

## SMALL BUSINESS

### She helps untangle web of clients' health insurance options

Vicki James saw firsthand the pitfalls in search for best plans

By NICOLE SHELDON

Watching her father go through the annual election period for health insurance brought up concerns for Vicki James; the agent her father was working with was only showing him one piece of the health care pie. That was the catalyst to start her own business, one that would be an advocate for people looking to address their health insurance needs.

James spent many years in the marketing sphere, eventually forming her own marketing consulting firm called Stand Out Results, which helped small businesses with strategy, branding and customer experience. She operated Stand Out Results for three years before deciding to pursue a new career path.

"The one thing I didn't like about my marketing business was selling," reveals James. "I liked the consulting part, but the selling wasn't fun for me."

James started attending college in her 20s, but she and her husband had children early so it became too tough to continue. She revisited higher education in 2015 and completed her bachelor's degree in business management online through Western Governors University.

"Western Governors was created by 20 governors on the West Coast that got together in the 1990s who wanted to figure out a better way for adult learners to get their degrees," explains James. "Everything is self-paced. I was so intent on getting it done that I completed my 19 classes in 21 weeks."

A tenacious self-starter, James went on to complete her MBA from Western Governors in just six months. In 2016 she launched Medicare EASY, located at 70 Linden Oaks, to help the 65 and older population deal with health insurance.

"I help people who are turning 65 decide whether it's a better choice to get Medicare or stay on their employer plan," says James. "If Medicare is a

better choice, I walk them through the process of how to enroll in Medicare. I go over in great detail what Medicare is and what it isn't and the different plans offered through Medicare."

During her first year of business, James saw a market for helping customers under 65 decipher which health insurance plans are the most beneficial and cost effective, so she added another element to her business called Health Insurance EASY.

For Health Insurance EASY, "there are different plans dependent on household size and income. We figure out if people qualify for Medicaid, or the essential plan, or if they qualify for the exchange where they get a subsidy from the state or if it makes sense to go with traditional health insurance," she says. "Depending on which bucket they land in, I help them determine which plan is the best for them."

James outlines the health insurance offerings for small businesses, as well, walking them through navigation process akin to the way she aids individual clients.

James also helps local citizens obtain and manage long-term care insurance, life insurance and final expense insurance. Insurance is notoriously confusing, and many people assume that Medicare will cover things like nursing home expenses. That is not the case. Medicare covers situations such as full-time rehabilitation following a hip replacement, but not long-term care.

"I like this new hybrid plan for long-term care, meaning that if you need long-term care it's there and it'll pay out to help pay for in-home care or assisted living or full nursing coverage, but what I love about it is if you don't ever need long-term care, then you get the cash benefit of a life insurance plan," says James. "Traditional long-term care insurance is like your home and auto insurance; you pay for it, but if you never get in an accident you basically just threw that money out the window."

James has her sights set on expanding her work to reach families with adult children with disabilities. She says there are special plans for people who have both Medicare and Medicaid, and she wants to be a resource to help those families simultaneously save money and take advantage of the excellent



Provided photo

Vicki James

coverage that is available.

Also on her list of goals is doing more community outreach and education events. James recently hired a bookkeeper to take that item off her to-do list and free up her time to focus on educating citizens through workshops and lectures.

"I also want to be connected with more HR professionals," says James. "I'm currently connected with HR professionals at a few companies, and as people are approaching turning 65 or retiring, they can just hand my card out to them and acknowledge that there's so much complexity around health insurance and that I'm here to help them."

James' No. 1 goal is always to make the health insurance process as seamless as possible for her clients. When her clients tell her she made everything feel simple and stress-free, then James knows she has done her job.

Currently, James has one other broker on her team, her husband, Terry James. But she hopes to continue growing in a thoughtful manner.

"I want to make sure the people on my team have the same moral compass and customer-first mindset," says James. "Some people are just out to find the quickest sale and move on to the next person. I want to create long-lasting re-

lationships with my clients."

James acknowledges that there are some unscrupulous people in the insurance industry who attempt to take advantage of the community. To prevent this there are stringent compliance laws that James and all other brokers must follow in order to stay in business. For Medicare, there is an annual compliance exam, and if a broker does not pass then they cannot sell that insurance for a whole year.

Additionally, for every carrier James and her husband represent, there are individual exams they must pass on a yearly basis.

"We know the ins and outs of insurance plans," says James. "I like that. I don't like taking the test, but I like being an expert because I treat every one of my clients as if they were my dad."

James notes that it is free for clients to sit down with her for a consultation and that premiums do not increase for clients using her services. In fact, the individuals do not pay James at all; she and all other brokers are paid the same commission by the insurance companies as required by the federal government.

"We have no incentive to push one plan over another," assures James. "I'm very upfront and honest when people are sitting with me and I tell them, 'Look, if I was sitting in your seat I would be wondering what's in it for her. And honestly, there is nothing in it for me. I just want to make sure that you have the best plan for you and that it covers all of your needs and keeps the most amount of money in your pocket.'"

On top of running a business, James is active in the Rochester community. She is the immediate past board chair for the Rochester Area Business Ethics Foundation, a member of Rochester Rotary and a member of the Rochester chapter of the National Underwriters Association. In recognition for her abundant community service, James was recognized by AARP's ACES Program in 2017 and 2018 for averaging 100 volunteer hours.

"Volunteerism is something I learned from my dad," says James. "It's important for me to give back to my community because you get what you give."

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