

Alumni Profile:

Kevin Dougherty (MBA '98)

Innovative, hands-on approach serves Sun Life Financial leader well.

by Mary Ann Gratton

People, partnership, passion and performance – those are the ‘four Ps’ in the strategic vision of **Sun Life Financial Canada**, but they also describe the skills and strengths of the company’s president, **Kevin Dougherty** (EMBA '98).

Kevin, who took on his new position in September 2004, describes his management style as “involved and hands-on,” with a proactive approach. “I want to help the people who work with me to be wildly successful. I love the businesses that we’re in, and I try to get as close as possible to our major customers and distributors – to spend time on the front lines where we serve people, and to leverage that involvement to encourage cross-pollination of ideas and concepts.”

Sun Life Financial is a leading financial services organization offering wealth accumulation and insurance products and services to individuals and corporations. The Canadian business group earns about \$950 million in annual net income and employs 7,000 people, plus 4,000 **Clarica** advisors. Kevin oversees Sun Life’s three major lines of business: Group Benefits, Group Retirement Services, and Individual Insurance and Investments. He previously held leadership positions in the insurance industry, joining Sun Life in 1994 as vice president, group marketing and sales.

During the transition to his new role, Kevin spent a full week with the Clarica advisors, shadowing them as they visited insurance and investments clients. “Spending time in peoples’ living rooms, kitchens and workplaces allowed me to experience our Individual Insurance and Investments line of business from the outside-in. I saw how people experience our products and our company, and came away

with many lessons and insights into our customers and distributors.”

Kevin created a diary from the week and made it available to others in the company, enabling them to share the insights he gained. “Leaders who spend time on the front lines gain a perspective on their business that you just can’t get from management reports and surveys. I try to encourage innovation by transferring this perspective. It gets everyone’s competitive juices flowing and stimulates improvements in different areas.”

His biggest professional challenge came in May 2002, when Sun Life purchased Clarica, and Kevin was responsible for combining the Group Retirement Services businesses of the two companies. Although the technical side of the integration was not easy, it was the people side that required the most care, he says. “For many people, a company is something they really care about – especially if they’ve been there for a long time.” Sun Life and Clarica were both leading organizations with longstanding processes and success formulas, he says. “Our strategy was to turn people’s focus to the future, to create a common purpose in order to build something new. We emphasized what was similar about the two companies, and came up with P4 – people, partnership, passion, and performance. Then we said, ‘now let’s focus on creating a winning customer experience strategy’.”

The integration took only 18 months, whereas most mergers take four to five years, he says. “Coming out of the integration, Group Retirement Services actually had increased customer satisfaction scores and the strongest sales in history. That’s unheard of: most companies are in a weak-



ened position after a merger, but we had incredible momentum and an amazing team. We’ve worked hard to create a winning culture.”

The services and value the company creates are unique and innovative, he says. For instance, it has built self-serve platforms for Web-based services for employers to operate their group insurance and pension plans. “We are providing completely different value propositions and not just competing on price, creating something quite different that the customer can’t get anywhere else. Ironically, I believe it’s easier to lead than to follow in these markets, because if you try to follow, the question is always ‘who to follow?’ I would rather drive the markets and shape where the industry goes. As a major player in all our lines of business, we can do that.”

Kevin applies many lessons from his Executive MBA to his work. “It helped me develop a more structured, critical way of thinking, and to ask: Are there other, less obvious solutions that we haven’t identified?” he says. “This adds to the quality of the ultimate solution, and demonstrating the thinking that brought you to the solutions you’re presenting helps others to understand and support the direction.”

When not at work, Kevin enjoys running, tennis, playing guitar, and spending time with his wife Lisa, son Patrick, 16, and daughter Nicole, 14. He is also actively involved in fundraising for the **United Way of Greater Toronto** and **Soulpepper Theatre**. 