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## **Staying Afloat in Turbulent Waters: A Case Study of CruiseVacationCenter.com**

When your passion turns into your profession, you might assume that everything will sail along smoothly. However, life oftentimes steps in and stirs the waters, causing turbulence in an otherwise fun-filled vocation. Smart web marketers keep one eye on the future and learn to adjust on a dime. This is the story of Roy and Kathy Witman and how Mustang Web Designs helped bring (and keep!) Cruise Vacation Center (CVC) to the front of the fleet.

Prior to starting their business in 1993, the Witmans had taken too many cruises to count. As their youngest child entered school, Kathy felt the need to look for a job. Since cruising was a passion, and since their preliminary research suggested a new trend (cruise-specific agencies) would be popular, they decided to move forward with their investigation to see how this idea would pan out.

In 1996, very early in the days of the Internet, Cruise Vacation Center's computer guru decided to develop a very simplistic information-page-type website strictly for fun. It brought no traffic to the business. In late 2002, CVC joined forces with Mustang Web Designs while brought about some dramatic, positive changes.

### **The Creation of the Site**

A change in booking engines was made in early 2003, and by late summer, a pay-per-click (PPC) campaign had been implemented. Traffic increased, but conversions did not, even after moving the interface for the booking engine to the home page.

In a methodical process, we turned to Karon Thackston at Marketing Words to revamp the site's copywriting. That was the ticket! The ball started rolling almost immediately. After uploading the new, more compelling copy to the site, weekend sales tripled and the site moved up in Google by several positions. This was the jumpstart CVC had been waiting for.

To accommodate the increase in international visitors, we added Google Translate in early 2007.

### **Search Engine Optimization**

Once the website was redesigned, an immediate push for high search engine rankings was made both with organic (free) search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per-click (PPC) listings. Since CVC was a national business, it had to compete with others that offered cruises all across the country. We started with about 130 PPC search terms.

When the campaigns were turned on, CVC was inundated with calls and emails. The staff could not keep up. They would return calls as quickly as they could, but by the time they reached the prospects, they'd already booked with another agency.

Because Roy's website was relatively small compared to some cruise vacation sites, we needed to look for unique opportunities – terms that converted in the PPC campaigns, but weren't as sought after by the competition.

Careful research (that still continues to this day) revealed keyphrases that potential clients were actually typing into the search engines. We created a list of general as well as highly specific keyphrases that could be used to develop targeted landing pages to work with the PPC and with the organic listings.

### **The Tide Changes... Again**

Just in the midst of great success, the tide changed yet again, and CVC was forced to rethink its position. The cruise industry as a whole began to see declining bookings around early 2006. Despite efforts to build and launch new, bigger and more luxurious ships, sales fell steadily. This translated into reduced revenues for cruise agencies.

It was about this time that Roy and Kathy began to notice something different in their web stats and in their bookings.

"We were getting business from not only Europe and the different countries within it, but also Australia and other places around the world," Kathy Witman recounts. "My guess is they are taking advantage of some bargains forced by the slow U.S. dollar." Roy adds, "There are more ships in Europe now and practically every cruise line has jumped in to take advantage of the increasingly popular itineraries."

Thanks to some adjustments on their website and some quick rethinking of SEO and other marketing strategies, CVC has been able to turn with the tide to capture a great slice of the European pie. Currently, about 30% to 35% of their business originates in Europe.

### **The Results**

If you created a line graph of the ups and downs CVC has experienced over the years, the results might make you dizzy! However, the proof of their longevity is in their ability to see what's coming, adjust quickly and follow through with strategic marketing and SEO that pull in visitors from various segments of their market.

Even in the midst of record-high fuel prices, the real estate market struggles, terrorist threats that cause fear in the minds of travelers and a supposed impending recession in the U.S., CVC is showing growth in areas other agencies aren't.

With some exceptionally strong rankings in Google and other engines, CVC boasts first-page positions for highly competitive keyphrases.

The combination of planning and taking strategic actions in addition to reacting to their ever-changing industry has provided a consistent level of success. The numbers show a vivid picture.

During the first year CVC and Mustang Web Designs worked together, CVC realized a 192% increase in passenger bookings, a 158% jump in gross sales and a 33% improvement in net commissions. In fact, net commissions have steadily increased every year since 2003.

Because CVC has heeded advice to look at its overall marketing plan rather than singular aspects, there is little doubt it will enjoy continued success for years to come.