

Judgment Call

THIS ISSUE MARKS THE WELCOME RETURN OF "POLICY BRIEFING," one of *Contingencies'* regular columns. When Tom Wilder took over as public policy director a year ago, he felt, understandably, that he wanted to get his feet wet before weighing in on public policy matters that affect actuaries and in which actuaries play a vital role. Now, up to his ankles and thoroughly drenched, he's got something to say. And we're glad he's here.

His message—that being nonpartisan is not the same as being equivocal and indecisive, and that the Academy needs to get over its fear of expressing opinions—doesn't come from him alone.

Several months ago, the Academy undertook an audit of its communications activities. How well do we get our message across to our various audiences—Academy members, legislators, regulators, and the media? Under the guidance of Academy staff, an outside consultant conducted focus groups all across the country, allowing Academy members, Hill staffers, NAIC members, reporters, and bureaucrats to vent about the quality of our publications, both print and electronic.

Predictably, the report cards were mixed. We got high marks on some, and failed miserably on others. For the most part, though, our public audiences appreciated the role actuaries can play (provided they understood what an actuary is) and had a high regard for Academy work product. Short, pithy bulletins were deemed most helpful, but sometimes, when complexity requires something deeper and denser, they appreciated the Academy's thoroughness.

But one message came through loud and clear: Monograph or one-pager, issue brief or letter to Congress, the Academy can't be afraid to take a position. Just announcing the lineup of the opposing teams and drawing white lines around the field isn't enough. The people we communicate with want us, whenever it's warranted, to make the call. They

want to know what we think and where we stand.

They value our opinion.

Might it be something a few congressmen don't want to hear? Might it make a few business executives angry? Might it send the White House into spin cycle or drive a few lobbyists to their cell phones? Maybe. And if the chips happen to fall on one side of the aisle rather than the other, then so be it; that's where they fall. But if the Academy doesn't say it and tell it like it is, who will? Because that's what the people we communicate with expect from us: clarity, brevity, and decisiveness.

What else did we hear from these focus groups? They don't think much of our Web site, for one thing. So we're hard at work trying to bring it up to speed. And members didn't like the old *Actuarial Update*, so we redesigned and rethought it to better fit their expectations. Many of them weren't quite sure what the actuarial counseling and discipline process was all about; they thought we ought to open it up and air it out a bit.

On the plus side, they liked *Contingencies*, though they admitted they didn't always read all of it. (Shame!) The NAIC was immensely grateful for the hard work the Academy performs for them. And those outside the profession appreciated the Academy's role in helping to define what constitutes ethical, quality actuarial work.

So we have reason to be proud, and we have some work to do. That was the reason behind conducting the audit in the first place, to find out what our audiences expect from us and how well we meet expectations. And the last thing you want to do is risk losing your audience by confounding its expectations. ●



EDITOR

Contingencies

VOLUME 12/NUMBER 4

PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACTUARIES

PRESIDENT

STEPHEN R. KERN

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RICHARD C. LAWSON

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

KEN KREHBIEL

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR PUBLICATIONS AND EDITOR

STEVEN SULLIVAN

ASSISTANT EDITOR

BECKY HORST

ADVERTISING

MOHANNA & ASSOCIATES

DEPARTMENT EDITORS

THOMAS L. BAKOS

ALAN GOLDBERG

IRWIN T. VANDERHOOF



PUBLICATION DESIGN & PRODUCTION

BOHOTOM STUDIO, INC.

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

JULIA T. PHILIPS, *CHAIRPERSON*

DWIGHT K. BARTLETT III

JAMES C. HICKMAN

FREDERICK W. KILBOURNE

RICHARD S. ROBERTSON

BRUCE D. SCHOBEL

SUSAN E. WITCRAFT

INTERNET ADDRESS

WWW.CONTINGENCIES.ORG

CONTINGENCIES (ISSN 1048-9851) IS PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACTUARIES, 1100 SEVENTEENTH STREET, NW, 7TH FLOOR, WASHINGTON, DC 20036. FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION AND CUSTOMER SERVICE, CONTACT THE *CONTINGENCIES* SUBSCRIPTION DEPARTMENT AT THE ADDRESS ABOVE OR (202) 223-8196. ADVERTISING OFFICES: MOHANNA & ASSOCIATES, INC., (972) 596-8777, DAWNETTE@MOHANNA.COM. PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID AT WASHINGTON, DC, AND AT ADDITIONAL MAILING OFFICES. BPA CIRCULATION AUDITED. (BASIC ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATE IS INCLUDED IN DUES. NON-MEMBER RATE IS \$24.)

COPYRIGHT 2000. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THIS MAGAZINE MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER. OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN SIGNED ARTICLES ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHORS AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT OFFICIAL POLICY OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ACTUARIES.

POSTMASTER: PLEASE SEND CHANGE-OF-ADDRESS NOTICES FOR *CONTINGENCIES* TO PRIMA FULFILLMENT, P.O. BOX 7225, BENSENVILLE, IL 60106-7225.