

Briefing Notes

What can Board Members Learn from the Digital Advancements in other Sectors that could Improve the Housing Sector?

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Introduction

In this session, Mike Longfellow of Wakefield District Housing (“WDH”) led a discussion on whether the housing sector could learn some lessons from the retail sector in relation to utilising digital advancement to improve their customer experience.

Mike is a non-executive director at WDH and is a Managing Director in the digital sector. Mike has 19+ years’ experience across digital transformation, customer experience and customer success. He is keen to help the housing sector accelerate its digital understanding and maturity.

It is the Perfect Time to Drive Change

The similar thread running through business models for all housing associations is the need for the customer to be at the heart of everything they do. This session looks at how to use digital to drill into this and help the sector achieve its goals.

We now live in a digital first economy and everything is accessible via mobile phone. This presents challenges for all organisations, including HAs, to make themselves visible to potential customers. 93% of customer experiences start on a search engine. However, the use of paid advertising and marketing technology means that there is disruption from private sector bodies who take up the Google ‘real estate’. So how do housing associations compete to be seen by existing and potential customers?

The main message that HAs can learn from the retail sector is to master the fundamentals.

Search engine optimisation (“SEO”) drives more than 50% of all website traffic. SEO involves creating an online experience that is enjoyable, relevant and useful for customers, which links in with HAs’ objectives of putting the customer at the heart of everything they do. It is therefore important that we understand how Google can help us gain an insight into our customers’ needs. One such way is to understand that 1 in 5 searches on Google is a question.

So how does SEO work?

- You publish content on your website.
- Google 'bots' or 'spiders' crawl your website and review your website pages.
- Google then indexes your page.
- If you successfully answer a customer's question, then your page can appear on the search engine results page for their query.

Why is this important for social housing?

- For every keyword, Google will give the estimated search volume.
- Every HA can track the keywords they rank for on Google, and where they don't rank. This will show gaps in an association's content.
- Once you have done that exercise, then you can map and create content which better answers customer intent.

It is important to consider the implications of not considering SEO for your business. Click through rates vary according to listings; on page 1 of Google results, 1st ranked position typically has click through rates of 34%, 2nd place 17%, 3rd place 11% and so on. This results in the saying: the best place to hide your business or HA is on page 2 of Google where click throughs drop down to just 2.1% of searches.

If we don't consider SEO and produce visible content for potential and existing customers, then people will resort to phoning the call centre which increases the cost to serve and makes it harder for people to find out what they want. This means if we use SEO properly, we can be more available for more customers more of the time.

How can social housing providers use this data?

- To better understanding customers (can people actually find you and the information they need?)
- To map content to customer's needs/intent/stage (facilitate self-serve, FAQs etc.)
- To understand current & future customer's digital needs
- To design services that meet customer's needs
- To improve service offer and brand perception
- To reduce complaints & improve customer engagement

It's important to consider the whole of the customer journey, including the bit before the customer comes into the organisation. This will help identify and alleviate barriers to customers finding information. It is also helpful to consider current search trends and adapt your content accordingly.

Measuring Success:

$$\text{Share of Voice (\%)} = \text{Your Current Performance} / \text{Your Market Opportunity}$$

Using the above simple methodology, it is possible to measure where HA websites rank, using key words, total search volume and ranking on search engines. The example used showed a low 'share of voice' for an HA on typical key words and search terms.

3 Key Takeaways:

- Situational Analysis – complete a 'digital effectiveness' review to understand the current digital landscape for your organisation.
- Content Gap Analysis – identify how 'search' data can help you be available for your customers at the right time through the channels that they consume.
- Customer Based Strategy – map your content, communications and digital strategy to the overall customer journey.

Q&A and discussion

- Do you have any sense as to the proportion of HAs who are using SEO analysis?

We have talked about creating a benchmark to allow organisations to get a comparative view of performance. A fairly small percentage are thinking of this. Where organisations are falling down is that other sectors are further ahead and constantly consider and improve their websites. Make sure to feed into the comms plan and look at websites constantly.

- Do you think the benefit is about driving more customers to the website or to allow existing tenants to do more stuff online?

This looks to assist both new tenants and existing tenants. If you do it right, you can facilitate more self-serve because you understand what their queries are and where your gaps are in that. It is important to understand the customer journey from the outside of the company looking inward because it helps you understand what triggers the need to call. There is a tendency to look at technology to assist, but actually we need to make sure we have the basics right first.

- Are you seeing HAs use this level of insight via the questions people put into Google?

Not pro-actively currently but a retail example is a retailer would break this down into three phases: research phase, decision phase and purchase phase. This would break down the journey to say what are the key words at research, what are the key words at decision and what are the key words at purchase and how do we make sure we are available. It's a question of how do we surface in the best possible way. The key is to look at trends, you can see these in seasonality, eg. when it comes to winter you can see people looking for information on saving money on heating, financial advice, there will be peaks and troughs in demand. This creates opportunity.

- With your external hat on, do you think we are pretty good or pretty bad as a sector and as board members?

I think there's more people to come into the sector with digital as part of their remit. I think the more benchmarks and information, the better. It is a real opportunity in my opinion to get the skillset within the organisations but they have got the capabilities to do this themselves and it's not very costly in comparison. It would not cost a lot to give an early view on where you are at.

- What is the best way to have the conversation to start with?

The first port of call would be at a senior operational level. Get the key stakeholders in the room to understand the opportunities and build a business case. If you're an organisation looking for a new website, it's the perfect time to ask the question.

- How far do we value this expertise on boards? Are we paying enough attention?

Discussion surrounding adapting to the advances made and driving efficiency by adapting to customer views of us. However, it is important to know your service user and accept that some of them are vulnerable and cannot make use of this technology, or we will need to adapt it to suit them. It might be worth looking at the skills matrix on the board and the preferred composition and see where the priorities are.

Register for our next session

The Board's role in addressing the labour
and skills shortage in the housing sector?

Monday 05 December 2022

Speaker: Nicola Rush, Public Sector Development Director, Adecco

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