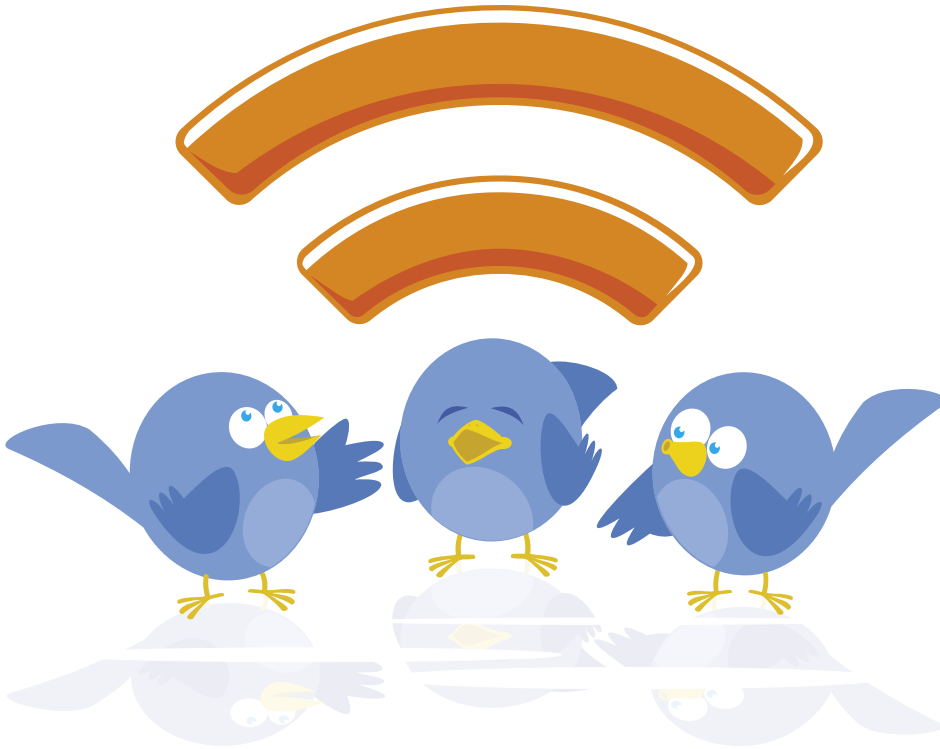


# Tools to Help Grow Your Agency

BY JACKIE FUNK



In today's competitive world, Allstate agents must make it a priority to stay in touch with their customers and engage potential customers using the method of communication that they prefer. While nothing can replace face-to-face conversations, it's important to incorporate new, cost-effective and impactful tools to engage your audience.

## Develop a Blog to Create a Conversation with Current and Future Customers

Many small business owners, including insurance agencies just like yours, are hesitant to start a blog. But blogs can offer you a great way to educate your customers, as well as the general public. Here are some steps that will assist you in developing and publicizing your agency blog:

- **Select a blogging application**

There are lots of free tools available to get your blog up and running. A hosted

blog service—such as Word Press, TypePad or Blogger—can help you get started cheaply and easily.

- **Launch your blog with at least five quality posts** – To give your blog some immediate presence, it's important to take the time to develop at least five posts before you take your blog live. Every blog has to start somewhere, but it pays to plan ahead.

- **Submit to directories** – Once you've got your initial content up, submit your blog to a few directories. A few good places to start include: Technorati, BOTW, Blogged and Bloggapedia.

- **Get the word out to everyone you know** – Don't be shy about letting the world know about your blog. Develop a list of clients, friends, family, business partners and followers. Ask them to introduce and promote your blog to their networks.

- **Include a link to your blog in your email signature** – By including a link to

your blog in your email signature, you're creating an opportunity to drive people back to your site with every email you send.

- **Get some comments going ASAP**

It's important to create a conversation on your blog. To get the ball rolling, ask friends and family to read what you've posted and provide some commentary.

- **Consider buying some advertising**

Bid on a few key phrases or even buy some traffic from Stumble Upon, a content-discovery service. It can be hard to get your content in front of the right audience and advertising can really jumpstart your efforts.

There are myriad of other approaches you can utilize when it comes to blogging. Monitor other blogs that are meaningful to your agency, your clientele and your community. Commenting on others' blogs, offering to post content as a guest blogger on another site and/or allowing others to be guest bloggers on your site can also help your marketing efforts.

## Not using Twitter yet? Why not?

Twitter has been the buzz for the last several months due to media hype and its usage by celebrities. But many "average Joes" still haven't taken the plunge. I often get questions from friends and colleagues about whether it's really worth the effort. I say, unequivocally, "YES," because in business, Twitter allows me to:

1. **Listen and learn** – By "following" people who talk about subject matter that is important to me, I can read and digest new information quickly.

2. **Build relationships with customers** – I monitor Twitter all day long. The reality of Twitter is that friends and foes can post whatever they like...whenever they like. As a marketer, it's very important for me to monitor comments about our company, brand and service. Through Twitter, I can see what's being said and offer customer service, thank people for

positive mentions or quickly respond to concerns as they arise.

3. **Track competitors** – All of my competitors tweet as well. And so do their customers. I can stay on top of product/service launches, announcements and promotions right from Twitter. Furthermore, I can see if anyone is having customer service issues or doing a great job of satisfying their customers...right from Twitter.

4. **Identify prospects** – Twitter is a great way for people to ask for a product or service. And many do. While prospecting is way down the list of reasons why I use Twitter, I find a gem every now and then, and can connect directly to see if the prospect would like to engage with me or another member of our team.

Setting up a Twitter account takes less than 5 minutes. Even if you're not sure Twitter is for you, there's no harm in checking it out.

### Utilize Local Search Listings to Establish an Improved Online Presence

You can quickly and inexpensively increase your agency's online presence by



adding your business to search engines and directories so it's easy for both current and prospective customers to find you.

• **Local Listings** - As you probably know, Google leads the market in search

engine traffic these days. By simply adding your agency to Google Maps and Google Local, you can ensure your agency pops up when individuals perform Google searches for insurance in your

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area. The same goes for Yahoo! Local. Other sites—such as WhitePages.com and SuperPages.com—offer free and enhanced listings as well.

### Take Advantage of Facebook for Social Networking

Most everyone has at least heard of Facebook. Many of you (or members of your family) are probably using it socially. Facebook allows users to connect and share information in a variety of ways and is currently the most popular social networking site. It is a great way to connect with friends, family and co-workers. It is also a terrific way for businesses to connect with customers and prospects – and create a web presence. Need a few more reasons?

- **It's Viral** – Once a few friends become "Fans" of your agency, others will follow.

- **It's Where the Young People Are** – You have to reach prospects, both young and old. And yes, many of us who are middle-aged and older have Facebook pages. But it's an excellent tool to reach the younger crowd...your future clients!

- **It's Free** – There's no cost associated with setting up a Facebook page for your agency. All it takes is a little time and forethought to get going. Most likely, you have plenty of content to post. In addition, Facebook doesn't require frequent postings like Twitter and it's up to you how much you use it. I encourage customers to make contact with us through our Facebook page and can attribute leads to our Facebook presence.

For ideas on how to get your Facebook page started, log into Facebook (or ask someone who already has an account to do so) and simply type in "Allstate" in the search box. Check out Allstate's corporate Facebook page (13K+ fans) or any other agencies that have set up pages. Another great resource is Facebook's very own "Facebook Marketing Solutions" page. Simply log into Facebook and type in "Facebook Marketing Solutions" in the search box to get started.

### Use Your Phone System to Set Yourself Apart from the Pack

As the chief marketer for a hosted PBX

and VoIP service provider, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that your phone system can and should help you promote your agency. It's often ignored as a sales and marketing tool when it can add significant value. Consider this:

- **Auto Attendant** – You can customize your greeting on your auto attendant to brand your business, provide important policy information, market new products and services, point callers to new content on your blog or Facebook page...whatever you'd like. You can choose to implement an elaborate auto attendant, a basic custom transfer message or just a simple greeting from your agency. Your auto attendant also allows you to route all calls to the proper individual or department, ensuring your clients are connected right away.

- **After Hours Call Forwarding to the CIC** – After hours call forwarding to the CIC ensures that your clients can get access to Allstate day or night. It's important to make sure the phone solution you choose meets Allstate's corporate standards. Additionally, if you do miss a call because a current or prospective client calls after hours, a hosted phone service offers call logs and reporting so you can see any call you missed. This allows you to come in the very next morning and follow-up to make sure the individual's needs were met. It's a great way to show your service orientation.

### What are you waiting for? The time is now!

Whichever tactics you choose, the most important takeaway for growing your agency is that you must continually look for new ways to expand your reach and create more touchpoints with your customers and prospects. All of the tools mentioned in this article are either free or very affordable. With some focus and an investment in sweat equity, these recommendations can make a significant impact on your continued success.

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