Go ONLINE for Targeted and Affordable Advertising

By Debi Wacker

As purse strings tighten, limited advertising and marketing dollars must provide solid return on investment. Online advertising may be the most cost-effective and successful marketing tactic that you initiate this year. You can strengthen your brand and increase potential leads using highly targeted strategies.

Communication is changing. The cost of direct mail is increasing, newspaper readership is declining, satellite radio is putting the squeeze on local radio programming and 54 percent of people have traded in their old Yellow Pages and search solely online, including your prospective customers. In fact, a prospect's first follow-up after a sales call or networking function is not your phone number, but rather a lunch date with your firm's website.

Success in our technological age is virtually dictated by a strong web presence and firms that undervalue the importance of a quality website impede their own growth.

First Things First

Start with an objective assessment of your company's website, ensuring that the design and content are professional and the functionality is perfect. Ask the following questions:

- When was the last time it was updated?
- Is the design user-friendly and is the overall image professional?
- Is the navigation ideal?
- Is there a real sense of the people and premises?
- Is there plenty of worthwhile content? Is our expertise highlighted?
- Is the writing persuasive; are the grammar and spelling perfect?
- Are there links to other websites? Do other websites link to us?

Cost-Efficient Search Engine Marketing

Once your site is in shape, the next step is search engine marketing.

When a user types in keywords, search engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN produce a listing of sites based on such factors as longevity of the website, keyword density within the content, relative freshness of the content, and number and depth of links to other sites.

To keep your website placed high in the search engines, search engine optimization (SEO) is fundamental. SEO is primarily the process of making changes to a website in order to reach a higher organic ranking for specific keywords. These changes can be as small as rewriting a paragraph to provide more valuable content and as large as restructuring the entire website to allow for easier access for both the user and search engine. Your online marketing firm should be conducting competition analysis, keyword analysis and link building tasks on a regular basis.

For companies with limited advertising budgets, Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising, another derivative of search engine marketing, is the way to go. PPC allows companies to electronically bid on the keywords that they want their ad to appear.

What does all this mean? Take a look at www.johnhallelectric.com. John Hall Electric initiated a PPC campaign in the summer of 2008. In one month the firm's internet-generated leads had increased by over 216 percent. Better still, the average page views totaled 5.4 pages per visit; in other words, browsers took the time to visit the rest of the website. The company attained these leads through an SEO and PPC campaign for under $10 per day in ad charges.

Smaller firms have had similar success with ad budgets of just $5 per day. With a comprehensive, yet targeted internet advertising strategy, John Hall Electric enjoys increased brand awareness and a fresh stream of customer leads each month.

Monitoring and Reporting

Once all of the advertising campaigns are set up, the last step is to track the effectiveness of each campaign and keyword selection to optimize spending and increase marketing ROI. If internet marketing, especially PPC is not set up and monitored correctly, a considerable amount of money can be spent without any results. Changing the ads, bid amounts, cutting off non-efficient campaigns and pursuing new opportunities can increase the return on advertising dollars spent by as much as 100 percent.

Overall, reports should be generated on a monthly basis, providing the story on how many visitors are attracted to the website, as well as information to identify the type of visitor and their motivation. Tracking should be performed at two levels: your own website's internal statistics system, along with the figures provided by search engines and other sites where ads might be placed.

Further, new local search link products are appearing on the horizon. Geo-targeting technology determines the physical location of an online browser and delivers appropriate content to that visitor per that user's physical location, frequently above national accounts that tend to outbid local firms.

Moving Forward

By nature, online advertising is designed to be affordable and effective for all organization sizes and budget levels. Beware of bundled packages of online and traditional print advertising, as the rates are often higher than necessary. Read the proposals carefully, calculate your expected returns and compare rates just as you would any investment.

We know that 63 percent of all clients search for businesses and services online before they make a decision. Search engine optimization and online advertising ensures that these customers will see your business when they log on.

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