

Oklahoma City insurance company endures two decades of changing **By Pamela Grady - 1/22/2007**

Thirty years after starting Professional Insurors Agency, LLC (formerly Property Insurors Consultants Agency, Inc.), founder and Chief Executive Cliff Miller, says he feels his ideas of how a commercial insurance agency should market its services and product back in the late Seventies and Eighties were ahead of its time.

After graduating from college in Kansas, Miller came to Oklahoma working for Goodyear Tire and Rubber in Broken Arrow, and after gaining insurance experience with other companies, to include Allstate in Bartlesville and Dallas and Oklahoma City firms among others, Miller and his colleague decided to go out on their own.

In 1976, Miller opened an offices in Oklahoma City and a Dallas with a partner, one employee and little money. The partnership, however, only lasted a year.

Miller kept his Oklahoma City office with one employee and continued to do commercial writing. And at a time when insurance agents were writing a variety of policies and trying to be everything to everyone, Miller targeted specialized groups such as Apartments, used car dealerships and pest-control operators. He wrote commercial insurance policies throughout the state and region.

As time went on, Professional Insurors expanded to offices in Lawton, Duncan and Sand Springs, Okla. He attempted to implement a satellite office concept, however, it did not work well for the company due to a lack of technological advances that are afforded today and travel constraints. It was time to change the company's strategy and Miller decided to close all of his offices except for the one in Oklahoma City.

"We were working hard but really not making money," Miller said. "We were losing a little bit every month."

In May 1987 – a time when the market was changing and insurance was a tough industry to work in – Kelly Miller, Cliff's son, graduated from Oklahoma State University and joined the agency.

The father and son sat down and began working on the company's marketing and growth strategies. They analyzed the business as if it wasn't their own. The discussion took place when the company had grown to 26 employees, but, still, things were not going as expected.

The bleeding had to stop, he said, and decisions would have to be made.

The Millers sold their building and downsized its employee base.

"We figured out who the people were that we needed and called them in and said, 'This is where we are. We are going to downsize the agency...because we have to in order to survive. If you are in this room, you have a job.

There's no increase in pay, there's no bonus... Please understand it will be tough and, if you're willing to accept those terms, great. If you're not, let us know now and we'll bring in someone else.'

"Everyone in the room stayed," Kelly Miller said. "The very next month we turned a profit."

Cliff Miller said it wasn't just their company that had been struggling.

"It was a tough time for everybody, a lot of people didn't make it," Cliff Miller said. "Some companies didn't survive."

The younger Miller explained it was a time when the local market was changing that things took a turn.

"...Penn Square (Bank) went down, and we had to refocus on everything we did because we had all of this commercial property that we had insured," Kelly Miller said. "All of it was going back to the banks and the savings and loans. And every time a bank would repossess a property, we'd lose it."

He said it was at that time the agency started working with the banks and savings and loans, writing their policies on the repossession side. The younger Miller remembers those times as tough in the industry.

But, as the old adage goes, time heals all wounds and things improved in the local market.

"All at once, things got better and the banks started selling properties to new investors and we started writing for the new investors, as well," Kelly Miller said. "We started building back our business."

Cliff Miller said the company started to grow again and continued working with commercial properties.

The younger Miller emphasized his father's idea of niche marketing was before the industry's time.

"Looking back now, it's very much the norm now to go into niche marketing," Kelly Miller said. "When Cliff started doing that (niche marketing) back in the Seventies and Eighties, that was highly unusual and actually considered aggressive.

"...It scared a lot of people in the industry. So now, 30 years later, what he started doing 30 years ago is what companies and consultants preach."

Over the years, the Millers say they've made many changes within the office. For instance, the office has no file cabinets. The company has gone totally paperless in order to be more efficient. And each person has dual computer screens to pull client records while on the phone.

The Miller's also say their hiring process has changed and top-talented employees have been part of the company's success. Among the many lessons learned are hiring the right people with the utmost talent, and with that comes paying a higher salary.

"We did \$700,000 in new business revenue this year, about \$10 million in premiums," Cliff Miller said. "We're on track with what we wanted to do. It's the best year we've had in our business. And we've got the best people we've ever had."

Cliff Miller added that in Professional Insurors's future, the company plans to go through a transition. Kelly Miller, President, plans to take over and purchase the company in approximately two years.

"It was a decision I made over the holidays," Cliff Miller said. "Kelly will take over the remaining management duties of the agency, and I'm going to focus more on sales."

Miller added in the last several years he has started to move away from managing the company while handing more of the responsibility to his son Kelly and to Vice President of Operations Chris Moxley.

"I was able to grow my client base more this year than I've ever grown within my part of the business because I was able to focus more on sales," Cliff Miller said. "I don't want to leave, I just want to work more on my clients and be more of a producer."

And after 30 years in business, Professional Insurors is true to their agency slogan "Focused, Strong & Growing!"