



# Increasing Website ROI Through Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

BY JON PAYNE & SCOTT JOHNSON

## **YOUR BEST PROSPECTS ARE SEARCHING FOR YOU!**

You've built a great Website. It's strategically sound, professionally designed, and quickly meets the needs of various types of site visitors. Congratulations! Now what?

A recent Forrester Research report estimates that 80% of overall Web site visits begin in a search engine or directory service. Why is this so significant? Because it means your prospects are no longer waiting for you to find and sell to them. Instead, they are finding you, and your competitors, instantly via Google, Yahoo!, MSN and other search engines. In this new environment, by the time your phone rings, or you receive an online inquiry, your prospect has often already decided that yours may be the best company for them. Their business is now yours to lose. This concept is so important that it needs repeating. **Today's consumers buy, they do not wait to be sold!**

Every minute of every day, the Web is teeming with millions of searches, people actively looking for products, services or information. Getting these motivated searchers to your site can obviously have a dramatic impact on your bottom line. The best part is that, aside from any investment you may choose to make in professional assistance — **it's free!** As your website begins to become effectively optimized for high search engine rankings, the increased traffic won't cost you any more, no matter how many new visitors you attract.

The results of optimization efforts can be accurately measured and tracked, allowing you to test different strategies and tactics, and quantify the results to a high degree, including ultimate conversion rates and outstanding, measurable ROI. You'll be able to compare how your site performs against your competition. And you'll be able to measure your ROI with precision, making Search Engine Optimization perhaps the most powerful marketing tool ever.

But the fact is that few Internet searchers ever read beyond the first page of search engine results. So what steps can you take to help your site consistently occupy a top position in the search engine rankings for searches related to your business? The answers can be both stunningly simple and mind-numbingly complex.



**WHAT'S IN A WORD? UNDERSTANDING HOW SEARCH ENGINES WORK.**

People communicate with each other in a variety of ways. But we all search the Web using the same basic communication tool: words. And understanding how the various search engines match up Web pages with the keywords their users enter is the first step in optimizing your site's performance results.

Search engines use automated software programs known as "spiders" (because they "crawl the Web") to find Web pages, which are then evaluated and ranked. While their methods and mathematical ranking algorithms differ, what's important is what they all have in common. Their spiders can't see Flash animations, they don't react to colors or graphic design, they can't watch streaming video, — so they focus on the words on the Web pages they "crawl," as well as how those words are structured within the body of the text, and the HTML code of the page. What words are used on the page, whether they're part of a link to another page, how unique they are when compared with other keywords, and how often they appear on a particular page. While we have deliberately oversimplified this description of a complex process, the takeaway idea is this: both content and context matter greatly when trying to achieve high search engine rankings.

So where do you start? **Keyword research** can show you what terms your competitors are using, and whether or not they would also be effective for you. It can also help you build a list of potential keywords to incorporate into the text of your site, and most importantly, determine which words and phrases will be most profitable and effective for you. Beyond the words themselves, *how* you use them — in headings, titles, links, subheads, etc. — and how they relate to the other words on the page also has a direct effect on their importance in a search engine's ranking of your web pages.

A full knowledge of the most effective keywords and phrases for your industry and how to use them can also help you determine their value in Pay-Per-Click (PPC) marketing (more on this later), comparing overall search volume with the relevance to your target audience, again to ensure maximum ROI.

*Example:* If you owned a barbershop, it's logical that potential customers might search the keyword "barbershop" when looking for you, right? But how would you weed those customers out from people searching for information on the popular "Barbershop" movies or TV series? Or those seeking information on barbershop quartets? If instead you optimized for less obvious terms such as "haircut" or "hair styling," you're results would probably be more appropriate.

A complete understanding of the most effective keywords and phrases for your particular industry and a list of the words and phrases your prospects are using to search for you are a crucial first step that can bring literally thousands of new visitors to your site.



#### A LITTLE HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS: THE IMPORTANCE OF LINKS.

In addition to evaluating and ranking keywords, search engines place varying degrees of importance on the links between Websites. The vast majority of web pages in most search engine databases have been found via other Web pages that the search engine has already indexed. The more active links that exist to a particular page, the better its chance of achieving a superior ranking. Having your site listed in various online directories, for example, is one way to create a measurable effect on your site's appearance in search results. Why? Well it's a popularity contest of sorts. If other, well-established and well-trusted websites link to your site, they are in essence vouching for your site, or voting on its behalf. Your site looks better and more relevant simply by being associated with other respected sites.

*Did you know:* Yahoo! will return a list of pages linking to a given site? The search command is `linkdomain:example.com`.

The outgoing links on your Web pages are also analyzed and used to determine your site's relevance to other pages in the database. Even where the links appear within your site can be of great importance in determining how it is ultimately ranked in a given search. But the "inbound" links to your site will always be the most important factor, as they represent other humans vouching for your site — rather than just relying on your site to vouch for itself. This concept is known as "independent citation", and is no different than the everyday example of checking the references of a potential new-hire. You want to hear the prospects' story, but you'd also feel better hearing a few other people give good recommendations.

#### SITE DESIGN AND STRUCTURE: SAFE LANDINGS AND EFFECTIVE DIRECTION.

One of the most important aspects of a successful SEO effort is the overall structure of your site itself. The search engines need to be able to crawl the site effectively; even minor errors in code or overly-difficult navigation can thwart the spiders and leave important pages excluded from the final results. And the design and internal mapping of the site can affect ranking in a variety of ways, from subtle to dramatic.

Armed with your list of keywords, it's important to place them properly to deliver visitors to the best **landing pages** for their particular search. Different keywords can have different effects depending on where your visitors are in the buying process, whether they're gathering information, comparing alternatives, or actively deciding where to buy. By mapping the relevant search terms and phrases to the right pages, you can match visitors' arrival points to their intentions, all with the goal of maximizing the return from the increased traffic generated by the search engines.

Campaign tracking software allows you to measure your results precisely to learn what pages are being viewed most often (and which are being ignored), how often searchers visit before buying, and how long the conversion process lasts.



For most searches, your home page is **not** the best landing page. Many visitors are best directed to interior pages where they can immediately find the specific information they seek.

#### **PAY-PER-CLICK (PPC): INSTANT RESULTS**

While “organic” (unpaid) searches are usually the most cost-effective form of long-term Internet marketing, building dramatic results can take time, typically a matter of some months. By far the fastest way to start attracting traffic immediately is a Pay-Per-Click campaign. Google AdWords and Yahoo! Search Marketing (formerly Overture) services are the two leading PPC providers. MSN’s search engine currently uses Yahoo’s paid ads, but will be rolling out their own PPC program in the near future.

The PPC business model is very straightforward: advertisers place bids on specific search terms, then pay that bid amount only when a searcher clicks on their ad(s). Think of it as a very highly targeted form of paid advertising. Complete control is one major advantage of a PPC campaign, allowing for quick placement, immediate returns, precise tracking and copy testing, and specific ROI measurement. But be aware that it’s a two-sided coin: because your competitors also have the same ability to measure their own activities and results, PPC campaigns usually require **active management and close monitoring** to be most effective. Some PPC programs (such as Google’s AdWords) also take into account the clickthrough rate (CTR) of your ads. Thus, the ability to create an ad that is more compelling and attracts more users to click on it will actually help your ads to be positioned higher and will even cost you less per visitor than the cost to your competitors. This is another way a SEO professional can actually save you money and dramatically increase traffic to your site.

**Example:** Does Google always reward the highest PPC bidder with the best placement? No! Both your ad’s click through rate (CTR) and your bid amount will determine your ranking. If your bid is 50 cents and your CTR is 1% you will be lower than someone whose bid is 40 cents and CTR is 2%. Why? Think about it from Google’s standpoint. They make 10 cents less per click, sure, but they get twice as many clicks. Thus, over 100 visitors they’ll make 40 x 2 or 80 cents instead of just 50 x 1 or 50 cents. That is why it is critical to run PPC campaigns correctly — write compelling ads and target the right people — not just unqualified prospects. Better CTR saves you money!

PPC also allows for **contextual advertising**, where your ads also appear on pages with related content, not just in the listing accompanying searches. This can sometimes expand your target pool to include those interested in your message before they even initiate a search.

One unique feature of PPC campaigns is the ability to quickly scale them up or down depending on your desired outcome. Not all advertisers always want the maximum number of responses at all times. You can run PPC campaigns in limited geographical areas, and even set and modify a monthly budget cap to control the volume of traffic to your site. If responding to inquiries in your line of business is a time-consuming



process, you can modify the campaign quarterly or even monthly based on the ROI and conversion data you collect to target and attract only the highest quality leads.

**ONGOING IMPROVEMENT: THERE'S A SEARCHER BORN EVERY MINUTE.**

As you begin to optimize your Web site based on a comprehensive SEO strategy, clearly defined goals and a phased action plan, you will undoubtedly run into challenges. Integrating strategically sound copywriting with optimal layout, design and functionality can sometimes seem like the proverbial mixing of oil and water. Yet the results are clearly worth the effort.

The real key is to remember that you're creating content to be viewed by human beings, not robots; your pages should never read as though they were written for a search engine. Users come first. If you should encounter a conflict between copywriting and your SEO goals, let the copy set the direction, and look for other ways to achieve the optimization objectives. There's usually more than one good way to improve your rankings. **What's more - all the traffic in the world won't help you generate any new business if your website's visitor-to-lead conversion rate is 0%. 0% of ten times the traffic is still 0. Better to find a balance — perhaps opting for a strategy that may draw 20% less traffic, but converts at a 50% higher rate — you'd still be much better off than the other way around.**

However, be aware that there's sometimes a tendency to overdo it, which could put your site at risk of a potential penalty or even having it banned outright. Several years ago it was common to insert keywords into every possible location on a page, from headings to the first words in every paragraph, every link, and even image descriptions. Today that's not only not necessary, it could very likely cause a page to be flagged by the search engines as a SPAM page, created only to attract search engine listings, and be either penalized or banned permanently!

Your prospects *are* out there, searching the Web even as you read this. Make it easy for them to find you, and then give them what they're looking for when they arrive, and success will take care of itself.

**THE BOTTOM LINE IS THE BOTTOM LINE.**

Finally, you may wish to seek the services of a reputable professional for all or part of your optimization program. While there are many SEO firms out there, its important to take your time and make sure you select one that you are comfortable with and fits your business goals. The complex nature of SEO techniques has spawned many online scams, that promise incredible results overnight and for prices that are far below what the many hours involved in a legitimate SEO program would cost. Be advised that SEO is a custom service, not a one-size-fits-all commodity. Whether you're hiring a firm for an initial assessment, a one-time "polishing," a complete Website overhaul, or an ongoing, long-term search marketing campaign, remember, **you get what you pay for!**



With the tools and resources now available, you can directly map tangible benefits to every dollar invested. When done right, few (if any) other marketing methods can match the highly measurable, impressive ROI of a professional search engine marketing campaign. By nature, SEO targets and attracts those prospects that have already specified that they are interested in what you have to offer. What's more — your ad and website are presented to them at their request, at the moment in time they wish to see it. Right prospect. Right message. Right time. That's target marketing at its best! Try telling your TV, radio or print ad representative that you only want to pay for your message to be seen by customers who've specifically requested it — and at the exact moment they want to see it! Planning, executing, monitoring and tracking have all evolved light years beyond simply counting the number of page hits. And new opportunities for improved ROI are coming online like never before. Search Engine Optimization affords you one of the last remaining legal means to gain a strategic advantage over your competition. All you need to do is grab opportunity by the mouse and click.

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Jon Payne** is the Principal and Owner of Ephricon Web Marketing (<http://www.ephricon.com>).

Mr. Payne has designed and executed highly successful SEM/SEO campaigns for a multitude of clients across a wide variety of industries. He maintains a blog about SEO and other Internet marketing topics at <http://www.jonpayne.net>.

**Scott Johnson** is the Principal of Rock Creek Creative, a 20-year-old strategic marketing firm in Bethesda, Maryland. Rock Creek serves government, corporate and non-profit clients both internationally and domestically. You may visit their website at <http://www.rockcreekcreative.com>.

#### PERMISSION TO REPUBLISH

© 2005 Ephricon Web Marketing, LLC. This search engine marketing article may be republished in its entirety free of charge, electronically or in print, provided it appears with the included copyright and author's bios including live, clickable website hyperlinks. Please contact the authors if you have any questions or are uncertain about the republishing requirements.