

The Right Way to Find New Insurance Prospects and Sales on the Internet

by Gary Savelli, Independent Agent and Agency Internet Consultant

If you're like most of us, the first thing you do today when you want to find out about a particular service or product is to search for it on the Internet. This simple fact should be sufficient to cause independent agents and brokers to radically rethink how their agency markets for new customers, and yet most have not done so. Take this simple test. "Google" for a particular type of insurance in your community, or for an insurance agent. Does your agency show up?

When ACT studied the major hard trends that are likely to affect our distribution system significantly over the next five years, having a strong brand on the Internet and being reasonably positioned on the search engines emerged as two key needs. Our concerns were heightened when we reviewed the results of the recent AUGIE survey which found that while 75% of agencies have websites, a majority of these agencies put no emphasis and resource into them. 56% of the agencies with websites stated that they update them only rarely, annually, or never.

At this fall's ACT meeting, the industry decided that improving agency branding on the Web and marketing through search engines are industry "must do" issues. An ACT work group has begun its work to raise agency awareness about the benefits agencies are already deriving from having a strong web presence. In the coming months, the work group will develop a series of tools to help agencies decide the web strategy that best fits their agency's brand and market focus and helps them understand the issues involved with search engine positioning. The work group will also work with vendors and carriers to increase the amount of real-time functionality available to customers through the agency website (such as billing, claims, and policy inquiry, and making a payment).

My focus as an independent agent for the last several years has been to use the Internet to gain new prospects and to sell business. Today I consult with agents across the country on this subject and build websites for many agencies that are specifically focused on driving prospects to the agency. Here are some key tips I have learned to generate meaningful sales from the Internet.

As I speak at agent conferences around the country, I rarely find an agent making money selling insurance on the Internet. The primary reason most agents are not making money is that they are doing the same wrong thing. If you look at most agency websites, what you will see is a general catch-all site that has a blurb about the agency, a link to various kinds of quotes (such as auto, homeowners, etc.), maybe a report of some kind and so on. It's always the same thing, with the same result - zero sales.

I'm asking for you to go prospecting a new way. Develop a website that does just ONE THING, and does it so simply that you cannot miss!

Examples you ask?

Prior to having a website, our family agency's new business count for California monoline earthquake insurance was zero - unless one of our existing homeowners policyholders wanted such coverage and requested it. Now it is not a rare thing to see a monthly commission check come in for over \$500, and sometimes close to \$1000 just on earthquake insurance sold online! Yes, that is NEW business, SOLELY from Internet customers. That's because I developed an earthquake insurance ONLY website.

Prior to having a website, we sold perhaps one or two Special Event policies per month (the source of that business was from a yellow page ad we had). Now, it is a commonplace occurrence to write one or two event policies a DAY (each bringing in over \$100 in commissions and fees to our agency).

Prior to having a website, we sold, on a good month, one or two surety bonds. Now, surety bonds are one of the main sources of new business income at the agency (sometimes amounting to in excess of \$1000 or \$2000 in commissions a month on contractor bonds, license bonds and more.)

There are lines of insurance that are MADE for the Internet. Your imagination is the limit. Think about the "unusual". Everyone writes auto insurance. It's getting harder to find customers when everyone offers it, so don't worry about auto insurance for now. Start developing an agency site that goes after something that FEW other agencies write. You must be there to help them where few others can. You must have a website for that one product and market it well.

List a toll free number to call for an instant quote, and encourage "call in" business which I have found to be most effective for sales. List pricing examples of recent accounts, and have a very short simple quote application to fill out for after-hours customers on the home page if possible, or no more than one click away. Do not ask for sensitive information on the quote form, such as driver's licenses or social security numbers. Your Web responses must be fast in every way, by phone and by email.

Special programs your agency may have through various companies are PERFECT for the web. "Guarantee issue smokers life insurance," "Motorcycle insurance for drivers regardless of points on driving record", "instant issue travel insurance," "bonds for contractors with bad credit", "flood insurance" --- these kinds of programs are tailor made for the Internet. Look over your inventory and get to work!

You will NOT get these customers finding your special programs from your agency "home page" that offers everything. It just won't happen. You must begin to develop sub sites that have key word oriented domain names, such as "ContractorBonding.com", etc. for these specific types of coverages.

The key is to have a site with a definite purpose that is simple, clean, white, with some but not too many graphics, and that encourages consumer interaction. You also have to

have a website champion who will continuously measure the site's effectiveness and revise it to keep it fresh and effective. That individual should plan to spend one to two hours a week for this purpose on a simple agency site.

An effective domain name using the products and lines of coverage you are selling is extremely important to positioning your site with the search engines. Key words are those that consumers are likely to use when conducting a search. Try to include your state of business if you write in only one state ("flood insurance NY", "Texas home insurance"), use a ".COM" if possible, and keep it under 20 characters.

www.godaddy.com is a good place to go for domain name services.

You and your website developer need to be focused on positioning with the search engines using key word domain names, good content, quote links that are textual and have key words in them, key word rich graphic "alt" tags, and effective meta-tags in the HTML code. Also, it is often overlooked that you MUST submit these sub pages to the search engines every three to four weeks to maintain and improve your positioning. Longevity of the site also contributes to search positioning. You may also want to consider a modest pay-per-click campaign with Google or Yahoo that targets your specialized product and community to keep the costs reasonable.

Some additional tips:

- Have your website on everything that goes out of your office
- Add your website address to your office window or sign saying, "free online quotations 24/7"
- Include on your "on hold" message that callers can get a quote or service online at your website
- Develop reciprocal links with partners such as mortgage brokers, real estate agents, car dealers, etc.
- Have your CSRs get an email address from every caller and then add them to your regular electronic newsletter
- Have an online viewer referral contest or program
- Cross-sell every quote request you receive.

In summary - pick a product. Build a website for that product once you know there is a need. List a toll free number for instant quotes and an easy-to-complete form, and begin to position yourself with the search engines. There is a gold mine out there, but you need to do the right things to get some of it now!

(Gary Savelli is President of Internet Sales of Basic West Insurance Agency in San Francisco, CA, and twice winner of the "idea of the year" award at the AAACO Convention. Go to <http://www.insurance-web-sales.com> for more information about Savelli's services and book, "Selling Insurance on the Internet". Contact Gary at: 502-445-2382; gsavelli@aol.com. This article represents the views of the author and should not be construed as an official statement of ACT.