

News

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Media Firm's Web Site Can Give Insight

Online Presence—or Lack Thereof—Shows How Company Can Help You

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

In a media planning crunch, have you ever found yourself needing information from a media property whose sales rep you had yet to meet? With all of today's automation, whiz-bang electronics and seemingly endless ways to communicate, it's hard to believe media planners can find themselves at a loss when it comes to obtaining crucial information in a pinch. But it happens.

If those around you or in your immediate network don't have a connection at a property, one might logically assume that obtaining a phone number for the organization or simply visiting its Web site will do the trick. But things don't always work out so cleanly.

Even in those cases, however, a planner can learn a lot about properties under consideration for a plan or buy.

A Mixed Bag

In a recent search for online media kit and rate information, I realized how many vendors are missing opportunities to advance sales due to poor digital materials. Some properties provide a significant amount of relevant information; others provide a mish-mash of approaches that can make planners scratch their heads.

I was fortunate enough in my search to find a few kits that provided everything needed: content opportunities, consumer profiles, reach of the property, specs and costs. On the other end of the spectrum were properties that provided information in such an unhelpful way that it seemed they were intentionally creating roadblocks.

For example, one vendor listed no sales offices or associated phone numbers. The only viable online contact was accessed via an "Advertise With Us" tab at the bottom of the Web page. Within that tab, the only way to obtain a media kit was to complete an online form on which one of the eventual questions asked what the applicant's interest happened to be.

Also included in the form were required fields asking what industry the request concerned and what budget level was expected. Filling out the form definitely left the feeling the vendor was attempting to separate the wheat from the chaff. As a side note, it took five business days to receive a reply to three requests for immediate help.

Further, I tried to attack this same property via direct solicitation of reps for specific sales team phone numbers. No one seemed to know a direct number. I repeatedly was funneled into an automated phone line to service my request. Similar to the Web experience, phone options that seemed to be most relevant for my request were fruitless. One terminated with a perfunctory message directing me to the online request form. Another terminated with a message stating no unsolicited brand sponsorships were being accepted. Click.

Efficacy of Web Materials

Two market forces suggest vendors should be very aggressive about providing useful sales information via

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the Web.

First, it would seem any vendor would want to use a Web platform to paint a picture of a progressive, cutting-edge, innovative property. The Internet as a medium has the ability to convey currency and vitality. It wouldn't take much effort for a vendor to digitize sales materials portraying it as a viable opportunity. Yet in my experience in recent months, many vendors are fumbling away the opportunity.

Second, fiscal pressures prompted by cuts in staff and resources have forced companies everywhere to do more with less. Vendor sales organizations haven't escaped this trend. From large organizations to small, fewer reps are out there to call on media people or are available when a media person runs into a crunch. It is here that digital sales tools can fill a key need, prompting a sale in a situation where human resources aren't available or directly connected to the prospect.

To underscore the need, planning teams also find themselves in a situation of doing more with less. Fewer planners today are working on more brands, eliminating opportunities to physically sit down with reps to discuss properties. Planners functioning in those environments rely on the experience of those around them, whatever materials are handy or the Web to obtain information they need to make recommendations.

Two-Fold Learning

My recent journeys into the realm of digital media kits have led me to conclude that there are two buckets of learning to be mined from the digital information vendors provide. First, there is the bucket of real information included in digital resources. Real information is generally what media planners value most.

The second bucket, which has at least equal value, includes what can be learned about a vendor by the manner in which its digital information is presented. Digital presentation is important when viewed through the lens of the old adage, "Those who can be trusted in small matters can be trusted in big matters."

Take a look at some online media kits and do your own assessment. You'll find that a media property Web site generally will have a navigational tab (usually at the bottom of the page) that says "Advertise," "Advertise With Us" or maybe even "Media Kit." As a first step, determine how quickly you can obtain useful information after clicking that link. Then think about what information is available and how well it's presented.

Is there a media kit included in the digital materials? Does the kit offer a broad variety of information including rates, ad unit specifications, audience detail or a useful delineation of demographics and behaviors?

Can you obtain direct contact information for an actual person if you need more information or assistance? Lists of specific sales staff and their responsibilities appear in digital information far less often than you would think. Often, there are not even phone numbers for regional offices or sales reps, or an e-mail address to a specific person.

If there is contact information available, what happens when you try to use it? Is it an automated line or are there actual people on the other end? It's not inherently bad if you end up with an automated service, but how you are managed in that queue says a lot. Is the user shortchanged in the automated options provided? It's hard to account for every eventuality in a phone queue, but there should at least be an option to contact a live operator and have your call forwarded to a real person who can assist you.

Many vendors will utilize some version of a submission function online. In some respects, these can be better than a phone queue in that they often provide for more user input than do phones. However, it's harder to know where your submission is really going, and you may have to invest a lot of time and energy to complete the submission.

It's after queries have been submitted that vendors can fall short. It's very common when shopping online to receive a virtually instantaneous response from the vendor acknowledging a query. That rarely happens when it comes to media kits or sales questions. It can take quite a while to receive a reply via e-mail or phone. It may even take more than one request to prompt a reply to your question.

Implications

The content, demeanor and efficacy of digitally provided vendor information such as media kits can tell a planner a lot about a property. On one hand, a well-crafted Web offering suggests that the property has not only embraced the Internet, but laid out an offering for planners with service in mind. Providing needed information in an accessible way could say a lot about how responsive that vendor will be when it comes to crafting a buy and servicing ongoing needs.

On the other hand, a vendor that unwittingly or by design makes it difficult to find the information needed for planning communicates much as well. Not only could it mean the property is ill-equipped to embrace a medium like the Web, it could also mean it will be difficult to obtain information or service from that property when it comes to the buy. Further, a digital offering seemingly designed to serve the vendor's needs and not those of a potential advertiser sends a bad signal.

It is incumbent on planners to learn what they can directly and indirectly from available digital information, using it as one way to conduct their own wheat-from-chaff exercise. Properties that can provide valuable information and service will begin to demonstrate themselves as the viable potential partners planners need for their brands.

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