



MainRhode combines Google Search and Google Maps to provide a groundbreaking user-friendly real estate website

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Bud Farris

Regional President of Century 21 Access America



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Business

When John Rowles wanted to sell his house in Newport, Rhode Island, he made an appointment with a realtor from Century 21 Access America, a real estate firm with 20 offices serving Connecticut and Rhode Island. While they discussed the sale of his house, Rowles happened to mention that he worked as an e-commerce consultant. Upon making that discovery, the realtor asked Rowles to review the Century 21 Access America website.

“From a user’s perspective, it was horrible,” recalls Rowles, the managing director of Rethought eCommerce Management.

This conversation planted the seeds for what eventually became MainRhode, a joint venture between Century 21 Access America and Rowles’ consultancy. The two groups came together to provide a better user experience for customers on the Century 21 Access America website, www.realsearchct.com. Rowles brought his e-commerce know-how and applied lessons of eCommerce merchandising to real estate.

Challenge

Real estate is a highly competitive market and realtors are looking for ways to stand out from the crowd. In what has traditionally been a high-touch business, many realtors are seeking to be more efficient in their customer interactions. Still, many real estate websites today are difficult to use and offer users limited search capabilities. Following the conventions of the Multiple Listing Service (MLS), a group of private databases with information about properties for sale, visitors are forced to pick from a limited number of pull-down menus, or check boxes for features of homes they are interested in, rather than simply searching in ways they have become accustomed to on the Internet.

“Real estate had somehow missed the boat on the lessons of search,” said Rowles. And so Rowles and his counterparts at Century 21 set out to change that.



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For more information, visit
<http://www.google.com/enterprise/gsa>.

Solution

MainRhode has combined Google Search with Google Maps to provide an easy-to-use website that customers can use to search for properties using plain language. The Century 21 Access America website allows customers to search for real estate with a simple interface like they are familiar with from the major search engines. So, a customer can search for properties using language that sellers would actually use to describe a home. For example, a "single level two-bedroom house near public transportation and shopping" or a "handyman special, two-family home near Hartford." A customer who had passed a house with a for sale sign while driving could enter a search for "well-landscaped yard on Main Street, Providence." The same property would be far more difficult to locate using standard MLS searching.

"MainRhode uses the Google Search appliance to power a user experience that delivers substance first," said Bud Farris, regional president of Century 21 Access America. "Unlike the database form search on most real estate web sites, people can use our Google Search to zero in on exactly what they want."

MainRhode uses the Google Mini to deliver search results, and plans to upgrade soon to the Google Search Appliance in order to take advantage of some advanced features, such as allowing customers to add a custom price range to their property search. When the search results are returned by the MainRhode website, the customers get a list of the most relevant properties side by side with the properties' locations displayed on a map. The interactive Google Map allows the customer to zoom in or out, get driving directions, or see a satellite image of the property and surrounding neighborhood.

Results

MainRhode introduced the new website using Google Search together with Google Maps in fall 2007. To measure the effectiveness of the website, MainRhode looks at one key metric: the return visitor rate – the number of visitors who come back to use the website again.

"We want to differentiate ourselves based on user experience," says Rowles. "If you provide a better experience, people will come back again."

Before adding Google Maps and Search to the website, roughly 20 percent of visitors were returning. After the launch of the new site, that number almost doubled – 38 percent of MainRhode's visitors were returning to use the site again. And when they filter out "bounce" visits – visits that include only one page and last less than 60 seconds – that number rose to 48 percent.

The new website has also generated additional leads, as more visitors have started to use the "Ask an Agent" feature that allows them to ask the realtors questions about properties that they have found on the website.

In 2008, MainRhode plans to roll out another user-friendly real estate site in Washington state, in partnership with another Century 21 office in the region.

