

Don't Trust an Advertising Agency to Build Your Web Site

Sure, the subject of this essay -- "Don't trust an advertising agency to build your Web site" -- is a sweeping generalization. While some advertising agencies may build great sites, the majority fail big time and their clients suffer as a result.

I've just finished a massive research project on effective Web sites as part of the research for my book *Cashing in with Content: How innovative marketers use digital information to turn browsers into buyers*. Over the course of a year, I have taken a look at least 1000 sites and interviewed dozens of marketing people about the way they build their sites. I have learned that Advertising agencies have a flawed model for Web site design. By understanding the Ad agency model marketers in all kinds of organizations can all learn ways to make our own sites more effective. If you understand these flaws, you can work with you agency and help them be successful. And agency staffers may be able to learn how to do a more effective job with their own Web site work.

I present two of the flawed Ad agency practices here, together with details on why you should avoid these approaches.

Flaw # 1 > Ad agencies focus on aesthetics over information.

Advertising agencies try to convince clients to focus on the sizzle instead of the steak. Their advice is to pay more attention to colors and graphics than to the substance of the Web site: *content*. Often Ad agencies push distracting images or generic stock photos throughout a site and clunky Flash Video introductions or pop-ups on the homepage.

= Why marketers should avoid this:

Visitors who actually want to learn something aren't satisfied and sales are lost. The best Web sites are designed by marketers who have learned to think more like successful publishers: It is important to make a book or magazine readable, but not at the expense of providing something good to read. The Ad agency focus on style over substance is flawed. Imagine if Pulitzer Prizes were only given for design, usability, and functionality but not the actual content?

One of the most important things that publishers do is start with a content strategy and then focus on the mechanics and design of delivering that content. Publishers carefully identify and define target audiences and consider what content is required in order to meet their needs. Publishers consider questions like: Who are my readers? How do I reach them? What are their motivations? What are the problems I can help them solve? How can I entertain them and inform them at the same time? What content will compel them to purchase what I have to offer?

Flaw # 2 > Ad agencies focus on the wrong part of the sales cycle.

Ad agencies often design sites that feature slick, TV-influenced, one-way broadcast messages that feel like advertising. Ad agencies create sites as if they need to grab the attention of visitors for the first time. Many sites designed by Ad agencies sport all kinds of in-your-face images and messages designed to get you to pay attention.

= Why marketers should avoid this:

When a visitor gets to a Web site, you don't need to grab their attention; you already have it! Advertising agencies' strong focus on grabbing attention is rooted in print and TV advertising models, not a Web content-marketing and publishing model. The ad model is flawed, because on the Web, the challenge has shifted from grabbing attention to informing and educating your visitors through content. People who visit Web sites are often further along in the sales process. But most advertising people don't understand this and create ineffective sites as a result. People aren't looking for TV commercials on the Web, they are looking for content.

People use the Web to shop and compare, considering purchase over many days and months before making a commitment. With sites that are too busy advertising, the opportunity to educate and enlighten potential customers--developing a relationship with them that may pay off in the long run--is lost. As a way to compete, successful marketers understand that an effective Web site is about publishing, not advertising.