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Larry Starr, a longtime ASPPA member and firm owner, frequently points out that he is not a TPA. He believes that there are no *third* party administrators, only *first* party administrators — or, better still, retirement plan consulting firms. In an increasingly commoditized and fee-compressed qualified retirement plan profession, service firms need to differentiate themselves. Almost every retirement plan service provider’s marketing materials say something like, “We are the best at what we do. We provide great service. We make sure your plan is correctly and timely administered.” Unfortunately, none of these statements communicate what makes one firm different from another.

Consider quantifying what clients and referral sources value:

“We are one of only 30 ASPPA Service Provider Certified firms in the country. One hundred percent of our senior administrators are credentialed with ASPPA. Our entire staff has passed exams to earn one or more ASPPA certificates. Ninety-five percent of emails are answered within one hour. Eighty percent of our clients have been with us five years or more.” ASPPA education and credentialing are the keys to service firm differentiation — and to retaining and winning business in an increasingly competitive services sector.

For example, Alliance Benefit Group has used ASPPA’s education programs to differentiate itself in the retirement plan services profession. ABG is a national network of independently owned retirement

A look at how Alliance Benefit Group has used ASPPA’s education programs to differentiate itself in the retirement plan services profession.

BY SARAH SIMONEAUX

plan consulting firms that operate as licensees of Alliance Benefit Group, LLC. Their structure allows each organization to maintain their independence and geographical autonomy while providing each firm

large firm buying power, access to sophisticated technical support and service collaboration with other consulting firms. Alliance Benefit Group is one of the largest retirement plan administrators in the country, providing administration services to more than 13,000 plans representing more than \$38 billion in assets and more than a million participants.

ABG recognized that a key to their member firms' success was their commitment to qualified plan education and supporting their staff in earning ASPPA credentials. Despite having more than 100 credentialed members, the group recognized that they could gain a competitive advantage by increasing the number of their designated employees. They worked with Lisa Allen, ASPPA's educational programs advocate, to purchase a block of online ASPPA exams, including RPF-1, RPF-2, PFC-1 and TGPC-1.

They made these exams available to all their member firms' staff, along with the online study guides for the courses. As employees began taking advantage of the online exam program, ABG perceived the need to offer additional education through the ASPPA web courses supporting the DC proctored exams for those staff members working to earn their QKA, QPFC and QPA credentials.

As a result of their partnership with ASPPA, ABG now has more than 200 credentialed members and 51 more employees working toward their credentials. With so many credentialed members, ABG managers encourage employees to take advantage of ASPPA continuing education offerings. Webcasts, web courses and onsite bootcamp-style training provide continuing education for credentialed ASPPA members who do not travel to conferences. ABG used ASPPA institutional education discounts to purchase an unlimited license for its staff to view more than 30 ASPPA webcasts each year. ABG's executive director, Don (Mac) Mackanos, explains: "ABG is

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dedicated to our associates' education, and we know that ASPPA's education and credentialing programs lead in the industry in credibility and excellence."

Approaching 250 ASPPA credentialed members, ABG members' growth in a competitive marketplace and difficult economy is proof that investment in education works. As Larry Starr would say, ABG is truly a *first party administrator*. **PC**



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Social Security survivor benefits or Medicare, the government is currently only granting benefits to married same-sex couples that reside in one of the 16 states that recognize same-sex marriages.

Adding to the confusion for retirement plan professionals, the Department of Labor has conflicting regulations within their own jurisdiction. ERISA rules are based on a married couple's "state of celebration," while Family Medical Leave Act protections only apply to married couples that live in those 16 states.

Triche said many plans will need to be amended, since they currently don't have a clear definition of who is a spouse. "Plans have always been somewhat murky, and this gives a lot of advisors an opportunity to address that by defining who counts as a spouse," Triche said.

Triche also emphasized the differences between civil unions and traditional marriages. In some states, such as Oregon, which has a ban on same-sex marriage, civil unions were set up to grant same-sex couples the same rights as their opposite-sex peers without running afoul of state constitutions. For federal purposes, however, those unions are not recognized, irrespective of where the couples may live. For example, he said, a same-sex couple living in Oregon could join in a civil union and be recognized for state tax purposes, but they would need to go to Washington State or California to get legally married in order for ERISA rules and other federal recognition to apply.

"This is a great opportunity for you to educate your employers so they can help their affected employees proactively, and not have to wait for them to knock on the HR department's door," Triche said. **PC**

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