



Developing a Search Engine Strategy for Your Web Site

As more businesses, both large and small set up web sites to market their goods and services and acquire new customers, a primary concern of business owners is “getting found” at the places on the internet where the public searches for businesses to serve their needs. All web site owners want their sites to consistently rank in the “top ten” of internet searches. This concept, simple as it seems on the surface, is actually a complex proposition requiring informed decision-making and planning. The purpose of this document is help business owners and managers navigate this confusing sea of technical concepts and plot a strategy to achieve success in their online marketing efforts.

What are Search Engines?

Internet search engines are often referred to as “portals” because they are the places that have become the entry point for millions of internet users, who utilize these massive web sites to find internet-based information and receive personalized online services.

Although all of these sites are generically referred to as “search engines”, a distinction must first be made between true search engines and online directories. The primary difference between the two is in how each collects and stores listings and links to outside web sites. Search engines work by using specialized programs sometimes called “spiders” or “crawlers” to seek out web pages, index the textual content of those pages, and place this information into sophisticated databases. Those databases are queried when users perform searches on the host web site. Directories, on the other hand, organize information into a hierarchical taxonomy to create massive categorized lists of other web sites. This service is usually performed by human editors, who process a vast amount of information flowing in each day.

There are dozens of search engines and directories in existence on the web today, however, seven large sites dominate the business, collectively handling over 97% of all searches. They are, in order of popularity: Yahoo, Excite, Lycos, Go, Altavista, Snap, HotBot, the Microsoft Network (MSN) and Northern Light. All of these sites are true search engines using automated spider or crawler based indexing of content with the important exception of Yahoo, which is a directory service that will be discussed in detail later in this document.

How Do Search Engines Work?

The mechanics of how the engines work is easy to describe in general. As previously mentioned, indexing programs visit web sites to “read” the content of pages and organize that content into their database of indexed web pages. It is very important to understand that these programs read only the text content of pages; there is no way for them to read graphics, therefore the words used in the text of web pages is critically important to that site’s ranking. The key determinant in how various pages rank in internet searches has to do with the sophisticated algorithms used by search engine databases to determine the relevancy of a page to the word that are being searched upon. There are a number factors that are evaluated by these programs which vary from one search engine company to another and are subject to constant change and revision. Some of the consistent factors in relevancy ranking on a given keyword or phrase include the following:

- The frequency of the keyword within the text of the page
- The use of the keyword in important places within the page, such as the page title, a headline or a hyperlink
- The percentage of that keyword’s use when compared to the total number of words on the page.
- The number of links to that page from other sites on the internet.

What about META Tags?

META tags, hidden HTML tags embedded in pages, are widely considered as a “magic bullet” for helping a site rank high under certain keywords. The reality is much more sobering. Search engine databases consider two types of META tags, the META KEYWORD tag and the META DESCRIPTION tag. Most search engine systems ignore the KEYWORD tag, because it is so easily abused, allowing the site creator to list keywords that have nothing to do with the site's content, or to list competitor's names. The META DESCRIPTION tag is used by most search engines. It is useful because the text embedded in the tag appears as the descriptive text that is displayed when the site is listed in a search results page. While this tag doesn't help the site get found, more often, it allows the site owner to write a compelling and persuasive message that will entice the user to click on the link to his/her site.

Getting Indexed

Understanding the basics of the indexing system used by search engines obviates the need to first be indexed by the search engine spiders. This, however is a process that often is more difficult or takes longer to occur than might be expected. Search engines locate pages using two methods: user registration and following links from other sites. The search engine systems are faced the gargantuan task of indexing millions of pages. Hundreds of thousands of new requests to be indexed are received each day. As a result, search engine databases contain only a fraction of the total indexable pages on the web, and are falling further behind as the size of the web grows.

Some interesting facts about search engine indexing are contained in a scientific study entitled *Accessibility of Information on the Web* (Lawrence & Giles; *Nature*, vol. 400; July 8, 1999). In their article, the authors report that the major search engines have stored between

2.5% (Lycos) to 16% (Northern Light) of the indexable pages on the web. Also, the median age of new documents on listed by the engines is 57 days, evidencing the fact that *getting listed can be a process that takes months*.

Yahoo presents a separate set of circumstances. As previously mentioned, Yahoo is not a search engine, but a directory. In addition, Yahoo is by far the most popular method of searching the web. Once listed in Yahoo, it will routinely generate more traffic than all other engines combined.

Requesting to be included in the Yahoo directory is simple; One only needs to go to the Yahoo site, find an appropriate category, and fill out an online form. However only 10% of submitted sites are included in the Yahoo directory and the wait for inclusion can last for several months. Yahoo's editors are tasked with processing hundreds of thousands of requests to be added. In four years of submitting sites to Yahoo, We have noticed no set pattern of which sites are included and which aren't, and are forced to conclude that inclusion is simply a matter of luck. We have also noticed that fewer and fewer sites are being included. Once included, being found on Yahoo has nothing to do with the content of the site. Yahoo searches its directory based on the name of the company and the keywords included in a 25-word description that is supplied by the submitter. Therefore, it is necessary to write this description very carefully, using the most important keywords.

Yahoo has recently launched a program called "Business Express" that allows a site owner to request that Yahoo's editors guarantee to review a site for inclusion within one week. This service costs \$199. Yahoo is careful to point out that this is merely a guarantee that they will consider the site for inclusion, not that the site will be included in Yahoo's directory. Yahoo will only reject a site if it is incomplete, or misrepresented. We feel that while this practice is a gross abuse of Yahoo's power over site owners, it still "money well spent" because a Yahoo ranking is so crucial to a successful search engine strategy.

Developing A Strategy

With these facts in mind, we can set about the process of developing your company's search engine strategy.

Is Your Business "Search Engine Friendly"?

An important first consideration in the development of a strategy is to consider the business you are in and set your expectations accordingly.

Some businesses by their nature are more appropriate for search engine marketing. These businesses normally have these characteristics: 1) They sell specialized or niche-related products or services; 2) They market nationally or internationally; and 3) They are able to develop a unique set of keywords to describe their businesses.

It is important to remember that search engines are based on words and words alone. Therefore, the only tools at your disposal are the words you use to describe your business. If those words are not unique in their nature, the prospect of being listed high on most search engines is unlikely. This is especially difficult for professional service companies such as attorneys and accountants and retailers that do not focus on a narrow niche. For example, there are thousands of accounting firms around the United States; the market for these firms spans the gamut from the enormous "big six" companies to small solo practitioners. However, the words used to describe those firms essentially does not vary. A small practitioner must use the

keywords, “accounting”, “auditing”, “tax preparation” etc. just as a big six firm does. The key point here is that the words used to describe the business are not unique in nature.

Second, search engine marketing favors companies that sell to a large geographic base. The individuals that will find your site through search engines will come from all over the world. If you can only do business within a local area due to logistics or contractual restrictions, getting found by thousands of individuals who can't be your customers and being contacted by them wastes everybody's time.

If your business does not lend itself to search engine marketing, you may conclude that the best strategy is no strategy at all. Instead of wasting time and effort on a futile battle with the search engines, you can focus your site marketing on local online directories and portals and offline local advertising media such as radio, television newspapers or yellow pages.

Businesses Favorable to Search Engine Marketing

Specialized manufacturers
Specialized service providers
National niche marketers

Businesses Unfavorable to Search Engine Marketing

Professional services
Local or regional resellers and distributors
Unspecialized retailers
Franchisees

Optimizing for Search Engines

If you have determined that your business is favorable to search engine marketing, what follows is a step-by-step process to maximize your ability to obtain new customers via search engines.

The steps of this process include: 1) Determining and prioritizing key phrases; 2) Writing copy for the site and directing design around those phrases; 3) Submitting to search engines; 3) Requesting links from as many other sites as possible 4) Follow-up, follow-up, follow-up.

Step 1: Determine key phrases

To successfully reach your potential customers, it is imperative to first stabilize your target by determining key phrases. At this point you'll need to “get into the heads” of a potential customer by thinking of the kinds of words that one would type into a search engine's search box. Be somewhat specific. General keywords such as “construction” or “insurance” are unlikely to be successful. Also, think in terms of the vernacular of your customers and avoid industry specific titles and jargon. For example, a client of ours manufactures home heating boilers for residential hot water heating systems. However, targeting the words “furnace” and “heater” are important, despite the fact that their product is technically neither a furnace nor a heater.

Choose three to six key phrases and prioritize them. While designing and writing copy for the site, this hierarchy will become important

Step 2. Develop the Site Around the Key Phrases

This process involves both copywriting and design. It is important to feature the selected key phrases prominently on the home page or selected interior pages by using them in page titles, headlines and hyperlinks.

Step 3. Submit to search engines

This is actually the easiest part of the process. All major search engines have a link on their home page called “Add URL” or “Add your site”. Submitting is simply a process of going to each site and providing the address of your site and usually an email address as well. Special instructions for Yahoo are outlined earlier in this document.

Step 4. Request Links

The *Accessibility of Information on the Web* article cited earlier states that there is direct correlation between the number of sites linked and the probability of being indexed. Sites with 2-10 links to them are three times more likely to be indexed by search engine spiders than sites with no links. In addition, the site is likely to be indexed faster, because the probability of the spider following a link to the site increases the chances of indexing. Also, search engine ranking algorithms consider links to the site as a sign of credibility and will rank the site higher. Further, recently discovered evidence suggests that some search engine actually rank sites found via links higher than sites that are submitted, raising the possibility that submitting the site might actually cause a lower ranking. Finally, links to the site are beneficial for bringing traffic on their own. Often site visitors who follow these links are better qualified than those finding the site via search engines.

Step 5. Follow-up

Checking rankings, making modifications, re-submitting the site and keeping an eye on competition for rankings is an ongoing process. Check your positions at least once a month and be aware of the rise and/or fall of the site’s rank. Look at the sites above yours (and the sites with links to them) and try to determine what those sites are doing right. Also, examine your site traffic reports, which can tell you where your traffic is coming from and the keyword queries that brought those visitors to the site.

Conclusion

Search engine marketing can be a confusing and frustrating process, but can also be the most cost-effective way to obtain new customers for your business. The bottom line is this: **The more time, effort and/or money spent on search engine marketing equals better and faster results.** It is possible to spend several hours per week optimizing and “tweaking” your site for best results. One could also go so far as to create separate home pages for each search engine, or create separate “dummy” sites just for the purpose of linking to the target site. You will most likely need to make aesthetic compromises to the look of your site in order to optimize it for search engines.

Planning and knowledge combined with a good dose of patience and perseverance are your most useful assets.

Online Resources

Search Engine Watch – (www.searchenginewatch.com) An excellent resource with up-to-date information on how search engines work, current news and feedback from other readers. The monthly email newsletter offered at the site is also useful.

Submit-It – (www.submit-it.com) A site that allows users to submit to several search engine sites at once

Top Search Engine Sites

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| Yahoo | www.yahoo.com |
| Excite | www.excite.com |
| AltaVista | www.altavista.com |
| HotBot | www.hotbot.com |
| Lycos | www.lycos.com |
| MSN | www.msn.com |
| Snap | www.snap.com |
| WebCrawler | www.webcrawler.com |
| Go Network | www.go.com |

Useful Software

WebPosition - (www.webposition.com) Desktop software application that helps the user create, submit and track websites for maximum search engine rankings. Includes a guidebook full of highly useful, though technical, information.