

## Top Five Lies Agents Tell Themselves

By: Heather Cochrane Russo

Agents are, by and large, incredibly honest people. We need to be — our very livelihoods depend on our reputations and the values we share with our customers. However, we're human (I know, shucks). Just like every other human on the planet, we tell ourselves little white lies to make scary, daunting and overwhelming situations feel better. But, we're not doing ourselves any favors. Here are some of the biggest lies we tell ourselves — and how we can move past them:

### 1. "My staff doesn't like change."

This actually isn't a lie. Of course your staff doesn't like change — most people don't. The lie here is that you're making the problem about your staff when, in reality, the problem lies with you. The real issue is not that THEY don't like change, it's that YOU don't want to manage them through the changes you initiate.

No doubt about it, change is hard. It's also necessary. Everything from a new policy to obtaining customer email addresses to transitioning to a new agency management system can cause resentment, confusion and all the negative feelings known to man. So, if change is hard but also necessary, how do we

reconcile the two and evolve as organizations without inciting staff revolts? The answer is simple: strong, steady leadership and empathetic support. Your staff can handle more change than you think they can, but it's up to you to create an environment that will allow them to more comfortably navigate the uncomfortable aspects of change.

Changes are much easier to swallow when all parties are informed of and involved in the process of change. This can be accomplished by utilizing a handful of change management techniques — ways to help your staff accept (and maybe even desire) the changes coming down the line.

First, educate your team to help them understand why the change is necessary. Look at the situation from their perspective, sincerely seek their input and welcome their feedback.

Second, involve them in the decision-making process. People are much more likely to buy into a project when they see that their contributions are being heard and acknowledged.

Third, keep the lines of communication open. Be willing to hear feedback

before, during and after the change has been implemented. Clear lines of communication solve many, many problems.

Change will be much easier to effect when your team is informed, involved and invested.

### 2. "I'm too busy for [insert important business objective here]."

As an agency principal, you're the jack-of-all-trades, the go-to person, the one who puts out the inevitable fires. It's your livelihood, your business and just getting through the day is an exercise in survival. How do you find time to take on all that EXTRA work, the stuff you KNOW you should be handling, but which you can never seem to prioritize? Every day you leave projects untouched that could help your agency grow. Maybe it's redesigning your website, launching that new marketing campaign, staying on top of social media or getting out and networking with your fellow agents. These could all contribute to the health and longevity of your business, but it seems as though there's just not enough time in the day.

Here's the secret: it's not about time; it's about control. Successful delegation leads to thriving organizations. Delegate

some of those time-eating tasks to your qualified staff, and give them the tools and knowledge they need to get results. If your staff is at capacity, examine what routines can be outsourced or handled by an intern. Put yourself in a position to work ON your business, not just IN your business.

### 3. “The insurance industry is stable — market disruption won’t happen here.”

Tell that to the taxi industry, the travel industry or to any number of the tried-and-true businesses that have suddenly found themselves on the outside looking in due to the explosive pace of technological innovations. That’s not to say that we’re all doomed — there’s plenty of value independent agents offer to their customers that they’d never get from technology companies that happen to sell insurance (looking at you, Amazon!). But, it does mean we must stay focused on finding new ways to reach potential customers and new methods to retain and communicate with our existing customer base.

This is an exercise in listening — we must be guided by the consumer, allowing them to drive the relationship and adapt to their changing needs. We need to be less like the IRS and more like the Apple store — providing the personal touch and expertise customers desire and deserve combined with the technologically advanced experience they’ve come to expect. Keeping up with changing technology isn’t chasing trends — it’s

investing in the future of our agencies. If you’re still using all the same technology you were using five years ago, it’s time for some serious self-assessment.

### 4. “My accounts are well-rounded.”

Every agent everywhere says his or her staff is THE BEST at account rounding. Where does this come from? Denial? Blind faith? Regardless, the reality is quite different. The average agency actually has fewer than two policies per customer which, I think we all can agree, is NOT well-rounded. The reason why is simple: most account managers are uncomfortable asking for more business. Shouldn’t it be easy to ask an existing client if they want a quote for an umbrella policy or if you can quote their workers comp, too? Yes, for a sales person (which, if you are an agency principal, you likely are). But most account managers aren’t sales people and REALLY don’t want to be seen as sales people — and asking to quote a policy the client didn’t explicitly ask for can feel really salesy to them. The good news is that this is manageable when you gain control over your agency metrics.

Dive into the numbers and track new policies by account manager. You’ll gain greater control over your retention rate, which directly translates into greater agency profitability (and better coverage for your customers, too.)

### 5. “I need to hire a producer to grow.”

This is the biggest — and my favorite — lie of all. Let me be perfectly clear:

you absolutely do not need to hire a producer to grow your agency. There is more value to be gained from your existing book of business through account rounding and referrals than any producer could bring in (and at a much lower cost to your agency).

But, as they say, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing you’ve always done and expecting a different outcome. We just acknowledged that agency staff don’t typically account round well (see #4). Therefore, if you truly want to grow this way, you need to shift to aligning your compensation packages with your organizational goals. Model out various compensation scenarios until you find the right one that will increase the value of your agency while significantly increasing the income your account managers take home. There are as many ways to do this as there are agencies — figure out what will work for your people in your market.

This all brings us back to the first point — aligning compensation packages with your organizational goals is about empowering people to manage change, building trust in your staff and being willing to innovate. Get rid of the lies you tell yourself and make the changes needed to set your agency on a course of growth, success and stability. ■

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