

IA

INDEPENDENT AGENT

WHAT WORKS

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Peak

Performance



Alliance
Insurance Group



CHALLENGE: Engage commercial prospects on their terms.

SOLUTION: Use digital marketing as a new channel for business development.

Folklore says that being in the mountains energizes people to be expressive, passionate and strong. From its headquarters near the foothills at the front range of the U.S. Rocky Mountains, Alliance Insurance Group offers living proof of that belief.

The independent agency based in Golden, Colo. counts itself among a pioneering, still-small segment of the independent channel that's attempting to scale the imposing summit of digital marketing. That excursion began early this year with a significant investment in an organic lead-generating digital platform and a well-planned route to ROI peak.

In a blend of old and new, the success of Alliance Group's state-of-the-art digital platform relies heavily on preserving a hallmark of the insurance business: assuring clients and prospects that the agency understands their business and can expertly manage their risk. The firm's 19 producers are billed as specialists in the markets Alliance Group services. Among those mostly commercial niches are agri-culture, crop and rainfall; oil and gas; real estate; bar and tavern; contractors; workers comp and general as well as cyber

“I’m not like
your current
broker.



What We Learned

Managing risk from its headquarters in the shadow of the U.S. Rocky Mountains, the Alliance Group is an aggregating firm with a dozen associate partners, most of them sprinkled along the Rockies’ front range and western slope. Other associates operate from Gilbert, Ariz.; Kansas City, Mo.; and Lincoln, Neb.

But only three years after Kevin Scally first hung the Alliance Group shingle in Golden, he sought a growth opportunity in Arizona by acquiring an agency that relied almost exclusively on contractor business. That was in 2007, and it wasn’t long before the market turned and Alliance Group “took one to the chin,” Scally says. “Boy, was that a lesson in diversification,” he laments. But he put the experience to good use over the next six years, and Alliance Group now has a record of wise—and profitable—decisions around M&A activity.

—P.V.

Targeted Content

“We manage 14 commerce sites, and behind each site is a producer who really understands that business,” says Martin Gibeau, Alliance Group president. “That producer has been in that industry, worked in that industry and is now in the insurance business selling to that industry. So they all understand the ins and outs of the business and who they’re speaking to, and they can speak directly to potential clients’ pertinent needs.”

The strategy behind the agency’s commerce sites and the rest of the digital marketing platform is precision dialogue, the communication approach that engineers a meaningful conversation around what matters most to the prospective client.

The Alliance Group commerce sites are designed to zero in on what’s important to prospects in each respective niche. Each site features attention-getting videos, market-specific information and a call to action. “The goal with these sites is to get them to stop shopping and give us a call or send us an email,” Gibeau says.

In its first four months, the digital platform generated impressive results: 429 visitors each week who viewed 3.1 pages on each visit; 47 organic leads per month via email; and another 52 per month via phone. Six months in, the agency was realizing more than \$15,000 in revenue from digital marketing leads.

“You have to think in seven-second increments when you’re talking about a digital platform,” Gibeau points out. “Think about your behavior when you’re doing personal shopping for a consumer item. You go to a site, look at an item, give it a few seconds. If it pushes a button, you stick around and you might buy. If not, you leave. That’s the approach we took.”

Driving Traffic

Email marketing is the primary tactic for driving traffic to the commerce sites, but the firm also drives traffic through search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per-click campaigns. The commerce sites allow risk managers and other commercial insurance shoppers to review a package of information directly related to what they’re

searching for online. For instance, Alliance Group optimizes its commerce sites for individuals that type “bar and tavern insurance Golden CO” into a search engine.

SEO and Google analytics are key, of course, in attracting and identifying visitors and measuring traffic on the commerce sites. Alliance Group works with a digital strategic partner to manage its online marketing by building and maintaining Alliance Group’s commerce sites.

Alliance Group does not, however, optimize its main website, allinsgrp.com. That site is simply “an informational tool like everyone else has,” says Gibeau, and does not generate revenue or organic leads.

Alliance Group leadership does attach a high priority to its mobile website and apps for every communications device. As Alliance Group apps become available, they are downloadable from the firm’s main website. “We feel we need to build dialogue on our prospects’ terms—when, where, and however they want to engage,” Gibeau says. “A digital marketing platform had better be available for every possible device, even if you’re not familiar with it.”

Close Watch

The firm’s intensified need for organic leads drove the quest for a top-notch digital marketing platform. “We mea-

sure everything,” Gibeau explains. That means Alliance Group leaders knew from the start how many leads their team was working in a month, a week, a day and even a morning. They wanted those leads to be organic and fresh rather than purchased and possibly stale.

“Business owners see our logo, our brand, and they know they’re going to talk with someone from Alliance who’s local in one of our offices,” Gibeau says. “People like that. It’s part of the process of lead stickiness.”

Social media sites also warrant some analysis by Alliance Group. The firm maintains a blog and a presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+. Traffic varies from site to site and does not compare to the results garnered by the more robust digital marketing platform.

“Have we sold insurance from our social sites? Yes,” Gibeau says. “Have we sold a lot of it? No. The social sites are there for brand awareness and exposure.”

First Impressions

Gibeau spent more than 12 years working with agencies on digital marketing platforms before Alliance Group founder and CEO Kevin Scally recruited him to join the firm in 2012. Scally had started the agency in 2004 with a substantial

book of farm business he had built across several states with his father, who had just retired. Alliance Group formed around Scally's crop business and his p-c relationships, and quickly grew into a

Alliance Insurance Group

Golden, Colo. (pop. 20,000)

FOUNDED: 2004

GROSS REVENUES: 2011, \$2 million; 2012, \$2.5 million; 2013, \$3.3 million (est.)

INSURANCE EMPLOYEES: 39

REVENUE PER EMPLOYEE: \$84,600

BUSINESS MIX: Ag/crop, 40%; other commercial property-casualty, 45%; health-benefits, 10%; personal p-c, 5%.

CARRIERS: Allied, Auto-Owners, Bituminous, CNA, Fireman's Fund, Foremost, Hartford, Hudson, Kemper, Liberty Mutual, Pinnacol, ProAG, Progressive, Safeco, State Auto, Travelers and 94 others.

CLIENT COUNT: Commercial property-casualty, 5,000; personal p-c, 1,000.

RETENTION RATE: 88%

TECHNOLOGY: Applied Systems Epic

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commercial-focused p-c firm. By 2012, Scally's vision for growth required bold, new measures.

"When I met Kevin, we just clicked," Gibeau says. "He had a need to advance his marketing efforts, and he saw what digital marketing could bring to the table. We have a lot in common in terms of developing a process and a system for sales—and not just online sales.

"Online marketing can certainly lead to sales, but it's more about the dialogue—the journey that engages the prospect. We wanted to add a couple of dynamic steps to the typical sales process to make it a little more special—to make it pop in terms of competitive separation."

Enter precision dialogue, which Gibeau says is equally effective in person as it is online. "We coach our team in developing an outstanding first and second impression," Gibeau explains. "In a cold-call or canvassing situation, when you're walking into a restaurant or an accountant's office for the first time, it's really all about the first minute. It's what you say to get their attention."

Alliance Group sales personnel are equipped with value-added services that support their precision dialogue, Gibeau explains. "It's not all about me and the insurance package I want to

sell you," he says. "I understand your business needs, and I'd like to assure you that I can bring value to your organization and your life. I'm not like your current broker. I'm better."

Included in the value-added arsenal is offering a client referral program for commercial clients to implement in their own businesses. Alliance Group sales professionals offer to establish a referral program based on leveraging the prospective client's own business relationships, encouraging each prospect to consider bankers, accountants, vendors and others who might serve as strategic partners to help generate business. Most prospects gratefully implement the Alliance Group program and realize its added value.

And what of life before the trek to digital marketing? "We looked a whole lot like everybody else who runs a commercial insurance agency," Gibeau admits. "We cold-called, we canvassed, we closed some sales and not others. With digital added to the marketing mix, it's another channel to work the same tactics. But now we're responding to a whole lot more people who have never met us before." □

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