Dave Cohen:

Welcome to the SeaComm Podcast, your place for the latest on what's happening at SeaComm and helpful tips on saving and protecting your money. Welcome everyone to our latest episode of the SeaComm Podcast. It is a very special episode today. Joining me are Scott Wilson, SeaComm president and CEO, and Tom Bellinger, the manager and lead licensed agent for the SeaComm Insurance Agency. And gentlemen, that's what we're going to be speaking about today is the SeaComm Insurance Agency. Just a little over a year ago, it was born and a very exciting thing to happen for the community and for SeaComm itself. So why did SeaComm decide to get into the insurance business?

Scott Wilson:

Well, first of all, we look at all of our products and services and decide what should we be offering to our membership? And that's ever evolving. I mean, we're always trying to develop new things to ensure that we're not only on cutting edge, but we're also ensuring that our members are getting everything they can possibly from SeaComm as a member. So the journey started a few years ago. We started talking about some of our products and services at strategic planning. And one of the areas we felt that we could really hone in on was insurance services, auto, home, things of that nature. In historical perspective, SeaComm used to have an insurance agency called SeaCo Services back in the late '80s. And you could come in, get an auto, and then be able to get your auto insurance at the same time. That went away from a perspective today.

I'm not sure all of the details of it, but it's been on our radar for a number of years as we've continued to grow, not only from St. Lawerence County into new markets, but also the plethora of other products, service we offer. And we decided that this was a good direction for us. Honestly, we have a built-in membership, nearly 58,000 prospective insurance clients. And we wanted to be able to say, "Hey, look, if you'd like us to offer you these services, here's an agency. We're here to do business with you." And that is working, Dave, today.

Dave Cohen:

So is the SeaComm Insurance Agency a separate company from SeaComm, the credit union?

Scott Wilson:

Yes, it's a separate company. It's an LLC. However, on our balance sheet, it's consolidated, which means it all blends into one. So we separate the corporations, but on the balance sheet it is consolidated because we're the wholly owned owner of it.

Dave Cohen:

So Tom, I'd love to know a little bit about what types of insurance that we offer through the SeaComm Insurance Agency.

Tom Bellinger:

Yeah. Usually when people ask me that question, I say we do pretty much everything besides life and health insurance. But I mean, the real answer is we do auto, we do home, landlord, commercial property and liability, commercial auto, workman's comp, disability. We can do bonds. We do all the toys, boats, jet skis, motorcycles, ATVs, scooters. We just actually found a new market for scooters and e-bikes that I think is going to be fairly lucrative. We also do RVs, motor homes. Basically, if it can be insured, we can probably do it, but yeah.

Dave Cohen:

Why are we different from other insurance companies?

Tom Bellinger:

I think it all comes down to dedication to service. We commit to meeting our clients where they are with what they need. And every SeaComm branch and in our office, there's a plaque called the Service Promises that aligns our commitment to helping our clients. We take the same approach to the service that that plaque does. And that's what helps us stay apart. Whether we're meeting a client who can't travel in their home or making sure we're re-quoting regularly, or even just spending an hour on the phone with an insurance company to straighten something out so our clients don't have to. We're here to help make the insurance experience easy and affordable.

Scott Wilson:

I want to add onto that, Tom. One of the things that I was very impressed when I met Tom for the first time, he was late for the meeting. And he was late because he was taking care of one of his customers. And he did say that. He said, "I'm sorry, I'm late. I was dealing with an issue with one of my customers I wanted to take care of before I left for the meeting." And I applauded that because that's exactly what we expect. We expect our members to be first and foremost in all of our business decisions. And as Tom indicated, the service promises that we have at SeaComm has obviously been an expectation of the SeaComm Insurance Agency as well. And like what we do on the SeaComm Credit Union side, where you get a quality loop survey and you can give us an evaluation of how that service was, we are also doing that on the SeaComm Insurance Agency side as well, just to ensure we're benching the expectation of our members in terms of those services.

Dave Cohen:

So it seems like there's an equal level of looking at what works within each, not just the credit union side, but also the insurance agency side.

Scott Wilson:

Yeah. I think you have to parity. I mean, we own the SeaComm Insurance Agency. We can't have different standards of expectations of service for Tom and his team than we do for anyone else. And one of the things that I will tell you, Tom has really embraced that based on our history of when we started discussing the credit union acquisition of his firm. He hasn't missed a beat in terms of knowing that that's our expectation. And really that has made it so smooth for us, Dave. Yes, we've been in business just over a year. July 1, we started it last year. And I couldn't be more pleased and nor could the CUSO board, which oversees the SeaComm Insurance Agency, they couldn't be more pleased as well.

Dave Cohen:

Have you been surprised by anything that's happened within the first year?

Scott Wilson:

I'm not. And here's why. The expectation when we put together our first forecast, by the way, we met this year in terms of sales, it really is important to know that once we knew we would promote this as part of our service offering, our members would embrace it. When the advisor came out last year, last fall with the information about the insurance agency, Tom can tell you this, the phone rang off the hook. In fact, it was a pleasant surprise for him, but it wasn't for me because our brand is very strong. We take good care of our members. And by the way, you can save money, hopefully, by moving to SeaComm Insurance. I personally did, as well as all my senior team, members of our board, our employees. In fact, I just had an employee come up to me this week and said, "By the way, my husband and I moved over to the SeaComm Insurance Agency. We're saving a thousand dollars a year on our home and auto."

Dave Cohen:

It's phenomenal. It really is. So Tom, what's been the biggest surprise for you in your first year leading the SeaComm Insurance Agency?

Tom Bellinger:

That's easy. It's the people we get to interact with. Getting to know the SeaComm family and especially getting to know the SeaComm members has been amazing. I've been all over the North Country meeting people in their homes, and the quality of people that I get to serve and the quality of people I get to serve alongside has been beyond any expectation I could have had. We just have the best people here. That's just the truth.

Dave Cohen:

You've said you travel all around. You've had these great experiences meeting people. Do you have any specific examples from your experiences?

Tom Bellinger:

There are some that stand out to me because they were firsts. I know there's an elderly couple in West Taho that I have gone to their house multiple times now. I got to know them there and got to know a lot about them. And it's kind of part of the job. It's a big part of the job that I love. I love helping people, but it's also the North Country is an interesting place and the people here are interesting. And I was talking with them just recently about how they saw a tornado touchdown next door to their house in the '60s. It's experiences like that that I really love because maybe it's not easy for them to get out of the house. It's not, but it's easy for me to get in the car. I don't mind that. And I love getting to meet people where they are. It's probably my favorite part of the job honestly.

Scott Wilson:

And I think that's the unique approach we're taking. Tom certainly understands this, that getting out where they need us is really critical. We take phone calls anytime. One of the things that I thought was interesting when I met Tom, we talked about some of the things he was dealing with. And he may take a phone call while he's at a little league game because someone hit a deer.

Tom Bellinger:

That happens to him.

Scott Wilson:

And right then it told me that this is the guy I want leading SeaComm Insurance Agency because he understood that, yes, it encroaches on his personal time, but nothing is more important than taking care of that member at that time with an insurance need. Because really at the end of the day, no one really wants to talk about insurance except when they need it. And that's exactly what Tom did. He answered that call, set that member at ease, took care of their need, and you couldn't ask for more, Dave.

Dave Cohen:

And I think, Scott, that goes into why we're successful in general as a brand with the credit union side and with the insurance agency side. And this will go into my next question. There is that face-to-face, that person-to-person feel, people helping people, not just the credit union motto, but it's also something that we do with the insurance agency as well. So why else do you think we've been so successful our first year?

Tom Bellinger:

One big thing I'd like to highlight is the score of the credit union has been huge. Giving us the tools to be where we need to be, to do what we need to do has been an enormous aid. And I'd also be remiss if I didn't take the chance to praise our staff at the agency. Jake and Aaron have risen to the challenge every step of the way, and I couldn't be more proud of them either because it's not a big adjustment for them and they have met it with eagerness. So I think that's a big part of why we are so successful because we have this amazing brand and this amazing organization that really backs up everything we do.

Scott Wilson:

And to capitalize on what Tom said, he's embraced the culture. That's a critical component of our company. It isn't just about the product and services, it's the culture that we've created. Like you talk about face-to-face, getting out and seeing our members, that is so important. And as I said, Tom and Jake and Aaron have all embraced that culture. And that is what has made this transition so seamless going into a new service like insurances.

Dave Cohen:

So I think it's really important for any business, for any venture to not just look about today and tomorrow or the next week, but also to have those yearly plans. So I'd love to know both of you, what do you think the SeaComm Insurance Agency will be in the next five years?

Tom Bellinger:

I think a big goal we have is to make sure we have a solution for every SeaComm member's insurance needs. I hope that in the not so distant future, that a member will be able to walk into any branch and be able to speak in person to a licensed agent or CSR. I want to make sure that no risk, no matter how specialized, is within our ability to insure. We're almost there, but there are some things that we can expand. And I want to make sure that we're not only the agency with the best service, but also at the best rates, which means continuing to hunt down companies and get appointments that will make our ability to help our insurance even more broad.

Scott Wilson:

Yeah. The staffing up is going to be critical. Tom has been very, very specific on this. You don't want to grow too fast that you can't keep pace with the expectation of service and ensuring you're giving that personalized touch. But also we do want to be able to serve our members in the New York side. We obviously can't do it in Vermont yet.

Dave Cohen:

Not yet.

Scott Wilson:

That's something we will look at in the future. But today in our New York branches, having someone who can answer questions, deal with a member with an issue is something long-term we're looking at. But again, we don't want to do that too quickly. So Tom and his staff have done a really good job of overseeing it as much as possible, but we want to make sure that we keep service and the expectations as high as possible for our members, and we just don't want that to be a miss. So we're willing to be more methodical during the process, Dave, and that's going to be important for both Tom and I and the credit union.

Dave Cohen:

Well, Scott, Tom, thank you so much for a great conversation. And before we go, Tom, I'd love to know, and our listeners would love to know how they could get more information on SeaComm Insurance as well as how they could contact you.

Tom Bellinger:

Well, our phone number at the agency is 315-393-4652. You can send an email to quote@seacomminsurance.org. You can also email me at tbellinger@seacomminsurance.org if you want to talk to me directly. We check our emails on the weekends and we're there. So I think the best way to start a conversation is with a phone call. Give us a call and we can go from there.

Scott Wilson:

And if you can't remember all of that, Dave, you can go to SeaCommm.org and all of this insurance information is on our website.

Tom Bellinger:

Yep.

Dave Cohen:

All right. Fantastic. Now, any final words from either of you?

Scott Wilson:

Yeah. I just would like to thank Tom and Aaron and Jake for a very successful first year. I couldn't be more pleased. I've told that to Tom. The board of directors at the credit union is very pleased with what we're seeing. They themselves have enjoyed savings and getting insurance through our own agency. And all I would say is, listen, if you're already doing business with us and you love the way we do things, you're going to get the same expectation at the insurance side and we'd love to have you.

Dave Cohen:

All right. Well, thank you both so much. Scott Wilson, SeaComm president and CEO. Tom Bellinger, manager and lead licensed agent at the SeaComm Insurance Agency. Gentlemen, thank you for a great conversation.

Scott Wilson:

Thank you, Dave.

Tom Bellinger:

Thanks, Dave.

Dave Cohen:

I am Dave Cohen, and this has been the SeaComm Podcast.

Thank you for joining us for this edition of the SeaComm Podcast. We hope you'll listen in again