

ANNUITIES • LONG TERM CARE • LIFE INSURANCE • INVESTMENTS

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Going *First Class*

Lisa McGowen's
elite networking strategy
has made her one of the South's
premier senior advisors

LTC Combos:
Solutions or snake oil?

Should seniors
buy bonds?

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a vibrant green two-piece suit with a fur collar and a matching knee-length skirt, stands on a grassy field. She is smiling broadly and holding a pair of sunglasses in her left hand. In her right hand, she carries a tan suitcase. To her right, a stack of three tan suitcases sits on the grass, with a black hat resting on top of the middle one. In the background, a large, dark green vintage airplane with yellow accents and a large propeller is parked. The sky is a pale, overcast blue.

Fueled by passion,
creativity and a fierce
branding strategy,
Lisa McGowen
lets Birmingham's
top business leaders
do her LTCI selling for her.



Mention Birmingham, Alabama, to anyone above the Mason-Dixon line and you'll likely invoke visions of a sleepy, sweaty town buried geographically and mentally in the heart of Dixie (not to mention the obscure Lynyrd Skynyrd reference). And if those thoughts prevent you from moving to Alabama's biggest city, keep thinking them, say the locals. In reality, Birmingham is closet cosmopolitan, helping lead the South in medical research, health care, insurance and banking. Its lush climate makes it a golfer's paradise (the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail runs through Birmingham), while not forcing its residents to swelter year-round. It's the town Atlanta used to be, with all the charm and hardly any of the population issues. In fact, Birmingham may be one of this country's best-kept secrets.

On the other hand, if you do business in Birmingham and don't know Lisa McGowen, your business is probably a secret, too. Born, raised and now thriving in Birmingham's fast lane, McGowen's fierce branding acumen, combined with a confident sales approach, has positioned herself as a pillar in the Birmingham business community, as well as one of the premier long term care insurance agents in the South.

If there's an event to be sponsored, a group to join or a charity to support in Birmingham, chances are Lisa McGowen's company is already doing it. LTC Consultants, LLC, a 56-producer agency covering five states, houses a public library on long term care for seniors, even though McGowen, 41, has almost entirely stopped marketing directly to the consumers.

What's her secret? Through her tireless networking efforts, she now has Birmingham's financial elite bring clients to her. Although she technically has office space, she spends more time in her car between appointments and networking events. McGowen calls her business "knotting pearls," creating a strand of influence from the best in Birmingham business. (Personally, she writes about 150 applications a year, all through referrals.) She's the reason why cell phones were invented, although she just got rid of her third phone because two are hard enough to juggle. >>>

Jet Set Marketer

INTERVIEW KARL LUEDERS
PHOTOGRAPHY CHUCK ST. JOHN

McGowen has evolved her business from strictly LTCI to total life planning. But long term care will always come first.

Sales did not come genetically to McGowen, however. The daughter of a Shelby County probate judge and a Social Security administrator, McGowen earned two undergraduate degrees in art and speech-language pathology, and four master's degrees, as well as Ph.D. studies in education administration, most of them for the purpose of working with geriatric patients.

"My grandmother's been the most supportive person in my life," says McGowen. "I've always had a love for the elderly, and she was just the center of my world. Because of that, I knew I wanted to be around that population."

After spending her first few years out of college in Georgia working as an audiologist, she returned to Birmingham to marry William McGowen III. Her husband's grandmother, unfortunately, required constant nursing care for five years, which Lisa helped provide during the last few years of her life. McGowen estimates the family spent upwards of \$600,000 for the grandmother's care until she died at the age of 100.

For the next year, McGowen preached the gospel of long term care to others in similar situations. Soon after that, she began to sell long term care insurance and has since evolved her mission to help seniors into a total life planning business.

McGowen recently created a financial arm for her business, GrandView Financial Group, to give clients a full array of investment and safety products, but her first obligation is to long term care protection. And if you still think she's just another pretty face with a good closing line, ask yourself this: how often do you reread Sun Tzu's "Art of War"? (Lisa has read it approximately 20 times.) It's not surprising that this high flyer has earned her pilot's license.

Senior Market Advisor joined Lisa McGowen in Birmingham during a typical hectic week to discover the inner workings of a marketing machine that has truly taken off:

Senior Market Advisor: After your husband's grandmother passed, you spent a year telling everyone you knew about long term care insurance. Why did you do that?

Lisa McGowen: After we started getting the bills, I started investigating long term care insurance. Once I learned about it, I got everybody in our families lined up because I didn't want anyone to go through what we did. I couldn't believe that there wasn't anybody out there who couldn't tell us about LTCI. We would have bought it in a heartbeat.

SMA: So, why did you start selling it?

LM: I figured how much I could have made selling it to everyone who bought it. And, I felt I needed to do this.


In 1990, I was an audiologist for the Shelby County school system, so I had my summers free. I called around to different agencies, believing I could sell over my summer break. American Express hired me.

SMA: How many summers did you work?

LM: I lined up the job during the school year because, at first, I wasn't about to give up my real job. I told them I'd start selling after school let out. Inside, I knew if I didn't like it, I could go back in September to my real job. That's actually what I thought would happen. I mean, I have four master's degrees and you shouldn't just throw those out the door.

It was hard convincing myself to enter a profession that I could have without any college education. That was





On the road: Lisa McGowen may have an office to hang her hat, but she spends more of her time making deals.

a big mental block. But when September rolled around, I didn't want to go back to my old job. I loved what I was doing. I got paid for visiting people. What better job could there be than that?

SMA: You quit being an audiologist after the first summer?

LM: Yes.

SMA: How much were you selling that first summer? Or were you just enjoying the appointments?

LM: It went in spurts. I didn't sell very much, at first, and I would cry myself to sleep thinking, "What have I done? Why do I like this so much but can't do it?" I knew that if I couldn't close, I was wasting my time. And one day, it finally clicked.

SMA: What clicked?

LM: My whole mental approach. I used to think that I needed seniors more than they needed me. I turned that attitude completely around — to them needing me more than I needed them — and it just turned my business around.

I used to think that if they didn't buy something, I might not be able to eat. But as my knowledge grew, so did my confidence. I changed my thinking to, "You need this. While this one sale isn't going to make or break me, it could change your life." After I finally got it, then life was different. I started closing. If I was sitting in front of someone, I expected to write an application.

SMA: What happened to your career after that?

LM: I became district manager and did some national recruiting and training for GE Capital Assurance. I traveled about two weeks out of every month training or recruiting. I eventually decided that most of my work was for other people but I had only one product to sell. In Alabama, at the time, there were dozens of long term care products that I could sell. So I opened up my own shop in 1998.

SMA: It sounds like you had been thinking of going off on your own for a while.

LM: Well, it really didn't matter. I'm not egotistical enough to think that it really

mattered who owned the store. My biggest thing is that I wanted to offer more than one product. I really didn't think one product suited everybody I saw. Also, in captive sales, you don't really get out there and learn what else is going on. There is more than one way of doing things.

SMA: What was your personal production before you went off on your own, and what is it now?

LM: I've kept pretty steady over the years. I write about 150 or 160 applications a year now and that's about what I did then, although the years I did recruiting, I didn't sell much.

SMA: Do you feel you need to write more, or are those 150 apps quality apps?

LM: I do personal production two or three days a week. The other days, I'm looking over my agents. The apps I get now are much cleaner than the ones I used to get using direct mail and lead generation.

SMA: Why is that?

LM: They're all referrals. And I know all about them before they get to me. I get all my referrals from financial planners, attorneys, CPAs or other professionals. By the time I see the client, I know how much money they need for protection and what they can afford.

SMA: Is that how you get your clients?

LM: Well, let me tell you how I used to get clients. I used to go through a mail generation company — the same thing I did at GE — and told the company the ZIP codes I wanted my mailers to go to. I hit different ZIP codes every month, and repeated it. At the same time, I started hiring agents. I put an ad in the paper and replaced my GE shingle with my own. I did that for a couple of years.

SMA: What happened?

LM: I changed my whole marketing strategy.

Radio Daze

Lisa McGowen remembers one of the best mistakes she ever made.

"I normally don't advertise on the radio, but these popular morning guys in Birmingham agreed to act out an ad for us, and I felt like I couldn't pass it up. Basically, they were supposed to sing a song and then talk about long term care insurance. I intended it to be a simple awareness ad for long term care, but these two guys made such a big deal of it. One interviewed his mother who needed care; they really sold it for me.

Except that I didn't realize how many states these guys reached with their show. And I got calls. I mean, we had to stop running the ad because we were absolutely swamped. Our 800 number rang off the hook. I had agents driving two states over to handle requests. It was absolutely amazing. When I get enough people to handle the calls, I'll do it again, but it taught me not to promise anything I can't deliver. Then again, if I'm going to have a problem, that's the kind I want."

SMA: How?

LM: I used to be a spokesperson for a local Mercedes Benz dealer in Birmingham. I will never forget when I was doing that, one of the ad guys told me, "If you have a product or service, and you present it correctly, you will never have a problem getting somebody to buy. They will always come to you."

That night, I lay in bed thinking, "There must be an easier way to do this." I was doing the leads, which was a paperwork nightmare. I'm not a good paper person and I know that. I'm not a good writer. I'm not a good paper shuffler. I don't want to keep up with it at all. I don't do well with stacks; I'd just as soon throw it away. So I started thinking about what I really wanted out of life. I decided to make as much money as I could while I slept with the least amount of stress as possible.

Then I made a list of what I liked to do and what I didn't like to do. I didn't

In terms of relating to the senior clientele, McGowen is truly a model agent.



like the paper pushing stuff, which I had plenty of, despite hiring an office manager. And then when the phone rules changed, it made following up on direct mail even harder. Seminars are a dime a dozen because long term care is hot. Then I got to thinking about how I would train my agents.

When I train my agents, I train their strengths. If one wants to do seminars then we put him on the seminar circuit and send him everywhere. If one wants to do one-on-one we find a way to get him in front of more clients. If they



Instead of finding clients, McGowen networks with businesspeople who have clients ready to buy LTCI.

scale and going down instead of the other way around. It's my backward marketing philosophy.

SMA: So, instead of finding clients, you're finding people that have the clients and then they refer you.

LM: Yes. What we really want is our name out there.

SMA: How do you find and maintain relationships with these people?

LM: I have a party every quarter for professionals. It's somewhat of an elite group that I target, but it's how I market in the city. I host a wine and cheese party and they come and we talk about what we can do for their clients and ask for their referrals. I meet these people through all the community activities I'm involved in, such as the Chamber of Commerce, Junior League and charities.

SMA: But you are a fierce brand manager, too. How do you get your name out to this public?

LM: We offer continuing education programs for agents and CPAs. I don't actually run the class, but I arrange it so our name is affiliated. If my name is in the paper every week, then the people who read the money section are going to associate my name with those kinds of things. Consequently, they'll turn around and call me.

To have other professionals talk about us establishes instant credibility. And if you can get to the influential people — the people that other people stop and listen to — our message coming from them is what we want.

SMA: What kind of advertising do you do?

LM: I try to take advantage of opportuni-

ties that other outside sources give me. In other words, any time something comes up in relation to long term care insurance, I'm going to piggyback off of it.

SMA: What do you mean? You let other companies advertise for you?

LM: Take Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, for instance. They've got a monopoly here on health insurance and now they just started offering long term care insurance.

SMA: How do you combat that?

LM: As soon as they put out an advertisement, I look at their message and respond. Blue Cross Blue Shield dropped a huge mailer saying that they are now in the long term care business. They've been trusted forever, so now you should trust them with that. I know the company that writes their product which is marketed under Blue Cross Blue Shield's name and I just responded to their audience telling them we can sell that exact same product, except that it's with the experts in the business.

SMA: So you send the direct mail piece out?

LM: Yes. But it's an announcement. It's not a lead generator. I don't want to seem like I'm begging for business anymore.

SMA: Do you still run seminars?

LM: Yes, but not in long term care.

SMA: Why not? What kind of seminars do you run then?

LM: Our seminars discuss senior-related issues. We talk about 529 plans, the difference between C Corps, S Corps and LLCs, and we bring in an expert to hold these seminars. When we

want to do direct mail, we personalize it much more for them. If they want to target other professionals, such as CPAs, attorneys or whatever, I would find out what these professionals want and then build a program around them. That last example is why I changed my whole marketing philosophy.

SMA: What is it?

LM: Instead of marketing to the actual seniors, we are marketing to professionals who already have senior clients. I'm starting at the top of the

don't hold seminars, we make our conference room available to groups like widow or widower groups, divorce recovery, health groups.

SMA: So tell me how your company is involved.

LM: We host the seminar at our office, although the person giving the seminar is what's being promoted. The speaker starts his speech by assuming that everyone in the room has already taken care of long term care insurance, and if they don't, they'll feel guilty enough to grab some literature on the way out.

My whole thing is that I want clients to come to me. Besides our conference center, we have a huge room that we call our Life Planning Resource Center. In it has all kinds of information for a senior, fliers on tax matters, medical issues, record keeping, women's issues, and, of course LTC. We provide books, tapes, brochures — anything the seniors want to read or listen to. It is a complete library for any individual; it's got all kinds of educational stuff with a bombardment of long term care information.

Our secretary is actually licensed to sell long term care insurance and can answer all questions and make appointments if they want to discuss things further. It's open during our normal business hours.

SMA: Do these business and community approaches work in rural areas?

LM: No. We do more sponsorship in the country. We network with dentists and chiropractors. They have a lot of integrity in the community and also have a constant flow of people in their



McGowen has her sights set on making money while she sleeps, although she does plenty of that while she's awake.

office. We leave materials and brochures — almost like a photo album where people can learn about long term care.

This is where we give away all of our rakes, door mats, sunglasses... all the gimmicky stuff. We sponsor a lot of chili-cookoffs and other things like that in the country, and that's where we present our marketing stuff. It's more of a camaraderie event. We sponsor the church bulletins in the rural areas. It's a community support effort that comes back to us. It's a lot of "sponsored by..." but never blatant advertising.

SMA: You seem to use the same branding strategy for both urban and rural markets, but your actual implementation changes with the audience.

LM: Well, it is effective now, but it's ever-changing. Marketing is something that has to be thought about every day, every week, every month. I'm always open to anybody who has a good idea. I'm going to steal it and put it into place if I can.

SMA: We are talking about the senior market though, and you can't appear like you're only out to make a buck. Hopefully you're trying to remain an upstanding citizen.

"Our strategy is effective now, but marketing is ever-changing . . . I'm always open to a good idea."

LM: Absolutely. Above reproach. But the thing is, it doesn't have to be hard to be a good citizen.

We try to make referrals fun. We've done a lot of focus groups to find out exactly what people want. That's where some of those gimmicky things came in. The population we deal with hate to pay for car washes; they're used to washing their car all the time and it's not as convenient for them as they're getting older. So I buy them a car wash. I call ahead to let the car wash know my clients are coming. The clients love it. And they give me tons of referrals.

SMA: You seem to have nailed down all sides of selling long term care insurance. You've got the passion for it, the marketing experience and the ability to get referrals. What's the most important part?

LM: Utilizing the value of the other experts in the industry — all those connections. I've seen a lot of agents come in that don't want to affiliate with a lot of the other experts. Not that they don't want to network or know how to, but there's a territorial belief that if you reveal too much, that person could take the client away. But when you specialize in one thing, you really don't have to worry about that so much, but you have to know where to network.

If you notice, we market in dentist and chiropractor offices, but not doctors'. A rotten head of teeth will still pass underwriting. ■

Junk Collector

Three people collect junk mail for me. I give them each a big box for their junk mail and have them put all their long term care and insurance-related junk mail in there. They are all different ages, so their mail is different. When they bring it in, I go through it all and see how my competition is marketing to that particular sector. — L.M.