
Web Master Want more sales from your Web site? You can learn something from Centex.

By Charles Wardell.

Two years ago, builders' Web sites were a pathetic lot. Some were little more than glorified advertisements; others contained lots of information but lacked focus. The Net was new, and few understood it. But time teaches those who listen, and many builders are using its lessons to re-design their sites. These second-generation efforts make better use of the Internet's potential. They're more interactive, more focused, and more tightly incorporated into the business. And they're usually way more expensive.

It's no surprise that big builders with big budgets lead this pack. One of the most striking redesigns was completed by Dallas-based Centex Homes. Unveiled in October 2001 after seven months of intense effort, the easy-to-use, easy-to-manage new site has one goal: lure potential buyers to a Centex community. Of course few builders can match Centex's deep pockets (rumor has it the company spent around a million dollars on the project), but anyone can profit from its research and reasoning that went into the site.

It's about sales

The first lesson is to get the best talent you can afford. To orchestrate the redesign, Centex hired Blair Kuhnen as vice president of Internet marketing. Kuhnen worked at American Airlines for 10 years in the Sabre reservations group, then became content director at Travelocity.com, and director of product development at Ameritrade.com.

Kuhnen brings strong opinions about what works on the Web. One popular notion he considers nonsense: online brand building. "The Web is a notoriously poor and expensive place to build a brand," he insists. Real brand building starts when buyers walk into a sales office; trying it online just detracts from the task of getting them there. It also misreads what people want from a builder's site. "People are hunters more than gatherers," says Kuhnen, so they're usually not collecting information. "They're motivated to find a home. We should help them."

The preference for action led Kuhnen to forego fancy graphics. Instead, easy navigation, fast-loading pages, and strategically placed items encourage you to respond. For instance, the old site's home page had a small map at the bottom of the screen where you clicked to begin a home search. Unfortunately, the page was so cluttered and the colors so dull that the map got lost. The new page is dominated by a bigger, bolder map. Individual states bulge up from its surface. There's no doubt what to do: click on the state where you want to buy. On the next page, clearly marked and numbered communities invite further exploration.

On the road

The new site was the child of meticulous planning and exhaustive testing. It started with lots of research--analysis of competitors' sites, usability studies, focus groups, feedback from individual employees and customers. "People told us they wanted pages to load fast, they wanted to get to information easily and quickly, and that they wanted accurate information," says Kuhnen.

For the initial usability studies, Centex hired Jeffrey Harpster of Useful Systems in Columbia, Md. Harpster asked different groups of users to look for homes on Centex's site, as well as on Beazer's and Pulte's. He videotaped them and compared their experiences. Smaller companies tend to skip this step, but Harpster insists that you can get meaningful feedback without video. "Bring a few people in, sit them down, ask them to look for a house on your site," he suggests. "It's amazing what you will learn."

To get the company on board, Kuhnen gathered a steering group of division presidents. The official project launch consisted of an all-day, kick-off meeting with the steering group, the software developers, and key staff. During this meeting, Kuhnen and his staff presented their research findings and got the group to make hundreds of large and small decisions about content, control, and the like. He then took his show on the road, visiting individual divisions to talk about the new site.

Software development began with a round of prototypes with no engineering behind them. Usability Sciences Corp. in Irving, Texas, gauged their ease of use and compared them to competing sites. Revised, more detailed mockups were then built, still with no engineering. After more testing and tweaking, these evolved into the final design, and the software developers began coding in earnest. Now Kuhnen and his staff started assembling content. (More than 20,000 graphic images had to be reworked.) Regional training sessions were held about a month before launch. A week and a half after launch, Harpster had groups of users compare the old site to the new.

The effort involved over 100 people, so the road to success had some bumps. What helped prevent a crash was strong support from above. It's a cliché to say that a successful Web project needs executive buy-in. It's also very true. Centex's corporate leadership saw the Web site as a priority, and that support sent divisional leaders a strong message.

The fact that corporate was paying for the redesign also helped. So did the fact that many divisions were critical of the old site's difficult navigation, and saw the project as a way to fix it. "Had they been required to invest up-front or change their operations in ways that end users could not immediately see benefits from, the outcome would not have been the same," notes Kuhnen.

Letting divisions manage their own content was also a major plus. The old site was centrally managed and took too long to update. Now divisions decide what content gets posted at the metropolitan and community levels. Click on Tennessee on the home-page map, and the next page to load will be "Where we build in Tenn.--Nashville." On the left, you will see a "Realtors Welcome" link. If you go back to the home page and click through to San Diego, you won't see that link. However San Diego has a "Design Center" link, while Nashville doesn't. Local control not only brings local market expertise, but saves a lot of work. "It's a big asset," says Amy Bettis, marketing manager for the Dallas/Fort Worth division of Centex's Fox & Jacobs subsidiary. "Our pricing and inventory is a lot more accurate because I can now update them in seconds. Before, it would take weeks to get things updated."

The payoff

Local control also makes it easier to start a dialog with a potential buyer. This is crucial. "Ask a room full of builders how many have sold homes over the Internet and a few might raise their hands," predicts Kuhnen. "But ask how many have sold someone a home with whom they didn't have a dialog, and none would raise their hand."

Some builders' sites seem designed to stifle dialog. Some don't even include phone numbers. All of Centex's community pages include sales contacts with phone numbers. Divisions often put the same promotions on the Web that they do in the local newspapers. There's a "Driving Directions" link in bright red. You can even print a customized electronic brochure of any home. It includes floor plans, elevations, and detailed specifications. It also includes community information, such as the names, Web links, and phone numbers of schools, stores, hospitals, malls, and other places of interest. "People visit Web sites to rule out builders," says Kyle Sipple of Velocity Media, the Tampa, Fla.-area company that created much of the graphics for the new site and the e-brochures. "If you can leave information printed on their desk, it's another opportunity for them to look at you."

It seems to be working. Company-wide, Web-site leads--brochure downloads and requests for information about specific neighborhoods--jumped from 1,000 per month a year ago to 1,500 per week today. Bettis says that leads in Dallas/Fort Worth doubled the month after e-brochures became available.

But some salespeople still have a hard time taking them seriously. (Even after his initial road show, much of Kuhnen's job still consisted of visiting divisions to sell the project.) "I was talking with one of our salespeople. He wasn't afraid of the Internet, but when I asked about his system for dealing with Internet leads, he answered that he checks them every Monday and Wednesday afternoon," recalls Kuhnen. That's not enough. "What is your tolerance for a salesperson who doesn't respond to you for over 24 hours?"

Attitudes began changing only after there was evidence that the site could drive more sales, and possibly grow margins. Centex tracks requests for driving directions and for e-brochures, then compares them to the number of visitors at those communities and how long it takes to make a sale. Though the data hasn't yet been analyzed, sales reps are taking note. "They have started to realize that these buyers are really serious," says Bettis. "The site is starting to really prove itself." Or as Kuhnen puts it: "When you have sales reps referring to Internet sales as easy money, behavior starts changing."

Survey Says: What Home Buyers Want

Centex asked potential and current customers what they wanted from a builder's Web site. The short answer is that they wanted to easily find a home. Here are the particulars.

Prospective customers wanted:

- Fast page downloads;
- Better navigation ("Just get me to the information.");
- Less company information about Centex (It gets in the way.);
- Good floor plans;

- More product photos;
- Virtual tours of interiors;
- A list of standard product features;
- A clear layout for plan and neighborhood pages;
- The ability to request help and information from any page;
- Thumbnails of homes on the neighborhood page;
- Good driving directions; and
- A table showing neighborhood information on the metro page.

Current customers wanted:

- More and better communication on the status of their construction; and
- The ability to make warranty requests online.

photo: courtesy centex

Trade Secrets

If you don't do these, you will lose sales.

Good design need not be expensive. Kyle Sipple of Velocity Media near Tampa, Fla., offers some rules for a great builder site.

- It should take no more than four clicks for a buyer to get to meaningful information like a floor plan.
- There should be two or three ways to do everything on a page.
- Include neighborhood information. People aren't just buying a house. Tell them on the neighborhood page what makes your neighborhood one they want to move into.
- Put contact information on every page that someone can print.
- Be specific. A button labeled "special promotions," doesn't mean as much as one that says, "Save \$3,000 if you buy by Dec. 1."
- Forget frames. They're easy on programmers, but users can't bookmark pages they like, and it's harder for you to track what's happening.

Site Crew

Centex used the following outside vendors for their expertise in design, content management, graphics, and usability.

Divine InterVentures

Site design, information architecture

www.divine.com

Velocity Media

Site graphics, consulting

www.velocitymedia.net

RedDot Solutions

Content management tool vendor

www.reddotsolutions.com

Perot Systems

Web hosting

www.perotsystems.com

Usability Sciences Corp.

Pre-launch and in-development usability studies

www.usabilitysciences.com

Useful Systems

Pre-development and post-launch competitive usability studies

www.usefulsystems.com

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