

TECHNOLOGY

The site stuff

FTRC director Ian McKenna explains why an online presence is essential for advisers

Over the last decade, consumers have become used to being able to access levels of information instantly that would previously have been unthinkable. A host of electronic devices, including smart phones and digital TVs in addition to the internet, now means that clients expect to be able to access details of their financial affairs via a Blackberry on a beach in Bali to a TV in a hotel room in Tokyo.

For advisers operating in the international market, the fact that clients may reside hundreds, if not thousands of miles from where the adviser is based makes being able to provide them with online access to details of their investments whenever and where ever they want even more important.

There are a number of approaches that adviser firms can take to achieving this capability. Those with very considerable IT budgets could commission their own bespoke solution to deliver such services.

Even if you can afford to do this and expect the total cost to run into at least hundreds of thousands, if not millions, it will probably be far more effective to arrange such services either as an optional extra from one of the specialist adviser client management systems or from one of a handful of companies which specialise in providing online services of this type for IFA firms.

Giving detailed online access to client information is a strong way of building the adviser brand into the relationship. It is perhaps not surprising that adviser firms have unquestionably been the most successful in the industry at using technology over the last decade.

Positive Solutions makes this a cornerstone of its customer proposition. Each customer is given their own web page where they can log in and look at their information, including valuations, factfinds, etc. With the launch of True Potential (see www.tp1lp.com <<http://www.tp1lp.com/>>), other adviser firms are now able to access the latest iteration of the software provided to Positive Solutions members. This is a product that should be considered by firms wanting to make their online presence a priority.

To be fair, a number of the mainstream adviser client management system providers are not catching up in this area. Intellifo's system now includes an area called Client Portal to allow clients access to online information. This can sit on the adviser firm's normal website as a simple script framed link to a dedicated client login page and can adopt the adviser's normal branding. The adviser can dictate which clients can log in and what they have access to. Functions offered include factfinds, portfolio reports, electronic valuations and risk profiling.

Quay's Modular Website has been developed to provide similar functionality and according to Capita Financial Software Marketing Manager Eric Armstrong, it is "at the heart of the strategy being developed by Capita to provide more effective joined-up solutions for advisers".

Rather than allowing clients access to the customer care desktop client management system itself, clients' holdings are revalued either manually by means of a price feed or using real-time valuation services within the CCD service. Information is also uploaded periodically to the Modular Website. This can include both packaged products and directly held assets such as equities and property.

The adviser decides how frequently the information can be refreshed and Quay's scheduled valuation service can automate the collation of revised valuations from providers. This then allows a client to review their holdings, including up to date fund values, premiums paid, benefits, review dates and fund links, and contracts can be viewed by both type and reason effected, together with summary cover levels for each planning need.

Rather surprisingly, the 1st Software division of Vertex does not offer this functionality but partners with Financial Express and Screen Business for clients who require customer-facing websites.

When it comes to stand-alone, off-the-shelf website packages, IFA Systems probably has the widest range of options with solutions that are designed to cater for the widest range of budgets.

Of those that provide client-specific content, all can be accessed through a secure client login area which can be branded to suit the originating website. The portfolio adviser service enables the adviser to upload a summary of the client portfolios from a range of client management systems, including 1st Adviser Office, Plum and Prestwood.

Features include a simple one-page display, products grouped by type and the ability to open up more details on each policy. Either the client or the IFA can add legacy policies or assets such as house, boat, works of art, etc, to give a



The age of communication: 'Giving detailed online access to client information is a strong way of building the adviser brand'

total portfolio view. Prices can be updated overnight and valuation histories can be retained for up to 12 previous values of the holding. In addition, there is the option to provide fund factsheets on each fund within a policy.

The portfolio updater service offers an automatic update on a client's portfolio for policies with Cofunds, Fidelity and Selestia. These can be triggered overnight with Cofunds or at the client's request for Fidelity and Selestia.

This is again an add-on option to the portfolio adviser but can also be used regardless of the back-office system used as it can collect details of all policies direct from these providers. A further add-on, transaction history, offers details of all transactions for each policy held with Cofunds.

While there are some advisers who do not believe it is necessary to provide clients with online access to the value of their investments, and I have come across fund managers who argue that clients should not need access to this information because they should be taking a long-term view of investments, in reality, we live in the communication age.

Offering access to the latest information online is an essential part of a firm's professional image and in an era when banks have trained customers to expect to be able to access information about their accounts whenever they want it, any adviser not offering a similar facility is likely to look the poor relation to banks' wealth management divisions.