



## THE INFORMATION PIPELINE

The internet has become an integral part of daily life for many Canadians. Successful traditional retailers have developed web resources that optimize communications with their existing customers. Beyond the scope of traditional retailing, a new breed of entrepreneurs

has developed a stream of e-commerce customers they will never see in person. Are there plumbing contractors who have developed successful e-commerce strategies? This column examines the contracting sector's internet presence.

### THE SEARCH BEGINS

The obvious start to this journey was to conduct word searches with key words related to the topic. Using two of the more popular search engines, I searched the keyword "Plumber" and the phrase "Plumbing Contractor". Surprisingly, on the Canadian search engine there were a lot of references for the keyword "Plumber" but not many of the 11,400 results lead to an actual plumber or plumbing contractor's web site, let alone one who was Canadian.

Of those 11,400 references:

- Two of the top five referred to a computer system architecture utility called Plumber.
- None of the top 20 related to a plumbing contractor. The first plumbing contractor hit was in the 21st placing (a contractor from the United States).
- Only four contractors made it into the top 50, with the only Canadian contractor ranked 41st.

It should be noted that most internet shoppers don't scan past the top 20. On the American search engine there were 755,450 references to the keyword "Plumber" with only four of the top 20 relating to a plumbing contractor.

### OTHER SOURCES

So, the fallback plan was to search the internet listed *Yellow Page* directories of several large Canadian cities. Taking Toronto as an example, of the first 50

companies listed as plumbing contractors, only three had included web site addresses (or URLs) in their yellow page advertisements. All of these factors seemed to lead me to the conclusion that only a relatively small percentage of plumbing companies have any type of presence on the internet.

### INCREASING VISIBILITY

To find out more about what would have increased the visibility of the web sites I

did find and others I did not, I solicited the input of an e-commerce expert, Dave Kitt. A principal at [ikrave.com](http://ikrave.com), Kitt and his partner Coran LaPierre operate a consulting firm specializing in web site design and internet marketing. He was involved in the industrial/waterworks supply sector of the plumbing industry before striking out on his own.

According to Kitt, the key is Search Engine Optimization (SEO). "Keywords within your web site are essential for the SEO strategy, which will be responsible for your site being ranked higher than competing sites in the search engines. Include targeted keywords and keyword

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## plumbing

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phrases that could be used to search for the type of company or service within the search engines," advised Kitt.

He maintains that a successful SEO strategy is developed and implemented during the site design process. "Don't use graphics in place of text because it looks nicer, and don't use too many keywords or keyword phrases that make reading the content difficult. You can also build link popularity and promote the site through a number of on-line marketing venues, forums and news groups."

Once the site is up, what else can be

ing to solicit new business and market themselves with their web site, or are they using it to optimize communications with existing customers and suppliers? What sector of the industry do they serve? These sectors and specialties could include: renovation; new construction; service/repair; commercial/industrial; multi-family residential; and single family residential.

Their business focus and objectives will dictate the type of web site content. This will be tempered by aptitude (can it be done in-house), budgetary limitations and time constraints.

"Their business focus and objectives will dictate the type of web site content."



done to increase traffic to it? While Kitt cautioned that most designers consider SEO knowledge to be privileged, he did offer the following dos and don'ts to consider during design and construction:

- Don't use frames to build the layout of the site.
- Don't use a "splash" page with graphics or animated introduction in place of a home page (search engines read key words in text, not graphic representations of words).
- Limit the use of dynamic content and dynamic pages in the top tier level pages.
- Develop keywords and keyword phrases specific to the industry.
- Develop an SEO strategy that focuses on the region in which you do business.

So, for those who may be considering an internet presence, what can be gained and at what cost? What can a plumbing contractor do with a web site? How can their business benefit from exposure on the World Wide Web? How can these new strategies be incorporated into an existing business plan?

In order to answer these and other related questions, it is necessary to ask what the contractor's primary objectives are. Are they trying to reach consumers or other construction industry businesses such as general contractors? Are they try-

### WWW PRICETAG

What can this cost? A web site can range in price from free (off-site limited space free web hosting with do-it-yourself site construction) to the sky's the limit (millions of dollars). What are some realistic numbers? Brochure style sites with static content would start at \$1,500 with monthly hosting fees ranging from \$10 to \$100 for shared access to off-site servers depending on the service package (content updates, graphic changes, archiving, etc.). Business style sites with dynamic content, interactive features and e-commerce utilities range upwards from \$2,500 plus monthly hosting fees ranging from \$500 up for the use of an off-site dedicated server. Maintenance fees vary by demand for site updates, maintenance and technical support.

To best answer some of our other questions, let's look at some sites.

### 1. [www.terrymarshallplumbingandheating.com](http://www.terrymarshallplumbingandheating.com)

Many manufacturers have "Authorized Dealer" relationships or other support programs for contractors, which may include web site design and support in addition to other marketing services.

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Marshall's site includes supplier references and employs graphics provided by a favoured manufacturer. His site can be classified as a brochure style site that provides basic contact information, scope of work information, project references and biographical information. It is not really a stand-alone marketing tool.

**2. www.mjdmechanical.com**

This can be classified as a business style site with many dynamic features and interactive functions. The intention seems to be to use this more as a stand-alone marketing tool. While it does contain standard contact information, it also promotes a specific technology that is an integral part of the company's sales focus.

**3. www.rotorooter.com**

This is truly a corporate site that goes beyond the realm of the basic business site. As one of the most evolved contractor sites I have seen, it has sound effects, virtual tours, a lot of interactive

features and is generally very interesting and informative. It functions not only as a stand-alone marketing tool, but to facilitate sales through various e-commerce functions such as its Schedule Service utility.

**4. www.terrylove.com**

Without question, this is the most interesting and unusual contractor site I have seen. Representative of the spirit of a true entrepreneur, this site has it all. Interactive features invite input from both consumers and other contractors. The content is always fresh and is presented in a folksy, down-to-earth, yet clever fashion.

With the proper planning and execution, all contractors can benefit from an internet presence. The key is to have clear objectives, know your audience and consider how your web site will impact other areas of your business. Keep it simple, genuine and avoid the temptation of trying to do more than is necessary. Look

at the web like you would any other investment. If in the cold light of day this will save you money and generate greater sales, then it is a good business decision.

As more and more contractors move to computerized billing, e-mail communication and online vendor management, establishing a web site is no longer the sole territory of the "geeky" few.

■ *Mark Evans is a 20-year veteran of the plumbing and heating industry, with sales and management experience in the wholesale distribution, rep agency and manufacturing sectors. Reach him by e-mail at writemarkevans@hotmail.com.*

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