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April 2005

#### Beyond Billboards

Why Web sites can be an integral part of the selling process

By Alan Horowitz

It's not unusual for Web sites to be afterthoughts in an organization's sales strategy. Many companies, in fact, don't harness them as the powerful sales tools they could be. Berkshire Life, an insurance company based in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, for example, had a site that John Broderick, Berkshire's creative director, refers to as a billboard. "It was nondynamic. It was our answer to what everyone else was doing," he says.

That changed when Ceonex Internet Consulting Inc., of North Adams, Massachusetts, redesigned the site. "Your Web site is just as important as your top salesperson and should be taken just as seriously," says Ceonex CEO Theodore Agranat.

Indeed, Web sites are gaining in sales significance. Donald Chesnut, vice president of creative design at technology services company Sapient Corporation, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, notes that as recently as three years ago, little attention was paid to a Web site's role in the sales process. "Now, the Web site has grown in importance and has, in some cases, become the primary [sales] channel."

Ceonex studied Berkshire's business and processes. It added pictures that included a lake, forest, and people to replace shots of only oak trees, which were meant to imply stability. The color palette was expanded to include reds that give a family-friendly, by-the-fireplace warm feeling. These enhanced the emotional connection between visitors and the site. In addition, the underlying code was simplified to make the site more easily identified by search engines. Contact information, including an agent locator and e-mail addresses, was placed throughout the site to encourage people to act fast. "We wanted to get people off the site and to call or e-mail as quickly as possible," Broderick says.

Results have been dramatic: Monthly hits went from 10,000-12,000 to 35,000-40,000, while e-mail inquiries from prospects increased from 85-100 to 200-250 a month. Craig Roth, vice president at the research firm Meta Group, based in Stamford, Connecticut, says that for a site to be effective, it must evolve over time. Design, he says, "is not a one-time effort. [You need to be] able to handle changes, such as new products, without having to redesign the site." Berkshire has, in fact, been tweaking its site since launching its redesign.

"Stick to basics," Broderick says. "The sales and marketing principles are the same. The site is just another tool." s&mm

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