

STRATEGIES

Weaving in the Web

Wilshire Homes devotes its ad dollars to the Internet



BRETT BUCHANAN | ABJ

Edward Horne, president of Wilshire Homes, is going after homebuyers on the Web.

STACY STROUD | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Wilshire Homes, the largest private homebuilding company in Central Texas, will spend more than 90 percent of its 2007 marketing budget online as part of a new marketing strategy.

For the last three years, Wilshire Homes has experienced a 30 percent to 40 percent increase in Web traffic. And according to President Edward Horne, at least 80 percent of Wilshire's customers throughout Aus-

tin, Houston and San Antonio started their search for a new home on the Internet.

"We needed to focus our attention on the place our buyers would most likely be, and that is the Web," says Horne.

Aiming to capitalize on the peak summer season for new-home purchases, Wilshire Homes worked with Austin-based nFusion Group LLC to create a consumer-oriented online marketing and advertising campaign for at least the next three years. With a theme of "We Speak Your Language," the new campaign focuses on homes specifi-

LESSONS LEARNED

MORE CONSUMERS are turning to the Internet. **SOMETIMES** an extreme marketing shift is needed.

DESIGN a marketing strategy around your customers' buying habits.

cally built around the customer's lifestyle, and consists of targeted online ads, search-engine marketing and even an interactive microsite www.BuiltAroundYou.com with a virtual new-home consultant named Sheila.

In a warm, interactive "home" environment — where prospective customers can even adjust the lights and change the music on the MP3 player — Sheila guides visitors through a series of preliminary questions to help them explore the spaces and functions of their prospective homes. The result is a personal home report that can be emailed to a Wilshire Homes consultant, brought in to the Idea Center or even forwarded to family and friends.

Teaser ads and other tools are in place to lead visitors to the site, and additional interactive features will be added throughout the year.

According to BIGresearch's June Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey, when asked how often they research products online before buying them in person or in a store, 87 percent of nearly 7,500 respondents said they did so occasionally or regularly. Wilshire Homes' customers are no exception.

"This strategy is a mutual recognition

WILSHIRE: About 90 percent of ad dollars go to Web

that consumers are increasingly going to the Internet first for their considered purchases, and that the Web has become the centerpiece for those investigations,” says John Ellett, CEO of nFusion.

Wilshire’s decision to spend almost all of its marketing dollars online — up from a 50-50 split last year — may be virtually unprecedented among homebuilders in Central Texas, but it follows a larger trend in marketing today. Internet advertising grew by about 35 percent last year, according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau’s annual report. According to the same report, online advertising revenue ballooned to \$16.9 billion in 2006.

In 1999, Wilshire Homes turned to a two-pronged selling approach that focused on point-of-sale pricing and delivering a good

customer experience. It rebranded and redesigned its sales offices as idea centers and adopted a more consultative selling process, custom-designing homes that are “built around you” as opposed to a menu of predetermined models that customers must choose from.

“We want to get to know the customer better than any homebuilder in the country,” Horne says.

Consultants listen to the needs of their prospective customers to determine how they will use their space. At the Idea Center, the client and consultant can use a computer-aided design program called BAY (Built Around You) to create their perfect home virtually. They usually get a quote within 24 hours.

This year’s move to an online focus for

WILSHIRE HOMES OF TEXAS LTD.

WHAT IT DOES: Builds homes in Austin and San Antonio.

EMPLOYEES: 120

FOUNDED: 1991

HOME SALES: \$67M in 2005

WEB: www.wilshire-homes.com

its marketing is a natural extension of the company’s customer-centric approach. It is an especially important tool in Austin’s growing market. Hundreds of people move to Austin each week. Now these homebuyers can connect with the builder before they even make a visit to the showroom — meaning less hassle and greater ease of entry for Austin’s growing pool of busy, Web-savvy professionals, Horne says.

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