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Brand advertising's next big idea

One of the biggest challenges facing retailers with brand advertising on the Internet is how to turn impressions into repeat clicks that result in additional sales. Banner ads and paid search are certainly effective vehicles for creating brand awareness, but they are expensive and competition for high profile placements is fierce. Nor is there a guarantee these tactics will deliver the stickiness retailers desire from their brand awareness strategies because of the fragmented nature of the web as an advertising medium—a landscape that includes domain names, e-mail, blogs, customer newsletters and social networking sites.

Given the downside to brand advertising on the Internet, the conclusion that marketing experts are drawing is that retailers' online branding efforts must evolve in a way that delivers more control over exposure of their brand to the consumer, while further differentiating it. As a result, retailers continue to search for new marketing vehicles around the online transaction that can make their brand top-of-mind with shoppers—and even enter shoppers' subliminal consciousness.

While searching for a more convenient way to log onto web sites and enter user names and passwords, Kirk Godby, founder of Ft. Worth, Texas-based SmartIcon Technologies LLC, hit upon a solution to the problem of how to create a branded online experience. Godby's idea was to leverage the real estate on the shopper's computer desktop to deliver a branded icon that allows shoppers to log onto the retailer's web site with a single click.

Creating brand awareness

The idea evolved from the same concept software providers use to enable consumers to launch an application on their computers. Each application icon features the brand of the software provider, which in turn generates brand awareness.

"Every retailer is looking for new and innovative ways to create brand awareness," Godby says. "Placing an icon on the desktop that automatically launches access to the retailer's site when clicked is a way to provide a competitive edge in brand building and cultivating customer loyalty. Every sophisticated marketer knows the power and value of 24-7 advertising."

With this concept in mind, SmartIcon Technologies developed SmartLogin™, a patent pending software application featuring the retailer's brand in the form of an icon that resides on the desktop and that automatically logs consumers into their personal accounts on a retailer's web site when clicked.

The program, which can be downloaded from the retailer's web site, a CD, a flash drive or via email in about 20 seconds, is also installed on the browser toolbar and Microsoft Windows' Quick Launch taskbar, further increasing the visibility of the retailer's brand on the shopper's computer. As consumers' awareness of a retailer's brand increases, so do the odds they will click on the retailer's icon to begin their product search, as opposed to a search engine.

"Because the logo is in multiple places on the shopper's computer screen, it's always staring them in the face when they are on the system," Godby says. "It is the type of presence retailers can't get through traditional ad channels."

In addition to being an omnipresent brand awareness vehicle, SmartIcon is a convenience tool that can engender greater loyalty because it automatically logs shoppers into the retailer's site. Shoppers do not

have to type in the retailer's address, go to their favorites menu to locate the site address or enter passwords and user names to access an account.

"By eliminating these steps consumers can get right on to the retailer's site and start shopping in one click," Godby says. "It also enables consumers to add the icons of favorite retailers. In a business as competitive as retailing, where consumers have multiple choices, that level of convenience is a huge competitive differentiator." The company's slogan is Always On, Always There and Always Logs You In.

Boosting sales

Providing one-click access can also boost sales. During the initial trial conducted with a package courier in the Fort Worth area, online orders increased from 40% to 70% of total sales. As the number of online orders increased, the number of orders placed through the call center decreased. Godby tested the application with package couriers because their customer base is made up of companies whose time-critical needs exceed the capabilities of conventional overnight services. The courier companies also face stiff competition that erodes margins and many are looking to reduce operating costs by shifting more orders to their web sites.

"This is a tool that can help retailers drive more business online," Godby says. "I can see consumers having multiple retailer icons on the desktop just for the convenience factor alone. How often do consumers forget their user name and password for a site they infrequently log onto?"

Since its beta project launch to selected same-day courier companies in 2007, SmartLogin™ has been installed on more than 10,000 personal computers in North America that generate more than 25,000 orders per month. The application is currently being reviewed by several large retailers. SmartIcon offers two pricing plans, a flat rate paid annually or monthly and a per installation rate per month in which retailers pay based on the total number of installations. With the latter, fees can be tiered down based on volume of installations. The overall pricing structure is far less expensive than click-through rates, paid search, national media advertising or direct mail.

Retailers can also leverage real time reporting data that tracks the total number of installations and how many times those installations have been clicked. More detailed information can be broken out to show usage by IP address and the time and date of when the shopper clicked on the icon. The information can be exported into Microsoft Excel.

"This is dynamic information that can help retailers understand customer usage patterns," Godby says. This cookie-free application is truly unique. Consumer log-in data and the icons will not be removed through routine maintenance scans to eliminate Internet cookies, and IT loves it because there are no support issues.

Making business run smoother

Godby, who has a professional background in the same-day courier business, hit upon the idea for SmartIcon when he realized how much time he spent logging on to web sites throughout the day. "My focus is on finding ways to use technology to make business run smoother and when I figured out how much time went into entering web addresses, user names and passwords, it made sense to come up with a short cut," he says. "These are manual processes that can be streamlined to deliver a higher level of convenience to the customer."

After spending more than three years developing and testing the application, Godby admits that retailers marvel at the simplicity of the idea and that no one came up with it sooner. "There are so many high-tech ideas in e-retailing that an idea like this can get lost in the shuffle, even though it seems so obvious," Godby says. "We are providing retailers with the equivalent of a static billboard that is always in view."