

12 Things You Really Should Know About SEO

From the very beginning of the Internet, the number one challenge which all of us have faced is how to attract qualified visitors to our websites. Throughout the boom years, one of the most popular solutions was to get massive funding, relatively easy to get in those days, and "buy" traffic, by various means.

As an iconoclastic young developer, with ambitions of beating the "big boys" at their own game, more time than money or the connections to get it, I sought a less capital intensive methodology to achieve the same results. Years of study and rapt attention to the pertinent forums, trying everything that even seemed to make sense (making many mistakes along the way, and learning much from each one), then carefully monitoring the results, has lead to many highly workable tools in our SEO bag of tricks. The outcome of these trial and error methods, (lots of both) lays the foundation of our SEO services and the basis for the ongoing growth of traffic to your website and ours.

The simple fact of the matter is this: Expertise in any other form of writing in no way qualifies one for the type of writing required to optimize a website for the Internet. There are many sites which have less than correct punctuation, grammar, and even spelling which rank #1 in their optimized search phrases. This is not to say that I don't think these things are important, only that to be found in the search engines, they are not the most important consideration.

The flip side of this argument is equally true. Just because someone knows all the ins and outs of all of the search engines, can write algorithms in their sleep, has lunches with Dr. Eric Schmidt and is on a first name basis with Larry Page and Sergey Brin, does not, in any way, make them a writer. All of the writing on this site was done as a collaborative venture between Susan K. Thompson, a professional writer with strong academic credentials and real world experience, in both business and marketing, and myself. Was there a lot of editing and re-write? Yes. Were there disagreements? You bet! Was it worth it? Look at the record.

Emerald Coast Entrepreneur was launched on May 1, 2005 with most site optimization in place and submission to the directories just beginning. With a total monetary investment of less than \$100.00, and a time investment, I'd rather not think about, but which approached 300 hours, the site was given a PR5 ranking by Google on its first update, less than 2 months after our launch.

Studies show that over 90% of all online users use search engines to find what they are looking for, whether products/services, or just plain old information.

The following twelve points will, I hope, summarize a philosophy, approach and methodology to the SEO question which is both sound and effective, along with giving some helpful insight into the industry itself.

1. Content. Content. Content.

Effective, professional, optimized Copywriting is the single, most important factor in any SEO campaign. Search engines index websites based on the content found on each page of the site. With a thorough understanding of the language and grammatical conventions combined with intensive research, to find and exploit the market focus, one can move a website to the upper echelon of the "SERP's" (Search Engine Results Page) in a methodical as well as ethical manner.

2. Analyze Web Logs.

Measure everything, at least twice, and then check again. While I would be the first to say that many of the procedures that make up website optimization are more art than science, one needs to take a very scientific approach to the results of the effort. This is done by methodically keeping a record of, and making an analysis of the sites web logs. There are a number of specialized software which make the job easier but at the bare minimum, one needs to keep a close eye on the site visitors and their activity while on the site. No matter how well planned the strategy, it is largely theoretical until proven by the results, which can only be measured by the logs, and a thorough analysis of their content.

3. No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google, or any other search engine.

Those who promise such feats will either optimize for such vague search term phrases (such as, "green stunted widgets with purple Polka-dots and icing") that no one will ever likely look for, or they are making a false claim, which they have no intention of keeping, or they have an inside edge at Google, something which they will lose, quickly, when the honest folks at Google find out about it. The other option, that they will take the money and run, is worth mentioning here but I'll be polite.

4. Some things are just plain silly.

You don't need to submit your site to 50,000 search engines. Businesses which offer this service are suspect, at best. 85% of the search results on the Internet come from one search engine, which, if you have one link from an established website, or better yet, a directory, will find your site just fine, on its own. Four (4) search engines account for over 90% of the traffic on the web. As for any supposed benefit which may accrue from being listed in an obscure search engine in Botswana which specializes in safaris to the Kalahari Desert and receives 7 hits per day; well, you figure it out.

5. SEO is not Pay-per-Click.

While no one would argue the effectiveness of getting increased traffic and sales, through a well planned, pay-per-click campaign, the fact remains that the conversion rates are generally low and they cease the moment the "pay" stops. With a well planned and executed SEO campaign, while results may take a bit longer, they continue to produce, and in fact grow, long after the work is done and paid for. Quite often we have found that after a thorough optimization of a site, only minor adjustments are needed on an ongoing basis, primarily related to new content and/or new items of sale or service.

6. SEO is not witchcraft, Druidism, shamanism.

Neither does it require any special chants, ceremonial fires, or vestments, though some of us do like to howl at the full moon, on occasion. There are no "Top Secret" practices which a reputable SEO cannot tell a client, a judge, or his mother, for that matter. The very nature of the Internet has always been cooperative and there is nothing about SEO that can't be learned, with a heavy dose of time and money. A reputable SEO firm will give you an item per item breakdown of just where the money goes. Be wary if you sense a secretive atmosphere or any unwillingness to answer questions. While there are technical points which might take some background to fully understand, if one has a solid overview of the entire situation, a simple explanation should be easy enough to come up with.

7. Do-it-yourself SEO.

Yes, you can execute your own SEO campaign and find a reputable SEO firm to help plan and organize it for you. About one half of my own clientele do some part of the actual work themselves, or have their in-house dedicated personnel do it, after discussion of the goals and aims of the business/website, a thorough website analysis, comprehensive search phrase research, and focused instruction on the ways and means of achieving high SERPs. These preliminaries are followed up with a detailed program of suggestions and methods which the client can then implement themselves or hire others to perform. Average savings; 30-40%.

8. Phased Implementation.

While many companies spend thousands of dollars per month on Search Engine Optimization, an alternative is available which will pay dividends to you in increased sales and leads without the high initial investment. The most important consideration is to have a reputable firm handle the initial evaluation and suggested optimization planning first. The trial and error method will cost much more, in the long run, with or without the desired result. After studying the plan and establishing a workable budget you may implement the plan as finances allow.

9. Remember the old saying, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Never was this more true than in the realm of SEO. While concrete and measurable gains will always come from a well thought out and executed optimization strategy, the Internet is a competitive media and we all want to be number one. Accept that a steady upward movement, over time, will place you worlds ahead of a flash followed by a crash.

10. A thought to ponder.

At stake, in the race for the top, is the very existence of your website, your business, and quite possibly your reputation. Beware of any "shortcuts" or less than ethical schemes that anyone might suggest to further your business goals. When it's all said and done it is you, the business owner, who bears the responsibility for any company or individual you hire. Insist on knowing exactly what the strategy is and what steps are being performed to implement it. If it seems, in the least, suspicious, ask for and get an explanation. In this case, not only is Ignorance not bliss, it could very well be the beginning of the end for your business.

11. All incoming links are not created equal.

Both the relevance to your line of business and website subject matter and the PR value of the incoming link determine how valuable they are to your own PR ranking. With Google starting the trend, nothing new there, and most of the others following close behind, the days of grabbing all the inbound links, in any way possible, are gone. Not only will low ranked and/or irrelevant inbound links not help, they will, in fact, cause a penalty. Link farms, free-for-all link schemes, automated link accumulation software, or any other fad that doesn't carefully screen the links and websites they are coming from will, in the long run, do more harm than good.

12. It's more than just facts and figures.

The relationship between an online business and SEO is, perhaps, one of the closest of business relationships. In order to be effective, a SEO must know not only the facts and figures pertaining to the endeavor, but s/he must know something of the dreams and aspirations of the business principals. Things which don't normally come out in a prospectus are often invaluable information when searching for the "right fit" into the complex world of the Internet. My own clients sometimes ask, due to the frequency of my calls and email in the early phases, "Am I your only client?" I usually laugh and say something to the effect that until I know your business almost as well as you do, yes, you are the only one that counts.

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