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Marketing FAQs



By Duane Carey

We hear a lot of the same questions from clients. Here are three of the most common:

1. Should I advertise in the yellow pages?

If you're one of the (apparently, based on the number of calls I get from them) 47 million people who sell yellow page ads, please skip to another article – I don't particularly like hate mail. I'm probably asked this "yellow pages" question more than any other. Like so many questions in life, clients always know the answer, but just need some validation, as if I'm their therapist. My answer is often something sarcastic, such as, "yeah, and you should also buy a couple of 8-track tapes while you're at it". Other times, in true therapist fashion, I answer their question with another one: "when was the last time you looked something up in the yellow pages – and how did that make you feel?" Obviously, my opinion is no, you should not advertise in the yellow pages, unless you happen to be a computer technician. Why computer techni-

cians? Because if your computer is dead, you can't Google "computer tech" to find some help – you have to look it up in the book. For just about everything else, the computer trumps the phone book.

I would much rather see you spend your yellow pages budget on website initiatives. The first order of business should be to update the design to ensure that it provides what the user seeks: well-organized content that is easily navigable and useable. You don't need fancy video and audio on your home page or splash page. In addition to being annoying, they're impediments to the user trying to get information. They can also be impediments to the search engines, which brings us to the second order of business. Most businesses can pay for very high quality search engine optimization (SEO) with just a fraction of the money previously spent on the yellow pages.

So take that budget, divert some of it to SEO, and some to SEM, or search engine marketing. SEM is the pay-per-click advertising that you see on the right side of the screen on a Google search. It's really one of the best marketing oppor-

tunities around, because it's an example of what I call marketing pull rather than marketing push. You're pulling prospects in toward you because they're actively looking to buy and you have provided a message that helps them, as opposed to pushing your message out through a less targeted medium and hoping that someone wants your service. SEM is also one of the most trackable forms of marketing; you can track exactly how many people viewed your ad, clicked on it, viewed pages on your website, and contacted you for more information. There are no long-term commitments required, and SEM campaigns are very flexible with regard to budget.

Caveat: I admit that I'm being a bit absolute to make a point. In truth, if your business caters to an older demographic or is in an industry in which yellow-page use is still common, then you might want to maintain limited exposure in the yellow pages. In Howard County, the Black Book from Patuxent is still pretty well read.

2. Cash flow is really tight and my accountant suggests I slash the marketing budget. What should I cut and what should I keep?

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First of all, I don't agree that the marketing budget should be cut at all. Although your CPA sees it as an expense on your income statement, it should really be an asset on your balance sheet! An integrated marketing approach is really the only way to gain market share to build the critical mass that will prevent future cash crunches, particularly in the troughs of the natural economic cycles.

There are solid data to back this up. In a study well-known among marketing geeks, McGraw-Hill Research analyzed 600 business-to-business companies from 1980 to 1985 to gauge their performance during the '80-'81 recession. The results were stunning. At the end of the study period, the companies who had cut back on their advertising during the recession had grown sales a total of just 19%. However, those companies who maintained or increased an aggressive advertising approach during the recession grew by a whopping 275%.

For me, the most impressive aspect of these results is that they represent data from three years following the recession's end. In other words, those who invested in advertising during the recession, reaped the benefits for many years thereafter. So keep those ads running!

3. Is it true that all publicity is good?

If your name is Britney Spears or Joey Buttafuoco, then yes, all publicity is good. You really don't care how bad the photos or quotes are, you just want your name out there; nothing is embarrassing. In many cases, the worse you look, the better. But thankfully, most of us are not like Britney or Joey. Good publicity is good; bad publicity is bad.

One of my clients had a violent crime occur in front of their business. The next day, four TV news vans were in their parking lot shooting video and interviewing everyone who

walked by, including their employees. With all four major networks running the story on their evening news, we had the opportunity to reach hundreds of thousands of people with an image of the client's logo/sign in the background. Theoretically, that's a good thing, but in reality, we don't want their brand associated with something so negative. So we met on site with the reporters and politely asked them to shoot their video with a backdrop other than the client's business. Luckily, they complied, then got back to the more serious reporting about Britney's latest exploits. The bottom line is that perception is everything with regard to your reputation, and you don't want anything negative associated with your brand.

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