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Tweaking website promises increase in sales

BlueRibbonCloseouts gets pointers in search-engine marketing and optimization from MoreVisibility, a Boca Raton-based company.

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For many businesses, going online with a website can be a lot like falling into a black hole.

It's easy to get lost among the vast choices being searched by potential customers. Purchase the wrong word or phrase from a search engine and you end up attracting buyers looking for kitchen string on your computer sales website. Worse, offer a boring website or one difficult to navigate, and your introduction to a potential buyer is gone in a single click.

Four years ago, Moises O. Estevez started BlueRibbonCloseouts online and dove headfirst into this ocean of online customers.

The business, which purchases close-out items from major department stores and other retailers, resells them in bulk to smaller outlets, including overseas buyers from Southeast Asia to New Zealand, U.S. strip mall stores and flea-market retailers, or eBay dealers.

While he has seen success, doing as much as a million dollars in sales in a year, Estevez continues to struggle with attracting new customers online.

"The majority of people have no idea this exists," said Estevez, who worked in corporate accounting as a controller for Nestlé and a national cosmetics chain before venturing out on his own.

Closeout sales offer huge discounts, fueling entire chains. TJ Maxx and Marshalls, for instance, sell close-out clothing but employ their own brokers to find items.

"You're actually acquiring the buying power of a \$30 million organization," he said.

Estevez rents warehouse space near Miami International Airport for some storage but does not have a traditional "brick and mortar" business. His website, therefore, acts as his showroom.

Enter MoreVisibility, a Boca Raton-based company that specializes in search-engine marketing and optimization.

President Andrew Wetzler and two partners started the company in 1999, at the advent of the Internet, on a hunch that online searches would become a huge marketing tool.

Nearly a decade later, the business has grown to a staff of more than 40 with clients across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Sears and Lucky Brand Jeans.

When MoreVisibility agreed to take a look at BlueRibbon's website, Wetzler asked April Nelson, his director of strategic accounts, to consider two areas where businesses typically stumble in online work: paid campaigns on search engines such as Google and the usability of a website.

"The search-engine market and search-engine optimization, as well as having a good site, is considerably more complicated than even a few years ago," Wetzler explained.

Each search engine has a different way of ranking websites when it churns out a list of results. Google, for instance, uses an algorithm that considers, among other things, the content of the site and whether the search word or phrase is on the site's home page. Sometimes tweaking a website can improve the results of that equation.

"Google is all about the experience of the searcher," Wetzler said.

CLICKS COUNT

Search engines also allow clients to buy words and phrases and enable them to appear at the top of the engine's paid section (Google lists these paid ads at the top of its page in the peach-colored box). Estevez pays each time a viewer clicks on BlueRibbon's site, so clicks matter.

Nelson found a lot of room for Estevez to improve the keywords he purchases as well as to begin incorporating longer tail words. Instead of using "close-out sales," she suggested using "name brand clothing close-out sales."

"I'd rather get five people to the site looking for name brand clothing close-outs than 500" looking for other products not carried, she explained.

Google also provides a search query report to determine which words are working, which Nelson encouraged Estevez to use. Google has also created a tool that collects data and would allow Estevez to test the different elements of his site. It would track, for example, every time someone signs up for his newsletter.

As for the site itself, which is heavy on text and lists, Nelson suggested making it easier for users to find their way around and more clearly stating what the business does.

For example, Estevez places his call to action, "Buy Thousands of Products for Way Below Wholesale," at the bottom half of his page, which viewers could easily overlook. Move it up, she said. Clarify the order of options and add a logo, which could be a hot link back to the home page, she said. Include a toll-free number for international prospects.

Also, a navigation bar should run along the top of the page so that no matter where a viewer is, it can be seen, she said. BlueRibbon's bar runs down the side.

THROW SOME 'CRUMBS'

Nelson also suggested using "bread crumb" navigation, which allows the user to return to any of the pages they've already viewed.

"It's a usability feature that's getting, not to be more expected, but more common," she said. "We want to make it easier for people to find their way back."

Estevez, who spends about \$1,000 a month on online marketing, agreed that sharpening his search words and better defining search phrases would probably draw more of his target audience. He also plans to revise his products page to be more unique, beef up the page that describes his company and increase the frequency of his newsletter to regular monthly releases. He also wants to start using some of the Google tools that allow him to determine how the website is being used.

"The Internet opens up the whole world, no more 9-to-5, and that's one of the things I enjoy a great deal," he said. "Now information is available in an instant. You can literally make contact with people across the world."

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Andrew Wetzler, president of MoreVisibility, talks with Moises Estevez, of BlueRibbon Ventures, and April Nelson, director of strategic accounts, about the functionality of Estevez's website. BlueRibbon ventures specializes in wholesale of name brand apparel.

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