Throughout my career, I have continued a pattern of behavior: I focus on what interests me. Over time, my markets and my interests have evolved, but I continue to sell the benefits of our crafted programs to clients and advisors, or centers of influence.

In 1974, a new tax law — ERISA — changed the landscape of the pension plan business. After falling into a pension plan sale, I was so excited that I became an expert in the qualified plans market, reading everything I could. By the late 1970s, I became involved with publicly held companies, selling nonqualified executive retirement plans. Basically, my business was focused on living benefits and retirement savings. Life insurance was introduced as the relationship was being established, and we started to discuss what might go wrong and how life insurance could fit individual and corporate needs.

As I’ve matured and my clients have gotten older, their needs have changed, and so have my interests. I am building a business that focuses on solving problems for people who have special problems or unique needs.
Specializing
As I reflect back to the early 1970s, insurance was used as a tool to fulfill certain needs and expectations. It's still used that way today. So what does this mean? It became apparent to me that I was selecting one narrow aspect of the life insurance business that I thought was interesting and opportunistic. Consequently, I learned one or two techniques for that market, and as I would speak to each person, I would discuss that technique. I have continued to generate business in the same way — becoming a specialist by learning to solve specific problems. To support my presentation, I put together a four-page example, which discussed the problems, opportunities, solutions, results, and benefits to both the client and the advisor. I started calling on advisors to discuss my expertise and what I could deliver.

I did the same working with public companies. I learned the public company's particular problems and put together a simple presentation for their review. I would seek out and call on advisors who worked with these public companies specializing in the executive benefit area. Most importantly, I would discuss what's in it for both the client and advisor. The benefit for the advisor was more business from the same client, and it was another reason to strengthen their relationship with that client.

Target market
While starting out, I always called on people 10–30 years my senior. People my age didn't have any money, but those 10–30 years older did. Today, those same people are in their 60s to 90s. Consequently, their lives have changed. So, today, the tagline for my company is “Lives change. Needs change.” As my life has evolved, my business has also evolved to reflect a new stage of my life and the interests I currently have. The result is that I still call on various professionals and consultants who are experts in a particular field. I learn a great deal about them, their needs and the problems associated with their businesses, as well as the particular market I want to enter. I deliver a very high level of expertise to a very narrow area of need to those people who live in that specialty on a daily basis.

Marketing today
While I do much of the traditional marketing, such as sending out mailings, each mailing is specialized and narrowly focused to a small group of advisors on a single subject. In my opinion, if you're specialized, the conversation quickly becomes focused. If it's a subject that you're extremely interested in, your passion will come through. I also believe that keeping close to our current clients is a form of marketing.

Following are some examples of how we market our business today:
1. We have thank-you luncheons for our clients, where no business of any type is discussed.
2. We have social dinners for our clients and selected referral sources, where no business of any type of is discussed.
3. We change the gifts that we give to keep things interesting. Last year, we sent out pecan pies from Texas for Thanksgiving.
4. We send midyear gifts for no reason whatsoever — just to say “thinking of you.” Those gifts could be specialized pasta or sauces, wines, chocolates or olive oil from Italy.
5. We have also sent out a Vermont Teddy Bear Bear-Gram when someone has a child or grandchild.
6. We host small, intimate dinner parties, functions at a museum and other events.
7. We send out birthday cards and holiday cards.
8. We e-mail a technical letter on a specific subject of interest to the advisor two to three times a year. These items — often found in newspapers or industry technical bulletins — support our position or give additional information the advisor might be seeking.
9. We also have produced a year-in-review letter — a capsule of the prior year's successes — to keep clients and advisors current with our growth and evolving practice.

I've found that to effectively solve your clients’ problems, you have to be engaged with them. The clients and markets I target must meet three criteria: I enjoy them, I am curious about them and they fit my personality. I enjoy the relationships created with the clients and the long-lasting relationships created with advisors.

As a result of this work and prospecting in this manner, I’ve been able to develop strong referrals from both clients and advisors that have continued to drive my business.