



Take a sharp knife to marketing

Use Email

By Stan Sauerwein

An Internet consultant says the fragmented distribution system that characterizes the insurance industry — and its line-up of many key players who have different opinions about the amount and kind of information they want to share — is the biggest roadblock to brokers getting the most out of the Internet.

Streamlining how the industry is going to use the Internet will take a long time. Brokers should let the players with the deepest pockets work out that puzzle and instead focus on components of their own businesses that can be immediately helped by the electronic transfer of data.

Vancouver business development consultant Elaine Allison is the president of Positive Presentations Plus Inc. With work experience in the financial services and insurance sectors, she sells herself as an advisor on business growth planning and as a professional speaker on how businesses can use the Internet to build profit.

Allison likes to throw entertainment in with her teaching. A guest speaker at the June IBABC event in Whistler, she handed out a six-pack of beer (I Am Canadian) to the best Canadian broker website created by the attendees during her presentation. She has even done a dance number wearing 'top hat and tails' to get her points about marketing across to ultra-conservative business audiences.

However, when it comes to insurance and the Internet, Allison is all business. The distribution issue, secretive companies and the fact most brokers would rather sell insurance than deal with the Internet, all combine to make insurance one of the 'have-nots' when it comes to Internet-driven technological efficiencies.

Ignoring the Internet will spell disaster for brokers facing a hardened market in an increasingly competitive electronic world, a business environment where saving a little on sales and/or operating expenses can be crucial to success. Internet, for private and commercial use, is a rising

tide that will engulf unwary businesses, she says. Within three years, global traffic will be 93 times greater than it was at Y2K and yet some brokers still don't understand the most basic ways to gain efficiencies.

Having nearly 70% of the nation's customers claim they still prefer the reassuring presence of a warm body when they buy insurance is just a temporary coinci-



B.C. business development consultant Elaine Allison says the rewards for brokers of being online to generate profit are much greater than a six-pack of beer. Brokers not effectively plugged into the Net are missing the boat.

dence, she says.

Allison warns brokers who still don't know how to swim the Internet — let alone surf it — to get their feet wet fast. "The Internet is the best communications tool we will see in our lifetimes. It is better than TV, radio, fax, the postal system or our telephone, and we're all just learning how to use it. It doesn't matter what industry you are in, we're all just learning how to use the Internet's capabilities," she says reassuringly.

Brokers don't need to wait for companies, portal vendors or management systems salespeople to show them the way to B2B solutions. Allison says they can take

some easy steps on their own now by doing something as simple as maximizing email — the Internet's version of the dog paddle.

They can also take advantage of the innovative services for insurance brokers that are popping up like mushrooms in the cost-conscious hard market currently faced by the industry.

In a re-seller environment like insurance, the successful business model is based on volume. The most efficient means of touching customers is the route brokers should travel. Surveys show more than half the households in western Canada now have the Internet and 85% of Internet users go online for email. With experience, consumers are becoming more discerning and jaded about what the Internet can provide and not provide. In British Columbia, for instance, users are spending an average of 12.3 hours per week logged on and nearly half of them have high-speed connections for fast retrieval of information.

Only 20% of the users are online shoppers, but Allison believes that is rising almost daily. Even so, 70% are wired up to the Internet so they can access information.

Those are broker customers.

Allison claims their actions are telling brokers they want to do business when it suits them and how it suits them whether it be face-to-face, over the telephone or via the Internet.

"Most business owners only have time after 8 p.m. to think about insurance," she says half-jokingly. Brokers should be prepared to help customers with insurance questions at times they may not have considered prime business hours ever

Continued on page 13

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Fall 2002 Insurancewest 7



Don't shout!

here are some email tips

1. DO NOT WRITE USING CAPITAL LETTERS! Capital letters equate to "shouting" on the Internet. It's okay to use caps to emphasize words occasionally, though.

2. Be bright. Be brief. Be gone.

3. Don't send emails when you are upset with the person to whom you are communicating. Wait until you have calmed down, or call them directly. People are often less willing to forgive words typed in haste than words spoken in the heat of the moment.

4. Avoid 'lingo' or acronyms the reader may not understand.

5. Avoid web page formatting of messages. Some computers can't recognize the messages and some people are annoyed by what they view as a waste of bandwidth.

6. Avoid sending huge files. If a lengthy email is necessary, divide it with headings.

7. Use blank lines or hard returns

to break up your paragraphs.

8. Use descriptive subject lines.

9. Avoid e-grunts. One-word responses like "great" or "cool" add nothing to a healthy, informative dialogue.

10. Keep multi-line paragraphs to 76 characters. Some handbooks even suggest 60-65 characters are a safer bet for correct display on most screens.

A broker does not have to be an Internet marketing genius to gain big-time advantage from actively using email to touch customers. Several programs, including one developed by a Vancouver company called MailLoop, even automate and simplify the bulk mailing process.

Allison's advice is to jump in and use what's available now. That way, when roadblocks are removed in the industry's quest for online integration, brokers can be ready. **iw**

"Email is so under-utilized. It could save the broker thousands for renewal letters and most other simple communications."

She firmly believes brokers should utilize email to communicate information about products their customers may not currently be shopping for or even know they need. She also says brokers should consider using Adobe Acrobat to safely distribute documents. Email, she believes, becomes a "nearly no-cost way" of producing declaration pages, brochures and even policy wordings for clients.

"Think of what that means! You can eliminate printing, storage, the cost of stationery, postage and HR expenses. It can provide a very dramatic bottom line improvement."

Brokers who want to catch up to technological efficiencies should look at email as one more of several effective ways to touch their customer list, she says.

Here are some sample email practices

and policies for business that Allison advocates brokers should consider:

1. All personnel should have their own email account. With a website, brokers should have one main account for new customers to use for product or service inquiries (*info@broker.ca* as an example). The downside of a general info address is that someone on staff must manage the account.

2. Set policy on time frames in which staff is expected to respond to email. Is 24 hours suitable for your business or does competition make same-day response a necessity? Allison says this is especially important if brokers are accepting email queries from their website.

3. Ensure a forwarding system is in place. If a client makes a request of one employee who happens to be away on vacation or a business trip, other employees should be receiving the request and responding in a timely fashion.

4. Ensure staff restrict the company email address for company business use only.

5. Make sure staff understand virus and security risks. This includes a formal policy about dealing with attachments from unknown sources. Use professional IT resources to minimize exposure of your networks or systems to unauthorized use by hackers.

6. Have your employee Signature File set up with the employee name, brokerage name, and contact info. Don't forget to post your web address if you have one.

"This makes it easy for someone to print the email quickly and have it handy for later use if they are coming to the office or a meeting," Allison says.

7. Make sure email settings have spell check turned on.

8. To avoid spam or unwanted mail, set up restrictions with the 'Block Sender' instructions in your email settings.

9. Maintain professionalism at the broker email. That means discouraging clients from sending jokes and not allowing employees to forward discussion list items or jokes to others.

10. When sending bulk email, use the BCC (blind carbon copy) setting to keep confidential the names of other parties being contacted. **iw**



Allison sometimes needs to do a song-and-dance number to get the attention of conservative business people.

Allison

Continued from page 7

before. She preaches using websites and having very accessible lines of communication via the Internet.

Only five per cent of insurance brokers sell online to the consumer, she states, but a growing number of them (now estimated at 18%) are offering online quoting.

Allison advocates brokers start to become savvy Internet marketers by taking some low-cost baby-steps. Delightfully, the baby-steps can dramatically cut a broker's marketing and servicing costs.

"Web strategies are cost-prohibitive for the smaller brokers who can't go ahead and develop their own sophisticated online solutions," says Allison. On the other hand, email strategies actually present ways to save a broker cash.

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Fall 2002 Insurancewest 13