

## What Works

### Five Tips on Thriving in a Limited Market



**Brad Van Vleet**



**Eric Van Vleet**

efforts: They're always asking for them, and one of the most prominent links on their website invites visitors to join their "referral club." The agency spent \$1,240 on gift cards

**Agency:** Van Vleet Insurance Agency in Richmond, Ind.

**What they're doing:**

Promoting a solid referral program, hiring ambitious producers, and making the most of a new, high-profile location.

**What's the benefit:**

An 88.4 percent retention rate, a 75 percent referral conversion rate and a steady stream of new leads.

Van Vleet Insurance is on the move. For starters, the 32-year-old agency in the small "Rust Belt" city of Richmond, Ind., (population 38,000) recently moved from a two-story home converted into an office with a finished attic in a quiet part of town to a former bank on its Main Street.

But **Eric** and **Brad Van Vleet**, the father-son team that serve as the agency's principal Agents, are banking on more than their new location to grow the agency. Here are a few of their tried-and-true tips to attract and retain Customers in a small market.

- **Ramp up your referrals.** Referrals are the lifeblood of Van Vleet's growth

last year—which was worth every penny considering the fact that they write business for three out of every four referrals they receive.

"We also hold an annual "Beer and Brats" VIP referral party at a local minor league baseball game," says Eric. "We also share which Customers made referrals at our monthly sales meeting. This way, employees can thank any customers they see out in the community."

- **Hire young, ambitious employees and train them.** Six of the agency's 11 staffers are under 35, and most came to the agency with no insurance experience. Eric says this "youth movement" has revolutionized their business.

"They're all fantastic. And it's good that they didn't come to us with bad habits acquired from other agencies," says Eric. To get new hires up to speed, the agency offers many kinds of training. "We have them shadow more experienced employees one-on-one and take advantage of any training programs offered by our DSM, branch office and the Independent Agents & Brokers of America," says Brad. "We also do evaluations

at the three- and six-month marks."

- **Take marketing seriously.**

Brad's wife Kelly serves as the agency's part-time marketing director, a role that Brad, Eric and District Sales Manager **Rachel White** call essential. "Marketing isn't something Van Vleet does occasionally—it's high on the priority list and is an integral part of the agency's identity and brand," says Rachel.

In addition to managing the referral program, coordinating traditional print advertisement opportunities and measuring the return on various marketing activities, Kelly also awards dozens of sponsorships every year (special preference is given to their Customers' favorite charities) and sends out a quarterly newsletter.

- **Choose the right location and invest in it.** Van Vleet says its new Main Street location is generating more walk-in inquiries and increases the agency's visibility. Eric and Brad

also make the most of the bank's unique features: They've moved the reception area into a light-filled atrium, filled the open space with plants and repurposed the drive-in as a way for Customers to make quick payments and sign policies. (Lollipops for kids and bones for dogs are still included.) The agency also added a glass-walled conference room that boasts a large-screen projection unit. "It lets us project a Customer's policy on the screen so we can scroll through everything together," says Eric. As a finishing touch, the agency redesigned their logo and invested in a new sign.

One of Van Vleet's goals for 2013 was getting a new producer who speaks Spanish. In January, **Michael Elorreaga** was hired and he's proving to be a major asset to the agency because of the growing Hispanic population. "Other than that, we want to continue to grow," sums up Brad. ■



**The VanVleet team (left to right): Val Huffman, Marcia Stroud, Eric Van Vleet, Michael Elorreaga, Christina Martin, Kyle Zajdel, Mary Lou Runnels, Brad Van Vleet and Michelle Ledgerwood. Not pictured, Marketing Director Kelly Van Vleet.**