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## Single-Sponsor CU Credits Educational Seminars With Driving Growth

By Michael Bartlett, Reporter

LOS ANGELES — Many credit unions offer or sponsor financial education workshops for members. But Farmers Insurance Group FCU says its relationship with one such education provider has helped drive its net member growth.

Les Ginoza, VP-marketing for Farmers Insurance Group FCU, said member surveys and focus groups had showed a high interest in financial education, and management spent much of 2003 searching for a source that met its criteria. The CU has 17 branches spread out over 12 states, and the ability to reach locations in multiple time zones was a must.

"We also needed a provider with non-biased information," he explained. "Part of our membership is insurance agents who sell annuities. We did not want a partner that would push products that would cut into our members' livelihood."

FIGFCU eventually met with Manhattan Beach, Calif.-based Financial Finesse, a company that started in the corporate market before expanding into credit unions. Financial Finesse CEO Liz Davidson founded the company in 1999 in the San Francisco Bay Area on the principle of non-biased education. All employees who put on seminars have 10 years of financial planning experience, but all gave up their clients.

"All of our services are delivered by in-house, certified financial planners," she said. "We do not sell financial products other than our education."

Ginoza said FIGFCU was skeptical at first that Financial Finesse "could be as good as they say." After an initial meeting, two CU managers made an anonymous call to the Financial Finesse telephone helpline to test the system. "They answered everything perfectly," he recalled.

### **Seminars Begin With Employees**

The first seminars were attended by FIGFCU employees. According to Ginoza, the staff members were able to see first-hand the value of the education being offered. This was important, he said, because if the staff is not excited about the product, they won't pass it on to the members.

From August through December 2003, FIGFCU trained its staff at Financial Finesse seminars, while gradually adding information to its website. The educational offerings were made available to members in early 2004.

"We hold seminars not only in our branches, but also in Farmers Insurance Group offices where there are no branches," said Ginoza. "This allows us to talk to people we don't normally have access to, build a sales and service culture, and introduce new products. The word of mouth really explodes - we get over a 90% satisfaction rate out of these seminars."

Davidson said her company's start in the corporate market helps it when working with CUs to penetrate SEGs, especially in relating to HR representatives.

The workshops are done by topics. Davidson said there currently are 10, with the most popular being "Personal Financial Basics." Other subjects include: Getting Out of Debt, Saving, Investing, Improving One's Credit Score, Retirement, Buying a Home, and Taxes.

"Farmers started with the 'Buying a Home' module. It got more traffic than they expected, and we built up from there," she said.

In addition to the seminars, Financial Finesse offers online "content modules." There are 15 step-by-step articles on various financial topics. Also, it has a toll-free helpline for members to call with questions.

In all of 2003, FIGFCU had a net member increase of 1,155. In the first nine months of 2004, that number grew to 1,445.

"This number might not be a lot for a community credit union, but it is impressive for a closed-membership credit union like ourselves," said Ginoza. "The growth cannot be attributed solely to Financial Finesse seminars; it is part of an overall effort. Out of sight is out of mind, so the more touch points we have, the better."

"I don't think we could have accomplished all the things we have without their help," he continued. "With any educational program, it is a long-term commitment on the part of a credit union. It needs to be at the forefront of members' minds."

Davidson said FIGFCredit Union has been "great to work with." "We have put in place a strong, multi-channel educational effort. The workshops are consistently full, and they grew due to demand by members thanks to the way the credit union marketed them to their offices. They wanted to be the trusted resource for their members, and they've done an excellent job of that."