



Digital Windshield

by STEVEN B. ZABOJI

It was a little over a year ago that I found myself driving between two sales calls that were hours apart when my mind began to question the efficacy of all the road time just to make a couple of sales calls. For years, I actually had an aircraft in our business, and I always marveled at how quickly I moved through great distances with very little effort, certainly a lot less than the drivers I saw down below on the Interstate.

The sad part of my journey that day revolved around the fact that, for only the second time in the history of our company, we lost a significant line. Not bad; but nevertheless, it was financially destabilizing, and in this particular instance, my pride and joy — the aircraft — had to go. Anticipating increased mundane windshield time, I began to agonize over the problem that all of us in the rep business share, and that is how to effectively communicate the volumes of information to the many people we serve. The digital age, especially in the consumer electronics industry we operate in, has brought fast developing, complex products

whose operational intricacies present huge challenges in training, both in sales and technology.

When I returned to my office the next day, I sat down with a friend and colleague Norm Bringsjord, also an aviator, graphic artist and software developer. I shared my feelings about my trip and how bummed out I was about the inefficiency of all my driving, just so I could talk to five or so people. We discussed all the shortcomings of printed newsletters and the standard e-mail, e-blast systems and decided to look at a whole new approach.

What began as a brainstorming session has resulted in a self-publishing newsletter system that has changed the internal culture of our sales and marketing company. Bringsjord, staff members and I began the weekly publication of *The Virtual Representative* in May of 2003 and have not missed an issue since its inception. In a sense, we created a virtual representative.

Best of Intentions

Having had a number of at-

tempts at publishing printed and mailed newsletters before, I realized that most efforts were like joining a health club; that is, you start out with great intentions only to drift into inactivity within a short time. Printed newsletters are slow to produce, so their news is often stale and rigid. Add on top of that the designing, printing, labeling and mailing costs and you can easily see why most newsletters of smaller organizations have no staying power. But there is an even greater obstacle inherent in the nature of the rep business, and that is we are independent sales companies that represent a number of factories, and printing a single publication always needs to be sanitized because of proprietary information.

Bringsjord's savvy perspective led us down a road that created a publication we called the *Balaton Bulletin*, a name reflecting our cor-

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porate name of Balaton Marketing, Inc. We renamed our publication the *The Virtual Representative* as it started to evolve. We publish every Friday, as we want floor salespeople to have fresh reminders about our products for their upcoming busy Saturday business, and include several distinct features in our publishing system:

- The publication has graphics, pictures and text. The graphics and pictures are linked to our server and never clog the subscriber's computer.

- The system allows up to 30 lines or category headings. For example, if you represent ABC Widgets, that company will have the text heading "ABC Widgets." When one of your customers subscribes, they check a box marked "ABC Widgets" and they will only see information that is pertinent to them. The system is secure and no search engine will find any sensitive information. In other words, the system automatically sifts the information, allowing you to direct confidential information to specified subscribers. Just as you must keep your product lines straight between varying customers, *The Virtual Representative* keeps messages properly targeted.

- Publish from any computer online. For instance, this past January while attending the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, I carried a small digital camera to the exhibit booths of all the manufacturers we repre-

sent and took pictures of the new products and key personnel. That evening from my hotel room, I published all the latest information with text and pictures, and the following day 450 subscribers in our territory had a meaningful glimpse of our industry's most meaningful trade show. Our message was exceptionally valuable to those who couldn't get to the show.

- It is cost-effective because you can publish as often as you like and e-mail, at no cost, to almost an unlimited number of subscribers. It is easy to create since photos, headlines and copy are inserted in boxes on a template and are automatically uploaded for publication. Hit "Enter," and all your customers will hear from you in a matter of seconds. It really is a pretty nifty process of "drag, drop and go."

- And here is probably the most significant feature: Your articles and tips can be shared with other self-publishing reps in your particular industry. In our case, we share four lines with the rep firm in Atlanta, Georgia. When they sign on to publish their newsletter, they have access to those articles of ours that we have designated for sharing. Two clicks on the mouse and they have uploaded a meaningful article. And, of course, the same holds true for us because we can use their articles. As more and more rep firms sign up, we will collectively develop a communication equity that will add tremendous value to our worth in the eyes of the manufacturers we represent.

Our firm belongs to a representative organization called IPRO (Independent Professional Representative Organization), and one of the highlights of our annual conference is the presentation of an annual survey of its members.

The survey deals with all aspects of our enterprises, especially those that make us better reps and businesses. One factor that has always intrigued me is when the group is asked, "Considering everything, i.e., salaries, insurance, car expenses, phone expenses, etc., what is your best estimate of the cost of a single sales call?" The answer over the past several years has always hovered around \$250.

I bring this to your attention because it has a second meaning; to be part of *The Virtual Representative* self-publishing system, the cost is \$250 per month. There is also an initial set-up charge that includes graphic design for your logo, training and all the support that you need to get going.

Efficient, Cost-Effective Communication

What I found interesting is that as news of any kind travels to our office, we have an immediate way of transmitting it to all the appropriate people with tremendous speed and efficiency. Our factories like it and so do our dealers. We have clearly noted increased sales and the image of our company has been tremendously enhanced. Personal contact is still very important and this system is not intended to replace that very important aspect of what we do. It is interesting though that now when I go into the field, there is a much greater familiarity to our meetings. *The Virtual Representative* has strengthened our communication position across the territory.

A final benefit I would like to share is the fact that once a week, as a principal, I have to sit down and think about what I want to say to my customers and their sales-

staff members. That process might seem daunting at first, as it has you doing product research, including regular discussions with your factory personnel. However, you'll notice your competency will rise dramatically and the efficiency and quality of your communications will transform your company.

For us, *The Virtual Representative* has become our digital windshield. We find ourselves looking at the road ahead through it and we feel more empowered than ever before. *The Virtual Representative* has replaced our mundane view of the road with a "digital super highway" that delivers valuable information in a lot less time than it used to take us to drive there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Steven B. Zaboji is the president/founder of Balaton Marketing, Inc., which covers the Mid-Atlantic for specialty audio/video manufacturers and retailers. They currently represent Yamaha Electronics, B&W, Rotel, I-Command, Classe, Velodyne, Sonance, BDI, Sennheiser and OmniMount. The rep/distributor (Balaton Distribution) operation is comprised of three sales reps and one detailer in the field, along with three administrative personnel in the office. Zaboji serves on the board of directors of IPRO (Independent Representatives Organization) as a former IPRO president. Visit www.virtual-representative.com or call (800) 288-4434 for further details.



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