

CHECK OUT THUMBTRACK, LESSONS.COM AND THE REST

ONLINE REFERRAL SITES: LEGITIMATE BUSINESS BUILDERS?

By **David Gould**, Staff Editor

Without actually signing up with Lessons.com, Proponent Group member Mary Hafeman was sent a lead by the online teach/coach/tutor platform that converted into a four-lesson junior package, generating a welcome \$180 in revenue.

“I didn’t create a profile or do anything,” says Hafeman, who teaches summers in the Milwaukee area and winters in Jacksonville, Fla. “I got an email from the website totally out of the blue.” Her digital lead that turned into dollars came last spring as a seeming one-off, but over the past few months

Hafeman has received a flurry of Lessons.com inquiries, at least two dozen, she estimates.

“Leads for new students are important to any golf instructor, and finding ways to generate them is not easy,” she acknowledges. “However there’s been a frustration factor for me, in

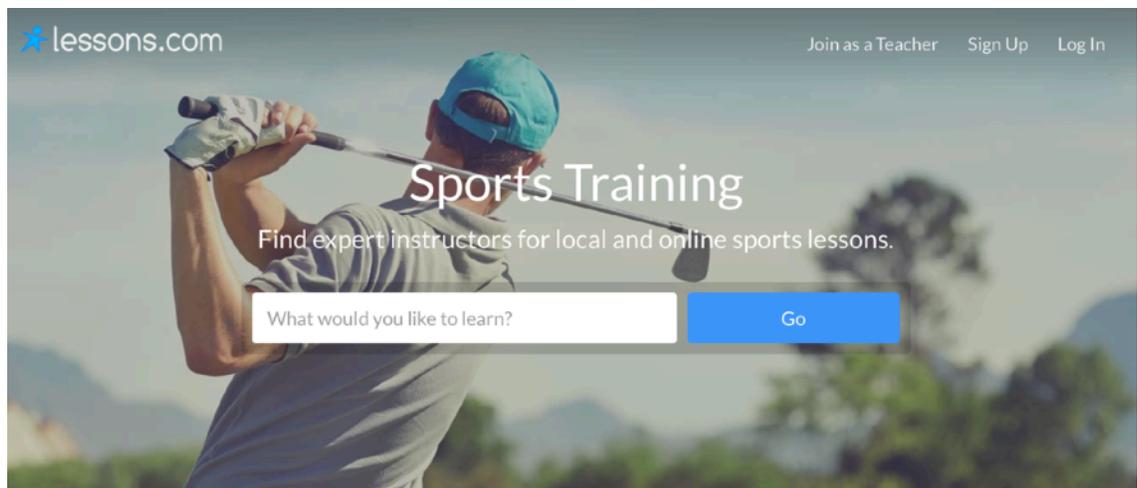
responding to these online leads. Basically I’m putting out my bid then hearing nothing back.” There you have it: The classic marketing-and-sales challenge of converting leads into active business isn’t easily solved just because the referrals come from online sources.

Thumbtack, TakeLessons, Lessons.com and perhaps a few other referral sites have lately been on the radar of anyone who teaches golf and doesn’t disdain modern digital technology. The oldest of the bunch, TakeLessons, began way back in 2006 and made its mark in the music-lesson category, less so with sports. TakeLessons reported back in 2013 that, to date, it had paid out over \$10 million to music teachers, and that its student base was geographically spread over thousands of cities and towns.

On Lessons.com, you (theoretically) have to create an account, although Hafeman figures the website found her through a web search and plugged her name and email address into its database—why not, they

need teachers. Account setup and creation of a profile is free, so if a Lessons.com employee did in fact load Mary’s data on their own, the site wasn’t giving something away that they normally charge for.

For Proponent Group members, the Lessons.com platform became a topic of discussion last year on Proponent’s private Facebook forum. Massachusetts-based member Cathy MacPherson initiated the discussion, which quickly attracted comments from a half-dozen others. The gist of that exchange was that Lessons.com was actively soliciting teachers, to help



build out its roster in the golf “vertical,” as these companies call the various skill areas.

The Proponent newsletter devoted space last year to an interview with John Kelley, the CEO of CoachUp, which has a similar business model to Thumbtack and the rest. Kelley addressed the question of credibility and trustworthiness of sites that connect lesson-takers with lesson-givers, noting that, in his company’s case, athlete endorsements—the likes of Steph Curry and Julian Edelman endorse CoachUp—turn out to be an effective, though expensive way of persuading people that the platform works and those who use it will be well-treated.

Vetting is a major benefit, and if you’re a user of TakeLessons.com it continues beyond initial meet-up. After every session, either online or in person, TakeLessons verifies that students were satisfied with their teacher and then releases the payment to the instructor. So, yeah, the rubber meets the road, through a digital intermediary.

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Interestingly, Thumbtack's first move into the professional-services marketplace involved creating a Craigslist tool any service-providing pro could use as a template, in order that their presentation on

Craigslist would be more effective and attention-getting. That tactic rather ingeniously helped solve the chicken-and-egg problem of where-to-begin, at the point when Thumbtack had no roster of service providers and no customer base, either.

Kyle Voska, a Denver-based Proponent member, has a fair amount of experience with Lessons.com and some good things to say about the platform. In a forum post from earlier this year, he stated the view that golfers who seek instruction via Lessons.com seem to be very price-conscious, which means the more up-market instructor will have to be able to offer some type of program—in all likelihood a group format—that allows for a rate that avoids sticker shock. “If you list your normal private-lesson rate, you’ll probably price yourself out with this type of client,” Kyle says. With Lessons.com, a teacher keeps the full amount of the client’s payment—the site generates revenue by charging teachers a small fee to send out their price quotes. Voska reports paying the nominal sum of \$2 for each quote sent.

To a good degree, these online referral companies replace the photocopied flyer for babysitting or guitar lessons that you’d see tacked up in your local pizza shop with a row of tear-off tabs at the bottom, each containing a name and phone number. Going slick and digital doesn’t change the fact that the service provider’s quality level is difficult to gauge, from the evidence presented. Platforms like Thumbtack are most likely to draw lesson-givers from the lower and middle echelons of a category like golf before making an impact on the upper stratum where Proponent members can be found.

Every technology has early adopters, and apparently a golf instructor named Tony Weiher, who has worked in both the Boca Raton and southeast Ohio markets, is an early adopter of online professional-services referral tech. Under the tagline of “Thoughtless Golf,” Weiher markets himself energetically through his own website, but



his presence on both Thumbtack and Lessons.com is formidable.

His Thumbtack profile page displays multiple award icons with the Thumbtack logo labeling Weiher as a “Top Pro” and a service-provider awarded “Best of”

status. That page, where it reports the running total of individual golfers who have hired Weiher (through the site) recently showed the number 62—a prodigious total, given how many original leads there must have been, to yield so many conversions.

That brings up a potentially worrying aspect of a platform like Thumbtack—its ability to amass data, including TripAdvisor-type reviews, and turn that into online reports and rankings that by definition can only spotlight and praise the instructors who are active on the site. If you go on Google and enter “Thumbtack best junior golf lessons” plus a city name, you’ll see a stack of results that, if clicked upon, will reveal a “best of” report on teaching pros who work with juniors and have won the metrics contest in that market, either by volume of lessons given to Thumbtack clients or by a combination of that plus ratings input by the lesson-takers.

“Content is king,” the SEO experts have long stated. With a website like Thumbtack, generating the kind of content that Google’s web-crawlers will respond to isn’t so difficult, as long as large numbers of service providers in the category participate.

One result these days is that when you enter a question in a search box like, “How much do golf lessons cost?” ... there’s a very good chance that one of these referral sites will rank very high—and not only earn a high placement in the results stack, but even quite easily make it into the “answer box” up top that, which these days so dramatically represents Google SEO success.

Current wisdom regarding these platforms seems to come down to this: Don’t ignore them, don’t expect them to match up very well, demographically, with your current clientele, and try to create a product and price point that will lead to a decent conversion rate, if and when you decide to devote some time and energy to these online sources. PG