

Client-Focused

An Interview with James W. Crystal, Vice Chairman, Alliant Insurance Services

EDITORS' NOTE After joining his father, Frank Crystal, at Crystal & Company in 1961, James Crystal was named President in 1963. Crystal serves as Vice Chairman and Member of the Board of Alliant Insurance Services, Vice Chairman, Trustee, and Member of the Executive and Finance Committees and Co-Chairman of the Audit Committee of Mount Sinai Medical Center, along with serving on the board of K2 Intelligence.



James W. Crystal

COMPANY BRIEF Crystal & Company (crystalco.com) was known as a leading strategic risk and insurance adviser, addressing clients' risk management, insurance brokerage and employee benefits consulting needs. Founded in 1933, Crystal & Company was comprised of more than 400 colleagues in 11 regional offices across the United States and placed more than \$1 billion in premiums in the global marketplace annually. Prior to its acquisition by Alliant Insurance Services (alliant.com), Crystal & Company was a family enterprise spanning three generations of Crystal family ownership and management.

How critical is brand awareness for Alliant Insurance Services and is the strength and leadership of Alliant well understood?

I think the brand is well known among people within the areas of specialties it has. Alliant's leadership team drives company growth and ensures stability, but their real job is to empower every team member to lead the way in our industry.

How challenging is it to differentiate in the industry and how do you define the Alliant advantage?

It can certainly be difficult at times to differentiate yourself from your competition, but it is something we have successfully accomplished over the years and also one of the reasons we chose to partner with Alliant. Both of our firms are known in the industry for our commitment to expertise which becomes very clear to clients once they spend time with our team. We are also a leader in developing proprietary products for specific industries so the clients are not only the recipient of our expertise in their industry but, at times, also receive a product unique to their needs. And at the end of the day, it also boils down to individual relationships. People want to deal with somebody they know and trust.

Crystal & Company built a family culture. Is it difficult to maintain that culture as you have integrated into Alliant?

Not at all. We have maintained the culture for our clients and have demonstrated our historic culture to new clients while introducing them to Alliant.

Will there be continued consolidation in the industry?

Yes, you'll continue to see the big companies grow. You can look at the number of acquisitions being done on a quarterly basis of all sizes, and it's a constant number somewhere, plus or minus, around 100 a quarter. Firms are trying to grow by being aggregators.

How critical is size and scale to compete in today's marketplace?

I think it's totally critical. Scale enables you to make investments over a larger base of clients which makes it easier to justify those investments in process, resources, technology and people.

■
People want to deal with somebody they know and trust.
 ■

How will technology impact the workforce?

Technology will impact the workforce in a positive way, allowing people to work more efficiently and better serve clients. It's about taking time away from redundant tasks. There will be an increased demand for IT support to build and maintain these systems.

How has your role changed as Vice Chairman?

It really hasn't changed much. I am still out there with clients, helping other Alliant employees

establish relationships when they want. I am focused on expanding Alliant.

What is the target market for Alliant and where will growth come from?

That answer really depends on the type of business. Alliant has operations in different product areas, like P&C and employee benefits, different geographic territories as well as different industry verticals, like construction, energy, public agencies and more. So the target market varies based on the area being discussed and the needs of that client base.

What are the keys to being a successful broker?

You have to be self-motivated. You can't just sit at your desk and wait for the telephone to ring because you'll go bankrupt, either mentally or financially. That's number one. Additionally, you need to be someone that you can call "Curious George," who when they go after a piece of business, has studied the client and studied the marketplace that client participates in, so they are fully prepared. You also have to have the personality that when there is the inevitable turndown, or there is a dry spell, you are able to get up off the floor and fight back and win.

You commit time, energy and resources to philanthropic causes. What has made this so important to you?

I believe that if you have been a little lucky, you have an obligation, at least ethically and morally, to put back into the community. I think there is a lot you can personally gain out of it, and I'm not talking financially. I'm talking intellectually by making new friends and learning new subjects.

How do you focus your philanthropic efforts?

I mainly focus on healthcare. I sponsor the Adolescent Health Center at Mount Sinai, which is now treating almost 5,000 young people a month and I also underwrite the Department of Genomics, as today big data and the retention of data and developing it is critical for the improvement of healthcare.

What are the keys to successfully leading a family business?

I'm not a jealous person, particularly not of my own family. It is not always the norm that families get along and work together and maintain a good relationship, but we are a very close family, not only at my sons' and their wives' levels, but also at the grandchildren's level. We take vacations together as a whole family and enjoy spending time together. ●