

Selling in the Business Market ▼

Eliminate the Fear Factor: *Choosing the right voluntary benefits partner*



by Melissa Hemdal

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OK, you get it: voluntary benefits are the fastest-growing part of the insurance market, a way to increase your income stream and a tool to

build your reputation as a solution provider with your clients. But when it comes to putting those same hard-won clients in the hands of a voluntary benefits provider, your feelings may range from slight misgivings to full-fledged panic.

Fear not! Finding a strong voluntary benefits partner to work with is a simple matter of knowing what to look for. Here are five tests you can take (none of which involve eating mystery innards or jumping off high platforms) to find out if a voluntary benefits carrier knows how to work with you and your clients.

1. The voluntary partner has a proven record of best-in-class service. Many carriers tout their products and leave mention of their service for last. But I'm putting it at the top of the list because service is the true market differentiator. The carrier's customer service must be both broker- and client-friendly. Your voluntary partner's local team should be modeled after your traditional group product distribution model, with individuals in the sales and marketing side who work with you as well as service reps who work with you and your clients to follow through on implementation and fulfillment. Ask about the carrier's home

office support to make sure it can serve you and your clients in various capacities:

- Separate customer service units dedicated to serve you, your clients and their employees.
- A dedicated broker web site with access to online proposals, compensation, etc., as well as a dedicated plan administrator web site.
- Quantifiable customer service goals and published results on how well the company meets those goals.

2. The voluntary partner offers a broad product portfolio. To meet your clients' different needs, you need access to a broad array of products, including both individual and group voluntary products. The products should address the health care cost issue: helping fill gaps in an employer's benefits program and helping employees pay for increased out-of-pocket expenses. A carrier should also offer products that mesh with today's consumer-driven health plans and are compliant with health savings accounts requirements.

3. The voluntary partner provides flexible enrollment options. Many voluntary benefits carriers have products but they don't have the delivery system. That means you have two options: enroll the benefits yourself or find an enrollment company, which means bringing another third party into your broker-client relationship. A good voluntary partner will be able to handle this for you.

In addition, the carrier's products should work with a variety of enrollment methods, giving you enrollment flexibility to meet your clients' different needs. A good voluntary partner can conduct its voluntary benefits enrollments the way you like to conduct business: face-to-face, enroller-assisted enrollments; group meetings; paper enrollments; web-based or offline electronic enrollments; call centers and self-enrollments. A voluntary benefits carrier must have a wide range of products plus delivery solutions that fit most, if not all, of your clients' needs — not just solutions for the one or two clients that fit the carrier's way of enrolling.

4. The voluntary partner offers customizable benefits communications. Effective communication is where

many benefits plan succeed or fail. After all, what good is your clients' investment in their benefits program if their employees don't understand and appreciate it? A voluntary benefits carrier that can communicate both your clients' core and voluntary products stands out over other carriers. A good voluntary partner will present a single, streamlined solution — a value-added service, at no direct cost to you or your clients.

5. The voluntary partner respects your client relationships. Last but not least — in fact, perhaps most important of all — your voluntary benefits carrier should understand the importance of the broker-client relationship and the value you place on it. After all, the account is your client. Just like teammates on the “Fear Factor” television show, you and your voluntary partner must have strong trust. Would you trust this voluntary benefits carrier to work with you to develop benefits strategies for your clients? Will the carrier respect and honor your desires for the account's benefits program? Will it put your relationship with the account before its own needs? Here are some keys to help answer those questions:

- The voluntary rep should work with you and the client to set clear expectations for the relationship. For example, you may feel more comfortable if the rep only makes recommendations to a client with your full knowledge and agreement.
- The carrier should have a track record of honoring its commitment on Broker of Record letters. The carrier should make every effort to honor your clients' wishes, only deviating from an account's wishes in extraordinary circumstances and with full disclosure to you and the client.

The primary goal should be to ensure that products, services and recommendations are in line with the overall goals and themes of the benefits program you have in place with the clients. The carrier should be both broker- and client-centered — recommending the right products and delivery methodology based on both the client's and your needs.