

New Rules of

Search

MARKETING LANGUAGE MAY BE THE BE ALL AND END ALL IN THE PRINT WORLD, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO THE WEB, IT'S NOT GOING TO HELP POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS FIND YOUR SITE.

By Jean Bedord, Shore Communications Inc.

Congratulations! Your team has built an attractive Web site, complete with Web 2.0 look and feel. But why aren't more customers finding your Web business? Are you using customer words in the site metadata? Or were the words on the Web site from your marketing department and internal Web team? If your potential customers don't use the same words, your Web business can't be found in the search engines.

Let's see why this happens by looking at the evolution of search technology.

In the Beginning

As an anthropologist turned content technology analyst, I find the linguistic and search behaviors in the Web ecosystem fascinating. The tools are browsers, the cultural sites reside on computer services and the participants have various titles, customers, users, clients, students, employees or patrons, depending on the organization.

This ecosystem was first populated by early adopters, also known as techies or geeks, with their own language based on acronyms from the tribes of computer scientists, software and

hardware developers. Their cultural values do not include making money or communicating with non-techies.

Technology, however, operates in the world of unintended consequences.

Entrepreneurs discovered the usefulness of this new Web technology. They built businesses existing only on the Web, though quite traditional. Then they used short memorable names, such as Amazon (bookseller) and eBay (auction) to brand their businesses. It was easy for customers to remember and find their sites by directly typing the URL (universal resource locator – another techie acronym) into the software browser address bar. Inside the walled compound of the Web site, the business owner controlled the navigation and customer experience.



These successful businesses begat more and more Web businesses, every possible clone and innovator. Web sites proliferated as the creation costs of domain registration, software tools, hardware and computer services became inexpensive. Barriers to creating digital sites faded as techies and non-techies learned to cooperate and share business and technical skills.

These new users created a new problem; all these Web sites needed to be organized. It was like having an unlisted phone number. Immigrants to this new environment needed some way to find useful sites. Initially, there were tribe directories, but these weren't sustainable. Volunteer catalogers just couldn't keep up with the volume.

So commercial Web site directory companies were created to help guide these new Web users. Yahoo was one of the most successful. Its digital natives used an index structure similar to the familiar telephone yellow pages. Banner advertising paid for directory maintenance, as well as software and hardware.

Directories, now called portals, had worked well for native Web participants, sharing a common vocabulary and culture. But for new Web users, there were just too many unfamiliar paths to find information. The categories were in English. But the knowledge structure baffled them since it was created by humans with a different index structure.

And the exponential volume of new sites became overwhelming. Creative techies enthusiastically created sites on inexpensive computer servers in schools, libraries, university campuses, home offices and businesses of every size.

Search Engine Evolution

Techies solved the problem of finding any Web site in the Web ecosystem by creating search engines to find Web sites using language found on a page. Web crawlers and robots (more techie speak) indexed all of the ASCII words on HTML Web pages. Then searchers could use their own native language to type words to retrieve "matches." Algorithms derived from scientific literature analysis determined relevancy. A query returned a set of snippets from individual Web pages.

Techies rapidly adopted this new search tool to share technical knowledge. They could search using new acronyms and terminology descriptions. They could find relevant Web sites with those search terms on HTML pages. No need for human categorization. The indexes rapidly grew beyond the capacity of university computer centers. In 1998, Google went commercial to fund software, hardware and people to maintain these useful indexes.

This one innovation changed the way everyone uses the Web.

Both digital natives and digital immigrants rapidly adopted the new simple search box on the white page. It was easy to understand and always provided an answer. Searchers could examine this initial answer and redefine their search. They didn't have to know the exact URL anymore. Starting with the search box rather than typing cryptic code in the browser address bar was much easier.

This was a major change for businesses dependent on Web traffic to bring customers to their sites. Search was different than links from a directory or direct referral to a well-crafted home page.

Finding relevant Web sites now depends on meaningful indexed word descriptions on individual Web pages. Search results consist of text snippets (not even graphics) from individual Web pages anywhere on the Web site. The home page is just another Web page.

Search Goes Mainstream

Initially, the emergence of search as a major change in online behavior wasn't obvious. Established companies such as Microsoft and Yahoo didn't detect the tsunami changing the ecosystem. But Web users did. They started searching.

So what forces resulted in comScore reporting more than 6.4 billion searches in June 2006?

Google grew beyond the techie domain primarily by word of mouth. Simply put, it was useful and easy-to-use, with no distractions on the first page. Information seekers didn't have to know any technology or make any decisions, just type a few words to ask a question. Techies could show their friends this new virtual world. Non-techies could

actually understand why their friends were getting excited. And then they started talking to others. This knowledge spread throughout the computer-literate population.

The environment changed in other ways. Computer prices dropped, so business users started buying home computers. Their kids discovered video games. One computer led to another computer, until every member of the family had one and maybe more.

Internet protocol (known as an IP) address, not to be confused with physical addresses. Users could access their mail from any computer, at work or at home.

AOL and CompuServe offered friendly walled compounds to non-techies to provide e-mail using local dialup telephone numbers. Every member of the family could have his or her own e-mail address. And the services used familiar words, such as address books, help desks and customer service with 800 numbers.

Change in Rules

As search became an everyday behavior, Google changed the rules of the Web. Searchers use nouns to find what they are looking for. They use product names. They don't use marketing words such as "industry-leading," "authoritative" and "outstanding." Print collateral language is no longer meaningful for search.

Businesses native to the Web understood the relationships between words and searching. Startups without established brands and marketing budgets found they could quickly build their businesses simply by making their Web pages easy to find. They could structure individual Web pages with "calls to action" (the Register Now or Order Now button) to convert browsers to buyers. The other Web pages on the site existed only to provide assurance that the business owner was trustworthy.

Findability on the Web means ensuring the description of your products and services are answers to the questions searchers are asking.

Searchers speak many dialects and use different words for the same concept, product, service or information. Organizations that rely on using only their own internal jargon and techie acronyms won't be seen as an answer to the questions searchers are asking.

Marketing departments don't determine the words customers use. The frequency of word usage is key to reaching your market. The word "librarian" is used 53 times more frequently than the term "information professional." The numbers of searches for "webinar" and "web conference" are similar, but there are four times as many searches for "video conference." So using multiple synonyms, aka alternate search terms, increases findability of Web pages.

For the Software and Information Industry Association, digital immigrants looking for an "information industry conference" wouldn't search for "SIIA Content Forum." They don't know the language. Search engine crawlers don't associate the */c/* in the *www.siaa.net/c/2007/* URL with the Content Forum. To make the Content Forum visible to the searcher requires adding meaningful customer words to the metadata and Web page.



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E-mail became a preferred way to communicate, expanding computer literacy to new groups.

Many businesses already had internal e-mail communication dating from the mainframe computer era. The Web, however, allowed communication between company networks and between home and work. E-mail could be sent to any computer with an

These services included Web directories and later expanded to search.

Telecommunication speeds increased, and broadband networks became affordable. More and more participants discovered the Web could be useful for everyday tasks and activities. Last-minute presents could be found, gift wrapped and mailed without having to set foot in a shopping center or post office.

Structuring Answers

Business managers can be oblivious to the importance of information architecture in this changed environment. Graphics and composition on a computer screen are meaningless to the search engine and aren't visible in the search results. Crawlers can't read words in images; only the words on the Web page are indexed.

Resident techies tend to dismiss title tags, URL naming structures, descriptions and page copy as unimportant. They are much more interested in implementing the newest and coolest technology, such as Flash and Ajax, neither of which contribute to findability.

Search findability means structuring the metadata and content of each Web page with compelling words consistent with terminology your customers would use. These words then appear in the snippets on the search results page. The <title> tag and URL are the most important lines since they always appear in the snippet returned in a

search. The additional two to three lines in a snippet contain the search terms chosen by the searcher, not the marketing department. Having text rich with keywords consistent with most-often-used search terms puts your site in the running for being seen as most relevant by searchers.

Searchers choose to click through only on those snippets they perceive as relevant. Or they try another search if they deem the results irrelevant to the answers they want.

Rule changes mean having to bridge between the old rules and the new rules of the search environment. I'm a digital immigrant whose job evolved with the expansion of computer technology in the corporate world. I find myself translating between more recent immigrants and digital natives, including my teenager. As an anthropologist, my role is understanding the challenges of communicating between the technology and the marketing tribes. They each have their own language and cultures

but need to work together for the benefit of the enterprise kingdom.

Human behavior and information seeking remain relatively constant, with just a new set of tools. Adapting to major systemic changes is difficult, and the Web environment changes more rapidly than more traditional environments. Organizations that continue to provide relevant answers while adopting emerging technologies that fit their mission will thrive.

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