

Case Study #13: Small Business Trends 50/50 Test Using a Static Image and SitePal Speaking Character - Fall 2007

What is Small Business Trends and What Were the Challenges?

Small Business Trends (www.smallbiztrends.com) is a Website that provides content and other insightful information that is of interest to the small business community. Another element of the business, closely aligned with the Web site, provides consulting on trends in the small business market. The site earns revenue from a number of brand advertisers.

Since 90% of lead generation for consulting comes through the site, the executive editor and well-known small business trends expert Anita Campbell was interested in improving the rate of sign ups for the site's email newsletter. She felt that this would help to keep the brand top of mind for potential consulting customers and also help to drive additional traffic to the site.

The 50/50 Test and The Results

Anita decided that she wanted to run a test using the SitePal avatar, to see if the avatar would drive an increased number of newsletter sign ups. To help lend additional credibility to the avatar and the Small Business Trends brand, the team at SitePal recommended that a custom animated speaking character be used in the test. The custom character was created from an actual photo of Ms. Campbell.

Test Methodology

A very defined methodology was employed to help test the effectiveness of the speaking character and better understand best practices as well as the final results. The following outlines the process that was undertaken:

1. The team utilized Google Optimizer for the test. Google Optimizer is an analysis tool that measures landing page conversion rates.
2. Fifty percent of home page visitors were shown the Anita Campbell speaking avatar, which included a short recorded message in her own voice inviting them to subscribe to the newsletter.
3. Fifty percent were shown a version of the page without the speaking avatar.
4. In each case, Google Optimizer was used to measure exactly how many subscribed on each version of the page. The technology also tracked site visitors through the signup process on the site, all the way to the thank you page.

With a statistically significant sample size of over 11,000 people the speaking avatar did 144% better than the static photograph in driving newsletter signups. In other words, the Anita avatar helped to drive more than double the newsletter sign ups. "The avatar focused the attention of visitors on the newsletter and was successful in convincing visitors to take the extra steps to subscribe. The SitePal avatar exceeded my expectations," Ms. Campbell says.

The results from using SitePal Speaking Character?

- Newsletter signups more than doubled
- 144% increase in conversion rate
- The avatar focused the attention of visitors on the newsletter



Version 1 - Original with her still picture



Version 2 - Same page with her SitePal avatar

Anita's Key Insights Uncovered During the Test...

After the test was concluded Anita Campbell uncovered and documented some interesting insights and best practices to consider when deploying a speaking avatar.

Persuasive and Brief Messages Help to Drive Conversions

By using a persuasive and brief message with the speaking avatar (including a call to action), site visitors are driven to specific sections of a page or site where they can act or in this case sign up for the newsletter. So in effect, the character is like a sales clerk for your site.

Conversion Beyond Commerce

The character can be used even for a site that is content-based, and not ecommerce based. One of the big questions during the test was whether the character really could make a difference in a site where the reader was met with content at every turn and not being asked to buy anything. The test proved it could.

Personalization is Very Important and Creates a Rapport With Site Visitors

Anita's Web site is all about her thoughts on small business and is somewhat personality driven. She wondered if the animated character would be considered too impersonal rather than a photograph, which is more realistic. The feedback she has gotten indicates that people actually think the avatar is more personal because it speaks and brings life to the static content that lives on the page.

Reducing Cost Per Acquisition Should be a Driving Force for Online Businesses

As a small business trying to increase site traffic, individuals are faced with investing a significant portion of the small business budget on advertising. Whether you are looking at time or money, it is too expensive to just let visitors walk away without trying to engage them and entice them to become part of your community, or buy something before they turn around and leave. Maximizing the investment it takes to get visitors to a site is of the utmost importance and any tool, even a speaking avatar, that can help you reduce the cost of new customer acquisition is of great value.

With So Many Competitors Out There Differentiation is Key

Differentiation is also of the utmost importance. Especially since more and more websites are being built every day. Site owners must find ways to stand out in an already crowded and competitive field. Speaking avatars and other interactive features help to give visitors something unique to remember. They are also a great way to present potential customers with a distinctive call to action.

"My recommendations would be to explore extensively with any new technology that you are using. With the avatar I spent time recording various messages and also set aside time to really explore the full potential of what the technology could do for my business. And if you are a consultant or the public face for your business be sure to record your own message in your own voice. This allows people to get to know you ahead of time, so to speak. Now, when you meet them in person they will already feel that there is a connection. This is incredibly powerful," continued Anita.

