Westway Studio Raises the ‘Woof’
With Email and Social Media
Background
Terran Bayer grew up in a barn, on horseback, with dogs underfoot, in a family of artists. She opened Westway Studio, a San Diego, Calif.-based graphic design and fine art pet photography studio, in 2006 as a freelancer while also holding down a corporate job. Word got out, more side projects rolled in, and a year later she took the leap, leaving the world of big business to become a full-time small business owner.

One of the first tasks to tackle for this first-time business owner? Finding more clients on a nearly non-existent budget. “I started email marketing right around the time Westway Studio became my full-time career,” says Terran. “I had a small handful of great clients, but if I was going to make up for the income loss from leaving my corporate job, I needed to find some more quality clients quickly – without spending a lot of money.”

Problem
Email marketing was a low-cost, high-impact way for Terran to not just reach out to current clients, but also former colleagues, friends and family to let them know that she was actively looking for new clients. But she soon ran into challenges.

“I ended up on Yahoo’s blacklist for months because I just BCC’d everyone on a message I sent using Outlook,” she says. Knowing that Outlook was not a long-term solution, she began looking for a better way to send – and track – her emails.
Discovery

A fellow graphic designer referred her to VerticalResponse, and she signed up for the company’s flexible pay-as-you-go option, which lets customers buy email credits for the number of emails they want to send.

As a designer and self-described perfectionist, it was important to Terran that all the emails have a consistent, clean layout and look that reflected her company’s aesthetic. “I use the ‘Canvas’ editor for all my text, so it looks perfect no matter what email program it shows up in,” Terran says.

In addition to email marketing, Terran participates in events, donates her services to animal-related silent auctions, and photographs dogs from a local rescue organization to help them find their forever homes. Although she often publicizes these activities in her emails, she wanted to do something that would be even more engaging and give people an irresistible reason to visit her website.

Solution

Terran came up with a creative idea to drive new traffic to her site: online pet portrait photo contests. At her booths at the San Diego Humane Society’s Walk for Animals event, American Cancer Society’s Bark for Life event and, most recently, the Helen Woodward Puppy Love 5K Run/Walk, Terran snaps photos of as many pups as she can and invites their owners to sign up for her mailing list.

After the events, she sends an email letting everyone know about the contest and encouraging them to click through to her website and blog. The blog features a voting gallery with all the pet photos, as well as more information on the contest and prize (a free portrait session valued at $190).

The email also has links to her Facebook and Twitter profiles, where she actively promotes the contest and encourages voters to do the same.
Results

Contest-related emails have open rates between 45 and 60 percent, well above her emails’ typical performance. Traffic to her blog also increases tremendously – between 1,700 and 4,300 percent every time she holds a contest – because of her email and social media efforts.

“I am always amazed when I looked at my blog stats after the first email goes out,” says Terran. “People pass the links around like crazy. With my first contest, I had an average of 13 visitors per day before the first email of the campaign went out; as soon as it did, my average visitors per day jumped to 560.

“I met a woman from Baltimore who recognized my website address and told me that just the evening before, she saw a link to the contest on Facebook being shared by her local pit bull rescue group.

“Email is a great way to keep everyone up to date on specials, exciting news, events and contests,” continues Terran. “I think consistent marketing is important for staying top of mind. I want to be the first person someone on my mailing list thinks of if they need a graphic designer or photographer.”

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Biggest challenge being a small business owner:

I think my biggest challenge is that I work out of an office in my home. While this is absolutely wonderful, it’s incredibly hard to make a distinction between work hours and personal time. I often find myself working past midnight because, “Hey, I’m here. I have work to do. I might as well.”

Biggest lesson you’ve learned as a small business owner:

That it’s OK to say “no.” At first, I wanted to be everything to everyone. Once I realized that wasn’t very realistic, my way of thinking shifted: I’m not going to be a great fit for every client and not every client is going to be a great fit for me. It was very hard to learn to say “no” to the ones who didn’t fit, but my business is better for it.

What do you like best about your work? What keeps you going?

I love creating art everyday. What keeps me going is the challenge to always do better. I’m constantly reading, attending workshops and partnering with fellow professionals.