they don't, we do everything we can to make sure they do. We need to look ourselves in the mirror and be sure we understand this. Are we doing everything within our means to ensure appearance? To what degree are we staying with the transaction after the actual posting of the bond?

From a national perspective, I see minimal resources being devoted toward the furtherance of our industry or the development of an effective and cogent plan for the future. We seem content to play defense and apply any available financial assets to simply avert the current crisis.

Let's face it, our industry is comprised of distinctly different distribution channels and can be divided into three groups, property-backed bail agents, insurer-backed bail agents and the sureties themselves. By definition, property-backed bail agents have a distinctly

local focus. The maximum geographic reach of their financial support seldom crosses their respective state lines. Why should they? Surety-backed bail agents, by design, have reason to rely upon the financial resources of their insurers. Why else choose to partner with them? Finally the sureties are perceived to be the 'deep pockets' who will respond financially in the time of crisis. The disconnect occurs when insurer resources are requested to support causes which may be mutually beneficial to both of the previously mentioned agent groups. Why should profits be reinvested to assist a particular channel of distribution which provides no reasonable expectation of a return on the investment? I would suggest this is exactly why any existing National group has difficulty gaining the necessary support, both philosophically as well as financially.

Any organization seeking to draw membership from across this country needs to properly identify the members it seeks to serve and serve them directly. If such membership is determined to represent differing distribution channels, the national group will need to recognize the financial difficulties a choice such as that can bring and the membership itself should be expected to shoulder their burden.

Our Company will continue to provide its resources, both financial and personnel, to any effort which can be demonstrated to be trying to grow the surety-backed agency channel. Anything else would be hypocritical.

Maybe the time is here for the creation of a national group of surety-backed agents. Let me know what you think.

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