

A word is just a word, **RIGHT?**

By Peter Strozniak

WRONG! CAREFULLY SELECTED WORDS COULD MAKE OR BREAK YOUR COMPANY'S WEB SITE IN CAPTURING CUSTOMERS AND PROFITS.

When it comes to your company's Web site or blog, do you know which words are most valuable to your business?

For a company like Patio Enclosures Inc., just two words — sunroom, sunrooms — increased consumer traffic to its Web site by 130 percent in six months.

So how did the Independence-based company move the needle with two simple words? It all began with three words: search engine optimization (SEO). These words initially rolled off the lips of computer geeks. Today, businesses are discovering that those three words are worth their weight in gold in terms of attracting more customers, more sales and more profits.

Having a Web site or blog is important for any business. However, if they don't contain the keywords and phrases your customers, prospects or consumers use to describe your products and services, they won't find you when they launch an Internet search in the vast and complex information jungle of the World Wide Web.

"SEO is speaking in the language of the consumer," says Megan Hauer, director of digital media and content at Optiem LLC, an interactive marketing company in Cleveland's Warehouse District.

So what does it mean to speak in the language of the customer? One of Hauer's customers, for example, described trash cans as refuse containers because that's what his industry buyers called them. But most consumers call them trash cans. Indeed, a Yahoo.com search reveals the words "refuse containers" produce 1.3 million search results, while "trash cans" generate 3.6

million search results.

When it comes to results, you want your product or service to be ranked in the top 10, the first page of search results. Nearly 134 million people in the United States regularly use search engines when looking for information online. Of that number, 63 percent look only at the first page of the search results.

To get on the top 10 search list, you have to do some homework. First, you need to know what words and phrases customers, prospects and other VIPs to your business are using to describe your company, products and services.

Sometimes businesses can figure that out on their own by using a free Web site analytics tool offered by Google. This free service can tell you where your traffic is coming from, what words are being used by searchers to get to your Web site, what pages on your Web site searchers are landing on and how long they are staying.

For example, Patio Enclosures found the words sunroom and sunrooms were attracting consumers to the Web site. Optiem was hired by Patio Enclosures to find ways to increase its Web traffic by using those keywords.

Optiem updated Patio Enclosure's Web site content to include the words sunroom and sunrooms. In addition, Optiem posted images of Patio Enclosure's sunrooms to Flickr, Yahoo's image directory, which linked to the Web site. These changes, and other enhancements moved Patio Enclo-



Megan Hauer, director of digital media and content at Optiem LLC

sure's search ranking from "search page nowhere," to the top 10 search results on Google and Yahoo, Hauer says.

"We're also doing research for Patio Enclosures to find out what other keywords consumers are using on their Web searches," says Hauer.

Search engines use programs, otherwise known as search spiders, which search or "crawl" the Internet looking for Web sites. The spiders read the Web site's meta titles and meta tags, which hold the keywords and phrases describing the Web site. All of that information is indexed and stored in the search engine's central database.

The meta title is the blue bar across the top of every Web page that shows the company's name and other keywords. Patio Enclosure's meta title, for instance, includes the company name and keywords, "Sunrooms from the #1 Sunroom Manufacturer."

"The meta title is very important because it's the first thing the search spiders look for, they hit the meta title

before they hit the content on your Web pages," says Hauer.

The meta tags are also important because they are used to describe your Web pages. The search spiders will capture those words and index them for their search engines. In your meta tag, include the important keywords or phrases that you think will be used by your consumers in search of your product or service.

If you aren't certain what keywords your consumers use in looking for your product or service, you can purchase online tools that can help you do the research. Optiem, for example, uses Trellian.com, which aggregates search-word results from about 200 search engines. Trellian's tool also estimates the annual search volume of each search word or phrase.

While the right keywords can increase your ranking on search engines, so can inbound links. An inbound link is a link to your Web site from another Web site.

Let's say you write a press release about your company's new product

or service. You should include a link to your Web site or a landing page that can generate a lead or a sale. Plus, every time your press release is posted on another site, such as an online news site or blog, the inbound link from

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— Megan Hauer of Optiem LLC


that news site or blog helps increase the ranking of your site.

"The more inbound links you have, the more credible search engines like Google and Yahoo consider you," says Hauer.

You'll also want people to link to your Web site through the keywords or phrases used to describe your product or service. When search spiders examine what Web sites are pointing

to yours, they also look at the visible text in the hyperlink you must click to go to another page or Web site. This is otherwise known as anchor text, which is given more weight by search engines and can improve your Web site ranking, Hauer says.

It's also important to list your Web site in a directory, which are databases containing listings to Web sites based on categories and subcategories. Whether paid or free, directories can be valuable because they can help increase your site's visibility and improve your site's ranking depending on how much weight a search engine places on it.

Finally, if you are unable to invest resources into developing a Web site, Hauer suggests you open a blog and write about the information that is most relevant and useful to your customers and prospects. When you blog, it's important to use the keywords and phrases that your customers and prospects are using to describe your business. If you do this, they will come. 

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