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Be the best needle in the haystack

Google's head of real estate reveals strategies for growing your business

BY MATT CARTER



ORLANDO, Fla. -- Real estate brokers and agents who want more buyers and sellers to discover them on the Internet -- and to be impressed by what they find -- can start by putting themselves in the shoes of their would-be clients.

If your market is Atlanta, Google "best Realtors Atlanta" or "best places to live Atlanta." Are you in the results? Where?

Try Googling your own name or your brokerage's name, and see what comes up -- your website, or sites over which you have little or no control?

If you Google your name and "reviews," what are people saying about you?

This little exercise is one example of what Patrick Grandinetti, head of industry across the real estate vertical at Google, calls finding the "pulse" of online consumer behavior.

Once you've found the consumer pulse, he said, respond -- either by creating content that will draw "organic" (unpaid) traffic from search engines, or by buying keywords and paying for a set amount of "clicks" (traffic to your website).

Google has an arsenal of tools dedicated to helping you not only create effective content and keywords, but measure the results on your website. Grandinetti made sure to touch on as many of them as he could in a presentation to a room full of Realtors Sunday.

Speaking at the National Association of Realtors' annual Conference and Expo, Grandinetti seemed intent on winning over any skeptics in the room who might still be spending a significant portion of their marketing and advertising budget offline.

For converts, he also provided detailed insight into how to use a number of Google tools -- many free -- to grow their business (Grandinetti's Google real estate team posts updates on Twitter using the handle @GoogleRE -- a Web page is in the works).

Having spent nearly a decade in advertising at some big-name firms like Saatchi & Saatchi, DDB, and McCann Erickson before making the move to Google in 2007, Grandinetti understands how traditional advertising works -- and how the wealth of information available to consumers on the Internet has undermined its effectiveness.

In the old days, companies with household brand names like Procter & Gamble operated on the premise that there were two "moments of truth" that could make or break sales of their products, he said.

The first moment of truth came when a consumer was, say, standing in front of a shelf of products at a supermarket, with only a few seconds to decide which one to buy.

Consumers had to make a spot decision based on price, their previous knowledge about each product and brand, and whatever additional information its packaging managed to convey.

The second moment of truth was the experience they had when they actually used the product - say toothpaste -- for the first time. If they liked it, chances were they'd keep buying it.

"Procter & Gamble says if you can win at the first and second moments of truth, you have a high likelihood of retaining that customer for life," Grandinetti said.

Google's 'zero moment of truth'

But today, consumers can obtain detailed information about virtually any product with a few taps on a smartphone's touch screen. Advertising may only serve as the impetus for a consumer to launch their own online investigation.

Google calls the decision that results from this online research the "zero moment of truth," or ZMOT.

Grandinetti told a story about his father purchasing a Canon digital camera after seeing a TV ad featuring Ashton Kutcher.

"I said Dad, he advertised for Nikon," Grandinetti recalled. After seeing the ad, his father had gone online to research cameras. "He saw an ad for Nikon, but Canon won in that zero moment of truth," Grandinetti said.

Thanks to online reviews, one consumer's experience using a product -- their "second moment of truth" -- can become another consumer's zero moment of truth.

Consumers have always been willing to do some homework on big purchases like a car or a home. But the rise of consumer rating sites and other sources of online information -- and the ease of accessing it via mobile devices -- means that the "zero moment" comes into play even with more modest purchases.

Google is so enamored with the concept -- which dovetails nicely with the company's business model -- that it's [published an e-book](#), "Winning the Zero Moment of Truth." "Over the past couple of years, online research is changing the nature of the game," Grandinetti said.

From January 2009 through June 2012, searches related to automobiles were up 262 percent, as were searches related to travel (up 211 percent) and real estate (253 percent), he said.

Applying ZMOT to real estate

Think of real estate brokers and agents as products that consumers research, and it's not hard to understand how the "zero moment" would apply to them.

Brokers and agents not only need to be discovered, they need people to discover things about them that will differentiate them from the competition.

Finding the pulse of online consumer behavior makes it easier to create relevant website content and keywords.

The process doesn't have to be rigorous or complex. Grandinetti noted that a quick way to get a feel for what consumers are searching for is to start entering a search term, and see what suggestions Google Instant displays as you type.

As you begin typing "best real estate," for example, [Google Instant](#) may suggest search terms like "best real estate websites," "best real estate apps," or even "best real estate companies to work for," because that's how most users complete that phrase. Showing up in a search of "best real estate companies to work for" in your market might not seem like an obvious way to connect with buyers and sellers.

But, Grandinetti asked, "Wouldn't your customers want to use the company that's best to work for?"

[Google Trends](#) is a free tool that provides more insight, allowing users to type in up to five search terms, and sees indexed query growth over time. Users can see results at the global, national, state or local level, choosing the time period that they want to view.

A chart [generated using Google Trends](#) shows search volume for "foreclosures" has declined in the Orlando area in the last month, but still outnumbers "vacation homes," "investment property," "short sales," and "rental properties."

To make sure that Google's spiders find the unique content you create for your site, Grandinetti recommended [Google Webmaster Tools](#) for optimizing websites for crawling.

Grandinetti also recommended another free tool, [Google Reader](#), for staying on top of news about what's happening in your real estate market and what people are saying about rival companies.

Better to lead than follow?

Many brokers and agents may find that time-tested, proven methods like advertising in newspapers are still working for them today. But Grandinetti suggested that those who haven't given much thought about how to "win the zero moment," should feel some urgency to do so.

"Be nimble -- experiment," he said. "Don't be afraid to innovate."

There's often an advantage to being the first to stake out new territory online, he said, citing the example of a "little recipe gadget" Betty Crocker launched that captured the eye of 81,800 users after six months. When Kraft launched what Grandinetti described as a much more sophisticated app, it had only 9,900 users after six months. Betty Crocker won eight times more users because they were first, he said.

Grandinetti encouraged brokers and agents to at least experiment with AdWords, the pay-per-click ad campaigns built around keywords.

"See how many leads you get from spending \$50 or \$100 day," he said. "Play around in Google AdWords, it's an amazing tool."

To boost your rankings in organic (unpaid) search results, create content that answers questions that your would-be clients are asking.

"Homebuyers have so many questions," Grandinetti said. "You know how to help them. Position yourself as the expert."

YouTube videos are a good way to demonstrate your expertise. Choose specific topics that are relevant and useful to your target audience.

"Tips for first time home buyers in Bay Area California," is a great example of a specific subject that will attract potential clients, he said.

"Don't be afraid to make a homegrown video of yourself," he said, citing the YouTube video above as an example.

YouTube -- a Google company -- is the second-largest search site in the world, he said.

You can build up your customer base by signing up subscribers to your YouTube videos. Create a YouTube channel, and put its URL on your business card.

Research commissioned by Google shows people take three months to one year from the time they begin researching a home purchase until closing (33 percent take three to six months, and 27 percent take 6 months to a year, he said).

Keeping a steady stream of information to those people as they do their research can help you win the zero moment, he said.

Google's social media offering, [Google+](#), allows users to organize and communicate with their customer networks via circles, targeting specific messages only to first-time homebuyers, or second-home buyers, for example.

"I send one message to one group, another message to another group," Grandinetti said.

Like Facebook, Google+ also offers the option of [creating a business page](#) that's geared for building a large audience and marketing to it.

[Adding a +1 button](#) to your website allows visitors to recommend the content they find there to other Google search users, and share it on Google+.

Google's "enterprise class" web analytics tool, [Google Analytics](#), is also free because, Grandinetti said, "we believe, if you have better understanding of the data, you're going to be a better customer for us."

Grandinetti's final piece of advice for brokers was to "make plans to win at ZMOT (zero moment of truth). The No. 1 thing you can do is put someone in charge in the ZMOT. If you don't put someone in charge, it's not going to happen."