



The association, says past IBAM president Irwin Kumka, shown here greeting the prime minister, needed more open and direct avenues to the world of politics.

Friends in high places

The Insurance Brokers Association of Manitoba, Dave Schioler at its helm, has beefed up its provincial and federal lobbying efforts. Many feel the initiative has raised the association's efficacy to a new level.

Some time ago the board of directors of the Insurance Brokers Association of Manitoba decided it was time to follow a new course of political activism. The idea was to better communicate its concerns and aspirations to politicians for the benefit of both its membership and the consumer. Today, it counts itself at the forefront of politically astute organizations.

IBAM, according to past-president Irwin Kumka, a senior partner in Winnipeg's Ryan Gateway Insurance, had its house in order under previous CEO Margaret Scurfield. But the association wasn't particularly well-versed in dealing with issues and people at the political level, he says. It needed connections and more open and direct avenues to the world of politics, both provincial and federal.

"In the last year of Scurfield's tenure," Kumka said, "the association did some soul-searching. I had joined the board a number of years ago,

and I was surprised how little political activity there was. Even now, there's still a long way to go. Communication is not a quick fix. It's a continuous process."

Kumka says a political road map was developed over time by a four-person management team of the IBAM board.

"I wouldn't want to give the impression that we drew a line in the sand and said 'that's it.' It took a while. It was a slow, evolutionary process."

Among the key players in the process were Tony Taronno and George Miller, both past-presidents, and board member Scott Andrew of Andrew Agencies in Virden. Andrew says a strategic planning session in 2004 set the course.

"We found that all of the directors, including the executive, were of the mind that the number-one priority of our association was political activity or lobbying. That's where we started. We felt that we hadn't been as active or effective as we could be."

BY RON SHORVOYCE

Andrew says nothing in particular precipitated IBAM's move into political lobbying; it was just something the organization had to do.

"There weren't really events or a crisis that had us step up to the plate. We just knew our primary role was political activity, and we got on with it."

Kumka says one of the first steps IBAM took was to initiate an annual MLA-MP reception.

"We felt that was very important, so that when issues did arise, there was a process of communication. Politicians now know what IBAM's goals are. They recognize us and what we're about."



Andrew

By the time IBAM was ready to recruit a new CEO, Kumka says the objective was clear: hire someone with a solid political background. That someone turned out to be Dave Schioler.

"I was immediately impressed," Kumka says, "with Dave's political savvy, his communication and management skills."

Current president Larry Watson echoes that sentiment.

"Dave," he says, "is very astute."

Schioler has been IBAM's CEO for about

two years. He's a teacher, a lawyer and he has an MBA. He's worked extensively in the private sector and knows politics.

In 1993 he ran – unsuccessfully – for the



Schioler

Progressive Conservatives in the federal riding of Winnipeg-St. James. He counts Peter MacKay, Canada's defence minister, as one of his close friends.

"Peter is my best friend from law school," Schioler, 50, says. "We maintain regular contact and get together quite often." That type of connection and knowledge was precisely what IBAM was looking for when it hired Schioler. He believes his efforts since then, in concert with the wishes of the directors, have taken the organization to a new level.

Watson agrees. "I think there's no question, no matter who you talk to within our association, our executive, our board or anybody nationally, that Manitoba has taken quite a lead over the last couple of years in terms of not only local political action, but national political action."

Political action by IBAM is now multi-directional and more refined, according to Schioler. At the provincial level, there's certainly a new awareness of IBAM, he says.

"Last year, we were successful in getting (Manitoba premier) Gary Doer as the guest speaker at our annual convention. That hadn't happened before."

New relationships with provincial politicians will be important, Andrew says, as IBAM wrestles with the issue of credit unions in the province entering into the insurance business.

"Part of the political activity with MLAs is to educate them so they understand the implications of financial institutions owning insurance organizations."

While the pace of official political meetings between the association and MLAs and MPs has been stepped up, Schioler says the association is also encouraging brokers at the grassroots level to cultivate political contacts.



Watson

"Brokers are known for the work they do in the community," Schioler said. "But the association has now also taken a more strategic role to help out in that regard."

As a result, the awareness factor has gone up in the public eye across the province. Decision-makers see that and the public sees that. And with our involvement, all the work that brokers already do gets noticed even more."

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An added benefit of IBAM's new course is the contribution the organization is now making to the Insurance Brokers Association of Canada through Kumka's role with the national body. He is currently chair of IBAC's political action committee.

IBAM represents 90 per cent of the 1,700 independent insurance brokers in the province. It employs four people, which includes Schioler. His second-in-command is Rosemary Poleshuk, director of operations, who has been with the association for six years. She came to IBAM from the Manitoba Restaurant Association.



MacKay

"I did a lot of the restaurant events and coordinated a lot of their board meetings," Poleshuk said. "I had a lot of association experience when I applied for the IBAM position."

Poleshuk looks after the day-to-day workings of the IBAM office and is the direct liaison between the membership and her boss.



Poleshuk

"I coordinate some of the special events. That would include our annual conference, golf tournaments, dinners and board meetings. I'm also the lead on professional development."

Poleshuk says she likes the people she works with, the variety of responsibilities and the independence of the job.

Tammy Shpak, membership services coordinator, joined IBAM in 2003. She looks after the association's E&O program, Customer Service for the Insurance Professional, and the auto broker technical course. She also acts as liaison for the young broker committee.

The association has Cathy Kropp, a part-time accountant, on staff, and will also be adding a replacement position to handle IBAM's professional development and education coordination. The newcomer will also coordinate the Fundamentals of Insurance course, education seminars and maintenance of IBAM's website.



Shpak

"The thing that amazes me most about the staff here is the amount of work that gets done with so few people," says Schioler. "They're dedicated and do a great job. In Rosemary's case, she's a self-starter, and that allows me to do things away from the office. We have developed excellent working relationships in our office, and we are very proud of that fact. In the end, it all really helps us to fulfill our political action mandate." IW

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