

Does Your Website Pass the Sprinkler System Test?

BY TIM REED

Wedding Dresses and Websites

One of the things that's easiest to miss after spending a substantial amount of time in our industry is just how obscure our products are. Tim Rethlake says that buying a fireplace is like buying a wedding dress: You only purchase one (or maybe two) in your life, and you don't want to make a mistake.

Due to the infrequency of the purchase, people aren't naturally familiar with anything having to do with fireplaces. And when you couple this with the fact that it's a specialized and technical purchase, it's more important than ever that we guide our customers through each step of the process in a clear and intentional way.

And this starts with our websites.

Unfortunately, most websites in our industry are confusing at best and set customers up for all kinds of frustration and fatigue—inundating them with insider jargon and information overload without any clear way to find the answers they need in order to move ahead.

While the focus for many companies today is trying to find the marketing secret to get more customers to their website, I'm much more concerned

with what happens once a customer is on that website.

If we want to avoid the problems that plague most industry websites and make it easy for customers to do business with us, we need to step out of our world as a fireplace expert and think about what it would be like if we were looking to purchase something obscure and technical—something like a sprinkler system.

The Sprinkler System Test

Yes, I know, buying a sprinkler system isn't exactly synonymous with buying a fireplace at first glance—but think about it.

Imagine that you were sick of watering your yard by hand and you wanted to get a sprinkler system installed. What should you budget for the project? Chances are that you've never bought one, so you can't rely on your last purchase—and I'm guessing that you don't know anyone who's ever bought a sprinkler system that could help you with the budgeting process.

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On top of this, you wouldn’t be familiar with any of the major brand names, and outside of the basic understanding of the fact that there will be pipes, water flow, and a lot of digging, you really don’t know much about the installation process either.

As you sit down in front of your computer to start the process, you’re really starting from scratch.

Now, imagine that you do a web search for “sprinkler system installations in Portland, Oregon” (or whatever city you live in) and you click on “Joe’s Sprinklers and Landscape”—what do you want to see on that page?

Do you want to see five different brands of sprinkler systems? How about the KNW2 Wi-Fi Module—or the 32LE Sprinkler System Control? What about valve manifolds and rain sensors?

No. You don’t want to see any of this.

All you want are the answers to three simple questions:

1. Which options will work in my space?
2. How much is it going to cost?
3. What do I need to do to move ahead?

That’s the sprinkler system test.

A website that’s able to answer these three questions is a website that has a chance of winning your business—and this is exactly the same for the fireplace industry.

While it might seem difficult, dealers—or manufacturers—who position their websites to answer these three questions will see a massive uptick in lead generation and discover that they have a sales funnel that works 24 hours a day.

Here’s how to do it.

Question 1: Which Options Will Work in My Space?

Let’s go back to our sprinkler system analogy. Imagine that you had a 0.25-acre yard. Would you want to see sprinkler systems for five-acre estates? I’m guessing not. How about options for 30-acre beet farms? No way (sorry, Dwight).

Customers don’t want to see everything you sell—they only want to see the options that will work for them.

When it comes to fireplaces, the first change that should be made to our websites is to stop organizing them by confusing categories that customers don’t even understand—linear fireplaces, zero-clearance fireplaces, gas inserts—and start arranging them by customer situation. As an example, have a simple section titled, “Choose Your Scenario” with tiles underneath labeled, “New Construction,” “Fireplace Replacement,” “Open Fireplace,” “Stove Replacement,” and “Outdoor Space.” Then, when a customer clicks on one of the tiles, show products that will work in that situation.

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You can take this even further with product filters at the top of each of these pages—gas, wood, pellet, electric—and even have dimensional calculators, but the point is to give the customer easy tools to understand which products will work best in their space.

But even in its simplest forms, this will make an immediate difference for the customer—because rather than confusing them with everything you sell, you’re showing them models that will work specifically for them.

This sets proper expectations and builds serious momentum towards the second question of the sprinkler system test.

Question 2: **How Much** Will It Cost?

Whether we like it or not, we live in a world where we expect to know the price for the things we see online. And we can complain about it all we want, but our behaviors are no different than those of our customers.

In our fictitious sprinkler system search, imagine one website had no prices posted whatsoever, and another website had an “average installed price range” next to each of their sprinkler systems. Which company do we feel more comfortable dealing with?

The one that posted their pricing—plain and simple.

Now, pricing is a sacred cow for many dealers—and manufacturers—in our industry. And this is partially understandable. After all, each project

is unique and prices can vary wildly in a given situation. But hear me on this: When customers don’t see a price, they don’t think, *Wow, these products are really specialized, and I’ll bet the price range can vary quite a bit.* They think, *These guys must be way too expensive—and I’ll bet they’re hiding something from me.*

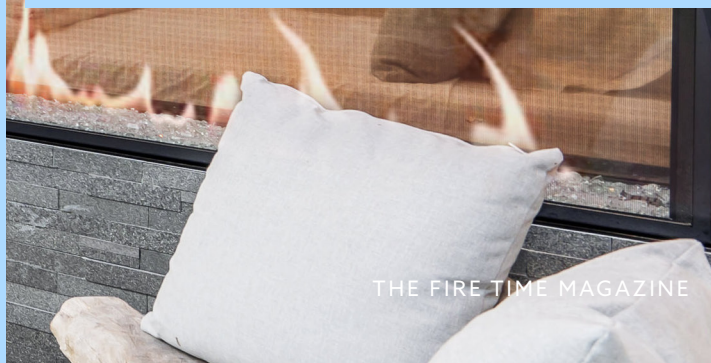
The best way that I know how to get around this is to have an average installed price range handy for each of the products—or product types—on your website. And then give customers an easy path to get that number.

Maybe you show it at the top of your product category page, maybe you show it individually on each product, or maybe you hide it behind a wall and have customers submit their information to get the pricing in return. All of those options are okay. The point is that you make it easy for customers to understand approximately what their projects will cost.

The best part about this is that an average installed price range is simply that—an average. Some jobs are more, some jobs are less, but this is what most people pay for a project like this.

Remember, just like a sprinkler system, most customers coming in to shop for a fireplace have no clear budget in mind—and if they do, it’s probably wrong. So giving them the chance to find a product that will work for them and understand the price range online allows them to reset their pricing expectations on their own, and that’s powerful.

When businesses set up their websites to answer these first two questions—“Which options will work in my space?” and “How much is it going to cost?”—their customers will be breaking down the metaphorical door to find the answer to question number three.



Question 3: **What Do I Need to Do to Move Ahead?**

When customers understand which options will work for them and have an idea of what the price range will be for their project, the most natural step in the world for them is to take action and move ahead with it.

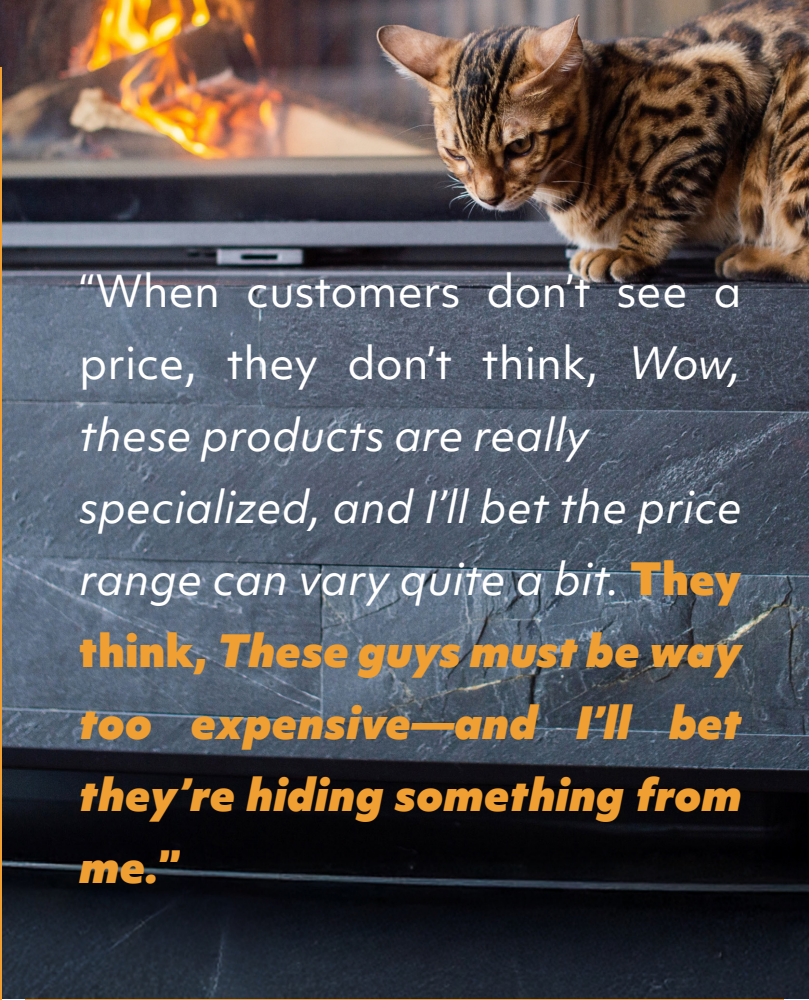
To do this, they need to know exactly what the next step is—and be given a clear path to take it.

Most websites in our industry use weak calls to action—"Contact Us," "Learn More," "View Details"—but this isn't what customers want to do. They want to "Book Appointment," "Get Estimate," or "Buy Now."

In addition, many of these sites have their calls to action so infrequently that customers don't know where to go to take action—so they leave to find another site that can help them do it.

Donald Miller says this is like a store burying their cash register out behind the building and expecting their customers to go out there and dig it out each time they want to make a purchase. It simply won't happen.

With that in mind, let's go back to our sprinkler system scenario. Imagine you and your spouse find a website that shows you which sprinkler systems will work for your home and an average price range for what they cost. The natural next step is to click a button that says, "Book Appointment" and schedule a time for the contractor to come out to your house.



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We can never forget that customers want to be taken off the market—and your website should make it easy for them to do just that.

Start by ensuring that customers on your website always have a clear path forward when they're ready to take the next step—whatever that is. For cash-and-carry items, it might be "Buy Now" or "Place Deposit." For gas fireplaces and pellet inserts, it might be "Get Estimate" or "Book Appointment." For luxury fireplaces, it might be "Book On-site Consultation" or "Schedule Showroom Walkthrough."

Every business will have different calls to action based on the structure of their company and the services they offer, but the ones that give their customers a clear next step to move ahead will find themselves swimming in leads compared to the ones that are content to hand their customers the shovel and hope they don't mind digging.

Remember, if you show your customers the next step to take—and make it easy for them to do it—it's amazing how many of them will move ahead.

Leaving What's Behind and Pressing on to What's Ahead

For years, our industry has enjoyed all kinds of protection from outside disruption. We're just obscure enough, just small enough, and just risky enough that companies like Home Depot and Amazon haven't wanted to get involved.

And hiding behind the veil of complexity, our industry has historically operated like the wild west—making it easy for us first and our customer second. After all, if a customer doesn't like the local blacksmith, then too bad—because there isn't another one for 150 miles.

But all of that is changing.

Consumers today are smarter than ever. And they expect that companies will make it easy for them to buy.

And we're no different.

If you audit your own behavior, when was the last time that you stuck around on a website that overwhelmed you with a million things the company sold, most of which wouldn't work in your situa-

tion? When was the last time you stuck around on a website that didn't give you any idea as to the price of the thing you were looking to buy? When was the time you stuck around on a website that didn't give you a way to take action and move ahead with that company?

It doesn't matter if you're shopping for a sprinkler system, new windows, a car, or a fireplace—consumers today are looking for the answer to three simple questions when they go to a website.

1. Which options will work in my space?
2. How much is it going to cost?
3. What do I need to do to move ahead?

This is the sprinkler system test.

Fail it, and you'll have to keep shoveling marketing dollars into the machine in hopes that some occasional stragglers find their way to your company.

Pass it, and you'll find yourself with more leads to follow up on and more qualified sales appointments to try and close—and that's a great problem for any company to have.



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