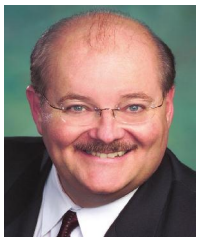




SEO + social media: marketing on steroids

by Douglas Knorr



Douglas Knorr, known as a "retail marketing activist," is president of Knorr Marketing (www.knorrmarketing.com), a full-service marketing and advertising agency specializing in the home furnishings industry. The agency provides strategic planning, creative production, public relations, sales promotions, website development and media buying services. Headquartered in Traverse City, Mich., the firm serves clients throughout the United States.

If you think putting a company website up is all you have to do to benefit from the Internet, this is the year to make search engine optimization (SEO) a priority item on your marketing to-do list. It's *that* important.

SEO is the process of building specific words, phrases and other content into your website that matches what online consumers are seeking when they query Google or another search engine about a product or service. The more relevant to that search your website's content is, the higher the "spiders" will rank your company in the search results listings. Ranking is important because in today's rush-rush world, shoppers will not explore much past the first page of results they see. (Search engine "spiders" are software applications that "crawl" the web looking for web sites to "index" or add to their database. They do this primarily by following links, absorbing the text on the pages they crawl, and then indexing or categorizing the results.)

Search engines have always been a tool to help shoppers find businesses, but there wasn't a lot of accountability. Some sites got the hits and some didn't; and businesses spent time and money developing beautiful, creative sites that didn't deliver more "eyeballs." That has changed. Today, content accountability or relevance is vital to having a successful website.

Recently, the most popular search engine, Google, has taken content relevance to a whole new level. Google has integrated its mapping service with its local business profiles and inserted that directly at the top of each SERP (search engine results page). This lets shoppers see a map of the locale keyed to the business listings on that same results page. Assuming there are a number of furniture stores in your general area, having your results show up on the first page near the map makes it extra-easy for time-crunched consumers to choose you for their shopping. What that means to you is that the relevancy of your content is more important than ever before.

What's relevant content?

Above all, relevant content includes words and phrases that your target customer is likely to type into her search engine query. If your target customer is very design-savvy, you can use more design terms than if you want to attract the casual shopper who just needs something to sit on. Stay away from industry jargon, however; few outside the industry will use it to find your store.

Content can also include product catalogs. However, there's a catch: while customers will appreciate your linking to vendor websites so they can quickly view their products you offer, a product catalog that is not directly a part of your website does not add relevance for consumer searches. Product catalogs on other sites, even linked to yours, don't help your ranking, so make sure you provide at least a good sampling of products on your own site,

and then refer them to the vendor's site for even more.

What else makes content less than relevant? To the despair of graphic designers everywhere, if the words on your website are presented as graphics they will be invisible to spider software and will not be counted as adding to your relevant content. (This does not mean your site should look like a typewritten letter. It does mean you should keep your most important words and phrases in the clear.)

Also, if an internal link on your site is not structured correctly, search engines like Google may not be able to follow the path and index the content, making it basically invisible to the spiders. To help ensure sure that search engine spiders index all of your most important information categories, include a site map on your site.

Pay-per-click no panacea

Isn't there a simpler way? Well, sort of. Many retailers use pay per click (PPC) strategies to draw consumers to their websites (and from there to the store). PPC is an online advertising medium that allows you to bid for position/ranking in the search engines by using key words.

However, Google is currently changing the guidelines for PPC. Position will not always be based on how much you pay for first or second position, etc. Google now determines ranking by "relevance" and may not even allow you to place (bid on) certain popular key words based on a lack of relevance on your website.

Google is doing this because some companies have

used key words that make it seem that they offer popular X when in reality they offer entirely different Y.

Google knows that when consumers find exactly what they are looking for when they make a query on Google, they will be more likely to search using Google and spend more time on Google. This is extremely important to Google's ability to win and keep advertisers. (All the new tools they are launching like Google Today, Android OS, YouTube, Gmail, etc. are powered by advertising dollars.) If your consumer's eyeballs are reading a page of relevant listings, she's much likelier to read the paid ad ("sponsored result") at the top of the page and in the far-right column on the page.

Bottom line: Even if you pay, you have to play — by the relevant content rules.

In addition to including a site map, keeping important words in the clear, making sure your key words are formatted right, internal links are operable, your content is relevant, here are a few more things you can do to achieve better SEO rankings.

- Take control of your business listings and upload your website site map to Google.
- Read your website traffic reports so that you will better understand how your visitors are using your website.
- Take advantage of Google's free business listings and its website statistical reporting and help with search relevancy.

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Make the most of *social media:*

1. **DO** use Facebook to invite consumers to store events or to view your information on YouTube. More and more of your customers will be using social media, so get started now. You can go to the Facebook website for a free set-up.
2. **DON'T** just set up your Facebook site and forget it. You or someone competent on staff will need to provide daily interface and updates to keep consumers coming back.
3. **DON'T** write a Facebook or Twitter message as an advertisement. Write a conversational, personal, message just as you would if you were chatting to your neighbor about the event.
4. **DO** Create special offers and use special functionality like a furniture catalog or clearance items on the Facebook Marketplace.
5. **DON'T** just run your in-store decorating tips seminars for live walk-ins. Record them, run them on YouTube and invite customers to view your expertise via Facebook, Twitter, etc.
6. **DON'T** get scared off or discouraged: Use experts (and your own enthusiastic young staff) to help you get up to speed.

Be aware that Google is integrating social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) into its results and even streaming Twitter or blog updates that come up adjacent to your company name on a Google search.

With social media and blogs appearing when a customer queries "furniture stores" in your locale, your store listing may get pushed farther down in the rankings.

Worst-case, this may mean an unhappy customer's rant in a blog or on a complaint website could appear near your store's own site listing.


The integration of social media with SEO has put SEO

on steroids. Mobile devices are being incorporated into media faster than any other area, and Facebook status updates, pictures and events can be updated automatically on a consumer's phone. Some devices even have a second screen dedicated to displaying Twitter updates.

Just building a website does not work today. Social media must become a major part of your website and all your content must be fully integrated into your website instead of linked from other sources. Every website Knorr Marketing builds has a social media interface so that all web visitors can easily use the

tools on the website to communicate with their friends and family. The more points at which your company can touch a customer's life, the better for you!

Today, your business needs to operate as nimbly in cyberspace as it does in the "real" world, and your website must take center stage to your marketing efforts.

There are challenges to getting it right, but think of it this way: Without going door to door or spending a zillion bucks, you've always wanted a way to genuinely connect with existing customers and begin a relationship with new ones. Now, you've got it! 

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