

CNET Networks eMarketing In A Slow Economy

Who says you can't market effectively in a slow economy? While companies scramble for measurable results to justify their marketing bang for buck, eMarketing has emerged as the poster child for efficiency. In addition to being an effective way to track ROI – by tying costs directly to results and refining programs to increase competence – it's become a dynamite way to build customer relationships.

While both traditional marketing and advertising have their place in building a company's brand, they are difficult to quantify. And in this economic slowdown, if you can't measure it, it often doesn't get funded.

According to Scott Anderson, Director of eMarketing at Sun Microsystems, who is responsible for Sun's Web marketing strategy, eMarketing can help companies streamline processes and build customer relationships while measuring success, refining programs and improving targeting.

"eMarketing allows you to drive efficiencies into your marketing programs by allowing you to make business decisions based on sound data. It also cuts messaging waste." Anderson should know, since implementing his eMarketing program, Sun has improved efficiency by more than 1,000 percent.

Get Closer To Customers

eMarketing is proving itself as the weapon of choice in today's economic doldrums. First, e-marketing gets you closer to customers than traditional marketing. Because every aspect of e-marketing is measurable, you can test, understand behaviors and interact with users about preferences. Second, by understanding what your customers want, you become more relevant in your dialogues with them. Relevancy equals loyalty.

Anderson believes that companies deploying e-marketing effectively actually help customers by making it easier for them to understand your offerings, which saves them time – a precious commodity these days. He adds, "Done right, it increases response rates, while decreasing costs – a win-win for both our clients and Sun. In this economy that's a formula that's working."

Use Online Events To Draw Crowds

One of the ways companies use eMarketing to build efficiencies and deliver a higher level of service to customers is through online computing events as opposed to traditional event-based or in-person product launches. Companies like Sun are seeing a huge response from customers.

Since the economic slowdown began in 2001, Sun has focused a larger portion of its marketing resources toward Web-based events such as Sun's Network Computing 03 with enviable results. Customers don't have the travel budgets they once had and online events save money and keep users up-to-date on latest technologies – without leaving their desks. Customers win because Sun can provide them with greater access to deeper levels of information on architecture elements, technology innovations and infrastructure solutions. Sun wins because they can extend their invitation list to a greater number of attendees. As Anderson states, "We now bring in enough people to fill a stadium at the cost of a barn dance." How's that for ROI?

Design Customer Interaction

Sun's Web events allow users to interact with live video streams of Sun's executives unveiling new products and sharing their perspectives. Even CEO Scott McNealy is available for live online chats to discuss how technology can achieve business objectives. Because IT managers are one of Sun's key targets, it's no surprise that Sun has ongoing campaigns that encourage IT professionals to come to their web events. While these events deliver high level value to users, their main objective is to entice users to opt-in to one of Sun's programs.

When users opt in to a program, they receive a number of options including the chance to download presentation materials, white papers, product specs and more. This brings them into what Anderson calls the “consideration phase” where users do research on products and services that might fill a need.

Measures User Effectiveness

Anderson’s team measures their effectiveness at empowering users through questionnaires and exit surveys. By understanding who these users are, why they opted-in, and whether they were successful in getting what they wanted, Anderson can gauge if users will opt-in further or move towards the purchase cycle. “When somebody opts into a program we focus our efforts on getting to know them and working with them to help them get what they want.”

Users can also choose to receive a variety of newsletters, including one from CEO McNealy with his thoughts on various subjects from reducing computer complexity to cutting operating costs by millions of dollars per year. Other newsletters provide content on a variety of vertical industries or current hot button topics presented by experts using technology to solve problems. The articles are product neutral, so users can leverage the information, whether they use Sun products or not. However – and this is the power of interactivity at work – as users utilize the targeted information they request – they also gain a deeper understanding of Sun’s expertise. A dialogue has opened and a relationship of trust has begun.

“Everything we do is focused on the opt-in. Once a person opts-in to a program, our mission is to stay ‘top of mind’ by providing expertise while gathering valuable information on the user. If a user stays within a program and we stay top of mind then loyalty is built.” In fact, in brand tracking studies, Sun has found a significant build up in loyalty in direct proportion to the quality of the information they deliver to users.

Quantify Investment Every Step Of The Way

Like other companies, before Anderson’s team built its e-marketing ecosystem, Sun spent large sums of money marketing through online banner ads – with low response rates. In addition, they couldn’t tell if they were reaching current customers, potential customers, or uninterested users. With no ability to track, no interaction, and no way to know if they were delivering value, they might as well have been throwing darts blindfolded. eMarketing has changed all of that.

Through its Web-based programs, Sun can quantify its investment every step of the way. So far, Anderson says it’s paying off big time. “As we move people into our databases and learn more about them, we see much higher response rates. The costs have gone from thousands of dollars per relationship down to pennies. This means greater effectiveness at a much lower cost.”

Anderson believes it’s important to organize an e-marketing program around the entire buying cycle -- from acquisition and retention through demand creation that eventually drives users to a purchase.

Figure Out How To Get Better

“Smart eMarketing is all about prompting an action from a user, measuring that action, and then encouraging the user to take the next step,” states Anderson. “Each step creates a business result. The value of e-marketing is its ability to measure an action that you’ve prompted, then evaluate that action and figure out how to get better.”

Yes, Anderson believes traditional marketing and advertising have their place, but when it comes to delivering results – eMarketing rocks. He adds, “In this economy, I’m achieving measurable business results where traditional marketers can’t even get close.” That puts e-marketing in a very solid position indeed.