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Looking Back, Moving Forward

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Internet Marketing 101

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Your agency just got its first Web site, or has redone and refreshed an older site, and you're as proud as a new parent. You imagine potential customers logging on and becoming captivated by the site's colorful graphics and snappy language.

However, unless you planned ahead by utilizing specific tactics for customers to easily locate or discover your site, you have just placed your fabulous Web site at the end of a long, dead-end cyber alley, as far as your clients and referral sources are concerned.

When it comes to using the Internet as a marketing tool, building the Web site is just the first step. Making certain potential clients can find it when they do Web searches is quite another.

Remember that most Internet searches are pretty rudimentary. A searcher enters one or two key words and scrolls through the first and - maybe - the second page of results. This means it is essential to have your Web site appear on the first two pages of results. And, the first page is really, by far, the best.

KEY WORDS

Anticipating the language a searcher uses to find your type of service is critical. Think about a specific description a potential client or referral source might use when searching for information about your service or your agency. These words or phrases might not be

what YOU would use, but what is in the mind of the consumer. (For instance, "skilled care" might be your word, but the consumer might look for "in-home nursing".) These specific words are your key words, and the text on your Web pages had better include them - again and again. This is called relevancy (simply meaning that all text is relevant to the subject of the site), and your Web site needs relevant text, not just attractive pictures of people performing your service.

META TAGS

Your page's title (hidden from the viewer by the programmer in the source code) must contain your targeted key words. The page title cannot simply be the name of your company, or "Welcome" or "About Us". Also take the

opportunity to have the Web designer pepper your chosen key words throughout the hidden source code as well as within your page contents description, which is read by those who do find you on a search. Planning out these critical (hidden) key word opportunities will make a difference in the long haul as to whether or not your site will be ranked by the search engines. And don't forget to use the key words (hidden again by the programmer) on any images or pictures. These are called "alt tags" and are useful ways to repeat key words in order to increase the chances of a search engine finding your site. It is impossible to overstate the importance of repeated usage of key words. For that reason, Web pages heavy on graphics and light on language can be counter-productive: lovely to look at, but useless when there is no one to admire them.

INBOUND LINKS

Obtaining links to your site from other sites will also increase your possibilities of ranking on a search engine so you are found on that all important first page. But consider the audience of the site you want to link to yours. A trade association your company belongs to is a good place for a link. Having your name in a story in a major newspaper also will help increase your ranking. Other ways to get inbound links that raise ranking include writing articles that other sites use and then link back to your site, and regularly writing an informative or helpful blog. Consider paying the nominal annual fee to Yahoo so you are linked and listed, as Yahoo is an important ranking tool for the search engines. Actually send your site to Google and MSN so they know you want to be ranked and can get in the queue. Most Web designers should submit your site to these three as a part of the design fee. Ask if they did and if not, have it done or do it yourself.

PAID CAMPAIGNS

A highly competitive component of e-commerce today is paid advertising, called pay-per-click (PPC). The rate charged to advertisers is based on the number of times an online searcher "clicks through" to the advertised Web site. Basically, advertisers buy key words and placement on search engines, in particular on Yahoo, MSN, and Google.

These highly effective PPC advertisements appear at the side and the top of search engine results pages. The ads are triggered by the key words typed in by search engine users, and the advertiser pays on a "per-click" basis for those searchers who "click through" to the advertised Web site.

INTERNET SAVVY MARKETING

Internet marketing is the key to having your site found by interested potential customers. Like any good marketing

tactics, the first step is a plan. Then the results are measured and changes made as deemed necessary to reach goals.

And even prior to planning, the savvy home care or home health care marketer will understand the growing importance that a well designed, well written, regularly maintained Web site holds as a primary and essential component of the marketing mix for today's health care services.

About the Author: *Merrily Orsini, MSSW, is Managing Director of corecubed, an integrated marketing communications company that specializes in homecare and home health industries. Orsini has been active in Internet marketing since 1990. She is an 18 year veteran of the private duty industry and currently serves on the Advisory Board of the Private Duty Homecare Association.*