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Global Perspective: Bruce Clay, president of Bruce Clay Inc., at his offices in Simi Valley.

The CEO of SEO

Bruce Clay has made himself the go-to name in search engine optimization. He also got his sister \$1 million with 12 hours work.

By **JOEL RUSSELL** Staff Writer

Bruce Clay wrote the book on search engine optimization, better known as SEO. It's an acronym that's thrown around a lot these days and basically is a technique for helping websites achieve better rankings on search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Bing. That might involve changing the product descriptions on a webpage to include keywords that Google likes, or it might mean a full redesign of the site. Bruce Clay Inc. has 76 employees in six countries. Its clients are some of the biggest names in business: Target Corp., Victoria's Secret, Rosetta Stone, Pitney-Bowes, Toyota, Edmunds and Nickelodeon. The company has appeared on the Inc. 5000 for seven consecutive years. The 64-year-old Clay co-wrote "Search Engine Optimization All-in-One for Dummies." He met with the Business Journal at his offices in a Simi Valley business park to discuss Google's crackdown on "cheaters" and how he made his sister an extra \$1 million.

Question: What do you like about your job?

Answer: It's like juggling Rubik's cubes, trying to solve them while you juggle, and the colors are changing in midair. It's the ultimate game environment.

Are SEOs playing a cat-and-mouse game with Google and the other search engines?

It's not the job of SEO to make a pig fly. The job is to genetically re-engineer it into an eagle. We satisfy the search engines, not fool them. Content is fundamental to get into search engines. We make you a subject-matter expert. We improve the content, improve the structure, improve the usability. Our approach is to actually improve the website.

But doesn't the industry suffer from a reputation for tricking search engines?

The difference between an SEO and those who fool search engines is that people got excited about traffic and thought it was easy. They didn't invest in the quality of the website. Instead, they bought links that looked like testimonials but weren't. They stuffed keywords onto white backgrounds. They would spam. They colored outside of the lines and hoped they wouldn't get caught.

Do they ever get caught?

In March 2012, Google started putting out strong penalties and algorithmic updates to punish cheaters. The problem was that the top search results for most keywords were companies that were cheating.

What happened?

Widespread chaos. All these top sites were vanishing. Companies had built their economy on the Internet, and they didn't know they were cheating. They had hired a marketing company to get them links. Then all of a sudden, all these links that they had paid for were

Bruce Clay

TITLE: President

COMPANY: Bruce Clay Inc., Simi Valley

BORN: Chicago, 1948

EDUCATION: M.B.A., Pepperdine University; B.S. in mathematics and computer science, Western Illinois University

CAREER TURNING POINT: Founding Bruce Clay Inc. in 1996.

MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE: "How many people have an opportunity to build an industry? That opportunity, more than an individual, influenced me. I'm a programmer at heart, and along come the search engines. I figured it out in almost no time, and I owned it."

PERSONAL: Two grown children; lives in Moorpark

HOBBIES: Work.

punished. Whole companies got wiped out.

Can you give an example of a site you've improved legitimately?

I have a sister who lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin. She and her husband work four months out of the year selling fireworks from a 22,000-square-foot store. They were doing \$1.6 million in sales in four months.

Where did you come in?

All of a sudden my sister called me up and said, "I just remembered what you do for a living." She had a website and it was doing nothing. It took me 12 hours to fix it. That year they did \$2.6 million, or \$1 million more than before.

What changed?

The basics weren't even done. If you searched for "fireworks Green Bay Wisconsin" it didn't even show up. In 12 hours, I fixed enough so that it showed up in the top three results. That same kind of situation is true for a majority of the websites out there.

Since search engine optimization didn't exist when you were young, what did you want to become?

When I got out of school, I became a programmer. I worked at a bank in downtown Chicago. After a few years, I went to work at a software company based in Sunnyvale. Then I went to work for Amdahl, a main-frame manufacturer.

How did you get into SEO?

I went to work for (computer manufacturer) Acer. I became senior vice president and general manager of the networking division for North America, based in Westlake Village. That was a pain.

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Employee Assistance: Clay speaks to Michael Shore, a company senior analyst.

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Why?

They required double signatures on all checks. They would bring me a basket larger than a banker's box with checks every week. And I would spend half a day every week signing checks. I decided I wanted to do something unique.

When was that?

January 1996, the time when Al Gore invented the Internet. (Laughs) I was looking for something I could consult, just a personal little company. So I started Bruce Clay on my dining room table in Westlake Village.

How did you succeed?

I wrote my own software. You would point it at a webpage, and it would tell you where the keywords were missing. Once I had the software, I could optimize a webpage faster than anybody else. I could analyze a webpage in a minute instead of a day. It was literally that much of a difference.

How did you market yourself?

I got my website to be well-ranked. This was before Google. Early adopters went to Alta Vista, InfoSeek and Excite – the early search engines. People were building websites with the idea “If you build it, they will come.” That didn't happen. So people needed to do something to the site to make it show up on search engines. They hired me.

What do you charge?

My personal consultations are \$1,000 an hour. And they pay.

You must have some reputation to get those rates.

What's interesting is that many times when I'm at conferences, people come up and are surprised there is a Bruce Clay. They think it's just a name like Hewlett-Packard. They think it's like talking to Charles Schwab – you don't do it. So when people talk to me, they are surprised they can.

Do you think it has to do with your reputation as one of the highest-priced consultants in the business?

If I'm *one* of the highest-priced, I'm not charging enough. Let me rephrase that: It's a fallacy. When it comes to SEOs, if you pay peanuts, you'll only get monkeys.

But aren't there plenty of companies that charge \$19.95 a month to generate traffic?

Yes, there are. Anybody can do SEO from their house with a computer and cell phone and charge less than a real company. But you end up losing. You're paying money and you can see they are making changes, but you aren't making money as a result. I mean, if

you are one of the top 30 out of a million results on Google, that's pretty good. But anything past No. 10 gets no traffic. You might as well be tied for last. In order to be at the top of the first page, you have to pay attention to details. You have to be a brain surgeon with a laser scalpel – it takes that level of precision. But 90 percent of people doing SEO are doing brain surgery with an axe.

Who was your favorite client?

We've had some crazy clients. At one point, there was a woman in the San Fernando Valley who was a practicing witch. She wanted to sell amulets and wanted her site better optimized for “Wicca.” I think every SEO needs a witch for a client.

What happened to her?

She did very well. Ultimately she sold her business.



In Demand: Clay's ID tags from events.

If Business Journal readers want to start a website, what advice would you give them?

If no one is searching for your product, SEO can't help you. So there must be some interest in a keyword. You want to examine the competitors for that keyword. Which ones are successful? Then get a consultant, a site architect. Based on the sites you like, they are going to structure the site.

What about the product?

If you are selling the same product as 100 other people, why should people buy from you rather than them? Are you doing reviews? Are you rewriting all the product descriptions? Once we have that figured out, we build the façade and put it up to make it available for Google.

How do you spend your time when not working, by the way?

I work 14 hours a day, six and a half days a week. It's my hobby, my job, my career, my life.