Dear Mr. Internet: Help For HomeFeedback

by Michael J. Russer
Published: January 19, 2005

Dear Mr. Internet,

I have a HomeFeedback.com button on my site that allows my sellers to login, enter and view showing information on their listed property. Often times my sellers forget how to use this powerful tool and we get the calls for "help" which can be time-consuming. Is there some way to provide easy-to-follow automated help on my site for this kind of situation?

Brian Hickox
Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage
Franklin, MA

Dear Brian,

Powerful interactive tools like Homefeedback (for showing feedback), Online Transaction Management and Online Listing Marketing Coordination, etc. certainly make our Websites and services more valuable in the eyes of our clients and prospects. However, as your question suggests, there is often a learning curve for each of these and if we end up becoming our clients' "Help Desk" to use these tools, then that becomes an expensive use of our time! Fortunately, there is a very cool and interactive way to offer help 24/7 for any of your Website tools while freeing you and your staff up from this time consuming task...

Multimedia Help In a FLASH!

There are several tools available that allow anyone to create highly interactive and engaging "Help Tutorials" that can be displayed on your Website using FLASH, the Web's most widely used multimedia medium. Two in particular, Camtasia Studio and Captivate (from Macromedia) allow you to show your clients step-by-step how anything works on your site and include voice and text commenting as well.

Camtasia Studio works by recording a video of anything on your screen including all mouse movements, clicks and text input. Once the raw video is made you can go back and edit it by adding text and voice comments after which the finished video is easily converted to FLASH format and saved on your Web server. By providing a link to your FLASH video on your site, visitors can easily access the

help they need when they need it (it is estimated that the ability to play FLASH files is on over 98% of personal computers in existence).

Making these videos is fairly straightforward because you simply turn the Camtasia recorder on and then go through whatever process you want to demonstrate. You can even combine several videos into a menu-driven help screen. For example, I made 5 short voice-annotated clips on how to use several aspects of HomeFeedback using Camtasia and combined them into one menu-driven help page. Just click the link in the example below to see the results.

When creating video clips using Camtasia, it is best to keep them short, otherwise visitors with dialup connections may become annoyed with the delay in downloading. As mentioned above, Captivate is another tool that allows you to create interactive FLASH help screens. Instead of recording a video of every movement however, Captivate takes a series of screen shots and then simulates mouse movements and entering information into text fields. While not as smooth looking, it may help keep file sizes smaller than if done with Camtasia.

More Than Just Help

Since these tools record anything on your computer screen they can be used to create much more than just help screens. Here are some ideas:

- Pre-Listing presentation
- Special multi-media marketing piece
- "How-To" tutorials on financing, disclosures, negotiating, etc.
- Just about anything else you can imagine!

Both Camtasia and Captivate are fairly straightforward to use, however there is definitely a learning curve before you become proficient. As an alternative to purchasing the software and struggling with learning "one more new thing" you might want to consider hiring a "Pro" who already has extensive experience with either of these tools. You can find them at Elance.com and Guru.com. Also, if you want to add a higher degree of "polish" to your FLASH videos consider hiring professional voice-over talent from the same sources.

Any time you provide tools that make your clients' and prospects' lives easier you look good and standout from your competition. "Good" turns into "Great!" however, when you also provide them with easy to access 24/7 help on how to best use these tools. Do that and you define a whole new category of professional service!