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SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION -
WINNING THE CUSTOMER ATTRACTION BATTLE

Article At A Glance:

- To be truly competitive in today's digital marketplace, your business needs to be found in Google, Yahoo, MSN Live and the other major search engines where buyers are searching for your product or service.

- 85% of searchers click on the first page (first 10 listings), yet many web sites are virtually invisible to search engines because of their fundamental structure and presentation.

- The content of your website must be written using keywords so that search spiders (the automated tools used by search engines) can easily scan and categorize the information on your site.

- Your website content should be organized in a way that search engines will interpret your site to be of high quality and authority.

- Your site should be interlinked with other relevant, high quality sites on the Internet.

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Can your customers or interested buyers find your company when they use a search engine to help them find a site to answer their needs? To be truly competitive in today's digital marketplace, your business needs to be found in Google, Yahoo, MSN Live and the other major search engines where buyers are searching for your product or service. How high does your company rank on the most popular Internet search engines? Are you at the top of the list when someone types in a keyword search for your product or service? Are you third? Twenty-third? Are you there at all?

A core concept of effective web marketing is to win the customer attraction battle. In his best-selling book, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, David Meerman Scott describes today's marketplace this way, "The Web is different. Instead of one-way interruption, Web marketing is about delivering useful content at just the precise moment that a buyer needs it." The outbound interruption of advertising has been replaced by the need for inbound engagement. As almost every article about marketing will tell you today, the customer is now in charge and marketers must find ways to help customers find you when they want to find you, not when you want them to.

There are many inbound marketing tactics you can use to boost traffic to your Web site. Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Pay-per-click (PPC) online advertising, blogging, social media and targeted landing pages are a few of the more popular marketing tactics you should be evaluating for their appropriateness and effectiveness in your category. We believe that the first place you should begin is to make sure that your website has been optimized in order to achieve top placement in search results.

Many studies have proven that the higher you rank, the more traffic (and potential sales conversions) you can generate. Here are two important facts to keep in mind:

- Eighty-five percent (85%) of searchers click on a website on the first page (first 10 listings).
- Ninety-two percent (92%) of searchers never go beyond page two.

That means if you aren't listed on the first two pages of a search query, your chances of being spontaneously found are very limited.

Consumers are using search engines in record numbers and search engine optimization is considered by many to be the fastest-growing form of digital marketing because it provides a contextual and timely way to reach consumers at a key point in the buying process. Yet, many web sites are virtually invisible to search engines because of their fundamental structure and presentation.

A basic concept to remember is that search results and how high your company or organization ranks is a direct function of relevant content and how important the search engine thinks your site is related to the search terms that were entered. You may not fully understand the technology behind the Search Engine Optimization process – after all, that is what experts are for – however, understanding the concept is important. And it may be easier than you think.

You may have heard the terms organic search (sometimes called non-paid or natural search) and paid search (also known as pay-per-click or PPC). Both are valid marketing tools that can be used in conjunction with each other but, in this article, we will focus on organic search and how you need to structure your site so that it naturally ranks at the top of any search result.

A good place to start is to determine where you currently stand in search engine ranking. There are sophisticated software tools you can use to compare your ranking to that of your key competitors. But an easy, no cost way to see how high your company ranks is to simply type in your industry, city and product or service you offer to see where your company name comes up. If your company doesn't show up on the first page, don't panic, especially if you are in a very competitive market space. But you should know that eye tracking studies have confirmed that most people look for relevant results on a page from top to bottom and from left to right, like books are read. So it stands to reason that getting placed at or near the top of the rankings increases the chance that someone will see your name and site description and will visit your site.

A 2004 study entitled *The Role of Search in B-to-B Buying Decisions* (by Enquiro Research with MarketingSherpa) underscores the importance of search engine optimization to improve search rank on organic search. In the study, 70 percent (70%) of B-to-B buyers click on traditional organic listings and less than one-fourth of B-to-B buyers look to the paid listings in their first try at accessing information. As shown in the chart on the following page, organic search is even stronger on the second attempt.

Types of Link Chosen
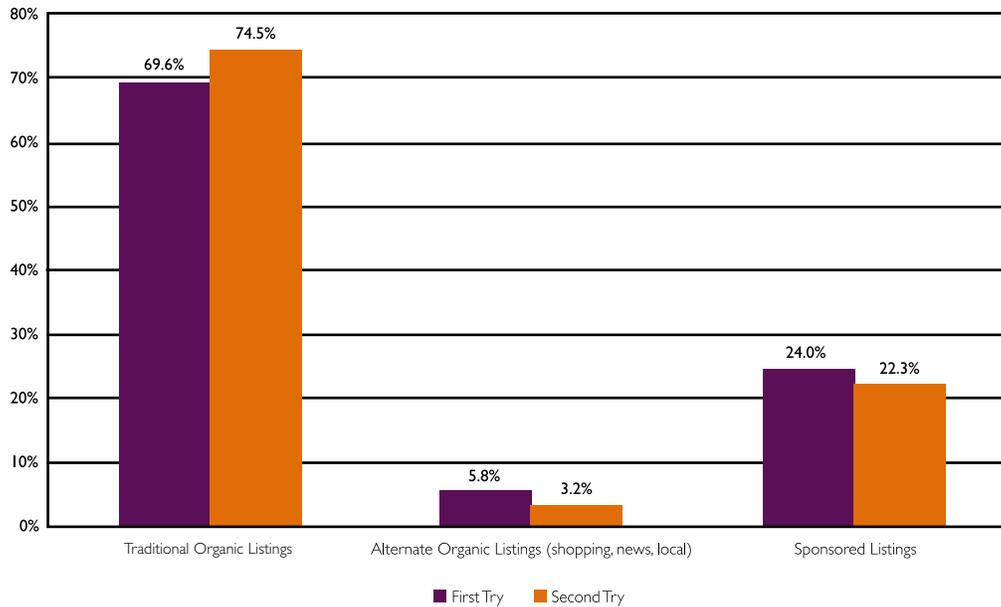
SOURCE: Enquiro with MarketingSherpa, *The Role of Search in B-to-B Buying Decisions,* October, 2004.

The highest click ratio on organic to paid links is on Google, but organic outperforms sponsored links on all of the three top search engines.

Click Ratio of Organic vs Sponsored Links by Search Engine

	Organic Links	Sponsored Links
All the Web	62.5%	37.5%
Ask Jeeves	50.0%	50.0%
Google	76.7%	23.3%
MSN	54.5%	45.5%
Yahoo	69.4%	30.6%

SOURCE: Enquiro with Marketing Sherpa, *The Role of Search in B-to-B Buying Decisions,* October, 2004.

What can you do to improve your performance, even if you don't make it all the way to the number one ranking?

First, you must understand that there are three keys to strong organic search performance:

1. The content of your website must be written using keywords so that search spiders (the automated tools used by search engines) can easily scan and categorize the information on your site.
2. Your website content should be organized in a way that search engines will interpret your site to be of high quality and extremely relevant.
3. Your site should be interlinked with other relevant, high quality sites on the Internet.

Picking the right keywords is the first important task in optimization.

We've all heard the maxim that content is king. The leading search engines use spiders (also known as crawlers) that review and assess a site's content and structure for relevance to the keywords that have been typed into the search engine. The most important connection they are looking for is how relevant and authoritative the content on your site will be to the potential customer, based on the keywords of the search request.

Search spiders look for words or phrases that describe the purpose and content of your site, then determine how well they match up with the requested keywords. Search spiders will analyze the keywords that are visible on-page to the reader but, more importantly, they will also scan and evaluate elements that are not visible to the naked eye, such as the HTML source code used in programming your site, file names of linked documents, and descriptive text for images and icons.

One of the more important content elements that search spiders look for is the descriptive language used to define your web page title, known as the title tag. Title tags are just what the name implies: they are the words that appear at the very top of your browser that describe the page you are viewing. Title tags are visible in the top bar of your Web browser on every web page and are important because they add weight to the relevancy ranking by the search engine. The title tag is also displayed along with the metatag in the search results for your site, so having a descriptive and enticing title tag can increase the likelihood of the user clicking on your listing.

If the title tag matches all or part of the keyword phrase the user typed into the search query, then the user can expect your site to meet his information needs. Search spiders will also scan your headlines and body text to determine how many times the keywords to describe your company, product or services are used and how well the keyword density matches the search criteria. It is important for you to add page titles with keywords to every page in order to increase the perceived relevance of your site to the topic. But be careful not to duplicate keywords just to try to trick the search spiders. They are constantly being updated and have become very adept at seeing attempts to stack too many duplicated keywords.

You can find out which words search engines favor with a free search tool from Google at https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal. Google dominates the search engine category with almost 60 percent (60%) of search volume according to the March 2008, comScore Core Search Report, so we recommend this free tool as a first step.

The Google Keyword Tool can be a great way to find keywords that are being typed into the search query. The Keyword Tool can filter the keywords based on average volume of usage over time or the volume during the most recent month. This is important to know because search engines work best with just the keywords that are most important to your search. For example, "Budget Hotel Seattle" will get better results than "inexpensive place for lodging while on a trip to Seattle."

The Google Keyword Tool can also help you to find keywords based on your site content. Instead of entering your own keywords, you can click on the Website Content option and enter the URL of your website. The tool will scan your page and suggest relevant keywords. It is also a good idea to enter the URLs of your competitors' sites to learn what keywords they are using to describe themselves.

Descriptive metatags and keyword metatags that describe the content on the page but are not visible on-page must also contain the right keywords.

An important factor in optimizing your website is that search spiders do more than just scan the visible content of your site; they search the programming code to see what metatags have been used by your programmer to define the content on the page. A metatag is an HTML tag that contains descriptive infor-

mation of the content on the webpage. Metatags are important in search algorithms and, for a site to be optimized, meta names and meta keywords that increase the perceived relevance of your site should be there.

Title tags should be written in much the same way as a newspaper headline – short and attractive but also interesting and relevant to the top two or three phrases that you would like the page to be found for. Just as a newspaper headline should make you want to read a story, your page titles should encourage users to click through to your site. Most spiders will use the text of your title tag as the text they use for the title of your page in search results.

A final thing to understand on content is that search spiders cannot read graphic images, yet the image may be very relevant to the search query. This is where good programming comes into play. Images should be coded so that search spiders can read the ALT text assigned to that image by the programmer. In most browsers you can see this ALT text by placing your mouse over the image and looking at the tool tip that appears. ALT text should include keywords to describe the content of the image and should repeat any text that is a part of the image word-for-word.

Most commercial web sites contain corporate logos or other special images that are important communication elements. In order for the search spider to "read" the logo or other image, they must read the ALT text. You should not, however, expand the ALT text to simply add another use of the keywords that are not relevant to the image because the search algorithms may determine that you are cheating and discount its importance in the search results evaluation.

How you treat keywords within the site can provide additional indications of relevance that influence your page ranking.

It is not just the presence of keywords but also the location, font treatment and frequency of those keywords on a web page that can affect how relevant your site is deemed. For example, search engines will check to see if the search query keywords appear near the top of a web page, such as in the headline or in the first few paragraphs of text. They assume that any page relevant to the topic will mention those words right from the beginning.

When designing and building a site, most programmers develop a style template that calls for a different font size and treatment for more important content elements, such as headlines and key phrases. If the programmer uses a larger and bolder font they might assign that format as <H1> text, while smaller text size or an alternate font might be designated <H2> or <H3> text. Search spiders weigh <H1> text more heavily than other text because they assume that larger and bolder text is more important. But just as the search algorithms have learned to discount overuse and improper placement of keywords, too much of a good thing no longer becomes good in their eyes. If you use too many <H1> text headings on a page, the search engine will tend to devalue and dilute the importance of that headline in their evaluation of relevancy.

Keyword density is often touted as a critical on-page metric with the argument that "the more times a keyword appears in a document, the more relevant a document becomes for that term." If search engines determined document relevancy based solely on keyword density then all you would have to do is repeat your target keyword over and over to get pages to rank highly. Fortunately, search engine algorithms are not that simplistic. Search engines analyze keywords based on their contextual relevancy, not the frequency or distribution of those terms on the page. When writing content, you should make sure that your keywords flow in a natural pattern. It is the words that surround the keyword terms on a page that help define context.

For example, a bug can be an insect or a flaw in the programming code. An application can be a software program or a document that you complete when seeking a new job. If all the search engine did was simply count the number of times one of these words appears in a document, the search query would return irrelevant options. Keywords are important but keyword density needs to be correctly integrated into the total context of the document. If your use of keywords is too low, you will not get the optimum benefit; if too high, your page might get flagged and devalued for keyword spamming.

Page ranking is largely driven by inbound links, not hits on your site.

Professional SEOs are nearly universal in their agreement that link analysis and link-based factors, not how many hits you receive to your site, are the most important determinant of page popularity. By analyzing links, engines will judge a website and page to further determine if that page content is important and thus

deserving of a boost in ranking. Search algorithms are written to analyze the number and popularity of pages linking to your site, as well as metrics like trust and authority.

For example, Google uses a patented link analysis algorithm called PageRank to measure the number and the relative importance of inbound links to your site. PageRank interprets a link from page A to page B as an endorsement by page A that page B contains relevant content. Google search looks at more than the sheer volume of links that a page receives; it also analyzes and assigns an importance factor to the pages that cast the vote.

For example, a link from .edu and .gov sites or from major media sources like nytimes.com or cnn.com carry a greater presumed importance and trust than a link from your neighbor's blog. On the other hand, if the links that point to you are from low-quality, interlinked sites or automated spamming techniques also known as link farms, search engines will discount the value of those links.

Some companies offer to sell links to webmasters to improve their PageRank, but these so-called link farms are discounted by most search engines. Google has publicly warned webmasters that if they are discovered to be selling links for the purpose of influencing PageRank and reputation, their links will be devalued and ignored in their calculations.

There are several ways to build legitimate links to your website, including local and national directories, blogs, posts on sites like Digg and Reddit, press releases with a link to your website embedded within the release and social media such as MySpace and Facebook. Link-building is one of the most difficult and time consuming aspects of search engine optimization and will be the topic of a future white paper.

Optimizing your site is a constantly changing process.

There are many other internal and external factors that must be taken into consideration when optimizing your site – information architecture, usability and even professional design can impact page ranking. As the online environment becomes increasingly competitive search engines are constantly evolving to improve their technology and ability to return more relevant results.

The Internet is dynamic and changes happen due to new filters being put in place to combat spamming and websites competing for top positions. So what works well today may not work as well tomorrow.

To keep up with this dynamic environment, your site must constantly evolve as well. Certainly, you will need to have an ongoing link building-strategy to protect and improve your ranking position. You should also plan on monitoring competitor activity to see how your search engine performance compares with theirs and to identify any new opportunities. The most effective marketing campaigns have always routinely expanded based upon what has been successful in the past. Search marketing is no different.

Depending on your in-house SEO and programming knowledge, time availability and other cost factors, you may opt to outsource your search marketing to a professional firm. Since our firm offers professional SEO services, we believe that our expertise, diverse experience and link-building knowledge make outsourcing a better solution. However, we also recognize that do-it-yourself SEO can be an effective solution for some companies. The most important thing to remember is that a good optimization strategy can mean the difference between attracting thousands of visitors and being buried deep, or even hidden, in the search results.

Are you winning the attraction battle?