

# the Business Ledger

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## Challenging beginnings, stellar results

*How Jim Effner carved the western suburbs' top financial service organization out of personal adversity*

Jim Effner founded Downers Grove-based Effner Financial Group, a part of Northwestern Mutual Financial Network, on Sept. 1, 2001. Ten days later, the attacks on the World Trade Center occurred. On Sept. 26, Effner contracted viral meningitis, was hospitalized, and wasn't sure if he was going to live. Two weeks later, the illness attacked the nerves in his ears, and he permanently lost his hearing. Shortly thereafter, Effner's father suddenly and unexpectedly passed away.

All of this occurred within the first 30 days of opening his business.

While for many people such calamity may have been reason enough to throw in the towel, Effner used his misfortune as fuel to drive his business to success.

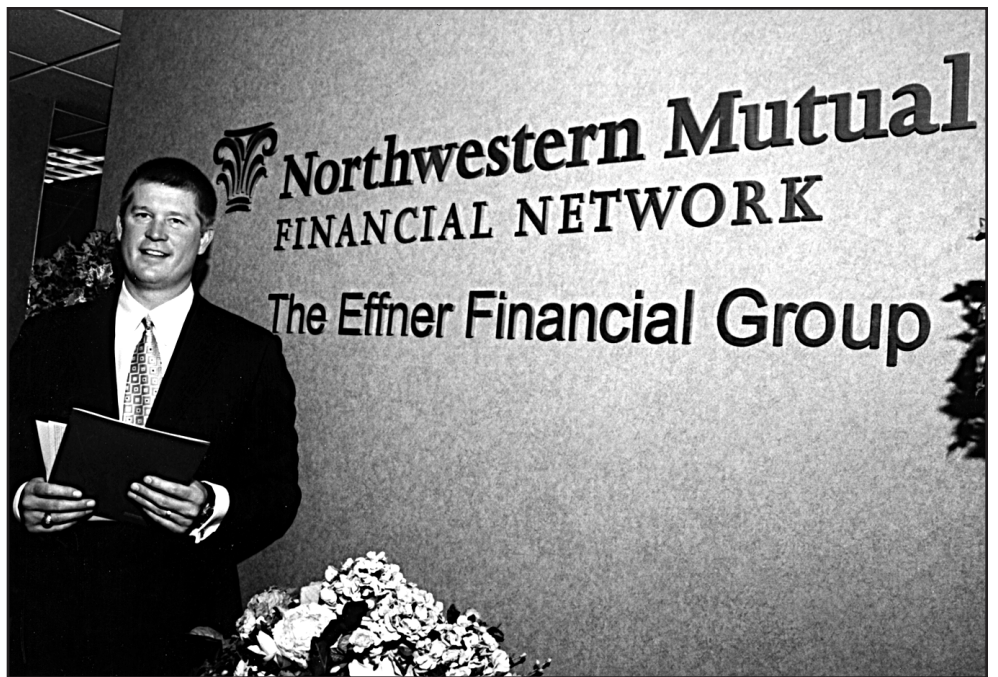
"I didn't let my problems get the better of me," said Effner. "I was determined to fight the illness, and even more determined to make the business work."

On April 19, 2002, Effner received a cochlear implant and can now hear electronically. Today, the Effner Financial Group is the western suburbs' top financial service organization.

"My start to owning this business was very challenging," said Effner. "But I knew I needed to turn a negative into a positive. As a result, there is a spirit of cooperation and perseverance that permeates my company. Our representatives and staff know that all things are possible here."

### Strength in numbers

Effner's progress in the financial services industry was natural.



*Jim Effner, founder of the Downers Grove-based Effner Financial Group, has surmounted both professional obstacles and personal illness and tragedy to build the western suburbs' top financial service organization. "I didn't let my problems get the better of me," he says. "I was even more determined to make the business work." (Photo by Dietrich Wolfram)*

After graduating from Valparaiso University with a degree in finance and economics in 1989, Effner joined Northwestern Mutual in downtown Chicago as a financial representative. In his first year with the company, Effner established exemplary credentials in sales, training and management, was named "Rookie of the Year," and qualified for the Million Dollar Round Table, which honors representatives who have achieved outstanding sales records.

Effner quickly advanced through the company. He was appointed district

agent in 1999 and managing partner of Effner Financial Group merely two years later.

Because of Effner's perseverance, the Effner Financial Group has 37,000 clients and is rapidly growing. As of April 30, 2004, the agency's total insurance in force totaled \$103,688,741. The office currently has 103 financial representatives, six financial specialists, and is ranked in the top 20 of Northwestern Mutual's 98 independent agencies nationwide, based on premium sales.

"My goal is to get us into the top five," said Effner.

If the Effner Financial Group continues to grow at its current rate, it shouldn't take long.

## Secret to success

What is the Effner Financial Group's secret to success?

"We make a concerted effort to get to know our clients as well as possible," said Effner. "Our job is to play financial quarterback for the overall correlation of all of your assets. We take you from where you are in your life financially now, to where you want to be. To do that, we need to know you personally."

Before Effner or any of the agency's financial representatives make any recommendations, they carefully analyze what Effner refers to as "facts"—the client's income, liability, current insurance, employee benefits, wills, trusts, age of family members, and the like—as well as "feelings"—the client's risk preference, hopes, visions, dreams and goals, both personal and financial.

"Every plan is custom made and tailored to the individual," said Effner. "In the planning process, we're going to ask tough questions in order to figure out what is important to you and how you operate."

According to Effner, ethics and trust build the foundation of the relationships between his financial representatives and clients.

"We build long-lasting relationships and we care," said Effner. "As a result, our retention is unbelievable. Our clients are clients for a lifetime."

## Expert guidance

The Effner Financial Group operates under the umbrella of the Northwestern Mutual Financial Network, which enables it to maintain its small agency environment while offering the high level of services and expertise unique to Northwestern Mutual.

"The products we sell at Northwestern Mutual are world class," said Effner. "That sets us apart from our competitors who can't offer quite as wide a range of services." The Effner Financial Group's network includes

not only 103 financial representatives, but also six specialists whose areas of expertise include long-term care, retirement planning, employee benefits, estate planning, investments and executive benefits.

"Our financial representatives are trained to recognize when a client can benefit from a specialist's expertise," said Effner. "For instance, an executive worth \$10 million may need a detailed and comprehensive estate plan or a business owner may need to reassess and develop a new employee benefits plan."

"Our mission is to help you align your actions with your intentions so that you may achieve all of your financial goals," Effner said.

## Caring for the community

The Effner Financial Group recognizes the importance of being involved in the community, and supports several local organizations, including Easter Seals DuPage, the DuPage Children's Museum and the Indian Boundary YMCA.

Easter Seals DuPage provides services for children and adults with disabilities to achieve maximum independence, and provides support for the families who care for them. As an integral part of its recent annual benefit gala, the Effner Financial Group helped the organization raise more than \$225,000 for children in need.

The Effner Financial Group is also a proud sponsor of the popular bubbles exhibit at the DuPage Children's Museum in Naperville. As a non-profit organization, the DuPage Children's Museum's mission is to stimulate curiosity, creativity, thinking and problem solving among young children.

The Effner Agency also supports the Indian Boundary YMCA whose mission is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind and body for all. In 2003, Indian Boundary YMCA and its contributors were able to improve the quality of life for over 1,383 children, families, and seniors representing more than 15 communities by providing \$338,961 in membership and program assistance.

"I know what it's like to have to face adversity," said Effner. "So we make it a part of our mission to help those in need."

As for the future, Effner plans to stick close to his roots—the network of friends, colleagues, and experts at Northwestern Mutual Financial Network.

"It has been 15 years now, and it has been nothing but a fabulous ride," said Effner.

To learn more about The Effner Financial Group or to arrange a personal consultation with a Financial Representative, phone 630-353-2300 or visit [www.nmfn.com/effnerfinancialgroup](http://www.nmfn.com/effnerfinancialgroup).

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*Northwestern Mutual Financial Network is the marketing name for the sales and distribution arm of The Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, its subsidiaries and affiliates. The Network, with 7,900 financial representatives and more than 350 offices nationwide, is considered one of America's "15 Most Effective Sales Forces" by Selling Power magazine (2003), ranking first in the financial services industry.*

*Northwestern Mutual, the nation's largest direct provider of individual life insurance according to A. M. Best, has always received the highest possible ratings for financial strength from Standard & Poor's, Moody's, Fitch and A. M. Best. Fortune magazine has voted Northwestern Mutual "Most Admired" in its industry for 21 years, and ranked it one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For" two consecutive years. The company, its subsidiaries and affiliates provide annuities, mutual funds, and disability income insurance. Among its affiliated companies are the Russell Investment Group, the investment management and advisory firm; Northwestern Mutual Investment Services, LLC (NMIS), the securities brokerage firm; and Northwestern Mutual Trust Company, a special purpose federal savings bank. Further information on Northwestern Mutual, based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, can be found at: [www.nmfn.com](http://www.nmfn.com).*