



## **What You Don't Know About SEO**

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Search engine optimization--the canny use of keywords and other techniques designed to shoot a website to the top of a search--is the make-or-break factor for many new businesses.

It is also the web's unfolding, and unregulated, frontier. There are countless SEO strategists, consultants and self-professed experts who will claim they can beam your site up into Google's top 10 search results--for a price, of course. Consultants commonly charge upward of \$200 an hour, and most will pressure you to sign a contract that keeps them on retainer for months--at prices as steep as \$12,000 a month. Unscrupulous SEO firms not only make promises they can't keep, the worst of them also use shady practices that might produce no traffic, deliver the wrong traffic or even get you banned from planet Google.



"The SEO business is 80 percent scam," says Peter Kent, an internet marketing strategist and author of *Search Engine Optimization for Dummies*. "It's very, very difficult to find a good firm."

For the startup owner who isn't well versed in webspeak, hiring an SEO consultant is one of the more vulnerable moments in launching a new business. So before shelling out thousands of dollars, it's essential to understand what they do, when you need one (and when you don't), how much you should pay, what you should expect--and when you should fire them.

First, experts generally agree that SEO firms are most worthwhile at the development stage of a website. For example, for \$225 an hour, Kent will take a spin around your site, looking for the elements that will get you to the top of a search--clean URLs, site maps, heading tags, page titles. Ideally, he says, someone like him helps lay a solid, searchable foundation for a site as it's being constructed. Beyond that, Kent and other experts don't see much value in contracting with an SEO firm. "Once you optimize the website and everyone on the team understands what needs to be done, there should be no cost moving forward," he says.

SEO firms that ask for a lump sum payment as well as a monthly retainer--or worse, a long-term contract--are suspect. Yet such deals are common.

Executives at Optimal Fusion, a Los Angeles-based marketing agency, found that out the hard way. The company hired and fired roughly 20 SEO firms in the years after opening its doors in 2005. It paid as much as \$12,000 a month for what Optimal president Joel Bess calls, bluntly, "Bull-S#@!".

"They weren't getting us ranked anywhere," Bess says. "They would send us reports and say we were ranked. But we were ranked No. 44 [on Google] for the search term 'Internet advertising in America.' When was the last time someone actually searched for the words 'Internet advertising in America?'" Frustration finally led Bess to learn the SEO game for himself. He hired an ex-Google engineer to teach Optimal's team

members in a half day what SEO firms said would take at least six months of contracted work to achieve. That not only helped their business, it also gave them expertise to share with clients, which include as-seen-on-TV products such as the Snuggie blanket and Sham Wow, the super-sucking sponge. "If you're trying to rank the word 'Ab Circle Pro,' don't write on the title 'exercising is fun,' " Bess says.

### **The Right Keywords**

Google, of course, is the web-search alpha dog. But all the others--Bing, Yahoo, Ask.com, Lycos--are sniffing out the same stuff.

What gets their attention? Good, fresh, focused content. Adding a blog is one of the easiest and most straightforward ways to bulk up on content. If you sell hair-removal devices, for instance, start a blog that explores all aspects of waxing, plucking, threading, electrolysis and so on. Over time, your site will accrue searchable heft. The trick is to be hyper-conscious of your keywords. For example, if you want web surfers on the prowl for "eyebrow waxing" to find your site in search engine results, organically work the exact phrase "eyebrow waxing" into each blog post (maybe multiple times), and use it on all static pages related to eyebrow waxing. Lather, rinse and repeat with every term and phrase you want to rank for.

### **Relevant Page Titles**

So once you have your list of keywords, where else do you use them (besides your hair-removal blog)? The obvious spot is the keyword field, part of the hidden meta data that is attached to every web page. But last fall, Matt Cutts, Google's head of Webspam, wrote on his personal blog that the search engine behemoth ignores keyword meta tags when ranking websites. The revelation caused quite a stir in the web search world. It confirmed what many experts suspected: Google was combating professional spammers who practiced "keyword stuffing" to achieve higher rankings.

So now it's page titles--the line of text that appears at the top of your web browser--that are believed to be the most important few words in the SEO universe. (The title is also what shows up on Google's search result.) A page title tag field is standard on most blog programs, including TypePad and WordPress; any web programmer should be able to customize one for sites built on Drupal or Joomla, two popular content management systems. Another place to plant keywords is each page's description field. Customize the description for each page of your site, and write them with some care, because the first 120 characters show up on Google, tucked between the page title and address.

### **Getting the Links**

So what might be a good use of your SEO dollars? One word: Links.

Google uses about 200 data points when sizing up your website. But one of them is whether you're popular with the in crowd. If reputable websites link to your content, the Google gods smile upon you.

Getting these coveted links is labor intensive, however, and includes hours of groveling, cold e-mailing and link-swapping with bloggers. "It's the hardest part of SEO," says David Brown, a partner in the L.A.-based upstart social media marketing company Pure Ground. It's not impossible to achieve, he says, but many entrepreneurs don't have the hours to spare. An SEO firm that specializes in getting links might be worth the investment.

## Quick-Start SEO

Think of Google, Yahoo, Bing and other search engines as customers, and each page of your site as a box. Your customers want to know what's in the box, what shelf it's on and the address of your store. Simple, right?

Google lays out the nitty-gritty on best way to do that in a downloadable Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide as well as on its Webmaster Central pages. But here are some quick-start tips.

- **Find it.** Every page of your website has an address, or URL. When possible, keep the address short and clean--without equal signs, punctuation characters or underscores--and use detailed keywords that are relevant to the page. So `example.com/buy-blue-hats-on-sale` is better than `example.com/cgi-bin/gen.pl?id=4&view=blue_hats_are_on_sale`
- **Flatten it.** All pages need to link to one another--but you want to keep things as "flat" as possible, meaning that each page can be accessed with only one or two mouse clicks.
- **Name it.** You might overlook the title bar atop each browser window, but search engines don't. Give each page a concise, unique, keyword-driven title. If you sell knit beanies, don't title your page "Keep your head warm."
- **Explain it.** In the description field, enter a few sentences about the content of that page. Think of it as the text in a catalog. What makes your blue beanies special? Are they alpaca wool?
- **Map it.** Your customers would really love to have a map to all the boxes in your store, called an XML site map. Don't know XML from an X-Box? No worries. There are plenty of software programs that can do the job.
- **Tag it.** You'd be confused if this article didn't have a headline, right? Without an h1 heading tag on each page of your website, search engine crawlers have trouble understanding content, too.

### **Five questions to ask before you hire a SEO consultant**

So you've decided you really, really, really don't want to do your own SEO. Fine. Hire a consultant. But here are five questions to ask before you sign a contract--or a check.

1. **"Do you have any references?"** Get names, numbers and examples of past work. And actually check them.
2. **"What results can I reasonably expect and how long will they take?"** Demand a detailed game plan and don't accept vague answers. Shut the door on anyone who promises the No. 1 spot for a certain keyword or claims to "know a guy at Google." They're lying.
3. **"What is your experience in my industry?"** You wouldn't expect a barber to know how to fill a cavity. So why would you expect an SEO team that has worked only with nonprofit science foundations to understand your fashion boutique?
4. **"What techniques will you use to achieve my goals?"** Listen for warning signs of "black hat" tactics. As a trick question, find out if your potential "expert" spends a lot of time working with keyword meta tags. If so, you know this isn't the right person for the job.
5. **"How often will we communicate and by what means?"** If you expect instant responses to 3 a.m. e-mails, make sure your consultant isn't a monthly conference-call kind of guy.



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