

Using the Internet to Market Memberships

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As of March 2003, it's estimated 649 million people are Internet users and that number is only expected to grow. Figures estimate Internet usage will climb to 940 million by 2004.

Gartner Inc., the world's leading technology research and advisory firm, reports that the value of goods and services ordered online, including broker and agency revenue, but not including the gross transaction value of shares and other financial instruments traded on-line, has increased from \$11.24 billion in 1998 to \$380.5 billion in 2003.

Obviously, the world's reliance on the Internet is increasing exponentially and the private club industry can no longer ignore their members, and potential members' reliance on the Internet for commerce and information.

About 22,500 new web sites are launched daily and two million new individual web pages are launched daily as well (a few billion web pages are already online). Recently, I searched for "private golf club" on Google; it came back with 996,000 results. When I searched for "private club memberships," it came back with 128,000 results.

Many private clubs are coming to realize the importance of at least having a web site. Today, it is estimated that about 50 percent of private clubs have a web site.

Just having a web site, however, isn't always enough. Once you have a web presence, the next step is ensuring that people can find your club online. Your members will undoubtedly know your web site address, but what about prospective members?

Even if the majority of your site is password protected, most clubs want potential members to have access to a non-password protected public area so they can find out more about your club and membership contact information, should they consider joining.

The majority of Internet surfers use search engines as their primary method of finding information, businesses and resources online. According to the Georgia Institute of Technology, 88 percent of Internet users locate web sites through search engine listings.

If your web site is not fully optimized to rank high on these search engines, you simply will not be found. This process is known as search engine optimization (SEO). Unfortunately, 96 percent of all web site designers don't

know how this is accomplished. SEO is a constantly changing professional practice and it is wise to seek the help of a reputable search engine-marketing firm.

An increasing number of your prospective members also rely on the Internet to find private club membership information and private clubs are searching for the most effective way to market their memberships through the Internet.


Finding effective ways to generate leads in cyber space is a very urgent issue. Traditionally, some clubs ventured to advertise through traditional media like the yellow pages, newspapers and magazines. Other clubs were not entirely comfortable with this idea.

Internet marketing is hot; in fact, it has caught up quickly to, and is poised to surpass "offline" alternatives. One survey indicates that small to medium size businesses are increasingly attracted to Internet marketing because it works and is much more cost-effective than print. Private clubs need to recognize this change and make adjustments to their membership marketing strategy.

If private clubs choose to utilize online advertising for membership marketing, they must retain the exclusivity and integrity of their club while generating quality membership leads.

Private clubs are unique from public clubs or semi-privates. In choosing a firm to market your club, look to the number of requests they receive from carefully chosen sources including search engines and strategic partners.

Unlike traditional print-based advertising media, the Internet has no physical boundaries and attracts visitors across the world. If used correctly, it can allow clubs to maintain their integrity by generating leads, rather than memberships. Private clubs should always have full control over the type of information disclosed to potential members and then be responsible for converting the generated leads into actual memberships.

As private clubs across the country continue to be challenged by declining memberships, they should look to alternative marketing strategies and take advantage of the quickly growing popularity of the Internet. 

Steve Hwangbo is President of PrivateClubMemberships.com, a uniquely qualified service that can provide 501(c)(7) or taxable private clubs with access to buyers and sellers of private club memberships. He can be reached at (714) 484-3000, extension 101.