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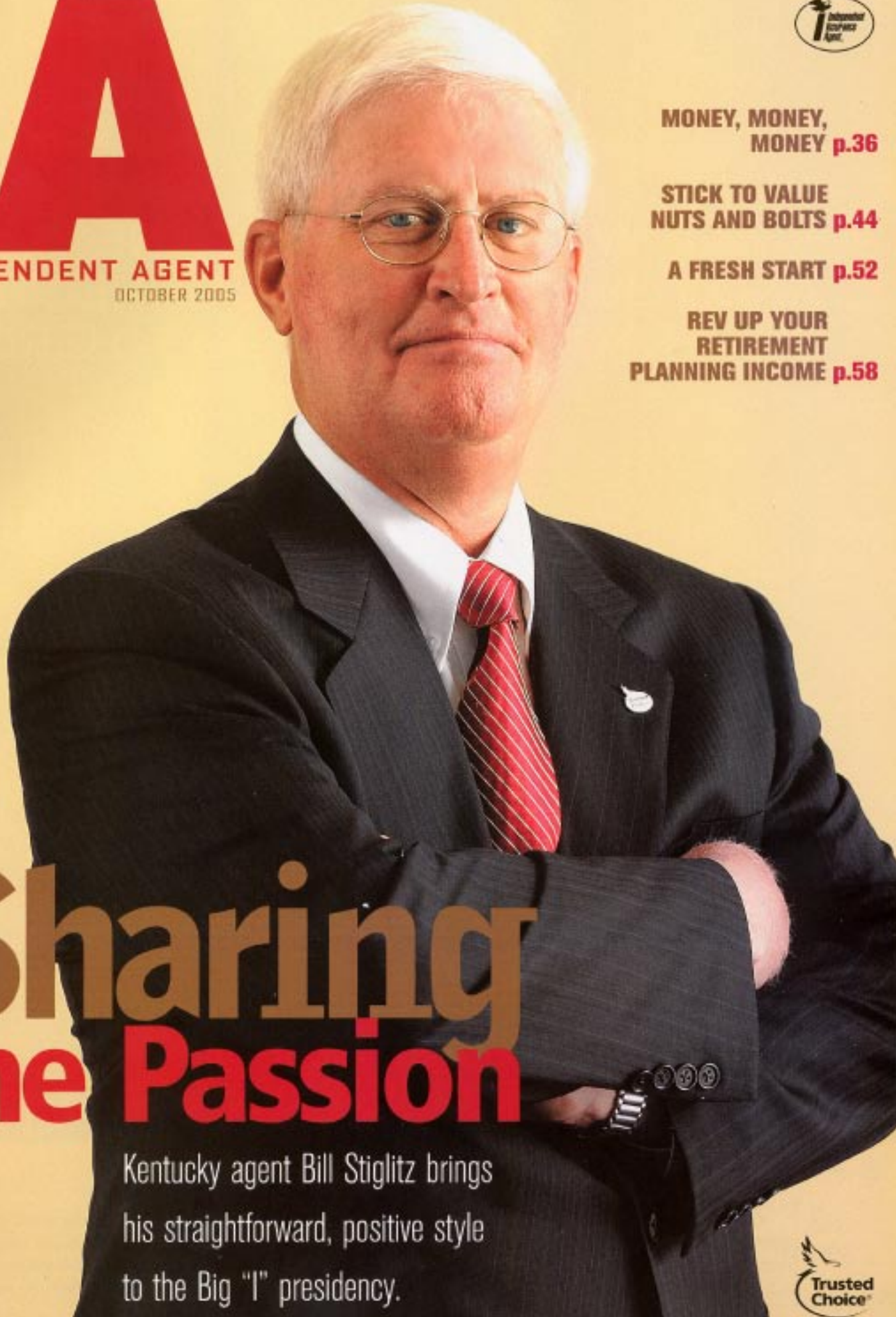
INDEPENDENT AGENT
OCTOBER 2005

**MONEY, MONEY,
MONEY p.36**

**STICK TO VALUE
NUTS AND BOLTS p.44**

A FRESH START p.52

**REV UP YOUR
RETIREMENT
PLANNING INCOME p.58**



Sharing the Passion

Kentucky agent Bill Stiglitz brings his straightforward, positive style to the Big "I" presidency.



A FRESH Start

WHAT WORKS

BY PETER VAN AARTRIJK JR., CIC

CHALLENGE: Going out on your own.

SOLUTION: Keep your word and be available—all the time.

How does independent agent Melanie Flamand market?

"Well, I sit at my desk and hope the phone rings," she says.

Flamand punctuates her deadpan comment with a peel of laughter. "I rarely give a straight answer," she says. "You have to have a sense of humor."

Despite the light banter, Flamand is dead serious about one thing: building her brand-new agency, Flamand & Associates. Incorporated in July in Warwick, R.I., Flamand is busy rolling over the \$400,000 in business she wrote through a brokering agency before going out on her own, and she has set ambitious goals for the firm's future.

"A year from now I plan to be comfortably at \$1.5 to \$2 million. And in five years, comfortably at \$5 million," Flamand says. "And by 'comfortably' I mean with retention that's good, loss ratio that's fantastic."

Those are hefty numbers for a new agency in a marketplace that already boasts many successful independent agencies. But the 20-year insurance veteran is confident in her abilities and eager to move forward. Flamand's entrepreneurial ambitions were sidetracked when a brief partnership in an agency didn't work out (see sidebar), but the delay only sharpened her focus. Her ingredients for success are simple: mine your current customers and referrals, be available all the time, focus on managing as well as producing and keep your word—to your employees, your carriers and your customers.

"Don't break your word. Have the same demeanor with everybody," she says. "Get that reputation and you can't go wrong."

Stealth Marketing

"My whole book is referrals," Flamand says. Indeed, she is not investing heavily in advertising and direct marketing (although she plans to place some local newspaper ads). Rather, she is engaging in a stealthier approach, building relationships and attracting customers through community and business networks, and then mining those customers for more business and additional referrals. "With every renewal, I'll look at the account, and if we just have the homeowners, I'll call and ask, 'What can we do for you?'"

Flamand also offers AFLAC voluntary benefits products to her customers, and she has found it to be a valuable cross-selling opportunity. "I have clients who want to offer AFLAC to their employees," she says. "And I've had AFLAC customers interested in personal p-c coverage."

24/7 Service Promise

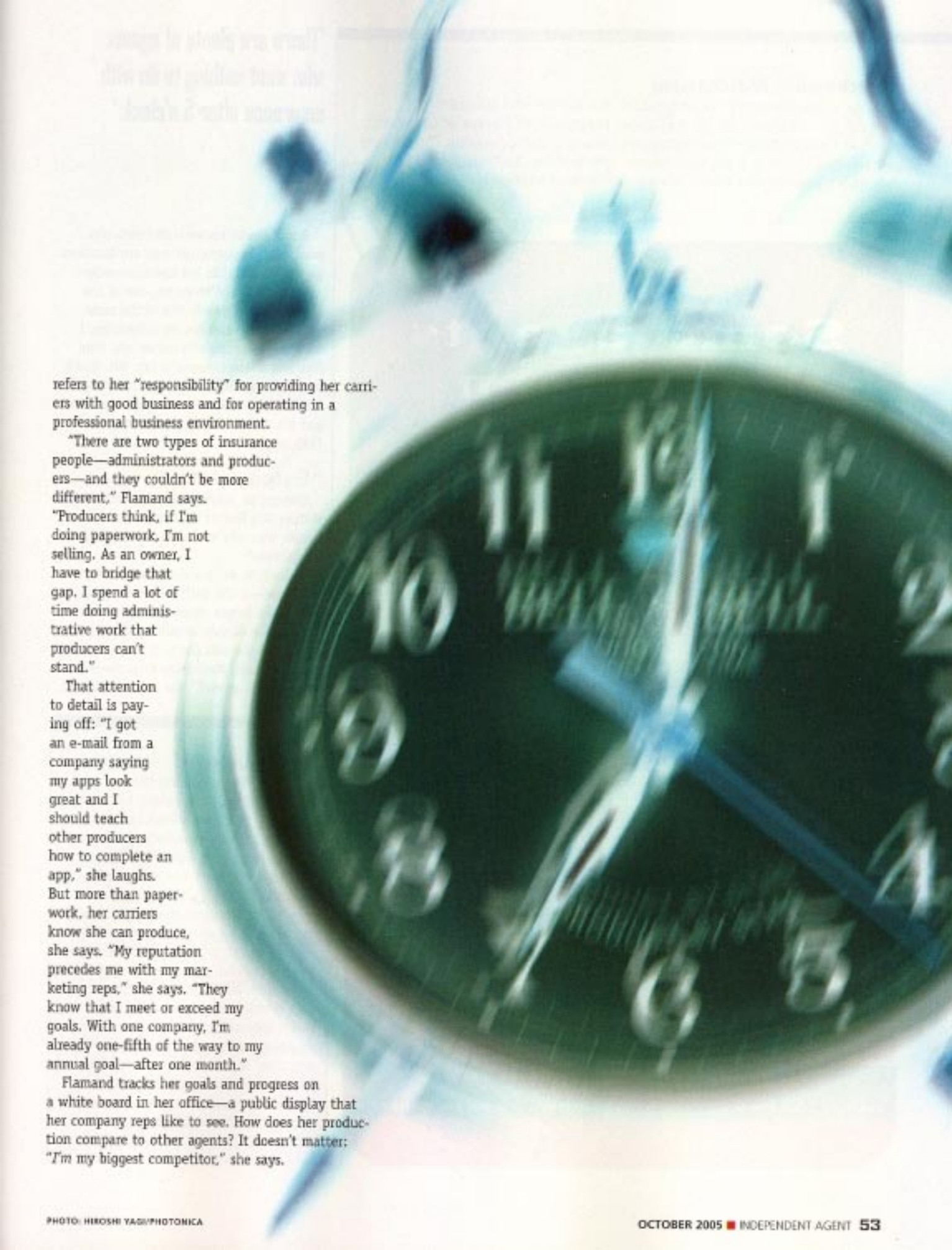
Before a customer is on the books, Flamand goes out of her way to be available for questions and concerns. "I'm available 24-7," she says. And that is, in part, how Flamand hopes to differentiate herself from the other insurance providers in her marketplace.

"There's plenty of competition in Warwick. But you can stand out by making yourself available," she explains. "There are plenty of agents who don't want anything to do with insurance after 5 o'clock."

She doesn't balk when a client or prospect approaches her on the golf course or at a restaurant to discuss a policy question or claim, and she genuinely seems to enjoy creating and maintaining relationships with customers. "I get postcards from clients, pictures of their kids," she says. "It's a great feeling when, instead of a handshake or an awkward 'Hello, I get a hug and a kiss.'"

Recipe for Carrier Relations

Flamand also wants her companies to have that warm-and-fuzzy feeling about her. She repeatedly



refers to her "responsibility" for providing her carriers with good business and for operating in a professional business environment.

"There are two types of insurance people—administrators and producers—and they couldn't be more different," Flamand says. "Producers think, if I'm doing paperwork, I'm not selling. As an owner, I have to bridge that gap. I spend a lot of time doing administrative work that producers can't stand."

That attention to detail is paying off: "I got an e-mail from a company saying my apps look great and I should teach other producers how to complete an app," she laughs. But more than paperwork, her carriers know she can produce, she says. "My reputation precedes me with my marketing reps," she says. "They know that I meet or exceed my goals. With one company, I'm already one-fifth of the way to my annual goal—after one month."

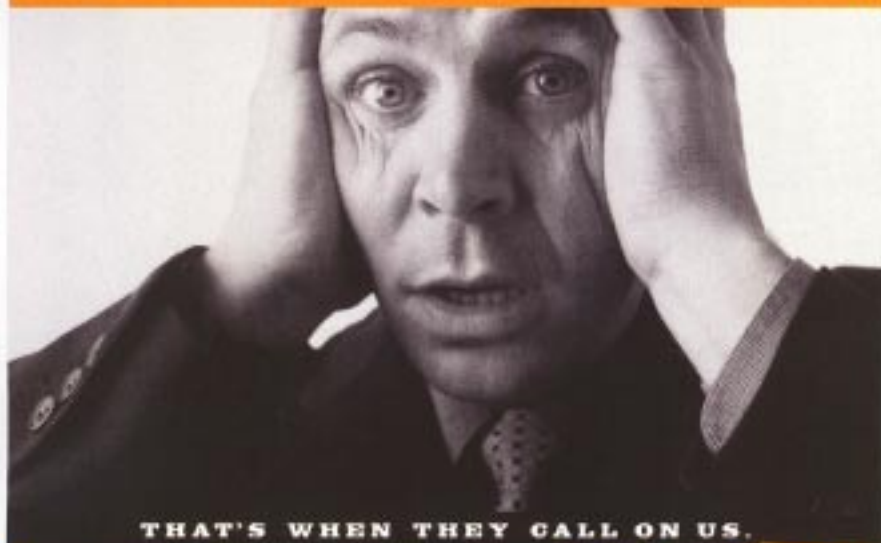
Flamand tracks her goals and progress on a white board in her office—a public display that her company reps like to see. How does her production compare to other agents? It doesn't matter: "I'm my biggest competitor," she says.

Matchmaker, Matchmaker

Melanie Flamand is a matchmaker—but not the kind you think. As an ambassador for the Central Rhode Island Chamber of Commerce, Flamand partners like-minded businesses in the community. “So, I might introduce a printer to a graphic designer,” she explains. Such helpful meddling brings her a wealth of contacts to mine for her own business.

—P.V.

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**'There are plenty of agents
who want nothing to do with
insurance after 5 o'clock.'**

But Flamand knows that companies want good business, not just any business. So she is careful in her frontline underwriting. “I intend to be not one of the biggest, but certainly one of the more profitable agencies for my companies. I want my companies to see an app from Flamand & Associates and say, ‘Oh, that’ll be good business.’” After all, she adds, “It’s one thing to roll over a book of business, and it’s another to have companies have faith in you.”

“Elation and Fear”

Owning an agency, says Flamand, “is elation and fear at the same time. I have people who rely on me now—employees, companies.”

Indeed, in August she hired her first employee—a CSR with 40 years experience—and began interviewing for two producers. She already is talking about what incentives she will use to prod production and retention. Motivating employees is “a means to an end,” she says. “I want to

What I Learned

While remaining discreet about the details, Melanie Flamand admits her biggest business mistake was getting involved in a business with a partner. “It definitely did not work out in my best interest.”

In 2001, Flamand and a partner purchased an agency in Warwick, but the relationship didn’t work and the partnership dissolved. The terms of the dissolution left Flamand unable to roll over or mine her book of business, and it took six months for her to find an agency willing to broker new accounts. She says the agency, Troy, Pires & Allen, is “a great agency, run by great men, and I appreciate every opportunity that they gave me.”

—P.V.