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Knockout service

Cornering the small group market one move at a time, Susan Combs uses her keen customer service skills and rapid response time to keep clients coming back, round after round.

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With a gift for customer service and a record of unbeatable responsiveness, Susan Combs tackles the small group market in the Big Apple.

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SUSAN COMBS doesn't hold back when it comes to customer service. Her no-holds-barred commitment to all of her clients — no group is too small for her — will likely have competitors taking a closer look at themselves and their business models.

Full Contact

BY ELIZABETH GALENTINE | PHOTOGRAPHER ERICA BERGER



It's no surprise Susan Combs is drawn to mixed martial arts.

The combination of styles commonly known as street fighting relies on a person's natural inclinations to produce the best results. It's a philosophy that's allowed the 30-year-old benefits broker's career to blossom and one that's led to her most impressive move yet. After eight years in the business — the last four as president of her own New York City firm — Combs has never lost a client.

With the gender divide in employee benefits still evident (just check out the crowd at any industry event or annual meeting), EBA went looking for a female broker working to narrow the gap. Who better to ask than Women in Insurance & Financial Services, the only national organization exclusively for women in the industry? The response came back with one name: Susan Combs.

"The minute you meet her you get this sense that she's got that gravitas," says Heidi Spilotros, chair of the WIFS chapter development committee. "She's powerful. She just kind of exudes that out of every pore of her body and you like that about her — instantly."

Raised in a small Midwestern town with an education in hospitality, the owner of Combs & Company uses the networking skills she learned as the social coordinator of her 15-person graduating class and a service-minded mentality to conquer the small group market in the Big Apple.

Heck, she's even picked up a few clients at MMA fights. Talk about a one-two punch.

Not your typical broker

Combs' career in the service industry began at the University of Missouri where she was a junior event planner supervising concerts, halftime shows and even a Bob Dylan tour.

A post-graduation job offer from the Marriott World Trade Center brought Combs to New York City in the spring of 2001, but her plans changed when the company decided to restructure and offered a transfer to Detroit or New Orleans instead. Already settled on Long Island, Combs wasn't interested in leaving. Although she was offered a couple of other jobs in the city, she started to rethink her career path when the prospect of working nearly 20 hours a day and most weekends had her questioning the quality of life.

A headhunter hooked Combs up with a job at payroll company Paychex where she first dipped her toe in the insurance industry, dealing with auditing, sales and workers compensation. "I was referring a lot of clients to other insurance brokers and I was thinking, you know what, I can do this too," says Combs. "So that's when I got into insurance full time and since my background was in hospitality it just blended well. Like minds like to work with like minds."

Because she's "not the stereotypical insurance broker," Combs says she attracts "non-stereotypical clients." A full-service firm, Combs & Company offers both group and individual health insurance policies as well as property and casualty, life and other products. Most clients are in the entertainment or culinary industries. "I deal with a lot of actors, directors, producers, those types of people," says Combs. "And then food companies, I bet you we have over 100 cookie companies ... I found a nice marriage to stay connected to those types of people by doing [their] insurance."

Because she personally understands the hospitality industry's concern about keeping costs down and lowering their overhead, Combs is able to connect with clients. "It's been nice, but if you ever would have asked me if I was ever going to be an insurance broker I would have [said], what a boring industry," she says.

Yana Romano is an account manager at CRM Management, which represents actors, directors, producers and musicians. She met Combs through Paychex and, several years later, she's still impressed with Combs' service. "She's on top of everything, she's very knowledgeable. She's got a lot of resources. It's great to deal with her because there's never an issue of having to reach her or she has no information for you," says Romano. "... I would recommend her to anyone. She's a phenomenal person."



A couple of decades younger than your typical benefits broker, Combs believes her youth brings a level of fun that can sometimes be missing from the job. “I think insurance can be a really dry subject but I try to make it fun and I like my clients,” she says. “I have friends, when the phone rings they grimace because they don’t want to deal with the person. When you get that way then I think you’re doing yourself a disservice and you’re doing the client a disservice.”

Up each day for an invigorating 5 a.m. workout, Combs says the biggest advantage of her age just might be the energy level. “I’m not tired of this business,” she says.

Although she gets new business from other brokers after they get complacent by not giving clients options before they automatically renew the same plan for another year or when they don’t get in touch with clients until renewal time, Combs says she doesn’t like to take over a client in that way. “I feel like I didn’t work for it. It’s just my own hang up,” she says. “I have plenty of friends that broker-of-record all day and they make a great living, but I feel like I didn’t work for that client.”

At her own office, Combs says she’s an easy-going boss. One thing she learned from event planning, she doesn’t expect any of her employees to do anything that

she wouldn’t do herself. “You get more respect from people when you’re in the trenches with them doing things because they know that you don’t feel like you’re above anything,” she says.

Opportunities and obstacles

Getting respect from her employees may not be a problem, but being a woman in a male-dominated industry hasn’t always been easy for Combs. “It’s an interesting marketplace,” she says. “And then to be a female in it, I think it gives you some opportunities but then also it shuts the door on some.”

Combs recalls a “painful” six-month stint in Kansas City when she was working for Paychex. “It was, ‘Hey honey, what are you trying to sell me?’ Or people were so nice to you, they didn’t want to be rude so they keep having you come back even though they were never interested,” she says.

New York City is another story. “Out here, I get doors slammed in my face and it’s fine,” says Combs. “I know where I stand and it’s done. I don’t think I could be as successful as I have been anywhere else just because I think that the New York

Your looks get you in the door on some of the meetings, but you open your mouth and you clearly know what you're talking about and that keeps you there.

marketplace is just more conducive for quick turnarounds and you get more women in business out here. But in the Midwest ... I had the hardest time."

Not to say that she isn't still the minority in New York. "I'll go to golf tournaments and it'll be like 116 men and two women and the other woman is 65 so it's just, it's a very, very different industry," she says. "But, I mean, it works. You have to kind of figure out what works for you. Your looks get you in the door on some of the meetings, but you open your mouth and you clearly know what you're talking about and that keeps you there."

Of the other women she's met specifically in the employee benefits industry, Combs says she can't recall many under age 50 who aren't working for a carrier or as an account manager. "I don't know why that is, I really don't. Because you would think that if you're being stereotypical and saying women are touchy-feely and they want to do the hand holding, you do that a hell of a lot more with employee benefits than you do it with property and casualty insurance," she says.

Considering the rapport that can be built from client relationships, Combs is surprised that more women aren't involved as principals. "I think a lot of times with insurance, it's a male-dominated industry and [women] don't think they can build a relationship with clients," she says. "They think it's sell the client and move on and they don't realize that there is an aspect of this business that you do build a relationship with the clients. And that's why I think it's been successful for me, because I have maintained the client relationships as well as [relationships] with the employees."

When Combs sets up a new client all of the employees are immediately introduced to her and her staff. "They come to us before they go to their employer," she says. "So we're kind of another arm of their HR dept."

That applies to employee dependents as well. Combs will often get calls from husbands and wives with questions about their policy or looking for a doctor recommendation.

"I think one of the coolest things that always happens is I'm on the short list for any baby that's born," she says. "The wives are in the delivery room and the BlackBerrys are going and I know within two hours of a

baby being born, which I think is cool. I don't know how people do it differently. That's just always how I've done it where it's just a much more personal touch."

Combs' approach fits well within the growing market segment of women-owned businesses. According to the Center for Women's Business Research, the approximately 10.4 million women-owned businesses in the United States invest around \$54 billion annually in employee benefits. A recent report from American General Life Companies' employee benefit division, "Women-Owned Business Marketplace: A Growing Opportunity for Employee Benefit Sales," illustrates how brokers like Combs are able to connect with that market.

"The research we've compiled shows that female entrepreneurs typically emphasize relationship building and fact gathering in their management styles," says Shari Ciapka, vice president of strategic marketing. "A producer that takes a more collaborative and consultative approach with women business owners may be better received than the producer who is just looking to sell them a 'one-size-fits-all' insurance plan."

One thing that keeps more women from becoming benefits brokers in Combs' opinion is the need for financial security. "I think a lot of times for women it scares them to be in commission-based type of work," she says. "... I think for a lot of women that's scary to not know. OK, maybe my paycheck this month is going to be \$2,000 and next month it's going to be \$20,000."

Combs knows the fear from personal experience. When she started her business she was making \$1,600 a month and paying \$1,200 of it in rent. The good thing about the health insurance business, she says, is that you can think of it like an annuity. Once the client base is in place, commissions start coming in monthly and you can budget to have more of a base salary, as opposed to other fields like P&C where payouts are often annual. "I think everybody has that [fear], but if you know that there's nowhere to go but up and as long as you don't neglect your clients and keep people happy then they're going to stay with you," she says.

New York state of mind

In January, Combs got the opportunity to start connecting with more women in the industry when she helped

found the New York City chapter of WIFS. Although most of the women are in life insurance and financial planning, Combs appreciates the connection. “It’s nice to see all the different women in the industry because I’ve never met a lot of women, or if I meet women in the industry they’re not brokers,” she says.

An agent with Mass Mutual, Spilotros met Combs at the first New York meeting that she helped establish. It’s been hard to get a chapter going in the city, says Spilotros. “I think it was challenging for women to galvanize because New York is sort of an anonymous cultural place where people don’t necessarily know each other,” she says.

Sixty women came to the first meeting and they’ve been gathering monthly ever since to hear speakers, have panel discussions and network. “I don’t think I’ve ever met even 60 women in the insurance industry,” says Combs, who serves as vice president. “Sometimes you do at carrier functions and things like that, but these were all sales people.”

A life and financial planning specialist with NY Life Insurance Company, Fabiola Joseph met Combs when they both joined the board of the new WIFS chapter. The pair recently put together business cards to boost membership and networking opportunities. “She’s a go-getter,” says Joseph, the group’s communications and marketing chair. “I think whenever you’re a woman in an industry where it’s predominantly men you have to have energy, you have to have something that sets you aside from not just everyone else but as a woman you really need to be on point. You need to be out there, you need to be vocal, a little aggressive to let people

know who you are and create a name for yourself, and I think she's definitely done that."

Growing up in a military family — Combs' father was a two-star general on the Joint Chiefs of Staff for both the Army and Air National Guard — gave Combs the confidence to be able to adapt to any situation when she and her brothers would often interact with high-ranking officials. "By us being able to go out and see the world and interact with different types of people it didn't intimidate me to move out to New York and see how I could do it out here and then start my own company and not be afraid to pick up the phone and call the people you don't normally want to have a conversation with," she says.

Combs' upbringing had an immediate effect on Spilotros, who liked her forthrightness from the moment she met her. "She was not afraid to walk up to anybody and say anything and it was clear that she was focused on building her business. She's very entrepreneurial and that I think goes a long way in this business because you have to have a take-no-prisoners sort of attitude and she absolutely with no question has that," says Spilotros. "She wants to conquer New York. She wants to be *the* benefits person. So she's forming key partnerships with people. She's just aggressive and she's very smart."

The New York market in particular combined with Combs' personality gives her an edge, says Spilotros. "I think in that particular market it plays very well," she says. "Because she can bullshit with the guys and talk sports and whatever, but she can also hang with the women and go shop and talk about all the girly stuff too."

Every couple of months Combs teaches a class for

entrepreneurs in Queens. It's where she meets many of her cookie company clients and talks to at least two growing business prospects from the class a week. On the other end of the client spectrum, Combs works with financial companies and architecture firms that have had to do some layoffs, but for the most part her clients have been riding out the recession with few issues.

When something does come up, like administrative problems with the COBRA subsidy, the self-described "queen of BlackBerry" prides herself on always being accessible — a fact that doesn't go unnoticed by customers.

Adam McMaster, senior vice president with JF Capital Advisors, met Combs when he joined the company a year and a half ago when she offered to check a list of all of his doctors to make sure they accepted the company's insurance plan. "She is great. She is unbelievably responsive. If I send her an e-mail, I know I'm going to get a response within 10-15 minutes, and if I don't get it then there's usually an apology that comes an hour later saying, 'Sorry I was in a meeting' or whatnot," he says. "So she's extremely responsive. Even when she's on vacation, wherever it is, she's responsive."

Small-minded

M

ost clients Combs works with have less than 20 employees, with an average of 10. Although she does work with groups of 50 and larger, Combs like to deal with smaller groups that "prefer the hand holding" and who know who she is when she walks into their office. "They have the instant comfort

Benefits and MMA — more alike than you think.

TAP OUT: A method in which a fighter submits to his opponent by tapping his opponent, himself or the mat.

This action reminds Combs of a broker-of-record deal. "Accomplishment is a big part of mixed martial arts — having an opponent tap out being the biggest accomplishment. You have to work hard to get the opponent to surrender. It's the same in business, while I don't

mind the easy wins, it's more gratifying if I worked hard to win a new client."

GROUND AND POUND: Taking a fighter to the ground, placing them in an inferior position and striking them until they are knocked out, tap out, can be submitted or the match is stopped.

This reminds Combs of getting shut out by prospective cli-

ents. "If I can survive a ground and pound session with my trainer, having someone say 'no' to me for business is no big deal. If you're not willing to take the blow, don't get on the mat. I take the same philosophy into business ... rejection doesn't really phase me."

SUPERMAN PUNCH: An overhead punch in which the fighter leaps at his opponent

in an attempt to avoid his defense.

This reminds Combs of making a living in the small group market. "Some brokers throw nothing but Superman punches, trying for the quick knockout; high risk, high reward. I think winning on points and having a longer career is the best strategy for me."

Definitions courtesy of warriorpages.com.