

MassMutual's Sales Agents Turn to Strong Interest Inventory® Assessment for Targeted Marketing

Increasing Agent Profitability and Retention



CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

STUDY OVERVIEW

MassMutual Financial Group, the fleet name for Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company and its affiliates, is a mutually owned financial protection, accumulation, and income management company headquartered in Springfield, Massachusetts, with more than 85 agencies nationwide. Founded in 1851, MassMutual today is a Fortune 100 company* and in 2007 was ranked by *Fortune* magazine as one of America's "Most Admired Companies" in its industry category.**

CHALLENGE

The challenge at MassMutual was to help grow and retain its sales agents—enhancing their prospecting and sales efforts through more target-marketing efforts. Ultimately, the goal was to enhance agents' profitability in selling MassMutual products and services.

SOLUTION

Beginning in fall 2004, MassMutual began using the *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment to implement target marketing—at the independent agency level as well as at the corporate level—helping agents develop targeted marketing plans focused on their strongest areas of interest.

RESULTS

Today, with more than 2,000 agents having completed the *Strong* assessment since rollout, MassMutual is getting the sales staff moving on the targeted-marketing path. The *Strong* is now being considered for use as part of the contracting process for all new agents and is having a positive impact on agent retention.

Life insurance. Disability. Money management. Retirement. These are highly sensitive, yet inevitable, topics, and the complex products created to address them aren't always easy to sell. The job of financial services sales agents is a precarious one. In fact, retention rates for sales agents are exceptionally low industry-wide—only 15% of new agents survive the first four years of building their business.¹ And it's not hard to imagine that for agents trying to sell services to individuals with whom they have little in common, it's an even tougher task. Furthermore, MassMutual's 80+ agencies throughout the U.S. operate as independent contractors selling MassMutual products to individuals in all walks of life and all professions, as well as selling other firms' products. The fact that these independent agents are not exclusive to MassMutual makes the agents' job even more complex.

When challenged with improving agent retention and sales success, MassMutual took a highly innovative approach to enhance its competitiveness and target-marketing efforts—it turned to the *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment from CPP, Inc.

"STRONG" TARGET MARKETING

Michael Klein, PsyD, Field Training and Development at MassMutual, shares responsibility for developing the organization's sales agents. Naturally, part of their development program focuses on sales skills, including prospecting and marketing. Klein and his colleagues knew that sales agents who share interests with certain types of clients are better positioned to prospect in those groups and ultimately be more successful in building and maintaining profitable client relationships. Klein knew of an instrument—the *Strong Interest Inventory* tool—that could help agents discover occupations or markets for which they have a natural affinity. Klein and his colleagues knew the *Strong* could be a unique tool for targeted marketing for the agents—one that would create for them a greater sense of focus and provide a path for prospecting. Further, since the company was planning to almost double its sales force in the next few years, he thought this tool could help MassMutual grow and retain its sales force.

Klein says that many financial service professionals come into this business as recent college graduates with no sales experience—or having recently changed careers. As a result, new hires have a lot of anxiety about calling

**Fortune* magazine, April 30, 2007

***Fortune* magazine, March 19, 2007

¹ Annual report, Agent Production and Retention 2007, LIMRA.

on prospects. For these individuals, the *Strong* instrument makes the prospecting process much more real, building their confidence by showing them areas of common interest with their prospects that make their marketing efforts more focused, and more effective.

The *Strong Interest Inventory* assessment is one of the most widely used career planning instruments in the world, having guided millions of individuals in their search for rich and fulfilling careers over the past 80 years. It generates an in-depth assessment of an individual's interests among a broad range of occupations, work tasks, and leisure activities and is ubiquitous throughout top educational institutions, as well as organizations of all sizes. Updated regularly to reflect the latest changes in all fields of work and study, the *Strong* remains the gold standard instrument for career development. It consists of 291 carefully selected questions that identify an individual's interests as they relate to fields of work and study. Answers are compared to those of a large representative sample of the U.S. workforce, as well as to those of professionals in more than 120 occupations. The *Strong* enables individuals to identify occupations in which they have shared likes and dislikes with others working in that field.

Klein expands on the traditional use of the *Strong* as a career development tool, leveraging the compatibility of interests as a predictor for sales compatibility within an occupational field. For example, an agent who shares the likes and dislikes of lawyers can better relate to lawyers and will subsequently be more successful selling to this market segment, especially when it comes to complex sales transactions such as life insurance. He feels that using the assessment in this innovative context makes a lot of sense for MassMutual's agents and contributes significantly to increased agent retention.

STRONG ROLLOUT AT MASSMUTUAL AGENCIES

After consulting with CPP's Research Division in the spring of 2004, MassMutual rolled out the program in the fall, with Michael Klein conducting *Strong Interest Inventory* training and orientation seminars, and promoting the use of the *Strong* tool in a weekly corporate newsletter.

The various MassMutual agencies have flexibility in how they can use the instrument, but most are using it early in the new agent training process, specifically in weeklong agent bootcamps or ongoing weekly agent trainings. As a "home office" for its sales professionals, MassMutual holds bimonthly new agent orientation seminars during which agents analyze their *Strong* assessment results and create plans for entering potential occupational markets.

According to Klein, over 2,000 agents have taken the *Strong* assessment since the 2004 rollout, and he is starting to see other departments take interest in innovative applications of the *Strong*. One of the latest innovations is using the results of the *Strong* with sales managers to help them determine target occupations from which to recruit potential salespeople.

Klein reports that agents react with a combination of relief and excitement that there are prospects out there they can comfortably and enthusiastically call on and successfully sell to. One agent had taken the *Strong* as a college student, and his two top-scored occupations were "life insurance agent" and "attorney." He now has a successful insurance practice selling to attorneys—the *Strong* gave him another indication that this was the right target market for him.

Not only can the *Strong* reinforce areas of interest, but it also can help agents refocus target marketing to areas more appropriate to and in line with their interests. An agent in Florida was struggling to sell to attorneys; but once he took the *Strong* assessment, he realized his interests were more suited to selling into the medical field. After refocusing his efforts on this field, he immediately became more successful. Klein has additional evidence of the instrument's positive impact based on feedback he's received from agents who have taken the *Strong* and learned about high-affinity areas into which they should be selling.

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—Michael Klein, PsyD
Field Training and Development,
MassMutual

"The *Strong*," explains Klein, "has exceeded our expectations. It helps build prospecting confidence, quells anxiety, and provides real-world examples of target markets. What has in fact happened is that it has become the 'lead story' in our target-marketing saga here at MassMutual. It all starts with the *Strong*. We don't talk about target marketing without talking about the *Strong*—it is that invaluable."

And, he added, "Our relationship with CPP has gone well outside what you would typically think of a vendor relationship. In fact, we think of them as an ally. CPP stayed with us throughout the implementation process, and supported us in our innovative use of the *Strong* assessment."

GETTING RESULTS – PROMOTING ACTION

Klein's original hypothesis has been proven, and indeed the *Strong* has had a positive impact on sales agents. But, what's the impact on MassMutual's bottom line? Klein says the most important benefit of the *Strong* is that it "gets people moving on the target-marketing path. It promotes action by providing another avenue for agents who are

prospecting for new accounts. Further, if agents become profitable earlier, we have a better chance of retaining them and helping them build a viable, long-term financial services practice with us.”

In addition to its use as a sales development tool by new, inexperienced agents, the *Strong* assessment is being used by a field leader in Atlanta as a recruiting tool. He shows candidates a sample report, talks them through the process, and explains how their *Strong* results will help them determine the right markets to target to achieve the most success. And it’s not just the agents who benefit, but customers as well. “We are providing clients with a representative who has a genuine interest in who they are, beyond just having money to invest with MassMutual or loved ones to protect in case of death or disability,” says Klein. “They have real commonality. This is huge for clients, and a great way to build deep, lasting relationships with their financial and insurance advisor.”

From Klein’s perspective, “We can’t teach target marketing today without referencing the *Strong*, it is that synergistic.”

About CPP, Inc.

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