

Ten online

advertising tips

Small businesses accustomed to simple advertising tactics need to prepare for more work – and more reward – when advertising online

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Online advertising is an excellent way to get more customers, improve your margins and promote your business. There are no contracts, no minimum outlay – you determine the size of your advertising budget and where your ads appear.

If you do it right, you will increase the number of customers clicking through to your site. You'll also learn more about your customers and what they want. Get it wrong and you'll have wasted your time, your advertising budget and missed an opportunity to gain an edge over the competition.

How do you know if you're getting it right? Here are 10 tips to avoid the most common mistakes:

1. Online? Offline? It's all the same, right?

Advertising online is not the same as running an advertisement in your local newspaper or putting a listing in Yellow Pages. Many companies are used to advertising in this way and automatically take the same approach online that they do offline.

Running ads online is not a set and forget process – it's a dynamic medium requiring an active approach to setting it up, managing it and optimising to get the returns you want.

2. Give me what I want

There is little point in scheduling your ad to appear for a specific product and then sending visitors to a generic page hoping they'll figure out what to do next. For example, a user enters a search term like 'bpa free water bottles' then clicks on an ad that seems to offer what they are looking for. Unfortunately when the page loads it's the home page displaying an unrelated image and a list of other environmentally friendly products. The visitor has two choices – click the back button and find another company offering specifically what they want or spend

time searching through the site to find the water bottles they're looking for.

A better approach would be to send those visitors to a page specifically focused on water bottles and then display other products they may be interested in at the bottom of the page. Give visitors what they've told you they want and you will increase your chances of making a sale.

3. What should I do?

When a user is looking for a particular product or service online, your ad is not the only option for them to select; there are usually other ads as well as organic listings. A searcher is looking for the listing which most closely solves their problem.

To attract attention an ad needs to reflect the search term the user has entered, provide a reason to click (do this by explaining what's in it for them) and then encourage them to take action. That can be difficult to do in three lines of text. Action phrases help – 'buy now', 'get it now' or 'order online' work because they provide clear direction and a sense of urgency.

This clarity and focus needs to be carried through to the web page that visitors are directed to after clicking on an ad – also known as the 'landing page' – so that a sale or lead is not lost at that stage. 'Click here' phrases are ubiquitous because they work.

4. What exactly do I want?

Advertising in the search engines using a one word keyword or generic term is best avoided unless you are focused on brand building rather than triggering a direct response from your ad. Bidding on generic keywords like 'date' or 'personal finance' is expensive, highly competitive and can have users searching for a variety of topics.

For example, a user entering 'date' into a search engine may be looking for a relationship, a calendar, birth records or the release schedule

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for a movie or book or some dried fruit. There is no indication of the user's intent in the term 'date'. However, 'date of birth' indicates that the user is looking for information related to a birth record.

5. I'm here. Now what?

The purpose of advertising is to trigger a reaction from a prospective customer. Online advertising is no different. Ideally that action is a sale but depending on the product or service you're offering, there may be pre-sale steps needed first.

Rather than waste a visit because a prospective buyer is at a different stage in the buying cycle, it's important to capture their details and build trust in your product or service. The best way to do this is by offering something of value – a free report, newsletter, prize for completing a survey, video presentation – that the visitor wants enough to trade their contact details for.

A one percent conversion rate of visitors to customers is a respectable average, especially when a purchase is involved. Given that it's easier to get a visitor to enter their email address than pull out their credit card, you can expect a higher rate when capturing leads. The key to turning leads into sales is through a coordinated and cohesive follow up strategy.

6. Am I worth it?

Knowing the true value of a web visitor is particularly important when you're using advertising to gather leads and not to directly make a sale. How much should you spend on acquiring each lead? How many of those leads will become customers? If you know your metrics you can confidently spend money acquiring each lead and know you can achieve an acceptable return on investment.

It's also a way to measure the effectiveness of your website and to determine if any changes to your site have made it more or less effective.

To work it out, take the number of unique

visitors over a particular time period, divide by the profit generated by those visitors and you have the true value of each visitor.

7. What works best?

One of the biggest differences between online advertising and traditional advertisements is that you can measure everything in the digital world. You can track which keywords result in sales, which ad is more effective, which ad appeals more to a particular demographic, which headline prompts a visitor to take action and which doesn't, which images work best, which ad position works best.

However, accurate tracking is only possible if web visitors are encouraged to take a measurable action upon landing on your site.

8. Are you sure that's what I want?

No matter how experienced you are in your industry and your product or service, there is one important rule to remember when it comes to online advertising – the numbers never lie. Putting up your best effort based on your experience is a good starting point but be prepared to change based on what people want and respond to.

The only way to really know what works and what doesn't is to run split-tests of different alternatives and let your ad and landing page copy slug it out to determine the 'winner'. At a minimum you should be testing two different ads at one time. Each ad should be distinctive and emphasise a different benefit – service, price, functionality, prestige, timing – in order to find an ad that produces the most conversions.

Use the same approach with your landing page. Again, you should ideally test at least two different pages to see which performs better.

Once you've found the angle that works best, and it may not be what you expected, then it's a case of making small changes to the ad and landing page to see if you can further improve

conversions. Sometimes just changing a word here and there can have a big impact on your return on investment.

9. It's not all about Google

Most of the tips in this article relate to search engine marketing and the main search engine is Google. They account for approximately 90% of search engine queries. However, they only account for 30% of total internet traffic and may not be the best advertising option for your business. Factors to take into account include your market, your service or product, how defined your ideal customer is, your geographic focus, how fast you want results and your ad spend.

10. It looks good but ...

Flashy design and background music may look great and set the mood for your product or service but most people are interested in how your offering solves their problem, not how slick your website is. However, it isn't about putting up the worst looking web page either. It needs to be functional and intuitive to navigate.

The same applies to online ads. Often the most effective ads are those without graphics and with lots of white space and plain text. This style of ad not only stands out against other graphics on a website but the message is clear and uncluttered. It won't work in every situation but is worth testing to see if it works for your product or service.

Advertising online is a great way to control the flow of new customers to your business. It's also an effective way to maximise your ROI and stay in front of your competitors.

Are you getting the returns you want from your online advertising? What can you do to improve your results? ■

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