

# SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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## Direct Insurance Sales Using Microeconomics

by Robert E. Winawer

Editor's Note: This excellent and timely paper will be published in its entirety over the next three issues of NewsDirect.

### Section One: Introduction

Direct response has become an attractive alternative to traditional distribution for many insurers because of the added control over the sales process and ownership of the

customer subsequent to sale. These

by Steven L. Ostlund

advantages are weighed against the costs, efforts, and risks of direct response.

The greatest risk in direct response is that most of the acquisition costs are incurred before the policy is sold. First, the cost of generating lists of prospective consumers by gaining access to affiliated groups, advertising in mass media, or by purchasing names from third parties is incurred. Then, the cost to close sales either by mail, phone, or the Internet is incurred. Finally, the policy is underwritten, issued, and mailed to the policyholder.<sup>1</sup> Spending money before it is certain that the policy will be sold makes the financial risk in the sales process greater than in

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### Chairperson's Corner Looking Ahead

by Mike Fix

s I begin to write this article, my first as the Chairperson of the Non-Traditional Marketing Section, I can think of so many things to pass along to you, the readers of our publication, *NewsDirect*.

I must first thank my predecessor chairperson, Jim Smith, for his contributions to the council and his leadership for the past years. Thanks also to Steve Ostlund who has completed his term of service on the council. He has helped to make our Council and our Section better.

We have added three new members, and I welcome them to the Council: Diane McGovern, Paul LaPorte, and Steve Konnath, who was re-elected after serving a partial term. I am sure they will find their volunteer efforts very rewarding.

We are a Section that is proud to have an active and involved Friends of the Council. Many of these fine people have been members of the council in the past and continue to graciously offer their services to our members and to the actuarial profession as a whole.

I encourage all readers to volunteer in any of a number of ways to help with Section activities. In each of my

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traditional distribution. This underlies the importance of efficient use of capital for direct-marketed insurance. In fact, the primary goal of direct sales management is to allocate capital in a way that maximizes profits in relation to risks taken.

This essay shows how to allocate capital efficiently for a subset of direct sales management called solicitation management (SM) by using the microeconomic marginal cost/ marginal revenue paradigm (MC/MR). SM focuses on closing sales. In this stage of the company's decision making process, it is assumed that premium rates have already been set and a list of consumers has already been generated

or procured. The decisions to be made are to whom to sell, and how much to spend to close each sale.

The MC/MR paradigm can help a company make SM decisions in light of several competing forces. The company may expect to increase sales volume either by spending more capital or by using that capital more efficiently. Conversely, as the company progressively spends more to close each sale, profits per sale will be forced downward. On the other hand. profits per sale can

be bolstered if the unit solicitation, production, and delivery costs decrease because of economies of scale. However, it is unlikely that

economy of scale gains will continue indefinitely; eventually, producing at full capacity will result in diminishing returns.

Unfortunately, applying the MC/MR paradigm to insurance SM is not as straightforward as it is in industries involving

manufactured products such as toys or cars. For manufactured products, management is directed to expand sales by incurring proportionately more acquisition expense until the increase in aggregate acquisition expenses and production costs associated with the last (least profitable) sale equals the increase in

> aggregate revenue from that last sale. The change in aggregate acquisition expense associated with each sale is called the marginal acquisition cost. Marginal production cost and marginal revenue are defined similarly. In most microeconomics texts, marginal acquisition costs and marginal production costs are bundled together and called simply marginal costs. Management's goal is to expand sales until marginal costs equal marginal revenue, which means that net profit from that last sale is zero.

Applying the paradigm to direct response insurance solicitations, marginal acquisition expenses may be defined as the additional expense incurred to make the sale, underwrite, and issue the policy. Marginal production costs and marginal revenue are both more nebulous. Insurance production costs (administrative expenses and contractual obligations) and revenue (premiums and investment income) continue for several years after the sale,

> adding risk as well as complication to insurance SM. The insurer must find a way to define marginal production costs and revenue before the MC/MR paradigm may be applied.

This paper demonstrates that embedded value of new business (VNB) using the Embedded Value framework is the most appropriate way to quantify marginal production costs and revenue. VNB also includes marginal acquisition costs. It is defined as the present value of profits available to shareholders using a risk discount rate (RDR). RDRs are based on organizational risk tolerance and reflect uncertainty of closing the sale and subsequent profits. The RDR may be viewed as an explicit risk penalty in the VNB formula. A higher RDR produces a lower VNB, all else equal.

VNB measures marginal riskadjusted revenue, production costs, and acquisition costs combined. Hence, management is directed to increase marginal acquisition costs until they exceed marginal revenue less marginal production costs; that is to say, until VNB is zero. This is equivalent to the traditional MC/MR paradigm which dictates that the net profits from the last (least profitable) sale is zero. This may seem to be a change in focus from the MC/MR paradigm because production costs have been combined with revenue, rather than with acquisition costs as most Microeconomics texts do. However, the end result remainsnet profits from the last (least profitable) sale are zero.

The use of a case example that is described in the subsequent installments of this essay, explains how insurers can implement the MC/MR paradigm to make superior capital allocation decisions. The process is implemented in stages for clarity.

- Section 3 shows how insurers can improve SM decisions by focusing on marginal acquisition expenses rather than full or average costs. It is assumed that the insurer is using the industry's most common risk/ reward threshold to make SM decisions rather than VNB. This section takes the first step toward applying the MC/MR paradigm by changing the measurement of acquisition costs without changing the measurement of production costs or revenue (i.e. the risk/ reward threshold).
- Section 4 shows how some insurers have the opportunity to improve SM by making more granular risk/reward decisions, even if they do not use VNB. While the premise of this section is useful taken alone, the purpose of this section is to introduce a level of complexity that is needed to show why VNB should be used in the MC/MR paradigm.
- In Section 5 it is asserted that by replacing the risk/reward threshold that is most commonly used in the industry with VNB, every insurer can be assured that total risk-adjusted profits will be maximized. This section completes the application of the MC/MR paradigm.
- Finally, Section 6 provides a brief recapitulation and conclusions are drawn. Based on the case example constructed for this essay, the tools introduced in Section 3 produce the greatest gain in risk-adjusted profits. The tools used in Section 4 also produce significant additional risk-adjusted profits. However,

the tools introduced in Section 5 do not increase risk-adjusted profits substantially. This will likely be the result when only one product is being analyzed as is done in this essay. As we will discuss in Section 6, using VNB will improve results more dramatically when several products are offered. There are also non-financial merits of using VNB, such as improved communication, which will be discussed as well.

As stated previously, the scope of this paper is limited to the application of the MC/MR paradigm to SM. Appendix 1 gives suggestions on how the principles discussed in this

"Premiums are unisex, as it is desirable to have direct response solicitations with premium structures that are easy for the consumer to understand."

essay can be applied to other decisions that face direct response insurers.

## Section Two: Description of Case Study

A hypothetical case study of three consecutive solicitations to a list of 4,000,000 consumers is used to illustrate concepts throughout the essay. After each solicitation, people who have purchased insurance are taken off the list. It is assumed that actual responses equal anticipated. In Example 1, shown on a following page, there are 3,987,000 consumers remaining after the first solicitation (4,000,000 - 3,987,000 = 13,000 responded to the first solicitation) and 3,978,032 remaining after the second (3,987,000 -3,978,032 = 8,968 responded to the second solicitation).

The product offered is small face amount whole life insurance designed to meet the needs of senior citizens' final expenses. Premiums are unisex, as it is desirable to have direct response solicitations with premium structures that are easy for the consumer to understand. Full details underlying the list of consumers and the product sold are shown in Appendices 2 and 3.

In the next installment, the ratio of costs to premiums is used as the risk/reward threshold. This means that the company decides to send solicitations to particular segments of their list of consumers based on the anticipated ratio of acquisition costs to issued and paid premium (Cost-to-Premium, or C-to-P). This C-to-P threshold is based on the most restrictive of two asset share pricing criteria (1) 8% profit margin

and (2) 15% return on investment (ROI). In Section 5, VNB is used as the risk/reward threshold rather than C-to-P.

Profit margin is defined as the present value of statutory profits divided by the present value of premiums discounted at the investment earnings rate. Profit margin may be thought of as an average profit over the pricing period, expressed as a percent of premium.

ROI is the discount rate at which the present value of shareholder profits is equal to zero. Shareholder profits are the profits that are available to the owner, defined as statutory profits adjusted for target surplus. ROI is synonymous with the term internal rate of return that is commonly used for financial analysis.

VNB is the present value of shareholder profits using a 10% RDR. It is also used as the definition

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of risk-adjusted profits in this essay. The SM risk/reward threshold is that VNB must be greater than zero.

In this essay, success is measured in terms of risk-adjusted profits. They are defined as the present value of shareholder profits at the 10% RDR. Risk-adjusted profits are a convenient way to measure the worth of any sale, venture, or even block of inforce policies. Management's goal is to maximize risk-adjusted profits as this measures their improvement to total company value.

It is important to note that VNB is defined with the goal of maximizing risk-adjusted profits in mind. VNB is equal to the increase in total company risk-adjusted profits caused by a specific sale. The SM tools discussed in this essay make use of this important relationship between VNB and risk-adjusted profits. If success is measured in terms of risk-adjusted profits, then sales should be measured in terms of risk-adjusted profits as well. Therefore, VNB is the best measure of a sale's worth.

In the next installment: *Improving* Solicitation Management: Marginal Costs and the Value of New Business

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### Footnotes

- In certain circumstances, these steps are shortened. For example, a bank that offers insurance to depositors incurs no cost to generate the list of prospective policyholders.
- 2) Chalke, Shane A., TSA xLIII, 1991.

### Appendix 1: Further Work/Extended Application

This essay advocated using the MC/MR microeconomic paradigm with VNB as a proxy for marginal revenue and production costs to make SM decisions. The same paradigm can and should be applied to each step in the direct response insurance marketing and sales process.

- In "Macro Pricing: A Comprehensive Product Development Process," Chalke introduces an algorithm based on the MC/MR paradigm to set premium rates.<sup>2</sup> Using VNB as the utility measure for alternative ventures can enhance this algorithm.
- The MC/MR paradigm with VNB can be used to evaluate consumer list generation proposals. Management needs only to develop a model of their company's network of solicitations such as was used in this essay and compare the total VNB that results under each proposal. An important subsidiary exercise is to assign a value to each name on the list of potential customers. This value is simply equal to the VNB of all anticipated future sales to that person times the probability of each sale.
- The application of the MC/MR paradigm with VNB to SM involving lists of prospective consumers who have not yet purchased insurance was discussed in this essay. The same principles apply when evaluating policyholder-marketing campaigns. In fact, it is best to include VNB from anticipated future policyholder-marketing efforts with the VNB from the initial sale when evaluating initial policy acquisition expenses. Otherwise the value of the initial sale will be understated and management will be directed to spend less to acquire policies than is appropriate. Both sales and profits will fall short of their potential maximum.

It is clear that the techniques discussed in this essay marginal acquisition expense SM decisions, refined analysis, and using value of new business in the MC/MR paradigm are well worth consideration for a wide variety of financial decisions.

\*\* Editor's Note: Please look to the next several pages as they contain supporting charts and tables for this article.



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\$703

\$633

VNB @ 10% Total Profits

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Jnisex Gross Pre		0 Insurance)	
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Five Year Terr	n Cash Values: N	lone	
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Whole Life & F	ive Year Term T	arget Surplus: 5	% of Statutory Reserves
Mortality			
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Withdrawals			
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1	60.00%	30.00%	
2	25.00%	15.00%	
3-4 5	10.00%	7.00%	
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Expenses			
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