

River Pools and Spas: Blogging for Sustainable Business Growth

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<http://inboundmarketing.com>

July, 2010



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River Pools and Spas: Blogging for Sustainable Business Growth

River Pools and Spas (RPS) was a small business that sold swimming pools in Virginia and Maryland. When it was founded in 2001, Marcus Sheridan, its owner, did not have an optimized marketing plan. Limited exposure to marketing techniques led him to rely on more traditional marketing campaigns, which tended to be costly. Reevaluating his marketing strategies, Sheridan decided to try something new—namely, use his website as a marketing tool and blog to draw site traffic.

Over the past year and a half, RPS grew its reputation online and became one of the largest pool companies in the United States. Blogging was a major contributor to River Pools' online marketing and business success. Since it started blogging, River Pools accumulated blog subscribers, increased site traffic, and generated leads even during low-demand seasons. According to Sheridan, a few things contributed to the success of RPS's blog. Sheridan and his colleagues integrated techniques to make their blog posts engaging, easy to find, and spread on the web.

Increasingly Expensive Marketing Campaigns

Back in 2001, River Pools was among many businesses that relied on traditional marketing like advertisements on cable and radio. It spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on marketing every year, a large amount even for a four-million-dollar business. Although the marketing costs were growing, River Pools did not see a corresponding increase in revenue. Radio and cable advertisements grew increasingly expensive since early 2000s as their effectiveness in attracting potential customers declined.

RPS also used some common online advertising methods. Pay-per-click online search campaigns, which Sheridan invested heavily between 2007 and 2009, delivered mixed results. In his words, "PPC is a wild animal." The cost-effectiveness was relatively high when River Pools encountered few competitors using PPC in the early days. As more competitors utilized paid search as a marketing tool, however, frequently searched pool-related keywords became more and more expensive. This led River Pools to rethink its reliance on paid search. If it continued PPC campaigns, its marketing cost may rise while the effectiveness of PPC may decline due to fierce keyword competitions. Furthermore, no matter how much time RPS invested in paid search, its online visibility would disappear as soon as it stopped paying. In retrospect, River Pools spent over \$200,000 per year on all marketing initiatives between 2007 and 2009. Desiring greater effectiveness and lower marketing costs, Sheridan sought alternative marketing approaches.

The Beginning of a New Journey

Before fully adopting online marketing, River Pools faced both marketing and sales difficulties. In the past, sales leads would call Sheridan and ask him countless questions without necessarily showing interest to buy his products. He frequently spent long hours with one prospect simply explaining how to build and maintain swimming pools. The more he shared educational information with individual customers, the more Sheridan feared that he spent too much time teaching and not enough time selling. Without knowing the buying intent of prospects, sharing valuable information on a one-to-one basis contributed little to sales success.

That perception shifted when he learned that sharing information one-on-one can be costly, but educating many potential customers at once using online tools could help RPS's sales cycle. The key laid in leveraging organic search. Sharing useful information online and making it easy to find River Pools could both educate large groups of people and achieve one-to-many selling. Sheridan learned that customers trust sources where they find the most credible answers. Given that many people use search engines for acquiring information, and that websites listed on the first page of search results are perceived as more credible, Sheridan could leverage educational information and search engine optimization to draw prospects to River Pools' website at no cost. He could then gauge their interest in its products.

The way Sheridan described it, "If you become the first person to give, you will be among the first to get."

Blogging: The Basics

To make its content findable, RPS needed to create valuable content worthy of sharing. As blogging is an effective form of content creation, Sheridan and his team started a blog to discuss every aspect of swimming pool selection and maintenance. To establish River Pools' blog as a resource hub, they needed to constantly add new and insightful content. Sheridan decided to publish longer posts two to three times a week instead of shorter ones every day. "The choice," he said, "really depends on the needs of a business and the nature of its industry." Pools are expensive, so he knew that customers would be willing to spend more time on product evaluation, which longer posts with detailed explanations of the industry served well. Other types of businesses may have chosen to publish shorter posts and use bullet points if they intend to provide only quick and easy-to-grasp information. In terms of frequency, Sheridan gradually found that writing two posts per week was optimal for both sustaining current subscribers' interests and engaging new subscribers. For the past year and a half, RPS blogged at a consistent pace, and the search engine visibility of its blog content grew.

Besides consistency in blogging frequency, a focus on keywords also contributed to River Pools' blogging success. By optimizing for certain keywords, RPS was able to target specific interests and segments. In deciding what keywords a blog article would emphasize, Sheridan and his colleagues always considered phrases that best captured customers' interests. Specifically, they compiled a list of questions they received most frequently from clients and turned them into blog post headlines with keywords that resonated with customers' interests.

RPS also optimized for long-tail keywords through blogging. Sheridan learned that targeting keywords with low difficulty is the easiest way to increase free traffic. Although these keywords also tend to have lower search volume, they are highly qualified and targeted. That is, those who search long-tail keywords tend to have more specific and higher levels of interests than those searching general phrases, thus producing qualified traffic. Instead of trying to rank for “fiberglass” or “swimming pool,” the team wrote articles on “pool patio materials” and “fiberglass vs. vinyl liner pools,” which received many page views. According to Sheridan, most if not all searches came from three- to four-word phrases.

RPS also stressed the importance of creating diverse content. While some customers cared about pool pricing, others paid more attention to installing or maintaining a pool. In Sheridan's words, “You never know what's going to catch fire.” He used a list of frequently asked questions to capture the diversity of customer interests, and the team took turns blogging about different topics to maximize site traffic and the size of audiences it was able to attract.

River Pools produced not only diverse content but also diverse keyword descriptions of similar content. Again, Sheridan and his colleagues acted upon customers' needs. Different customers framed the same questions differently. For example, some searched “fiberglass prices” while others searched “fiberglass costs.” To make its information available to as many interested prospects as possible, River Pools altered keywords and structure and focus of content in response to similar yet distinct inquiries.

The content itself was another reason for River Pools' blogging success. Besides useful information, open and honest sharing helped strengthen River Pools' credibility and reputation. For instance, some information in the industry had rarely been disclosed. Pool pricing was a classic example. Sheridan and his team, however, had received many inquiries regarding pricing and decided to break the tradition by sharing market prices of each type of pool material on their blog. The post, called “Fiberglass Pool Prices: How Much is My Pool Really Going to Cost?”, received 20,359 page views and 84 inbound links, the highest for both categories in River Pools' blogging history.

To receive visibility for all work dedicated to it, River Pools blogged on the domain that also hosted its company website. This allowed all inbound links to attribute SEO credit to the primary domain, www.riverpoolsandspas.com, which would subsequently rank higher on search engines and gain more visibility.

Blogging: Beyond Content

Besides generating and optimizing valuable content, River Pools also ensured that quality interactions occurred on its blog. Sheridan and his team always responded to comments promptly and with detailed explanations, an approach they applied even to negative remarks. As long as these remarks were not defamations, Sheridan respected dissenting opinions and shared River Pools' perspective on issues being discussed. He also noticed that negative comments often came

from competitors instead of customers, and open, objective responses helped potential customers see the value River Pools could provide.

Sheridan also kept in mind River Pools' ultimate goal of drawing leads and closing deals. A blog that received many visits with a low traffic-to-lead conversion rate would not be considered effective. As a result, Sheridan added a call to action (CTA) on the blog that led to a lead conversion form. Instead of inserting a specific CTA message at the bottom of every blog article, Sheridan chose to put a general message and links to diverse resources at the top of the blog, which no one could miss. Though the CTA message was not targeted at a specific aspect of swimming pools, phrases such as “free pool industry news and information” made its value clear. To further enhance blog readers' experience, River Pools added a search box at the center of the page to make it convenient for prospects to find specific information on the website.

Sheridan also employed link building to strengthen the blog's credibility and visibility on search engines such as Google. On the one hand, he and his team strove to acquire quality inbound links—that is, links to the blog page from authoritative third-party websites—by creating valuable content in the hope of being cited or referenced on other sites. In addition, they utilized external inbound links on the blog page to other websites. Linking to other websites that reinforce the information in a blog article may improve the credibility of a blog and also shows respect to those in the industry who provide supporting information to that post. Sheridan was not afraid of losing website visitors to external links. “Linking to others makes us helpful, which in itself helps retain prospects. Besides, you can design your webpage so that external links are opened in new windows, in which case people won't leave your site involuntarily.”

Amplifying the Blog's Impact Elsewhere on the Web

Sheridan extensively used social media to promote blog articles to maximize their reach. River Pools updated its business page on Facebook as frequently as it updated its blog. Sheridan also updated [@RiverPoolsBlog](#), RPS's Twitter account, on a daily basis. On Twitter, he shared not only River Pools' blog articles but also retweeted interesting and valuable articles not directly related to swimming pools. In other words, Sheridan deployed different strategies on different social media platforms; some strictly targeted River Pools' content, while others helped raise River Pools' online visibility in general.

Sheridan also actively participated in online forums related to swimming pools. He provided insightful answers to user inquiries and often referred people to River Pools' blog for additional resources. Spending less than five minutes a day, Sheridan became a reputable contributor to the forum and drew many people to River Pools' blog. Participation in online communities became another source of RPS's website traffic.

As its blog gained more online visibility and drew more traffic, RPS gradually reduced its investment in paid search. Sheridan felt that River Pools no longer needed to rely on paid search for website traffic when its organic search strategy could produce traffic of greater volume and higher quality. That said, Sheridan wanted to maximize River Pools' reach to potential

customers; he continued to use paid search only as an effective supplement to organic search to achieve that goal.

Seeing Results

For the first few months of River Pools' online marketing implementation, it saw slow but steady growth. Three months after it launched its blog, River Pools attracted few blog subscribers, and each blog article on average attracted no more than 50 views. Its persistent content creation, however, soon yielded significant results. By August 2009, 6 months after River Pools started blogging, its blog accumulated over 70 subscribers, which grew to 180 subscribers—an increase of 157%—within the next three months. Over a year and a half, River Pools' blog had 467 blog subscribers, approximately 45,000 monthly blog page views, and between 300 and 500 views for each blog article.

Long-tail keyword search also boosted search traffic. For “fiberglass pools problems” and “fiberglass pool prices,” River Pools website received over 1,000 organic search visits in two weeks. Other long-tail phrases brought slightly less traffic but had much higher lead conversion rates. Sheridan attributed the significant improvement in website traffic to the River Pools' blog. “If we were not sharing useful information, people would never bother to visit our website and fill out call-to-action forms to become leads. Reciprocally, ever growing site traffic and inbound links have contributed significantly to the online visibility of our blog and its number one status in the industry.”

RPS achieved overall remarkable results. In 2008, it ventured into the world of online marketing and became one of the top 5% of all in-ground pool companies in the U.S. By 2010, RPS had the most popular blog in the pool industry and had installed 600 pools. It weathered through the economic downturn while 50% of its competitors were no longer in business. And it became one of the largest pool companies in the United States and the number one pool company in the country specializing in fiber glass.

Looking Forward

Sheridan confirmed the value of investing time in blogging and organic search. “Organic search constitutes the bulk of all search traffic, and when I look at the money my business makes because of inbound marketing strategies, the marketing dollars I spend are totally worthwhile.” He plans not only to continue implementing online marketing but also learn and try new strategies. When asked how he would balance the time spent on blogging versus everything else intended for business growth, Sheridan emphasized the fundamental importance of blogging to River Pools. For businesses to see any online marketing success, they need to create content—blog—consistently. In other words, only when blogging becomes as natural as breathing can a business witness growth in marketing and business success like River Pools and Spas did.

Appendix

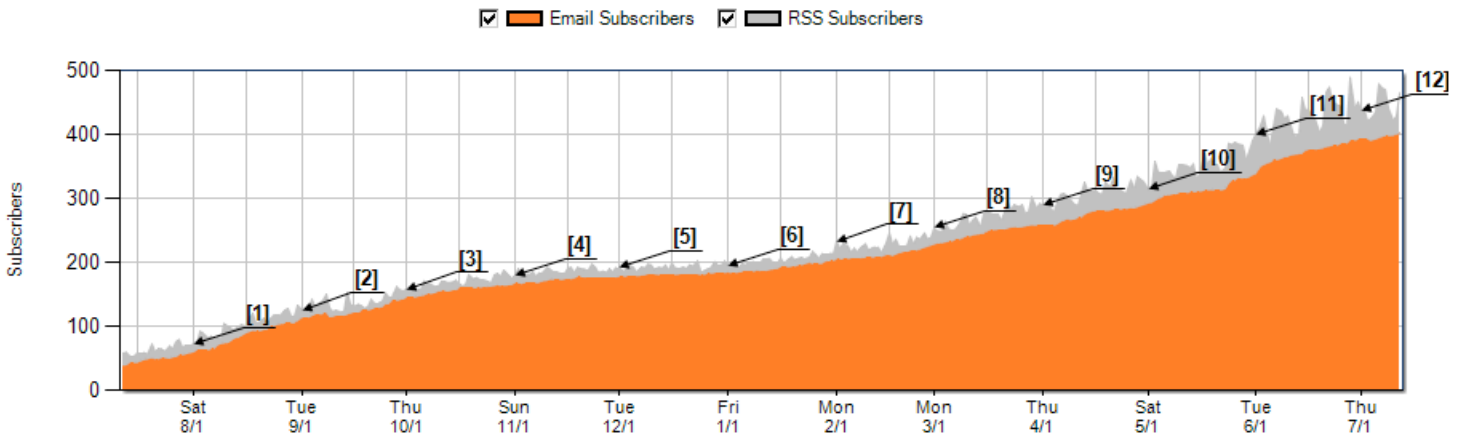


Figure 1.1 Number of Subscribers to River Pools & Spas Blog from August 2009 to July 2010

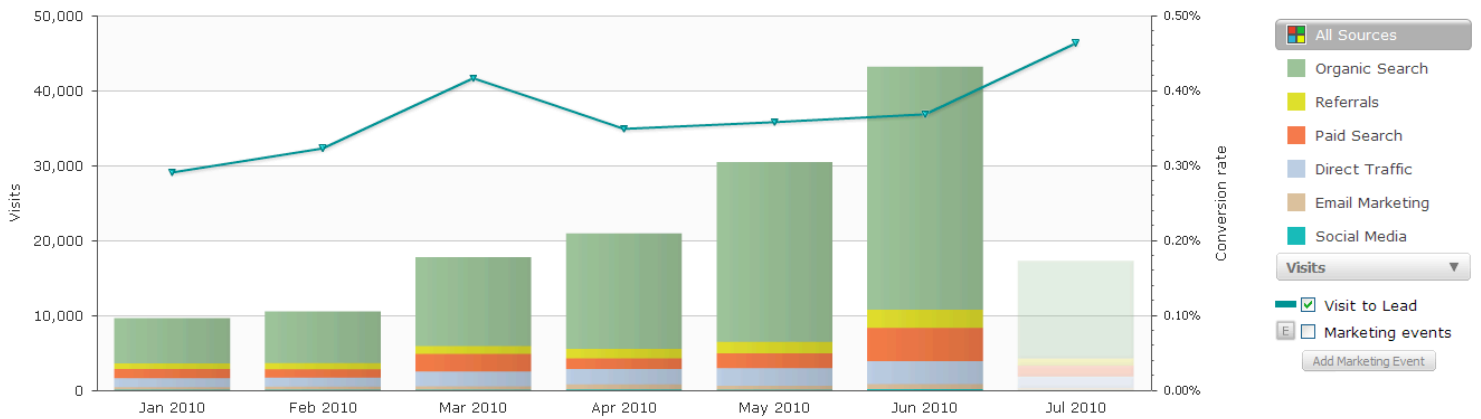


Figure 1.2 Website Traffic from All Sources and Monthly Lead Conversion Rate from January 2010 to July 2010

TRACK KEYWORDS?	SEARCH ENGINE	KEYWORD	VISITS	VISIT TO LEAD	LEADS	LEAD TO CUSTOMER	CUSTOMERS	VISIT TO CUSTOMER	VISITS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	fiberglass pools problems ↗	587	.17%	1	0%	0	0%	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	fiberglass pool prices ↗	571	0%	0	0%	0	0%	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	cost of fiberglass pools ↗	256	.39%	1	0%	0	0%	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	fiberglass pools prices ↗	154	0%	0	0%	0	0%	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	fiberglass pool cost ↗	151	.66%	1	0%	0	0%	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	fiberglass pool problems ↗	127	0%	0	0%	0	0%	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	river pools and spas ↗	126	2.4%	3	0%	0	0%	

Figure 1.3 Organic Search Keywords That Yielded the Largest Website Traffic Volumes

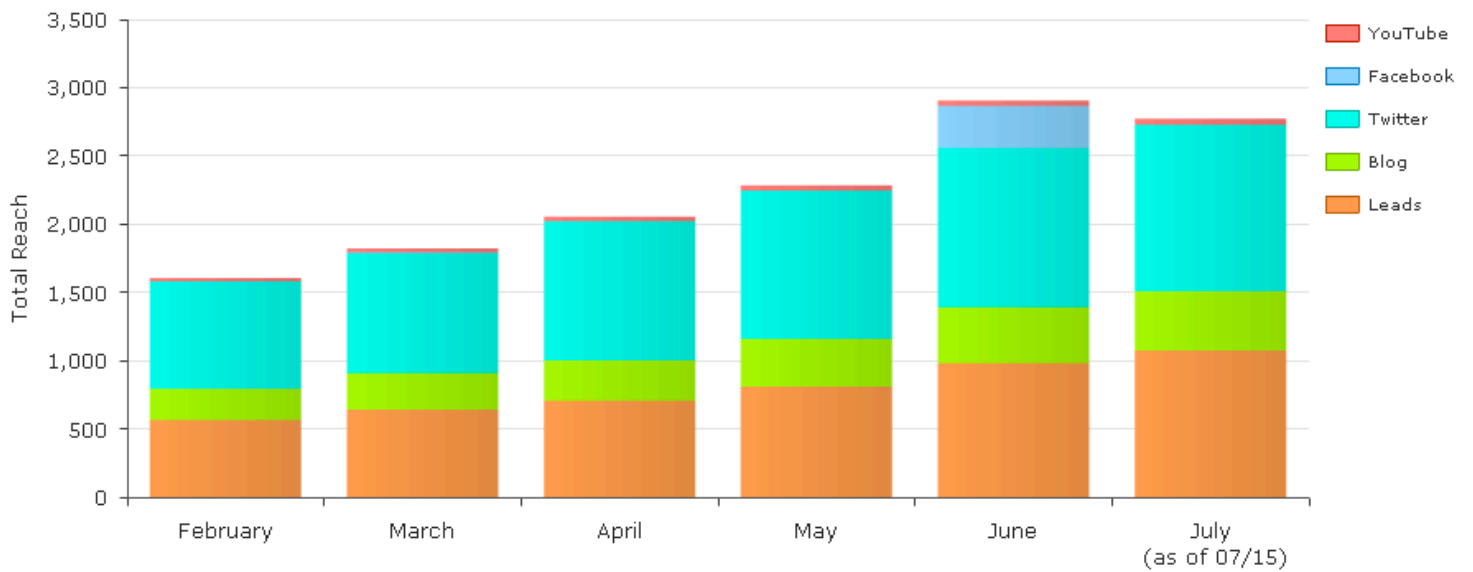


Figure 1.4 River Pools & Spas Reach on Social Media from February 2010 to July 2010