

Creating a consumer-friendly website

by www.canadianmortgageprofessional.com

November 2007 - When did you last invest some time, money and thought into your company's website? If you're having a tough time answering that question, you're not alone. Canadian Mortgage Professional explores how brokers can create a website that their customers will want to visit regularly

While the mortgage brokering industry has taken great strides over the past few years to increase its professionalism, the virtual world of brokering hasn't progressed at the same pace. And with more consumers opting to do their mortgage research online, this could be costing the industry a good chunk of market share.

According to a 2007 report by the Canadian Bankers Association, more than 343.5 million banking transactions were made online in 2006 - an increase of 15.6% compared to the previous year, and more than 300% compared to the year 2000. With branchless banking picking up - and companies such as ING Direct and PC Financial succeeding in the online mortgage market - mortgage brokers are in a prime position to penetrate this growing demographic of financial consumers.

To do that, however, brokers will have to rival the online professionalism of the banks - and this means investing in more than a \$500 out-of-the-box template website.

"You have to spend money to make money," says Nikki Harrison, a broker/owner of VERICO Mortgages by Design. "My website gives consumers information and doesn't just tell them that I'm special. I allow customers to educate themselves so that, when they call me, they already know what they want."

Harrison employed the services of a web designer to help launch her second website in May (www.nikkibroker.com). She opted for a chic yet professional design - with a deep turquoise and charcoal grey colour scheme, stock images of children and families, and an easy-to-navigate layout. She's also added some unique features - such as an animated 'virtual' mortgage broker who welcomes visitors to the site, a 'breaking news' section and various mortgage articles and links to online resources.

The site generates 50% of her business, but it doesn't come without a cost. Although she won't disclose the number, Harrison says the price is significant - but it's nothing she can't pay off within two deals. And since the site brings in more than 10 applications a week, the pay-off doesn't take too long.

Changing your website attitude

Harrison's outlook is the type of attitude more brokers have to adopt when creating their websites, says Jason Von Tassel, president of Toronto-based web design company, Mouth Media.

"Having a bad website is almost worse than having no site at all," he says. "You want to give enough information to make a visit to your site worthwhile. The longer a person is on your site, the more likely they'll contact you."

Mouth Media deals primarily with entrepreneurs and small businesses - companies that usually have one or two people running the business, with no internal marketing team. Although these companies are more budget-conscious than larger companies, this doesn't have to stand in the way of creating a professional-looking website, Von Tassel says.

"The main problem with most [small business] sites is they portray an unprofessional image," he says, adding that a lack of branding direction is usually the main culprit. "Some clients have websites that are homegrown, and they feature inconsistent marketing messages, different styles of font, or poorly written text."

Grammatical errors, typos and an amateur or confusing site layout can deter clients, Von Tassel says, adding that employing a web design company can help identify these customer-deterrents and create a consumer-friendly site. Von Tassel gets his clients to point out their competitors' sites - to see what they like and don't like about their online competition - as well as pinpoint some of their preferred non-industry-related sites. He asks them to pay particular attention to styles, colours, features and layouts that they find aesthetically appealing.

What would your customers want?

Obviously, the style, look and content of your website should also satisfy the needs of your customers. In fact, the most successful websites serve as a response to the customer's needs rather than merely an advertisement for the company.

This is an area where small businesses have an advantage because, unlike larger corporations, they know their customers first-hand. This fact helped Gord Wintrup, broker/owner of Langley, British Columbia-based Bayfield Mortgages, when he revamped his company's website in the fall of 2006.

"Bayfield has always focused on the average person in its business strategy," Wintrup says, explaining the philosophy behind the look and feel of the company's website. "We wanted to be professional, but not intimidating. We didn't want to seem 'big bank' - we wanted to be approachable."

Wintrup - along with assistant, Monique Tirschman, and manager of broker development, Connie Beaupre - approached the task from the perspective of people who possessed online habits that were similar to those of the average mortgage consumer. They found the sites that worked the best for them were those that weren't cluttered with too much text, were easy to navigate and had numerous buttons throughout the site that led to contact information.

"We didn't want too much information. Sometimes that can put the average person on information overload and they lose focus," explains Wintrup.

Since the revamp, the website is now bringing in a few applications a month - and serves as an important educational tool both for prospective brokers and clients. "A lot of brokers check us out online before calling to see if they can join us," Wintrup says. "Also, clients check us out online first, and call us up with a few more questions before applying."

While Bayfield's new website is light years beyond its first site, the improvement didn't come without a significant

price increase. "The worst thing you can do is spend very little and buy an off-the-shelf website. It doesn't look professional," Wintrup says. "You have to be prepared to spend at least \$2,000. We tend to spend more."

In fact, Von Tassel from Mouth Media says most small businesses should look to spend between \$3,500 and \$4,000 for a one-time design and development fee. Further improvements and design tweaking are additional costs, but Wintrup says this amount can be reduced if you find ways to update the site yourself.

"It helps if you find a design company you can work with and that allows you to do a lot of the updating yourself," he says.

Adding new articles and creating new keywords to make your site search-engine friendly are simple but effective things you can do to keep your website fresh. Von Tassel also suggests linking your site to various RSS feeds so that you can include current news with very little effort, and updating your 'frequently asked questions' (FAQ) page with actual questions you've heard from customers - rather than merely offering canned FAQs.

"Also, bring in the human element - include client testimonials, case studies or some real life stories of customers that you've helped," he says.

Market your site

Although creating a professional-looking website is a key factor in boosting your online business, the applications won't start coming in until you drive traffic to your site.

"Most brokers believe all you need to do is make a site look pretty and professional and it will make you money," says Doren Aldana, mortgage marketing coach with Vancouver-based Power of Choice Coaching International. "If you build a website customers will not come unless you come up with multiple methods of driving traffic to it."

In addition to constantly updating your site's keywords - search terms that will flag your site when potential customers type it into search engines such as Google - providing a link to your site in your e-newsletter, or acquiring visitors' contact information through special online offers will also help improve your database and get customers visiting your site.

"You have three seconds to make an impression on a potential customer. Offer a free consultation, encourage them to fill out an online application or receive a free report. Provide a reason for people to give you their contact information," he says. "If they don't request it, they're not your ideal customer. This is considered to be 'bold' marketing. It will allow you to get more qualified leads."

Remember to also keep track of the habits of your online visitors. Any good hosting company - the "parking space" for your website - should offer you information about the number of visitors logging into your site, says Von Tassel.

"People usually think hits are important - but they're not. You want to measure the number of 'unique visitors' that are coming to your site. That's the number that you want to go up," he says.