



Search Engine Optimization: Maximizing your Website's online presence

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It's a no-brainer: With 47 percent of shoppers using search engines to locate a Website (according to Jupiter Media Metrix), you absolutely *must* add search engine submission to your organizational to-do list. Simply submitting your site to a search engine, however, is not enough to guarantee prospects doing research on the Web will find you.

And that's a problem. Your organization created a Website to pique interest, offer information, and generate sales leads – even to close sales – right? What good is that wonderfully designed, well-written and user-friendly Website if no one ever finds you or visits?

People searching for a product or service most often look on the web. This is especially true if you sell to other businesses. But even for consumer product and service companies, more people search and compare on the web before purchasing now than ever before. If a prospective customer doesn't find your company in their online search, he or she may exclude you from the decision-making process.

Research shows that users rarely look beyond the first 10 sites listed in a search engine query. If you want to drive traffic – and potential customers – to your Website and see a positive ROI (Return on Investment) for your online marketing effort, your site must be listed within the top 10 positions for all search terms that potential customers might use.

Most marketers know that making the elevated ranks of search engine queries is much, much easier said than done. That's why they spend money on "pay-per-click" services such as Google AdWords, LookSmart and Overture, and on online advertising. As opposed to a prospect finding your site in a search listing without your paying for the search result, pay-per-click services can put your site on the first page of a query report. But as the name implies, you pay each time a prospect clicks on your sponsored link on the search query page. Using pay-per-click services intelligently can substantially improve the business generation potential of your web site.

But there's another way to maximize the dollars you invest in Web advertising – and in your Website. It's called **Search Engine Optimization** or **SEO**, and it should be a critical component of any organization's Web marketing plan. With SEO, your goal is to get search results on the first page of a search query report, without paying for the listing.

SEO has several key benefits when done properly:

- It lowers your cost of Web advertising.
- It ensures that your prospective customers know about your company.
- It helps your prospects find out more about your product or service.
- It makes your Web presence more effective.

Where SEO fits in your marketing effort

Consider the way in which your prospects become actual customers. Rather than simply identifying a product or service and buying it, prospects employ a relatively complex decision-making process made up of six stages: Awareness, Interest, Intent, Evaluation, Purchase and Retention (or Repurchase). At each stage, you've got to make sure you provide them with the tools they need to move to the next stage and, ultimately, to purchase.

The Six Steps of Purchase Behavior Decision Making

Stage	What happens	Your job	Example
Awareness	The prospect becomes aware of your product or service.	Create and establish top-of-mind Awareness and name recognition for your products/services.	Magazine ads create awareness, but rarely move a prospect through the steps needed to become a customer.
Interest	The prospect identifies your solution with an existing or anticipated problem, taking enough time and energy to begin to consider your communications.	Your prospect often has an interest in finding a product or service like yours when they start their search. You have to help them identify your company with their interest.	A prospect shopping for a car because his old car costs too much to maintain may be more interested in a car with a long warrantee.
Intent	The prospect invests sufficient time and energy to understand your marketing and sales messages. The prospect starts to consider purchasing from you.	Position your organization/ offerings in a unique way, developing the audience's Intent to invest sufficient time and energy to understand and consider purchasing from your company.	The prospect spends time shopping when her intent reaches a high enough level. Your communications should encourage the necessary steps to move to evaluation –offering a short-term promotion, for instance.
Evaluation	The prospect takes the time to evaluate your product with respect to a known problem s/he needs to solve.	Provide call-to-action offers, trial, money-back guarantees or other motivators to encourage Evaluation .	In the car example, the prospect takes a test drive. For a business service, the prospect asks for a proposal or a trial.
Purchase	You make your first sale to your prospect.	Produce qualified Purchase leads via toll-free number response, Website visits, direct sales or in-bound telemarketing.	You've made your sale.
Retention or Repurchase	The customer continues to use and pay for your service or buys more.	Provide feedback mechanisms, perks and other motivators to encourage Retention in the long term.	Now you must retain your customer. Airline mileage programs are a popular kind of retention program. Car dealer service-quality surveys and follow-up mailings are examples of encouraging repurchase.

SEO is a critical element of capturing your prospects when they move from the Interest to the Intent stage. Prospects might have interest in a product or service. Interest, however, can lay dormant for quite a while. When your prospect begins to do research on the Web, this indicates a move into the Intent stage – a much more fertile stage, in marketing terms. Now, you've got to make sure that s/he can find your information easily and quickly. This is where SEO comes into the mix.

How search engines work

The power of every search engine depends upon **algorithms** (mathematical formulae that determine how the engine conducts its search) to maximize its capabilities. Based upon the specific algorithms employed by the search engine, its computer examines in the most efficient way possible any document it finds on the Web. For example, as I wrote this white paper, Google's search site indicated that it is searching 3,083,324,652 Web pages! Your home page is just one of those pages. The search engine decides how the content on each site should be added to its database and ranked in a search with the goal of effectively presenting information that end users need.

The processes that search engines use to index sites are very complex. They rely heavily on factors like the descriptions that site developers provide for search engine listings and keywords (words used by Web surfers to describe what they hope to find when performing a Web search).

The powerful – and most popular – engines like Google base their rankings on hundreds of additional factors. You need to examine these at every juncture of your site-creation process. The following examples are just a few of the less complex factors:

- ***Your site's content:*** Sure, you list "Titleist" in your keyword list. But your site also must mention "Titleist" in the text presented to the user.
- ***The site's hierarchical structure:*** The manner in which you structure your site actually decides the weighting that search engines assign certain pages. The most important page in your site's structure is the one to which the greatest numbers of other pages link.

In the following illustration, the percent of searches that land on each page indicate which page is most important.

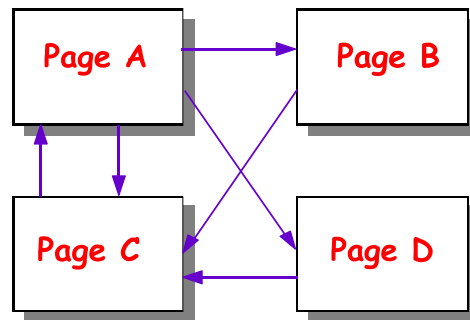


Fig. 2 – Based on this site's structure, page C is the most important. If page C isn't the most important, prospects are landing on the wrong page.

- ***The interlinking nature of the Web:*** This creates a ranking of its own. For example, if Google places high importance on a page that links to your page, your page automatically receives a higher priority. If a link on your site leads to a site upon which Google places high importance, you automatically receive a higher priority. This is called "reciprocal linking" when your site and the other site both link to each other.

Other factors employ mathematical formulae that are too involved to describe here without your eyes glazing over, but that nonetheless affect your site's ranking.

Arguably more important, however, is how people doing research on the Web actually use search engines.

Let's say, for instance, that your organization sells dog food. People looking to purchase dog food visit Yahoo, Google or their favorite search engine and search for the phrase "dog food." If you want a chance to sell dog food to this person, research reveals that your site must be listed as one of the 10 sites that come up for that specific search phrase.

To achieve this goal, your own Web designers can use technical tricks – from creating "meta-tags (see page 5) to tinkering with your site's structure (or architecture) – to push your site into the position you desire. You can also pay the search engine so it lists your site as a "sponsored link" or "sponsored match" under "dog food." Both tactics will only get you so far. Why? Your potential customer might search for a phrase that your site isn't using or for which you're not already

paying to be listed, such as "food for Fido." As a result, your Website will not place highly—if at all—within the results of such searches.

Savvy Web marketers acknowledge this somewhat disconcerting fact: searches are not always straightforward and might not include their company's name.

Here's another example. If you want to purchase a set of golf clubs, do you enter the names of companies that sell golf clubs? Or do you enter the brand name of the clubs you wish to purchase? If a company named "Golf Galore" wants to attract prospective customers, it must come up first not only for the search term "Golf Galore" but also for the term "Titleist," and possibly even the term "titanium driver."

Inside Yahoo!



Shopping: [over 450 Titleist](#) listings on Yahoo! Shopping
Auctions: [over 30 Titleist](#) on Yahoo! Auctions

Sponsor Matches

[\(What are Sponsor Matches?\)](#)

- [Titleist Golf at GolfDiscount.com](#) - Authorized **Titleist** dealer for all the new **Titleist** equipment including 975J drivers, Scotty Cameron putters, **Titleist** irons, golf balls, bags and accessories. Online since 1995.
www.golfdiscount.com

Fig. 1 – Search results for the term "Titleist" on 

Your Website's ranking (and sometimes even its listing) depends on your ability to manipulate the search engine's algorithmic processes to place your listing above your competitors. SEO creates a step-by-step, methodical plan that places your site at the top of search-engine listings. It does so by researching search engines' algorithmic processes and using a systematic method to drive your site to the top of its marketplace.

How SEO works

At its best, SEO maximizes your site's online visibility, helping vault it into search-engine top placement. The payoff is twofold:

1. While you might still pay to be listed for the search terms you've identified as most important, you'll save money on those terms that are less important, competitive or just plain obscure.
2. Even for the most important search terms, you can reduce your cost for paid results and increase your visibility to potential customers.

The SEO process employs strategic research and advanced technical knowledge to accomplish its goals. Whether you decide to undertake this project yourself or to engage the services of a search engine optimization company such as our firm to handle it, you should make sure that it includes the following critical steps.

Step I: Creating your site

A key component to the SEO process is creating your site for optimal visibility. If you fail to address all the variables search engines look for, no search engine will even have the opportunity to look at your site, much less index it.

To start the SEO process, your Website must exist with at least a minimal **site map** (see figure 3). Search engines (sometimes called "spiders") discover new pages on the web primarily by following links. Search engines "spider" the web, find links and follow them. Then they follow all the links on subsequent pages. And so on. And so on.

Minimal Site Map

Home					
Hardware	Desktop reviews Networking & wireless reviews Notebook reviews Peripherals reviews Storage reviews	Electronics	Camcorder reviews Cell phone reviews Digital camera reviews Handheld reviews Home audio reviews Home video reviews	Software	Graphics & publishing reviews Music & video reviews Operating systems reviews Productivity & business reviews Security & utilities reviews

Fig. 3 - A minimal site map

To ensure that search engines add every page on your site to their database, you must ensure that a link exists to every page on your site and that the search engine doesn't have to follow too many links to get to every page. A site map helps in this effort because it's a container of sorts for links to every page on your site. When a search engine spiders your site, and follows all the links off your home page, it will find the site map. In turn, since the site map has a link to every page on your site, you can be more confident that the search engine will add all of your site's pages to its database.

As well, this will make it more likely that your site appears in listings when a potential visitor searches for your keywords: a search engine can't direct someone to a page that it doesn't have in its database.

One final reason to have a minimal site map before starting SEO: Some search engines give pages a popularity weight based on how many other pages link to it. By adding a site map, you increase the number of links to your pages and subsequently increase the perceived popularity of those pages.

Now that your site map is in place, you must think strategically about issues related to text written into your site. The following information on meta-tags, spider food and content touches only the surface of tactics you can use to optimize your site.

- **Meta-tags** are information included in your site's "header" area, which visitors don't see. They contain basic information about your site that search engines use to present your entry to people searching the Internet. This information includes the title of the site, a brief site summary, keywords and other more esoteric elements.
- **"Spider food"** refers to keywords embedded (usually invisibly) into your site to attract search engines. Including spider food ensures that the page appears higher on the list of matches to a search engine query. You'll want to make sure the keywords appear in file names (including image files), directory names and other important elements.
- **Content** is the written text of your site that visitors see. Of course you must include keywords strategically throughout the site. You also must use keywords in specific structural elements—lists, definitions of terms, etc., navigation bar titles—to which search engines assign greater weight. In addition, the most important keywords should appear on the first part of your site—instead of a flashy splash page.

(The next section of this paper, "Creating a Search Engine Marketing Plan," provides tips on choosing keywords for maximum search engine impact.)

Other aspects of your site also are vitally important in the SEO process. Sure, you've included keywords and great text. But take a look at some other additions: Simple mechanisms such as customer testimonials and white papers that other sites link to are inexpensive ways to drive up your ranking via reciprocal linking. You also should consider offering product evaluation tools such as a free trial or demos.

In addition, if you have a product that you can sell on the Web, you also must make it easy to *buy*, offering simple purchase instructions and easy-to-use online forms. If you can't sell your product on the Web, make it easy for visitors to get to the very next-to-last stage of purchasing before they have to contact you.

Step II: Creating a Search Engine Marketing Plan

If yours is like most organizations, you've already identified your direct competition. Based on your top five competitors, examine what they are doing on their websites to optimize searches.

All Websites have their programming instructions—the **source code**—readily available. In Microsoft Explorer, you simply click on "Source" within the "View" menu. You can analyze the source code on your competitors' sites to determine the tactics (such as meta-tags and text) they use to facilitate search-engine listings. This research will help you compile a list of keywords that you might use on your site.

Your keyword list should include 25 to 75 unique words (in order of priority) connected to your business:

- Applicable names (company name, key employees, etc.)
- Products and services
- Other words that end users might use to search for products or services like yours

Using these keywords, you'll determine the best way to reach your target customer based on how the use of each search engine might affect your ROI. The key to this step is determining the keywords that are most effective to embed in your meta-tags and to include in your content, based upon the competition field research.

Search engines gather keywords in certain ways—each has a different method. Your best bet is to examine the most popular engines and set up the keywords that are caught by the engines you care about. For instance, 55 percent of people use Google; 22.1 percent, Yahoo!; 9.5 percent, MSN; 3.7 percent, AOL; 2.8 percent, Terra Lycos; 2.5 percent, AltaVista; and 1.5 percent; Ask Jeeves.

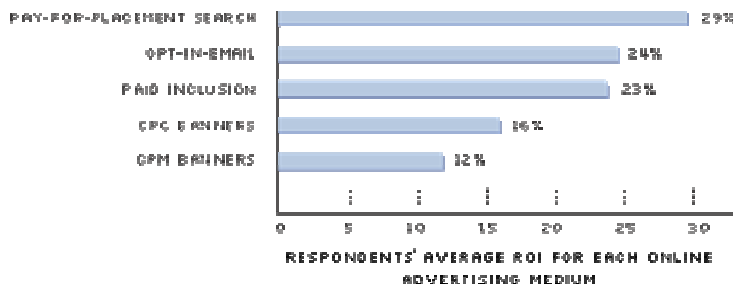
Last, finalize your keyword selection, and create a site description to use during the search-engine submission process.

Step III: Bring your site to the marketplace

The final step in SEO is to apply technical expertise with commercial search services to bring your site swiftly to the marketplace. Our firm uses commercial search services to maximize our clients' search engine efficiency.

Commercial search services like Overture and Canoodle allow businesses to pay to improve their sites' ranking. Different commercial search services, of course, use different methods to accomplish this. Overture offers a "pay-for-performance" product, in which it operates a real-time marketplace. There, its base of 80,000 advertisers bid for placement in search results that Overture distributes to affiliate partners such as MSN, Yahoo!, AltaVista, CNN.com and InfoSpace.

Users of pay-for-performance services rank them highly in their marketing efforts. Indeed, a 2001 Jupiter Media Metrix study asked about the ROI of different kinds of online marketing. Survey respondents ranked pay-for-performance searches first.



The following describes what would happen if we were acting as your SEO company. You can modify these directions to manage SEO yourself if you have the people to do this on a weekly basis.

1. We analyze your meta tags and spider food, and your ranking in searches to establish a baseline from which to build your SEO results.
2. Using a commercial search service, we analyze your keyword selection based upon how you've prioritized them, and research the relevance of each term to your value proposition and target customers.

3. We derive what you must pay to achieve the ranking you desire based upon the "pay-per-click" model and then present you with a range of budget options and recommendations. We filter all recommendations through our research team to ensure that you concentrate your investment on search terms most likely to bring you real prospects.

For example, spending money to achieve a position lower than the 50th spot for a given search term is not a wise investment. Research shows that a very small percentage of people searches past the third page. Thus, you would be ill advised to invest in such a ranking. Also, paying someone to visit your site who is unlikely to want your product or services is a waste of money.

4. We determine the appropriate bid level, striking the right balance between your search engine listing needs, your budget and the current market demand. For instance, your company – Golf Galore – wants to be the #1 company listed for the term "Titleist." We research what the current bidding price is for that term and provide you with that cost. Let's say it's \$.25 per click for the term "Titleist." With our guidance, you then decide how much you're willing to pay in order to achieve the search results rank you desire.
5. Once you select the option that best meets your needs, we place your ads and monitor them for effectiveness daily or weekly, depending on your budget and requirements.
6. The commercial search service begins aggressively pursuing optimal visibility for your site by:
 - Placing links to your site on affiliate sites.
 - Submitting your site to appropriate large search engines
 - Submitting your site to numerous smaller search engines that do not charge for submission. Many smaller search engines are considered "authoritative" sources; another factor affecting your Website ranking is how many authoritative sources link to your site.
7. As we establish your position in the commercial search service, we also evaluate the use of other pay-per-click services, especially Google AdWords

and LookSmart. Your marketing budget will influence the decision to use these services.

8. We also will update your meta tags and advise you on re-writing some of your Web content so the most important search terms appear within the text of your site and increase your search rankings for free searches. This is critical to your long-term goal of reducing pay-per-click costs.

The fruits of your SEO efforts

SEO is an ongoing process. Upfront planning is critical to achieving initial success, but ongoing maintenance and aggressive maneuvering is critical to remain on top. No matter how you achieve your SEO goals, you must continually monitor your ranking on the search engines you selected to ensure that you rank where you need to be on the keywords you selected. For instance, if another organization outbids you for a particular term, we notify you of your change in rank and work to regain your former rank if you so desire.

As well, you must continue to monitor search engines (which periodically change their search algorithms) and the continually fluctuating marketplace for your product. If any of these factors change with time, as they inevitably will, you must modify your SEO strategy to maintain your visibility.

Finally, there are some things to watch out for when selecting a firm to help you with your search engine optimization project. Rather than spell these out here, we'll let an expert firm do it for you. Google offers a page of tips to Webmasters regarding use of SEO firms. Go to Google at www.google.com/webmasters/seo.html to see this information.

Credits

Grace Lazzara, President of G. Lazzara, Inc., wrote this white paper with support from Noein, Inc. and Paul McAfee. Paul McAfee has permission from G. Lazzara, Inc., to publish this white paper. You may email us at info2004@exubrio.com.

Contacts

Paul McAfee
Principal, eXubrio, LLC
Owner, paulmcafee.com
Buffalo, NY
Phone +1 (716) 568-0329

Grace Lazzara
President, G. Lazzara Inc.
Buffalo, NY
Phone +1 (716) 883-5915