

Tablets Help IndiaFirst Life's Sales Agents Sell Faster

As the 23rd entrant in the Indian insurance industry, IndiaFirst Life had a world of ground to cover. But it didn't believe in catching up; it wanted to get ahead. How? By empowering over 1,000 sales agents with tablets that sell insurance in 30 minutes.



We thought, why not use tablets, build an app for it, and make the entire sales process paperless. In the hands of the employee, the tablet will become a mobile office.” *Head-Project Management and IT Excellence, IndiaFirst Life Insurance* Vinayak Khadye

Imagine you're visiting your aging relatives in some remote part of the country and need to provide them with insurance cover—something you've been putting off just to avoid the hassle of getting one. What if the very next morning—while you're sitting with your feet up on a couch, sipping coffee, and reading your favorite book—a gentleman walks up to you, swishes out a fancy tablet, takes down your details, and hands you a print-out of a life insurance policy—in just 30 minutes?

If wow is the word that came to your mind, then that's exactly how IndiaFirst Life Insurance aspires to make its customers feel. A joint venture between Bank of Baroda, Andhra Bank, and the UK's legal and General, the company is all set to change the way insurance is sold in India.

But a few months back, its sales agents weren't anywhere close to achieving that. The company's sales agents—called Business Development Managers (BDMs)—had to lug around and fumble through sheaves of collateral, application forms, and other customer documents. It was a process that was manual, cumbersome, and time-consuming. And it was time IndiaFirst couldn't afford to lose.

Squeezed under the pressures of low volumes, growing competition and price sensitivity of customers, industry reports say that a player in India's insurance sector can only hope to break-even in 13-15 years. This, clubbed with the increase in the number of lapsed policies, an overall decline in sales—and the fact that, according to industry reports, the profit margins on life insurance policies sold in India are the lowest in Asia—can make it look like one of the toughest industries to operate in. That, it is.

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The Scheme of Things

But while there are many who'd look at a challenge and run in the opposite direction, IndiaFirst was willing to look at it as an opportunity.

With a share capital of Rs 475 crore, IndiaFirst follows the Bancassurance model and has about 1,000 BDMs to cover the over 5,000 branches of Bank of Baroda and Andhra Bank. The company has clocked a growth of 39 percent at the end of March 2012 and managed to cap its operating expenses at 19 percent of new business premium. "As a new entrant, we have been able to grow at a rate faster than the industry average. But it will be difficult to keep doing so on a larger base. So we are focusing on improving our processes, our product suite, and enhancing customer delight," says Dr. P. Nandagopal, MD and CEO, IndiaFirst Life Insurance.

This becomes especially important in an industry where one doesn't deliver a product but a promise in return for the money invested by customers. "To enhance customer delight, it is an imperative to deliver on that promise in a fashion that is credible, instant, and efficient," adds Nandagopal.

But considering the push-sales dependent nature of the industry, such a vision is easier said than achieved. BDMs would have to indulge prospective customers with multiple visits and subsequent deliberations before they could hope for a sale. And even then, owing to manual processes, there was a lack of standardization in the sales process and hence a lot of scope for mis-selling.

This lack of standardization was visible in the way BDMs approached customers and their needs. "There was no way of knowing if all of the nearly 1,000 employees across the country were following a standardized process for selling our products. Or whether they were performing need-analysis for customers, recommending the right product, generating a benefit illustration for that product, and getting the application form filled correctly before collecting the premium," says Mohit Rochlani, Business Head-Bancassurance and Retention, IndiaFirst Life Insurance.



Due to the Bancassurance model that it operates in, IndiaFirst doesn't have dedicated offices or branches and couldn't hope to standardize sales processes by gathering people at one location for training. "Despite our online learning management system and monthly tests, the understanding of product plans among sales personnel is not uniform," says Vinayak Khadye, Head-Project Management and IT Excellence, IndiaFirst Life Insurance.

Moreover, the bank branches that the BDMs operated out of wouldn't have provisioned for a BDM to use the branch as his workplace. This would cripple BDMs who, despite being equipped with a laptop, needed to access scanners and the Internet to upload documents. Also, they didn't have an integrated application on their laptops to pull out product audio-visuals that need to be shown to the customer when pitching a product.

All this added to the growing heap of problems.

Ask, Apply, Get?

The company's issues multiplied when it found that its manual processes interfered with a BDM's ability to execute the Ask, Apply, Get (AAG) strategy. An over the counter policy issuance model, AAG is designed by IndiaFirst on the criteria of pre-underwritten products based on age range of the customer, sum assured, need for medical check-ups etcetera. A closer look at IndiaFirst's portfolio will reveal that a majority of its policies fall under this process and had the potential of getting closed on the spot. "Our portfolio is 90 percent non-medical and these could get covered through AAG. But due to our paper-based process, BDMs couldn't help customers with necessary information for them to make a purchase decision," says Rochlani.

It would also take longer to spot mistakes in customer applications. For example, a discrepancy with respect to personal details or policy elements like premium amount or sum assured would only be identified after it reached the Mumbai corporate office for manual underwriting. This would take at least two to three days to reach Mumbai—from major cities—and up to five to six days from the remote parts of the country. "In case of the incumbents—or established players—this is handled by one of the thousands of branches closest to the sales person," Rochlani adds.

But this wasn't possible for IndiaFirst's BDMs placed in rural areas. They won't have access to the same information as their peers in metros and would have to wait till they get response from the central command to address customer queries.

Opening more branches across the country would have helped the company, but that would, for one, render its Bancassurance model irrelevant. The Bancassurance model has allowed IndiaFirst to save on infrastructure costs and invest in new-age products and solutions that would give them the opportunity to grow faster than the industry. The model also accounts for easier access to customers, provides far warmer leads than any other channel, and gives a quicker time-to-market as it is inherently more agile.

As a three-year old organization, IndiaFirst wanted to build on this freedom and establish a digital channel that wasn't just limited to a Web portal. This, it was sure, would help address initial sales and post-sales service requirements of the customer far better than a brick and mortar interface. "As the 23rd entrant in the Indian insurance industry, we were determined to invest more in technology rather than setting up branches," says Nandagopal.

Khadye couldn't have asked for more.

On Auto-Pilot

Enthused by Nandagopal's faith in technology, Khadye decided to build a comprehensive solution that is available to the field force so that BDMs can interface with all the business processes within the organization. To avoid errors inherent in a manual process, Khadye started off by creating an end-to-end automation solution.

So the IT team got together to evaluate the options that could enable this. They started off by listing out key features and decided they needed a device that is small enough to carry but still has a good display. They also figured that it would have to be flexible enough to handle a fair bit of processing if it was to support client-based applications. Eliminating POS devices— being used largely in the micro-insurance sector—they decided to choose between laptops and tablets.

Since they were already on a laptop model, they were aware of the constraints it imposed and weighed this against the risks and benefits of going for a reasonably untested technology: Tablets. "We thought, why not use tablets, build an app for it, and make the entire (sales) process paperless," says Khadye. This, along with a portable printer, was all that was needed to set up the mobile office for IndiaFirst.

Once it was decided to take the tablet route, identifying the OS for which they needed to build it wasn't a tough decision to make. "The only real options at that time were IOS and Android. And considering the multiple device options and the lower cost per device, we decided to go with Android," says Khadye. Having the flexibility to run this app on multiple devices was important to IndiaFirst because it knew that in order to realize the full potential of mobility the company will need to equip both its senior management and extended enterprise of agents in the near future.

Khadye had a long way to go.

Operation AppDev

Khadye and his IT team figured that developing the application from scratch would be a tedious and time consuming affair. So they decided to go for a mobile enterprise application and development platform instead of a completely custom-built solution. Based on their requirements, they chose Acceltree's FRED as their preferred platform.

Leveraging the capabilities of the platform in both the development and run-time environment—the programmers used the integrated development environment, along with a simple tablet-based tool enabled by the platform vendor. This was done to define the user interface and build business and workflow logic and the logic for connecting to enterprise systems.

This entire logic is stored as business objects in XML format. At run time, the application on the tablet sends a transaction request through the messaging layer to the relevant business object that runs within the high performance transaction engine. The backend integration too is taken care of by the platform server's ability to interact with varied data sources and multiple enterprise systems simultaneously.

The underlying logic necessitated the breakdown of enterprise workflows into relevant chunks. "We looked at our organizational processes and packaged them in four modules: Customer, distributor, employee and corporate. In the hands of the employee, the tablet becomes a mobile office," says Khadye. The customer module which automates the entire customer facing process—from lead management to after sales support—is the first module in the suite that has been made live. The other three modules are under development.

The application flows in a step-by-step process. BDMs have to input all the mandatory information before they can move on to the next step. The important steps can't be skipped and it also ensures transparency with the customer. There are in-built validations for calculation of premiums and sum assured that help avoid mistakes. "The mistakes that BDMS were committing either due to carelessness or a lack of knowledge are now getting addressed," says Rochlani.

The application is designed to work equally well in both online and offline modes. Once data entry is done and supporting documents are captured via the tablet's camera, the data and documents are synced with the backend servers either in real-time or whenever the 2G/3G/WI-Fi connectivity is available. 3G is recommended but it works fine on 2G as well. Just that the syncing of documents which are captured as image files might take a little longer. Once all the documents are in place and checked, an insurance policy is issued—all in 30 minutes.

To tighten device and data security, Khadye has also leveraged Mobile Device Management (MDM). "We have also equipped ourselves with the ability to trace the devices in the hands of our users. This enables us to activate and deactivate applications, perform over-the-air updates, and wipe data on a lost device," says Khadye. He has also added security features to make sure that data and documents are encrypted not just when it is within the application but also during transmission.

The end result of the company's IT team and Khadye's efforts is a tablet—aptly called the Magic Board—in the hands of each of IndiaFirst's over 1,000 BDMs. And the company doesn't plan to stop at that. It is already charting a course that would enable them to equip each of its over 4,000 agents with a tablet.

The Magic of the Magic Board

Today, the Magic Board has worked like a charm.

"With Magic Board, the sales process has been standardized to a great extent and a policy can be issued on the spot," says the company's business head-Bancassurance and Retention, Rochlani. Though it's only been three months since the application has been launched, it is evident that BDMs no longer have to run around chasing documents and arranging for those to be couriered to the corporate office. Nor do they have to wait till it reaches and gets verified by an underwriter to check inconsistencies that might have crept in.

If the form has some deficiency, both BDMs and customers can be appraised of the same—almost immediately. “They can’t fill up a different sum assured and can’t sell a product meant for a particular age group to a person who does not fall into that age range,” says Rochlani.

The Magic Board has also added a dash of élan to a BDM’s image and helps build a sense of trust and credibility with the customer. He is no longer the clumsy guy fumbling bundles of paper, but one that sports a ritzy tablet.