

101 CONSUMER EDUCATION

An insider's look at how one manufacturer designed a new Web site — www.AntInstitute.com — to increase consumer awareness of professional pest control services and treatment options. **BY ROBERT HICKMAN**

It's no secret in the pest management industry that ants are the most common reason homeowners pick up the phone to ask for our help. In many cases, the consumer has done quite a bit of research on his own about the problem and the potential solutions available. A few months ago, a survey conducted by PCT magazine indicated that the majority of pest professionals appreciate working with a homeowner who is educated about the process, and that much of the homeowner's pest research is conducted online. (See "Disinformation," January 2007 PCT.) BASF has introduced two new Web sites in as many years that are dedicated to educating these curious, sometimes concerned, homeowners and promoting the value of professional pest management services as they seek solutions to their pest problems.

BASF introduced the Termite Institute (www.TermiteInstitute.com) in 2006 to deliver clear, concise explanations of termite activity, infestations, inspections, and ultimately, treatment and prevention. The response to that site was tremendous, and February 2007 marked the launch of a sister site, the Ant Institute (www.AntInstitute.com).

As a BASF Market Development Specialist in the southeastern region of the United States, I was asked to lead the development of the Ant Institute to ensure the breadth and depth of information was both accurate and enjoyable to read for the average homeowner (a delicate balance, to be sure).

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE. BASF knew from putting together the Termite Institute that a new Web site would be at least six months in the making, from the initial site outline to the moment it was live for the world to see on

the Internet. We took our time in developing a solid roadmap for the site, listing common homeowner questions that would be addressed in the content. We evaluated the Termite Institute site traffic reports to determine the most popular sections, and integrated similar tools and tips on ants. I reflected upon my experiences working with pest management professionals to gain control of difficult ant accounts, working with some of the best research cooperators in the field and talking with a plethora of homeowners about pest infestations and treatment options.

Invaluable to the site development was our third-party adviser, Dr. Harold J. Harlan, B.C.E. As with the Termite Institute, BASF enlisted the critical eye of outside experts to make certain the



final product was both factually accurate and even handed when it came to product information. While it is stated plainly on the site that BASF funds the project, the manufacturer of Termidor termiticide/insecticide and Phantom termiticide-insecticide, there are no recommendations for treatment — only a call to action to the homeowner to contact a professional for a first-hand, expert opinion.

CONTENT AND FUNCTIONALITY. Both institutes are inspired by the same philosophy: an informed consumer is more likely to make smart choices about protecting his property from pests. To that end, the Ant Institute is divided into the following sections:

Ant Identification: Keeping in mind that we did not want to overwhelm our visitors with too much information, we opted not to feature each and every ant across the country. What visitors will find is an accurate portrayal of 11 of the most common species nationwide, featuring various points of interest: origin and distribution, identification, biology, habits and control.

Map It: To localize the Ant Institute experience further for our visitors, a map of the United States highlights which ants are likely to be seen in each state. To create this section I turned to my partners on the BASF market development team, each of whom provided detailed information on the biology and prevalence of the specific ants in their respective territories.

Ant Photography: I don't know a pest management professional who hasn't been approached by a homeowner with a bug in Ziploc bag asking the question, "What is this?" Today's consumers want to know exactly what it is they're looking at, which made finding the right photography to accompany the Web site a top priority. We struck gold with the work of photographer Alex Wild.

Find A Pro: Reflecting an emphasis on professional pest control vs. do-it-yourself options, each Web site has a designated "Find a Pro" section that drives homeowners straight to BASF Partners via a ZIP-code locator.

Ant Solutions: Consumers seeking information on a specific problem prefer to go to Web sites that are not pushing one particular product or service. The "Solutions" section features multiple treatment options so visitors can be better prepared to consult with a pest professional at the time of treatment selection.

Ask An Expert: This popular section on TermiteInstitute.com garnered hundreds of homeowner questions, each of which our team responds to with as much information as possible and the all-important direction to contact a local pest management professional for a thorough assessment of the issue.

PROVEN RESULTS. One of the most exciting aspects of creating a truly helpful Web site and promoting it to consumers is the ability to track interest in it. AntInstitute.com traffic reports show us that the public is responding to this new offering, just as they have to TermiteInstitute.com. Visitors are spending between three-and-a-half to seven minutes on both Web sites (it should be noted that the industry average for a Web site visit is about two minutes) and viewing an average of four-and-a-half to seven pages per session. What's more, the media is latching on to the vast amount of information featured on the Web site.

The *Tampa Tribune* recently dedicated an entire page to the "empire of Florida ants," and highlighted the Ant Institute as a reliable source of information. BASF will continue to enhance and expand consumer education efforts to support the entire pest management industry, and I look forward to hearing from readers with new ideas and suggestions for the Ant Institute. ❁

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