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A Search Engine Success Story

While search engines rank pages, don't forget to think about the website as a whole, after all, the more pages the site has, the more pages the search engines can rank, and, if done well, rank well.

The biggest problem is content, how to generate original and interesting content. Let's take a typical web site, say a marina. You have just so many pages that you can fill with information: home, amenities, services, boatyard, sail loft, rates, location, contact, and... that's about it. If you can develop two key phrases per page then you have 12 to 16 key phrases to work with. But if you look at the site's AwStats, you discover that people are using a lot more than 16 key phrases to find your site. In December our marina was found with over 400 different key phrases and over 500 keywords. In theory, to develop 400 key phrases you would need 200 web pages, and with just 8 pages you pretty much said all there was to say about the marina. What to do?

Most websites are inward looking: "Hello people, this is what we have to offer." That is the same as advertising features and you have just so many of them to brag about. Good advertising copy, we are told, sells benefits, not features. If you have 100 satisfied customers who have received benefits, you have 100 stories you can tell, the benefit each one received from your products or services. In other words, if you look outside to discover what people want, you will discover a lot more material to write about.

When I proposed the marina website design I explained this to the owners and I proposed to have a two part website, the red menu would be about the marina (inward looking) and the green menu would be a mariner's information portal: catalog sales, destinations, charter fleets, racing events, weather, communications and so on. Later on the marina proposed publishing an article to counter the negative views people had about our country on account of the political instability. This idea eventually evolved into four pages with 20 stories told by people who had visited out country and our marina. To build these pages I searched the web for articles that were kind to us. I was amazed to discover that many mariners now record their cruising logs not just in the ship's log but they also publish them on the web. Some of these websites are virtual travelogs that describe cruises around the world, many have incredible photos, all of it of great interest to other sailors.

The first step in creating the cruising log pages was to select the 20 stories that best suited our objectives: interesting stories that spoke well of our country and of our marina. The next step was to select a piece of text and an image from each story to publish on our site with a link to the original site. I can hear it now: "What about copyrights?" Copyright does not mean you are not allowed to copy. It means you have to get permission to do so. After publishing the pages I emailed every one of the original authors thanking them for writing such kind words about my country and about our marina and telling them what I had done with their original material complete with a link to the proper page on our website. BTW, I also told them that I would appreciate a reciprocal link but that this was not necessary. Not a single one objected. Many were more than happy with the idea. Only one specifically said that they would not provide a reciprocal link. All my pages are legal!

The next objection might be that this was not, in fact, original material. Original enough for the search engines! By combining quotations from four or five articles with some text and links our our own, we created original web pages. More on this later.

The long tail of the web.

In the physical world of bricks and mortar, if you don't get a minimum return on an investment, it is not worth doing. That's why only the most popular products get shelf space, a limited resource. But on the web shelf space is not limited, the cost of adding one more product to your catalog is vanishingly small. The same applies to key phrases because the cost of adding 10 or 100 more pages to your website is also vanishingly small.

Every cruiser tends to have his own special interest: some like engines, some like folklore, some like food, some like people, some like pets and so on and so forth. But each one of them had two things in common, they are cruisers and they had visited our country, reason enough to include them in our website. All of a sudden I was looking at hundreds of key phrases which, in one way or another, are of interest to mariners, the kind of people who visit marinas like ours. I have discovered that even if a web page is not optimized for search engines, if the story is well written, it will be key phrase rich to the point that search engines will rank them quite well.

By combining four or five quotes from various cruising web sites we were, in fact, "reusing" or "recycling" their key phrases. Since there were several of them on each page we could not develop them with the same intensity as the ones on dedicated pages such as

"charter" and "marinas." On the other hand, these were not highly competitive key phrases, instead, they were narrowly targeted at our target audience. Instead of one key phrase getting hundreds of hits, hundreds of key phrases got one or two hits each.

The results:

The marina site has 58 public pages. Eight of those pages generate over 75% of the entries to the site:

Pages		entries	percent
index (home)	(1)	568	39.4%
marinas	(2)	290	20.1%
charter	(1)	141	9.8%
cruising logs	(4)	87	6.0%
Total	(8)		75.3%

Of these eight pages only one, the home page, is properly part of the marina website. The other seven belong to the information portal.

Google results for 'cruising logs':

cruising log:	6	out of	498,000
cruising logs:	9	out of	97,000
Caribbean cruising log:	1st	out of	61,400
Caribbean cruising logs:	3rd	out of	20,300
Caribbean cruising:	482	out of	934,000
cruising Venezuela:	43	out of	115,000

Another indication is how the number of keywords and key phrases that found our website has been growing since we put in place the cruising log pages (long tail):

Month	key phrases	keywords
Jun 04	282	385
Jul 04	337	438
Aug 04	316	412
Sep 04	356	458
Oct 04	395	489
Nov 04	389	489
Dec 04	409	501
Jan 05 (24 days)	470	517

Note: Not all the growth can be attributed to the cruising log pages because we have added other pages to the site over this time frame.

Conclusion:

While we optimized the cruising log pages for "cruising logs" they generate a very large number of low volume but high relevance, highly targeted, key phrases for the site. While I cannot claim that the results are according to plan, they are very satisfying and they point to another way to generate web traffic with the help of search engines.

The website:

[Bahia Redonda Marina Internacional](#)

Bibliography:

[The Long Tail](#) (wired.com)

[What is the Long Tail?](#) (Chris Anderson)

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