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Keyword Play: How an Acronym Helped Unlock Marketing Puzzle

David Pittman never intended to be a Web techie.

When his company, **Initiate Systems Inc.**, made a push to heighten its profile on the Internet, its Web-design agency helped create a list of 100 keywords to help the site turn up more often in search-engine results.

But the monthly Web-traffic logs—pages on pages of words and numbers—looked like “gobbledygook,” says Mr. Pittman, director of marketing communications for the Chicago-based data-management software company.

He couldn’t fully decipher the reports but could tell that the traffic wasn’t getting a bump. He “had a gut feeling” the strategy wasn’t working, he says.

A little more than two years later, Mr. Pittman, 45 years old, has come a long way. Like many small-business marketers, he has learned that search-engine optimization, or SEO, the art of making a site attractive to Internet search engines, is as much about knowing your own industry’s buzzwords as it is about the latest technology.

Terms of Endearment

Now, instead of relying on an outside expert who might be unfamiliar with the data-management industry, Mr. Pittman can manage his company’s needs. His breakthrough in decoding the SEO puzzle came when a colleague unknowingly clued him in to a pivotal keyword.

For companies without a big budget for online marketing, knowing what customers are searching for is paramount, says Rebecca Lieb, editor in chief of interactive-marketing portal ClickZ Network, a New York unit of U.K.-based Incisive Media PLC. “It’s about getting very descriptive and looking for the terms your customers use,” she says.

In the case of Initiate, a company with \$45 million in revenue last year, Mr. Pittman had to figure out how to make the Web site stand out to potential customers like banks, hospitals and insurance companies that want to manage their databases better. But after several months, the site’s traffic showed little improvement. During a staff meeting, it dawned on Mr. Pittman that the keywords were garnering so few hits because he still didn’t know exactly what Initiate’s customers were searching for.

At that meeting, a company manager repeatedly used the acronym “RHIO,” short for regional health information organization, pronounced “ree-oh.”

“Most of us in the room were like, ‘Ree-who?’ ” Mr. Pittman recalls.

After the meeting, he asked salespeople at the 200-employee company if they were hearing that term in the field and at trade shows. They said they were.

He then sent a note to key customers asking what the most important industry terms were. “RHIO” came out close to the top.

Mr. Pittman’s marketing team altered the company Web site within weeks, using the phrase “regional health information organization” several times, including at the very top of a new Web page and in press releases.

After a month passed, 167 visitors had come to Initiate’s Web site after plugging “RHIO” into a search engine—up from five the previous month.

Mr. Pittman scrambled over the next few months to expand the use of RHIO throughout the site, in press releases and in research reports the company posts on its site for prospective clients.

“We fed the monster,” he says.

After nine months, the number of monthly RHIO-related visits rose to more than a thousand.

Mr. Pittman began to read trade publications and attend conferences about Web searching. Initiate’s Web-design agency revamped the site to allow Mr. Pittman to make updates himself.

Capturing Buzz

Now he frequently presses salespeople for the latest industry buzzwords. RHIO, for its part, has taken a backseat in the industry and leads to fewer than 50 site visits a month.

Choosing keywords based only on software reports “doesn’t replace talking to people and getting the words directly out of their mouths,” Mr. Pittman says. Still, each month he also re-evaluates keywords using Web-traffic reports the company produces itself.

Optimizing a site “doesn’t require a huge budget. It doesn’t require whiz-bang technology,” he says. “We’re much more willing to try new things.”

—Simona Covel