

ASTONISH RESULTS' MAY e-MARKETING AGENCY OF THE MONTH

ROLLING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA



During its 30-year history, Auburn, California-based Berrier Insurance Agency has used a number of traditional marketing tools to build its presence and bolster relationships in its target market--trucking firms. "We've worked hard to stay in touch with people in our niche," says Lisa Sherer, agency president and owner.

"It is important to maintain contact with the truck dealers, service providers and operators," she adds. For years, direct mail and a strong referrals network were primary tools in the agency's marketing arsenal. They still are.

Recently, however, the six-person agency brought online marketing and relationship-building to the mix.

"We started incorporating social media, using Facebook and Twitter," Sherer explains. "In addition, we were doing things to help with search engine optimization and were using paid search to drive leads."

The agency's electronic marketing efforts met with some early success. Its Facebook community grew, its Twitter base was solid and, best of all, leads were coming in because of various digital initiatives. However, Sherer believed something was missing. "I was doing a lot of the pieces, but I didn't feel like we were putting them all together the best that we could.

"I knew we needed to focus our efforts in digital marketing," Sherer adds. "So I went looking for someone who could help us put all of those pieces together." A year and a half ago, she found Astonish Results, a digital marketing and training firm focused on helping insurance agencies, to help move the agency's electronic marketing into high gear.

"I realized it was going to require a significant commitment of time and effort," she explains. "You can't just expect to turn a switch and everything magically changes or improves." For the first few months, Sherer nailed down the agency's digital marketing direction, firmed up its

messages and, with Astonish Results, built the infrastructure for future growth and success.

Valuing relationships

Sherer knew the agency's success in social networking would provide a foundation for growing its target business. "Our bread-and-butter client is the owner-operator, the guy with one, two or three trucks," she explains. "And while it's not surprising to me, what a lot of people don't realize is that truckers are very high-tech."

Life on the road--often away from home for days at a time--feeds that. "Technology and the Web are a trucker's lifeline to everybody," Sherer explains. "When they stop, they have their smartphone and they are getting on Facebook in addition to tweeting about where they're going and what they're doing."

Facebook, in particular, serves as a strong networking hub. "Truckers have a really tight-knit community on Facebook," Sherer explains. Berrier Insurance Agency is an active part of that community--in a couple of ways. First, the agency maintains a business page, where it engages clients, prospects and others in the online community on a range of topics.

"We try to provide information our fans will find useful and interesting," Sherer explains. Some posts are quirky--a list of top April Fools' hoaxes and a post on jet-semi racing. Others are downright practical, like a post on truckers and seat-belt safety and one addressing on-the-job risk management. In between, they share news items of interest, like the trucker caught at a weigh station carrying nearly 10 tons of marijuana.

In addition, Sherer maintains a personal page for the agency, which allows her--and the agency--to be part of any Facebook user's network of friends. "Truckers all want to be friends with each other, because that's how they stay connected when they're out on the road," she says. "Once you're friends with a certain number of truckers, more friend requests keep coming in."

For a time, Sherer handled most of the social media work on her own. Recently, the agency hired Sammy Jo Thompson who, in addition to handling other agency tasks, helps keep the digital marketing engine running. Other employees lend a hand, as well.

"I encourage my producers to be involved." Sherer explains. "Of course, I don't expect them to spend all of their time on Facebook, but it is important for them to get connected to people through social networking.





Above: The Berrier Insurance crew pictured in front of a truck belonging to client JSB Trucking. From left: Kristi McLellan, Agent; Linda Wilkes, Customer Service Representative; Keith Broomhead, Agent; Sammy Jo Thompson, Social Media Architect/Customer Service Representative; Jeff Brown, Owner/Operator of JSB Trucking; Lisa Sherer, Berrier Insurance President; and Bradd Hoberman, Agent.

At right: From his iPhone Jeff Brown can pay his premium, check on a claim, and interact with Berrier Insurance in a number of ways.



We have written some good accounts as a result of connections we've made on Facebook."

For instance, a trucker saw a Facebook conversation between an agency employee and someone in his own network of friends. "We became connected--either as friends or when he 'liked' our business page," Sherer recalls. "He sent a message and asked for a quote." The agency responded, and wrote the \$65,000 account.

Content is King (or Queen)

To augment its social networking activities, the agency entered the blogging arena. "That was one of the strategies we focused on early on--to really start putting some great content that was specifically designed to reach our niches," Sherer explains. The agency used its Facebook experience as a jumping-off point.

"We used our existing presence to really listen to what people had to say, to understand what their concerns were, and to find out what kept them up at night," she notes. "We wanted to know what kinds of things they would be interested in hearing about. Based on that, we started putting out blog posts."

The agency maintains two blogs. One addresses insurance, risk management, and general business issues

for the agency's trucking and construction niche business in a rather straightforward manner. The other, titled "The Truck Insurance Diva Blog," takes a lighter approach. Found at blogaboutbigrigs.com and complete with a cape-wearing diva, the blog describes itself as "Keeping you up to date with truck insurance tips, transportation industry news, and stuff I think is fun and interesting to truckers."



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—Lisa Sherer

"The Truck Insurance Diva Blog lets us connect on a different level," Sherer explains. "Sometimes we share newsworthy things, sometimes it's something funny. As long as we think it's something truckers will find interesting and useful, it can go there."

The goal is to do blog updates several times a month. The objective: share expertise and demonstrate knowledge of the clients and their businesses. "We use these to get ourselves known as people who understand their industry and understand the kinds of things they're thinking about," Sherer explains. To leverage the knowledge and expertise, the agency feeds blog content to Facebook, where it reaches an even broader audience.

"The blogging and social networking have gotten us connecting more with our client base," she adds. "It really has gotten the dialogue going. Sharing good, strong content helps our customers and the agency. Having fun with it just allows us to engage a little more, on a different level, with our audience."

The agency also shares its expertise and knowledge through an on-site

feature—one that serves to generate leads. "For the last several years, we have offered free reports for clients and prospects in our target markets," Sherer explains. The reports—"How to Avoid the 7 Deadly Sins that Truckers Commit When Buying Insurance" and, for contractors, "Certificates of Insurance Made Easy"—help generate leads for the agency and provide useful, practical information for businesses.

"I want our clients to be well-informed," Sherer says. "The reports are just part of that." Since instituting various digital marketing initiatives, which helped increase Web site traffic, requests for the reports are up.

This desire to inform clients helps drive agency e-mail marketing as well. "We send monthly newsletters to our database of prospects, those we've quoted, our customers, and purchased lists," Sherer says.

"That's very effective. We're not necessarily trying to sell them anything, but rather give them information." As the e-mail campaign has matured, Sherer sees people who didn't open newsletters at first doing so now, and calls following e-newsletter mailings have increased.

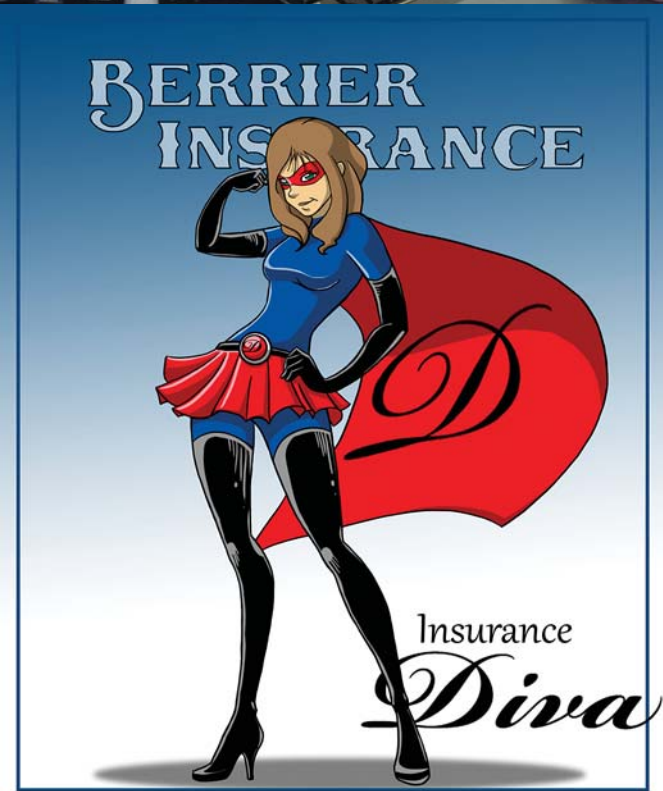
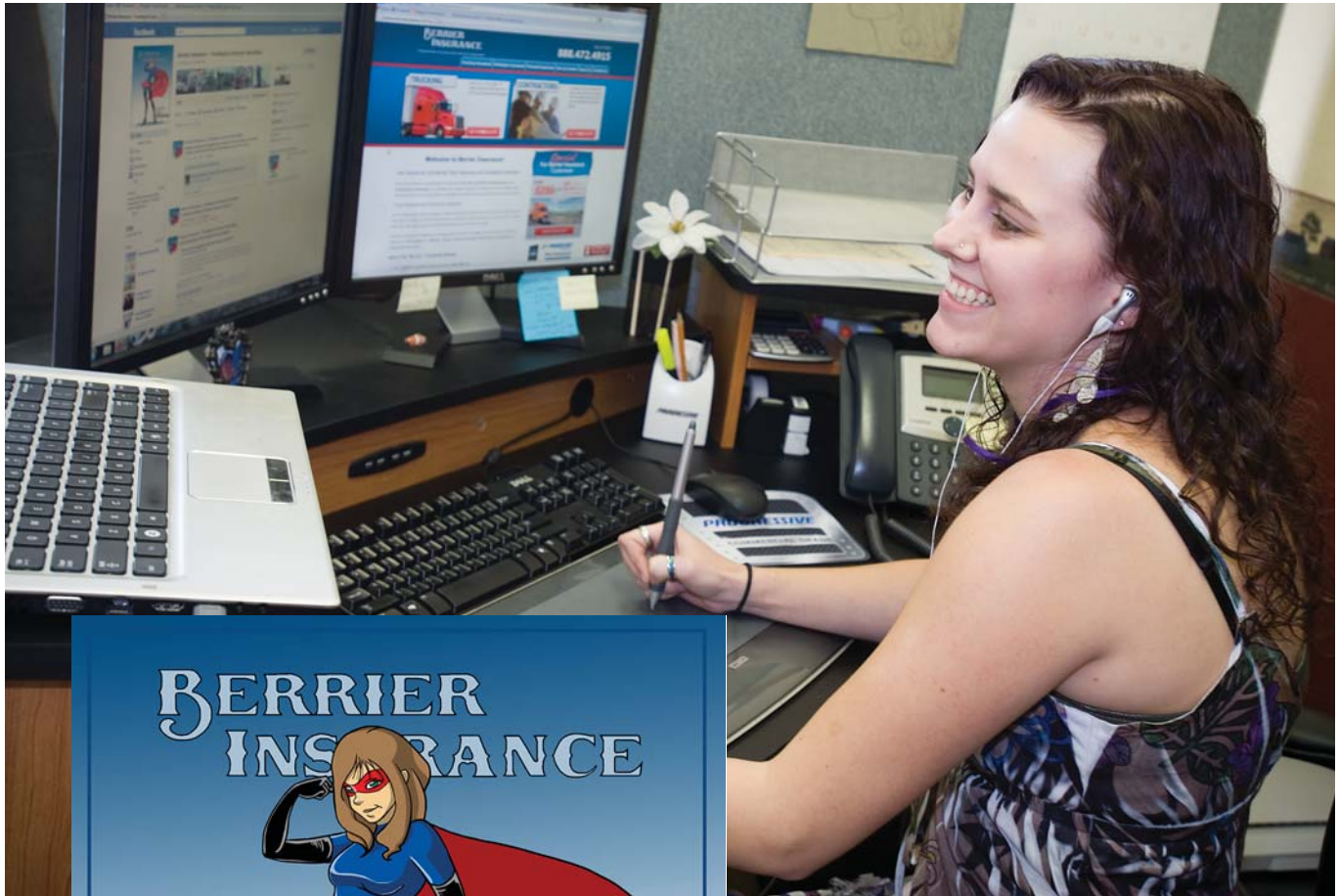
The people factor

As the agency built out its digital marketing initiatives, it found its strongest allies in its staff. "Our people understand what kind of agency we are," Sherer explains. "We want to be changing and growing. Everyone in the office knows that. They understand the world is changing and we need to evolve, we need to be able to respond to a changing marketplace."

Sherer says employee involvement is key. "I love the way our staff has embraced this way of thinking," she says. "It's one of the things I'm most pleased about."

Employees did not have to navigate change on their own. "Astonish has helped keep everybody on the same page," Sherer adds. "They helped our employees understand how to handle all of these incoming leads and how to create an incredibly positive experience for people when they call in."

As part of its agency partnership, Astonish provides up-front and ongoing training and support. "They provide written training materials and videos that we use to address everything from sales discussions to improving our closing ratio," Sherer explains. "I'm frequently on the phone



Sammy Jo Thompson manages the social networking activities for Berrier Insurance in addition to creating original art for advertising.

with our contact--our raving fan manager, they call it--discussing ways to move us to the next level."

These discussions run the gamut--from high-level strategic issues to nuts-and-bolts employee issues. "We work on everything from making sure we're capitalizing on the individual strengths of each of our employees to building teamwork to help the entire agency--and, as a result--our people, succeed," Sherer adds.

Something is working right, at least according to the agency's own raving fans. Berrier Insurance creat-

ed a page to capture client comments--and there are plenty. Nearly two dozen entries recognize the agency, its service and, most important, its people.

Sherer expects to see more of these testimonials going forward. However, she realizes they'll be the by-product of continued hard work. "We want to continue to focus on getting more great content out there and delivering a 'WOW' experience to each customer or prospect," she says. "I want to spend more time coming up with practical, interesting informa-

tion to help people, and then sharing it on the blog and everywhere else I can. Then when a prospect becomes a customer, we need to be the best insurance agency they've ever had."

She's also keeping up on more technical matters. "We use Google Analytics to make sure our Web site is producing as many good leads as it can," Sherer explains. "You have to keep on top of what the competition is doing and what is working. SEO is really big, and it all goes back to content--you need to provide really good, interesting information out there if you want to get your rankings up."

Her advice to others: "If you're going to invest in digital marketing, you have to be willing and able to invest a lot of time and effort to make it work," she says. "It won't work if you don't. You can't just dabble in it." ■

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