

SECOND EDITION

Sell the Truth

A Marketing Campaign Guide for
Real Estate Developers in the New Economy

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Introduction

We are a creative services firm that specializes in residential and resort real estate projects. This book is about the marketing campaigns that we help create for our project marketing clients. The sales and marketing of a real estate development is a very complex process that involves many decisions and many layers of strategy – our job is simply to help unearth and tell the stories that will motivate consumers. It's one very small piece of a very large puzzle.

This book is for our clients: the marketing professionals who hire us to help them Sell the Truth. These are people who make tough decisions, take risks, think big thoughts, and challenge us every day. We hope this book helps them all prosper and thrive.

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A word about terminology

Many words in our industry are misused and misunderstood. To be clear, in this book we refer to marketing campaigns, by which we mean the sum total of branding, advertising, direct marketing, social media, events, promotions, contests, websites, blogs and other communication activities created to help tell the story of a real estate project.

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chapter 1

A perfect storm of social trends

A perfect storm of social trends

In the current economic situation, the market for most things, including real estate, has changed dramatically. Five interconnected social trends had been developing at their own pace, but have seemingly been accelerated by market conditions:

SOCIAL TREND 1

People want more information. About everything.

They want to know where their coffee is grown and if the coffee plantation workers have been fairly treated. They want to know if their potatoes are organic. If the environmental policies of their homebuilder are sound. If the emissions of the car they are buying are harmful to the air. If the clothes they are buying were made in sweatshops.

Full disclosure has become a mandatory requirement for successful companies.

A perfect storm of social trends

SOCIAL TREND 2

Consumers expect dialogue.

They want answers when they have questions. If a company isn't quick to respond to an email or a call to the toll-free line, consumers get annoyed. In our hyper-connected world, consumers themselves respond to emails and text messages all day long, and it is now socially mandated that companies should too. Immediately.

SOCIAL TREND 3

Consumers are searching for authenticity.

We are all looking for what's real. We want vacations that have small footprints – where we learn about the indigenous people of the places we visit. We want Brie from France, and Burgundy from Burgundy. We have clothes for yoga made from bamboo fibre, and clothes for the office made from Italian wool. We want sushi rice with sushi, and basmati rice with a curry. (When I grew up, there was only one kind of rice. It came in a box. You ate it with or without frozen peas.)

Another word for authenticity is truth. People want truth.

A perfect storm of social trends

SOCIAL TREND 4

Traditional advertising is working less effectively.

People don't want to be sold anything. Hype and bombastic campaigns have soured the consumer towards overtly commercial messages, and rightly so. The proliferation of media options has splintered what audiences are left, and makes it hard to blanket a target demographic with a sales message, regardless of effectiveness.

A perfect storm of social trends

SOCIAL TREND 5

Social media networking sites have become mainstream.

The disconnection of our shared sense of community is largely blamed on technology. We keep hearing that no one knows his or her neighbours anymore because we all spend too much time online.

Ironically, it's technology – in the guise of social media like Facebook®, MySpace®, LinkedIn®, Twitter™, etc. – that is re-energizing the concepts of connection and community, making them relevant again.

A perfect storm of social trends

Roughly one-third of Canadians have a Facebook page (and one-third of those are over the age of 35) and more than a third of Americans have connected to an online social network of some description.

Social media helped Obama win the election. The Prime Ministers of Australia, Britain and Canada use Twitter to stay in touch with constituents. So does the former premier of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu.

And these are early days in the adoption process. These communication tools are not going away. They are only going to grow.

A perfect storm of social trends

Combined, these five trends create a perfect storm of change, an environment where everything we thought we knew about the sales and marketing of real estate developments (or anything else) will need to be rethought.

chapter 2

The dinner party argument

The dinner party argument

Regardless of what is going on in the economy, people will always need to move into a different home. The arrival of a new baby necessitates an extra bedroom. Kids leave home for school, so ‘empty nesters’ will want to downsize and move closer to the urban core. Students move to a new area to be close to university. Retired couples move to a beach home they’ve always wanted. Employers transfer people to new jobs in new cities.

These people need to make a buying decision. We need to help them make the right one – and help them feel good about it. We can no longer create real estate demand with a clever headline and a stock photo of two people in matching sweaters holding hands on a beach at sunset. We must provide accurate and intelligent information. And plenty of it.

The dinner party argument

It's a simple idea. The economy is stalled in fear and uncertainty. People fear things they don't understand and they are uncertain about things that they don't have enough information about. They are hungry for the truth. We need to give consumers the information they need to win what Kyle Dunn, SVP of Sotheby's International Realty Canada, calls the Dinner Party Argument.

Right now, if you went to a dinner party and announced that you had just bought real estate, you could get laughed out of the room. To win the Dinner Party Argument you need factual ammunition to defend your decision and to prove that you've been fantastically shrewd and smart.

No one is going to buy anything right now unless they can convince themselves, and their peers, that it was a smart move. They need more help to feel smart than they ever have before. They need the truth.

Excavating the truth – getting started

All five social trends mentioned in the previous chapter can be harnessed by simply using the truth. Let's recap those five interconnected and all-pervasive trends:

1. People want more information.
About everything.
2. Consumers expect dialogue.
3. Consumers are searching for authenticity.
4. Traditional advertising is working less effectively.
5. Social media networking sites have become mainstream.

So, if we do our homework and provide a complete and factual story, respond to questions in a timely and transparent fashion, embrace new channels of communication with the openness they require, rethink traditional mediums and methods in light of the new market realities, and base every decision we make on truth, there's a chance that someone will buy something. It doesn't sound very difficult. But in actual practice, it is.

In the next chapter of *Sell the Truth* we discuss specific categories of truth that we must examine in order to provide due diligence to our prospects. Meanwhile, just get a taste of the search for truth by putting yourself in your prospects' shoes. Sit down with a piece of paper or a voice recorder, and imagine you are about to buy a vacation property or

The dinner party argument

a primary residence. List all the questions that you will want answers to – every single one.

The obvious questions will come first. How big is the home? Do I like the floor plan? Are there enough bedrooms? How much closet space do I have? And so on. These are the questions our industry is good at answering.

Then go a layer deeper with your questions. Think like a journalist or a novelist. What else will you want to know to make yourself feel confident about this purchase? What would you want to know about neighbours, noise, convenience, security, belonging, acceptance, utility, value, quality, inclusiveness, entertainment, desire, status, privilege, growth? If you are absolutely honest with yourself, you'll

see my point. The depth and intensity of the information that a consumer requires is significant. And until now, we've more or less been leaving it up to prospective buyers to figure out the majority of the answers themselves.

The truth can have hazardous side effects

But before you head down this road and embrace the truth as a strategy, here's a warning:

If you are trying to pull a fast one, watch out. It will eventually be discovered. If your product is boring and has nothing to say for itself, you will fail.

If you are overpriced and over-hyped, you really don't have many choices. My advice for the overpriced: cut your losses and move on. Slash prices. Nothing else is going to change your truth, unless you have the ability to wait for the slow and eventual recovery of the market over a period of years.

The dinner party argument

Focusing on the truth, from the initial planning stages right through to marketing and sales, means you need to build something people want. Something you are proud of. And something that can withstand scrutiny.

Focusing on the truth will make our industry better from the inside out. And that's worth celebrating.

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

In chapter 2, I challenged you to think like a prospect, and start asking yourself questions that you would want answered before you would buy off-plan or presale real estate. In this chapter, we will drill much deeper into this process of uncovering the truth.

The truth will vary from one real estate offering to the next. As marketers in the new economy, we must fill in the gaps in decision-driving information with added details – information that we have traditionally forced the consumer to discover on their own.

What follows is a loose framework to work from, based on four categories of truth. Sit down with your sales and marketing team and answer these questions. Add more questions under each category. Ask a few customers what other questions they

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

would like answered. Write them down. Keep going until your head is swimming and your writing hand is cramping. Squeeze every piece of information possible out of your sales offering. Only then will you have the raw material that you'll need to start selling the truth.

Category 1 – The Mental Truth

Is this home good value for money? Can I afford it?

What financing arrangements are available?

Do I qualify?

What are the taxes and will they likely go up?

What are the bylaws, and what does all this legal jargon in the offering mean?

In plain English, tell me about the guarantee.

What are other comparable resale examples for the neighbourhood?

What are population trends and census data pointing to?

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

Does the government department responsible for housing and mortgages have any information I should be aware of?

Are there issues with any of the utilities or services I should know about?

How much do the utilities cost?

Category 2 – The Physical Truth

Will my furniture fit in the floor plan?

Will I have to renovate? Do you know someone who can help me?

Are hallways minimized?

Do doors open into each other?

Are light switches in logical places?

Is the baseboard heater on the only wall where a couch can fit?

Is the dishwasher quiet?

Are the bedrooms separated for privacy?

Where does the garbage go?

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

Category 2 – The Physical Truth (continued)

Can I walk to the coffee shop and grocery store?

Is there lighting over the mantle to show off my prized painting?

Where will I do the ironing?

There should be a linen closet.

Is there a park nearby?

Are there schools nearby and are they any good?

Where will my dog run off-leash?

Where do I store my bike/kayak/skis/
windsurfing board?

Category 3 – The Emotional Truth

Is there sunshine?

Will living here make me feel great about my life?

Who will I meet? (Will they like me? Will I like them?)

Will I get to know the local shopkeepers?

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

Will this be a community that I can be part of?

Who lives nearby?

Is the neighbourhood safe for me? For my kids?

What will my kids do for fun?

What are the other kids like?

Will I be comfortable here?

Does it rain too much? Does it rain enough?

Will this place make my life easier?

Will my friends be happy for me? Will they be jealous?

Will my parents think I did the right thing?

Category 4 – The Spiritual Truth

Will owning this home make my life better?

Will I be content?

Will I feel like I have done the right thing?

How will I know?

The whole truth and nothing but the truth

Category 4 – The Spiritual Truth (continued)

Does this home match my view of myself and my place in the world?

Do I belong here?

Can I see myself living here for a long time?

Will this place make me feel better about myself and my life?

These are not exhaustive lists of questions. Every audience and every product offering will have different key information drivers. Rural buyers will have different concerns than urban buyers. House buyers will have different concerns than apartment buyers.

A good technique to make sure you are asking the hard questions is to consider your competition. If you were trying to find reasons to convince a buyer NOT to buy from your competitor, how deep would your inquiry go to find all the reasons why your offering is superior?

Seven steps to success: building a marketing campaign

In chapter 3 we discussed the different kinds of truth that we need to give to our prospective buyers in the new economy. Developing that list of truths is, in fact, only one part of a seven-step process we use at Braun/Allison to plan and execute a truth-based marketing campaign. It can be a great road map as you prepare to launch your own communication efforts. Adapt and refine these steps to suit your own purposes.

Every creative services company will have a different approach to ferreting out the truth. At Braun/Allison, we've developed a process we call, simply, the Seven Steps.

What's Out There? – Step 1 of 7

During this first step of the process we access all available secondary research and internal documentation about the project. (After all, there's no need to completely reinvent the wheel.)

We read the tourism brochures for the region. We discover the festivals and celebrations that take place nearby. We learn about the history of the neighbourhood, and of the site. We walk the streets and talk to the locals. We read civic documents. We review memorandums. We collect, review and collate as much information as we can about the project so we can see where the gaps are.

Then we prepare a briefing document on our findings, and distribute it to the team, so that we all have the same base level of knowledge.

Seven steps to success: building a marketing campaign

The Creative Direction Session – Step 2 of 7

We have attended hundreds of envisioning sessions, discovery sessions, brainstorming sessions, or whatever else you want to call them. We've found some to be quite interesting, and others to be a total waste of time. We've spent three years reviewing all these approaches, and have reverse-engineered what we call the Creative Direction Session (CDS).

Seven steps to success: building a marketing campaign

The goal of the CDS is to answer the following three questions:

1. *Who are we talking to?* What do they think about life? What is their mood? What are their hot buttons? What truths do they seek?
2. *What are our key themes, our truths?* What are some of the most likely supporting stories that will reinforce the key themes? Which stories and themes are unique to us? Which ones are not?
3. *What kind of personality do we want our brand to have?* What tone should we adopt? What attitude?

The Agreement – Step 3 of 7

After the CDS, which tends to be an exhausting swirl of ideas, we condense the information into a short summary document, which is circulated – usually within a week – to all participants for review and signature. This solidifies the understanding of all key players and ensures that we are all on the same page.

The Scrum – Step 4 of 7

A news scrum is the term used when a public figure is mobbed by members of the media, all jostling for position, to get a great quote for the evening news or the morning paper. Our version is similar, although we are (usually) a little more orderly than our journalistic brethren.

Seven steps to success: building a marketing campaign

A team of writers and videographers/photographers is dispatched to interview, record and capture images of the stories – both the key themes and the support stories – that were uncovered during the CDS.

This might mean scheduling time with people for formal interviews with cameras rolling. It might involve walking the streets around the project site, and interviewing neighbourhood residents, shopkeepers and restaurateurs. It might mean spending time in libraries, online or in archives searching for historical information.

Depending on the circumstances, the scrum may happen here or at a later stage in the process.

Seven steps to success: building a marketing campaign

Story Crafting and Creative Strategy Development – Step 5 of 7

During this step, a team of writers takes the raw information collected during the scrum and begins to build the Story Library. This is an archive of written and prepared marketing news items categorized and filed according to the sales strategy milestones and timeline.

Creative strategy recommendations for the use of these story assets are also developed at this stage. Contests, promotions, events, campaigns, etc. are planned around the sales strategy milestones and timeline.

The Creative Capsule – Step 6 of 7

While this entire process is unique to Braun/Allison, it is this next component – the Creative Capsule – that seems to elicit the most surprise. Within four weeks of the approval of The Agreement, we come back to the core group of decision makers and present the conceptual direction for each piece in the entire campaign. This may include: names, logos, brand standards, colour palettes, advertising, direct mail, brochures, websites, promotional ideas, brand extensions, blog entries, Facebook strategies, Twitter posts, billboards, signage, sales centre pathing and interior wall graphics, staff uniforms, event ideas, contest concepts, etc., all calibrated to a pre-established budget.

This means that while the CDS is fresh in everyone's mind, the group is able to review the entire marketing campaign. Everyone can see his or her ideas reflected in the work. Everyone can see the beginning, the middle and the end. And everyone can make any final suggestions. The sense of ownership and the buy-in from the team is unparalleled.

Publishing and Feedback – Step 7 of 7

The biggest benefit to the Creative Capsule, however, is speed. Now that the entire marketing campaign direction is locked down and approved, execution of each component can happen quickly. Revisions are reduced. Delays around concept development are eliminated. Concept erosion (the natural slipping-away from the original idea that can happen over time) is prevented.

Seven steps to success: building a marketing campaign

Of course, the campaign remains organic. As the internal and external feedback loops from the sales team and the prospect audience begin to provide real-time information, alterations can be discussed and implemented as required.

That's the short version of our Seven Steps. It's not the only way to approach the business of finding truth. But it works well for us.

This is about sales

In the best-case scenario, we wouldn't start working on marketing campaigns at all until after there is a solid sales strategy in place. We believe that marketing and sales must be fully and completely interdependent; but, ultimately, a marketing campaign exists to serve sales. Sales trumps all. Simply put, your particular project may not need a brochure. Or it may need three brochures. You can't make these decisions until you know what the sales strategy dictates.

We believe the best sales strategies also start with the truth. In fact, truth needs to be at the core of every decision, stretching right back to the initial land purchase, architectural planning, interior specifications, and sales expectations. This is not a market or a time where we can continue to charge "A" prices for "B" buildings on a "C" lot, and hope

that some smart branding and a flashy ad campaign will help people overlook the gaps in that logic. This is the time to take a “C” lot, build a good quality building, install IKEA® kitchens instead of more expensive Boffi® or Poggenpohl® kitchens, and charge a price that allows for a reasonable profit. Conversely, there’s nothing wrong with charging a premium price for an excellent building in a fantastic location with an amazing high-end interior – as long as every decision is based on truth.

Let’s assume you have a product offering based on truth. Here are a few things to consider as you work on a sales strategy. Remember, this book is about marketing campaigns, not sales.

However, we've learned a few things about sales along the way, and we want to share some of this information here:

- Develop realistic sales expectations. In today's economy this can't be stressed enough. Be very realistic.
- If you have a formula for sales that has worked in the past, the best thing you can do is burn it. Destroy it. Toss it out and start fresh. It's a whole new market, and the old ways are not going to help you now. Think new thoughts.
- Determine the most likely sales process given your location, competitive activity, price point, and other factors. Should you do a traditional registration/launch/yield management program? Or a tempo campaign based on the principles of first-come, first-served? Or perhaps some hybrid of the two?

This is about sales

- Determine key dates in the process. Decide on objectives for each. Be precise and break sales objectives down into manageable bite-size pieces.
- Timing for certain sales milestones is beyond your control. Timing can be dictated by seasonality, competitive activity, and a host of other factors. Accept this. Plan accordingly.

Once you have a solid sales strategy and a timeline for implementation, it is a fairly straightforward process to layer a marketing campaign timeline and a work-back schedule over the sales calendar.

Social media, websites, videos, contests, events, public relations, and traditional media: all of these individual tools and the many stories that are required to fuel them must be timed with precision. Some tools may take longer than you think to become useful. For example, a social media program that

involves creating an online community of supporters on Facebook can take six months or more to build momentum. Conversely, the good news with social media is that you can begin using them long before other traditional mediums can usually be deployed. Unlike a brochure or a website, floor plans and renderings or other sales tools are not required at the outset. This is because the initial stages of a social media community-building program are all about less tactically driven messages, and more about the exchange of social information – the secret location of the coolest café in the neighbourhood, for example.

Layer the campaign tactics over the key sales milestones on a timeline so that the biggest noise, the best stories, the most exciting news, and the

This is about sales

biggest traditional media spend occur in the periods just before sales milestones. This will create as much noise and attention as possible, right when you need it the most.

Between key sales dates, things can calm down a bit, the less important stories can be posted, and the traditional media spend can drop. This establishes a wave pattern of activity that should keep you front and centre at all times, but increases your ability to attract attention just before the key sales dates in your schedule.

A final key planning consideration: the stories across all mediums must be timed to reinforce each other. Like a political campaign, the “story of the week” must be selected in advance, and must be consistently

This is about sales

told in all mediums and by all spokespeople. If week 7 of the plan is about the private beach in front of your best villas, and how it was once the landing site for a famous explorer (I'm making this up!) then that is the story that should be told in press releases, advertising, social media, blog entries, sales language on the phone and in person, any events that week, etc. Otherwise, your messaging is fragmented and watered down. You get less impact, and create confusion as you reach out to your prospect audience.

We believe that the new market is the perfect opportunity to revisit some of the things that we've been doing wrong in real estate development sales and marketing. Creating marketing campaigns that fully support and integrate with sales strategies is key among them.

The sales team is your secret weapon

The sales team is your secret weapon

For years now, in the real world outside planning documents, timelines and spreadsheets, the disconnect between sales and marketing has been pronounced and dysfunctional. If you can fix this in your project, it will be your secret weapon.

Think of the sales team as a target audience that needs to be included in the marketing and communications plans. They need the truth as much as any other audience, maybe more. Providing them with truth, and training from the marketing campaign team, will yield incredible benefits.

I usually get asked to talk to sales teams about the marketing campaign a day or two before the launch. Instead, we need to be working with the sales team from the moment they are hired to ensure they are

The sales team is your secret weapon

fully engaged in helping with the development of the campaign.

Once the marketing campaign launches, the sales team needs to be briefed on a daily basis about the stories being pushed into the market on that day. If a prospect calls the sales office to ask questions about something they read in a blog, or in the paper, or heard from a friend, the salesperson needs to know what information is being pushed out, and how to talk about it.

Furthermore, the sales team can be powerful allies as we work to keep the campaign fresh and interesting. They can relay information about what is working and what isn't, based on conversations they have with prospects and customers. Ideally, as they should get to

The sales team is your secret weapon

know the product and the neighbourhood intimately, they can act as a news gathering crew, relaying photos and stories back to the marketing campaign team for future use as the campaign unfolds.

Each salesperson could be issued a digital camera and asked to record their daily lives, the people they meet on the job, and the interesting things they discover about the surrounding area and the sales environment. Take it a step further and set up each salesperson with a Twitter account, or a Facebook page of their own, where they can share their findings directly with the world. Seeing their own thoughts and experiences used as part of the campaign will generate enormous goodwill and buy-in as the campaign progresses.

The sales team is your secret weapon

It's a good idea to set up social media rules of engagement for all members of your team, from salespeople to construction, regarding how and what they are allowed to say about your project. Even if you are not using the sales team officially to send stories out to the world in an organized capacity, many people are already using social media tools in their private lives, and need to be coached on what they should and should not say, as related to their employment. It's all fine that Sally from accounting is flirting with Brad at the sales centre, but we don't need to have these personal details revealed each time someone does a Google® search for the name of your real estate project.

Too often, those of us working on the marketing campaign team view our job as complete once

The sales team is your secret weapon

prospects connect to the sales team. But that job, by rights, should only be halfway done at that point. By working with the sales team, we can provide the truth consistently, which will help bring prospects through the doors and get them to sit down and sign a contract.

Social media and the web: a primer for property developers

For years now, the real estate industry has known that home purchases all begin online, yet we've disproportionately spent our time and resources on offline – newspaper, magazine, billboard, direct mail – initiatives. We've all used websites, sure, but as consumers are increasingly distrustful of old-world advertising, our industry needs to finally and quickly take up the whole range of online tools that are available to us. It's where our buyers are.

Somewhere back in university I learned that word of mouth was the most powerful communication tool. Social media is just the new version of word of mouth. You can choose to participate. Or you can choose to ignore it, in which case you will be leaving control of the conversation about your project in the hands of others. Make no mistake, your project will be discussed. It's probably happening right now.

At Braun/Allison, we believe the best approach for real estate in today's media environment is what we call blended media. You need online AND offline tactics, with the right versions of truth about your property development, for each channel.

Here's a disclaimer. I'm in my 40s. To a lot of the people in the social media industry, this makes me very old. I'm not a technocrat who knows all about the latest and greatest online inventions. However, I have spent the last year learning as much as I can at a macro level about the best and most effective strategies for real estate development to engage prospects on the web.

What I've noticed is that anyone in the communication business who has grown up thinking about strategies

for print and broadcast mediums needs to be put on notice, as applying that old-world thinking to these new-world methods of communication will not work.

We see it happening all around us. Large companies treating Facebook like it is a newspaper. Real estate sales organizations trying to use Twitter like a series of short radio commercials.

Of course, there is some crossover between these new mediums and more traditional methods. For example, while you are busy befriending people on Facebook, you can also employ advertising. Facebook advertising is incredibly targeted. Two weeks after launching my Facebook page, and casually mentioning that I was going to a piano

recital, ads started to appear on my page for various piano and violin recordings. Now that I have mentioned my work in real estate several times, I have real estate ads showing up each time I log in, specifically for the places I have mentioned in my Facebook posts.

Whether employing advertising in social media or not, we need to respect how the users of these social mediums interact, and behave like they do. These are social mediums. You need to be social. If you showed up at a party or social event and launched into a sales pitch, no one would talk to you. And eventually you'd be asked to leave. But if you were engaging and provided interesting conversation, people would gravitate to you, trust you, and want to know all about you, including what you do for

a living. You can still talk about your real estate project, and why it is fantastic, but you need to craft that message very differently than you would in a newspaper advertisement.

Websites need to be rethought

Every real estate project has a website. But the vast majority of websites are nothing more than online brochures. Today, we need to think about the website as the jumping-off point to a host of interactive and informative online options. The website must be the information hub.

Think of the website as the sun at the centre of a solar system. All other tools are planets and moons revolving around the sun. Newspaper ads, radio, billboards, site signage, events, promotions, public

relations, direct mail and all other traditional mediums exist only to feed prospects to the website. It's the same for online mediums: Facebook, Twitter, blogs, online contests and advertising all revolve around your website, and exist solely to help people find the website. The planets circling the sun all interact with each other, just as all media, offline or online, may have audiences and impacts that cross over and strengthen the entire system. The more planets you have circling, the more connected the elements become, and the gravitational ties that bind the whole thing together become stronger.

If websites are going to shoulder this burden of being the central part of our entire marketing campaign universe, they have to be more than an online brochure. New websites feature an abundance of

information, all reinforcing key truths unearthed using the Creative Direction Session (see chapter 4). Include links to videos, to contests, to fun and informative blogs. Make it easy to follow the sales team as they use Twitter and Facebook throughout the day. Post construction progress photos and videos on Flickr™ and YouTube™. New registrants should quickly hear back from a real live human being, instead of receiving an automated response. In some cases, we've even posted links on clients' sites to competitive product comparisons. Why not? We know that our prospects will go and look anyway. As long as your price and product are designed with truth as a cornerstone, you should have nothing to fear.

Three steps for online success

1. Have a great, interconnected, informative, truth-based website. All things lead from here. All things lead to here.
2. Provide information of real value and real interest to social networks. Never hide who you are, but don't "sell." Just participate.
3. Manage the conversations daily. Don't be afraid to be confronted by someone with doubts. Think of each objection as an opportunity to delight and surprise. Better that confusions are out in the open where you can work to resolve them, than to have them festering away invisibly.

Does it work?

All this effort on online messaging and social media seems like a lot of work, and many of our clients initially wonder if it will sell real estate.

Think of it as online publicity. You can't control what a journalist will write about in a story for an international newspaper or magazine about your real estate project. But do you want that article to run? Of course you do. Even better, with the online version, you get to talk directly to the people who read the articles. What could be better than that?

Traditional media and the law of singular focus

The spiralling ineffectiveness of offline media advertising is not news. Major newspapers are shutting their doors, not because people aren't interested in the news, but because the newspapers can't sell enough advertising space. There are many reasons why, but the declining effectiveness of print as a persuasive medium must be a contributing factor.

Add proliferation to the problem: hundreds of TV channels, satellite radio stations, and new magazines launch each month. It's hard to imagine a cohesive approach to advertising in traditional media that makes sense for an advertiser.

Direct mail hasn't been working well on our real estate projects for quite some time. Some will argue that if you have a great mailing list, killer creative,

and excellent follow-up mechanisms in place, it can still work. Perhaps that's true. But the way most real estate projects have been blanketing entire postal code areas with double-sided postcards with a snappy headline and the obligatory "happy couple" shot is not working.

Examine results from all the traditional media, and you'll find a pattern. Things just aren't working the way they used to.

So how do we make better use of traditional mediums?

We need to realize an important truth. It's not new, but it's something people in the real estate business all talk about and have agreed on for years. New home purchases begin online. So if we all know that, and agree with it, why are we surprised at the dismal response to traditional offline mediums? The role of newspapers, magazines, radio, direct mail, and signage has changed. We can no longer call these primary mediums. They can be very powerful support mediums. But, except in rare circumstances, they have had their day in the sun.

Don't get me wrong. Traditional mediums are still necessary. They must be included in your communications plan, as always. But today, the

best use for these traditional mediums is to direct traffic online. These traditional mediums should be thought of as teasers, as opportunities to dangle just enough information to get prospects to do what they really want to do anyway – go online for more substantial information.

While this sounds simple, it has drastic ramifications. It means offline mediums do not need to sell the property. They just need to convince prospects that they must go online for more information.

An ad is not a salesperson

One of our truths, a line that we repeat over and over, is “An ad is not a salesperson.” No one in the history of advertising has ever bought a home based solely on what they read in an advertisement,

or in a postcard that arrives in the mailbox. So if that's the case, why do real estate advertisements insist on including maps, renderings, floor plans, price points, lifestyle photos, paragraphs of "sales" language, and headlines followed by subheads followed by callout boxes urging people to "visit our show home today"?

The law of singular focus

We believe an ad should start people down the road towards the truth about your property offering. Get their attention. Tell them one startling fact. Then send them online for the rest. We call this the Law of Singular Focus.

Traditional media and the law of singular focus

If you can create an advertisement that gets people to visit your website, you have designed a great ad. That's all we can expect a great ad to do. So remove anything from your ad that gets in the way of this objective. Less is more.



On the left is an example of a great singular focus print ad. While it's not an example from the real estate arena, I decided to use it as an illustration of truth, and the Law of Singular Focus, done in the absolutely most extreme and beautiful way.

Here, without a single word, or even a headline, this magazine print advertisement has told me volumes about the product. There is no question what they are selling. There is no question that the person who owns this object is very successful, but also that they are a person of great taste, who is intelligent, and who has time for family and being at home. This ad makes me want to go to the website for more information. Use the same thought process, and make it applicable to your real estate offering.

Your job is to find a way for all your support mediums and all your traditional offline messaging tools to be this focused, this singular and this motivating. How simple and compelling can you make it? How much information can you leave out? Do this with direct mail. With newspaper. With magazines. With radio. And remember, as a tool to drive website traffic, traditional media can still be incredibly effective. As a salesperson, it's not effective at all.

One final note: make sure that when your offline campaign works, and you succeed in driving prospects online, you are ready for them! As discussed in the previous chapter, websites need to be entirely rethought for the new market, and the new expectations of consumers around truth.

Hypothetically speaking: a new economy case study

Hypothetically speaking: a new economy case study

Let's say that you're developing a marketing campaign for a master-planned community in Westbank, on the shores of Lake Okanagan, just across the bridge from downtown Kelowna in beautiful British Columbia, Canada.

You know that your young, single and perhaps newly engaged or just-married audience is living in Kelowna in part because they love the recreational opportunities available there. Because you have a waterfront site, and permission to build a wharf, boats can easily be moored right out the front door. The availability of boat moorage is therefore a great sales story, but what's really more engaging is the idea of being able to water-ski just minutes after leaving work. Water-skiing is just one potential story for this real estate development, but let's run with it for the sake of this case study.

Hypothetically speaking: a new economy case study

Your traditional offline advertising could have a singular focus with a headline like:

**Wake up. Drink Coffee. Water-Ski.
Brush Teeth. Get Dressed. Go to Work.**

Your Morning Routine Won't Be Routine

Combine this headline with an unexpected visual. A simple photo of a pot of coffee with toast and a lifejacket on the kitchen table, or a pair of water skis next to a briefcase, and you have an arresting idea with a singular focus.

For the period when this offline campaign is running, all traditional offline media should support this angle and this message.

Hypothetically speaking: a new economy case study

Your website, in addition to the necessary sales information, should offer a link to water-skiing weather reports, links to YouTube with videos of great water-skiing tricks, interviews with the winners of a local water-skiing contest, etc. Another link takes you to a page on Flickr where anyone can post pictures of themselves or friends water-skiing. Perhaps you host, on your website, a contest where people can upload photos of themselves performing water-skiing tricks, and where friends and family can log on to vote for the winning photo. Your blog could talk about best places to water-ski on the lake. You could exchange links with water-ski and boat supply companies in the area.

You take all the water-skiing stories you developed and crafted after the Creative Direction Session (see chapter 4) and all the visuals that go with them, and offer them free to existing water-skiing blogs, Facebook groups, and forums. Ensure the offline PR coverage you are obtaining links up nicely with related water-skiing events.

Your sales team has Facebook pages where they tell stories and post photos of their own water-skiing adventures. And you find the most famous water-skier available, and have him or her as the guest of honour at a water-skiing party on site, and invite everyone connected to your website from Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.

Notice that you haven't sold anything yet.

But you have created an unshakable position in the minds of a group of willing enthusiasts that your project and water-skiing are inextricably linked. You own the water-skiing position in the mind of all prospects in your area. Your competitor with the project down the beach doesn't. All area water-skiing enthusiasts will know your project. They will have been to your website. And if they are looking to buy a new place, or have friends or family who are looking, where do you think they will go?

Now extrapolate that rather simplistic overview and layer on a similar initiative around another key story you have to sell. Perhaps there is an outdoor concert venue in your master plan. That venue can connect you to communities of people who love music, support cultural events, or perhaps want to

help with programming ideas, school choirs, school theatre companies, etc.

Timing is essential and needs to relate to the sales strategies, and should be completely aligned across all channels of communication. For example, if during weeks 6 and 7 of the campaign, the message is heavily skewed towards water-skiing, then all communications for week 6 and 7 should be “on story.” Then, on weeks 8 and 9, the message could focus on the outdoor concert venue, with all channels and all mediums taking advantage of that story during this time period.

Whatever the timing, while all this goodwill is being generated and while all these truths are being embedded forever with your brand, it will

Hypothetically speaking: a new economy case study

be perfectly clear that you are selling real estate. But that is not the primary reason for building these networks of enthusiasts. It becomes a happy side benefit. Once people trust and like you, and share a common interest with you, they are more willing and accepting of the messages that relate more directly to sales. You trade truth for attention. You trade truth for trust. And with a motivated and engaged sales team mingling with these enthusiastic members of your community, you have a great stew of motivated prospects for sales.

A final word:
Marketing
Journalism

Over the last nine chapters we've covered a lot of information. Everything from major social trends affecting the market for property developments, to our responsibility to use truth as a cornerstone of every decision we make. We've reviewed a seven-step process for excavating the truth and planning a marketing campaign. We've discussed the new role that print and offline media must take in light of the ever-increasing importance of online and social mediums. We've reviewed the importance of a new kind of website, one that provides content and truth to help prospects become informed and confident customers. And we touched on a case study that illustrates the top-level thinking I've proposed.

The world of marketing campaigns for property developments has changed. And this is just the

beginning. Social media is in its infancy. Traditional media are trying hard to find ways to remain relevant and profitable. Newspapers are shutting down or migrating online. Online serials are turning into offline feature films. The blurring between the real and the virtual will continue as we all try to figure out new ways to communicate and new tools to communicate with.

As developers and marketers, we all must stop relying on hype and jive, on empty emotional appeals, on boring old view shots and snappy headlines. Everything we do must be based on truth, and plenty of it.

We need to think of ourselves as Marketing Journalists, employed in the service of sales.

A final word: Marketing Journalism

At Braun/Allison, in our role as providers of campaign content for a blended media approach that combines the best of the old with the power of the new, we call ourselves a Marketing Newsroom. It's a shift in thinking that the entire real estate/property development world needs to embrace. It's time we all started to Sell the Truth.

About the author

David Allison has a degree in journalism, and has worked in the advertising business for more than 20 years. He's planned, written and managed award-winning marketing campaigns, and supervised marketing teams for carmakers, telephone companies, hotels, orchestras, art galleries, technology companies, food products, newspaper publishers, and not-for-profit groups of all shapes and sizes.

From 2005 to 2008 he was VP Marketing for Sotheby's International Realty Canada (www.sothebysrealty.ca) and Blueprint Global Marketing (www.blueprintglobal.com), where he focused on developing marketing campaigns around the world for residential and resort real estate projects. At the same time, he and his partner Marcus Braun founded Braun/Allison Inc., a creative services firm specializing in real estate project marketing campaigns.

With this varied and broad base of experience, David has developed not just a keen interest in real estate project sales and marketing, but also a fascination with how brand messaging can influence behaviour in all consumer situations.

David collects contemporary art, sits on the acquisitions committee of the Vancouver Art Gallery, and is a member of the Metis Nation.

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