

# F FEMSA N NEWS



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# MASTERING ON-LINE MARKETING

By Alex Ford, CEO, FireRescue1.com



## THE BASICS OF ON-LINE MARKETING IN THE FIRE SERVICE—PART I

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We live in an exciting time. The way we communicate and access information has changed more profoundly in the past 10 years than during any other time in our history. Beyond the social significance, this has important ramifications for how we as companies interact with our customers and vice versa.

Whether you are a marketing manager, executive or small business owner, there is one thing that is certain in 2008: Reaching and marketing to our customers is much more difficult and complex today than it was 10 years ago. In thinking about marketing, I used to talk a lot about the "Law of 7s", which meant that to influence behavior a marketer must touch a customer seven times before that customer takes action. I then started talking about the "Law of 11s". But with our customers now being bombarded with more and more advertisements - an estimated 3,000 per day or more than one million per year - it is really more like the "Law of 17s".

At the same time, the evolution of the Internet into a key form of media has made the job of the marketer tougher. It is no longer about print ads and trade shows with a little direct marketing and sponsorship mixed in. The Internet has changed the rules of the game across all industries. Marketing is simply tougher than it once was, and reaching the fire service and first responders is certainly no exception.

## ONLINE MARKETING TO THE FIRE SERVICE

Our job as marketers is to answer this question: In an increasingly noisy and challenging environment, how can you capture the attention and interest of first responders and use marketing to create real and demonstrable business value?

My company has been marketing to first responders and helping clients reach the public safety market for nearly 10 years. This article is designed to address the complexity and challenges of online marketing and help you better understand and take advantage of the opportunities it presents.

So why should you care? Isn't the fire market still about relationships, trust and face-to-face contact? Yes, it certainly is. The goal of this column is not to tell you to move your ad budget online or forego offline options, but to highlight important trends in your customers' behavior and product research preferences and give you the tools to effectively add online as a critical component of your marketing strategy. Used effectively, online marketing reinforces and enhances the trust and relationships you have developed offline.

## ARE FIREFIGHTERS ONLINE?

Most of us are familiar with overall trends related to Internet use. I would bet that 90% of those reading this article have researched electronics - a laptop, a DVD player or a flat screen TV- using Google, CNET or another online resource within the past 3 months. If you're like me, you probably receive some sort of annoying email, video or link from your mother on at least a weekly basis.

Here are a few stats that illustrate the growth of the Internet:

- 71.4 percent of the U.S. population is now online, representing 126 percent growth over the year 2000.
- \$34.7 billion was spent online in the third quarter of 2007 alone and as of year end 2007, more than 50 percent of U.S. consumers had bought a product online.

- 60 percent of U.S. consumers use the Internet to do product research, with 20 percent of Internet users doing so on a given day.
- 48 percent of internet users have visited a video-sharing site such as YouTube, a number that is growing at 46 percent year over year.

But it seems there is a disconnect between recognizing these trends and applying this knowledge to marketing to the fire service and first responders as a whole. I believe there are a number of reasons for this, including comfort with existing media channels, the amount of work required to make online marketing work, too many advertising options and poor customer service from many of the online media sites out there.

Perhaps the most common excuse for the lack of online marketing strategies is the perception that the fire service is antiquated, backward and resistant to new technology. We tend to think of them not as mass market consumers, but as old-fashioned, traditional thinkers, beholden to forms of media such as magazines and the occasional trade show.

This may have been true in 2000, when perhaps 10 percent of firefighters were using the Internet. But things are much different in 2008; when was the last time you went into a fire department that didn't have online access?

I can definitively say that the fire service has moved online. We estimate that 73% of first responders now regularly access the Internet. More than 30,000 firefighters are on Facebook. We have estimated that the major firefighting Web sites collectively receive more than 1.8 million unique visitors each month. Our fire sites alone receive more than 360,000 unique visits each month, which is the equivalent of roughly 11 FDICs.

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## WHAT ARE FIREFIGHTERS DOING ONLINE?

OK, enough stats - you get it. Firefighters are online. But you're likely asking, "Yeah they're online, but what are they doing that is relevant to me as marketer?"

When thinking about online behavior, we Internet guys use the term "Use Cases". Use cases describe the set of needs, behaviors and the related activities that drive the use of a specific Web site. For example, if you use an online banking site, your use cases could include transferring money, checking your balance, or researching additional products like mortgages and lines of credit. For firefighters, we have identified the following four primary use cases that drive their online activity:

**Product Research** – More and more, firefighters have embraced the internet as a tool for product research. A large percentage of visitors to firefighting-focused web sites are driven by their interest in researching product purchases. Fire products are often complex, highly specified and mission critical. Many require education and ongoing training as part of the sales process. The online environment is ideal for this process and sites like present firefighting product information in a clean, easily navigable manner are becoming first stops when a firefighter or department needs to research products.

**Breaking News/Current Events** – Due to the local and regional nature of firefighting and the low frequency of calls, current events are an important tool for training and staying informed. Incidents and trends that are seen in one part of the country are directly relevant to most others. That, combined with the need to stay informed of homeland security threats in a post 9/11 world, has made staying abreast of current events essential. Before the Internet, "current" meant reading about an incident in a magazine three months after it occurred.

**Training Information and Research** – Firefighters spend the majority of their time training and only a fraction responding to calls, which means firefighting is decidedly a training-focused business. For the fire service, the Internet has become a 24-7 training environment. Access to video, online training tools, research, articles and case studies has been a major factor in driving firefighters online.

**Community and Interaction** – We all know that the fire service is an incredibly tight-knit community, but it is still fragmented across more than 30,000 departments, most small or volunteer and lacking significant resources. The Internet is ideal for connecting disparate groups of people and facilitating interaction. Whether they are discussing extrication techniques, new products, analyzing incidents or sharing photos of their pets, firefighters are communicating online in record numbers.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The bottom line is that the Internet is here to stay and the activities firefighters are engaging in online are DIRECTLY relevant to your company. Some of you have started to interact with your customers online in a meaningful way, others are dabbling online, and some are still hoping it will go away. Let me be blunt: If you are not incorporating online advertising into your marketing mix, your strategy will be incomplete and less effective at best and, at worst, you will lose sales opportunities and customer relationships to your competitors.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Online is a unique and rapidly evolving media channel and form of advertising. It offers marketers a highly flexible and complex environment that goes well beyond the traditional "About Us" corporate web site. This flexibility means the Internet can meet a wide range of marketing objectives, including:

- Building brand exposure
- Creating a thought leadership position
- Launching new products
- Differentiating your products
- Driving leads
- Conducting PR
- Managing your corporate presence
- Training your customers

- Educating the market
- Addressing business challenges
- Getting feedback from customers
- And, of course, selling

There's no way around it - online advertising requires work. It's not as simple as creating a one-page print ad and running it in three publications 12 times per year.

But a good general command of the basics of online marketing and the various options available to you puts you in a good position for success. Also, online is measurable and can be tracked, and online advertising is significantly less costly per impression and per lead than traditional print or trade show marketing. It's easy to run a couple of test campaigns and then refine.

Your customers and potential customers are online in rapidly growing numbers. As one of our top clients likes to say, "Fish where the fish are." This column is design to help you do it right and take away a lot of the mystery around the Internet and online marketing. Grab your pole and let's do some fishing.

Check next quarter's FEMSA Newsletter for part 2 of this column, in which we'll address some of the basic online marketing terms and explain the varied options available to you.

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