

Museum Tests 5 Online and Email Marketing Tactics to Drive \$20 Ticket Sales — Results Revealed CASE STUDY 01/30/2003

CHALLENGE: A few months ago Cynthia Mackey, VP Marketing at Boston's Museum of Science, was handed a \$250,000 budget to promote \$20 ticket sales to their hot new exhibit, 'Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt.'

Normally Mackey promotes ticket sales through offline media such as local TV, radio and outdoor ads. However, she'd noticed that up to 1/3 of the Museum's Omni Theater ticket sales generally came through their website.

With a hot new exhibit to push, why not test outbound emarketing?

Mackey decided to dedicate 10% of her total budget to online and email, with three goals:

1. Sell more tickets online
2. Generate awareness that might translate to offline sales
2. Run as many tests as possible to find out what works for online ticket sales

Mackey says, "We really wanted to do some experimentation." The question was - how many useful tests can you squeeze out of a \$25,000 budget?

CAMPAIGN: Mackey hired a specialist emarketing agency, e-tractions, to create online and email campaigns that would be integrated with the design and messaging of the larger offline efforts that her traditional agency, Gearon Hoffman, handled.

Their first task was to build a custom stand-alone landing page that all the test campaigns could link into.

Mike Gauthier CEO e-tractions says, "We've done tests with side-by-side comparisons between a landing page and driving people direct to a client's site. We've seen much higher results with the landing page."

(Note: For marketers with larger budgets, we strongly advise you also add landing page design tests to your plans instead of relying on 'your best shot' at one.)

The page (link to sample below) uses Flash, because of its animation capabilities and the opportunity to position offers more visually than with HTML (Gauthier: "It's all about catching the eye and getting people to click.").

The layout follows a deliberate structure:

- a. Present a short introductory message to remind people why they're there

The visual and copy elements reflected those used in the creative (which were consistent across all media placements), to ensure a clean transition from advertisement to landing page.

b. Present calls-to-action

The landing page doesn't feature traditional web page elements like navigation menus or "contact us" links. Instead, a number of call-to-actions appear in quick sequence: membership", "send to a friend", "buy tickets", "sweepstakes" and "about Quest".

The sequence ends with "buy tickets" highlighted most prominently, and copy text which offers reasons for buying, namely the quality of the exhibit and the fact Boston is the only Northeast venue on the Quest tour. Gauthier says, "Once you get a visitor, try to shake as much activity out of them as you possibly can. We tried to position a reasonable number of offers in a structured way."

Next the team researched their online media buying options. With no prior online marketing campaigns to go on, they took the psychographic and demographic audience profile developed for the offline campaign and matched that with websites with the highest number of that group in their declared audience.

They then further narrowed the choice by comparing advertising rates, placement opportunities and availability, and making "a judgment call" on those sites most likely to perform well.

Finally, it was time to conduct a structured testing program

Although driving direct ticket sales was important, Mackey needed to know which media placement would reach her audience and what kind of messaging worked best. Here are five of her core tests...

Test #1: Returns from different paid media placements

The team purchased...

- sponsorships of two email newsletters (geotargeting New York)
- banner ad buys on a Boston-oriented local portal site (see link below for creative)
- keyword buys at PPC search engines

Test #2: Value of "no-cost" online promotion

Since Mackey had already bought considerable TV-time with local stations, she was able to get banner placements on the stations' online properties as a no-cost add-on to the original purchase.

The team also sent two email promotions (separated by 6 weeks) to the museum's opt-in house list of just over 23,500 valid addresses. The first mailing was a general promo for the exhibit, the second included a sweepstakes offer (see below).

Mackey team also asked existing museum sponsors and trustees to put up banners on their websites or to send the email promotion to in-house employee mailing lists.

Test #3: Impact of sweepstakes offer

A seven-night stay in Egypt was offered as a sweepstake prize mid-way through the campaign, and the offer added to banner and email creative to see if this affected performance.

Test #4: Email subject lines

Using the same house list, one set of emails contained the subject line "Ancient Egyptian artifacts coming to the Museum of Science", one set the subject line "Exclusive Egyptian exhibit coming soon."

Test #5: Google vs Overture

The PPC search engine buys were split between Google and Overture, with both receiving the same budget and targeting similar keywords: Egypt-related words and phrases, and keywords used by people looking for visitor and events information in the Boston area.

RESULTS: The online campaign drove over 25,000 visitors to the landing page, of which over 15,000 (60%) went on to take some kind of action. Approx. 4,000 (16% of visitors) clicked on the "buy tickets" link and 7,000 (28% of visitors) clicked through for more information on Quest.

Based on these results, MacKay expects online marketing to become a regular fixture in her marketing mix. "We really need to think about this for the future."

Some other key results:

- Cost per click from the different media placements varied between \$0.62 and over \$8 (!). Contrary to expectations, the local portal proved the worst performer. PPC search engines were the cheapest source of paid visitors.
- For the same total spent, Overture sent twice as many visitors to the landing page than Google. However, Google produced eight times as many clicks on the "buy tickets" link than Overture.
- Offline advertising, which promoted Quest's homepage (as opposed to the online campaign landing page), drove some 50,000 visitors to the site - double the number from the online campaign, but with roughly nine times the budget (of course, offline campaigns are also driving awareness and walk-in exhibit traffic.)
- Some 2,000 (8% of traffic) people entered the sweepstakes and 1,800 (7.2% of traffic) added their address to the in-house list. Note: the sweeps only started part-way through the campaign, so these percents would have been higher for the whole.

- The first emailing to the house list produced about 20,000 delivered mails (after removing bounces), of which 74% were opened. CTR from opened email was 7.8%.
- The second mailing to the same list - this time with a sweepstakes offer - some 6 weeks later produced 17,000 delivered mails, of which 59% were opened. CTR from opened email was 13% (almost double that of the first mailout.)
- The "Ancient Egyptian artifacts coming to the Museum of Science" email subject line drew a 30% better response than the alternative.
- The other no-cost promotions were "hit and miss" in terms of results, but Mackey and Gauthier think they're well worth pursuing (especially now they can concentrate on the known "hits"; the TV stations' sites out-performed the portal, for example.)

More key lessons Mackey's learnt:

- o Tracking is critical - now she knows which paid media placements are best for her audience, she can cut her cost per visitor by over 90%
- o Don't limit tracking to clicks - follow visitors through to the end of the desired process; sales conversion and beyond. Though visitors from Overture were half as expensive to attract to the site, visitors from Google were 16 times more likely to hit the "buy now" button.
- o Don't rely on assumptions - before the campaign, the local portal was expected to perform best - it performed worst.
- o Leverage existing relationships for low-cost ad placement. For example, if you're buying a lot of offline ads, see if you can get website space for very little or nothing as a bonus.

Useful links:

Samples of banners tested

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/ms/ad.html>

Campaign landing page

<http://www.e-tractions.com/enteract/run/quest>

Museum of Science 'Quest' homepage

<http://www.mos.org/quest>

e-tractions <http://www.e-tractions.com/>

Gearon Hoffman <http://www.gearonhoffman.com/>