

Making a Web Site Work for You

by Kim and Linda Katwijk

How can you get the most from your Web site? To find out, I spoke with Rick Sloboda, senior Web copywriter at Webcopyplus, a company that helps businesses — from independent fashion boutiques to multi-national service providers — increase Web site traffic and sales through what’s called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Additionally, Sloboda speaks at Web-content conferences, and Webcopyplus conducts online studies with various organizations, including Yale University.

KK: What are the secret ingredients of Web sites that attract leads and sales?

RS: Keywords and links. Using the right words on your Web site helps search-engine spiders or robots (programs or utilities that search the Web)

determine what your site is about and how it should rank for specific terms. Links are also important. When other reputable sites in your industry link to yours, it builds credibility with search engines. It’s like a democratic vote in cyberspace. So get your vendors, suppliers, partners, friends, and family to link to your site.

KK: How do you determine which keywords to use in your Web content, and what difference can they make to your online presence?

RS: There’s software — some of it free to try — like Wordtracker

(wordtracker.com). Also, you can ask customers and prospects, “What would you type into a search engine to find my service?”

SEO professionals analyze keyword popularity, competition, and trends — often with surprising results. For instance, a national airline’s executives kept throwing around the term “reduced fares.” However, we determined that term is searched for less than 10 times a day on a global basis. Meanwhile, “cheap flights” was searched for more than 10,000 times a day. Targeting the right words can

**When other reputable sites
in your industry link to yours, it
builds credibility with
search engines.**

make a big difference to a company’s bottom line.

KK: What can high search-engine rankings do for a business?

RS: Lots. High search-engine rankings can help you avoid paid marketing, one common form being a pay-per-click campaign, or PPC — where you pay every time someone clicks on your ad on Google or Yahoo, and you’re stuck with a monthly marketing budget. The natural, or organic, search-engine rankings we’re talking about are more trusted by consumers and can bring you many

more visitors, without monthly fees or maintenance costs. About 85 percent of new traffic to Web sites arrives via search engines. Meanwhile, Google owns about 75 percent of the search-engine market. So if you’re showing up on Google’s “top 10,” you’re a happy business owner.

Before optimizing their Web content, many of our clients never generated a single sale — or even a lead — from their Web sites. But once they get the right content working for them, they start getting calls, e-mails, and requests for quotes in a matter of

weeks. Plus, the online presence means reporters can find you, resulting in PR in newspapers and industry magazines.

KK: Can you be more specific about what one needs to do with these keywords?

RS: Create a list of words to target, and repeat them often in your main Web content. Of course, the Web copy has to read well. Otherwise, you’ll turn people off and drive them away.

So if you specialize in deck repairs, frequently repeat the words “deck repairs” in your Web content. For optimal results, you want to attain a keyword density of at least 3 percent, meaning three out of every 100 words on your Web site are your targeted keywords. There’s a free online tool for Web writers at webcopyplus.com/tools, which is easy to use and can help you achieve the ideal keyword

DECK LEDGER

ratio. You should also include keywords in your metadata.

KK: Metadata?

RS: That's the geeky stuff your Web designer plugs into your Web site's back end to help search engines. Metadata comprises titles, keyword tags, and descriptions.

KK: Is there a way to get your search-engine rankings up in a specific region or city?

RS: Great question, and often applicable for trades and contractors. If you're focusing on the Albuquerque market, for instance, getting online visits from New York or Toronto would do you no good. So get "Albuquerque" and "New Mexico" into your Web copy and metadata. You're

RS: Provide relevant information and compelling Web copy that clearly outlines the benefits you have to offer prospects and clients. If your product or service will make customers enjoy extra years of hassle-free or luxury living, tell them so and explain how.

Keep your writing lean and clean. Don't force online visitors to wade through piles of useless, self-centric filler. Tell them why they should choose you, with as few words as possible. People have no patience on the Web. About 80 percent of online visitors scan Web content versus reading word for word. So go through your Web writing several times, eliminating the unnecessary paragraphs, sentences, or words.

Ask others to scrutinize your Web content, as fresh eyes will often catch

plowing through piles of long-winded letters. But many will sneak a peek at a sentence or two that's featured on the page they're viewing.

Each testimonial should promote a different point — for instance, your exceptional customer service, turn time, quality products, passion for the industry, or qualifications. And be sure to include full names for credibility, as "John D." doesn't cut it on the Web, where consumers are wary.

KK: For someone considering hiring a professional Web writer, is it best to do that before or after a Web designer gets involved?

RS: In an ideal world, the Web writer should be brought onboard before the Web designer. That way, the writer can help ensure a Web site has intuitive navigation, structure, and information flow. It also takes out much of the guesswork for the designer — for instance, how long the copy will be on each page.

Regardless of who's helping you with your Web site, before you invest another dollar or minute in it, be sure to clearly define your Web site's objectives. In other words, how will it support your business and its goals? It sounds like common sense, but many business owners launch Web sites "because everyone else has one."

Bad answer. Many Web sites are also money pits that float aimlessly in cyberspace. And thousands disappear daily.

Putting extra thought into your Web site launch or overhaul can save you time, money, and stress. And it can provide a powerful marketing machine that works for you 24/7, rain or shine. ❖

Kim Katwijk builds decks in Olympia, Wash., and is a contributing editor of Professional Deck Builder. His wife, Linda, co-authored this article.

The right keywords can make a big difference to a company's bottom line.

telling search engines your Web site's offerings are targeting that specific market or region, therefore making it easier for Google, Yahoo, MSN, and others to help you.

KK: Would you say search engines are king of the Internet?

RS: Search engines are undeniably powerful. Consider the last time you pulled out a telephone directory to find a company or even look up a number. But to be truly successful, a Web site needs to cater to two audiences: search engines, to generate traffic; and people, who ultimately decide whether to invest in your product or service. For that reason, I'd have to say consumers rule the Internet.

KK: So what are the fundamentals to writing Web copy for people?

things you won't. As a rule of thumb, Web writing should be about half as long as what you find in print marketing.

Additionally, always ask for the sale. Guide consumers to take the desired action, be it pick up the phone and call you, request a quote, or what have you. Featuring calls to action, such as "for more information, contact us today" is a simple tactic that can boost your conversion rates.

KK: What about customer testimonials — are they effective on Web sites?

RS: Very. Just keep them to the point to increase the chances of getting read. In fact, we often encourage clients to include a brief testimonial on each page to increase visibility. Few online visitors will go to a dedicated testimonial page and spend 30 minutes