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Selecting a Search Engine Optimization Company

There are numerous factors to consider when selecting a **Search Engine Optimization Company**. Unfortunately, many companies that haven't previously used search engine optimization to increase their visibility are unsure how to evaluate potential partners, and many are intimidated by the entire concept.

There are a series of questions any business with a website must ask them selves:

- 1) Are people and other business's using the internet at an ever increasing rate to secure information?
- 2) Without knowing the company that they are looking for, their choice for gathering information is to use one of any number of search engines. Is there any benefit to my company to being found by those people looking for what I do?
- 3) Am I being found for my core competencies now?

If not, it is only reasonable to wonder what it will take in time, money, and effort to make it so. The following information, divided into five major topics of consideration designed to answer those questions and is intended to help in the selection process.

Approach

There are many different approaches and levels of service available to anyone looking for a search engine optimization company. Some techniques, such as "cloaking" or "doorway pages" can put your site at risk of penalization, although they may give you short term gains. For some, the risks of penalization associated with such techniques may be acceptable, but most prefer to play by the rules.

You probably want to be certain that your SEO partner completely outlines their process and deliverables. Here are three important questions to ask your potential search engine optimization company partner:

1) Do you create pages, optimized for my keywords, which aren't built in to the navigation of my site?

If the answer is yes, you are probably dealing with a search engine optimization company that creates "doorway" or "bridge" pages (although most companies will call them by different names). Such pages may even reside on a different server and funnel traffic to your site. This technique violates the terms of service of most major engines. Run, don't walk, because if penalties are assessed it will be against you and not them.

2. Does your technique involve showing a different page to the search engine than to my visitors?

If the answer is yes, then you are probably dealing with a Search Engine Optimization Company that uses "cloaking" techniques. This is when the website server makes a note of the unique address assigned to each visitor, and when it notices that a visitor is a search engine, it feeds it specialized content designed to rank highly for certain keywords. Many engines specifically warn against this technique in their terms of service. Google is particularly harsh on sites that use cloaking, and is known to remove them entirely (when they find them). (See our SEO fraud section for the details on one such company)

3. Do you guarantee that I can achieve a #1 ranking for my selected keywords?

If the answer is yes, you are dealing with an "unethical" Search Engine Optimization company. Each company should have a statement of ethics available to you. If they don't have a guideline available on their philosophy, rest assured it is a whatever it takes to keep you paying us approach. The plain, simple, fact of the matter is no reputable SEO can guarantee a #1 ranking, and are careful to establish realistic expectations for your campaign.

Always remember Caveat Emptor: Let the buyer beware and, If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

Results

Almost every search engine optimization company has a history of successes of positions that they have achieved. However, looks can be deceiving. When evaluating the past results of a search engine optimization company, there are really five important components to consider.

1. Which engines do they have expertise with?

Make certain that the positions the search engine optimization company has achieved are for the most popular search engines, not smaller engines for which they may have a knack. The top 8 Search engines, as of this writing, are Google, Yahoo, MSN, AOL, Ask Jeeves, Excite, Fast, and Alta Vista. These engines represent 96% of the daily searches, and numerous other engines feed off of their results.

2. Which keywords should you target for optimum results?

Wordtracker (www.wordtracker.com) is a valuable tool (free for limited use) in determining if the positions your potential search engine optimization company proudly displays actually have any real value, since it shows the popularity of individual search phrases based upon actual search activity on popular engines.

When Wordtracker displays a very low number (or zero) for a particular term, it is most likely not very competitive (or beneficial), and high positions for it are probably nothing to brag about. In other words, if the search engine company you are considering is boasting of the high positions it achieved for a term and Wordtracker

tells you that nobody searches for that term, know that you shouldn't be impressed. This is about putting your companies' message in front of the most targeted, pre-qualified audience possible.

3. What about my entire site?

While it's easy to focus on one particularly impressive position on one popular engine, it's more important to focus on a broad range of positions achieved for one site. It's entirely possible for a site to have one great ranking and be sorely lacking in positions for all other keywords. Ask your potential search engine optimization company to show you a report for an individual client that demonstrates good positions on many popular engines for many popular keywords. An effective search engine optimization campaign will achieve maximum exposure (touch points) across a broad range of keywords and engines, not one notable position on one engine.

4. How have results stood up over time?

When you find a search engine optimization company that can provide you with the data mentioned, ask to see a report showing how those positions have held up over time (ideally for six months or more). Since search engine marketing is an ongoing process, you want to be certain your partner is capable of maintaining a high level of exposure for your company. Search engine exposure is not magic, it's a science and can be unbelievably difficult to manage, let alone master. It's a moving target, the rules of the road change constantly and expertise in this area has a tremendous financial upside for the companies that employ it.

5. Did they really do it?

The most obvious of the five components is to confirm that your potential search engine optimization company is really responsible for the positions they are claiming. It is not unheard of for unethical companies to take credit for the work of others in order to increase their chances of landing a sale. In some cases, vendor claims are easy to confirm (such as when a client site includes the vendor's name or logo). If you can't confirm that a particular search engine optimization company is truly responsible for the positions by looking at the site, don't be afraid to pick up the phone to do so. A highly reputable firm will aggressively promote you speaking to their clients by providing you all the necessary contact information associated with that given site.

References

If the search engine optimization company you are considering is unable to provide you with references, you may want to look elsewhere. When references are provided, avoid companies that quote a first name within a company and some blanket statement (Gene at Acme products says: They exploded my sales and I don't know what I'd do without them) In almost every business, excellent references are a necessity when considering expenditures over a certain dollar figure. Why should choosing a search engine optimization company be any different? Some optimization firms may cite "confidentiality" reasons, but search engine optimization is no longer considered the black art that it once was. Every legitimate firm should have

at least two clients (past or present) that you can call upon. You should note their willingness to provide you with full contact information including:

- Full company name and address
- Contact name of the person working directly with the SEO
- Phone and e-mail contact information
- Company website that has been worked on

Here are some important questions to ask:

1. Did you enjoy working with them?

This doesn't bear much explanation, but you should find out how available the vendor was for questions, whether they met their deadlines, and how the company would classify the overall experience "after the sale".

2. How reasonable were their requests?

Some companies will ask you to make changes that seriously compromise the visitor experience on your site. It is important to find a search engine optimization company that can find a balance between the needs of search engines and site visitors, not a company that goes for high positions at any cost.

3. What overall effect has it had on your business?

This is the most important question, and the most important overall factor to consider when selecting a search engine optimization company. While high search engine positions and more site traffic are an admirable goal, the true value of search engine optimization is found in positive effects on customer acquisition costs and bottom line revenues.

Conclusion

Search engine optimization can drive numerous, targeted, pre-qualified prospects directly to your website, typically at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing. However, as with most things, your results will only be as good as the people you work with. By taking the time to carefully evaluate search engine optimization vendors before signing a check, you will take much of the guesswork and uncertainty out of the process, and greatly increase your long-term chances for success.

The internet is the most dynamic marketing vehicle ever conceived. It is available 24/7 with the benefits of putting your message in front of the people seeking what you do. The associated costs vs. the potential returns are miniscule when you consider the vast opportunities to interact with your target market.