Ad tracking brings peace of mind to office

computer notes from the road

by WILMA MELOT

With the holiday season rapidly approaching, I was thinking of ways to bring peace of mind to the office.

After looking at some ad tracking programs, which all comes with a hefty price tag, I began thinking of ways to set up a simple program to track ads. And if we're keeping track of the ads, we're bringing peace of mind to the office.

Although those high dollar systems are great, you can actually start with a simple folder and file naming system. Add a good run sheet and you should be able to track any ad – even a year from now!

Now you have to decide what to track. Dates are always good. You might also consider a code for when and how often an ad should run. Maybe who purchased the ad and whether it was paid for.

For those of you who are saying this sounds like a lot of extra work just to be able to track your ads, consider how much time and money you spend looking for an ad that ran last year – or rebuilding the ad from scratch because you can't find it.

After seeing what other newspapers were doing, I came up with a four-part plan to do ad tracking:

1. Create a good file naming system enforced by whoever is in charge of the paper or ads.

2. Make sure the filing system is shared by all computers on your network.

3. Have accounting or ad reps keep records.

4. Back up your ad tracking system once a month with a medium that can be moved off site such as a CD or external hard drive.

Generally newspapers receive ads by a couple of different methods. The first is when someone on your staff sells an ad, brings it to the office to be built and hands the run information to the ad department. The second is when ads are received by fax or by e-mail. As in the case of OPS ads, you might be going to the Internet to download the ads. Phone calls might be orders for pickups.

Your job is to get all that information into the computer, make sure the ad is built or downloaded and that the ad is placed on the correct page in the correct issue.

To make sure everything runs correctly, start with an advertising filing system that everyone can use, understands and maintains.

Most of the papers I've seen use the alphabet to label folders that contain ads. There's often a folder just for downloaded ads.

With the ad safely filed in the proper folder, it's time to enter information about the ad in a spreadsheet.

This information will help you find a file later. Your spreadsheet should contain the name of the ad exactly as it's named in the file folder; the run date of the ad (i.e., 12/05/05); a code to tell you if the ad should run more than once (for example, 2xw for two times weekly); a name that you might recognize when you're looking for the ad a year from now (Christmas ad, Joe's Department Store), and maybe a stop date for the ad (12/16/05).

The information needs to be searchable so a spreadsheet will work best. You can put as much information as you want in the spreadsheet. This information will help track what you're doing with each ad.

A quick word of caution is in order here. If you're going to use abbreviations in the spreadsheet, have a master page that lists what each abbreviation stands for.

The ad tracking system can also be used to create a daily or weekly run sheet of ads.

The spreadsheet as well as the folders with ads needs to be backed up once a month.

Now for the tricky part – making sure everyone on your staff is in the habit of using the system.

Remember folks, this isn't going to work if you aren't diligent about it.

But if you train your staff to save the ads in the folders, input the information in your spreadsheet and to backup the information once a month, you're going to have a good sytem in place.

And that's peace of mind in my book.

LAST MINUTE GIFT GUIDE

In the wake of the coastal storms, not to mention the higher prices at the pump, most of us are looking for ways to decrease our holiday spending.

I usually include all the latest gizmos, gadgets and high-tech tools on the market. However, this year my list is full of smaller items that will still be appreciated by those in your office.

You can really get big bank for the buck with a jump drive. This little gizmo allows you to carry files from home to work or anywhere there's a USB port.

I love the jump drive but let me add a tech tip: always eject the drive from your computer before pulling it from the USB port. This helps your computer's finder as well as the jump drive. Same thing is true for the camera cards you use.
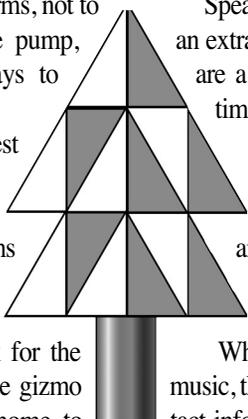
Speaking of camera cards, why not buy an extra one for the office? The bigger ones are a little pricey but they can save you time and money in the long run.

Another cheap idea is a big stack of CDRs. These are great for backing up information, file transfers and, yes, even music.

Of course, the hottest item this year is by far Apple's iPods.

While you may think they're just for music, the iPod can also be used to store contact information, phone numbers and, if the drive is big enough, ads or photos.

The iPod can act as a transfer hard drive for files while playing all your favorite tunes.

Recently released is the version that plays videos. Apple says the new video iPod is the toughest one yet. Its stronger case holds a 30GB ($299) or 60GB ($399) hard drive. The screens are brighter crisper and larger. An extra option is the wall outlet adapter, which retails for $29.

Of course, if you buy an iPod you're going to need a good set of headphones to listen to your music. Apple's ear phones have great quality and work with any computer.

Computers brings the thought of new keyboards and mice – always a good way to make employees happy. There's nothing worse than a sticking key or a contrary mouse.

Another practical gift is a surge protector or battery backup.

Wrap up a wrist guard or cushion to protect hands or maybe even a little pillow for the lower back.

Most of all, be creative. It's the thought that counts, after all.

Happy shopping and Merry Christmas to all!

plugged IN

Unmasking Unsharp Mask

Did you ever wonder what those settings mean in the unsharp mask tool in Photoshop? I recently found a good description of each one of the settings and I hope it will help you use this tool better.

Most papers use the unsharp mask on all black and white photos. It keeps the photo from softening too much when the ink bleeds on the press.

The unsharp mask works by finding edges in the image, then increasing the contrast on those edges.

The amount slider dictates how much sharpening is applied. Although it's tempting to apply high values to some images, the results won't be kind to your photo. Use the preview window to judge the point where shaping becomes unacceptable. It helps to first zoom in on the photo, which also makes the view in the unsharp mask window larger.

The Radius setting refers to how thick the edges should be, with higher settings resulting in thicker edges. The resolution of the files is the most important factor in determining what radius to use. Higher resolutions needs higher settings; but, as with the amount slider, a higher setting can have a negative impact on the image. Use Preview to avoid going too far. You know you've gone too far when lines start showing up around the photo.

Threshold setting defines what Photoshop considers an edge as well as what it ignores, in terms of how different the brightness values have to be between neighboring pixels before those will be sharpened. The range runs from 0 to 255. Lower values permit more of the image to be sharpened, while higher values limit the sharpening to areas of high contrast.

Did you know that there's even a sharpen tool in the newer versions of Photoshop?

It can be found under the blur tool. Use this tool to sharpen just someone's eyes or a small section of the photo. Try it when you have an overall sharp photo that just need a small area sharpened.