

For Google, many retailers eagerly jump through hoops

By Jefferson Graham, USA TODAY

When business turned south last year at Corrugated Metals in Chicago, it turned to Google, the Internet's No. 1 search site.

Co-owners Ken and Tom Carlton spent \$200 a month to get an ad for their business to pop up when someone searched for "roll forming," a process that turns metal into different shapes.

"Within days," says Ken Carlton, the ad "generated millions and millions of dollars in sales. ... I shudder to think of where we'd be ... without Google." Sales for the 26-employee firm are up 35%.

Corrugated's experience is a testament to the power of Google, where users can research everything from the Mars mission to the origin of Mars candy bars. The top of a Google search page is now the most vaunted position in cyberspace — especially if a Web site is trying to lure potential customers.

About 150,000 advertisers, like Carlton, take the easy way. They pay for ads that run next to Google's search results. But millions more try to get to the top of Google's search results without paying. They tweak their sites to match what Google's sophisticated technology looks for when ranking search results. They study Google's preferences and changing methods the way detectives study clues.

Google, which is reported to be considering going public this year in what would be the most-watched tech IPO in years, has become so important to marketing strategies that a cottage industry of consultants has sprung up to help companies get better results.

"I live, breathe and die Google," says Chris Winfield of New York-based 10E20 Web Design. He charges \$1,500 to \$5,000 to help make Web sites "Google friendly" and get them in Google's index of 3.3 billion Web pages.

Companies pay because about 80% of Internet searches are performed with Google technology, says online newsletter *Search Engine Watch*. That's 200 million searches a day, whether on Google or on affiliates such as America Online, Yahoo, CNN.com and USATODAY.com.

The benefits of being good at the Google game are obvious — and the flip side painful.

ExperiencePlus Specialty Tours, a Colorado-based bicycle adventure company, comes up near the top in a Google search, using quotation marks, for "Spain tours."

"We get 3,000 hits monthly from Google without spending a dime," company founder Rick Price says.

How? Price, who used to spend \$100,000 annually on catalogs, postage and classifieds, spends much of his marketing time updating his site to lift his ranks in Googleland. That means getting other Web sites to link to his, so Web surfers can easily jump from one relevant site to another. Google considers sites to be of higher quality — thus of more interest to users — if other high-quality sites link to them.

"We bust our butts to make Google like us," Price says.

Not so, Renee Duane of Portland, Ore. Google recently adjusted how it ranks sites in its index. After that,

her Unforgettable Honeymoon Web site "just disappeared overnight," she says. "We used to be the top-ranked site in the category, and then we were gone." Her business, which packages honeymoon tours, felt it. "We used to get e-mails and calls every day from people who found us on Google. That's come to a complete stop."

Others suffered, too, after Google tinkered with its index. "There was, no doubt, more outcry over this than I've ever heard," says Danny Sullivan, editor of *Search Engine Watch*.

Google won't say what tweaks were made. "We're constantly making adjustments. We just hadn't for a while, and people got lulled into this false sense of security," says Peter Norvig, Google's director of search quality. "We made a change in how we rank results. If you do that, 10 results will go up, and 10 will go down."

Googleology 101

Google's process of ranking pages is automated. Its 10,000 computers crawl the Web constantly to find new sites. Google says placement in its index cannot be bought and hinges on the quality and popularity of a site.

Because Google's index constantly changes, sites run the risk of dropping in the rankings. But there are ways to lessen that risk.

Enter "optimizers" like Winfield. A Google search for the words *search engine optimizers* (without quotation marks) yields about 30,000 hits. The Internet consultants design Web sites and write copy to match what Google's computers look for, such as keywords and links to other sites.

"The quality of the link is far more important than the quantity of the link," says Shari Thurow, an Illinois-based Web designer for Grantastic Designs. She's writing a book about how to profit from Google, titled *Just Google It*.

Her book, by the way, isn't the first on the subject. More than 20 titles are listed on Barnes & Noble's Web site, including *Google for Dummies*, *How to Do Everything with Google* and Thurow's *Google Sense: Building Your Business with Search*.

The only way to ensure top position is to buy a small text ad, which runs near the top and to the side of Google's editorial listings on a search page.

Advertisers bid for keywords — say, "dog collars." Every time someone searches for the term, the sponsored ad comes up. If it is clicked, the advertiser pays. Rates range from a nickel to \$50 a click. Most of Google's clients are small businesses, but more big companies are signing on, including Gateway, Marriott and No. 1 Internet auctioneer eBay.

'Online, I'm not bothering you'

"Search marketing has changed what an ad is," says Sheryl Sandberg, Google's vice president of global sales. "On television and magazines, (ads) are perceived as an interruption. ... But online, I'm not bothering you. You searched for information, and I'm giving it to you."

Ge'lena Vavra says Italian suit sales at her small business tripled after she started ads on Google. She used to sell suits on eBay. A friend recommended Google. She saw the ad show up for her site, www.Vavraltaly.com — under the search for "Italian suits" — and fell asleep, satisfied that everything had moved so quickly.

The next morning, orders started coming in. "It was absolutely amazing," says Vavra, based in Las Vegas. She says her success on Google helped her open a store in January. She employs three people and ships 25 to 30 suits a day.

Ken Carlton spends \$40,000 a year advertising Corrugated Metals in the 100,000-circulation business guide *Thomas Register*. He says he nets about five new accounts a year from the ad. On Google, he spends \$2,400 annually. In return, he says, he gets 16 to 20 new accounts a month.

Duane has considered buying ads for Unforgettable Honeymoon on Google but fears consumers won't trust them. She also worries about cost. "What happens if you expect 10 clicks a day and get 1,000?" After all,

a click might not mean a sale. Google lets users set a daily limit for click expenses, but she's skeptical.

She has also heard horror stories. A competitor of one friend tried to cripple the business by clicking its paid ad over and over to run up the bill. Luckily, Google caught it.

"Google sent us a note, saying this number of clicks couldn't be real and credited our account," says Michael Cottam, president of TheBigDay.com, a wedding registry. "I'm glad they were looking out for me."

Google insists that its growing ranks of ad-paying customers won't dilute the relevance of its editorial index. Google won't comment on whether it will go public. But search engine consultant Sullivan says there's concern that as a public company, Google might ramp up paid search to boost revenue and appease shareholders.

Google's Norvig says the focus at Google is on how to be responsive to users. "We're doing really well, but we have a long way to go," he says. "We have a bigger index, we're faster, we update more frequently and have more features. But could we get more relevant results? No question."

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