

San Diego Business Journal

Decade Makes a Difference for Ahern Family's Brokerage

By - 2/23/2009

San Diego Business Journal Staff

BY CASSANDRA DUMP

Family owned and operated Ahern Insurance Brokerage is a modest firm of 31 employees that's growing its national client base of 2,600 law firms.

With revenues of \$5.7 million in 2007 and \$6 million in 2008 and annual premium sales averaging \$41 million,

AIB is comparable to local insurance services firm Marrs Maddocks & Associates with 37 full-time employees as of 2008, annual revenue in 2007 of \$6 million and premium volume of \$55 million.

AIB has changed considerably since Brian Ahern, 47, launched it in June 1997 with only two support staff. His sister, Ellen Ahern, 43, joined the business later in the same year.

They are partners in the brokerage. He is majority stockholder and serves as president; she serves as executive vice president.

While AIB's headquarters is in San Diego, its San Francisco office opened in 2003 and is run by vice president and youngest brother, Kevin Ahern, 40. Other office openings followed in Los Angeles and Orange County.

"We have truly evolved from the beginning," said Ellen Ahern. "We have more of an intimate and customized personal approach."

Ellen Ahern focuses on marketing strategy, branding and business development efforts. Part of her marketing this year is a commitment to making proposals and other prospective client processes more environmentally friendly by emphasizing online avenues such as e-mail and an interactive Web site.

Leadership Experience

Additionally, she maintains AIB's relationships with the Bar Associations of San Diego, Orange County, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Arizona, which collectively oversee 70,000 professional members.

Brian Ahern has prior experience at larger national firms, namely Arthur J. Gallagher & Co., where he served as area vice president and director of the professional liability department. He had 100 clients when he left the firm, and most joined him in his departure.

John Engel, shareholder at Sullivan Hill Lewin Rez & Engel, was one of those clients. Brian Ahern



Ellen Ahern and brother, Brian, are partners in Ahern Insurance Brokerage, which specializes in insurance services for law firms. | Photo by Stephen Whalen

has served as the law firm's broker since 1994 for professional and general liability insurance, fidelity and notary bonds as well as workers' compensation and in 2007 began offering employee benefits services through AIB's subdivision Ahern|ELT — including medical, dental and disability insurance.

"You get the feeling he is dedicated to client service and satisfaction," says Engel. "He is always knowledgeable and well-prepared. I'm a big fan of Brian."

Engel serves as firm counsel on legal education and risk-management and says Brian Ahern is always testing the insurance market, making sure that the decisions made each year for premiums are competitive.

"We are a small agency, but we can compete with the larger national firms because we offer the same services," says Ahern.

Those services emphasize the business's specialization in providing insurance to legal clients, including professional, general, and commercial property liability and employment practices liability. Brian Ahern says 98 percent of business is in the legal field.

The remaining 2 percent consists of accountants, business consultants and medical professionals. They represent clients that range in size from one to several hundred employees.

"AIB has been the bar's endorsed insurance broker since 2004," said local county Bar Association President Jerrilyn Malana. "We selected AIB because not only do they support our efforts to provide our member's comprehensive and competitively priced insurance products, but they do so with exceptional service and quality insurance products."

Benefits Division

Ed Lee, president and founder of Ahern|ELT, and Brian Ahern share an equal partnership in the employee benefits division, which offers insurance services and funding arrangements such as 401(k), retirement plans, life insurance, long-term care and life insurance.

For 2009, AIB is projecting a 10 percent to 15 percent increase in revenue based on future hiring and intended agency growth. Brian Ahern says that despite the current status of the economy, AIB is growing and no layoffs are anticipated in the coming months.

"The last few years there have been soft market conditions making the premiums very competitive," Ahern said. "Our growth has allowed us to sustain even during economic woes."