ASTONISH RESULTS' MARCH e-MARKETING AGENCY OF THE MONTH

FROM STUCK TO THE *FAST LANE*

Digital initiatives transform agency's response to prospects and clients, yielding fast-paced growth

"I am so psyched about coming into work tomorrow," says Will Penny, owner of Penny Insurance Agency, a 79-year-old operation founded by his great-uncle in Hendersonville, North Carolina. "I'm even psyched about the rest of today."

How many agency principals can say that—honestly? A year ago, Penny couldn't. "I was a burned out insurance guy," he recalls. "I was just tired of it, tired of all the mess. I was dragging into the office each day."

Today, the rest of his 10-person staff shares Penny's new-found enthusiasm, something clients and prospects recognize the second an agency employee answers their call. "We now pick up the phone and say, 'It's a great day at Penny Insurance,'" he explains. "The reaction we've gotten from people who are calling, whether they're clients or not, has been amazing."

Less enthusiastic callers sometimes shoot back, 'Well, I'm glad *you're* having a great day.' Others are more than impressed. "One guy called from South Georgia, almost Florida, and said, 'Wow, I can feel those positive vibes down here,'" Penny reports. "It really gets everything started on a great footing."

Getting energized

The transformation, which goes far beyond how incoming calls are answered, didn't just happen on its own. But it was fast—virtually overnight. It coincided with a decision Penny made last summer to move his agency forward and rebuild workflows around a clear electronic marketing strategy.

Weary from a tough economy, tired of the "same old, same old" and frustrated with his lack of success in making changes, Penny turned to Astonish Results, a digital marketing and training firm that frequently uses terms like "marketing revolution" and "turbocharge your results" when talking with insurance folks.

What captured Penny's attention was, as he puts it, "their attitude of 'let's make it fun, let's be energized and let's go for it.' They don't believe this insurance agency stuff needs to be boring."

Working with his Astonish support person—officially dubbed a 'Raving Fan Manager,' Penny quickly began implementing changes to the agency's Web site, its workflows, its priorities, its people and more. Employees were skeptical, at

Photography by Phil Smith

William Penny Jr., President of Penny Insurance Agency located in Hendersonville, NC

The Penny Insurance Agency Team.

first, he says. "They were probably thinking, 'Oh boy, what's he doing now?'" Penny admits.

It wasn't long before they found out. In September, Penny and his wife—a non-insurance person—ventured to San Diego for an Astonish Results client group meeting. "I talked her into attending the first session," Penny recalls. Once that obligation was fulfilled, she planned to relax on the beach. "But she stayed in the sessions, and filled up an entire legal pad with notes," he adds.

Full speed ahead

Revitalized, Penny returned to the agency going full throttle. "I had all these fabulous ideas and this new-found energy," he notes. "I think people here thought I was on drugs." At a staff meeting, he shared his vision, goals and enthusiasm, and got the staff to drink the Kool-Aid. Literally. "For that first staff meeting, I actually made Kool-Aid," he adds. "We toasted our future success."

Enthusiasm spread. Staff started thinking and working differently. "Today, they get really excited when a lead comes in, and jump on it immediately," Penny explains. "Prospects are just blown away that they just submitted a form on the Internet and someone is already in touch."

To help reach a new agency-wide goal of 1,000 new policies in 2010, incoming leads take priority. Those coming from the agency's revamped Web site generate an automated response and are directed to Penny's e-mail and Blackberry. "I'm notified the second one comes in, 24/7," he explains. "I immediately assign it to an agent, enter it in the Virtual Profit Center (the Astonish customer relationship management system) and buzz the agent, saying the lead is there."

Unless the agent is already with a client or prospect—on the phone or in person—everything stops. "They stop whatever they're doing and call the lead," Penny explains. On those received after hours, Penny will call, up until 9 p.m., to let the prospect know who will contact them.

Speed is paramount when dealing with leads, particularly those generated via the Web.

"It used to be a lead would come in, and it would go to the bottom of the stack, because people were in the middle of something else," Penny explains. "Not any more, especially with the Internet customer. The second they click off of our site, they're clicking on somebody else's."

Focus on prospects doesn't minimize the agency's attention to existing clients. According to Penny, the excitement over growth actually translates into better customer service, as well. "Employees are eager to get to work," he notes. "They view client issues as challenges, and they know they've succeeded when they resolve issues and the customer walks away from the transaction just as happy as he can be."

Building community

The agency is doing more than offer fast, focused response to boost business. Social networking is another important part of the e-marketing initiative. The agency has launched a presence on Facebook, where it interacts with clients and prospects, offers personal and commercial risk management tips, and showcases friends and partner organizations within the community.

It uses LinkedIn, Twitter and an agency blog in much the same way. All of these efforts end up doing the same thing: reaching out into the community that the agency serves and driving traffic to the agency Web site.

In addition, the agency is working on other initiatives to further strengthen its client relationships and increase sales. "We're working on building social networking for our commercial clients—doing video blogs on their behalf and posting items on Facebook to promote them and drive business their way," Penny says.

This will help differentiate the agency and provide extra value to local organizations. "I want to be able to walk in and say, 'I want to be more than the guy who takes your money or helps when something goes wrong,'" Penny notes. "I want to help these clients grow their business. If they do well and grow, we do well and grow. It's a win-win."

Penny is also working with Astonish on an e-marketing strategy to reach more churches, a niche the agency serves well. "We have an excellent market for churches, and it's important for us to stay in front of them, particularly because volunteer boards tend to change regularly," he notes. "We're looking to not only strengthen our communication, but also to broaden our geographic reach. E-marketing allows us to do this."

The agency has already found its reach extended through its digital initiatives. "For instance, right now we're quoting a homeowners policy on Nags Head, on the Outer Banks, 530 miles away from our office," Penny explains. "We have the technology that lets us respond to requests from 500 miles away just as easily we can to those five miles away."

Meeting goals

According to Penny, the agency has gone from being a very traditional, plain-vanilla agency with a conservative, small-town-bank attitude, to one that, as he puts it, says, "Let's go do it. Let's have some fun. Let's rock and roll."

Today, staff meetings are upbeat and energized. "We promote an attitude that gets people excited about coming to work," Penny explains. "Everybody's passion for what we're doing is reborn." In-office promotional campaigns and Astonish coaching videos are used to reinforce the agency's focus and goals.

Penny knows the agency has its work cut out. "We have some serious goals," he says. "We've plotted out how we're going to achieve them and we're measuring them, largely with the help of technology Astonish offers." And so far, they're on track to meet those goals.

"We're growing significantly, almost methodically, and at a pretty fast pace," he adds. "And when this market turns, when the economy turns around, we're going to be golden."■

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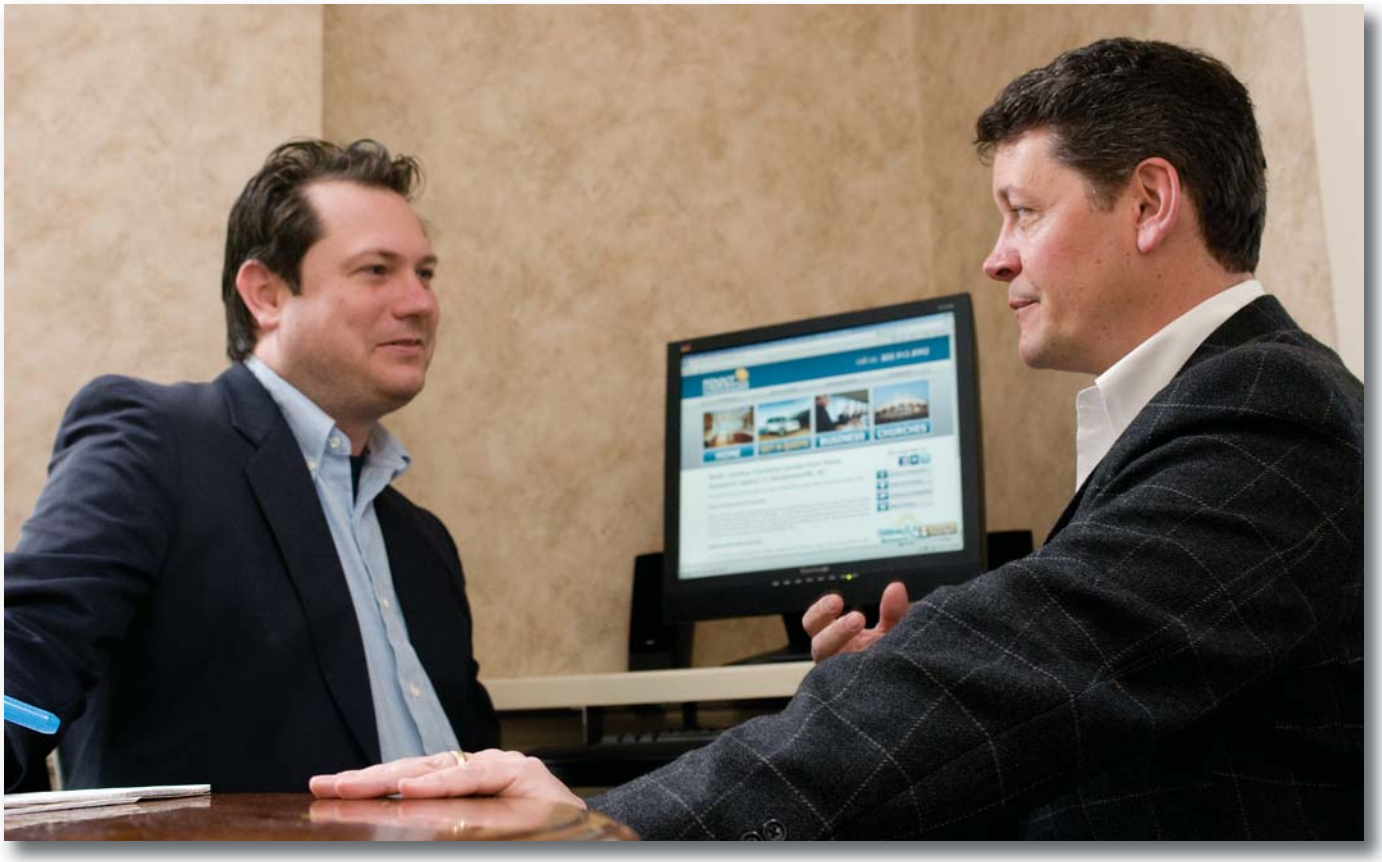
Will (right) meets with Manny Creech, the Social Networking Engineer for Penny Insurance.