



ASTONISH RESULTS' APRIL e-MARKETING AGENCY OF THE MONTH

Photography by Lynn Donaldson



MAKING THE MOST OF TECHNOLOGY AND TRADITIONAL

Strategic use of blogs, e-mail, Web sites and personal touch reap big rewards



David Whitfield is busy these days. In addition to running his own agency, Prostar Insurance Agency, he serves as district manager for a group of agents—former captive agents—who banded together in 2006 under the Prostar Financial Group umbrella. “We were frustrated with the captive side and knew that to have significant market share and preferred carrier arrangements, we needed to work together,” he explains. Today, nearly 40 agents across the state of Washington share ownership in the organization and run their individual books under the Prostar banner. Whitfield expects that number to grow to 60 or more.

In his management role, Whitfield handles recruiting, hiring and training new agents. He also drives marketing efforts in support of the group. A key element of the overall marketing initiatives revolves around electronic marketing, something that has been enhanced through a relationship with Astonish Results, a digital marketing firm. “When agents sign on, they’re also partnering with Astonish,” he explains. “All the great features provided by Astonish, from e-mail marketing to tracking to search optimization, are all included.”

Whitfield teamed up with Astonish last year to round out existing e-marketing efforts. “We have a three-part team,” he explains. “A team member works on search engines for us locally. We have a full time blogger, who manages a half-dozen or so different

blogs and other social networking initiatives. And the Astonish team helps quarterback things, providing the product support and technology we need to make it work in a professional manner.”

Blogs and customer focus

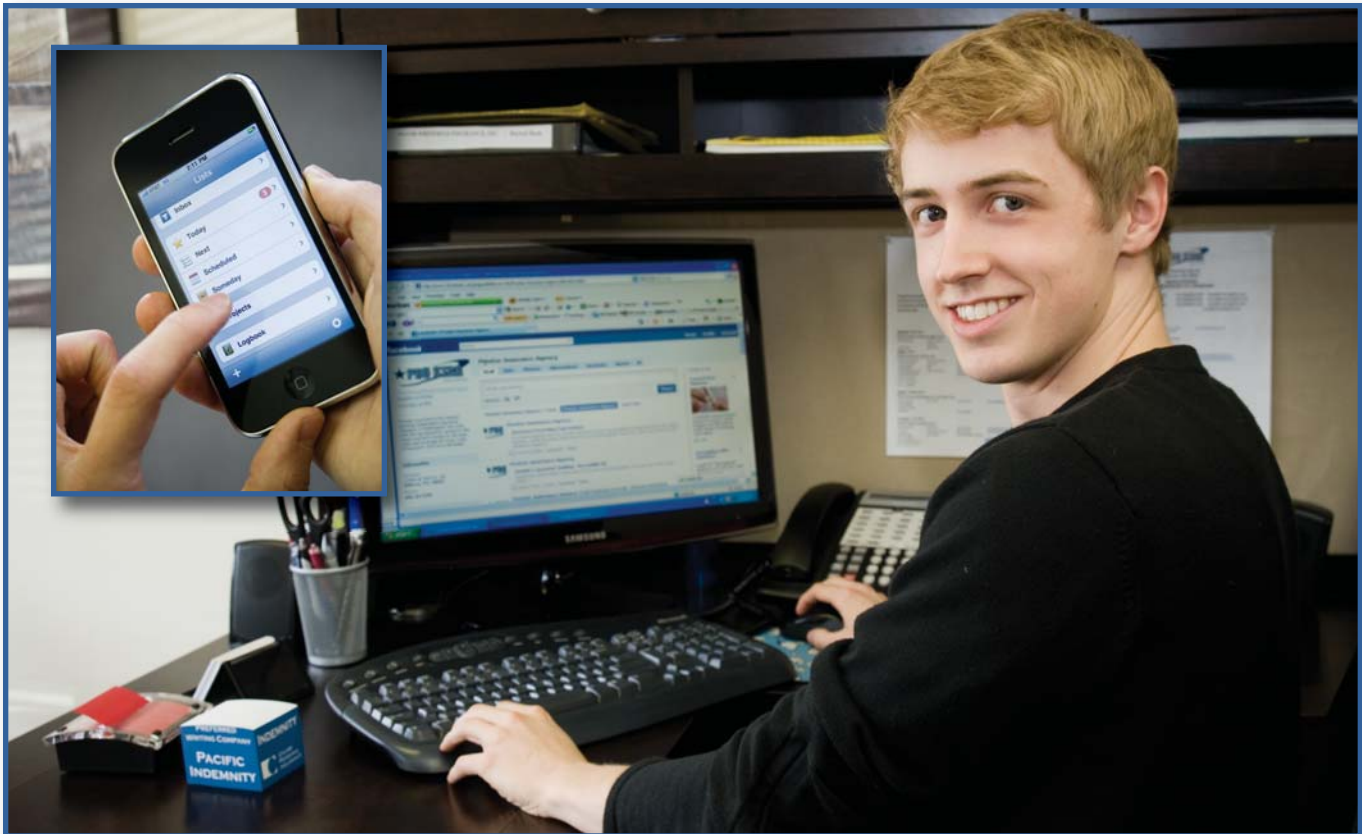
A key driver in the organization’s e-marketing efforts is blogging. Chris Kollar, Prostar Financial Group marketing director, maintains the agency’s blogs—plural. In addition to one that focuses on general interest topics, the agency maintains blogs for general business insurance topics, auto insurance, restaurants, insurance agencies and more.

The agency also makes use of microsites, Web sites with URLs chosen to reflect the specific topic or market they address. For instance, the agency owns and runs WashingtonStateBusinessInsurance.com, which is updated a dozen or so times a month with news that interests local business owners. According to Prostar Insurance

At left, Prostar executives include (seated) Chris Kollar, Marketing Director; (standing from left) David Whitfield, Agent/Owner; and Tyler Kerlee, Agent/District Manager.

Below: The Prostar Team





Marketing Director Chris Kollar uses his iPhone as well as office computer to update blogs, check e-mail, send Twitter messages, and update Facebook.

Agency agent Tyler Kerlee, who manages the agency's commercial operation and also serves as a Prostar Financial Group district manager, the site helps set the agency apart. "It's no secret that business insurance is extremely competitive today," says Kerlee. "Whatever we can do to generate greater awareness and increase traffic to our site helps us grow."

SeattleRestaurantNews.com offers content of interest to restaurants. "Chris was at the Hard Rock Café, posting blog updates from the restaurant during its grand opening," Whitfield explains. "He took pictures, and updated the event on Twitter and Facebook, as well. He really just gets out there and not only 'dry-blogs,' but writes with a hint of humor or some twist that really makes it relevant. It's news, but it's fun to read."

The goal of the microsites and blog efforts is to share valuable information and establish a place within the minds of prospects. Because of the value search engines place on continually updated content, a side benefit is enhanced rankings. "Our restaurant insurance blog has earned the number one spot on Google," Whitfield notes.

Optimizing for search

Because of the key role search plays in driving prospects, the agency maintains a clear focus on search engine optimization—doing what it can to make sure the agency appears when people search for insurance.

Blogs and updated content, of course, play an important role. So does basic Web site structure. "Sometimes, you have to treat search engines like a five-year-old," Whitfield says. "If we try to make the site simple to read, make it so readers understand what we are trying to push or trying to do, we see greater success. The better we optimize the site and the better we link and back-link, the better our results." And the greater the traffic.

Key elements in these efforts include registering the agency name on a variety of relevant sites, ranging from those that serve restaurants or other businesses to those focused on general liability and auto insurance, Whitfield explains. "We try to find out what's working with Google Analytics and Google Trends, to see where the most traffic is coming from. This helps drive keywords and phrases that will bring even more traffic."

Social media and e-mail marketing

Prostar also maintains an active presence on social media sites. The agency has more than 400 Facebook fans and a growing number of Twitter followers. "We ask our agents and their friends to become fans," Whitfield explains. "When we sign up new clients, we also let them know about our page, and ask them to become fans, as well. This allows us to interact with them in different ways."

Managing the social media presence is made easier through integration. "Every single time we update our Web site, it updates Facebook," Whitfield says. "We use social media to talk about contests we are having, talk about what is happening in the city, request referrals—anything that's relevant." By tying the tools together, Twitter, Facebook, Web content, blogs and even e-mail sent using Astonish are made more manageable.

Since signing on with Astonish, the agency has boosted its e-mail marketing activities. "Astonish provides a template that ensures a professional presentation, of course, but more important is Astonish offers a way we can track our efforts in



great detail,” Whitfield says. “I can track every e-mail. We know when a person opens it, the frequency, and when and where they went after it was opened.” This not only allows him to gauge success, it also feeds traditional marketing efforts.

Integrated with traditional

“If we’re prospecting clients and we see that a particular restaurant owner has opened our e-mails five times, we know there is interest,” Whitfield says. “We know they’re hearing our message, so we give them a call. It’s more of a warm lead at that point than a true cold call.”

E-mail marketing, social networking and other Web activities represent electronic elements Prostar’s marketing efforts. But the agency does more than e-marketing. “We still blend traditional approaches into the mix,” Whitfield explains. “We send out letters, we send out postcards. We conduct various campaign calls and participate in local events. You never know what might lead someone to respond.” Sometimes it’s an e-mail. Sometimes

“We see a tremendous amount of success when we incorporate all of the strategies. Our closing ratio is just through the roof when we do them all.”

—David Whitfield

it’s a Google search. Other times, it might be a letter. “We just don’t like to put all of our eggs in one basket,” Whitfield adds.

Technology also plays a role in developing targeted and usable leads. By accessing information in online databases, for instance, the agency can determine where—and in what kind of building—a potential prospect is situated. “There are some

buildings built in the 1920s or earlier we can’t write,” he explains. “So we use that information to make sure we’re not wasting our time and money marketing to entities that we can’t insure.”

Once the agency does have good leads for campaigns, it may do an e-mail blast or two, send out a couple of postcards or make a phone call. “But we never send out letters like traditional insurance form letters,” Whitfield notes. “We handwrite every one. We hand-address the envelope and, although we have a form letter, we always include something personal in each.”

The efforts are working. “We see a tremendous amount of success when we incorporate all of these strategies,” Whitfield explains. “Our closing ratio is just through the roof when we do them all. It’s amazing.” Growth for most companies the agency represents was in the triple digits last year. E-mail marketing and organic searches are generating 15 to 20 new leads each week, and the agency is closing more than 70% of these.

Recently, the agency wrote a \$25,000 restaurant policy through a search that came in from Brazil. “They were opening a restaurant in downtown Seattle, but they were in Brazil searching the Web and found us,” Whitfield says. “People are definitely finding us from all over.”

What gets Whitfield nearly as enthusiastic as increased revenue is the fact that most of the tools the agency is using to e-market are free. “Facebook is free, Twitter is free, Wordpress blog software is free,” he explains. “I’m a ‘numbers guy.’ I’m always asking about return on investment. These tools are cash-flow positive, because there is no expense; it’s just labor and time.”

More than free, it’s relatively easy. “The more we do it, the more we are educating ourselves,” Whitfield adds. “It’s been great to see Chris grow our business, but it’s also been great to watch his skills develop.”

He also credits Astonish Results for the growth. “Once you partner with Astonish, you start dealing with minds that are in the field all the time,” he says. “It keeps us thinking all the time. That’s one of the things that I really love about this.” ■

See it now

Prostar Insurance Agency
www.prostarinsuranceagency.com

Astonish Results
www.astonishresults.com