

News

September 16, 2007

Showtime Culls Search Data to Refine Plan

TV Marketers Tap an Online Weapon

By **Daisy Whitney**

Showtime is plumbing the minds of consumers on the Web to fine-tune its marketing pitch for serial-killer drama "Dexter."

It's the next step in the evolution of television marketing. Like many networks, Showtime buys advertisements from Google and Yahoo that are linked to search terms relevant to the show. The premium cable network is among the first, however, to analyze responses to those ads to identify potential fans and pitch them via print, television spots and online ads.

Showtime and its search marketing agency, Outrider, study the data they receive from Google and Yahoo on a daily and, in some cases, minute-by-minute basis to learn which of the search terms they purchased have generated the most click-throughs. That gives the network a better idea of what consumers do and don't like.

The data already has shaped Showtime's "Dexter" marketing campaign. When the network premieres the program's second season on Sept. 30, it will tailor some of its online marketing to horror fans. "Dexter" isn't a horror show, and Showtime didn't anticipate that "Dexter" would resonate so heavily with fans of the genre. But an analysis of what consumers are searching for on the Web helped the network realize that the show's serial-killer protagonist is drawing in fans of slasher flicks.

"We still aren't going to position 'Dexter' as a horror show, but we know we have an affinity in that genre, so we will do more messaging to that audience, almost like a sub-campaign," said Robert Hayes, senior VP and general manager for digital media at Showtime. The online marketing for the show was slated to begin over the Labor Day weekend.

Mining search results is a relatively new technique for marketers looking to improve their effectiveness in engaging consumers, who have become increasingly jaded toward traditional advertising. For Showtime, marketing "Dexter" is particularly important now as it seeks to make gains against rival premium cable channel HBO, which is searching for a hit after "The Sopranos" ended its run.

Showtime says it's impossible to determine how much any specific marketing tactic has contributed to its growth in subscribers. The network currently reaches 14.5 million subscribers, up 200,000 from a year ago.

In August, Showtime generated 1.97 million video streams on Sho.com, an 82 percent increase from the previous month.

The network attributes some of that uptick to search marketing for the return of "Weeds" and debut of "Californication," in part because nearly 59 percent of visitors to Sho.com came directly from search engines.

Paid search, which generates the ads that appear above and to the right of search results, is the largest category within Internet advertising. It accounts for about 40 percent of the \$21.7 billion spent on online ads this year, according to market research firm eMarketer.

Search results may become one of the most valuable marketing data sources available because they represent a real-time, unfiltered look at what's on the minds of consumers.

Marketers are just learning that they can take that information and use it to inform all of their ad-spending decisions.

"It's pretty cutting-edge to use search engines to inform the rest of your marketing decisions," said Bill Tancer, general manager of global research for Internet audience research firm Hitwise.

Online retailers leverage search-term data to help ensure they stock the products for which consumers are searching. Mr. Tancer said Hitwise also has newspaper clients that use search data on hot news topics to make coverage decisions. But few other marketers have glommed onto the font of consumer knowledge that search represents, he said.

Showtime uses search marketing to drive users from Google and Yahoo to its Web site, Sho.com. Once there, the goal is to entice people to become or remain subscribers to the pay TV service.

Showtime buys obvious search terms such as "Dexter" to attract the low-hanging fruit, but it also aims to capture viewers who are interested broadly in the content of a show. That's why the network buys terms like "serial killer," "forensics" and "crime scenes" for "Dexter."

The network is backing up its faith in search marketing with more investment. Mr. Hayes said Showtime is increasing spending on the medium, though he declined to say how much is being allocated. "Marketers should look at the Internet as a massive, real-time focus group," Google spokesman Brandon McCormick said. "Consumer behavior such as search patterns and traffic data can give marketers powerful insights into what consumers are interested in."

Showtime plans to mine the search results for all its shows, Mr. Hayes said.

When Showtime launched "The Tudors" last January, the paid search listings indicated that a supporting actor, Henry Cavill, had become one of the most popular "Tudors"-related search terms.

When Showtime launches its marketing late this year for the January return of the show, it will feature Mr. Cavill in the art in TV, print and online ads. Showtime also plans to buy additional search terms connected to the young rising star, such as movies he appears in and people he is associated with or dating.

Source: http://www.tvweek.com/news/2007/09/showtime_culls_search_data_to.php

Tags:

Dexter, Print Edition, Showtime, The Tudors