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## TWIW creates CEO position to lead firm's growth plans

*Greg Van Ness*

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Citing fast growth, the largest insurance agency in the region has reorganized its management team and hired a CEO.

Ventura-based TWIW Insurance Services, which has about 140 licensed agents in the Tri-Counties, hired Greg Van Ness last month to fill the newly created chief executive slot and to manage its Ventura office. An industry veteran, Van Ness will be tasked with day-to-day management of the firm.

"There's a rich legacy here," Van Ness said. "The firm has grown substantially into the largest insurance brokerage on the Central Coast. The plan of the leadership team is to continue to grow substantially."

Van Ness is a UC Santa Barbara graduate who most recently headed up a large region for Wells Fargo Insurance.

TWIW Chairman Steve Carter said the company decided to hire a top-level executive who could focus on managing the firm, rather than selling insurance to clients. "We wanted a full time leader who's not on the court playing the game, so to speak," he said.

TWIW has four offices, in Ventura, Santa Maria,

Salinas and Bakersfield. It is the largest insurance firm in the Tri-Counties, beating out Hub International Insurance Services, which has 127 brokers in the region as of May, and Walker Financial Partners, with 65.

A football standout at Dos Pueblos High School in Santa Barbara, Van Ness went on to play quarterback at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas and had a brief pro tryout with the Denver Broncos. He then returned to the South Coast and received his bachelor's degree in sociology from UC Santa Barbara.

Van Ness worked for the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee during the 1984 Summer Olympics as Chief of Press Operations for the UCSB Olympic Village. He then moved to New York and joined advertising and marketing firm The Interpublic Group as Manager of Executive Development.

His insurance career started three years later with a return to California, where he worked for two independent agencies in Stockton before moving on to work for Acordia, later acquired by Wells Fargo Insurance Services.

For the past 13 years, he has been a regional managing director for Wells Fargo based

out of the Sacramento area. That regional insurance office generated about \$60 million in annual revenue with 300 employees, according to a TWIW memo sent out to its staff and made available to the Business Times. In the space of a decade, Van Ness grew revenue at Wells Fargo's Rancho Cordova insurance office from \$10 million to \$31 million, the memo said.

At TWIW, which was founded in 1923, it was steady growth for decades until the recession hit. The firm bore it out, Carter said, and then recently decided that it was time to rethink its growth strategy. "As you grow the firm, you come to realize at some point you're wearing too many hats. We kind of pared that down," he said. "Before, we had 20 member-owners and an eight-person board of managers and then a smaller executive management team of three from those eight."

Under the old model, those executive managers were still working with clients, he said. "You get to the point where to keep moving the business forward you need a different management structure. And we decided that the economy had stabilized enough that it was time to grow again."

A recovering economy cou-

pled with health care reform presented a ripe opportunity to restructure TWIW's executive suite, he said.

While some independent insurance brokerages have been wringing their hands over the massive overhaul of the country's health care system, stressing that the changes will mean they get smaller commissions, TWIW leaders said they see it as an opportunity to act as a go-between for their clients.

One part of the law mandates that 80 to 85 percent of health insurance premiums must go to providing care, not administrative expenses, under which agent commissions fall. Agencies also face increased regulatory compliance demands, a burden which smaller insurance firms have said will likely hurt them more than their larger peers.

Van Ness said that while the nature of the insurance business is changing, brokers also have an opportunity to step up and be an educational tool for their clients. "We see this health care reform environment as a chance to serve our clients ... in a way that really addresses their needs and answers the questions and concerns they have," he said. "There's clearly a lot of confusion as to how this is all going to play out."