

SHOULD I MARKET MY WEDDING BUSINESS ONLY ONLINE? THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE MAKING THE BIGGEST MARKETING DECISION YOUR COMPANY HAS EVER CONSIDERED.

The Internet is a powerful wedding planning resource – so much so that nearly every bride uses it to some extent to find or evaluate wedding vendors. But, does that mean a wedding vendor should commit all of his or her marketing dollars to the web only?

Since 2003, *The Wedding & Special Event Yellow Pages* has invested significantly to market its own business online. Like many of our clients, we are enthusiastic about the web and its potential as a shopping tool for brides and a marketing tool for wedding vendors. We believe it should be a key part of any wedding vendor's marketing mix – but, we also believe that relying on it as the *sole* medium of advertising is a very risky decision. Here's why.

The long-term costs of being wrong are high.

Most vendors who tell us they're mulling moving to 100% Internet marketing are only considering it because "other leading vendors" say it's the best approach. The problem is, what if these influential vendors are wrong?

It will take *years* for the consequences of dropping traditional media to play out – so the influencers that recommend this bold decision now may not even realize they've made a mistake. How much risk can you afford to take?

We are already seeing vendors who dropped all print a few years ago come back to print – especially in the Bay Area, where the "internet revolution" happened first. Considering that they lost not only the brides they would have booked, but also all the referrals that those brides would have produced, these vendors paid a heavy price for not understanding fully how their customers shop.

Tracking challenges belie what's really happening.

Most vendors find that when they ask a bride "how did you find us?" or "why did you call us?" most brides now say "I saw your web site," "I liked your web site," or even "I'm on your web site right now." And therein lies the tracking rub. Because while your web site is probably the last information source a bride will see before she contacts you, that doesn't mean that your web site alone produced the lead.

Today's brides use a wide variety of media (print, shows, wedding web sites, search engines) to make decisions – as most people do when contemplating their most significant and expensive purchases. However, unlike in the past, brides *don't* typically respond to wedding advertising by picking up the phone – instead, they go to company web sites first. Instead of prompting calls, your marketing efforts now send brides to your web site. And that means that "I saw your web site" doesn't tell you much about how she *really* came to call you.

When it's not obvious where leads come from, it's tempting to conclude that offline marketing investments are no longer effective – after all, if you can get the same results without investing in marketing, why not cut out offline marketing and enjoy higher profits? But, assuming that a bride saw your web site because of free search engine traffic is a dangerous assumption.

Let's say your log files show that you're getting lots of search engine referrals. Can you be sure that these visitors are motivated buyers? How many are competitors checking out their rivals? How many are not even brides, but browsers who made an imprecise web search – then clicked on your link out of curiosity?

Or, how many found you on a search engine because they typed in your name to find you? When a bride uses a search engine to find a company she's already heard of, it's offline marketing driving the process – not the search results.

All of these things potentially limit the value of search engine traffic. But perhaps most important, even if your company ranks well with search engines, and even if that means significant qualified traffic coming your way for free, that can change in a heartbeat. The search engines have their own proprietary methods for ranking sites in response to keyword searches, and those methods can change any time.

[Please note also, while the web has confounded tracking your marketing results, there are ways to get more accurate information than simply asking brides. (Accurate tracking concerns you greatly – but concerns the brides not at all.) Ask us for ideas – we're happy to help.]

Rumors of offline media's demise are greatly exaggerated. If brides don't value print media, why do they still pick up the books? If they don't value shows, why do they still go?

We've seen no drop-off in demand for our print product. We increased our circulation steadily from 2003-2005, and this year will have no problems distributing 22,000 copies of our book.

Brides also report to us that they use the book largely to determine *which* web sites they want to visit for more info. Print is a web site traffic-driver – and a relatively inexpensive one.

Similarly, wedding shows throughout Northern California are still well-attended – in fact, producers are so bullish, a number of new shows were launched this year, and more are set to debut next year. This media market wouldn't continue to be so dynamic and competitive if brides weren't still interested in attending shows.

Even the biggest *online-only* companies rely on traditional media (print, tv, radio) to reach new customers. If the world's leading Internet companies (like eBay, Yahoo! and Match.com) are having trouble finding sufficient customers using just online advertising, can local wedding vendors assume they'll do better?

http://news.com.com/eBay+launches+national+TV+ad+campaign/2100-1024_3-5916234.html

<http://www.adrants.com/2005/01/matchcom-launches-national-print-campaign.php>

<http://www.techweb.com/wire/ebiz/193003128;jsessionid=404VXOQG5C5CCQSNL0SKH0CJUNN2JVN>

These companies realize that traditional media are essential (and more cost-effective) for reaching customers en masse and creating awareness than the web – so, when they need to get the word out quickly and acquire new customers, they don't rely on web advertising alone – *even though they conduct 100% of their business online.*

Consider, also, that your customer acquisition problem is, in some ways, much trickier than eBay's (or Match.com's, or Yahoo.com's, or Amazon.com's). Each bride will shop once, during a short time period, and then the opportunity is gone. Doesn't it make more sense to try to intercept her everywhere she's looking?

The out-of-pocket cost of online advertising (done alone) is much higher than it appears. Most companies consider switching to online-only because they believe it will be less expensive. However, the opposite may be true, as online pay-per-click advertising – e.g., through Google, Yahoo!, et al – is much costlier than it appears at first blush.

Consider this math: On average, for any product, .5-2% of people reached via *effective* advertising initiate further contact. For a vendor with a very high level of awareness in the market (say, through an extensive referral network of other vendors), that number might be higher – maybe 5%. Of the .5-5% who click, maybe you are very effective at selling brides, so that you can regularly convert 25% to buyers. That still means a lot of expensive clicks to purchase!

Assuming you convert 25% of the people who contact you by phone, and your goal is to book 50, that means you need to get 200 people to contact you. Even if you're converting 5% of the people who see your web ad and web site into callers (or emailers), that means you need 4,000 valid clicks – *all from qualified brides* – to reach the people you need to reach via web links alone.

All from qualified brides is the important point here. The 4,000 click goal doesn't take into account the huge numbers of fraudulent clicks, duplicate clicks, clicks from curious non-buyers, and clicks from competitors that can't count toward this total. Most experts believe that fraudulent clicks alone account for 50% of clicks purchased, as explained here:

<http://www.searchenginelowdown.com/2004/09/fifty-percent-of-ppc-clicks-fraudulent.html>

Beyond fraudulent clicks, there are duplicate clicks (shoppers who click your same ad twice on different occasions), clicks from competitors (checking out your site), clicks from casual browsers (who absent-mindedly click on your ad "just for the heck of it."). Considering all these factors, you will likely need as many as 12,000 paid search engine clicks just to get the 4,000 qualified visitors to your site that you need to get your 200 calls. At \$1 per click (or sometimes more), that is at least \$12,000 – an expensive proposition. (Especially in comparison to a wedding publication – through which you can reach 10,000 or 20,000 brides in a year for a fraction of that cost.)

The cost of online advertising is going to get more expensive – and, it will be harder to be sure to reach all the brides you need.

Unlike print media, the pricing for web clicks is set on a competitive, auction basis. As more wedding vendors in more categories shift their marketing budgets to online-only, the cost-per-click of web advertising will rise quickly.

If you have no other advertising in place when these prices rise, you will have no choice to pay more – regardless of whether the increased prices are beyond your planned budget.

Moreover, the increased competition will make it harder to reach as many brides as you need – *regardless* of your willingness to pay a higher price per click. Search engines include a limited number of ads on each page – and don't rank the ads by price alone. You might not even be able to purchase all the exposure you need, regardless of price.

This kind of "inventory problem" was rampant in the technology, travel and finance sectors during the Internet boom of the late 90s. So many companies wanted to advertise online that there weren't enough ad positions to accommodate them. That drove prices through the roof -- \$7, \$8 and \$9 clicks were not uncommon. Even today, in hotly competitive categories like asbestos litigation, costs per click can be as high as \$50!

On the flip side, when you consider the cost of attracting all the brides you can reach with print via web ads, the cost of print "marketing insurance" is relatively cheap. Especially when you take into account the extra value of web exposure most print media provide. Because it blankets an audience, print offers a much more cost-effective means to reach your audience – with no loss of targeting.

What's more, most print products (ours included) offer web exposure along with their print ads. These web sites deliver *pre-qualified* leads to your site – at no out of pocket cost to you. Plus, links from targeted, wedding-related sites may help boost your rankings in search results of some sites – helping you receive more free traffic from these search engines.

As other wedding vendors in your category flock to Web-only advertising, they leave the microphone more and more open in print.

Professional media planners use a term called "share of voice" to describe how much of the total communication being presented to potential customers is coming from your company's advertising. It's a way of understanding how much of the market's attention you're able to grab with your marketing investments.

When other companies reduce their investments in traditional media in favor of increasing use of pay-per-click advertising and paid links, that makes it easier for those that remain to get more attention with their advertising in traditional media – i.e., to increase their share of voice. Conversely, it's tougher to get more attention with web clicks when more and more of your competitors are focusing their efforts there.

Consider the case of Kellogg's versus Post. Kellogg's maintained its advertising during the Great Depression – despite lower revenues. Post, like most companies, cut its advertising. Kellogg reaped a huge market share advantage that persisted for more than 50 years. Similarly, during the recession of the 70s, Revlon made huge, lasting gains against Avon by continuing to advertise as Avon pulled back. In both of these examples, continuing to advertise while competitors were pulling back allowed these companies to create a persistent improvement in their share of market.

Both Kellogg's and Revlon benefited from the repeat-purchase nature of their products – by attracting new customers while advertising at an "open microphone," they stole customers from competitors *and* secured future, repeat business. The wedding market has a characteristic that makes advertising almost as powerful: referrals. Each bride attracted by advertising to your business may ultimately lead to 5 or 10 additional bookings through referrals. When you attract extra brides by advertising when/where your competitors aren't, the long-term benefit can be extraordinarily powerful.