Protests Target NAIC
Protesters who say insurance lobbyists are undermining state efforts to implement federal health care reforms disrupted the National Association of Insurance Commissioners’ summer conference. ▶ Page 6

Flood Bill Delays May Drive Out Private Carriers
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Insurance ‘Redlining’ Solution Suggested
The new financial reform law is a “golden opportunity to effectively respond to the racial discrimination that still permeates” insurance underwriting in minority neighborhoods, a public policy academic contends. ▶ Page 26

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GAME CHANGERS!
Meet The Rock & Rollers From Astonish Results Who Are Shaking Up Agency Marketing
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LOSE YOUR EYES and imagine, if you will, “a Tasmanian Devil in human skin.” Now you might be describing the character Dewey Finn, played by actor Jack Black from the 2003 movie “School of Rock,” in which the actor portrays an old-school rock-and-roller who finds himself substitute-teaching a class of fifth graders. Or, you could be describing Adam DeGraide, CEO and co-founder of Astonish Results—a self-described rock-and-roller whose firm is committed to shaking up independent agency marketing and customer service.

Similar to the character in the movie who takes his class of musical misfits from the mundane to the magnificent, Mr. DeGraide finds himself infusing that very same energy and passion to the growing list of Astonish clients throughout the agency distribution system.

He and his colleagues accomplish this through a combination of leveraging the latest technology, fully engaging social media, marketing his clients as full-fledged business advisors rather than merely policy peddlers, and by recruiting “raving Fan Managers” to promote the Astonish approach wherever he goes.

Astonish Results (www.Astonishresults.com) bases its approach on two core beliefs.

The first is that agencies must shift from a service-oriented emphasis to an aggressive sales and marketing-focused culture. This doesn’t mean that one supersedes the other, according to Mr. DeGraide. Instead, he noted, the key is “you must never forget that every service encounter is a sales opportunity.”

The second belief is that by implementing the right technology and imbedding social media as a key touch point for clients, agents will not only grow their book of business with a major influx of new prospects, but improve retention levels with existing accounts as well.

By Mr. DeGraide’s measure, “the biggest thing we’ve done is given local agents the ability to compete and win against national direct writers.”

“The principal problem agencies typically have is they don’t know what’s working and what’s not. After we come into an agency, they will never do business the same way again,” added Tim Sawyer, the firm’s president and co-founder.

The third co-founder of Astonish, Chief Operating Officer John Boudreau, said that “the tools, technology and training we provide agencies have literally changed their lives by changing their businesses.”

He added that his system is “built to encompass all aspects of an agency’s operation, allowing them to find, sell and keep more customers.”

“We’re changing the insurance industry one agency at a time,” he said.

“Agencies are excited about their businesses again.”

Astonish begins by meeting with the agency team, assigning a personal “raving Fan Manager” (RFM) whose responsibility is to make sure everything is on track, that the unique needs of the agency are integrated into the plan, and to oversee all media development. Once the RFM is assigned, work begins on the new website.

Concurrent to that is the implementation of what Astonish calls the Virtual Profit Center (VPC). The VPC includes a “customer relationship management tool on crack,” as the colorful Mr. DeGraide describes it, along with a lead generation tool. The VPC becomes the “heartbeat of the agency,” he explained.

Agents say ‘rock-and-rollers’ help boost sales while making work fun again
his agency operation had to change once he realized that “whenever I needed anything from a garden hose to a new drill, I would go online.” While he appreciated the realities of Web growth, he didn’t know how to make it happen at his agency.

Established in 1948, the midsize agency was facing stronger competition from direct writers, and there wasn’t a lot of help for independent agents,” he recalled. “I tried going online to get a quote and found it complex and too long a process. I knew there had to be a better way, and that was when I came across Astonish Results.”

His expectations from Astonish were to “create an online presence to bring the agency into the modern world.”

Mr. Caton wasn’t just going after the youth market, either, recognizing that most middle-aged buyers and even many seniors were using the Web to do research before shopping or just to stay in touch.

Since his installation of the Astonish tools, Caton-Hosey’s personal lines department has grown by 10 percent, and with the newest version Mr. Caton expects growth to be even greater.

Kenneth Petersen, CEO of the Massachusetts-based Encharter Insurance (http://www.enchart.com), came to Astonish through a different impetus. Regulatory changes in the state resulted in an onrush of direct writers into his backyard, requiring Encharte to become more sales-oriented, he explained.

A small-to-midsize business, Encharter is made up of seven different agencies operating in five locations. Leveraging social media to coordinate brand, service and provide a platform for growth, Astonish signed with the agency in August 2009 and by September had a new website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Animoto (video and slideshow) accounts—all of which is bringing traffic, renewed interest and excitement to the agency.

Mr. Petersen explained that until Astonish got involved they were doing about 70-to-80 new deals each month, while “now I’m looking at 150 new deals this month, and it’s not going to stop there. We’re growing 6-to-7 percent currently and expect it to improve upon that.”

He described Astonish as a “life line” for his agency. “You have to work really hard, but it’s a whole lot of fun,” he said—echoing the same observation and enthusiasm expressed by many Astonish clients.

For example, Tony Alessandra, president of Mission Viejo, Calif.-based Insurance Solutions (http://www. ins-solutions.com), said that “after 43 years, I’ve fallen back in love with my agency again.”

Before Mr. Alessandra signed up with Astonish, Insurance Solutions’ marketing activities were like those of his competitors—a lot of reliance on the traditional referral approach. Since Astonish came on board, that number has dropped to 85 percent, with the balance of lead generation being augmented by a very aggressive online marketing strategy.

As a result of Astonish’s efforts, search engine optimization numbers have pushed Insurance Solutions to the top of the list when someone is searching for insurance in Mission Viejo, Calif. Indeed, Mr. Alessandra reported a 1,700 percent increase in Web traffic since implementing the Astonish system.

Those numbers would certainly resonate with Nathan Dagley, president and CEO of the Katy, Texas-based Dagley Insurance (http://www.dagleyins.com). Mr. Dagley realized that people were no longer using the Yellow Pages and had long since gone to the Internet when it came time to shop for products or services, but the persistent question was, “how do we access them there,” he recalled.

For Dagley Insurance, the entire implementation process took about two months. “Having personnel that understood and enjoyed social networking helped speed things up,” he said.

Prior to Astonish coming on board, Mr. Dagley estimated that 95 percent of the agency’s new business was coming through traditional marketing methods. Now that number has dropped to 66 percent, with the balance coming through online efforts.

“Those social networking tools have allowed us to build stronger, deeper and faster relationships with our prospects as well as our existing client base,” he said. “We are super excited about what we’re doing with Astonish Results, but we haven’t even scratched the surface. Wait until this fall.”

For Krystle McEachron, chief operating officer of California-based ISU Insurance Services—ARMAC Agency (http://www.isu-armac.com), the decision to sign up with Astonish was just a matter of convincing her father.

As a family-run agency with 25 employees and $34 million in premiums, ISU was a prime candidate for the services of Astonish. Ms. McEachron, a vocal advocate of social media, just didn’t have the time to implement her ideas.

It was when Ms. McEachron’s father read an article that “supported all I wanted to do [online] that we decided to bring in some help.” They had already decided to drop their Yellow Pages ad, and so applying those substantial marketing dollars to a comprehensive, online marketing strategy was easy.

Like the other examples, the process went quickly and smoothly. The Raving Fan Manager was assigned. E-mail campaigns were developed. Blog, Twitter and Facebook postings were generated. And all marketing efforts were integrated, revolving around the new Virtual Profit Center.

As a result of working with Astonish, Ms. McEachron said “website leads have grown about 200 percent, and our [search engine optimization] position is much higher than it was with the previous site.”