

New Ad Age

Turning tweets
and pageviews
into business

Story//Ellis Smith Photography//Tim Barber

Let's face it: the TV show *Mad Men* is the advertising archetype for this generation.

Although we love the well-dressed mad men and women of the Sterling Cooper firm, who spend much of their time chasing an adulterous affair with a mid-morning cocktail, the world has changed. **The suits are old news.**



Papercut Interactive staff
Photo by Dotson Studios

Don't get the wrong idea — companies still need these firms to appeal to the American dream if they want to sell cigarettes, plane tickets or candy. That's what most marketing firms still do. Billboards, along with radio, TV, newspaper and magazine advertisements, more often than not, are created at a marketing agency to sell more widgets, make the public feel better about a company or help diminish the memory of a particularly nasty corporate scandal. **And they work.**



Bill Colrus, center, director of content marketing at UpTik Media, talks strategy with Brady Callahan, left, and Bart Simpson, during a weekly planning meeting at the UpTik office in Hixson, Tennessee.

Photo by Brian Shakley

But the rise of online commerce has brought with it a new breed of digital marketing firm that usually doesn't indulge in swanky offices, tailor-made suits or a large staff of secretaries — oops, administrative assistants. These firms can be found in industrial parks, their employees wear whatever they want, and the teams often consist of just a few workers who make their own coffee and copies.

Brady Callahan, who carries himself with the excitement of a scientist on the verge of a breakthrough, is the new prototype for today's digital marketing expert. Like many in the field, his title — lead SEO Strategist at Uptik Media — is a real head-scratcher. The easy explanation is that Callahan is into web analytics, or the art of gathering huge amounts of data about what users click on and how long they look at something. By looking at human behavior online, marketers can continually hone their campaigns.

"Web analytics are very involved at this point, where you can have a really good picture of how much traffic Facebook is driving, then how much of this traffic is converting [to a sale] on this page, or you can tell that these views are coming from a white paper you released that was picked up on X website," Callahan says. "There are really specific ways that you can drill down and find that this was the exact value of your marketing campaign. You can even drill down for dollar values."

Though these firms themselves are usually small, the number of digital marketing firms in the Chattanooga region has grown in recent months. Their branding carries an air of mystery: Bantam, Papercut, Uptik, Full Media, Flypaper, Riverworks, Fancy Rhino.

The nature of their work is just as mysterious. Through

Digital marketing tips

- 1) Check the references of anyone who claims to be in digital marketing. Call a company's former clients, even the ones they didn't provide as references.
- 2) Push for a responsive website that works across multiple platforms, including mobile.
- 3) Do not make a decision based solely on cost.
- 4) The sales process can often be indicative of what long-term experience can be like. If someone is taking two and a half weeks to get back to you, maybe they're too busy for you.
- 5) If you're an established business, and you want a long-term relationship with a vendor, which is what you really need, you have to make sure not to choose someone that's a flash in the pan.
- 6) Find digital marketers who have worked on websites like what you want. You don't ever want to be their first.

Source: Jenny Hill, partner at Papercut Interactive

some unknown combination of magic and moxie, these digital wizards are seemingly able to manipulate the fabric of space and time itself in order to help companies show up in Google searches. They're able to coax stunning websites out of complex technology, designing a digital front door for large and small businesses. They can wave a hand and generate content for social media websites that sounds as if it's coming from the company itself.

"The way people read online is not the same way they read in print," says Jenny Hill, a partner at Papercut Interactive. Hill, the firecracker wife of company co-founder Jason Hill, has been doing this for 12 years now, which means Papercut has become a seasoned digital marketing veteran in the Chattanooga region. "When we read in print, we're studying photos, then photo captions, then the headline, then the subhead, and maybe the story. Online, people scan like crazy, but once they find what they want they will stay, and stay, and stay," Hill says. "They read wide, then they go deep."

It's easy to spot the moment when one of these firms takes over the digital reins. All of a sudden, a boring public school is imbued with soul. A run-of-the-mill electronics company is suddenly crowing about how it empowers the individual. A business that was founded two years ago begins suddenly appealing to our nostalgia. They begin telling stories. In the process, we get to know them better, — and buy more of their stuff.

All of this leaves the owner to actually run his business rather than worry about how many times he's tweeted today or responded to an online comment. And though these services come at a price, digital marketers argue that it's a price business owners can't afford not to pay.

Early Lessons

In the old days, many smaller companies turned to kids — typically high-school or college-age — for help in creating a website. Paying students was hit or miss, depending on the student, and once they got another job or moved away, no one could quite locate all the passwords or figure out how the website actually worked. Those situations left a bad taste in everybody's mouth.

The subsequent explosion of social media activity generated a similar panicked response. Unsure of how important a Facebook page was, executives recruited young interns to manage the social media experience, or simply tacked those duties onto the job description of a middle-manager who couldn't tell a tweet from a text. Young interns are great, until they accidentally tweet out their political beliefs or romantic feelings using the company account.

Either way, businesses ended up throwing away a lot of money, Hill says. "In our industry, there are a lot of people who work in their mom's basement. There are a lot of people who run a web company between jobs, or as a freelancer in addition to their jobs," she says. "There are a lot of ways to waste money."

Not that businesses should completely rule out hiring a young person, especially if they just want to spend \$500 to create a single page with a couple of phone numbers and the company's hours of operation, Hill says. It's just that in this day and age, consumers expect more. Much more.

Expectations

Digital marketing is all about the story. Like others in the writing profession, digital marketing experts look for that one detail that brings a business to life, and they brainstorm the best way to communicate it through the web, on Facebook or through a tweet. They don't think of digital marketing as an add-on, an optional extra that adds a little icing to a company's cake. They see it as survival.

"If your website is four years old and hasn't changed, people are getting a less-than-favorable first impression," Hill says. "You could even be getting a negative impression." Turning off a potential customer isn't the only danger, though it is a real danger. Missing out on local customers searching on the web for dining, retail or other options in their area takes revenue directly out of a company's pocket and gives it to someone else with more foresight.



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But that's not really as big of a problem as it once was. The number of businesses that have no web presence or an embarrassing web presence is always shrinking, thanks to a growing number of do-it-yourself tools. And since most executives these days know from personal experience that customers use their phone or a computer to check out just about anyone they do business with, there are fewer and fewer officials holding back their company's online efforts.

For Internet marketers, the more aggravating problem today is that some companies have paid a lot of money for a website or digital marketing plan which they think is good, but which is actually terrible. Taste can be fairly subjective, and an executive who personally signed a large check to create a website that isn't working could be blind to the problems because of how personally invested he is.

There are lots of ways that websites can be bad, making customers mad. The easiest way is to send them on a wild goose chase, marketers say. The journey typically begins with a Google search. A person types a phrase into the popular search engine. Perhaps they're looking for tips on buying a home, as an example.

Up pop countless pages created by real estate agents, who often flood their pages with what they think are keywords in an attempt to trick Google into placing their page above that of a competitor. Attorneys often do this too, Hill says. But when users click on the page, they're dismayed to find out that the Realtor or attorney actually has very little usable content.

"It's horrible," Hill says. "Web users, usually, they leave. You do not get the conversion that you want. You do not get someone digging in. They bounce."

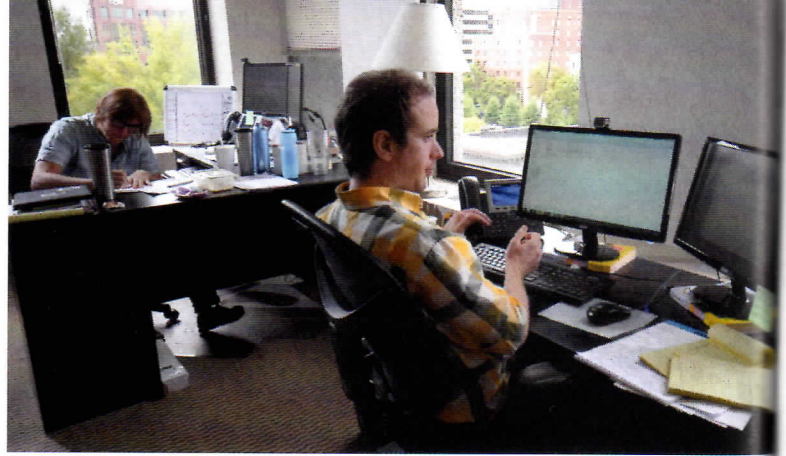
The word "conversion" is marketing-speak to describe the moment that people take an action a company wants them to take. Perhaps they enter their contact info, sign up for a service or buy a product. Some companies just want people to call them. But without the information that rings true, without the story, users are unlikely to take that desired step, says Bart Simpson, founder of Uptik Media.

It's not just to make people happy, Simpson says. Google is slowly figuring out the difference between websites filled with a bunch of random words designed to attract the attention of search engine robots, and websites filled with interesting and engaging content that people actually want to enjoy. This is a good thing for consumers, and a bad thing for spam websites filled with broken links and bad grammar.

"One of the best tactics in an SEO (search engine optimization) campaign is to create something that people will actually read," Simpson says.

If companies do this, consumers will link to the content. Perhaps it will be a tweet or a post on Facebook. Perhaps they'll blog about it. Maybe it will make the news. All of these things are good because Google is constantly tweaking a long algorithm that measures these connections, which is part of how it ranks sites.

Google uses about 200 known factors, and thousands of



FullMedia internet marketing analysts Pete Intza, right, and Jean Marie Davis work in their offices in Suite 700 of the SunTrust building at 8th and Market Streets.

"unknown" factors to calculate where a page appears. The company doesn't show the exact algorithm, for fear that smooth operators would try to find a way to game the system. But the search giant will broadly describe each update, in addition to giving them names like Penguin and Panda, allowing marketers enough detail to point them in the right direction.

These days, that direction is interesting, sharable content, says Bill Colrus, director of content marketing for Uptik. Websites that are full of spam typically get demoted until they don't appear on the front page anymore. Those with interesting content, as judged by Google's robots and a site's audience, get promoted up the list toward the coveted No. 1 spot.

"We try to get people to think of brands as publishers, and consumers as audiences, and build that brand affinity and trust so that when people do need to make a brand decision, they're top of mind," Colrus says. "You're not going to grab people's attention if it's not useful and entertaining."

Relationships

While it's always a good idea to build a smart-looking website that opens correctly and looks good on any device, it's just as important to continually update a page with new posts, and constantly communicate with customers through social media in order to be effective online, says Maggie Hodges, an Internet marketing analyst at Full Media. In fact, that's what Full Media, which is one of the larger marketing firms in town with 35 workers, spends much of its time doing.

"When you hear about all the Penguin or Panda updates on Google, and people suddenly lose traffic, typically when those things have happened our clients have benefited, because those changes are intended to weed out people who are gaming the system, and actually show relevant results," Hodges says.

If a potential customer is searching for a good place to eat, and the last update to a diner's Facebook page was 2010, a person might wonder if the eatery is even still open. That's why marketing firms are increasingly offering long-term services to companies, offering to tweet, make posts and even create white papers on behalf of a client, says Kris Nordholz, CEO of Full Media.

“We have 120

clients or so that we’re working with on a monthly basis, and they would tell you that they view Full Media as their outsourced web marketing department,” Nordholz says. That could mean that the blogs you find on a company’s website are actually written not by employees of that company, but by third party vendors like Full Media. The person with whom you’re communicating on a company’s Facebook page could even be in a different country rather than at the business headquarters.

A single Internet marketer may manage six to 10 corporate relationships. For each one, they’re researching the industry, researching the company, and doing the legwork to become knowledgeable enough to strike a chord with potential customers. From there, the digital marketers will make posts on third-party websites like blogs and bulletin boards, create case studies to post on the website, make daily Facebook posts and tweets, and generally give off the impression that a company is interested in a relationship with its customers.

“Our goal is to generate content that’s unique, that’s helpful to the end user, and something that’s shareable,” Nordholz says.

As an example, Hodges works for a dental client trying to drum up business online. So she writes articles to pitch to industry blogs, family-related sites, mom blogs, and health-related sites, she says.

“It’s this really delicate blend of creativity and strategy,” she says.

Strategy

In the end, not everybody is going to shell out tens of thousands of dollars for a yearlong marketing program. Perhaps they don’t think there will be a return on the investment. Perhaps they’re primarily business-to-business and believe they don’t need a consumer-focused strategy. But even those companies need a good-looking front door, says Adam Vasquez, sales manager at Flypaper.

Flypaper, a recent startup in Chattanooga,

is owned by WEHCO Media, which also owns the Chattanooga Times Free Press and publishes Edge magazine. Vasquez, a veteran of the digital marketing world — even if at 23 years old he’s a little young — is blunt when asked if there are companies that don’t need to embrace digital marketing.

“If you’re not putting advertisement dollars into your SEO campaign, then you’re losing money to someone else who is,” he says. “From our point of view, there are local Chattanooga businesses who are leaving dollars on the table.”

Even if a company isn’t ready for a full-fledged yearlong media campaign, there are little things they can do to clean up their web presence. Because with the ability to search

from any mobile device, customers turn to web research before they buy, before they make a phone call, before they even get in the car to go somewhere. Not two minutes of research, 30 seconds of research. And whatever pops up in that 30 seconds, that’s going to represent all their knowledge about a service or business.

“We can go through and pull every negative review a company is mentioned in, and if it’s a negative review, provide a professional response,” Vasquez says. “Chattanooga doesn’t feel like a huge metropolis, but the fact is that we have a lot of people here at the college and

university, a lot of those people are doing the majority of buying decisions online, so those searches can provide real results.”

Companies can also skip all the blogging, posting and tweeting, and just buy raw search engine advertising through a firm like Full Media, Papercut, Uptik or Flypaper. But that still is only as effective as the website where users land. The very best advertisement in the world, if it redirects customers to a difficult, unhelpful website, isn’t going to be a very effective advertisement, says Amanda Haskew, a search engine specialist with Papercut.

“If all else fails, just do a one-page,” Haskew says. “Buy your URL for \$10 per year on GoDaddy. Do a Facebook page. Tweet, or something. You don’t need a decent website in three years, you need a good website six months ago.”

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Meet a local digital marketing agency

► **Uptik Media** – This five-man operation, launched this year, specializes in search-engine optimization through storytelling

► **Papercut Interactive** – Founded 12 years ago by husband and wife team Jason Hill and Jenny Hill, Papercut bills itself as a “superfriendly” firm specializing in responsive website design

► **Full Media** – Founded in Gainesville, Georgia in 2008, Full Media has expanded to three offices and 35 employees, and works out of the SunTrust building in Chattanooga.

► **Flypaper** – Newly launched, Flypaper is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Little Rock, Arkansas-based WEHCO Media, which also owns the Chattanooga Times Free Press, publisher of Edge Magazine.

► **Bantam** – Co-founded by former Area203 creative boss Tavis Salazar, Bantam is made up of a small team that brings in freelancers for specific projects as needed.

► **Riverworks** – With clients like Public House, Hullco Exteriors and the Chattanooga Tent Co., Riverworks brings a strong local flavor to the digital marketing scene.

► **Fancy Rhino** – This small Chattanooga agency launched from humble roots to national stardom, uses its video and design expertise to work national contracts from coast to coast.

► **Southside Creative Group** – From retailers to restaurants, Southside Creative Group brings a veteran team to help with regional projects.