

Website Success 101: What's "Search Engine Optimization" and Do I Need to Worry About It?

"If you build it, they will come," was a winning mantra in the Kevin Costner film *Field of Dreams*, but the reality for websites is just the opposite: you need to send, lead, and even push your customers to your site.

A website is not a marketing silver bullet. Your revenues won't double overnight, and people won't instantly know your company's name just because you have a web address (URL). But if you market your site effectively, people will come. And if you provide an easy-to-use site with useful information (and you follow through on your sales promise of quality products or services), people are more likely to come back.

The question is this: how do you get your site "out there?" That's where search engine optimization (SEO) comes in.

What are search engines?

Remember when (not too long ago) you had an interest in a subject, you'd go to the library and look up the subject in the card catalog? You'd find a list of book and magazine titles that dealt with the subject. You'd then wander the library and select those titles that seemed to fit your search criteria best.

Search engines, in essence, do the same thing. The difference is a search engine's "library" is hundreds of thousands of times bigger than your local library's shelves of books (according to Google, their index has more than four billion URL's). And you can do your search online 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Depending on what you search, you may have - literally - thousands of sites to choose from.

This fact is significant. If your prospective customer does a search on your industry and 100,000 sites are listed, where does your site fall in the lineup? Are people going to scroll through 10,000 pages for the information? Of course not. But how many pages will they go through? Statistics on this differ, but one thing is probably true. Once prospects find the information, service, or product they're looking for, they're likely to stop searching. So if your competitor is the fifth site listed and yours is number 212 and the prospect finds the information he or she is looking for on your competitor's site, the prospect will probably buy from your competitor - even though your service or product may be superior.

How do search engines work?

There are two types of search engines: web crawlers (like Google) and directories (like The Open Directory Project, monitored by people).

Web crawlers do the work automatically, following links and crawling over the Internet, "indexing" the information they find along the way. Keywords and phrases - both in the website

content and the HTML coding - are important. If a crawler notes that a certain word is repeated a certain number of times on a particular page, the page will be listed in the results when someone does a search on that word (where the page - or site - falls in the list is the issue, as noted above).

In order to be listed in a directory, you (or your web designer) must submit a description of your site to that directory. Searches involve only the sites that are listed.

What are the major search engines?

There are four search engines that cover 94% of the market: Google (35%), Yahoo! Search (28%), AOL (16%), and MSN Search (15%). AOL uses the Google database, so that really leaves only three.

Google is a web crawler, and it will eventually find your site. If other sites link to yours, you'll probably be found a bit sooner. Google does tap into Open Directory Project despite its web crawling technology. You should consider submitting your site to The Open Directory. It's a free submission. However, The Directory is staffed by volunteer "editors" and it could take up to two months for your site to be listed (this delay won't necessarily prevent Google from finding your site sooner, though).

Yahoo! Search is also a web crawler like Google, so it will find your site with time. However, you should consider submitting your site (submissions are free) as a "suggestion."

Overture, a paid listing service, handles all submissions for MSN Search. While you may want to consider this option, the cost may be prohibitive to many businesses.

So how can I make sure search engines will find my site? Is this "search engine optimization (SEO)?"

There are many strategies, and these strategies change over time (sometimes faster than you think). A good source on SEO is Search Engine Watch. The best search engine optimizers do SEO for a living (meaning 40-plus hours a week). This point alone should show you (1) the importance of SEO and (2) it's not an amateur sport. Good web designers and copywriters - while far from "expert" - should have a solid grasp of SEO concepts and should keep up with the latest trends and research.

There are two universally accepted strategies for SEO: keywords and links.

When writing the copy for your website, your copywriter should research how your average customer would conduct a search. What words or phrases would the customer enter into a search engine such as Google? There are many ways to approach this. The easiest and most effective way is by using Overture's keyword and key phrase suggestion tool. Performing searches on Google is also useful.

Once you know the keywords or phrases you're going to use, you need to incorporate them into the copy. You could use different words for different pages and you may want to focus on one specific keyword or phrase per page. The important thing is to weave the words into the copy in a "readable" way for your website visitors (that is, write for your visitors, not for the search

engines), but at the same time repeating the words enough so a search engine will rank you high on the list.

How many times are enough times? That depends. There's no accepted formula, and it is possible to put in too many keywords into the copy. If a keyword shows up an inordinate number of times on a page, it will register as spam to the crawler and your site won't be listed at all.

Another way to optimize your site is through links to and from other high ranking sites. Of course, before linking to other websites, be sure to get their owners' permission to do so.

"Reciprocal links" may be powerful ways to boost search engine rankings but they're not always appreciated (especially when the other site's owner's integrity is at stake).

A few final thoughts

Your web designer will want to work closely with your copywriter concerning the keywords and phrases. He or she will want to incorporate the words not only in the so-called "meta tags," but also into the page titles and labels for images within the coding. The biggest mistake you can make in creating your website is allowing someone to write the content who doesn't understand SEO. It is a specialty, so make sure your writer has experience (and can prove it).

Like any "tool," you need to understand how to use SEO in order to achieve maximum results. Your website can be a fabulous, cost-effective marketing vehicle for your business. Taking the time to understand search engine optimization is the first step in experiencing website success.