MARKETING EXPERIMENTS

Clarity Trumps Persuasion: How changing the first seven seconds of user experience drove a 201% gain

If you're like most online marketers, you invest significant time and resources in your website's order path, forms, shopping cart, infrastructure, and many other features that are deeper down in the funnel. But, if you don't command your visitors' attention long enough to get them that deep into your website, all of these investments are for naught.

While marketers invest the majority of their time and budgets on the back end, MarketingExperiments research has found that most of the gain from optimizing a website occurs in the first seven seconds of users' experience. Millions of dollars are won or lost in these first few moments a visitor spends on your site. So in this issue of MarketingExperiments Journal, we'll explore what can be done in this very short period of time to increase the probability of converting those visitors into customers.

Let's begin with an experiment to illustrate this point.

EXPERIMENT

Experiment ID: (Protected)
Location: MarketingExperiments Research Library
Test Protocol Number: 1306

Research Notes:

Background: Provides end-to-end market solutions for small-and-medium-size businesses.
Goal: Increase the amount of leads from an online form.
Primary research question: Which page will obtain the most form submissions (i.e. leads)?
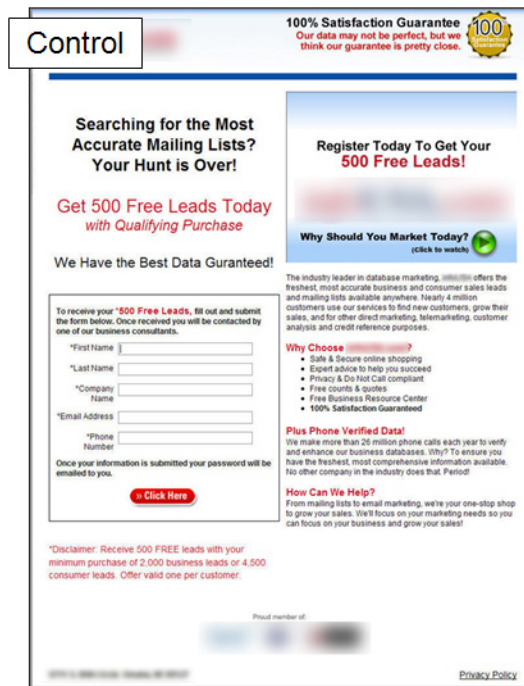**Approach:** A/B/C/D multi-factorial split test that focused on increasing overall communication of the value proposition.

Control:
The primary landing page for this Research Partner's paid search campaigns received a five percent visitor-to-lead conversion rate.

> *If the entire concept of a page is inadequate, trying to optimize it by fixing a single element will not get you very far.*

Our researchers analyzed this page using the MarketingExperiments Conversion Index and developed a hypotheses that increasing the clarity of the value proposition would increase the probably of conversion. *(EDITOR'S NOTE: The Conversion Index, displayed below, is too complex to cover in this issue. To learn more about the Conversion Index please review some of our past research or register for a training and certification course.)*

$$C = 4m + 3v + 2(i-f) - 2a \,^{©}$$

Wherein:
"C" = Probability of conversion.
"m" = Motivation of user.
"v" = Clarity of the value proposition (why).
"i" = Incentive to take action.
"f" = Friction elements of process.
"a" = Anxiety about entering information.

Treatments:

Our analysts instituted a radical redesign of the control page and created three optimized treatments. Too often marketers make changes to web pages based on incremental insights. If the entire concept of a page is inadequate, trying to optimize it by fixing a single element will not get you very far. In that case, a radical redesign is your best initial testing option.

While there were slight variations of the radical redesign, in all cases the treatments shared the following optimized elements – headlines and subheadlines, copy, layouts, credibility indicators, and calls to action.

Specificity in copy and credibility indicators reduce anxiety

Layout supports call-to-action

Headline with clear benefit better communicates value proposition

Results:

	Conversion Rate	Relative Difference
Control	4.86%	-
Treatment 1	**14.65%**	**201.3%**
Treatment 2	13.37%	175%
Treatment 3	13.10%	170%

What you need to understand: Treatment 1 produced a 14.65% visit-to-lead conversion rate – a 201% increase in total leads. And while Treatments 2 and 3 did not perform quite as well, they still produced triple-digit conversion gains.

Given the above results, even a novice tester would be intrigued by the commonality across all three treatments of our radical redesign. Our scientists delivered these results because they understand not just "how to test," but have learned the fundamental principles of "what to test." The principles that produced these results are the main subject of this issue of MarketingExperiments Journal.

What's the difference?

The key is not magical words, the key is clarity.

All of the complex analysis and formulaic methodologies used by our scientists to arrive at the optimized page can be summed up in three simple words…

CLARITY TRUMPS PERSUASION

Over and over again, we have received emails from marketers who have attended our training courses and web clinics saying that these words have produced significant dividends and dramatic gains for them. The key is not magical words, the key is clarity.

If you truly have a value proposition, then your most important job is to communicate it clearly. We have amassed the world's largest collection of optimization-related experiments. From these thousands of experiments we have learned that the single most important change to fixing a page is eliminating confusion in the first few seconds a visitor spends on your page. Because it doesn't matter how great your call to action is if no one ever reads it. The first seven seconds, and perhaps just those first three, are vital to guiding your visitor into an inevitable conclusion to engage in a transaction with you.

The simple, yet powerful way to drive customers deeper into your web page is by being clear. So don't worry about selecting the perfect persuasion words and putting them in the perfect order when writing your website copy. Instead, focus on answering these three questions…

The Three Questions You Must Answer

There are three simple questions users subconsciously ask when they arrive on your page. Your website must have an answer to:

1. Where am I?
2. What can I do here?
3. Why should I do it?

QUESTION #1: WHERE AM I?

This question may seem simple, yet so many websites do not answer it. Marketers may be trying to emulate success from the physical world and simply recreate their efforts in a virtual environment and hope it works. Successful online marketing is not that easy.

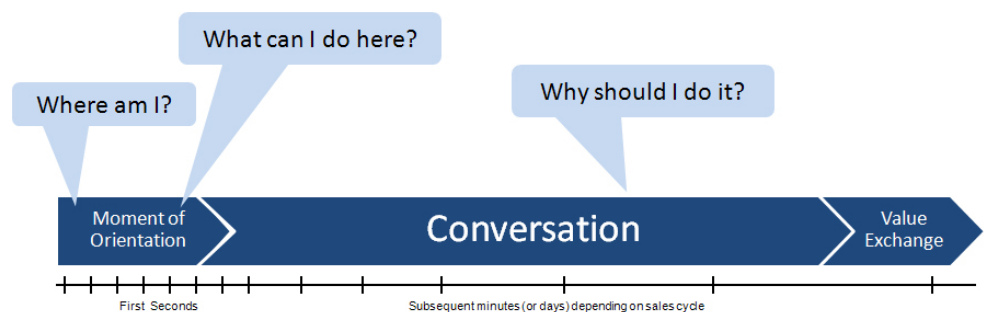To understand why this question can have such a profound effect on the success of your website, it is important to think like your visitor. Don't optimize web pages – optimize thought sequences. Because people don't buy from web pages – people buy from people.

> *The simple, yet powerful way to drive customers deeper into your web page is by being clear.*

Let's first consider how your prospective customer interacts with the physical world. When customers visit a brick-and-mortar store or office for the first time, they have many senses at their disposal to judge their location. They can see other stores on the same street, hear the type of music coming from your store (teen club music gives quite a different connotation than Perry Cuomo), feel the materials you chose for the front door (stainless steel for a slick, modern advertising agency versus smooth mahogany for an austere law firm)…there are consultants that will even help retailers develop a signature smell to boost sales.

On the web, they don't have the advantage of using these senses. The virtual visitor experience is quite different.

Visitor Experience:

Don't optimize web pages – optimize thought sequences. Because people don't buy from web pages – people buy from people.

Where am I?

What can I do here?

Why should I do it?

Moment of Orientation | Conversation | Value Exchange

First Seconds — Subsequent minutes (or days) depending on sales cycle

In any transition from one place to another there is a required moment of orientation. In a virtual setting, you must overcompensate for your visitor's inability to use of all of his senses.

A movie is a perfect example of this need for orientation. If you were to take a vacation to Florida, you don't need many landmarks to let you know that you have arrived. You've been on the airplane for two hours. The wheels have touched down. You step off the plane into the airport and know where you are. But a well-written movie would never assume the viewer knows he is in Florida. There are a few signature shots of palm trees and beaches, perhaps even an alligator, before the film returns to the plot. The director might even visually display the exact name of your location by filming a sign or superimposing the name on the screen.
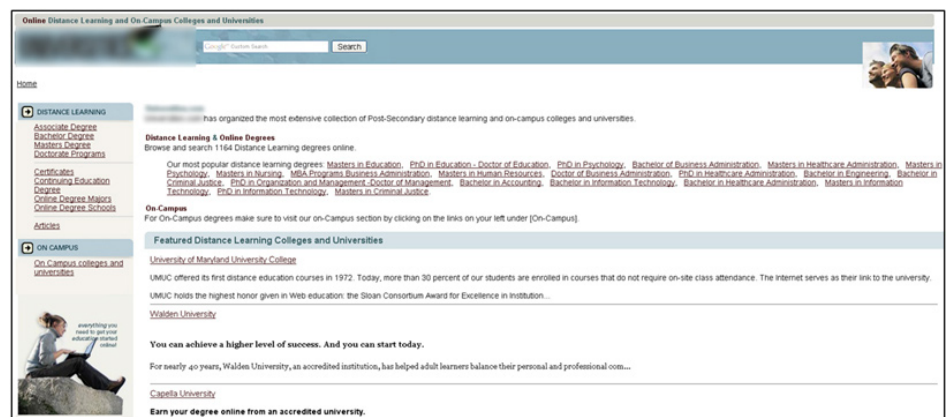
Your visitors experience a similar need for orientation upon arriving to your landing page from a search engine or email. One of the ways to overcome this inherent confusion is to hit the back button. Your job is to keep them from needing to hit that button just to gain an understanding. You need to show them where they are and how it fits in with where they were, to ensure that there is no unsupervised thinking. Don't let them solve this dilemma with one costly click.

But do you spend enough time and resources clearly communicating with visitors when they first land on your site? We've found that many companies invest most of their resources on the visitor experience that follows this moment of orientation, despite the fact that these companies are losing many of their customers in those first crucial moments. The world's greatest value proposition won't help you if you lose visitors at the very outset because they didn't get oriented.

After you answer the first two questions in the chart above, every single element of your website must be used to answer the third question. Once your visitors know what they can do, let them know why they should do it.

Example: Where am I?

In any transition from one place to another there is a required moment of orientation.

(Editor's note: Out of courtesy to the Research Partner, we have anonymized this page)

When we studied the metrics of this page, we found it had a very pressing problem. Even with all the links in the left and in the middle, the number one clicked link was the "Home" button (double the amount of clicks over the next most popular link).

The problem is, visitors are already on the home page. They are completely lost. This page is not doing its job. Money is leaking out of this website.

And that gets to the heart of what optimization does – it resolves an issue that is costing you money every single day. Even without clarity, you could still capture some business, but how much revenue are you leaking from the extra business you could be getting with no additional marketing spend to drive traffic?

Let's look back at the experiment we started with to discover why the control page was not answering this question well and why the optimized page improved conversion.

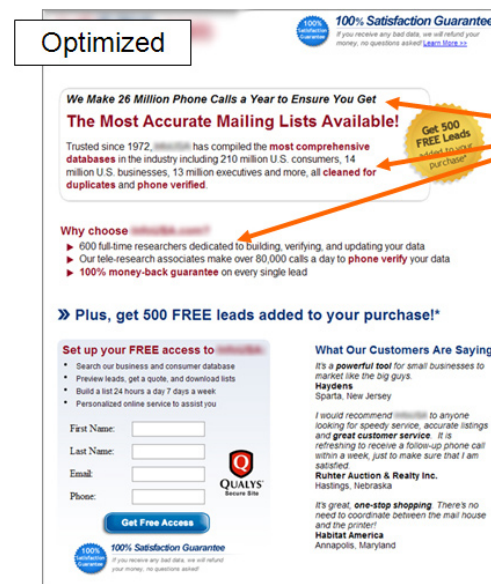**Experiment Control: Where am I?**

Key information about the company and who they are is out of the natural eye path

When trying to determine how visitors interact with your site, it is important to consider the primary channel(s). In this case, most traffic to this page came from generic paid search terms. These were new visitors that were unfamiliar with the company.

Yet, when fresh prospects land on this page, it is very hard for them to instantly get their bearings. The key information about the company is out of the natural eye path. Beware of equally divided, two-column designs like this one. They rob you of the ability to leverage natural progression of your visitor's thought sequence. Even if visitors don't bounce right away, you are still dividing their attention and keeping them from moving sequentially through a rational process that leads them to an inevitable conclusion.

Having a clear conversation with your customers that follows a natural progression is vital for high conversion. Remember – people don't buy from websites, people buy from people.

Experiment treatment: Where am I?

The chief enemy of forward momentum is confusion.

Key information about the company is now placed in clear view

In the optimized version that delivered a 201% conversion gain, the key information is now placed in clear view in the beginning of the dialogue making it much easier to get oriented. Prospects can now easily see where they landed and who they are dealing with and begin to enter into a conversation, which is vital.
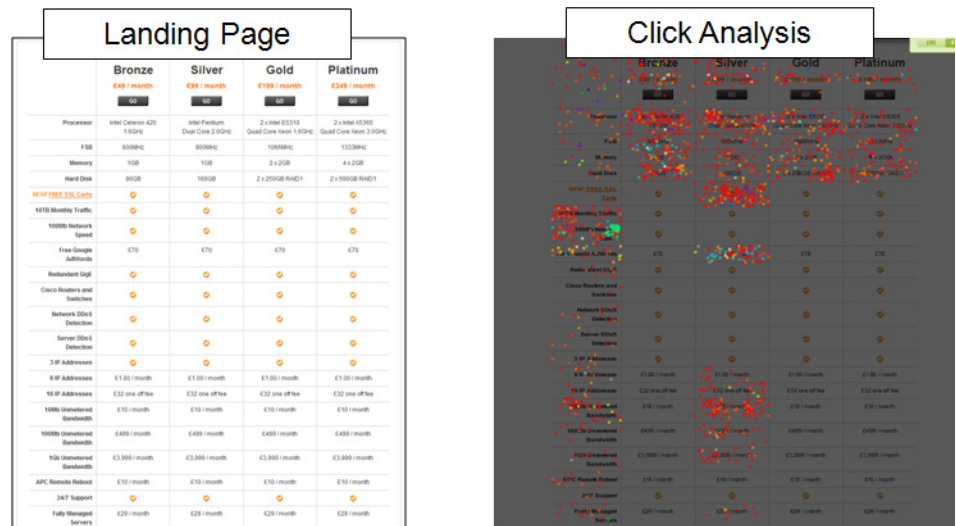
QUESTION #2: WHAT CAN I DO HERE?

Of course, it's not enough to answer the first question and tell your visitors where they are. The answer to this first question should be almost instantaneous. In the next few seconds they must know what they can do to begin that dialogue with you and move in a forward direction.

Since we are essentially freezing time and breaking down customer behavior in an educational manner, everything we're talking about here may seem almost too simple and obvious to mention. That is the nature of teaching. But when you think for a moment how many websites do not follow these simple principles, how many websites overload visitors with Flash animations, banner advertisements all over the place, three equally weighted columns, and no clear direction of what a visitor should do next, you can understand how important it is to dissect those first few moments a customer spends on your site and fully understand what they are thinking.

In answering Question #2, clarity is again key. The chief enemy of forward momentum is confusion. Prospective customers move through your site and the cognitive process gains forward momentum as what they should do and why should they do it becomes clearer to them. The more they move through your site, the higher the probability of conversion grows. Your enemy is anything that stops them from doing that. The chief way to you can defeat this enemy is by clearly telling them what they can do there. Remember, your value proposition has no relevance until the visitor knows what they can do about it.
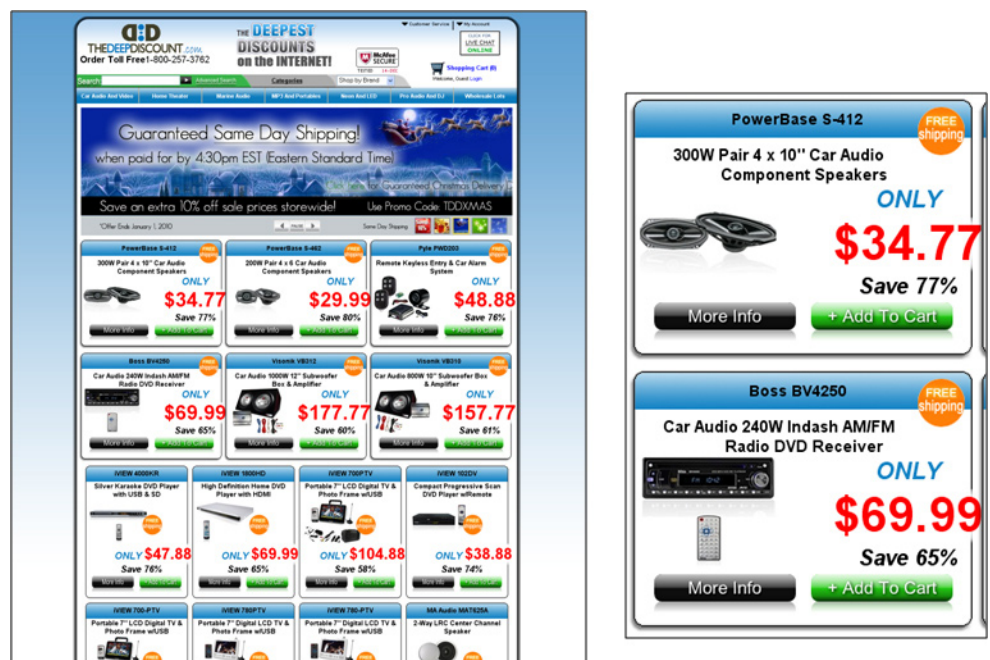
Confusion:

Viewing how people interact with your website can give you a good idea of what the visitors are interested in and the level of confusion they may be experiencing in trying to obtain what they want. One way to determine how your visitor interacts with your page is with a visual click heatmap.

The above landing page came from a web hosting company. A click heat analysis of this Research Partner's page showed us that the visitor did not know which option to choose and why they should choose it. The high amount of erroneous clicks told us that many visitors didn't even know where to click. Most of the click activity on the map did not occur on clickable links, and there were almost no clicks on the actual buttons. For this landing page, the culprit is probably the four-column design with equally weighted calls to action.
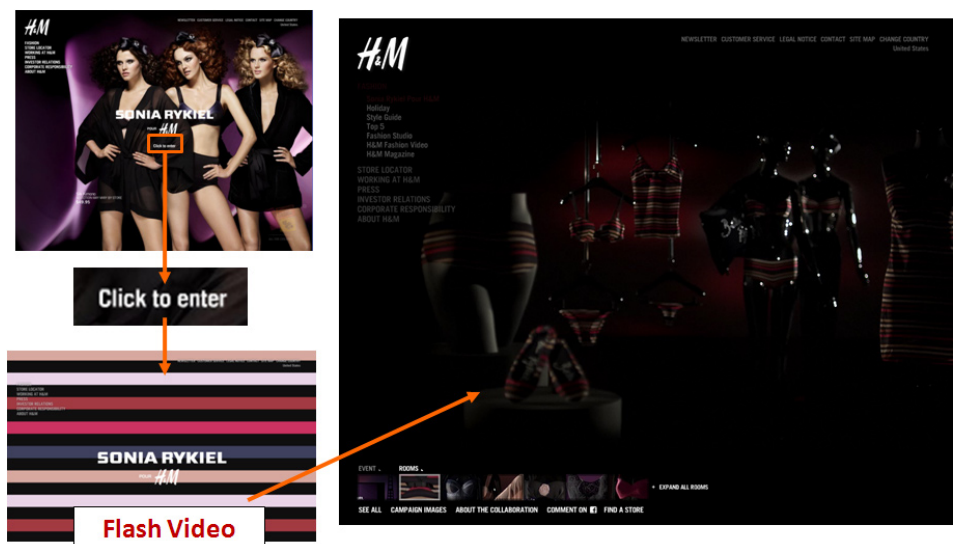
Example: TheDeepDiscount.com

This page was submitted by a member of our live web clinic audience. It is an example of a page that does not answer Question #2.

When visitors first land on the page they may not even notice the headline, since there is low contrast between the font color and background color. Also, since the headline is located in a banner-type box, they may think it is an advertisement and overlook it entirely. This is known as "banner blindness."

If they do read the headline and understand the value proposition, they may not be sure how to act on it. There are more than a dozen equally weighted boxes and visitors have no clear idea where to click next. Competing objectives hurt conversion rate. In this case, the objectives just proliferate and visitors are lost and have a difficult time trying to make sense of it themselves.

This page is asking visitors to make a decision before it presents information in the proper order to help them make that decision. It's like asking a girl to give you a kiss before you even asked her out for a date.

Here is another example, submitted by our audience. While this website has a certain visual appeal, it does not answer Question #2. In this case, the visitor will probably look everywhere on the page except at the small "Click to enter" button. The size and location of the button do not provide the emphasis needed for the customer to know where to click.

Even if the confusion on your landing page is not as obvious as this example, does your page utilize valuable real estate at the top of the page to display a Flash animation or a hero shot that confuses the visitor? Does it make them question how they should navigate through your site to conversion?

Even if the confusion on your landing page is not as obvious as this example, does your page utilize valuable real estate at the top of the page to display a Flash animation or a hero shot that confuses the visitor? Does it make them question how they should navigate through your site to conversion?

Now, let's go back to our experiment and look at how we dramatically increased conversion by clearly answering Question #2.

Experiment Control: What can I do here?

The original page featured competing graphical elements fighting for the visitor's attention (i.e. the two headlines, the video, the form).

Even worse, this page put the cart before the horse. Before engaging the user in a conversation about what they can do on the page, it instantly presents a form without clarifying why they should do it. In addition, the form creates anxiety about receiving a sales call before providing a clear incentive to complete the form.

This page is asking visitors to make a decision before it presents information in the proper order to help them make that decision. It's like asking a girl to give you a kiss before you even asked her out for a date.

This is not an uncommon mistake. Many marketers still operate off of the newsprint "best practice" to keep the call to action above the fold – even if they have never marketed in traditional media. This is a perfect example of a legacy "best practice" being passed down by Old World practitioners to marketers that operate in very different media.

But by conducting thousands of experiments aimed at improving website conversion, we have discovered this so-called "best practice" to be largely untrue. You don't always want your call to action above the fold. If you ask prospects to take an action before you tell them why to take it, you will lose many of them.

Another reason this page underperformed was that it kept important information behind the fold, so to speak. The video on the page had compelling information, but most post-modern consumers simply do not have the patience to watch a several-minute-long video just to understand your value proposition.

Original

Valuable information hidden in the video

Vital copy in the right-hand column is overlooked

Form's "Click Here" button does not inherently communicate the point of the form

Experiment Treatment: What can I do here?

A lot of the information that you see on this optimized page was already on the Research Partner's website. It was "buried treasure" hidden on the About Us page, in the video, and even in the bottom righthand corner of the landing page that many visitors likely never read.

Optimized

Bulleted and bolded text makes it easier to read and understand main points

Form tone "Set up your FREE access to…" is clearer and lets visitors know what they are supposed to do on this page

The single-column layout with clear headlines and subheadlines guides the visitor's eye path through the page to tell them what they can do and then why they should do it.

The goal of the typical headline (there are some exceptions you can learn about in our training courses) is just to stop the user from clicking on the back button and leaving. The headline just gets visitors to read the subheadline. Then the subheadline gets them to read the first paragraph. And if you can get them that far, you probably have answered the first two questions and have begun to answer Question #3. Which brings us to our next question…

QUESTION #3: WHY SHOULD I DO IT?

This is the most challenging question to answer. The problems stemming from the first two questions are much easier to fix, but you must answer the last question in the context of all of the other competitive options available to your prospective customers. Most importantly, answering this question matters most to getting prospective customers to say "yes."

In the first seven seconds, you must answer the first two questions. After that, every element of every page must be answering the fundamental question – "Why should I do it?" – which usually translates to "Why should I buy this product from you rather than any of your competitors?" This is your value proposition. Just having any value proposition is not enough; it must clearly answer the above question.

$$C = 4m + \underline{3v} + 2(i-f) - 2a \ ^{©}$$

Additional resources on value proposition

While we do not have the room to extensively cover the topic in this issue of the MarketingExperiments Journal, clearly communicating the value proposition is something that we have taught extensively in the past. Here are a few resources that can help you:

- **Article:** Transparent Marketing
- **Research Brief:** In Search of a Value Proposition
- **Worksheet:** Value Proposition Worksheet
- **Blog Series:** All about Value Propositions
- **Certification Course:** Landing Page Optimization

So let's go back to the experiment and see how clearly the original page was communicating the value proposition.

Experiment Control: Why should I do it?

Vague headlines (what do "accurate" and "best" really mean with no context?)

Quantified value statements are hidden out of eye path

Form language is company focused, not customer focused

The original page makes a common mistake by relying on vague statements of quality rather than specific statements of quantity. The post-modern consumer is inundated with marketing messages. So unless you have real proof to back up your claims, they will likely fall on deaf ears.

But, like many websites we see, this Research Partner was attempting to communicate real quantifiable value…it was just hidden. In this case, that value was in the right-hand column and in the video – two places that most visitors will likely never view in the first seven seconds and therefore end up bouncing from this site.

Another problem exemplified in this page that we see often is that the language is company-focused, not customer-focused. For example, the sign-up form seems to care more about what this company will get from you than what you will get from this company. Visitors want to know, "What's in it for me?" Yet on this page visitors hear, "Once you give us your contact information, we get to have one of our sales reps call you." This is not a very compelling answer that will drive prospective customers to the page's intended conversion action.

Specific, quantifiable headlines ("26 million", "1972")

The seal draws attention to the incentive and third-party testimonials reduce anxiety

Customer-focused language

Experiment Treatment: Why should I do it?

In the optimized page, the headlines make quantified statements like "We make 26 Million calls" or "Trusted since 1972." This gives the company instant credibility and stops the visitor from hitting that dreaded back button.

BOTTOM LINE

In 2009, marketers have been asked to pull off extraordinary results while being extraordinarily limited. While there are no easy ways to make that happen, there is dramatic potential to drive more value from your current marketing spend by answering three key questions clearly and articulately for visitors to your website:

- Where am I?
- What can I do here?
- Why should I do it?

New visitors must have answers to the first two crucial questions (Where am I? What can I do here?) during the initial seven seconds they spend on your site. After that, every element of every page must answer the third key question (Why should I do it?). Confusion is the chief enemy of forward momentum and forward momentum leads to your conversion goal. If visitors are even slightly unsure of the answers to any of these questions, they will likely just leave.

By clearly answering these three questions, one of our Research Partners produced a 201% increase in conversion. So as you invest in elements that pay off later in your funnel on your own site, don't overlook the upfront work necessary to drive your customers all the way to conversion. The best shopping cart is useless if your visitors never get that far. As Abraham Lincoln has said, "If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend six hours sharpening my ax." Sharpen your site upfront, and hopefully you'll be harvesting many new customers in 2010.

For hundreds of free test ideas and case studies, and information about our Fundamentals of Testing training and certification course, visit: **MarketingExperiments.com**.