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Ensuring truth in Web-vertising



BY JIM CARROLL

It couldn't have been funnier if a professional comedy writer had actually prepared the script.

Last month, a page appeared on the Microsoft Web site titled "Confessions of a Mac to PC Convert." Ostensibly modelled after Apple's wildly successful and brilliant "Switch" ads, the Microsoft page featured a "freelance writer" who had recently abandoned a Macintosh for Windows XP.

Not long after the page (let's call it an "ad") appeared, some Mac zealots, being inherently suspicious of anything that Microsoft might say, suggested in a Weblog that it looked a little too slick. Heck, the page didn't even offer up the real name of the "switcher," as do the Apple ads. From that point, it took only hours for someone to determine that the picture of the "convert" was actually a stock photo. Mere hours later, an AP reporter dug out the fact the supposed case study was actually an employee of a Microsoft PR firm. Not long after, Microsoft removed the Web page.

The resulting online buzz suggested that Microsoft might need a good lesson in "truth in online advertising." Maybe so, because soon after this incident, people began scouring through the Microsoft site searching for other "ads" that might be considered a "Stretch," not a "Switch." They quickly came across a Microsoft Encarta Reference Library ad featuring a 12-year-old boy with a rather remarkable vocabulary. He was writing about "thematic images" and using phrases such as "foreshadowing like the red sunset falling on the French palace." That ad also disappeared soon after.

By this point, people were wondering how Microsoft could be so brilliantly inept. We'll reserve judgment on that issue, but every online marketer should ask themselves: How easy is it to fall into the same trap?

Last spring, I noticed the Bell Canada site featured a Web page denoting that "Bell's e-Catalogue Solutions have helped thousands of business customers reach their e-business goals." Since e-biz seemed to be in kind of a funk, I contacted Bell for clarification. "It would be quite useful to know," I said, "how many companies are using e-catalogues. 1,000? 10,000? 50,000?" Not surprisingly, I soon got a response from a PR rep: "We do not, however, have thousands of customers on our e-Catalogue product line. Unfortunately, this information was not clearly or accurately reflected on our Web site. Please accept our apologies. We will correct the information shortly." The information was subsequently "corrected"–it too disappeared.

Is there a lesson digital marketers can learn from such stories? Definitely. As sprawling Web sites become a key component of corporate communication methods, we've got to instill a truth-in-Web-vertising philosophy.

There are steps you should take to ensure your organization doesn't get caught in the same trap. First, establish a code of ethics for the Web. If people don't know what's unacceptable, then they can always stretch the edges. And given the numbers of people who might be providing content for a corporate Web site, it can be too easy to lose control over the quality of information. Make the code of ethics available to everyone who might be involved with online content. Ensure any information that goes online is truthful, can be independently verified and is credible.

Second, learn to balance freedom with bureaucracy. To maintain quality, you must bureaucratize your site to a degree. But the beauty of the Web is its immediacy. It can be quickly updated, which means you can avoid the often long delays that come with a traditional ad campaign and traditional media. Use its immediacy and don't stifle it, while carefully controlling its power.

Third, control workflow. Successful sites that consist of thousands of pages of information have an established procedure that guides the process by which content goes online. Workflow rules guide the content methodology, provide control over who can update which sections of the site, and include sophisticated content-management tools and methods that ensure a quality Web site.

Last, but not least, don't assume any mistakes can be hidden by your own little Ministry of Truth. Despite the fact that Microsoft quickly took down the offending ads, they were already available on an ongoing basis through Google. From there, people captured images of the pages, and circulated them. So they live on as an embarrassing memorial to what happens when online advertising enthusiasm goes a little too far. (see http://www.jimcarroll .info/archives/000004.html)

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