

Ep. 180 Part 2 – Why it Matters Who We Let In: The Partners Who Help Elevate your Portfolio, ft. Lee Cohen, NY Life

[Patti]

Hi everybody. I'm Patti Brennan. Welcome to *The Patti Brennan Show*. Whether you have \$20 or \$20 million, this show is for those of you who want to protect, grow, and use your assets to live your very best lives.

Joining me again today is my friend, Lee Cohen. Lee is an advisor consultant with New York Life Investments—commonly referred to as a wholesaler in our industry—but he is so much more, as you're about to find out.

We thought it might be fun—maybe not, I don't know—we thought it might be helpful for you all to get an understanding of what this relationship is all about. I'll tell you point blank: people like Lee make us better. There's just so much to know out there, and only so many hours in the day. Having access to the resources of New York Life Investments, which—by the way—is an insurance company... What are we doing talking to an insurance company about portfolios?

Lee, let's start off with that question. First of all, thank you for being here today. Welcome to the show.

[Lee]

My pleasure. Happy to be here.

[Patti]

So, you hear about firms like Vanguard, JP Morgan—all those guys. They're known money managers. Why New York Life Investments? Why should we listen to what you have to say, and what your firm is all about?

[Lee]

It's a great question. Ironically enough, New York Life Insurance Company has been around for 180 years—which many people know. It's a name people trust. The "big blue box," right? A powerhouse insurance company.

But the investment arm of New York Life used to be referred to as the MainStay mutual fund family. We actually went through a rebranding last year for that exact reason—because while our strategies remained the same, the brand recognition just wasn't there. It wasn't a household name.

So, our thought process was: let's bring the strength and confidence of a AAA-rated insurance company like New York Life and tie that to our investment platform. That's important because New York Life Investments has been around for decades. We manage over a trillion dollars in assets—and I'll keep that evergreen by just saying "trillions," to future-proof this conversation a bit.

[Patti]

I'm glad you said that—it just hit me that adding a specific number could make this episode less evergreen. So thank you.

And I also want to emphasize something: the access that we get through firms like New York Life Investments. It's not just about the AUM. It's about being part of one of the most respected financial institutions in the country. I mean, the way you stay around for 180 years is by being really good at money management.

[Lee]

Exactly.

[Patti]

Beautiful. I'm glad we hit pause and reset, because now we're in a groove.

Let's dive in.

Hi everybody. Welcome again to *The Patti Brennan Show*. Whether you have \$20 or \$20 million, this show is for those of you who want to protect, grow, and use your assets to live your very best lives.

Joining me today is my friend, Lee Cohen, from New York Life Investments. Talk about protecting and growing—New York Life Investments sure knows how to do that, don't you, Lee?

[Lee]

Oh yes, we do. I appreciate you having me.

[Patti]

Thanks so much for being here.

So here's a question. People listening or watching today might be thinking, "Patti Brennan, what are you doing talking to an insurance company about portfolio management?" Right? We work with firms like JP Morgan, Vanguard, Fidelity—so why New York Life?

[Lee]

It's a great question. And what I love about it is that people know New York Life as a AAA-rated, mutually owned insurance company. That story is well known. But the reason we've been around for over 180 years is because we know how to manage money. We've had to manage it for ourselves as an institution, and then translate those same principles to benefit the people who matter most: the policyholders.

[Patti]

You know what's interesting—and I didn't even make this connection until just now—is that you and I did a podcast before about what a wholesaler does, how that relationship works, and

how you've differentiated yourself from everyone else who calls on our firm saying, "Aren't we great? Recommend us to your clients."

You've never done that. You've always been more interested in what *we* are trying to provide *our* clients. And I think that really comes down to the structure of a mutual company.

[Lee]

Absolutely.

[Patti]

So for those of you who may not be in the financial industry, let's talk about the difference between a mutual company and a stock company. Lee—take it away.

[Lee]

It's a really important distinction. Stock companies are owned by shareholders. If you buy a share of Amazon, you own a piece of Amazon.

In a mutually owned company, the people who buy the insurance policies—whether it's life insurance or annuities—*they* are the policyholders, and essentially, the owners of the company.

[Lee]

So within a stock company, the shareholders are the primary decision-makers, right? But within a mutually owned company, it's the policyholders themselves who have that role. The company is run for the benefit of the policyholders, not shareholders—and I think that's really important when it comes to how we consult at New York Life Investments.

We want our policyholders to be happy. We want to engage with them, make sure they have what they need.

[Patti]

And when you think about shareholders, right? Sure, they may technically own the company—but they're not really the decision-makers. I mean, these proxy votes go out and no one really votes. It's hard to know what's actually happening inside a company like Amazon. I don't know—I just let them run the company.

But with a life insurance company like New York Life, the portfolio is managed specifically for the benefit of the policyholders. The company answers to them. And that's a big difference. It affects things like the dividends paid on policies. New York Life wants to maintain a higher-than-average dividend payout and be consistent in things like that.

[Lee]

Exactly. And that perspective really shapes the way we approach our relationship with you—as the advisor—which in turn shapes your relationship with your clients.

[Patti]

To give everyone listening some background on how this relationship started: in a previous

podcast, Lee and I shared the story about how it all began. We had a single client trade into one of your investments—a convertible bond fund—as part of a tax loss harvesting strategy. Every portfolio we manage is customized. So my Chief Investment Officer did a deep dive into what alternative investments would best suit this specific client and landed on a New York Life fund.

It was one trade—not a lot of money—but it started this entire relationship. Lee reached out to introduce himself and see how he could help. And what really stood out to me is that for the first year or so, I don't think you ever even talked about your investment products.

[Lee]

I don't think I did either.

[Patti]

Right? So let's walk everyone through that process—maybe you and I can go back and forth a bit, like we did in the beginning.

I remember in a previous podcast, you mentioned bringing up our firm to your senior management, and their reaction was like, “Wow, this is a huge opportunity—you don't want to mess this up.” I didn't know that at the time, but looking back, I can now see how thoughtful your approach was in wanting to understand what makes us different, how we've grown, and why the demand for our firm is so high.

[Lee]

Exactly. And that's why we call ourselves *advisor consultants* at New York Life Investments—not wholesalers. Because we take a consultative approach.

Every advisor is different. Every client is different. So the way to get to the right solution is by asking questions, not leading with product. The world moves fast, clients' lives change fast, and if we're not keeping up with what matters *now*—to both your practice and your clients—that's a missed opportunity.

When we first sat down with your team, I think I asked more questions than I spoke. And that's what set the tone for the relationship. I got to know you. So when the time came to offer a solution that fit your practice, I already knew what mattered to you because I had all the information I needed.

[Patti]

Yeah, it was really impressive. So let's walk people through it—pretend we're just starting. What are some of the first questions you ask?

[Lee]

First, I try to read the room. Every advisor has a different personality. Some want to talk for three hours, others have two minutes. I try to understand: do I have the time and space to be consultative, or do I need to figure things out on the fly?

Once I understand the dynamic, I start with learning about the advisor—who they are, how they work. Then I ask questions to learn what their client base looks like, what stage of their career they're in, what their firm needs. Every practice is unique.

Only after I understand those things do I begin to consider whether there's a fit for a solution. And if there isn't? That's okay. I'm still happy to recommend something—even if it's outside of New York Life—that could help that advisor in their practice today.

[Patti]

You know, as I reflect on our relationship, so much of what you've provided to us has been intellectual capital. I have to say, the content you've shared with us has been amazing.

[Lee]

Thank you.

[Patti]

Seriously. Folks, for those of you listening and not watching, I've got materials from Lee that are dog-eared and covered in Post-its. The content is that good. I send a letter to clients every 90 days—and I've been doing that for over 30 years. Coming up with something new and engaging every single quarter is not as easy as it sounds. The research, insights, and articles you've sent have been invaluable.

[Patti]

There's always something going on—always something different—and I've found your content to be some of the best I've read. It's clear, understandable, and useful.

You sent me an email a couple of months ago with five packets full of graphs, explanations, market views, and everything from where we are in the economic cycle to what an S-curve is in the context of artificial intelligence. That kind of deep thinking coming out of your firm—and the fact that you're sharing it with us—is what I really appreciate. It makes us better at what we do. It helps us put together well-informed portfolios that support the individual goals of each client.

Because every advisory firm is different. Every client is different. At least we're not doing any of that program trading stuff.

[Lee]

Nope!

[Patti]

We don't do that here. Every client is different. We want to understand their full financial picture—their plan, their tax situation. We get tax returns from their CPAs every year. We're reading the wills and the trusts. And it was interesting... I don't know if "surprised" is the right word, but I was pleased at your reaction. You were like, "Wow, you actually do all that?"

It made me feel like, okay—maybe we really *are* doing something different. But to us, it just feels like what we'd want if *we* were the client. Not everybody takes that approach.

[Lee]

I completely agree. That's where this business gets really interesting. People assume financial advisors are just here to make people money. And wholesalers—or advisor consultants—are just here to sell product. But it's so much more than that.

To me, being a salesperson is one thing. Being a true partner—part of someone's team—is something else entirely. I consider you part of my team, and hopefully that's mutual. Because we can't do this job alone.

I have access to really smart people who manage a lot of money. It may not be my personal area of expertise, but I'm in constant contact with the people who live and breathe it every day. If I can take that information, translate it, and hand it off in a way that helps you deliver value to your clients—everyone wins. That partnership between advisors and consultants is incredibly valuable, because ultimately, we're working together to support your clients.

[Patti]

Absolutely. And once that foundation of trust and understanding is built, it makes a difference.

For example, when you bring us a municipal bond fund, we know you're giving it to us straight. Every once in a while, I'll even test you a bit. I'll ask something like, "What do you have in the large-cap value space?" And without skipping a beat, you'll say, "That's not really our thing. Don't use us for large-cap value. But we are strong in fixed income—here's an idea."

Then we dig deep. After you leave, my team and I take the materials you provide and go through everything thoroughly. We want to make sure it's truly appropriate for our clients. It's a lot of work—but it's worth it.

And part of the challenge is that we don't know what we don't know. We may already have our favorites, but then you show up with something new, and we have to be open-minded and do the research to ensure what we're recommending—and what our clients already own—is truly best-in-class.

That's really the core of what we do. It's what I would want my advisor to do for me.

[Lee]

Exactly. And honestly, that's part of what makes this business fun. There are times when we engage in constructive debate. One advisor might be really adamant about liking—or disliking—a particular asset class or strategy, and that sparks really good conversations.

Those debates make us better. I learn from advisors, and hopefully they learn from me. Even if I believe a strategy is amazing, if it doesn't resonate with your clients, no one wins.

That kind of back-and-forth helps refine the solutions we provide. And that's what makes this job great—this collaboration between advisors and consultants. We both have access to different insights and experiences, and when we bring those together, we deliver better outcomes for the people we serve.

[Patti]

You know, it's funny—at our recent client event, we hosted a panel of economists, advisors, and money managers. Your team was on stage with us. And we weren't throwing softball questions—Brad and I were asking the tough ones.

I remember asking, “The international markets have done nothing for 10 years. Are overseas markets becoming irrelevant?” The performance gap between U.S. and international equities has been staggering. And it's hard, as advisors, to keep recommending global diversification when clients see the S&P 500 outperforming quarter after quarter.

But then—January 2025 rolls around. Here we are, recording this in late February, and what's outperforming? International markets. The very thing that had been lagging is suddenly leading.

[Lee]

Exactly.

[Patti]

And what I appreciated was your team didn't just tell us what we wanted to hear. You pushed back. You still stood by global diversification. You talked about the fantastic industries and companies overseas.

Lauren Goodwin, for example—what a powerhouse. The first time I spoke with her, I think she had just flown back from Dubai. She'd been on the ground, meeting with people, understanding what's happening globally.

[Lee]

Yeah, I think she actually flew straight from Dubai to that meeting with us.

[Patti]

Exactly. That kind of global insight matters. And the fact that your team brings it into our conversations is part of why this relationship has been so impactful.

[Patti]

There's a lot to be said for people having boots on the ground—actually seeing what's going on in these countries. And your team gives it to us straight. You'll say, “Listen, we understand it hasn't worked recently, but that doesn't mean it won't work going forward.”

The windshield of a car is a lot bigger than the rearview mirror for a reason. That's where we want to focus—forward. Yes, history matters, but we have to look ahead and understand, on a fundamental level, what's happening in the world around us.

Sure, it might feel like pure chaos in Washington. But truthfully? It's *always* felt like chaos. Every year, there's something. And having that broader perspective is so important.

What's great is, while we may not have the day-to-day data and resources, *you* do—and you share them with us. And I really appreciate that.

[Lee]

Happy to do it. That's one of the value-adds we bring as advisor consultants. Your day-to-day focus should be on the client. My role is to help gather and filter the data—to sort through the noise and identify what's actually relevant.

We don't have a crystal ball, of course, but our job is to highlight the substance that matters—whether it's market trends, portfolio construction, or big-picture strategy. If we can deliver that in bite-sized, digestible pieces that help you better serve your clients, we've done our job.

[Patti]

You know, I have two examples of that off the top of my head. With everything happening in Washington lately, I've been getting emails from clients saying, "This is pure chaos. Should I move to cash? Is the economy going to crash?"

The materials you've sent—and my conversation with Lauren—gave me exactly what I needed to respond thoughtfully. I was able to say, "Yes, it feels chaotic. And sure, we might go through a recession or a market correction—or even a bear market. But we've been here before. We'll get through it again. We understand your concerns. And we've got this."

That's what people need to hear: that they're going to be okay. But we can't just *wing* that message—we need solid, credible information to back it up. Too often, I hear people say, "My advisor talks down to me" or "They're not really listening." These emails I'm getting? They're from people who are *really* worried.

So I want to acknowledge that. I want to recognize their fears and offer a perspective they may not have considered. That's where *you* come in. I need you to give me the materials—the reasons—so I can say, "Yes, these concerns are valid. But here's why we're still going to be okay."

And honestly? That's the name of my book: *Am I Going to Be Okay?* That's the question every client is really asking.

[Lee]

Exactly.

[Patti]

And because of the relationship we have—and the access to that information—it also allows me to focus on things you wouldn't typically associate with financial planning.

Let me give you a perfect example. I met with a woman recently—let’s call her Marge—who’s going through a tough time with her husband’s health. If I had been too focused on market updates, interest rates, and Fed policy, I would’ve missed what was *really* on her mind.

Her biggest concern? The people cleaning her house weren’t actually cleaning. And I said, “Marge, I’ve got the perfect company for you. They clean my house. They clean my office. They’re amazing.” And she lit up—she was so happy by the end of our meeting. That was the thing weighing most heavily on her.

[Lee]

That’s such a great story. So true.

[Patti]

Right? But if I hadn’t been present, I would’ve missed that entirely. That’s the power of being *there* for your clients.

[Lee]

Sounds like my wife!

[Patti]

Exactly! And you know, that interaction made me realize something. Men have needs. Women have needs. And they’re not always the same.

You actually mentioned this before we started recording—about International Women’s Day—and I’d love to talk more about that.

[Lee]

Yeah, I love International Women’s Day. We celebrate it every year. And I think there’s still a stigma in the financial industry when it comes to the female demographic.

Let’s be honest—this has traditionally been a male-dominated industry. And historically, the assumption has been that the man in the household handles the finances. But that’s changing. There are more women today managing money, leading companies, and making major financial decisions.

So as advisors, we need to meet them where they are. The woman who’s a CEO of a company has different needs than a woman who just lost her spouse. And that distinction *matters*. Celebrating International Women’s Day is about celebrating the range of those experiences.

And what’s encouraging is that more and more advisors are recognizing that women want to be approached with different resources and mindsets. That progress is important.

[Patti]

Absolutely. When I first started, I’d go to conferences—often pregnant—and someone sitting next to me would look at my belly and say, “So, who are you here with?”

And I knew exactly what they meant: they assumed I was someone's assistant. And I'd say, "I'm here with me, myself, and I. Oh, and this baby I'm about to have."

And then I'd say, "I'm here for the same reason you are—to learn how to make a difference in my clients' lives."

[Lee]

That's incredible.

[Patti]

Not every man is that way, of course—but yeah, it happened a lot.

For me, this work has always been about making a real difference. And to your point, I find that women are incredibly smart. They want to *understand*—they don't want to be talked down to. They want to do the research and ask questions. And they deserve thoughtful, respectful conversations around their financial futures.

Because here's the truth: women tend to feel more insecure about their long-term financial well-being. So we have to do the work to empower them.

[Patti]

We have to demonstrate that we've done the research and deliver it in a way people can understand and digest. Don't talk down to them, and don't fluff it off either—because it's important to them.

Really listening, recognizing that they may have questions, and encouraging them to ask—there's no such thing as a dumb question. Personally, I think I may have an advantage—not because I'm a woman. In fact, some of the best mentors I've had in this business have been men. So this isn't something that *only* women can do for other women.

What I mean is, I didn't enter this business through traditional channels. I wasn't a financial advisor. I didn't have a business background. I wasn't in the insurance industry. I was an ICU nurse.

And I never realized how valuable that would be—because I *get it*... because I didn't get it.

As you know, I've built a very deep bench here. I've got 31 incredibly smart people—CFPs, MBAs, CFAs. When we get into the weeds during investment committee meetings or in our monthly planning lab, I always say, "Okay guys, remember, you're talking to a nurse. Give it to me in words I can understand." And I want them to get used to communicating that way with clients—because our clients aren't in our industry. If they're going to feel confident and comfortable with what we're recommending, we need to speak their language.

It's not enough to say, "Just trust us—we're the advisors." No. Tell them *why* we're recommending something, and *why* it's relevant to *them*. Whether they're on the front lines in pharmaceuticals, like I was in nursing, or they're the CEO of a company.

And what's interesting is, the higher up people get, the less they often understand their personal finances. They're hyper-focused on their area of expertise, their cash flow's good, they're making great money—but personal finance becomes secondary. And worse, they're embarrassed to admit they don't know, because they're C-level execs, doctors, lawyers—very smart people.

So I think it's crucial, for our industry in general, to let it be okay *not* to know.

[Lee]

100%. And I have to give you credit, Patti, because you are so well recognized in this industry across the country—and you've earned that reputation. You've built a great business, with great clients and a great team.

But beyond the numbers—beyond the “How much did I make or lose?”—the human element you bring to your clients is invaluable. There are things I've seen you do that, honestly, would blow the minds of others in this industry. It's not the norm.

That's what's impactful. It's not just about helping clients *get* to their goals—it's about helping them feel good *along the way*. And that journey can be tough. People lose loved ones. Life throws curveballs. You help your clients walk through those seasons with comfort and confidence.

You bring humanity into wealth management—and that's rare. It's worth its weight in gold.

[Patti]

Thank you for that, Lee. That really means a lot. And you're exactly right—so much of what we do is behind the scenes.

As you know, we have a scorecard for every client. I'm a total nerd—I need to know everyone is okay. And when you've built a business like Key Financial, you can't possibly look at everything all the time. So we created systems where issues and opportunities bubble up. We get alerts and alarms. We've invested in advanced technology to support that.

Sure—it's expensive. And yes, we'd probably have a lot more money if we hadn't made those investments. But every decision I make is driven by one thing: better outcomes for our clients.

And it's interesting—when I look back on the decisions I've made over the years, I see now how client-focused they were. But I didn't always realize the ripple effect that would have on my *team*.

About a year ago, one of our employees—he'd been here for four years—came into my office. We were chatting about his time here. And he said something that really stuck with me: “People always say they care. But you really do. Every decision you make shows that.”

[Lee]

That's powerful.

[Patti]

It is. And that's why, years ago, I actually changed my title—from "Patricia Brennan, CFP®" to "CEO." It may sound small, but how we identify ourselves *does* impact what we do.

As CEO, my responsibility is to create a culture where people feel purpose. Where this is the *last job* they'll ever want. Of course they'll grow and make money—but at the core, we all have a need to make progress. And we need the tools to measure that progress, both for clients and for ourselves.

For example, with our financial planning technology, we freeze the data every year and store it in a digital vault. Five years from now, clients can look back and see: at the end of 2024, we projected *this*. Where are we now? Did we exceed it? Fall short? Let's dig in and learn from it.

That's how our meetings work. It's not just, "You're doing great!"—but *why* you're doing great. Show them the numbers. Show the progress.

[Lee]

You walk the talk. And that's why your clients and your team feel it. That kind of leadership shows.

[Patti]

Thank you. And the consulting you've done for our firm has been invaluable. In a previous podcast, I was actually bragging about my bracelet—and that bracelet is the result of your consulting.

You came in with a group from your firm, and we played a game: pick one word that will be your mantra for the year. We shared ideas with each other, and someone said to me, "Patti, maybe you could be a little clearer in how you communicate."

So if you're looking at my bracelet—my word for the year is *Clarity*. Be clear with clients. Be clear with my team. Be clear with our partners—CPAs, attorneys, and yes, even wholesalers.

[Lee]

I love that. That whole session was a blast—and clarity is a great word.

[Patti]

You did that for us. And everyone on our team walked away with a word. It was meaningful and fun. So thank you for that.

[Lee]

The pleasure's all mine.

[Patti]

And thanks to all of *you* for being here today. Lee, I always love having you here. Before the cameras were rolling, we were talking. After this, you'll meet with the team. I just really value the relationship we've built.

[Lee]

Best part of this business is the relationships—so thank you for having me.

[Patti]

And thank you to all of you watching and listening. I hope you have a fantastic day.

As always, if you have questions, we're here for you. These podcasts are made to open the curtain a bit—not to show off, but to show you how this all actually works behind the scenes.

We couldn't do what we do without people like Lee Cohen and the team at New York Life Investments. So thank you again for joining me.

If you have a question or an idea for a future episode, head to our website—keyfinancialinc.com—and reach out. We'll turn it into a podcast.

Thanks so much for joining me. Take care!