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Best IFAs offer guiding hand along financial path of life

The UK's top independent financial advisers are celebrated, writes Richard Lander

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HOW WINNERS WERE CHOSEN

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that competition improves the breed. If that is the case, then more individual investors stand to benefit as the ranks of customer-focused independent financial advisers (IFAs) continue to grow.

From just a few hundred no more than five years ago, there are now several thousand advisers throughout the country who seek to offer their clients a comprehensive wealth management planning service, rather than just sell them life insurance products that earn the advisers the fattest commissions.

The best in a breed of these swelling ranks were celebrated at a gala dinner in London last week when television sports presenter Steve Rider handed out the prizes at the 2007 New Model Adviser Awards, organised by Citywire, the financial information group.

The eight winning firms – one from each region of the United Kingdom – won their awards for the work they do in helping their clients tread the best financial path through life.

This involves making investment and savings plans to help pay for those milestones most of us can expect to pass, such as school fees, property purchases, retirement and inheritance, as well as ensuring we are protected against unforeseen events, such as death or critical illness that can derail the best-laid plans.

Each client is different and advisers who follow this route like to offer a gourmet delicatessen service as opposed to the 'pile it high and sell it cheap' approach of dishing out the same insurance product to everyone, no matter their circumstances.

It all takes time – time to train, pass exams and keep up with ever-changing regulations, as well as time to talk and listen to clients and work out their best needs. With no life company commissions to underwrite their income, advisers who take this approach face the hard task of telling clients that they have to pay fees. While it may be daunting at first, the advisers say their clients soon begin to appreciate the value of a personalised approach that puts them first.

Saran Allott-Davey of Heron House Financial Management, which won the award for Wales, knows this well. ''It was so difficult at the start talking about fees in south Wales when we started in 1994 because at that time people could get free financial advice,' she said. 'But clients have recognised there's no such thing as a free lunch and financial advice is worth paying for."

Of course, not everyone can afford the fees – often more than £1,000 for a compete financial review – that come with such detailed advice. However, Ms Allott-Davey has been moving beyond her immediate circle of clients over the past year, working with the AXA insurance group on its recent 'Avenue' personal finance project. This found that families who spent just 15 minutes a week reviewing their budgets could save up to £6,000 a year.

Ms Allott-Davey's victory belies the image of financial advice being the preserve of middle-class men, as did another of the evening's winners, Rebecca Taylor, managing director of Peterborough-based Dunham Financial Services. At just 31, Ms Taylor, a former sales manager at Debenhams, already has a long list of the qualifications that are now the hallmark of good wealth managers, including the coveted certified and chartered financial planner designations from the Institute of Financial Planning and Personal Finance Society.

Perhaps surprisingly in such a sizeable and prosperous town such as Peterborough, Ms Taylor's firm is the only one that charges fees rather than commissions. Unsurprisingly, she is inundated with clients and says she has to put them on a waiting list.

So competition may be on the increase among the best advisers, but it still has some way to go. This time next year, we can probably expect other people to be giving Ms Taylor a run for her money in Peterborough.

Regional winners

The Midlands: Fiscal Engineers

Fiscal Engineers founder Shane Mullins is a man of many parts – a former pro golfer, he is also an active diamond dealer and committed evangelical Christian. The company did not even exist until 2000 when Mullins founded it with £15,000 of his own money. Today he looks after £75m of client assets and says he works ''around core principles of integrity, competence and a passion for building and enhancing the wealth of our clients".

London & the Home Counties: Bloomsbury Financial Planning

Set up in 1998 by Jason Butler, Bloomsbury now looks after about £68m of investors' money. Butler, backed by fellow advisers Campbell Edgar, Carolyn Corless and Robert Lockie, has a high profile both within the industry and in the media. He described the award as ''either a fantastic end to a good year of 2006 or a great start to 2007".

South East: FS3

Southampton-based FS3 offers advice to three constituencies – individuals, businesses and employees –hence the name. Founder Mike Godfrey collected the prize for the second successive year and hopes for big things in 2007. ''The win last year gave a real boost to our existing client bank and so it can only get better with a second win," he said.

The North: Argyle Financial Group

The year started with a bang for Argyle directors Phil Melville and Jean MacIntyre. They collected the award on behalf of their Southport-based firm just days after returning from their Caribbean honeymoon. One of the earliest firms to move away from relying on commissions, Argyle has made intelligent use of technology, implementing a new website and paperless office over the past year while dealing with 85pc of clients online.

Scotland and Northern Ireland:The Turris Partnership

Glasgow-based Turris Partnership is led by Brian Steeples, a leading figure in the march to change financial advice from a trade to a profession. A former president of the Personal Finance Society (PFS), he paved the way for leading advisers to gain chartered status through a set of exacting exams. Practising what he preaches, Steeples gained chartered status in just 15 months to prove it could be done.

South West: Paradigm Norton Financial Planning

Preparing wealth management strategies for families in business and working out developing philanthropic strategies for his clients are the main activities of Tickenham- based Paradigm Norton. The firm is led by Barry Horner, vice president of The Institute of Financial Planning, who collected the prize for the second successive year.

Wales: Heron House Financial Management

Newport-based Heron House is led by Saran Allott-Davey and Chris Jordan, who have built up the business to the point where it looks after £72 million of clients' money. Allott-Davey also tries to make sure the advice message gets heard far and wide and has offered strategies to women and same-sex couples to help them make the best of their financial arrangements.

The East: Dunham Financial Services

Dunham Financial Services' managing director Rebecca Taylor was the night's youngest winner. She is the firm's sole qualified adviser and looks after £50m worth of funds. While many financial advisers prefer to concentrate on client care and leave investment choices to fund of fund managers, Taylor chooses her own funds with the meticulous use of statistical performance tools.

Full details of the winning firms can be found on Citywire's website at www.citywire.co.uk/NewModelAdviser/Awards