

# Updating Your Website

by Mark Coleman

## Make sure prospective customers can find your business online

For most deck builders, the goal of a website is to increase sales leads. But if your phone's not ringing, you need to evaluate whether your website is performing as it should — and consider whether it's due for an overhaul.

One of the best ways to measure performance is to look at overall traffic, or visitors to your site. Nearly any traffic is good traffic, even visitors who don't immediately convert to being customers, as they might be considering a future project, getting ideas, or comparing your services to a competitor's. What's important is whether or not your traffic is increasing. If it is, even gradually, then you're doing something right — though that's not to say you shouldn't try to drive even more traffic to your site. But if it's flat or declining, you need to find out why and update your site accordingly.

### Do Search Engines Like You?

An essential part of any website update is making your site search-engine friendly, known as search engine optimization (SEO). The higher your site is ranked by search engines, the closer it will be to the top of a list of search results and the more likely it is that someone will click on your link rather than your competitor's.

You can get a sense of your site's SEO by checking whether Google and other search engines have indexed it. Say your site is named *abc.com*. Go to Google and type *site:abc.com* into the search field. This will return a list of all the pages on your site that Google has indexed. (Yahoo and Bing offer similar tools.) If you have lots of pages but only a few are on that list, you need to work on SEO.

One measure that search engines

use when ranking a site is the number of other sites that link to it. There are a variety of tools you can use to find out how many sites link to yours; I like Yahoo's Site Explorer ([siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com](http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com)). You just need to create a Yahoo ID, which you need for other Yahoo SEO tools as well, and enter your site's URL into the tool. It will then return a list of sites that link to yours.

If you don't have many inbound links, then reach out to companies you work with or have an association with. Offer them links from your site (ideally from content that you have written that references their products or services) in exchange for their linking to yours. Links back from sites with a higher page rank than yours help build your site's rank even more. Industry associations are a good place to start.

In addition to checking indexing and linking, you should employ web-analytics tools, to see how people are using your site. If your site software or Internet service provider (ISP) doesn't have analytics built in, set up a Google account and add Google Analytics to your site. It's free, as well as being easy to set up and use. The key metrics, which even the most basic programs provide, are page views, visits, and unique visits. This last metric identifies new visitors to your site and is a good measure of whether the efforts you are putting into SEO are working.

The metrics will also show whether traffic is increasing or decreasing, as well as which pages visitors spend time

## Advertising on Google

The businesses listed on the right side of a Google search-screen page and in the shaded area at the top pay to be there — a few cents every time someone clicks on their ad (pay-per-click, or PPC), up to the monthly dollar limit they've agreed to. You can have your site listed there, too, by adding Google Boost to your Google Places account. Experiment by setting a small monthly budget and see what results you get. Use conversion as your measure of success. If PPC that costs \$100 a month brings in even one lead that converts to a sale, you're getting a good return on your investment.

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on or whether they even bother to go past your home page. Analyze the data and make changes based on it. If you have lots of page visits to your contact link, for example, but you never receive any leads, you need to figure out why. Is the correct email address associated with the form? Is the form actually sending an email? Does your site identify the geographic area you work in? If you're located in Connecticut, visits from customers looking for a deck builder in California are not going to turn into leads.

### Good Content Attracts Search Engines

SEO is not something you do once and forget about. For your site to continue to be valued by search engines, you need to continually manage it. Websites that sit for months or years with no changes or additions don't get attention from search engines.

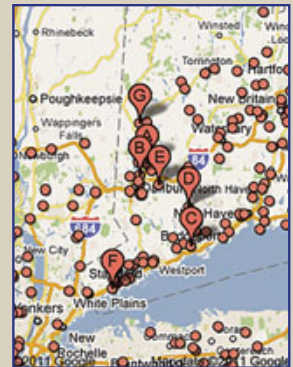
Content is the single most important factor that website owners overlook when trying to improve SEO. Content can be images, blog posts, full articles, PDF brochures, videos, or even forums. The key is relevance. Only add content to your site that focuses on what your business does. That article you wrote on hardwood floors might be a good read, but it won't show up in searches by customers looking for a deck-building business.

Include keywords (terms people are likely to enter into search engines) in your content. State that you're a decking contractor and don't be afraid to mention it several times in longer pieces. When thinking of keywords, imagine what people will be searching for. You might mention, for example, low-maintenance decking. If you have several pieces of content with the same keywords, it's likely your site will show up higher in a search for that term. Also, make sure the pages on your site have specific titles, such as

## Drive Customers to Your Storefront

Does your business operate from a storefront, a physical place that you want potential customers to visit? Then get a Google Places account: [places.google.com/business](http://places.google.com/business). It's free and easy to set up. When someone searches for local deck builders, not only will a link to your site appear but so will a map indicating your business location.

The other advantage of a Google Places account is reputation management. It's common to find unfavorable messages about a business online. Anyone can create a Google Place for a business, even if he or she isn't associated with that business. To preempt a disgruntled customer from doing that and leaving you unable to respond, set up a Google Places account even if you don't have a storefront. That way, you get to respond to any comments that might be made.



“Using Hidden Decking Fasteners” or “Refinishing a Deck.”

Whenever you add images to your site, you can boost SEO by including keyword-rich image captions and “alt text.” Alternative text is text associated with an image that conveys the essential information in that image. You know the text that appears on top of an image when you mouse over it? That's alt text. When the image is not available to readers (perhaps they have turned off images in their web browser or are using a screen reader because of a visual impairment), alt text ensures no information is lost. Most site-building software has an editor that allows you to manage images and enter alt text.

Add content on a regular basis. That can be once a month, once a week, or even every day (monthly should be the absolute minimum). Search engines rank sites with regular content updates higher.

Testimonials are important content with a twofold value. For one, they provide credibility and for another, they're one of the first items to show up in the Google index. Add lots and add them frequently. To solidify your geographic

## Keeping Up

Where else can you get ideas for updating your site? A good web designer is the obvious response, but another source is your competitors' websites. They might be using types of content or keywords that you would benefit from adopting. In the online business I'm in, I frequently check other sites for design inspiration and SEO work, and to see what the latest trends are. Are other businesses posting videos on YouTube, blogging, or linking to and from Facebook? If you can tell what they are up to, you might be able to get a leg up on them.

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presence, identify the location of the people who provided the testimonials. You don't need to include a specific address, but the town or county and the state is important.

### Boost SEO With Video

Video content has gained importance in the last few years. All you need to start posting video is a typical digital camera and a free YouTube account. Links coming to your site from a video hosting site such as YouTube count toward your site's rank. Be explicit in your title description and include keywords that describe the project. Vague labels such as "Smith's deck" don't tell the site visitor much, whereas "Smith's mahogany deck with cedar railings" provides helpful information.

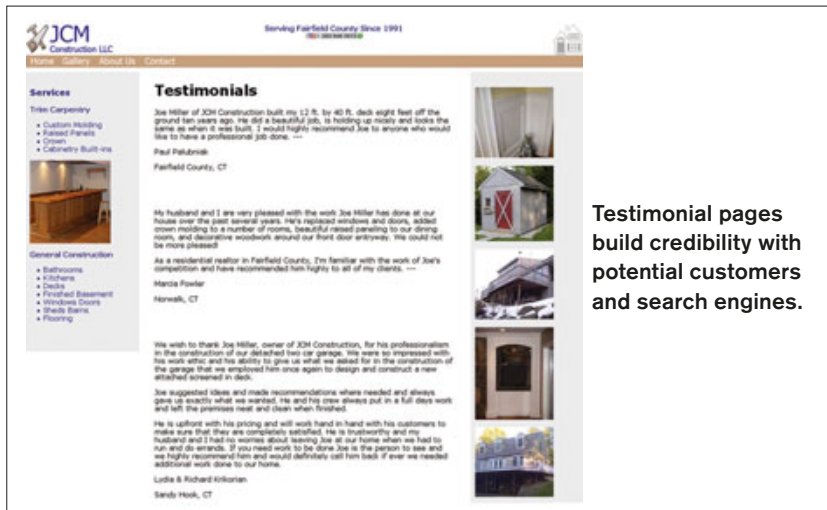
YouTube is the easiest way to get video on your site and it's free. Create an account at youtube.com. If possible, use your business name as the account owner, to build authority for your business. Then upload the video following the click-through process.

Once the video is on YouTube, there are two ways to place video on your site. The easier approach is to link to it, but it's better to embed the video. You will find an "embed" button below your video on YouTube. Select it and you'll be presented with a piece of HTML code. Copy this code and place it where you want the video on your site. The process takes only a few minutes.

### Consider a Full Redesign

If your site is more than a couple of years old, you might want to refresh the design. For one, monitors are much wider than they used to be. Who doesn't have a 21-inch flat screen these days? Take advantage of that real estate and have your site design reworked to use those wider monitors.

Next, ask yourself how good your navigation is. Is the information on your site easy to read? Does it contain



Testimonial pages build credibility with potential customers and search engines.

lots of images? Can users easily find out about the services you offer? Is your contact information repeated throughout the site? Is your physical location displayed on most pages, by town, city, county, and state? Clearly stating your location is of the utmost importance for a contractor.

If the response to these questions is negative, it's time to redesign your site. Although you can do it yourself, my recommendation is to hire a web designer, ideally one who is interested in deck building. An engaged designer will understand and meet your needs faster and ultimately more cheaply.

### Marketing Your Site

It wasn't long ago that sites like Facebook and Twitter were mainly used by people looking to connect socially. In the last year or so these sites have morphed into business-drivers. If you have a Facebook or Twitter business page, use it to drive traffic to your website. Post pictures of recent jobs or entries from your site's blog along with a link to your site. Not only does this drive direct traffic to your site, but search engines are placing more and more value on sites that have incoming links from social media.

Get your site out there in "real" life. Plaster your web address all over your



company vehicles, on your business cards, invoices, company shirts, and on any marketing materials you distribute. A web address is easy to remember, and if people know yours, they can quickly find information about your business.

Now you're ready to take your website to the next level. You have a Google Places account, you signed up for Yahoo Site Explorer, you're redesigning your site, and you have some sort of web analytics in place that's giving you lots of good data to pore over. What to do now? I tell my clients to make changes and see what happens. Track the results, and tweak. ❖

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