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Search Engine Optimization: *A Summary for Marketing Professionals*

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Search marketing is vital to today's marketer.

While Search Engine Optimization (SEO) has become a growing industry, its practices have been widely misunderstood.

Most SEO-dedicated companies are reputable and deliver on their promises, but some are intentionally unclear about their SEO packages for website development and ongoing content management.

This white paper is a researched overview intended for marketers who seek a value-driven engagement of SEO, either in-house or with an outside contractor.

What is Search Engine Optimization?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a term that refers to the tools, processes and resources used by a webmaster to develop or improve a website, allowing search engines to easily discover, analyze, and index content, with the goal of getting the website ranked at the top of the results list.

Through the use of page links, search engine robots (often referred to as spiders or crawlers) scan through billions of interconnected documents on the web. These crawlers break each page down into text, and parse all the information they see as relevant. Because these crawlers are text driven and not human, they fail to see the beauty of a sleek design, or a striking image. ***What they value instead are things like well-written content, link popularity, and coding standards.***

Why is SEO important for my business?

Consider the following facts:

91% of internet users use search engines.

73% of all online transactions start with a search engine.

87% of all visitors are from a page one position.

If you're not on page one you probably won't be found.

With this in mind, it's clear that the opportunities presented through SEO cannot be ignored. SEO allows you to continuously put yourself in front of the widest possible audience by targeting many niche searches that together drive more traffic to your website.

The process of Search Engine Optimization is somewhat of a mystery, mainly because search engine providers have never revealed to the public exactly how their algorithms work. While there are known techniques and methods, many questions are left unanswered, which leads to common misconceptions.

The most common myths:

SEO is a one-time thing.

It's important to remember that SEO is never really finished. Search Engine Optimization is an ongoing process. Because it can be time-consuming, many companies prefer to hire a professional to handle the daily or weekly routine tasks.

It happens overnight.

A website's ranking is not boosted immediately after updates are made. This is never the case. Search engine crawlers may take up to two weeks to re-evaluate a website's ranking. Patience and persistency is key.

One size fits all.

Many SEO companies claim their software can guarantee a number one spot in the search listings using automated submissions. Steer clear from these types of programs as they can potentially get your website blacklisted, causing more harm than good. SEO is not one-size-fits-all, and no software program can customize or update to the degree required to maintain a top listing.

It can be faked.

For as long as there have been search engines, there have been people trying to use tricks to cheat their way to top rankings. These methods, known as "Black Hat SEO," are risky, and can get your website permanently blacklisted and removed from search engines.

Google is the only search engine that matters.

It's fair to say that Google is the leader when it comes to search engines. However, in 2011 Google accounted for approximately 65% of searches that were conducted in the United States. A mistake webmasters often make is to ignore the other big players, such as Bing, Yahoo, and Ask. Each of these engines has different ways in which they index and rank content.

Basic SEO Practices: Easy to Follow

As the Internet is constantly changing and evolving, SEO practices often change with it. However, there are some common underlying SEO techniques that will always hold true. All it takes is a bit of effort, willingness to change, and some re-thinking of how to approach your website content.

Here are some basic tips:

1. Content Updates

Keeping your content fresh is one of the most crucial aspects of Search Engine Optimization. Every time a search engine crawler scans your website, it checks your content to see what has changed since the last crawl. If a search engine sees your website is becoming stale and outdated, it will cause your ranking to fall below websites with fresher content.

“For the most effective long-term SEO strategy, move the focus back to great content.” – Erin Everhart, Director of Marketing, 352 Media Group

2. Keyword Placement

Keyword placement is arguably the most important factor of SEO. You should be placing appropriate keywords throughout your website—titles, headers, content, URLs, link titles, image names, etc. Remember to be strategic and avoid getting too carried away with keyword stuffing. This can lead to your website being labelled as a spam site and harm your ranking.

3. Internal Linking & Sitemaps

It goes without saying that every website should have some level of internal linking throughout—otherwise how would users navigate through content? However, it is important to ensure that each individual page is linked from at least a few different locations, aside from the main navigation. The more clicks it takes a user to reach a page the harder it is to find. If a page is hidden too deep chances are that the search engine crawler won't get to it either, and the content won't get properly indexed.

In addition, search engines like it when you provide an XML sitemap file located in a website's root directory. There are many online tools available to help with this, such as www.xml-sitemaps.com.

4. Search-Friendly URLs

Search engines look carefully at each page's URL, and use this information when ranking content. If a human can't decipher what content should be expected by looking at a URL, then a search engine definitely can't either. Search engines tend to favour dashes (sugar-free-cakes.php), and don't like dynamic URLs (cakes.php?sugar=false).

For example:

Good: www.bestrecipes.com/cakes/chocolate
 www.bestrecipes.com/cakes/sugar-free/vanilla.html

Bad: www.bestrecipes.com/cakes.php?id=3827&type=choc&sug=false
 www.bestrecipes.com/cakes.php?cake=chocolate

“While Flash sites might look decent, they rank really poorly in Google. Change your Flash-based site to WordPress or another platform, and you'll rocket up the search engine rankings.”

– Nathan Lustig, Co-founder, Entrustet

5. Avoid Flash®

While it may be tempting to use Flash to deliver a strong visual impact that is unmatched by HTML, Flash websites fail to get indexed properly by search engines. In addition, Flash content cannot be viewed on iPhone or iPad devices. It is also believed by experts that Flash will soon be phased out in favour of HTML5. However, if you run into an instance when you must use Flash, ensure that it is accompanied by descriptive text. Never use Flash as part of your website's navigation—this will prevent the majority of content from being indexed.

6. Image Descriptors

Optimizing images is becoming an increasingly important aspect of SEO and is often overlooked. The alt (or alternate) text appears when an image fails to load, and also helps the visually impaired get a better understanding of content. But more importantly, it is a way for webmasters to utilize the full power of SEO. It is always a good idea to use informative alt tags that accurately describe the image, especially when using an image in place of text.

For example:

(for a header image with the words “How to Make Chocolate Cake”)

Good:

Bad:

Do You Need an SEO Company?

In most cases, the answer is no. There's nothing mysterious or difficult about building and maintaining a site with solid and cost-effective SEO basics. However, if in-house resources are not available and there is a strategic need for top five ranking, then an outside SEO company should be considered.

Here are some things you should know before hiring an SEO company:

What added value can an SEO company provide?

Because SEO encompasses so many different aspects of web development, it's important that you know exactly what you're paying for. An SEO company should be able to share the specifics of their strategy and plans for implementation.

It's normal to feel like you need an SEO company solely for SEO. However, in many cases your agency or webmaster can provide the same quality services for a fraction of the price.



It pains me to hear some of the stories of snake-oil salesmen claiming to be SEO or Social Media gurus/experts when all they do is simply take the money and run.”

– Matt Sullivan, Senior Marketing Manager, Direct Capital Corporation

How do I know who to trust?

The SEO industry is full of companies making outrageous claims and guarantees. Separating the honest ones from the fakes is a challenge. There are certain things you should look for:

- Do they have a proven track record?
- Can they provide you with a reference list of previous clients?
- Do they provide reports to prove their success?

A trustworthy SEO company isn't afraid to show their success or demonstrate how they got there.

In general

Steer clear of companies that guarantee things like a number one spot in a search engine's rankings—no one can promise that. A reputable company will be honest and set realistic goals.

Advanced SEO Practices: Expertise Required

Search Engine Optimization can be a time-consuming process. While most SEO practices can be handled in-house, a more advanced level of SEO may require special attention and expertise.

Here are some of the ways an expert can help:

1. Market & Keyword Analysis

Choosing the right niche markets and keywords to pursue is a very important process in SEO. For example, if you have a medium sized bike shop in Toronto, you wouldn't want to target keywords like "buy bikes" — the competition and market would be too saturated. Instead, it would be more effective to target keywords that relate to your specific niche market (i.e. "Toronto bike shop").

An expert can help you make wise choices and avoid pitfalls which may plague your business. Once these decisions are made, they can help you with an aggressive keyword implementation strategy.

“I suggest hiring a Search Engine Optimization company or freelance specialist to develop an effective strategy to improve your rankings. Look for individuals or companies with proven track records, and monitor their bi-weekly reports closely.”

– Scott Gerber, Founder, Young Entrepreneur Council

2. Website Architecture

Consider web architecture as the main structure of a website which acts like a skeleton or road map. A search engine may not be human, but it definitely scans the web in a similar fashion. If visitors are having trouble navigating through your website, you can bet that the search engine's crawlers will have trouble as well.

In addition, proper coding standards, load times, and usability all play an important role. An SEO expert should have a proper understanding of all these concepts, and can help you analyze your situation and put together an implementation strategy for improvement.

3. Backlink Building

Backlinks are incoming links to your website. To search engines, the number of backlinks is a good indication of popularity and importance. Building a high number of quality backlinks is one of the most effective ways to improve your search engine ranking. The best way to do this is to develop quality relationships with other reputable websites and exchange links. An expert can help you develop a realistic strategy for building these relationships, as well as performing manual link submissions to other respected websites.

NOTE: Beware of SEO services that rely on automatic directory submissions. These directories, also referred to as “link farms,” are usually seen as low-ranking websites and are not a good source for building backlinks.

“Google Analytics cannot be ignored by any SEO or for that matter any web marketing professional. It shows us the road ahead and helps us to tap the online market with confidence and assuredness.”

– Bharati Ahuja, Founder, WebPro Technologies

4. Analytics

Web analytics and tracking play a large role in SEO. These tools allow online businesses measure growth, analyze trends, and set goals. An expert can help assist you in setting up analytics, show you what to look for, and help with setting up some of the more advanced features (i.e. custom reporting, conversion tracking, and goal tracking).

Three key areas of analytics that can help improve SEO:

- > **Traffic Sources** – how much traffic is being sent from different search engines vs. referral websites
- > **Keyword Tracking** – which search terms are bringing in the most traffic
- > **Content Performance** – which pages are performing the best (load time, most visited, time spent on page)

5. Social Media Marketing Campaigns

One of the largest shifts in SEO over the past few years is the increasing importance placed on social media. Search engines typically interpret importance as popularity: the more popular the page is, the more valuable its information must be. Today, search engine crawlers are tapped into social media sharing and if you aren't connected then you'll likely be left behind by those who are. An SEO

expert can not only provide tools and guidance to make social connecting simple, but also help implement a focused strategy based on which markets you need to target.

6. Rank Monitoring

You won't know if your SEO efforts are paying off unless you monitor your targeted keyword rankings on a regular basis. An expert can assist with the latest software and tools that automate this process so that you don't have to take time from your daily schedule. Rank Monitoring is crucial because it indicates which keywords are working best for you and which ones need improvement.

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