



PROJECTAPEX

The Masterclass MindsetSM



A lifelong journey that **begins in the mind**

It's not easy to reach the top of any profession. That's especially true in the hypercompetitive insurance business. While the achievement is coveted, the barriers along the way ensure not everyone makes it.



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*The countless hours of unanswered calls.
The disappointment of no-show appointments.
The constant struggle to sustain what you've built and find ways to keep getting better.*

The truth is, producers shouldn't have to work that hard only to see their business plateau while their competitors continue to grow and thrive.

What is the difference between the frustrated and the fortunate – between the stuck and stellar? How are some producers able to elevate themselves above the rest? **At North American, we call it...**

The Masterclass MindsetSM

Part II: Masterclass Mindset

In this second and final Project Apex white paper, we'll give you a never-before-seen glimpse into the minds of top annuity producers.

The Masterclass Mindset revealed itself through a survey of hundreds of financial professionals and a series of in-depth, follow-up interviews with dozens of them.

Individually, they shared what's made them successful, many of them over the course of several decades. Here, we've pulled together the common traits most likely responsible for leading them to the top and that could help you on your way there as well.

Not only do we have a better understanding of what drives them today but also their journey – from the early days entering the business to establishing themselves as consistent performers to now – looking ahead and providing counsel to the next generation.



But wait, there's more

In case you missed, Part I of this two-part series examined the best practices in business that set top producers apart and help them maintain an upward sales trajectory year after year.



Origin stories

It's often been said you won't know where you're going until you know where you've been. While the top producers we studied were similar in many ways, coming from humble beginnings, there was a lot variety in what motivated them to join the financial services industry and how their careers began.

1. Connections and recruitment

Many producers were “recruited” by a family member, friend, their own financial professional, a recruiter, or a teacher/professor. Some of these family members or friends were already in the industry and helped them get a job. Other producers were clients of advisors who suggested they become a licensed agent or were recruited based on previous knowledge and experience they had from another job or their college education.

In their words:



“As an MD, I was approached a lot from financial professionals. I wanted to learn more...so I took some online financial courses. I also began working with a good smart adviser. After that I began working with him and my own clients.”

“I was very concerned about working for commissions only. I met a very inspiring and encouraging person who convinced me to get my license. I learned the business from the ground up and eventually moved into sales.”

2. Altruistic desires

Other producers wanted to help people. They saw the chance to make a difference in people's lives by teaching them better financial habits and practices and helping them develop the financial journey that best fits their needs.

In their words:



“The lack of education regarding money management and financial products. I wanted to help educate people on how to make better financial decisions to retire comfortably.”

“I loved working with people and helping them better their situations in life, and money was always something I understood well.”

“I saw so many people didn't understand how to manage their financials. At first, I was interested in the income, but after I learned and saw some of my friends struggle after someone in their family passed away, my objective shifted to, 'I want to help them.'”

Origin stories (Continued)

3. Making a career out of what had become a profitable hobby

Some producers were previously interested in the financial industry, kept up with it and self-educated themselves about managing money, investing, stocks/bonds, etc. Many were already doing their own financial work and realized that their personal skills, interests, and knowledge could become profitable, so they turned their “hobby” into a profession.

In their words:



“Started out in investment banking out of graduate school. Basically, retired from that industry and pursued insurance as sideline.”

“Purely unintentional. I was selling prepaid legal coming out of 25 years as a pastor. I got my insurance license to enhance my value proposition. I quickly realized the greater potential in and value of life insurance and annuities.”

4. Directed career path or job change

For some producers, their career naturally transitioned from another financial job (i.e. banker, CPA, financial analyst). For others, the industry path was due to getting an internship, it was their first job out of college, or it was their major or a career path they were always interested in.

Some producers made a career change due to interest in a different career and found it upon looking for closely associated jobs. Others were laid off and looking for a job that matched their skill set. A few producers realized that there was a demand for sales agents in the financial planning and management industry and decided to take the opportunity.

In their words:



“Career change, with background in accounting and tax. I thought it would be a good fit.”

“I had gone from engineering to mortgage industry (12 years) before starting in this industry.”

5. Flexibility

Some producers were attracted to the flexible schedule. Many offices allow their sales people to set their own hours and are expected to figure out what works best for them. There was the appeal for some producers knowing they could eventually become independent and self-employed.

In their words:



“The idea of being able to build a business and control my own destiny, while helping people to achieve their goals.”

“What attracted me to the industry were a few things...to be able to control your own time, income and who you choose to work with. To be your own boss and that the sky's the limit on your potential income. To be able to have life balance. To be able to spend quality time with my kids, friends, family, and the community. It is almost the perfect career!”

What's my motivation?

Our research showed that the motivations of many of the top producers we studied specifically led them to sell annuities (and life insurance, too) as part of their practice.

1. Helping people

Producers realized that by selling life insurance and fixed index annuities, they could seize the opportunity to help people. To educate them on what products are available, what best fits their situation, and really work through the journey with their clients. These products allow them to develop relationships with their clients, not just maximize profit.

In their words:



“Help people secure their retirement, protect their families, and offer a level of peace that comes from knowing they have some security regarding their future.”

“Flexibility, working with the multicultural smaller communities, helping middle America improve their life and prepare for their future was also gratifying.”

“Making a difference in people's lives financially. Most people don't have a clue what insurance and financial products they have.”

2. Valuable products that fit clients' needs

By adding life and annuity products to their tool belt, producers continue offering more variety and diversification to their clients. These products provide the security of guaranteed income from annuities and asset protection and a high value proposition for clients. Some producers mentioned that these products tend to be the best “fit” for many of their clients' needs.

In their words:



“The desire to help people understand the need for insurance and to educate them that they did not have to settle for extremely low interest rates at a bank or put their money at risk in securities.”

“As a vehicle to hedge and offer options to simply investing directly in the capital markets where there's unlimited risk exposure.”

3. Earning potential and flexibility

Life insurance and annuity products can often offer higher commission percentages and can help them earn more, so by adding these products to their offerings, they're not only increasing the variety in products but can increase profit margins. These can help give producers a more flexible work schedule and the ability to work independently.

In their words:



“The independence that I had and that my earnings did not have a cap in addition to working with a variety of people and working to help them solve problems.”

“Ability to be my own boss as an independent agent.”

Mirror, mirror on the wall

Sales career trajectory

It could be easy for top producers to grow content. But our research discovered that not only do almost all the top producers we talked to believe their sales career is still growing (over 90%), they far outpace non-top producers in that confidence.

Producers that believe their sales career is growing



92%

of those producing over \$3 million

VS



64%

of those producing under \$3 million

Top 5 personality traits

Aside from such an optimistic and confident view of their sales career growth, top producers believe strongly in key personality traits that allow them to be successful in their field.



1. Ethical

This trait is seen as a must-have and is defined as “always doing the right thing” or “always doing what’s best for the client.” It means being honest and transparent, so trust is established, helping to build and maintain relationships with clients.

2. Caring

The client’s needs and wants must always be No. 1. Producers demonstrate that they really care about their clients by actively listening and paying attention to and being proactive about taking steps that are in the client’s best financial interest. Recognizing personal milestones with clients (i.e. sending a birthday card, thank you cards, a personalized note of life change, etc.), empathizing with both their clients’ financial and personal situations, and taking on a more consultative role shows clients their best interests are at heart.

3. Authentic

This trait means being a straight shooter, being genuine with clients. Respondents noted that they don’t “sugarcoat” things for their clients. They take the most honest, sincere approach they can about what best fits their financial situation. Clients see the authenticity of the financial professional, realizing their best interests are top of mind, building trust and respect and helping service retention.

4. Strong communicator

Being a good communicator is a must. Producers note that they must be able to take complex ideas and concepts and explain them in layman’s terms. They must be able to pass along product knowledge, guide clients in the right direction that best fits their financial situation and ensure that the client understands what they’re being sold.

5. Confident

Producers must have the confidence to discuss financial matters. This could include public speaking or talking to clients one-on-one, but regardless of the method, financial professionals need to feel confident in what they are selling and how it best fits their clients’ financial goals. Having knowledge of the products inside and out, and pairing that with what’s going on in the financial industry (i.e. market trends/fluctuations) and the clients’ personal finances, gives clients peace of mind that their financial professional is competent, reliable, and experienced.

Mirror, mirror on the wall

(Continued)

An unfinished product

Top producers also pointed to continued learning and self-improvement as a key factor in their long-term success. They do not rest on their laurels. They strive to get better and are students of their craft. Here were a few key areas that were consistent across all our top producer respondents.



Education and professional development

Producers in our study constantly read industry news articles, journals, books, listen to podcasts, etc...to stay up-to-date on the latest trends, techniques, products, and technology in the financial services industry. They attend conferences, webinars, seminars, professional development courses, continuing education classes, workshops, career coaching and mentorships to expand their knowledge and skill set.



Networking and community involvement

Producers acknowledge they must be open and flexible to changes and new opportunities in order to evolve and grow in their financial services role. In order to do this, many attend community events and social functions to network with clients and other industry professionals, while others may volunteer or do community service work. Some will connect and network with others online (i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook) to enhance their connectivity. They try to stay open-minded to innovative techniques and strategies that may evolve into new business opportunities or generate leads.



Taking care of current clients – They stay in touch with current clients by following up with them often to keep lines of communication open. The client is the No. 1 priority; thus, they treat them with prompt, friendly customer service and always make sure to be available and accessible to their clients in case any questions or concerns arise.



Establishing a referral network – Referrals are important to top producers' business, so some try to reciprocate and help others out. They build relationships and develop partnerships with other industry professionals in case a client needs to be referred for another service the producer doesn't offer. Those other professionals will reciprocate by referring their clients back to the producer.



Looking back and paying it forward

Anything you'd do differently?

If they only knew then what they know now. Top producers in our Project Apex research study were incredibly consistent in what they said they'd do differently with a second chance.

Started my career earlier – It took them a long time to build their clientele base and that they learned a lot along the way, so it would've benefited them to start investing, learning, and selling earlier in their lives.

Specialized, gotten certified/licensed or a higher education/degree – They would've gotten their certifications earlier than they did and should've specialized in a specific area of the financial services industry rather than taking a broad approach. Some wouldn't have waited to achieve a higher degree. Others would've educated themselves more about the industry and products they sell and completed more training in their field.

Obtained referrals earlier/differently – Some would change the way they prospected for leads, such as using seminars to obtain new business, being selective in the clients/businesses they chose to work with. A few say that they should've started prospecting earlier on in their career to build up their book of business.

Worked with a mentor – Other producers would have aligned themselves with similar professionals to network with and learn the ropes from, or say they would've passed on their knowledge to others trying to become a successful salesperson.

Gone independent sooner – Some producers started out in a broker/dealer business or much larger firm.

Networked and built relationships – They would've started networking a lot earlier in their career to meet potential new clients and met with similar financial professionals to build relationships to help with amicable referrals.

Do it all over again/do nothing different – Despite the long list above, many producers told us everything they did has led them to their success so they wouldn't do anything different to get where they're at today.

Looking back and paying it forward

(Continued)

Best advice they can give

Top producers were asked what advice they would give someone just getting started in his or her career.

🔑 **Remember the client is always No. 1** – Always make sure the client's needs are their top priority. Focus on developing relationships by being genuine, learning about their clients, and gaining their trust.

🔑 **Get a mentor** – Surround yourself with successful people and connect with them, interview, job shadow, etc. to learn all you can about how those mentors became successful.

🔑 **Be a constant student of your craft** – Get certified and licensed early, continue to train and educate yourself about the industry and know your products inside and out. Top producers constantly train to stay up to date and informed about changes in the industry and stay knowledgeable about the business.

🔑 **Be persistent** – Producers say it's not easy to start out in this industry, so they advise sticking with it by being focused, determined, persistent, and not getting discouraged at hearing "no" or when losing a sale.



For more information on Project Apex or to discuss any of the cases you're working, call Sales Support at 866-322-7066.

Methodology

This Sammons Financial research study was conducted in two phases between September 2019 and January 2020. Phase 1 consisted of in-depth phone interviews among 23 top producing agents. Phase 2 was an online survey exercise comprised of 254 life insurance and annuity agents, both sampled from the general insurance market and Sammons Financial member company agents.

Agents interviewed sell more than annuities/life insurance and statements provided may not apply directly to the sale of these products.

Analysis is for educational purposes only. The experience of the participants of the 2020 Sammons Financial Research Study may not be representative of the experience of all.

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