

MARKETING secrets from TOP PRODUCERS

YES, WE ARE EXPERIENCING AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN,
BUT THIS HAS NOT PREVENTED SOME PRODUCERS FROM
THRIVING. FIND OUT WHAT THREE OF THEM ARE DOING
TO SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTE THEIR SERVICES AND REACH
HUNDREDS OF HIGHLY QUALIFIED PROSPECTS.

BY TINA OREM

If there was an award for devotion to traditional marketing methods, Ron Erickson, CLU, AEP, CFBS, Debbie Feist, LUTCF, and Charlie Pinson, LUTCF, would lose. Erickson hates cold calls and won't hold public seminars. Feist turned her back on mass mailings and Pinson blew off the suit-and-tie look. But if there's one thing these advisors are not, they are not losers. In fact, their disregard for traditional marketing methods has helped them win major industry awards and put them in the top producer category. Read on to learn the secrets of their success. ▷



Off the beaten path

Though TV, print and other marketing strategies can be productive, nothing connects with potential clients like an “out-there” idea. Top producers know and embrace this strategy and are willing to take risks to differentiate themselves from the competition. For example, Erickson, who is a NAIFA member and president of EMM Financial Services in Greensboro, N.C., routinely visits his clients on Halloween while wearing an Uncle Sam costume. He haunts them with spooky tales of poor tax planning and missed investing opportunities. Two of his staffers, dressed as the Statue of Liberty and Betsy Ross, tag along.

“And of course I have been able to say, ‘If you don’t do your estate planning, Uncle Sam’s gonna get you,’” adds Erickson. “It has gone over well,” he notes. “We’ve actually had people call us and say, ‘You’re gonna come again this year, right?’”

Erickson’s idea might sound outlandish, but that’s the point: Find something you enjoy doing and incorporate it into your marketing strategy. Pinson, a NAIFA member who runs Charlie Pinson Insurance in Pikeville, Ky., and happens to be a TV sportscaster on the side, offers another example. He covers more than 100 high school and college games a year,

and he’s incorporated that coverage in his personal branding strategy. “While sports commentating at a local high school,” he recalls, “the student pep section tried many antics to capture the camera’s attention. Their efforts finally paid off when they began chanting, ‘Charlie Pinson, Charlie Pinson.’ Soon, every pep section at every school picked up the chant. We now use the chant in our TV commercials, each season featuring a different school.”

» TOP PRODUCER TIPS

- **Be willing to try new things.**
- **Give back to your community.**
- **Keep it real.**
- **Become referable.**
- **Never stop prospecting.**

Pinson also set up booths at some unusual venues, including a bridal show. But he didn’t just sit at the booth and watch brides-to-be go by—he danced. “Joyce [his wife] and I performed several ballroom dance routines,” he says. “We expected to gain some newlywed life clients, which we did. However, we picked up some parents and a couple of the other vendors as well.” Pinson had similar success

running a booth at a “Big Boys Toys Show,” which featured new model cars, motorcycles, motor homes, fishing boats and the like, though he wisely did not do any dancing there.

Get a life

The top producers all agreed that personal involvement in their communities generates a huge flow of business. Feist, a NAIFA member and Allstate agent in Wenatchee, Wash., sums up the idea well: “I have always been active in the community, and I did it not for business exposure but because I enjoyed it and liked meeting new people. Some of these folks have become clients while others have referred [me].”

Pinson says the brand recognition he’s created by being a sportscaster has generated a consistent flow of leads. “People do business with people they know,” he notes. In addition to being active in the local chamber of commerce, Pinson is on the board of the local Rotary Club, and his employees are also members of the Kiwanis club, several arts organizations and other groups.

Erickson also attests to the dividends community involvement pays. “Our kids all grew up playing soccer, so we’ve been supporting soccer in our community,” he says. He also puts calling cards in charity newsletters and gets involved

WHAT NOT TO DO

Here are some real-world mistakes that keep average producers from making it to the top, according to Pinson, Feist and Erickson.

☒ *Spending too much time networking with other advisors.* Or as Erickson puts it: “Too much BS and going to lunch with each other. I’ve never found one agent who would buy from another agent.”

☒ *Chasing only large accounts.* “We have all heard of the 80/20 Rule,” notes Pinson. “However, we have seen many producers who live and die by the big account. Building a balanced book of large and small cli-

ents insulates your success over the long haul.”

☒ *Putting existing clients on the back burner.* “Don’t forget about your current clients as you search for new clients,” cautions Feist. “Your current client base is your best friend.”

☒ *Acting like an employee rather than an entrepreneur.* “If the office is closed, I’ll pick a day like Columbus Day, they don’t go to work. If you’re self-employed, [a

holiday] doesn’t make any difference. You must be entrepreneurial and must be a self-starter,” says Erickson.

☒ *Becoming complacent.* “Especially with the current business climate, it is important to keep a consistent message and image,” says Pinson. “Consumers are uneasy and need reassuring and reminding of why they are doing business with you—or why they should be.”

personally in causes he believes in. "We're not really advertising for business," he says. "We are making a statement that we believe in the charity."

These top producers are also keenly aware of the demographics within certain groups and events. "Strategies for focused niche marketing generally revolve on being involved in activities the target clientele is interested in," Pinson says. "For instance, we target seniors through participating in health fairs and walk-a-thon events."

Keep it real

Feist, Erickson and Pinson note that using marketing ideas from other producers or marketing experts is OK, but those ideas should reflect who you really are.

"The world has salespeople of all personalities, looks, etc.," says Feist. "Just be yourself; don't try to clone that top producer. You might try some of his or her strategies, but stay true to yourself." Feist notes that independent agents should think about hiring a marketing company to gain some expertise. "Take their ideas, with your own personality, and keep things fresh and modern. But don't spend tons of money," she says.

Making sure their marketing tactics reflect, if not celebrate who they really are, has helped these producers create competitive advantages. "Our marketing objective is to portray our agency as approachable and likeable," says Pinson. "We position ourselves as 'everyman,' someone our client sees every day at the grocery store, church, ball games and civic events. We are not the suit-and-tie guys, but the knowledgeable friend next door. This approach serves us well with both white- and blue-collar clients."

Pinson carefully points out that the idea of portraying oneself accurately is not just philosophical; it also applies to every physical image that top producers share of themselves. "Photographs should be updated every two or three years," he says. "Using photos with out-of-date styles says 'out of touch.' If you've added a few pounds or a few more grey hairs, admit it. Be real."

Be referable

Getting to the point where a client base starts to multiply on its own is every producer's dream. After all, it means more business and fewer marketing expenditures. Pinson, Erickson and Feist say that huge—and incredibly valuable—portions of their new clients come via referrals and word-of-mouth advertising.

But these new clients still take a lot of work to acquire because existing clients have to be so happy that they are willing to tell their friends, family and associates. Top producers get to the top because they know the importance of being good at their jobs—that is, they knew they must be referable.

"I moved here from Duluth, Minn., about 40 years ago and I knew no one," Erickson recalls. "And I had to cold call and I hated it. So I tried to make myself referable. I tried to just build a reputation of excellent



for referrals," Erickson says, "we get them. It just increases a good working relationship with the firms." Those CPAs and law firms are what Erickson calls advocates; they don't become clients themselves but they send people his way.

The work never ends

Though these top producers have earned the luxury of getting large referral businesses and don't have to rely on big marketing efforts anymore to survive, it doesn't mean they've quit promoting themselves.

"This is a very competitive business and getting more competitive," notes Erickson. "There are so many financial advisors who are calling on your clients that you really need to work constantly on the value-added proposition to keep them as clients."

These top producers are too competitive to sit back and rest on their laurels. "Insurance is a competitive

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and impeccable service. I tried to do what was right for my clients and therefore became referable."

It's also important to remember that part of being referable means developing relationships with those who have the power to make referrals—and those people are not just the folks on your client list. They are people who have the power to send their own clients or associates to you.

A lot of CPAs refer clients to Erickson, for example, because he very deliberately cultivates good relationships with them. In fact, around April 15 of each year, he sends lunch to a number of CPA firms in a 60-mile radius of Greensboro. "Even though we don't ask

business," says Pinson, "and I want to stay ahead of the competition."

There's no doubt that effective and outside-the-box marketing plays a huge role in achieving top-producer status. The question is whether you've got the guts to do your own thing. And although producers like Erickson shun old-school marketing tactics, even he says there are still a few sacred rules to follow: "Number one, be a relentless prospector. Number two, be a relentless prospector. Number three, repeat one and two. That's how you stay in business." □

Tina Orem is a contributor to Advisor Today.