Call Tracking: the Missing Piece in the Multi-Channel Marketing Puzzle

by Ray Tennenbaum

At a time when it's almost impossible to turn around without bumping into a budget constraint, maximizing the return on your marketing campaigns is critical. Three goals are constant: 1) increasing sales, 2) reducing cost and 3) improving customer satisfaction and loyalty. With web analysis, acquiring the data to do those things is relatively simple, of course. What you may not know is that the same sophistication has come to call tracking. Advancements in technology have given the the most sophisticated suites of call tracking an array of powerful tools. It's now possible to survey every telephone call your online and offline marketing activities generate -- to see who's calling, what brought them to your site, where they've been, and what they wanted to know. If you rely on phone calls, it may be time for you to listen to who's calling, and why.

How do these tools work? As soon as a user finds a call-tracking-enabled website, the source -- search result, keyword ad, banner, or direct entry -- is used to assign a dynamic, session-based phone number. That number furnishes a multitude of variables -- location, source (branded ad words campaign, SEO-generated results, banner ad, direct email). As soon as a user uses that number to make a phone call, the information is logged; after the answering customer service representative can note further information.

An enterprise that doesn't have the tools to survey the calls its online and offline efforts generate may be allowing potential sales to fall through the cracks. Failure to understand how well advertising campaigns are functioning risks spending needlessly on ads that don't drive results -- resources that might be used more intelligently. And the deep data that call tracking provides can help guide the design and implementation of a site in a way that enhances customer experience and encourages return visits.

Knowledge is power, as search engine evangelist Alan K'necht points out. "Answering the phone costs money, that may or may not lead to a sale. And by understanding what's causing the phone to ring -- both negative and positive rings -- a marketer can then optimize marketing efforts to maximize sales for their company's marketing spend."

For the vast majority of online sellers, the phone call is an important nexus, even a critical one. Are phone rings missing from your analytics reports? Then it's likely you don't know which keywords or banner ads are producing call conversions -- which might be an expensive blind spot. "Phone calls are an integral part of the business cycle," says K'necht. "Knowing that certain ads may look on paper as though they're not generating the appropriate response simply by looking at web user activity, is a mistake." Web analytics tools are apt to become useless once a user decides to phone in to place an order or to find out more, as K'necht points out, "Many web users may follow an ad, then not find the supporting information they're looking for, and instead of completing the online requirement -- a purchase, a registration, a download -- pick up the phone to ask a question."

And making sure users are guided to fulfillment offline is crucial to fostering customer loyalty. The call can represent a critical event, for good or bad -- because the web user is ready to convert, or alternatively, is confused or uncertain -- we've all experienced the frustration of being unable to find what we're looking for in a phone call. All the more reason you need to see how well or poorly your site is doing what you want it to do. Knowing where the user was and had been before they made the call can be valuable information -- as K'necht

says, "If the web user doesn't return online to finish the transaction, you won't know what decision your potential customer has made, or why -- unless you can track that call."

Spend Better to Convert Higher

The bottom line is, of course, the bottom line. For a relatively small cost, enterprises that are using call tracking are seeing results. One specialized mental-health provider with a $125,000 monthly paid search advertising budget was dissatisfied with their pay-per-call tracking service and switched to Mongoose Metrics: with 99.9 percent accurate, easy-to-understand reporting, they were able to reduce their ad spend by 20% while increasing sales by 20%.

Mongoose Metrics is at the forefront of call tracking. Recently the company embarked on a solo partnership with Google Adwords which allows phone calls to be analyzed on Google Adwords Placement Performance Report dashboard. For the first time, enterprises can look at both online and phone conversion on the same page, and instantly see how well keywords are performing. Now companies are using it to replace guesswork with instantly-accessible, thorough, accurate reports.

For instance: Triton Barn Systems, a manufacturer of horse exercise systems and specialized modular horse stalls, deploys a wide array of marketing initiatives including e-mail marketing, banner advertising, paid search, trade shows, trade magazine ads and direct mail. Thanks to the complex, high-end nature of its products, phone conversions are critical to Triton's sales -- but the company had no idea how many leads its paid search advertising was generating.

Mongoose Metrics created a new call-tracking system which allowed Triton to track exactly how many calls came from its paid search campaign. After creating a new goal in Google Analytics to show those paid-search driven calls, Triton Barns configured its Mongoose Metrics account to tick the goal's URL whenever the tracking number was dialed. Analysis led Triton to increase its paid search spending by 180%.

Call tracking is a whole new game. Says Mongoose Metrics' CEO Brad Reynolds, one of the leaders of the vanguard, "The old-school call tracking was, 'Here's a phone number, we'll tell you somebody called you, and we'll give you their caller ID.' The new school of call tracking is: 'Somebody called you -- we'll give you all the information we can possibly glean about why they got to you, how they got to you -- web, direct mail, billboard, radio, television -- along with identifying information. And we're also going to start delivering information about what happened on the call -- your customer service rep will be able to enter whether a lead was converted, or whether a sale happened."

Reynold's mantra is pretty irresistible. "I would say for a nominal fee every month, a company should be able to increase the ROI of their marketing adverts by 20-30%. They're going to be able to decrease their spend a bit, and going to be able to spend better on things that convert higher -- so you're able to see a 20-30% increase in ROI for basically a nickel-dime type spend increase to add a call-analytic service like ours. It's a pretty low investment in technology to get a huge return that can transform their business."

For any business that relies on phone conversions, ignoring the intelligence it might gather from tracking and analyzing those calls can be perilous.

Offline Advertising for Your Online Presence

by Ray Tennenbaum

Whether your small or medium-size business is local, national, B2B, or highly specialized, you already understand the necessity of offline marketing -- print, broadcast, billboard, and direct advertising are critical to capturing the attention of customers. But in these uncertain economic times, how can you tell which medium is best for you? Which advertisements are working? Call-tracking can help provide a cost-effective answer.

Experience has probably taught you what a recent LinkedIn survey confirmed: however much online advertising is spreading, offline advertising is critical for most businesses -- indeed, print ads are still seen as the second most important critical part of those surveyed. If you're trying to get people to call a number, you need to know as much as you can about what got them to call you. And if you're driving potential customers to a website, you need to anticipate that as they get closer to converting, they'll pick up the phone to place an order or ask a question. Veteran web analyst Jason Cutroni notes the importance of understanding what's driving the call: "Sure, you can see there are phone calls coming in, but if you're spending money specifically to drive people to your website through different marketing initiatives, and then get them to call you, you really need to understand, 'I've got this many calls, is that good?'"

The more potential customers need to know, the more you need to know about them. Call tracking will fill that need.

Marketing consultant and columnist Alan K'necht has seen his clients reap benefits from the technology: "Call tracking can help you by identifying more accurately which ads are working and driving sales, versus ads that are driving the tire-kickers. Are those ads driving phone calls that go nowhere? Are those ads driving phone calls that then go on to convert? Once you gather that intelligence, you can then optimize based on additional customer tracking information -- what are the nature of these calls? What kind of questions are they asking? Can I modify my ads?"

Here's how it works: every piece of advertising -- billboard, radio ad, tv commercial, business card, refrigerator magnet – features a unique number (toll-free, or local), along with a unique, easily-remembered web address. If the ad triggers a phone call, the call is immediately logged to a web page, along with all the information about the call -- customer location, duration of the call, and offline source. If the ad triggers a web hit, the offline source is is used to assign a dynamic, session-based phone number, and the user's visit is then tracked and logged – then, if the user decided to pick up the phone to place an order or ask a question, the number called connects straight back to that original advertisement, business card, or trinket. In either case, once a call is completed (and optionally, recorded) the operator can log the results. The result is an easily-analyzed report, showing which sources resulted in which kinds of conversions.

Now you've got a record of exactly which sector drove which result -- data that can guide your spend. Take them all together for a particular time, survey them using analytics tools -- and a simple ROI calculator will furnish you with a comparison of all your advertising media. You'll be able to see how many of each medium brought in each call.

Call-tracking is simple to implement, inexpensive -- and might just be indispensable at a time when budgets are strained and you need to make sure that you're getting value for your advertising dollar. Was it that price-point

offer you made in a flier mailing that's bringing in the buyers? You'll never know for sure -- unless you tie that offer to a number, and learned who called it and what happened once they did. Once you see the numbers, you can determine whether that spike is due to that direct-mail campaign, the April broadcast buy, traffic around your billboard, or your daily-newspaper ad.

Consider this scenario: the customer base from which your auto dealership draws can be reached by billboard, direct mail, radio advertising, and television ads. You've been running TV ads for the last few years, but your customer surveys aren't a reliable indicator, since the only customers who fill them out are for the most part successful conversions. Looking forward, you're not sure whether the cost of producing a new television campaign will be worth it -- particularly since your gut tells you that your radio ads, which are relatively inexpensive to produce and buy time for, are effective ways to stay in the minds of potential customers. Are your traditional end-of-season discounts best promoted on the air, through direct mail, through your billboard campaigns -- or with some combination of all of them? Are people learning enough from your advertisements, or becoming confused? Are they finding what they need to find on your website? That radio ad folks tell you is funny – is it actually bringing in sales leads, or just prank callers? Which is the best way to reach your price-point conscious buyer -- and what's the optimal price point?

You don't need just to understand the here and now -- marketing has to change as conditions dictate. If you're bringing out a new line or goods or services, or contending with a new competitor in your sales space, following the performance of your campaign on all fronts is the best way to determine your next move. If the message about the next-year models isn't getting out there, or a story in the news is affecting the way potential customers are reacting to your message, you need to know as soon as possible

How much of a difference can call tracking make? Brad Reynolds, CEO of Mongoose Metrics, offers some interesting numbers: "For a nominal fee every month, a company should be able to increase the ROI of their marketing adverts by 20-30%. They're going to be able to decrease their spend a bit, and spend better on things that convert higher -- so you're able to see a 20-30% increase in ROI for basically a nickel-dime spend increase to add a call-analytic service like ours. It's a pretty low investment in technology to get a huge return that can transform their business."

Reynolds suggests a revolutionary approach to the phone call: "Whereas people tend to say. 'Oh the phone -- that's old school, we want to do everything via the web' -- it's going to become, 'Hey the phone is just as valuable as the web for converting our business.'"

No one needs to tell you that whatever you might decide to do with social networking in the coming months and years, you're not going to give up your direct mail or tv/radio or billboard -- the product you're marketing demands a different approach to your target consumer. As far as you're concerned, those key offline media are here to stay. Using call tracking is the most cost-efficient way to guide your advertising budget, especially if you've already committed to the phone contact. Knowing which medium is the likeliest to lead to conversions is the the best way to ensure you're getting the most bang for your advertising buck.