

How to Manage the Google Shake-Up

Does it seem like your company's web site has received significantly less traffic in recent weeks? It's not a glitch, and you're not alone. Thousands of commercial web sites have fallen victim and the effects have been especially severe for builders and real estate agents. On Nov. 16, 2003, Google.com (far and away the world's most popular and powerful search engine) initiated dramatic internal changes to its search result rankings. Since that day, thousands of companies have seen their once highly-ranked web sites become filtered into oblivion, causing major economic damage in the midst of the holiday season and beyond. Because of Google's affiliation with other search engines and portals such as Yahoo! and AOL, the loss in traffic to commercial web sites has been amplified.

If you have not experienced this update with your own eyes, we invite you to try it right now. Visit Google and conduct searches with phrases such as "New Mexico home builders", "Oregon home builders", "Florida new home communities", "New Jersey luxury homes", "Miami new homes", and "Georgia custom homes". What you will find among the results is an assortment of real estate portals, local home builder associations, and local newspapers. Very few individual builder or agent web sites now appear on these searches, and the ones that do are often found quite low among the rankings.

In December, we surveyed builders to find out how visitor traffic to their web sites had been affected since Google changed its ranking results. Roughly 69% of the respondents answered "sharply decreased" or "decreased"; about 12% answered "stayed the same" or "slightly increased"; and, interestingly, more than 19% answered "**skyrocketed!**"

"Google's unfortunate and unannounced change has really hurt small to mid-sized builders and real estate agents, many of whom depended on Google results to direct traffic to their web sites," said Barry Lynn, president and founder of American Home Guides.com (www.americanhomeguides.com). "However, some major builders and developers who actively advertise on referral sites and portals have experienced increased traffic as a result of this change."

The folks at Google have not made an official comment about the update, but industry observers have a number of theories about the motivation behind it. Many feel that this is just the beginning of a major "pay-for-placement" strategy being enacted by the company (which is going public), and that the days of free corporate listings on search engines are coming to an end.

What can builders and real estate agents do right away to drive traffic back to their web sites? We offer the following suggestions:

- **Join a lead referral service:** As you have probably seen from your Google searches, most of the results are from real estate referral services such as American Home Guides.com, Homebuilder.com, and NewHomeSource.com. Traffic to these sites has increased appreciably as a result of Google's update, and builders should take advantage of the services these companies offer. (For online home buyers who forgo search engines altogether, these portals are often the first place they visit.) From a profitability standpoint, advertising your listings on these services is significantly less expensive and more productive than paying broker fees or buying newspaper advertising.
- **Put your web address on EVERYTHING:** Now more than ever, it is up to builders themselves to make sure prospective buyers and existing residents know their company's web address. Look at your advertisements, brochures, hats, golf shirts, give-aways, business cards, pens, stationery...is the web address featured prominently on all these items? Is it included in correspondence to customers and prospects, as well as the outgoing message of your voice-mail or answering machine? If you stopped one of your sales agents and asked them to say the company's web address right on the spot, would they be able to do so? If you answered "no" to any of these questions, you are probably not pushing the web address hard enough and you need to re-prioritize it.

It is an old cliché, but it applies here: "when life hands you lemons, make lemonade." Google's changes could be the worst thing that ever happened to your company's web site, or it could be the opportunity to beat your competitors in the cyberspace turf war. With a small (and increasingly necessary) investment in a lead referral service membership, you will make it much easier for online buyers to find your listings first, and the value of that kind of positioning is immeasurable.

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