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Search Engine Optimization Fraud

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Cloaking, creating shadow domains, and link farms are common techniques employed by fraudulent search engine optimization (SEO) firms. Range Online Media says it knows how to identify SEO fraud. Legitimate companies are getting bumped from Google and Yahoo! for illegal search engine optimization (SEO) practices, and most don't know why.

Anthony Muller, director of search engine optimization for Range Online Media, says there are five main fraudulent methods for driving search results: shadow domains, doorway pages, invisible text, link farms, and cloaking.

SEO companies produce multiple Web sites by using several different domain names to artificially boost search results for one Web site. These are shadow domains, one of the most common tricks used to boost rankings. Doorway pages duplicate similar content on several pages in an attempt to expand keywords and drive traffic.

Invisible text, which most search engines are now privy to, is text that is written in the same color as a Web site's background, so an SEO can duplicate a given set of keywords as many times as they possibly can on a page. Link farms--commonly used illegitimate affiliate marketing rings--are used by SEOs to create links to a site from irrelevant or illegitimate "affiliates." Muller notes there is usually only a page rank penalty for this offense.

Cloaking is the practice of showing a Web surfer one version of a page while showing a search engine a completely different page for its index.

WhenU was recently dropped by both Yahoo! and Google for cloaking, but denied any involvement or knowledge of the practices deployed by its SEO. (Article at the end of this section) Web publishers can check for cloaking by searching their Web address and clicking on the "cached" page, which shows what pages are indexed by search engines.

Muller says there are two reasons that SEOs engage in fraudulent search ranking practices. He says that "spamming" (as he calls it, although SEO spamming has no direct relationship to email spamming) "is quick and easy." For SEOs that don't want to redesign their clients' Web sites, SEO spamming is easy to do, and even easier to set up.

This is especially true for brands that don't have any link popularity, such as new companies, Muller says. Through SEO spamming, new sites can get to the top quickly through artificial inflation. The downside, he notes, is that "satellite" shadow domain names are usually busted in a few months, and the cost is even higher when a company's main Web site is dropped from a major search engine like Google or Yahoo! Muller notes that Google usually has a two-strike policy.

Muller says that when companies are dropped from Google, the process of getting their domain reinstated is a long one--and it's not always guaranteed, depending on the severity of the offense and the company's reputation with Google. He says these companies have to "write a letter explaining the situation, explaining whether they were unaware of the illegal practices. Google then has to reevaluate the situation," which he says can take 4-6 months.

Muller acknowledges that several big name brands have been banned by Google and Yahoo!, although he would not disclose any names. "The travel industry is huge with it," he says, adding that e-commerce, pharmaceuticals, porn, and gambling companies have also been major perpetrators.

"[Search engine optimization] is easier to do the right way, but it's more intimidating," says Muller. "If there wasn't a need for this 'quick fix,' then [fraudulent search engine optimization] wouldn't exist--you wouldn't believe how many hotel agencies aren't around anymore."

However, Muller adds that in many instances, Web publishers are completely unaware that their SEO firms are doing anything illegal. "A lot of times these companies don't even know they can get banned--they're only worried about the bottom line."

Companies that say they'll create additional pages to boost a ranking, or claim to have thousands of affiliates, are probably not legitimate SEOs. "The best way to protect yourself is to RFP [request for proposal] at least five SEOs," Muller says. Prospective clients should also be wary of any company that claims "proprietary" SEO methods or that refuses to disclose its methodology.

The best way to ensure your site's search ranking is optimized? Focus on content, Muller says. Be descriptive without compromising the brand's integrity; focus on the customer and also on meta-text. Steer clear of Flash or frames or anything that would complicate the main URL, use descriptive text links that indicate a definite destination, and include a site map.