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ReFocus 2016 – An interview with the ReFocus Committee

By Mike Kaster

I have been around the insurance and reinsurance industry for more years than I care to state. But in all my years, by far the best industry meeting I have attended is the ReFocus conference. This coming year will be the 10th anniversary, so as the committee prepares for another successful event, I asked a few committee members to share with me their perspectives on ReFocus over the years.

It was impossible to speak to them all, so I spoke to two of the longest tenured committee members, who both have been involved with all of the past nine ReFocus conferences. Mel Young is co-chair of ReFocus and Ronnie Klein has been a committee member from the beginning. The following are some excerpts from my discussions with them, in the form of a question and answer dialog.

QUESTION 1. HOW DID REFOCUS GET STARTED?

RK—Each year I used to attend the Canadian Reinsurance Conference and wondered why we never had a U.S. Reinsurance Conference. At a reinsurance meeting a few people had discussions about this including Mel Young. While the initial intention was for ReFocus to be a reinsurance meeting, Mel had greater visions for it to be the premier insurance industry meeting. However, the initial intent was for ReFocus to be a U.S. Reinsurance Conference.

MY—Yes, when the idea was brought to me to create a reinsurance focused meeting, I felt strongly that it can't just be about technical reinsurance topics. With a focus on industry issues, we would be more successful in attracting senior industry leaders. But it did start out with a U.S. reinsurance focus.

QUESTION 2. WHY IS IT CALLED "REFOCUS"?

MY—Craig Baldwin, one of our original co-chairs was always good at taking ideas we generated and making them sound good. "ReFocus" just seemed to be catchy enough based on where we started, with a focus of the meeting being on reinsurance.

RK—Since the initial intent of the meeting was to be a U.S. Reinsurance Conference, the Re in ReFocus stands for reinsurance.

QUESTION 3. THE EVENT HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN LAS VEGAS….WHY LAS VEGAS?

MY—We knew we wanted this to be not just a premier life insurance industry event, but it also had to be a destination event. Florida seemed over saturated with events. We also wanted to be able to incorporate a golf event with the meeting, so we needed some place warm for our desired March timeframe.

RK—In our discussions about the conference, we discussed how the premier nonlife reinsurance conference is held each year in Monte Carlo (called Rendez-Vous). We felt that executives would know that the first week in March each year we would hold the premier life insurance conference in Las Vegas. While we continually receive requests to change locations from a few people, we want the consistency of holding the meeting in the same city each year.

QUESTION 4. THE MEETING HAS A SPECIFIC TARGETED AUDIENCE… WHO IS IT DESIGNED FOR?

MY—We always wanted to try to attract senior individuals to the meeting. This has proven to be a challenge to maintain, but we make sure each year we address this issue. We tell people that this is not the same kind of meeting as other actuarial or industry meetings, but that this is meant to be strategic in its focus, so we need to attract the senior leaders of the industry.

QUESTION 5. WHO IS THE MEETING NOT DESIGNED FOR?

RK—As Mel said, this is not an actuarial meeting where attendees will learn the specifics of a new regulation or latest GAAP or Stat reserving interpretations. While these issues are very important, they are covered at a host of meetings held by various actuarial organizations. We are looking for a different type of audience. Each year a few people complain that there is not enough specific content at the meeting. We would tell those people that it is specifically by design that we don't include a lot of technical content.

QUESTION 6. SINCE THE FIRST REFOCUS, WHAT IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE TO THE MEETING?

RK—From my perspective, the most significant change is in the attendance which grew from the mid 200s to the mid 600s. Obviously the meeting has been a great success. Other things that have changed are increasing time for networking including longer lunchtime slots and longer breaks. We also end the meetings a bit earlier to allow those going out to dinner or shows the ability to attend all meetings before leaving to their events.

MY—I think the biggest change is that we no longer focus just on reinsurance issues and have specifically toned down "reinsurance." We now try to focus on big industry themes and topics.

QUESTION 7. REFOCUS SEEMS TO HAVE SOME PARTICULARLY INTERESTING KEYNOTE PRESENTERS … HOW DO YOU GET THESE SPEAKERS FOR THE EVENT?

MY—Since the meeting is jointly sponsored by the SOA and the American Council of Life Insurers (ACLI), we rely heavily on their influence. In particular, the ACLI has wide industry exposure, not just actuarial contacts. So they tend to take the lead on attracting these individuals.

RK—The types of keynote speakers we have been able to attract have really improved the reputation of the meeting and draws more people. Jeb Bush was a great speaker and draw, as were Michael Lewis with Billy Beane in 2014. Most of the industry people are recruited by Mel Young. His contacts and great salesmanship allow Mel to get executives to speak at ReFocus that would normally not volunteer to do so. We really appreciate this of Mel.

QUESTION 8. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BEST PART ABOUT REFOCUS … FROM YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

RK—Clearly the best part of ReFocus is the networking opportunity. I personally look forward to this more than anything. When I see some of my colleagues from Europe after the meeting and ask how they enjoyed the sessions, most say that they only attended one or two sessions. They say that they had too many client meetings and could not attend many sessions. This is music to my ears.

MY—I would echo what Ronnie said. People tend to tell me that they love attending ReFocus every year, to catch up with colleagues and to have significant business meetings and

contacts. This is great when I hear this and I'm very proud of this.

QUESTION 9. WHY DO YOU VOLUNTEER YOUR TIME TO PUT THIS INCREDIBLE EVENT TOGETHER?

MY—While working on ReFocus is a bit of a part-time job in the amount of effort, I absolutely love it. We have taken a concept and developed it into the premier life insurance industry conference. It's a pleasure to work on this with people like Ronnie and others.

RK—It is a lot of work to plan this meeting. It is also one of the most rewarding things that I do. I get to work with some of the most wonderful people in the industry including Mel Young, Pete Schaefer, Victoria Smith, Jay Semla, Doc Huffman, Joann Martin and Mary Ann Brown. Most importantly, we plan a meeting that over 600 people attend and rave about. It is worth all of the effort.

MY—In particular, I want to thank Victoria Smith from the ACLI for her invaluable contributions to ReFocus over the years. She will be leaving us after this year and she will be sorely missed. We have truly appreciated her efforts.

RK—I would also emphasize the contribution that Victoria has made to the meeting. She had the foresight to get a professional moderator, Bill Press, who adds to the professionalism of the meeting and always has great keynote speaker suggestions. We will miss her contribution greatly.

QUESTION 10. FINAL QUESTION—ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANT TO SAY ABOUT REFOCUS?

RK—My personal goal is to include more international sessions and also some nonlife sessions. I would like ReFocus to be as well known in the industry as the Monte Carlo meeting is to the nonlife meeting.

MY—Thank you to all the hundreds of volunteers and staff that help us each year pull together an event that is near and dear to my heart. I personally look forward to this event each year to see some of my senior-level colleagues and to learn more about what is affecting them in their business life. Plus it's a lot of fun too! See everyone in Las Vegas, March 6-9, 2016 at the Aria Resort. ■

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