

Case Study: Search Marketing Campaign Atlanta Children's Shelter



SITUATION: The Atlanta Children's Shelter (ACS) operates within a very competitive non-profit environment. There is stiff competition among numerous worthy organizations and charitable initiatives that all vie to secure funds and volunteers from a relatively finite target audience. Although highly effective in filling its mission, ACS is a small brand with extremely limited resources that limit them in marketing their programs and services. The organization is continually challenged to "let the world know" of the work they are accomplishing and the results they are producing, but more importantly, their ongoing need for support.

The organization is highly dependent upon outright donations (accounting for 84% of operational expenses), volunteers and in-kind donations. Securing volunteers and in-kind donations helps the organization offset numerous operational expenses that can be directed to funding its core programs and services. It is critical the organization experience success in finding individuals and organizations that want to contribute to the shelter, thereby ensuring its mission to help homeless mothers and children to self-sufficiency.

OBJECTIVES: Given its lack of financial resources to fund more traditional marketing campaigns, ACS concluded that better leveraging their website as a marketing vehicle would be the most viable avenue to meet their challenge – nearly all expenses to raise their online visibility would be labor-oriented, or soft costs. In short, there would be no hard costs for printing, media production, buying ad space, etc., meaning not having to spend funds or seek additional in-kind donations for tangible marketing materials or production. In addition, all labor was provided pro bono, so ACS did not pay a penny for anything.

ACS contacted search marketing firm Prominent Placement to partner with the organization and its design firm/webmaster, The Gunning Group, to define, build and implement a strategic search marketing program for the shelter. Prominent Placement subsequently guided the team through its proprietary search marketing program, leading the efforts to: 1) identify the challenges, 2) develop the overall strategy, 3) define and set measurable goals and key performance metrics to be measured and addressed through 4) a program of effective search marketing tactics.

STRATEGY: The overall strategy developed by Prominent Placement replicates the firm's search marketing philosophy – place its clients in front of searchers no matter what search path is taken.

The rationale behind this strategy lies in the fact that there are numerous people in Atlanta searching to donate to and/or volunteer with a worthy charity in general, and a children's charity in particular. ACS wants to form a relationship with those people – it is critical for survival.

While important to be visible within the main search engine indexes, this all-encompassing approach to search marketing also requires achieving prominent placement within other search venues – local indexes, vertical search engines, news engines, Internet Yellow Pages, as well as others.

The end result of this strategic process is to have The Atlanta Children's Shelter appear in front of searchers no matter what type of search they're conducting and no matter what search avenue they're employing. By so doing, the ACS builds awareness, communicates the brand, acquires the prospective donors and volunteers it needs to thrive, and is able to measure and track their success.

TACTICS: Prominent Placement's search marketing program for The Atlanta Children's Shelter consisted of the following:

1. Correct technical issues with the site that were making it "invisible" to the search engines. In this case, an opening Flash intro that did not allow the site to be indexed by the majority of search engines was instead embedded within a table on the homepage, allowing search engines to fully index the site while retaining this brand-building element.
2. The second step involved developing relevant content for the site. This involved determining general areas for potential content focus, in this case homeless-oriented, volunteer opportunities and worthy causes to which one could donate. Subsequent research produced information on targeted search terms that were both relevant and searched upon in high volume(s).

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TACTICS (cont.):

3. The terms were seamlessly and effectively woven into the site's content, optimizing individual web pages for the respective phrases. Moreover, careful attention was paid to maintaining ACS's brand tone and voice – a provider of loving, high-quality child development and support services for homeless families striving for self-sufficiency.
4. The next step involved a program of building links from external sites pointing to the shelter's site. Link building is a core element in search marketing and in general, the more links a site has, the more likely it is to rank high. For ACS, the linking program involved:
 - Link reclamation (discovering and correcting flawed external links)
 - Reciprocal linking with community and agency partners
 - Linking from "authority" sites (i.e., United Way, Volunteer Match, etc.)
 - Directory submissions
5. Lastly, the program ensured ACS would be visible beyond the main search engine indexes. The effort involved submitting the site to numerous local indexes and Internet Yellow Pages (IYP), producing and distributing targeted optimized press releases, and Paid listings (PPC). The tactic was employed to have the site show within the results produced within Local, IYP, News and Sponsored Listings, respectively.

RESULTS: The results produced by the program revealed the effort to be an overwhelming success, greatly exceeding the goals first thought to be aggressive. In summary the following was experienced:

- ♦ Average monthly traffic jumped 250% – meaning nearly three times as many people are learning about and becoming familiar with ACS.
- ♦ Key site performance metrics (such as number of pages viewed, time spent on site and downloads) have positively increased – signifying targeted, qualified traffic was driven to the site.
- ♦ Search rankings experienced an astounding performance – nearly 100% of the targeted terms can be found on the first page (in top-10) of ANY search engine.

In terms of meeting the program's objectives and addressing the challenges faced by ACS:

- ♦ **Brand Awareness:** As mentioned previously, nearly three times as many individuals visit the ACS site than prior to employing search marketing. Moreover, ACS now experiences 1,700 more regular monthly visitors (those directly typing the organization's URL or having it bookmarked into their browser), representing a 325% increase, and indicating an enhanced brand "stickiness." There's also been a substantial increase in inquiries to the organization about its program and services – both online and offline.
- ♦ **Communicating the Brand:** The brand is now highly visible online – consistently ranking higher and better communicating its essence than larger, more established brands.
- ♦ **Acquisition:** The search marketing program had set success benchmarks for increasing ACS's volunteer base, donor base and in-kind contributions at +20%, +30% and +15%, respectively. Moreover, the program over-delivered these goals with the volunteer base growing by +210%, the donor base growing +160% and the level of in-kind contributions growing +115%.
- ♦ **Measurability:** The program was engineered to be completely measurable in order to document, assess and modify (if necessary) the program as ACS moves forward. In this vein, all details have been tracked and documented, and will continue to be monitored and managed into the future.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS: Besides meeting and surpassing the program's objectives, ACS experienced a pleasant increased demand for its Holiday and Note Card offerings (cards incorporating artwork produced by children served by ACS that are available for purchase online). This was an added bonus given the organization receives 100% of the generated revenue.