HOW TO TEST FOR INTERNET MARKETING SUCCESS

INTERNET MARKETING TESTING STRATEGIES

Internet marketing makes it much easier to create tests and learn what works best in order to improve the results of your marketing programs.

You can test almost any facet of your campaign. Testing offers, key messages, ad copy, graphic design, headlines and just about any other element you can think of is not only possible, but easier and much less expensive than with traditional media.

But what should you test and how should you test it in order to get the best results? After all, no one has an unlimited testing budget and even if you did, it's important to test the most important things first and immediately use that information to get better results in a faster and more efficient manner.

TEST HYPOTHESIS

When testing, it's critical to develop an initial test hypothesis, by stating the question you want the answer to. If you can't frame your test into a meaningful question, then you won't be able to develop the test properly.

The first thing you need to understand when building a test plan is what not to test. Don't test things that are unlikely to make a difference. Should your banner be red or blue? Should the submit button be round or rectangular? These tests will most likely yield insignificant results and will only prolong your testing while your campaign wastes money.

Another place to avoid testing is an area we call best practices. If other people have already tested something and published data that tells you it works, then use their experience and don't make these the areas the first thing you test. An example of this would be landing page design. A best practice landing page should have a good offer with a strong call to action, the form above the fold, and a limited amount of copy.

Don't start by testing a bad offer, with no call to action, a form buried deep down the page and thousands of words of copy against the good page. You'll just be wasting your time.

By leveraging experts in website design and direct marketing you can save yourself tens of thousands of dollars and hours and arrive at the answer much faster. So do your homework first and leverage all of the experts and best practices you can.

After you've done all of this, you'll find that there are many things you'll still want to test.

EVERYONE GETS AN OPINION - THEN TEST

A good place to start to build a test plan is based on the disagreements you have with your team on what will improve results and make a stronger campaign. One person will often feel strongly that one topic or offer is best. Another person might strongly believe that a particular media type is best. Still another person will feel that certain creative designs will perform best.

Many times these arguments can be diffused through testing. People often believe strongly that their ideas are best because they've had experience doing something that's worked or not worked, even though they have not really tested it scientifically. These ideas are often good, and it's fine to build them into your test plan.

GOOD THINGS TO TEST

In my experience the best things to test are the things that are likely to make the most difference fastest. In most programs, this includes the offer itself, the advertising media, the targeting and the creative.

THE OFFER

The offer is almost always the most important element of the campaign. What are you asking the user to do? What is their incentive to do it? If you are running a B2B campaign and offering a white paper in exchange for the user's contact information, then it's critical to offer content that is valuable, timely and important. An offer can be an early stage offer such as a white paper, a mid-stage offer such as a case study or demo, or a late stage offer such as a sales presentation.

THE MEDIA

The media you choose to use for your campaign is one of the most important decisions you will make. If you choose to advertise on billboards when newspaper ads, trade show ads or internet banner ads would have been more effective, you can waste a lot of money quickly.

The problem with media decisions are that they are often relatively expensive and any one placement can consume a large portion of your budget, so unless you have a large budget, you can only choose a few items. It can also take a lot of effort to evaluate and manage each media purchase and then collect and analyze the data.

When choosing media it's important to evaluate each option on similar criteria, and then make decisions based on your ultimate goal. This will make it easier to set up the tracking mechanisms you need to evaluate the results once the campaign is over.

If your goal is to drive qualified leads for your sales team, then create a simple table to evaluate all of your media choices. The table will include the name, cost, number of impressions, clicks or contacts expected, leads expected, cost per lead expected. By collecting the data across your media options based on your goals, you'll be able to rank order the media used based on which will produce the most leads or which will produce the lowest cost per lead.

PAID VS. EARNED MEDIA

Today, paid media may only account for a small portion of your media options. If you are active with your website or engaged in social media, you'll also need to manage your investments in time and energy in non-paid media

such as social networking sites, your own website, micro sites, social media, partner sites and press activity. These activities may take very little money, but they all require time and it's important to evaluate these investments in the same way.

If one of your marketing people is spending eight hours per week on social media, then allocate the time they are spending to each of the social media activities to make sure you understand the cost per lead from these activities, just as would from other paid media placements.

Once you have a good list of media options, it's critical to make small bets with your limited marketing dollars on new media until you have a solid understanding of the cost per lead you can expect from each type of media. I've seen a marketing manager get very excited about a new type of Internet marketing program and allocate 75% of their budget to the media without any experience on how well it would perform. Making small bets is critical to testing. If you need to commit large dollars to one media just to buy in, it's very difficult to test it.

CREATIVE TESTING

There are an almost limitless number of creative options you can test in any given campaign. The theme, headline, graphics, photography, copy, and layout can all be tested.

When testing creatives online, you can A/B test or multivariate test. A/B testing simply means that you position two fully designed creative options against each other. The critical part of this testing is that the creatives need to be seen by different segments of the same population at the same time in order for the test to be meaningful. If you send the A test email on Tuesday morning at 9 am and the B test on Saturday night at 10 pm, you won't be sure if it was the time of week or the creative that determined the success of the design. If you show one website ad on the home page and another on an interior product page, the results won't be meaningful. If you run an ad on one keyword and the test on a different keyword, your results could potentially be skewed by outside factors.

You also need to make sure your test results are statistically significant. To do this you'll need to do a little math to make sure you showed both ads enough times and that the results were different enough to tell you that one ad was the winner and the other was the loser.

BUILDING THE PLAN

Once you have these elements in place you are ready to develop the plan. The plan should start with a hypothesis which should give the rational for the test, the test budget, how you plan to run the test and the outcome you expect. In the hypothesis, I like to add a statement explaining the business
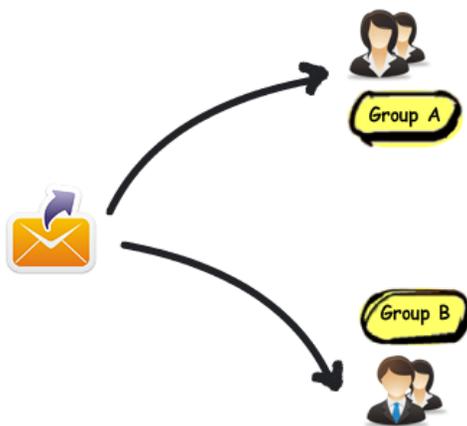
impact so that you can start to make decisions about which tests you should run first, second and so on.

Some tests are very expensive, and can be conducted quickly, while others need more time. For example, creating two competing TV ads, might be a very expensive test, but might result in a strong ROI. Other tests can be run on less expensive media to learn something that can be used on more expensive media. In other words, you might run a test on your website to see which type of offer, and "e-book" or a "white paper" with the same title is more effective. Based on this test, you can use the outcome to position the winner in an email campaign or a banner ad campaign or a direct mail campaign which is more expensive to run.

RECORD THE TEST RESULTS

After you run a test, make sure that you document what you learn. A year or two in the future, a new team may be considering more options for testing and you want to make sure that they don't spend money to repeat a test you've already completed. If you are running tests on a regular basis for every campaign, you'll soon amass a steady list of learnings that will help you get better and better at producing consistent results.

EMAIL TESTING

Email is a critical part of almost every online marketing program. Because of SPAM filters and how easy it is to opt-out of email campaigns, it's critical to make every email valuable and professional. You don't want to antagonize your users with miscellaneous testing emails that cause them to leave. And in many campaigns you can't send your list more than one email per week and in some cases more than once a month.

A critical part of every email creative is the subject line. This is the headline for the program that will either get the reader's attention or cause them to delete the email before they even open it. Because of this, it's critical to test the subject line first. The best way to measure the subject line is to evaluate the open rate. Even though it's not completely accurate, it's a good gauge for you to see if the subject is effective at creating interest.

Another important part of email testing is to evaluate the click through rate. If the user opens the email, the click through rate will tell you if the email itself is doing its job to get the user to take an action.

It's important to test both the open rate and the click through rate to help you see if the email is effective.

ONLINE AD TESTING

Online Ads used across different web sites can be very effective at driving traffic and leads. You can evaluate the effectiveness of different ads based on the click through rate (clicks divided by impressions) to the landing page.

When testing online ads, it's very important to make sure that the ads are shown to the same population in the same context at roughly the same time.

Online ads can be targeted by website, geography, by keyword or can even follow users across the internet.

When you test two ads against each other, make sure that the audience for each ad is consistent or else you will not get results that you can trust.

WEBSITE TESTING

Many organizations don't think about testing within their own website, although this can be the most productive and lowest cost marketing vehicle to test. You should be tracking marketing results on your website with the same metrics you are using to evaluate other media. Impressions, clicks and conversions can all be easily tracked. Since most organizations are using some sort of web analytics tool, the data can be even more granular and provide additional data points like time spent on page or bounce and exit rates.

Your website gives you the ability to rapidly create and deploy tests with no media costs. These tests can take the form of ads on your homepage or other pages, and you can vary the design, offers or messages on these ads, just as you do with other media.

Once you have your hypothesis and your ads developed, you can deploy them and get results on the click through rate in order to see which message or creative is best.

The power of website ad testing is that you can learn quickly depending on the amount of your website traffic, and then deploy these tested ads to other paid media.

Testing is essential to driving a very high ROI for your marketing campaigns. If you use your imagination and deploy the tests in a systematic and disciplined way you can quickly incorporate the learnings into all of your channels.
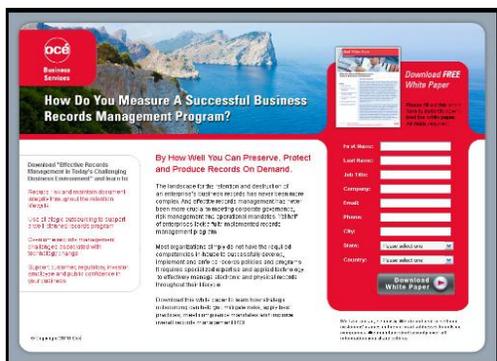
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Reske is the founder and president of Nowspeed, Inc. He founded Nowspeed in 2003 and is focused on delivering world-class Internet marketing services to clients across the US. David has over 15 years of Internet marketing experience in areas such as search (SEO and PPC), social media, email, and website marketing. He has personally worked with over 100 clients to optimize their marketing programs.

Before founding Nowspeed, David was also founder and CEO of Onward Technologies, a web marketing and systems integration firm, where he led the company to significant growth. In 1998, Onward Technologies was purchased by CSC Consulting Group, a division of CSC Corporation that provides information technology services to commercial and government markets. David is a graduate of Ohio State University and completed graduate work at Boston University.

ABOUT NOWSPEED

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