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Internet Yellow Pages

Level the playing field

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“Isn’t the Internet replacing Yellow Pages print usage?” is the question we’re asked most often at industry tradeshows. The answer is a simple, “no,” but it’s not as simple as that.

Although people use the Internet more and more to research products and services, they’re still referring to print directories. According to CRM Associates’ 2006 research, 47 percent of those consulting Internet Yellow Pages in certain categories also use the hardcopy directory. In fact, the heaviest users of print directories are the biggest group of Internet users as well.

What does this mean for the self-storage industry? Well, facility owners and managers now have an additional source to attract customers. The Internet is the small-business owner’s best way to level the playing field against the big guys.

The Field

Nearly 3.5 million storage-related searches are conducted by consumers annually on the three most widely used Internet Yellow Pages (IYP) sites:

1. **SuperPages.com:** published by Verizon; partners with MSN
2. **Yellowpages.com:** formed by a merger between AT&T’s smartpages.com and Bell South’s tealpages.com; partners with Yahoo and AOL
3. **Dexonline.com:** formerly published by Dex Media, which was recently purchased by R.H. Donnelley; partners with Yahoo

The Lineup

Unbeknownst to many business owners, you can’t advertise on the Internet without a website and a host company. Hire a professional company to design the website, making it as simple as possible for customers to navigate.

Think of your website as your introduction to prospective customers. Unlike Yellow Pages print ads, space is not restricted, so display as much facility information as possible:

- Sizes
- Rates
- Access/office hours
- Availability of packing and moving supplies
- Truck rental
- Boat, RV and/or vehicle parking (indoor/outdoor)
- Climate control
- Office services (fax, phone, wireless, meeting space)
- Access control
- Door alarms
- Wine storage
- Introductory rental rates

The site can also include a map and printed directions (or a link to Mapquest) for people to find you easily.

If you're located in an area largely populated by Hispanics, you'll draw many to your facility if the website is also displayed in Spanish, reached through a hyperlink from your English-language page. Even if the population is largely bilingual, you'll gain huge customer loyalty by advertising to customers in their native languages.

Drafting Key Players

The three IYP sites mentioned above usually duplicate the same geographic areas covered by their printed directories. For example, Yellowpages.com draws the most traffic from AT&T and BellSouth directory-delivery areas; SmartPages.com from Verizon; and Dexonline.com from the 14 (former) Dex states (this coverage will ultimately expand due to the Dex acquisition by Donnelley).

However, don't assume this to be always true. For example, I was speaking to a group of storage owners in Pittsburgh earlier this year, an area where Verizon has a stronghold. I discovered a majority of the seminar's participants advertised with Yellowpages.com rather than SmartPages.com—perhaps because the former had been running a \$20 million advertising campaign. Don't be fooled by snappy ads. Do your research to determine which cities drew the most IYP storage-related traffic to the geographic area you are targeting. The best way to get information is from someone selling IYP: either a local salesperson representing a specific IYP publisher or a national advertising agency.

Positions

Since customers typically hail from a 3- to 5-mile radius of your facility, focus on a local buy if you own one or more facilities in a particular area. Measure the radius to incorporate city names from which customers will drive. If it only covers

one or two cities, you may save money by just buying in those areas. If it covers more, a “county buy” may be more economical (perhaps even a two-county buy if you are drawing customers from more than one county).

The more targeted the area, the less competition you’ll encounter. To check out where your competition is, go to the IYP sites for your area. Under “business type,” type in “storage.” Under “location,” key in different cities and counties and note where your competitors pop up.

You may find the most effective IYP advertising requires you to buy listings on more than one site. Local-based listings are not terribly expensive, and can be well worth the investment.

If you own several facilities in different areas, you can target them through a local buy, or you can try a “metro buy” or “state buy.” You can hit multiple states, if necessary, depending on your facilities’ locations.

Avoid a “national buy” unless you have properties in numerous states. If you do have multi-state locations, you’ll want to research different IYPs. SmartPages.com, for example, may be the most effective for some sites, while another might better serve different geographic locations.

The Pitch

IYP placement works very much like Yellow Pages print—the more you spend, the closer you’ll be to the beginning of the category. Some IYP sites have “tiers,” referring to the proximity to the top of the first page, i.e., Tier One placements come first, then Tier Two, etc.

An advertiser’s location within the higher-tier placement is determined by seniority based on the date and time you register (commit to buy) the product. These products have a fixed price, which varies depending upon geographic coverage and ad placement.

For an additional fee, you can probably add enhancements such as color or icons (logo, link to website). They might draw more attention to your ad. Regardless of placement, if you can’t be on the first page, you may not want to buy IYP at all. Just as in Yellow Pages print advertising, you must consider whether you are vying with direct competitors (within 3 to 5 miles) or against facilities that wouldn’t be targeting *your* customer.

Some sites offer performance-based products, such as “pay-per-click.” The placement for these depends on who’s the highest bidder for their buy (city, county, metro, state, etc.) within the category. It’s like an auction: You decide how much you want to spend and bid.

Let's say you want to spend a maximum of \$500 and no more than \$1 bid per click. After 500 visitors click through the IYP site to visit your website, your ad will be taken off the site unless you commit to spending more. Advertisers will frequently buy a fixed-placement ad along with a pay-per-click product to ensure they'll still have an ad running once pay-per-click is removed. While an excellent way to monitor performance by tracking visitor numbers from IYP, it's a demanding program to manage. You'll need a staff member to monitor the program daily, or you'll have to hire a company to manage it for you.

Some IYP sites offer advertising under multiple categories for the same rate. If so, take advantage of categories most effective for your particular situation; i.e., boxes; packing and moving supplies; boat, RV or vehicle storage, etc.

The Ninth Inning

Do your research. Talk to representatives from IYP sites covering your area. Ask questions and make sure you understand answers before making a decision. Ask about coverage area and traffic reports specific to your area and category. Also, get pricing information. Contract agreements cover predetermined periods of time, generally a year, but they may have an automatic-renewal clause. Find out if you'll have to sign a new contract after a year or have to contact your rep to cancel.

While it's true that choosing Internet Yellow Pages advertising is a bit confusing, it promises a good return on investment as an addition to your Yellow Pages print exposure. Choose your players and game plan wisely to become a big hitter in the self-storage playing field.

Sue Weinman, senior account executive, represents the Yellow Pages Division of The Michaels/Wilder Group, an advertising agency that specializes in Yellow Pages, Internet and recruitment advertising. Based in Phoenix, the award-winning firm works with hundreds of self-storage owners and managers. For more information, call 800.423.6468; visit www.michaelswilder.com.