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Case Study: Ameriprise Uses LinkedIn To Help Consumers Find Advisors

by **Bill Doyle**

with Benjamin Ensor and Doug Roberge

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media will have an outsized impact on relationship-based businesses like investment firms, life insurers, and private banks. Some of these wealth management firms are piloting programs that enable their advisors and agents to participate in social networks. Ameriprise Financial has gone a step further, empowering consumers to use LinkedIn to find connections who can provide referrals on prospective advisors. Smart eBusiness and channel strategy professionals at other wealth management firms should follow the company's lead in order to improve their firms' ability to acquire clients and recruit agents and advisors.

SITUATION: MORE PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMERS GO ONLINE TO RESEARCH

Consumers making considered purchase decisions go online for guidance. Forrester's consumer survey data shows that:

- **Many prospective wealth management clients do their research online.** Of the US consumers who opened a full-service brokerage account last year, 40% researched their choices online.¹
- **More research is happening in social networks.** Consumers turn to social media for guidance in product research and selection: Forrester estimates that US consumers make 500 billion impressions on one another about products and services every year.²
- **Most investors use social networks.** Two-thirds of US online adults with an investment account have profiles at a social network like LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter.³ But few investors use social networks for wealth management today, in part because their firms have been slow to embrace social media.⁴

Ameriprise Is Poised For The Groundswell

Ameriprise Financial has moved faster than most other full-service firms to develop social media for advisors and investors. We spoke with eBusiness managers at the firm to find out why. They understand that:

- **Wealth management is a referral business.** Approximately three-quarters of new client acquisition in the financial services category comes from referrals.⁵ "Advisors are in the relationship business — and the Web is evolving in their favor," said Joe Rueckert, director of online marketing.

- **Online researchers want references on prospective advisors.** “When we do consumer testing of experiences like our ZIP code advisor search, we also ask, ‘What would you want to do next?’” said Jane VanTassel, VP of interactive marketing at Ameriprise. “They always say, ‘I would reach out to friends and family to seek referrals.’”
- **Social media can work.** Ameriprise already has a track record with social media. Since 2008, the firm has allowed advisors to have a presence on LinkedIn; today, 63% of Ameriprise advisors have LinkedIn profiles.⁶ On the consumer side, Ameriprise has been encouraging prospective customers to seek references via status updates like “Has anyone tried Ameriprise?”⁷

ACTION: AMERIPRISE USES LINKEDIN TO HELP CONSUMERS FIND THE RIGHT ADVISORS

A number of full-service wealth management firms such as Morgan Stanley Smith Barney, New York Life Insurance, and Raymond James Financial are enabling their advisors and agents to use social networks like LinkedIn and Twitter. Ameriprise has gone a step further, empowering consumers to use LinkedIn to find connections who can provide references on prospective advisors. Here’s how it works:

1. **Visitors to ameriprise.com’s “Find an Advisor” feature can search via LinkedIn.** The visitor signs in to LinkedIn to find an advisor who is connected to someone he or she knows (see Figure 1). The search page also includes a sample result. “When we show the results, then they really get it,” said VanTassel. “The visual helped people take the next step and log in.”
2. **The search results show the connections between the visitor and advisors.** Ameriprise delivers search results that contain photos of the advisors as well as thumbnail photos of the contacts who connect the visitor to the advisors (see Figure 2). The advisors’ photo and contact information link to their Ameriprise websites, which show years of experience, office location, “My Approach,” and more.⁸

Figure 1 Ameriprise Enables Prospects To Find Advisors Via LinkedIn

The screenshot shows the Ameriprise Financial website's "Find an Advisor" page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for "About Ameriprise", "Careers", "Customer Service", "Contact Us", and "Log In". The main header includes the Ameriprise logo, the tagline "MORE WITHIN REACH", and the slogan "America's leader in financial planning*". A search bar is located in the top right corner.

The main content area features a large heading "Find an advisor who is right for you" with a magnifying glass icon. Below this, there are three search filters: "Search by Location", "Search by Advisor / Team Name", and "Search via LinkedIn". The "Search via LinkedIn" option is highlighted.

Text on the page reads: "Find an advisor who is connected to someone you know on LinkedIn® professional network services." It also includes a privacy notice: "Ameriprise Financial respects your privacy. Unless you request a contact from Ameriprise Financial or one of our advisors, we do not retain information about you or your LinkedIn® network connections." A "Sign in with LinkedIn" button is present.

A sample advisor profile for Jennifer Stevens is displayed. She is a ChFC® Financial Advisor with contact information: Jennifer.Stevens@ampf.com, 1099 Ameriprise Financial Center, Minneapolis, MN 55414, and phone number (612) 123-1234. Her areas of focus are Small Business, Protection and Insurance, and Retirement Planning. A "View my LinkedIn Profile" link is also shown.

Below the profile, it says "You're connected through" and lists three contacts: Emily Johnson (1st), Pat Jones (1st), and John Smith (2nd).

A section titled "How does this work?" explains: "When you sign in to the LinkedIn® professional network using your login information and allow access to your account, your connections will be compared to our financial advisors who are registered on the LinkedIn® professional network. If you or any of your LinkedIn® network contacts are connected to an Ameriprise financial advisor, we will display those advisor(s) and the connection(s) you have in common."

The footer contains four columns of links: "Working with Ameriprise" (Why Ameriprise, Getting Started with Ameriprise, Our Advisors, Fees, Ameriprise Client Resources), "Products & Services" (Financial Planning, Banking & Cash Management, Annuities, Life Insurance, Auto & Home Insurance), "Retirement & Life Events" (Retirement Stages, Maximize Your Savings, Manage Your Investments, Define Your Expectations, Retirement Income & Expenses, Common Retirement Risks, Investment Planning, New Baby, College Education, Inheritance, Job Transition, More...), "Research & Tools" (Market Information & Research, Market Perspectives, Market News, Weathering a Volatile Market, Videos, Financial Articles, Calculators & Tools, Tax Center), and "Find an Advisor" (About Ameriprise, Company Information, Investor Relations, Newsroom, Careers, RSS Feeds, Customer Service, Contact Us, Sitemap).

Source: Ameriprise Financial website

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Search Results Show How The Prospect Is Connected To Ameriprise Advisors

The screenshot shows a search results page on the Ameriprise Financial website. At the top, there is a search bar with the text "Find an advisor who is right for you" and a "Search again" button. Below the search bar, there are navigation options: "LIST VIEW" and "MAP VIEW" icons, a "Sort By: Last Name" dropdown menu, a "Show: 10 per page" dropdown menu, and a "Page:" indicator with buttons for pages 1, 2, 3, and 4. On the left side, it says "58 advisors found" and "Search Again".

The main content area displays three advisor profiles:

- Patty Heimbuch**: CFP®, Private Wealth Advisor. Contact: patricia.a.heimbuch@ampf.com, 11145 Reading Rd, Cincinnati, OH 45241-1903, (513) 554-1104. Areas of Focus: Retirement Planning Strategies, Estate Planning Strategies, Charitable Giving. Practice: AN AMERIPRISE PRIVATE WEALTH ADVISORY PRACTICE. Connected through: Kim Sharan (1st).
- Jeffrey Hodges**: CRPC®, CFS®, Financial Advisor. Contact: jeffrey.l.hodges@ampf.com, 501 Pennsylvania Pkwy, Ste 200, Indianapolis, IN 46280-0014, (317) 844-6441. Areas of Focus: Charitable Giving, Estate Planning Strategies, Retirement Planning Strategies. Practice: AN AMERIPRISE PLATINUM FINANCIAL SERVICES® PRACTICE. Connected through: Jane VanTassel (1st), Tammy Nelson (1st).
- Sherry Hunt**: CRPC®, Financial Advisor. Contact: sherry.s.hunt@ampf.com. Practice: With the practice of Bob Edmonds. Areas of Focus: Estate Planning Strategies, Retirement Planning Strategies, Saving for Education.

Source: Ameriprise Financial website

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

How The Ameriprise eBusiness Team Made It Happen

What were the keys to rolling out this social search functionality?

- **Getting advisors onto LinkedIn.** “We’ve never said to advisors, ‘You must be on this platform’ — we just make the point that you need to be where your clients are,” said VanTassel. Added Rueckert, “Success stories circulate about how advisors used LinkedIn to develop relationships with centers of influence such as realtors,” which drives adoption.
- **More flexible APIs from LinkedIn.** Rueckert and Scott Allen, director of interactive marketing, brainstormed about potential applications of the steadily improving application programming interfaces (APIs) for social platforms like LinkedIn. “We talked about a LinkedIn widget for recruiting, which led us to the advisor selection process, which had benefits for advisors and consumers,” said Rueckert.
- **Pre-sold senior management.** Senior management didn’t need a formal ROI model to approve the initiative; more importantly, they didn’t overreact to potential risks, thanks to several years of ongoing education by the eBusiness team. “We’ve been able to demonstrate over the past several years that when we do social within industry guidelines, bad things don’t happen,” said VanTassel.
- **Compliance involved from the start.** The eBusiness team at Ameriprise brought compliance in at the very beginning, when advisor search via social was just an idea. “I learned more about testimonial acts, records and retention than I ever thought I’d know; they learned more about LinkedIn, Twitter, and Google+ from us,” said Rueckert.
- **Web API programming talent.** After talking with the LinkedIn developer team to create a proof of concept, Ameriprise built the application itself using LinkedIn’s developer tool kit. The project took more than three months and required significant resources: The core team included not just developers but also two interactive marketers, a compliance officer, and a project manager.

Ameriprise launched its advisor search via LinkedIn in November 2011. “We’re early in the launch phase, not yet to the point that we have enough visits to analyze,” said Rueckert. But he said that consumers are reaching out to their peers after searches, and success stories are accumulating.

Next Steps For Ameriprise

Encouraged by early responses, the eBusiness team at Ameriprise intends to push further into social media. Immediate next steps include:

- **Encouraging more advisors to participate.** The “find an advisor” search results link to advisors’ websites. To be included in results, advisors must have a LinkedIn profile and a link to their LinkedIn profile on their advisor website. While 63% of Ameriprise advisors have LinkedIn

profiles, only 26% of advisors link to their LinkedIn profile from their website. As more advisors add links, user searches will yield more results.

- **Supporting other social networks and more interaction.** As a professional network, LinkedIn was a great place to start. But with traffic skyrocketing on other social networks, as well, the eBusiness team is broadening its support. A pilot is underway letting some advisors create a Facebook page, post pre-approved content to their social network profiles, and respond to comments, none of which is permitted today.

ANALYSIS: AMERIPRISE IS PIONEERING A PRIME APPLICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Forrester expects social media to have an outsized impact on wealth management, a business based on relationships and referrals. As Ameriprise pioneers smart applications of social, other full-service brokerages, life insurers, private banks, and asset managers should follow its lead. Early movers will gain some of the same advantages that Ameriprise will enjoy, including:

- **More consideration from today's researchers.** For prospective clients who research online, a clever and effective online presence is an important signal that the firm understands their preferences and will be easy to work with.
- **Easier agent and advisor recruiting.** Social media savvy is also an important signal to today's advisors and agents. They want to know that a firm is committed to improving its practices with social media tools that work.
- **Bringing the financial advisor into digital channels.** To date, wealth management firms have done little online to support the relationship between agents and their clients and prospects. Social media presents a watershed opportunity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Full-service brokerage research is evenly distributed across research channels: Forty-five percent of eventual purchasers research over the phone, 45% research in person, and 40% do their initial research over the Internet. Most online researchers switch channels to purchase, opting for the phone or an in-person meeting. The same thing happens with prospects who research over the phone: Half choose to open their accounts in person. See the February 28, 2011, "[How US Consumers Research And Buy Investment Products](#)" report.

² Based on our surveys, people make 500 billion impressions on one another about products and services within social environments every year. Sixteen percent of consumers generate 80% of the impressions — we call these Mass Influencers. See the April 20, 2010, "[Peer Influence Analysis](#)" report.

³ Forrester's recent survey of online adults indicates that 68% of US online adults with an investment account maintain a profile at a social networking site. Source: North American Technographics Online Benchmark Survey, Q3 2011 (US, Canada).

- ⁴ To date, traditional investment and life insurance firms have been insulated from the disruptive forces of social technologies because their best clients are older. Younger generations lead in the use of social networks, while the generations with the most investments — Boomers and Seniors — lag. As older investors continue to adopt these new technologies — and as younger investors accumulate more investable assets — social strategies will become imperatives for investment firms and life insurers. See the June 8, 2011, “[Mobile And Social Technologies Come Late To Wealth Management](#)” report.
- ⁵ Source: Scott Allen, director of interactive marketing at Ameriprise, in a phone interview with members of Ameriprise’s eBusiness management team on December 12, 2011.
- ⁶ Advisors are permitted to create LinkedIn profiles based on Ameriprise policies. For example, profiles must be pre-approved, and advisors may not recommend a connection or accept recommendations from others.
- ⁷ In January 2011, Ameriprise launched its “Social Call To Action.” Visitors to the ameriprise.com advisor search page are encouraged to seek references with the tag line “Someone you know may already be working with us. Ask them” and links to Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Those who follow the links are told: “This tool is a simple way to ask your friends and family if they’ve worked with us. For example you can ask something like this: ‘Has anyone tried Ameriprise?’” Source: phone interview with members of Ameriprise’s eBusiness management team on December 12, 2011, and the ameriprise.com site.
- ⁸ An Ameriprise advisor website also includes a link to the advisor’s LinkedIn profile, as well as a link to “Share This Advisor” with a Facebook friend or group or email address.