

## HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR DIGITAL MARKETING

By Mary Lou Jay

**"B**uyers used to rely 100 percent on realtors; today they know as much as realtors, in many cases just by doing their homework on the Internet," said Robert Cowes, president of SmartTouch Interactive, a real estate marketing company. That makes it essential for home builders to make a real commitment to digital marketing and to use marketing professionals, either internal employees or external agencies, who are experienced in this area. These professionals can establish key performance indicators so that they can measure the ROI of every marketing dollar spent.

Cowes offers these suggestions for effective digital marketing:

**1. "Own the internet, with every experience being mobile first."**

Builders gain credibility when their communities or listings appear on multiple websites. You get more opportunities to engage with buyers and start building a relationship with them even before they visit your model homes.

**2. Use SEO (search engine optimization) marketing.** If you have a ranch community, employing SEO can help ensure it appears in the top four to five natural search results. You can also buy the keyword "ranch" so you appear at the top

of search page results. Since sites like Zillow and Trulia also appear high up in searches, builders' ads should appear on these sites as well.

**3. Take advantage of big data aggregated by media companies like Comcast and Spectrum to make highly targeted digital media buys.**

"Rather than having to buy 1 million impressions of digital advertising across all Trulia's and Zillow's targets, I can just buy highly, highly targeted ads and reduce my impressions needs to only 50,000 to 100,000," said Cowes. Targeted advertising produces much higher click-through rate because it appears only to people who match a builder's preferred home buyer profile based on aggregated data.

**4. Build virtual reality tours of unbuilt model homes;** they are a key sales tool in presales and appeal to the Millennial generation that has grown up playing video games.

**5. Manage your online reputation.** Unhappy buyers post negative reviews, so builders should work with customers to address any dissatisfaction ASAP. You can offer incentives



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to home buyers who post reviews right after they sign their contracts, when they're usually the happiest.

**6. Use a customer relationship management (CRM) platform to manage leads.** You can track and follow up not only with people who are ready to buy within the next 10 weeks but also with people who are likely to buy over the next year or so. A CRM system also ensures that the builder and not a sales person who may change jobs owns the potential customer data. At minimum, you should be using CRM to track buyers who have registered on your website.

**7. Communicate with realtors and potential home buyers via email campaigns.** Nurture contacts with community and lifestyle information. Briefly explain why they should live in your community. Keep them informed of grand opening and other community events. "Drip" emails for home buyers provide relevant information to guide them through the home selection and buying process.

#### **Successful digital campaigns**

SmartTouch Interactive used strategies like these in developing STAR-award winning campaigns for two TAB members.

Steve Klein Custom Builders' award-winning email campaign helped build brand awareness as the company expanded beyond its usual home building market in Georgetown. "Nobody outside of Georgetown knew who we were," said Chris Dodd, sales and marketing manager.

The company directed its email marketing campaign towards realtors and home buying prospects in the Liberty Hills neighborhood. "It was all about branding: who we are, what our houses looked like, where we were, so they'd get to know that we were expanding outside of Georgetown," said Dodd. The email campaign was the only way to get to the real estate community without shaking hands with everyone individually, he added.

Every month for four months Steve Klein sent out an email with attractive pictures of the company's model homes. The message also contained a link to an interactive tour of the homes. These email contacts did help the company sell homes, Dodd said.

Dodd is a believer in digital marketing, but is currently focusing the company's efforts on Facebook advertising rather than email. "Facebook ads are inexpensive and the most targeted thing that I can do," he said. Costs are much lower as well; the company can place 150 ads for the cost of doing one email campaign.

Spicewood Development's online advertising for the Gardens at Verde Vista won a TAB Star Award for its effectiveness.

"We're focusing on Google over Bing and Yahoo, because Google is the giant in the online marketplace and it's where the majority of

people are searching – which consequently presents us with the highest return on our investment in terms of views, click-throughs to our landing page and website, and ultimately prospect lead forms," said Ryan Ziehe, vice president, land development and marketing. "We formed the campaign to strategically take advantage of every opportunity that Google provides including a variety of differently sized ads that appear in all the places that ads can go when potential buyers search for certain content—side banners, top headlines, horizontal ads, longer skinnier ads, bigger bulk ads that fill up space."

No matter where they appeared, the ads all used the same picture (of a home in another maintained garden community that the company built) and the same succinct message that stressed the higher quality of the homes and the low-maintenance lifestyle the community offered. The company also used retargeting so that after someone visited the Spicewood Development website the company's ads showed up on other websites that they visited as well.

The campaign was a success. The sales performance of the Gardens at Vista Verde has outpaced other similar communities in the area.

Ziehe said that Spicewood Development uses some form of online marketing in every community, but since the Gardens at Vista Verde community is the largest they've ever built this advertising campaign is the largest as well. The company will stick primarily to online advertising.

"Even if you can't sell a home this way you at least put your very important first foot forward and pull someone in your direction," Ziehe said. ■

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