

Click Closely, We are Turning the Corner on Internet Marketing

by Jeremy Conaway

This is a classic Cinderella story. Well into a down market cycle, we are seeing the birth and growth of several new and exciting trends and directions. New company benchmarks, new broker/agent relationships, new management models and, at last, a new and serious approach to real estate Internet marketing.

After over ten years of ignoring the growing marketing potential of the Internet, companies representing an impressive range of industries are finally moving resources, innovation and creativity into Internet marketing initiatives. Consider the fact that General Motors, the country's third-largest advertiser, will be shifting half of its three billion dollar ad budget into "online" or "one to one" programs. Companies like Proctor and Gamble and Coca-Cola are right behind GM.

Much of this activity is being driven by the fact that the business community is finally beginning to understand what the average 14-year-old has known for the past five years. As pointed out by Jakob Nielsen, a top web marketing consultant, "The web is not a selling medium, it is a buying medium. It is user controlled, so the user controls, the user experiences."

In plain English, today's consumer goes to the Internet to accomplish a specific task (e.g., searching for a home) and they don't want to be interrupted along the way even when that interruption has some distant relationship to the task at hand (an advertiser offering products or services relating to the transaction). This simple concept is one of the basic rules of "consumer centricity."

The real estate industry is beginning to align with this important distinction. A number of new real estate-related websites have been brought online lately that demonstrate this concept. Worth noting are the newly engineered Houston Association of REALTORS® consumer facing website (www.har.com) and the recently introduced V-4 platform websites for Century 21 Canada (www.century21.ca) and Coldwell Banker Schmidt Real Estate (www.cbgreatlakes.com).

All three sites offer advanced functionality that allows the consumer to move through entire searches without leaving the initial

screen and with an absolute minimum of clicks. All are designed to deliver a simple marketing message: "If we can make the search process this effortless, imagine what we can do with the rest of the transaction."

As more real estate firms increase their level of web engagement, management is encountering a number of basic questions, such as how to allocate web marketing budgets. Mark Renshaw, an executive with the Leo Burnett/ARC Worldwide marketing firm, suggests using the 70/20/10 rule. He advocates dividing the firm's Internet marketing budget into three accounts.

- 70% should be expended in the basics, including website development and search engine optimization techniques such as Google Ad Words.
- 20% should go to areas and techniques that represent the "leading edge" (not bleeding edge) of your web marketing experience. This approach is critical because a company must be sure that its efforts do not become old hat or stale.
- The final 10% of the budget should be invested into what Renshaw calls "real time marketing opportunities." These are emerging digital areas that even consumers aren't aware of yet. Use this fund to "take a flyer." The past few years have established that (1) web marketing is not for the faint at heart and (2) that with a little research coupled with creative and innovative thinking, it is very possible to hit a web "home run."

Another common complication among real estate companies making their way into web marketing is the relative lack of Internet marketing experience of their in-house marketing staffs and limited "agency" relationships. Actually, this was a problem in the print and electronic media age as well. Many firms in our industry have entrusted their marketing investments to someone who may have taken a few marketing classes or earned a marketing degree at the local junior college. This was manageable in an era in which most firms simply mirrored the competition, but this approach is more difficult in the sophisticated web environment.

In order to meet this challenge, Rex Briggs from the Marketing Evolution, has

developed what he calls the "Five Platinum Rules For Effective Digital Ads."

1. Know the purpose of your campaign and the psychological concept or mechanism you are seeking to engage with your ad.
2. Maintain brand discipline throughout the campaign.
3. Use a simple, easy-to-picture message and make sure the image and copy work together.
4. Focus on the format. Keyword buys can work for consumers actively seeking information such as a home search. Page skins are an effective way to raise brand awareness. Over-the-page formats are effective for presenting more complex, animated stories.
5. The best result will come from the creative content of your ad. The more creative, the more effect. You are not interrupting the consumer anymore; you are adding to the pleasure of their task or journey.

Finally, continue to educate your management team about the demographics and benefits of web marketing. Web marketing is a fast-moving subject. Spend the time necessary to learn the new concepts and track the pioneers. Believe it or not, there are still good people out there who believe that the evening newspaper and television are the best available media. Stay calm, stay focused and make your point every day in every way.



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