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## Search-engine pros can click it up a notch *Marketers aim to lift a company Web site's presence -- and business*

BY JEFFREY KELLEY

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Saturday, April 2, 2005

David Mullsteff wanted to build a better business Web site.

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The president and owner of Cables Plus LLC, a Richmond-based wholesale distributor of networking equipment and custom cables, said Web site sales were slow, "almost nonexistent."

But in November 2003, he hired NetBaldwin LLC, which guided Mullsteff's business in developing a new Web page and restructuring its coding it to help search engines find the site easier.

"Before the [new] Web site, we basically had to solicit all of our sales

-- repeat calls on a regular basis," he said.

Cables Plus closed its first year of business in 2003 just shy of \$1 million in sales. Last year that figure rose 40 percent. This year, Mullsteff hopes to double that amount.

"Over the last year, we don't make any outbound calls at all," he said of his three-person team. "All of our sales are generated from people purchasing online or finding out about us online."

That wouldn't have happened without a company such as NetBaldwin, a search-engine marketing firm based in the Innsbrook Corporate Center.

Such firms can help a company boost business and visibility online by helping it rank higher in a search engine's results, known as natural listings. The firms match key words from Web searches to those within the coding of a company's site.

Search-engine marketers "revamp the Web site so it aligns with [a company's] business goals, then we optimize it to drive qualified prospects to the site," said Mary E. Archer, owner and founder of Strategic Ranking LLC, a search-engine marketing firm in Mechanicsville. "A lot of Web sites really don't do anything for the company. You want your Web site to work for you."

Search-engine marketing provides another way to advertise on the Internet, aside from traditional "banner ads" that link surfers to a company's Web site.

To improve a company's ranking on a search engine, Archer will rummage around inside the complex coding on a firm's Web site, helping it become more "search-engine-friendly" by changing and rearranging words in the Web language.

But a company's ranking on a results list depends on a number of variables, including how much competition there is in that particular field.

According to the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization, an industry trade association, advertisers spent more than \$4 billion last year on search-engine marketing programs. Dana Todd, president of the organization, expects that figure to climb between 20 percent and 25 percent this year.

The association also found that more than anything else, advertisers sought search-engine marketers simply to increase brand awareness. The Interactive Advertising Bureau estimates that last year's total Internet ad sales clicked to the beat of \$9.6 billion, a 32 percent increase from 2003.

The search-engine marketing industry "combines all the elements of advertising with product placement," said Todd, who is also executive vice president of SiteLab International Inc., a digital marketing company based in La Jolla, Calif.

"We feel that it shouldn't just be part of someone's ad budget, it should also be a product-placement budget, as well," Todd said.

Archer said companies looking to optimize their Web pages for more exposure in search engines can expect to pay from \$5,000 to \$50,000. She said the average is about \$10,000 for a page revamp, but she will track the page to make sure there are results. Monthly maintenance fees on the site also are necessary.

Laurie Baldwin, chief executive of NetBaldwin, gave similar figures in terms of the cost to revamp a page.

Both executives said the key to fully grabbing a Web page user's attention is to track progress. Marketers must make sure the page not only is seeing traffic but is generating a return on investment.

For instance, Archer said Strategic Ranking helped improve leads to sites operated by a manufacturer's representative based in Hanover County by 500 percent. Traffic to the sites increased by as much as 240 percent.

But Archer noted that "you can't guarantee rankings" on search engines, and it can take months for companies to see results with search-engine optimization.

Marketers that offer ranking guarantees should raise a red flag with advertisers, warns Google Inc. and industry experts such as Baldwin and Archer.

Advertisers looking for more immediate results may use "pay-per-click" advertising. Typically, companies have to bid on certain key words to attain higher rankings, and some pay dearly for it.

For instance, last week, top bidders paid \$5 to be listed on Yahoo as the first sponsored search result when someone typed the word "taxes." Each time someone viewed the site from Yahoo, the company -- in this case a California tax-relief firm -- would be charged \$5 per click.

But bidding wars can emerge. "The No. 2 person, in order to be No. 1, you only have to pay a penny more," Archer said. "So you really need to watch it."

Other tax-related companies paid as little as 30 cents to appear when "taxes" was typed, but they ended up farther down on the results list.

Companies also can target advertising to regional consumers, Baldwin said, searching for localized businesses instead of national companies.

"You can pick who you're marketing to," said Archer, adding that search engines will recognize where the computer doing the browsing is located. That location is known as an IP address.

"If your IP address is located in Richmond, Va., then you'll see those ads that are targeted for Richmond."

A search for "Richmond wholesale cables" put Cables Plus at the top of the natural-results listing on Yahoo. At least, that was the case last week.

"That can change," Baldwin said. "But one of the things we do is try we monitor it."

If there's substantial change in a ranking, Baldwin can tweak settings in the code to help push the page back up again.

The sales generated by Cables Plus have more than paid for Mullsteff's search-engine advertising and given him a solid return on investment.

"It costs me a lot to do my advertising," he said. "But it pays for itself. Yeah, it's definitely worth it. And my bottom line shows."

Any ideas? Staff writer Jeffrey Kelley can be reached at (804) 649-6348 or [jkelly@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jkelly@timesdispatch.com)

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