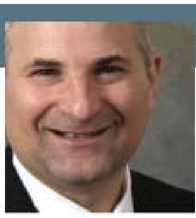
Tools of the Trade



Micro Focus Yields Macro Picture

By Carl Langrock and Cordie Depascale

Do you remember the first time you looked through a microscope? Maybe it was in middle school and you were looking at a drop of pond water. To the naked eye, the water on the slide is just a drop of water. When you look through the microscope, it's water-world and you're Jacques Cousteau. The microscope quickly reveals a hidden world of information.

ZOOMING INTO MEDIA DATA

Sharp media minds always are looking to dive deeper into the data and find new ways to paint the picture. The relationship between offline buying and web results is fertile ground. The "micro-site" technique is one path for mapping that turf and connecting the cross-media dots. Literally speaking, a micro-site is a separate, smaller version of a website. It may be accessed via a unique and descriptive URL, such as www.bigtelecom.com/SHIPFREE.

The micro-site will most often be tied to a special offer that you can't find anywhere else. It's in your face and entices you to learn more, to sign up or get something free. That is the very definition of a call to action. A good use of micro-sites embodies all of the qualities of direct response, minus a telemarketer (unless, of course, your micro-site offers online chat).

For direct response, a micro-site is designed around the "special offer" found on-air in a DRTV or radio spot, in a print ad or online in banner ads that hyperlink directly to the micro-site. The offer and micro-site design are critical in "getting the prospect through the door" and "onto the sales floor." When the offer and micro-site are cohesive, they are proven to deliver campaign ROI.

Micro-sites are particularly powerful when the "on-air to web" offer directs you to a specialized website. The offer can't be found inside the regular website, and that's by design--you would lose valuable results-tracking information. For instance, the URL might represent the ad vehicle, e.g., CNN.bigtelecom.com, or the media, e.g., bigtelecom.com/TV.

How the URL is used depends on the tracking goal and the results you expect to receive. The more complicated the URL, the more difficult it will be for a prospect to remember and access. The simpler the URL is, the less granular the results tracking might be.

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MICRO EVOLUTION

Irv Brechner is executive vice president, new business development at SendTec, a direct marketing services company based in St. Petersburg, Fla., with offices in New York City. SendTec specializes in integrated online marketing, DRTV, search engine marketing and response tracking and optimization, among other disciplines. Brechner expands on the different ways of setting up a micro-site:

The most common approach is the "suffix approach" or subdirectory, e.g., "ABC.com/ tv/123." In this approach, you create one or more subdirectories that have tracking codes in them. There are three major drawbacks to this method. First, most consumers rarely type in whatever comes after the dot-com. They know they'll get to the website by typing in abc.com and leaving off the rest. The second problem is if somebody mis-types the suffix (anything after the dot-com), they get a "page not found" error. The third problem is you have to build separate landing pages for every code that you use as a suffix.

The second method is to use individual domains, like "123abc.com" with no period between the "123" and the "abc." In order to do this, you have to buy and manage many domains. So if somebody is running on a hundred cable networks and broadcast stations, he or she has to buy a domain and set it up for every single media that he or she is buying. If you make a change to one website, you have to update all of them. This is clearly inefficient and costly.

We found the prefix method to be the most successful. An example of a prefix is, "123.abc.com," where we tie the "123" to a specific cable network or broadcast station and a specific destination on the advertiser's website. In this method, you need only one domain and you can create an infinite number of prefixes--each one taking mere seconds to set up. This means you don't have to worry about multiple sites, multiple domains, updating and "page not found" errors. For example, let's say Nike is running a TV ad for its Shox IV sneakers. On ESPN the shoe company runs the "123.nike.com" URL. When someone types in that URL, it goes through our servers transparently, and registers that a visitor came from media 123 (ESPN) at a certain date and time, and that person went to the Shox IV sale page on the Nike website--not to the home page. "124.Nike.com" might signify The Golf Channel, whereas "132.Nike.com" might refer to ESPN, and so on throughout the various media.

When somebody buys a product on the website, we capture a pixel code on the order confirmation page. The pixel informs us of the sale occurrence and the dollar value. With this data, we can create reports showing how many people went to the website, how many people bought something (or took another action like registering for a free newsletter or taking an upsell) and what the total sales were.

Our iFactz system is more than a simple URL change. It involves underlying databases based upon traditional bursting technology. If you have 100 orders coming in from a TV commercial at 9:10 to 9:15, the system allocates those orders to the spot that ran at 9:03. If another spot runs at 10:17, orders coming in after 10:17 will be allocated to that spot. We can do this with any media where you can either print or say a URL. Using this technique, the marketer can compare not only within a given media (e.g., results on ESPN vs. results on The Golf Channel) you can compare results across channels--an ESPN commercial vs. a direct-mail campaign, print ad and banner campaign. So you're comparing apples to apples across all media.

Mixing it up with Search

Search throws a curve at URL tracking. Today, instead of dialing an 800 number or typing a URL, many people simply search on the advertised product. Allocating activity from a customer who came in through search changes the analysis. Compared to tracking actions on a URL, it's more difficult to establish what drove the customer to a search. But quantifying this relationship should be of critical importance to the marketer. Brechner explains why and describes SendTec's approach to this challenge:

When customers come in through a search, you really have no idea where they came from. But, if you monitor the data carefully, you can track spikes in search that result from TV. You can't allocate specific search sales back to specific spots, but you can make solid assumptions based on the trackable web orders.

Tracking is the Holy Grail of marketing these days. Without it, you're going to make bad media decisions. For example, let's say Nike runs $500,000 worth of TV spots that include web addresses that cannot be tracked. Most people agree that about half of all orders will come over the web--especially for cataloguers. If you can't track where the orders came from, your TV campaign will look like it's failing, because phone orders will be half of what they used to be. You can't just simply allocate web orders to the TV spots on an arbitrary basis because there is no valid way to do that.

Here's another problem. Let's say a TV spot runs and search sales go up as a result. The people who are managing search say, "Look at all these orders that our search program is generating. Hey, Mr. CEO, give us a bigger budget." And the TV media people are saying, "Where are all the orders going? We have a great spot that used to work, but now it doesn't." Because of this, more money goes to search and TV spots are cancelled. But the fact is that most of those extra search orders were driven by the TV spot. Companies end up canceling profitable TV spots. They're doing so because they don't know that they're profitable--they have no way of tracking web orders that come from TV. The ideal scenario for advertisers is to use the same company for media buying, search engine management and tracking. Unless you have a coordinated effort to manage the entire scenario, marketers end up making bad decisions.

It's straightforward: when TV commercials launch, search activity increases. You just have to allocate the activity in a way that makes sense. The way you do that is to benchmark your paid search campaigns for a couple of weeks before your TV launches and then see what happens when you launch the TV. Just measure the increase in search activity. Then, allocate that increase to TV based upon the tracking of web orders that come in to the URL. That way, you get a good snapshot of what is going on.

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