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Web Site Marketing

A NATURAL REMEDY

TO A LOW PROFILE

“WE wanted to do something different,” says Ken Hakuta, creator of Allherb.com. “Other sites would have hired an MD from Harvard or something, but we went another direction.”

Hakuta, who is known as “Dr. Fad” after creating such successful products as “Wacky Walker” octopus, decided in 1997 to put his two major interests together in creating his newest business venture. Combining his fascination with Internet technology and his love and study of herbal medicines, Hakuta launched Allherb.com, an herbal retail site that is also designed to answer questions about herbal remedies and to discuss the benefits of natural vitamins and supplements.

A “wellness destination,” Allherb.com includes alphabetized detailed listings of herbs and vitamins, articles discussing new herbal findings, an “herb of the day” section, and links to several different experts who can answer consumer questions. According to Hakuta, “There is a real need for a comprehensive wellness destination, because being an educated consumer is paramount when the product is your own body.”

Despite this “real need” for such a site, Allherb.com was struggling to build the kind of traffic for which Hakuta had hoped. That’s when Jericho Communications stepped in with a big publicity idea. Jericho, a public relations firm based in New York, proposed that the site bring in shaman, an herbal expert taught through apprenticeship, to add to its list of experts advising the visiting consumers.

“I thought it was a great idea,” Hakuta said.

The next challenge, obviously, was finding an actual shaman. According to Eric Yaverbaum, Jericho’s president, that’s not as easy as it sounds. The company turned to an organization called ACEER (Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research Foundation), which Yaverbaum said was “our only way to get into the Amazon.” ACEER helped provide contacts with several different shamans, and Allherb and Jericho selected Don Antonio Montero Pisco, a Spanish-speaking shaman from the Peruvian rain forests.

Says Yaverbaum, “He was the most accessible to us. We had him come over here a couple times with an interpreter. He was willing to do that and he was really anxious about our idea.”

In order to introduce their shaman, Allherb.com and

Jericho hosted his first visit to the United States. “This was his first trip out of the Amazon,” explains Hakuta, “and the whole staff was very excited. We were saying ‘Is this shaman really coming?’ With a six-month visa and a plane ticket, Don Antonio Montero Pisco flew in to Washington, D.C., where he attended luncheons and was presented with an award for his commitment to herbal healing. He also spoke, with his translator’s help, to students at John Eaton Elementary School about his knowledge of plants and the need to protect nature. Then he came to New York City where he appeared on Manhattan’s leading morning radio show at 99.5 WPLJ before giving a public tour of the Amazonian section of the New York Botanical Garden.

His trip lasted only a week, but the press coverage was amazing. As Yaverbaum says, “The fact that we had brought in a shaman, this was network news. It was covered by hundreds of papers,” including *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, *the New York Daily News*, *the San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Denver Post*, and *The Detroit News*.

Hakuta said, “I can’t tell you how many people have seen our shaman. I’d run into a couple of lawyers and they’d say ‘Oh, you’re the site with the shaman. I read about that.’”

Not only did the public read about him, but groups wanted the shaman to visit and speak. Says Hakuta, “We have a large black congregation next to us, 23,000 members, and they want him to come and speak and he doesn’t even speak English.” Within a week, people not only knew what Allherb was, but they wanted to see the site and read about the shaman.

As a result, “the site has dramatically taken off,” said Yaverbaum. And Hakuta added that the reaction from the public has been extremely positive. “It is hard to say how much business grew as a direct result of the shaman, but our numbers are growing all the time now.”

And as for a return visit from the shaman and a consequential return flurry of press for the site, Allherb.com recently acquired for Don Antonio Montero Pisco a ten-year visa so that he can make future trips to the United States. Hakuta and the Allherb.com staff look forward to his return and, according to Hakuta the shaman looks forward to the visits also: “He can’t wait to come back.” ■

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