

Search engine prowess boosts business marketing ability

Charles Berlin knew Berlin Designs' Web site wasn't search engine-friendly.

A Google search for "Berlin Designs" resulted in a top ranking. Yet a search for "South Florida interior design firms" hardly put it in the top 10. Though sharply crafted and representative of the interior design business, its graphics- and Flash-heavy home

page was keeping search engines from "seeing" the site – and steering visitors his way.

"As a high-end graphic design firm, we get a lot of positive response from people who love the site," said Berlin, who oversees marketing and operations for wife Dalia Berlin's Aventura firm. "But search engines may not see through the Flash. Our goal is to be in the top-10 rankings for interior design in the categories we do business in. We had to do something."

Berlin is not alone. As more companies rely on Web sites to drive exposure and business, search engine optimization (SEO) becomes critical to boosting traffic. SEO and search engine marketing can be a multifaceted discipline. A company's marketing team can handle some efforts internally, and some should be outsourced, Berlin learned last month at an SEO teleseminar hosted by Zable Fisher Public Relations in Boca Raton.

Berlin and other participants discovered



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that traditional, content-rich HTML or CSS coding outperforms glitzy designs or the use of frames and heavy graphics for SEO. A "clean" site with appropriate, industry specific keywords helps search engine "spiders" crawl the site, discover information and steer visitors its way. This can often lead to a higher ranking on search results.

"You expect to find what you need on Page 1" of the search results, said Neil Patel, an SEO expert with ProNetAdvertising.com and leader of the seminar. "It's not likely that somebody wants to go to Page 2."

KNOW KEYWORDS, BUILD LINKS

Among the other SEO strategies:

- Know the keywords people are searching for, and infuse content on the Web site with them. Articles on the site can have their own page and should have those words in the title tags at the top of the page, said Rudy De La Garza Jr., owner of SEOMarketing.com in Jupiter. Services like WordTracker.com can help discover key search terms.

- Remove password-protected or subscription areas. They're often not easily viewable to search engines.

- Links in – and out – boost search appeal. Links from .gov, .edu or news sites build authority, credibility and traffic.

- Build links by submitting articles to complementary Web sites. Don't expect payment. The link is the compensation.

- Get listed on those sites' blog rolls or referral areas (in exchange for your site posting the others' links).

- Place a really simple syndication (RSS) feed button on your site so subscribers can learn when new content has been posted.

Some SEO may be do-it-yourself, while others – like use of meta tags that insert words into the Web site's infrastructure – require knowledge of Web coding, De La Gar-

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Rudy De La Garza Jr. | Owner, SEOMarketing.com

za said. Yet, fundamentally, much of SEO is more business development than computer coding, he said.

"It's not all technical here," he said. "You need to network and develop content that is useful to users and Web sites. You want to become a source for content that no one else has. That way, lots of other sites turn to you for specific information."

Whether redesigning an existing site or starting from scratch, it can help to hire a firm versed in SEO to discuss goals and strategies, said Vic Kuzmovich, an SEO consultant in Deerfield Beach.

"Take the SEO guy to meet the graphics

guy so it's designed SEO-friendly," he said. "Most important, put yourself in the shoes of your consumer so you deliver what they're looking for."

PUTTING ADVICE INTO PRACTICE

The Berlins have put the advice to use. Dalia blogs several times a week, and distributes a monthly electronic newsletter. They're working with a new Web firm to include meta tagging and search terms that will drive results. Dalia will begin writing and posting new – and searchable – content to the site and complementary sites on the Web. They'll post project highlights and testimonials to industry and vendor sites to drive referral business.

"They'll keep some Flash. Clients expect beauty, and "elegance and simplicity can co-exist," Charles Berlin said. But the site will be equally friendly to spiders and viewers.

"We're in an instantaneous environment. People will go to the next link if you don't show up or have what they need," he said. "We're losing some traffic and business because of that."

Interested in learning more about SEO? The South Florida Interactive Marketing Association (SFIMA) will present an all-day workshop at 8 a.m., Friday, Feb. 22, at the NBC 6 headquarters, 15000 S.W. 27th St., in Miramar. Cost is \$299. Go to www.sfima.com for information.

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