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SEM, Sales Assistance, and Proactive Communications, Part 1:

Search Meets the Phone

>>> Paid Search Strategies

BY [Kevin Lee](#) | April 16, 2004

What would happen to sales at your local Gap or RadioShack if there were no salespeople, only checkout clerks? My guess is sales would plummet. If you wander around a retail store long enough, a trained salesperson inquires if you need help finding something or selecting a product. Such interaction increases the store's conversion rate.

I briefly observed (for about five minutes) activity at my local RadioShack recently. At least 35 percent of the

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people walking in the door made a purchase. Compare 35 percent with online conversion rates (where 5 percent would be considered high), and you'll see opportunity. Can an on- or offline sales rep close the gap between on- and offline sales conversion percentages?

Let's take a look.

Sure, a comparison between a brick-and-mortar retail environment and an online one is unfair. Think of the real estate adage, "location, location, location." People go to stores because they're in convenient locations. If a buyer doesn't find what he wants at a brick-and-mortar store, alternatives are usually limited, even in a mall.

Online, the competition is right next door, as easy as a click back to the search results or on to a bookmarked standby, such as Amazon or eBay. Even service industries suffer from the challenge of the Internet's near-frictionless environment. The back button beckons. If anything about your site turns a buyer off or isn't "just right," you can easily lose that opportunity forever.

We've covered landing-page testing and the importance of a good user experience. This week, let's look at the salesperson and her role in the online purchase process.

The first way a salesperson can get involved in closing Internet sales is through a toll-free (or even a regular) number. I recently called a DSL provider with a service question (while visiting its Web site). After answering my question, the salesperson offered a better deal than the one on the site. Would I have purchased online regardless? Perhaps. But I had browser windows up for two of its competitors. The sales rep closed the sale and captured revenue that may have been lost had I continued shopping. There are several options you can use to track conversions facilitated through phone contact, including unique phone numbers, phone extensions, and promo codes.

Several of our clients rely on phone conversions. Data validates the fact these conversions justify more aggressive search engine marketing (SEM) campaigns. After all, if 30 percent of orders or leads come from phone calls and the site



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prominently features your phone number, looking exclusively at online conversion misses the full return on investment (ROI) picture.

Many computer telephony systems provide reporting automatically when multiple inbound telephone or extension numbers are used. Unique inbound telephone numbers can't be assigned at the keyword listing level. So common practice is to assign numbers based on media vendor. For example, assign Overture, Google, MSN, and Shopping.com unique landing pages or the same landing page with unique, automatically generated numbers.

For tracking beyond media vendor, extension numbers or coupon codes can be assigned at the listing level. Once you have phone conversion data, your paid search campaign management vendor will incorporate it into the bid strategy. We've been testing several technologies and techniques to facilitate phone conversion data availability to our campaign management systems. I'll keep you posted.

Some merchants and other businesses have gone beyond toll-free numbers to push to talk. [eStara](#) has a technology that provides a pop-up that allows Web-based voice chat or initiates a call that's fielded by a sales or customer service rep.

Because the technology dials the user, the call costs the site visitor nothing. Some purchases are complex. Push to talk can be a great way to take customer dialogue to a one-on-one level. According to the eStara Web site, it's possible to customize the system to track call initiation via standard Web analytics and integrate phone data into other applications.

Given the importance of phone calls to hundreds of thousands of businesses, the search engines are rolling out innovative solutions as well. FindWhat.com recently [announced](#) a "Pay Per Call" addition to its pay-per-click (PPC) search service.

This new service, being developed in cooperation with technology provider Ingenio, is slated to launch in Q3. The service will track and bill calls generated from search listings that aren't necessarily clicked or even clickable.

The phone is still a powerful sales tool. Inbound communications with prospects and potential customers are important. Sales assistance via phone can increase average sales (order size), as well as close sales that would never have occurred in a self-service environment.

In part two: online chat and other modes of proactive sales activity.

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