

An Interview With Rob Snell

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Today I'll be chatting with my good friend and fellow Yahoo! Store designer [Rob Snell](#) of [Snell Brothers](#). Rob is a very well known expert in the field of Yahoo! Store design, a guru if you will, and he has a lot of great advice to offer in regards to designing a Yahoo! Store, search engine marketing, user-ability, and of course his favorite subject... increasing conversion rates.

Rob is the author of "[Starting a Yahoo! Business For Dummies](#)", and has a very successful [Yahoo! Store Blog](#) which features informative insights on website development and marketing. Both are really great resources, and I would certainly encourage you all to have a look at them. They're perfect for anybody looking for ways to improve upon their own design and marketing efforts.

I am very happy to have Rob on board today, as I happen to know that a large majority of my Blog Subscribers own and operate a Yahoo! Store website. With that I am hoping that this interview comes across as both educational, as well as entertaining.

And without any further ado, here is the exclusive one-on-one chat with Rob Snell.

Hey Rob... welcome to the Klog! I know you and I've been talking about doing this Interview for some time now and so I am super-thrilled to finally be throwing it down here today. I know you've been hard at work as of late, as are most people during the holiday months, and I certainly want to 'thank you' for taking time away from your very busy schedule to come and chat.

Howdy, Karl! Thanks for having me! It's great to be here!

Let's dive right in and start by having you share with us a little bit about yourself in regards to your background and how you first became involved in Yahoo! Store Design and web marketing?

Sure. I grew up in retail, working in my parents' dog supply business. One of my earliest memories is first thing every morning going with my Mom to the post office to get the mail from our P.O. Box. She would get all these envelopes stuffed with money orders and checks from folks sending money for dog collars. I thought that was so cool!

Later, as a high school student, I realized that I could use my folks' tax ID number to buy comic books wholesale! Sweet! Using that knowledge, we started a little comic shop as college students which grew over the next ten years into a chain of five "pop culture" stores in college towns. That spawned a mail order business that turned into an internet business, and we sold the last of the comic stores in 2001 to concentrate on Internet sales. Steve & I also started the Copy Cow, a copy shop, way back in



1996. The Kinko's in our town closed its doors one Christmas, and we hired two former Kinko's employees, and 10 days later we were making copies.

Shortly after that, my mom asked me to build a little brochure-ware Web site for her dog supply business. That was probably the biggest break of my career. Once the Web site was built, I wanted to drive traffic to it, so I did my homework. I read an article about how to write a good Yahoo! Directory listing (then the Holy Grail of Web marketing). I submitted a really good directory listing, got listed in Yahoo!, and then we started getting swamped with catalog requests. Literally! My dad said we couldn't afford to mail out hundreds of catalogs a day, so to either put the catalog online or cut off the Web site. My brother, Steve, ran across Viaweb online store builder (now Yahoo! Store) and we were off and running...

After two or three months of working on Mom's Web store, Paul Graham, founder of Yahoo! Store asked me to consider doing Web development for other Viaweb merchants, so I started doing e-commerce design and marketing. After a couple or three years of doing Yahoo! Store redesigns, I noticed that other competing designers had much "prettier" designs, but my stores were out-selling the pretty ones. That's when I started getting out of the "make my store pretty" business and into the "make my store make more money" business. And business has been insane ever since then...

That's actually a pretty extensive background. You've been a store clerk, the owner of a couple of businesses, and now the go-to-guy for all things website design and marketing related. Definitely points worth mentioning on your resume. In addition to these fine attributes, what other work experience would appear on your resume if you included all that you have done?

Well, ok. I've been self-employed since college and never had a "real job." Other than my entrepreneurial ventures? Well, I love working with animals! Some folks may know about my love / hate relationship with goats, but very few people know exactly where that comes from! While my friends were either working impressive internships, or padding their resumes, or backpacking across Europe, I had a different path. Thanks to my aunt being well-connected in city government, I was able to get a coveted slot working with animals. I spent the summer between high school and college working for minimum wage as the "Goat Boy" at the petting zoo at the Jackson Municipal Zoological Park. There's nothing like cleaning up after fifty pampered goats in the hot Mississippi summer sun. I think that experience prepared me for life in the real world. Shovel or not! ;)

Wow... I'm actually visualizing you standing in front of a farm with a shovel in hand like the guy from Green Acres (except he had a pitch-fork). You're certainly well-passed all of that now. Having worked with many Yahoo! Store design and search marketing clients, what would you say is a typical Snell Brother's client?

Most of our clients are Yahoo! Store guys (or gals) who have quit their day jobs and work full time in their Yahoo! Store business, but they need to crank sales up to the next level. Its fun watching folks go from low six-figure annual sales, and barely making it, to breaking the million-dollar sales mark. I love teaching folks how to do most stuff themselves, too, so we get called in on the fun gigs or when stuff blows up.

You know... for as many times we've connected at conferences or wherever, I've never met your brother Steve. Can you shed some light on Steve, and tell us a little bit about how he fits into the Snell Brothers business model?

Steve, my baby brother, has been my business partner since we started up way back in 1988. Steve got the hunting genes, and I got the geek genes, so the division of labor has been pretty easy. Steve also handles the checkbook and runs the operations side of all the things we do. I handle all things Yahoo! Store, SEO, and design / marketing... We've been working together for almost 20 years now, so I think we've figured out how to get stuff done.

You certainly have, and it shows. You guys sound really close. In fact, you guys almost remind me of my personal favorite brother duo... the Mario Brothers. With that said, if the Snell Bros. were to some how become the Mario Bros., who would be Mario, who would be Luigi, and who would save the princess?

Actually, Steve would be Donkey Kong and I would be Barraka from Mortal Kombat 2! ("Finish him!") And in this day and age, I think the Princess could save herself...

Lol... very well said, and I think its time to move forward. I'm personally a big fan of "Starting a Yahoo! Business for Dummies", and I've spoken with many who also share my appreciation for your book. When did you first decide you were going to write the book, and how did you enjoy the experience?

Thanks! Writing a book was the hardest thing I've ever done. Seriously!

I guess third time is the charm, because the DUMMIES title was the third attempt. In 1993, I wrote a rough, rough draft based on my experience starting our company for a book called "College Entrepreneurs: How to Start Your Own Business." Never finished that one.

In 2001, a tech publisher from San Francisco called and wanted me to write an ecommerce book based upon the Yahoo! Store platform. We got as far as a detailed outline and talks with the folks at Yahoo, but since there were so few Yahoo! Stores at the time, the publisher thought the market was too small to risk printing a real book.

Since then, several friends of mine have self-published Yahoo! Store books or eBooks, and were pretty happy with the results. On top of that, Yahoo! announced that there were 40,000 Yahoo! Stores, so I knew the time was right for a Yahoo! Store book.

After I got back from Pubcon: Vegas 2004, I got an email from the Acquisitions Editor at Wiley Press asking if I would like to talk about writing a DUMMIES book on the Yahoo! Store platform. I finally got him on the phone the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. He said he loved my Yahoo! Store blog (ystore.blogs.com), and wanted a detailed book proposal in three weeks. No problem! I cranked out my Yahoo! Store book proposal over Thanksgiving weekend and dropped it in his INBOX first thing Monday morning.

Long story, short: I got the gig. We got contracts worked out over the next few months and then I started writing in July. Finished up in December and then had to cut 125 pages. Whew! Writing that book was the best thing I ever did, both personally and professionally!

I'd certainly agree with that. The book is phenomenal! Is there any chance that you'll be writing a follow-up? Maybe a version 1.5 or 2.0 which includes Yahoo!'s recent shopping cart and design wizard updates? Or, what about a book on a completely different subject altogether?

Yep. Looks like a second printing will be coming out soon, and I believe a second edition is in the works. I have a lot of work to do!

Great! I think I speak for a lot of people when I say that I'm eagerly awaiting a follow-up. Oh, and this time be sure to spell my name right! Just kidding man, you know that I still need to heckle you about that one. Now, what's the deal with these Yahoo! Store seminars I've been hearing so much about? I see that in some instances you've teamed up with Yahoo! Store experts Michael Whitaker and Istvan Siposs... talk about pulling out the big guns. The three of you chatting away with tips, strategies, and secrets is well worth the already affordable price for admission. How has your experience been thus far?

Whoops! Sorry about that, Karl with a K. (Note to self... don't forget!)

Yeah, doing the Ystore101 conferences with Mike and Istvan was literally a dream come true for me. We had fun swapping RTML riffs and Yahoo! Store marketing secrets. Retailers were literally freaking out over all the great ideas we introduced. And we had three of the strangest accents in the same room: Hungarian, British, and Mississippi Redneck.

Lol... is there any chance that you'll be taking the "show" on the road? Maybe to the Chicago-land area?

I'm sure we'll be doing more Yahoo! Store seminars in the near future. And there's always the Webinar format! We had a ton of folks sign up for those free Yahoo! Store marketing Webinars last month and we'll be doing plenty more of those. Email info@ystore.com to get on my mailing list to stay in the loop.

Very Cool. Your blog, book, and seminars are undoubtedly great resources for thousands of Yahoo! store owners and designers trying to make it online. With that said, what are some of the tools and resources that you use religiously and on a daily basis? Which would you recommend to others?

- 1) Get third party analytics: Michael Whitaker of Monitus.net has an awesome Yahoo! Store tool set that works with the FREE Google Analytics. And he's not paying me to say this!
- 2) Get Firefox. Install Aaron Wall's SEO for FIREFOX. It's free.
- 3) Bruce Clay has SeoToolset.com. Not free, but worth the cost.

Nice! These are some great tools and recommendations. Thanks Rob! Regarding search engine optimization of a Yahoo! Store, which techniques and strategies do you feel are most important when trying to rank a website?

Writing good content. Unique text on your Yahoo! Store's product pages is SO important these days for so many reasons. Write buyers' guides, product reviews, how to articles, etc. Have an opinion on the products you sell and share that on your Yahoo! Store.

On that same note, which do you feel to be least important?

On page SEO is over-rated. Don't sweat the H1 tags or the META KEYWORDS, either. IMHO, you need unique text in your CAPTION field, keywords in your NAME field, and unique TITLE tags and Meta Descriptions. And then get tons of links.

MonsterCommerce is one of Yahoo! Store's most promising competitors... at least when it comes to providing a reliable website and shopping cart solution. What is your take on MonsterCommerce? What do you feel are some of the positives and negatives for when comparing the 2 together?

OK. I think competition is a really good thing. I know I do a better job for my clients when I know that there are other folks right outside the door trying to steal my biscuit.

Honestly, if Yahoo! Store disappeared tomorrow, I'd totally freak out but I'd probably wind up using the MonsterCommerce shopping cart platform. I've been buddies with Steph & Ryan and the folks at MonsterCommerce (howdy, y'all!) for a couple or three years now. I liked what I saw when I ran a couple of MC stores, but I'm still a Yahoo! Store kind of guy. Think: old dog, new tricks.

I guess the biggest difference between MC and Yahoo! Store is in pricing: MonsterCommerce doesn't charge a percentage of sales (revenue share fee) and Yahoo! Store does. And if you do sales of hundreds of thousands of dollars (or millions of dollars!) that fee can add up!

However, I do believe you get what you pay for. 40,000 merchants wouldn't pay that percentage if they didn't think they were getting value for it. One of the biggest advantages of hosting your store with a Yahoo! is that a multi-billion dollar company has resources that smaller companies don't have. One thing I love about Yahoo! Store is their multi-million dollar load balancing systems. I like that I don't have to think about things like that that make my head hurt!

Yahoo! certainly has some great features that, as you say, don't make a person's head hurt. In fact, just this past October Yahoo! Store launched their brand new "Design Wizard", which in my opinion is a HUGE step up from their past editors... and it's much easier to use too. What are some of your thoughts on this new addition?

Design Wizard rocks. Paul and the gang really pulled out the stops on this one. WARNING: Folks who have custom templates do NOT need to mess with the Design Wizard because this will nuke your custom RTML. You've been warned!

Do you ever feel that as Yahoo! Store continues to make designing a "visually pleasing" website easier, which they obviously have done with this latest upgrade, that developers, such as you and I, will no longer be needed?

I wish! I'd love to just go fishing! Seriously, I think there will always need to be someone to help translate the "dot com stuff" into something "Mom & Pop" shops can understand. I do think that some of the over-priced RTML template "designers" will get nuked by this. Too bad...

Yeah... something will have to give with those guys eventually. Going forward, In my opinion Paul Boisvert of Yahoo! Store and of the Yahoo! Store Blog is one of the better bloggers to touch on Yahoo! Store Design and marketing. Paul is currently in the process of publishing a segment called "12 Post of Christmas" (I believe he is on number 9 as I write this), where he offers short tips and thoughts for pumping up holiday sales. Assuming that your suggestion wouldn't conflict with his, what would add to his list?

Paul B is THE MAN! He reviewed my DUMMIES manuscript before it went to press and had some major input on the book. Michael Whitaker was my tech reviewer, so I had two smart guys tightening things up to make me look better than I am!

I think the most important thing you can do before ANY major holiday is to remove items that are out of stock and make sure you let folks know what they have to do to get something delivered in time for the holidays.

Simple, yet very good advice! What about the newbies? Being the Yahoo! Store expert that you are, what advice would you give to a new Yahoo! Store owner, say a mom-and-pop business, who has little to spend on website development and marketing services? What would you advise them to do in order to get the best possible start online?

If you're already a retailer, start marketing your best performing products. Buy PPC ads to drive traffic to those few products and work on increasing your conversion rate and getting more and more sales. [Buy my book](#). More than a few developers have blessed me out for giving away too much stuff in the DUMMIES book. ;) A few weeks ago, I had an opportunity to sit in on your "Site Clinic" session at the [SES Conference in Chicago](#) (which was a great session by the way), and would very much like it if you would comment on a couple of the ideas you shared. The first one is the importance of using an "Add to Cart" button vs. the commonly used "Order Now" button, and second is regarding your experiments with making changes to the size and color of an "order" button.

ADD TO CART is so much less of a commitment than ORDER or BUY. Your mileage may vary, but test different text and graphic combinations to see which converts better for YOUR Yahoo! Store...

I like to make small changes like increasing the size of the button and waiting a week or so to see what happens. It's best if you can use something like Verster or Google's new Website Optimizer to do serious A/B testing, but most folks can get by making small changes and keeping what works.

Very cool man. A great summary! Speaking of SES conferences, I've been to a few with you in the past, as well as some trips to visit Yahoo!, and I used to think that the medium-sized black notebook you carried with you contained many of the worlds secrets, such as the Google search algorithm or at least the blue prints and vulnerability points of the Emperor's Death Star (from the Star Wars movies). Obviously, now knowing you a bit better, I know that it only contains tips and tricks for improving conversion rates... which I guess is just as important, but not really as cool. Any chance that you'll share with us some of your beloved conversion tips?

Make sure your 1-800 number is visible in the cart. And the checkout. And above the fold. When I order online, I don't really want to talk to a person, I just want my stuff, but if there's a problem with my order I know I can always call.

And if you offer FREE SHIPPING, push that promotion everywhere you can. On most of our stores we offer free shipping over a certain dollar amount (say \$99) to folks in the continental US., and we push that offer in a graphic on every page, but that's not enough. For example: say the sale-price of a WIDGOMATIC 3000 is \$130, then you know the customer gets free shipping, so emphasize that on the product page. I put something like this in the HEADLINE field: The WIDGOMATIC 3000 Ships FREE US48 And "100% Satisfaction Guaranteed" is one of the most powerful phrases you can have on your store, IF you can back it up! Take the risk out of placing an order with your store and your conversion rate will jump up!

Those are some REALLY great points Rob, and they're so easy to do / test. Ok... one more question and then you'll be off the hook. What can we expect to see from Rob Snell and the Snell Brothers brand in the not to distant future? Are there any new ideas, services, tools, or resources brewing down there in Mississippi that you'd be willing to share with us?

Coming soon to a Yahoo! Store near you: The Marketing Time Machine - TM 2006. 'Nuff said.


Ohhhh..... and we'll leave it with that. Rob, again, thank you for taking the time to do this interview... I think we were able to put down some really great stuff here (quite possibly the best one I've done to date), with lots of tips for the readers. It's been a true pleasure to have you aboard.

Thanks, again, Karl! Happy Festivus!

About Rob:

[Rob Snell](#) is Managing Partner of [Snell Brothers](#), a consulting firm specializing in search marketing for Yahoo! Stores. Rob has extensive Yahoo! Store experience with both family-owned stores and consulting clients. The Snell Brothers have designed, developed, marketed and/or maintained hundreds of Yahoo Stores that have generated millions and millions of dollars in online sales. Rob has a B.A. in Graphic Design from Mississippi State University.

Rob is the author of "Starting a Yahoo! Business For Dummies" (Wiley Computer Publishing, 2006). Rob Snell loves e-commerce and all things Yahoo! Store. He is totally obsessed with search marketing and increasing his stores' conversion rates.



He is a small business owner, online retailer, search marketing/e-commerce consultant, and Yahoo! Store developer.

He's been online since 1990 and opened his first online store in 1997 when his brother stumbled across Viaweb (now Yahoo! Store). Rob has a lot of experience as a small business owner in many different fields. He started freelancing as a graphic design student and was booking and playing bass in several bands in college when he and his brother started a small chain of five comic book stores (which they sold in 2001). Rob spends his workdays helping his clients sell more stuff on the Internet and working with his family.

Rob now consults with retailers on improving their e-commerce sites and maximizing their search-marketing campaigns and is a guest speaker and lecturer on search marketing and e-commerce for small business. He posts somewhat regularly in his Yahoo! Store blog at ystore.blogs.com

About Karl Ribas:

Karl Ribas is the Project Manager at [All Web Promotion](#), and on the side runs his own [search engine marketing Blog](#) and [consultant website](#). He has been designing websites since 2001, and began his involvement with search engine marketing in September of 2003. As both, Project Manager at All Web Promotion and owner of his own website, Karl provides up-to-date, valuable, and effect Search Engine Marketing and design services to a wide range of small to medium sized online businesses.