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Mutual Respect

Bernard Condon and Daniel Fisher 12.22.08. 12:00 AM ET

Mutual Life insurers are stuck in the mud. If you've pizzazz, you work for a stockholder-owned insurer. That was the refrain from stock insurers a few decades ago.

Without the shareholders' lash to whip them into shape and stock with which to buy rivals, policyholder-owned insurers were sure to get crushed by publicly traded rivals. So went the argument, and so began a flight from mutual ownership that included such stalwarts as Equitable, Prudential and Metropolitan.

Who's sneering now? The mutuals that refused to switch over. The stocks of publicly held life insurers have fallen 63% this year. They had a little too much pizzazz, in the form of corporate bonds, mortgage securities and risky bets on annuities.

With their survival on the line, publicly traded insurers are scrambling for cash by cutting dividends and issuing new shares (diluting existing investors), begging regulators for a relaxation of capital requirements and lobbying Washington for a cut of the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout.

Their mutually owned rivals haven't asked for a dime. Their statutory surpluses (the regulatory counterpart to book value) have held steady or even increased. Some are announcing plans to pay out near-record dividends to policyholders.

"We're Main Street. Not Wall Street," brags an ad from mutually owned New York Life. Translation: We're better off than swashbucklers like American International Group.

"We're not seen as stodgy and slow anymore," says Dennis Manning, chief executive of mutually owned Guardian Life.

Moody's life insurance analyst Arthur Fliegelman says mutuals have done plenty of stupid things over time. But he reserves his 2008 booby prize for their public rivals, several of which he has downgraded this year. He puts the blame for their missteps squarely on the need to satisfy Wall Street and its lust for quarterly profit gains. Public companies felt they had to report a return on equity of at least 15%. "You just can't do that in a mature business without taking too much risk," Fliegelman says.

Two years ago mutually owned New York Life began fearing that the thin premiums corporate bonds were paying over Treasuries didn't justify the added risk and began shifting assets into government bonds. The \$20 million a year in income it lost as a result would have left shareholders howling at publicly held insurers, says Solomon Goldfinger, a New York Life senior vice president.

Publicly held firms like MetLife, Prudential Financial and Hartford Financial have been forced to recognize billions of dollars in losses this year on mortgage securities, corporate bonds and real estate. They've also been clobbered by promises they made to pay variable annuity holders minimum returns in the event that stocks fared

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badly.

Variable annuities are mutual funds (often stock funds) wrapped inside life insurance policies that endow them with a tax deferral. As competition heated up for this lucrative, fee-driven business, publicly listed insurers began making brash guarantees of minimum returns to backstop the stock funds in which the customers' money was invested. Following October's stock market shellacking, more than half of Hartford's U.S. variable annuity clients are sitting on portfolios worth less than the company has guaranteed to pay them. That has caused its potential annuity-linked liabilities to balloon to \$3.9 billion from \$184 million at the beginning of the year.

Hartford noted in a November securities filing that an S&P 500 decline to 900 would cause its capital to fall by another \$1.5 billion; the index recently closed at 816. Hartford's shares are off 90% since the beginning of September and now trade for 18% of book value.

Soon after going public in 2001, Prudential Financial bought Skandia, the largest variable annuity distributor. It then acquired similar units from Cigna and Allstate. Pru Chief Executive Arthur Ryan assured shareholders of "double-digit returns." Instead, they got triple-digit losses. As stocks have fallen, and Pru's guarantees kicked in, its annuities unit swung to a \$307 million operating loss in the third quarter from a \$205 million profit a year earlier.

The mutuals, meanwhile, are sticking largely to sales of whole life—policies with a death benefit and relatively stingy payout guarantees. Guardian Life says its individual life insurance sales rose 14% in October from a year earlier. New York Life says its individual life sales are growing at double-digit annual rates, too.

David Schiff, an industry gadfly and publisher of *Schiff's Insurance Observer*, has been warning since the late 1990s that earnings-per-share pressures would drive insurers to do dumb things. He was right. Since going public Prudential has spent \$11 billion buying back shares at an average cost of \$63, Schiff estimates. Those shares are now worth \$19. Hartford spent \$2 billion the past two years buying back stock. That's as much as the entire company is now worth.

The mutuals aren't geniuses at investing—proportionally they own more mortgage securities than do public insurers, according to Etti Baranoff, a professor of insurance at Virginia Commonwealth University and former Texas insurance regulator. It's just that mutuals don't have the same incentives to boost net income.

Baranoff also notes that mutuals don't have to file financials under Generally Accepted Accounting Principles. Those principles require public companies to mark down investment securities, some of them distressed and thinly traded, to current market values. The rule has given rise to \$40 billion in unrealized losses as of Sept. 30.

Perhaps the market has overcorrected, and shares of Hartford and Prudential are a bargain. But their mutual rivals will be snickering for quite a while.

Policy Differences

Economic tumult aside, top mutually owned insurers have increased book values this year. Not so their public rivals.

COMPANY	BOOK VALUE (\$BIL)*	% CHANGE THIS YEAR	A.M. BEST RATING
MUTUALS			
MASS MUTUAL	\$8.4	5%	A++
NEW YORK LIFE	12.0	0	A++

NORTHWESTERN MUTUAL	12.4	2	A++
PUBLICS**			
HARTFORD LIFE	4.7	-19	A+
METROPOLITAN LIFE	12.0	-9	A+
PRUDENTIAL LIFE	3.8	-46	A+

*Statutory surplus and capital as of Sept. 30. **Surplus and capital at each insurer's biggest operating subsidiar Source: SNL Financial.