

'Warm Leads Delivered Fresh Daily to Your Inbox Only'

By Donna Kreutz

Just three people work behind the scenes to generate tens of thousands of warm leads for businesses all over the country that rely on in-home sales calls. Two-thirds of their clients are water treatment dealers who start by giving Mac Leads a try for two weeks. The company targets the ZIP codes the dealers specify and provides exclusive sales leads "delivered fresh daily to your inbox only," said company founder Bill MacHale. "We use a remote data-center facility with multiple servers, enabling us to use hundreds or even thousands of phone lines. We can access and control the system from any PC, laptop, tablet or even a smartphone."

Most people want to know what's in their water—especially well water, he said. That's why a brief, automated survey offering free water testing gets results. "We try to lead off with the fact that free water testing is available in your area. It can be as basic as 'If you are concerned about water quality or would like to know what's in your water, press 1 now.' Then people are asked to leave their name and phone number." On the surface, this may sound simple but the success of this small but mighty company is based on more than two decades of perfecting the process.

This thriving yet ever-evolving business is the result of a cold call to MacHale himself. "During the early years of my business, I was cold called by a local water treatment company that was offering free drinking water testing. Since I had a well, I was curious to see what was in my water. I learned that I had very hard, acidic water with a lot of iron. I purchased a whole-house water treatment system and an RO unit as well. When the salesman asked me what I did for a living, I told him we generated exclusive homeowner leads with our automated water-quality surveys. He was intrigued and requested a short-term trial to see if my leads could increase his sales. He liked the results and kept coming back for more. Using him as a reference, I soon expanded my reach to water treatment dealers in neighboring states and beyond.

"The hard-water areas of the country tend to do better—especially well water. People don't know what's in their water, just that it tastes fine. But if it's not delivered by a city or a company, there's the mystery of what's going on underground—what the neighbors are doing or farmers using pesticide or fertilizers. You really can't take the quality of your drinking water for granted any longer. In fact, US EPA recommends annual testing of well

water. Municipal water woes are reportedly widespread across the country as well."

Offer a useful free benefit

"This is very much a niche market. It really works best for an industry that's health- or energy-related because then you are not selling but offering a useful free benefit, like water-quality testing or energy audits to save energy. There is a surprisingly small number of businesses that really gel with this concept. We're a niche player and we try to manage this niche really well."

MacHale started out in business selling life insurance. "Back in 1991, my brother-in-law was a salesman and he told me that by using an auto-dialer, he was getting lots of leads to build his business. Then I saw an ad in an entrepreneur magazine for a company that would pay auto-dialer owners for leads. I did this on the side for a while and enjoyed the extra income. I bought more and more machines. Eventually I found the most success generating custom leads for individual water conditioning companies and insulation contractors." By 1994, Mac Leads was a full-time business.

"We started with one stand-alone, single-line auto-dialer that used audio cassettes. We soon grew to have a closet lined with shelves filled with nearly 40 of what were basically oversized answering machines in reverse. With all the blinking lights it looked like something Scotty on *Star Trek* would have had. Even with the closet doors closed, you could hear the machines clicking and whirring away." Back then, MacHale spent hours in the library looking up area codes and prefixes in big, bound directories. His hefty long-distance phone bills came in a box that cost the carrier \$25 to ship.

"It was quite an amazing shift when the Internet came along. We had the world at our fingertips. We were able to not only obtain phone listings but also demographic information by

ZIP codes from all over the county with a click of the mouse. The Internet allowed us to easily research potential markets and expand our business much faster than before. We worked locally at first, then spread out to adjacent states."

And the automated telemarketing industry has been fast-forwarding ever since. "People are far less receptive than they were in early '90s. Consumers are getting more and more difficult to reach and their behavior is getting ever more sophisticated. We live in a more complicated world with the Internet, cell phones,

Mac Leads

8 Corral Court
East Stroudsburg, PA 18302
Toll-free: (888) 920-1500
Tel: (570) 223-6000
Fax: (570) 309-0056
www.macleads.com
macleads1@gmail.com
Employees: Three



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YouTube, Snapchat. The attention span is so short now. It's harder and harder to get people to pay attention. It does make things more challenging."

"Just try it for two weeks"

The company is based in East Stroudsburg, PA, a town of some 10,000 residents nestled in the foothills of the Pocono Mountains and has clients all over the United States and Canada. It is a family-owned company of three, including his son Jonathan (who handles IT) and MacHale's best friend Paul Lebkuecher, who is Program Manager. "I wear all of the other hats and try to keep them from falling off my head," he said laughingly.

MacHale asks customers to "try it for two weeks at a special introductory rate, with no further commitment. That seems to be the sweet spot to see if it will be a good fit for them." The business fluctuates, of course. "On a regular basis, we have about 20 to 40 clients at a time and provide them exclusive leads in their selected area. We can send hundreds or thousands of phone surveys to their desired audience in a matter of hours. Because of increased competition, most businesses today must contact up to three times more people to generate the same sales volume as they did in the past. We do in the neighborhood of 2,000 calls a day per customer

and get a handful of names. Twenty years ago, we would do half the amount of calls and get 10 to 15 names a day, or more."

"We have several types of customers: the ones who come back for two weeks again and again virtually endlessly, some who use us seasonally, some who use us only when they're not doing a home show. Some small businesses don't need a lot of leads and might use us once every other month. We're happy to accommodate any pattern. We love repeat business." In addition to the warm leads, the company provides time-tested sample scripts, appointment-setting tips, responses to common objections people may have and qualifying questions that lead to scheduling the free water testing.

Mac Leads has a long history of being nimble. "This year we expanded our available demographic offerings for leads from simply average gross household income and home values to almost every conceivable criterion. We also can now prospect to mobile phones at a reasonable cost. As long as water conditioning dealers need to get in the doors of homeowners, we will strive to continually adapt to changing technologies and market conditions to remain a viable lead source for the residential water conditioning industry." ♦

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