Increasing Traffic to Your Website Through Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Techniques

Small businesses that want to learn how to attract more customers to their website through marketing strategies such as search engine optimization will find this booklet useful. You may want to read this booklet in conjunction with other booklets in this series such as "Successful Online Display Advertising" and "Social Media Marketing."

What is Search Engine Optimization?

Search engine optimization (SEO) involves designing, writing, and coding a website in a way that helps to improve the volume and quality of traffic to your website from people using search engines.

While Search Engine Optimization is the focus of this booklet, keep in mind that it is one of many marketing techniques. A brief overview of other marketing techniques is provided at the end of this booklet.

The marketing strategies you choose depend on your target audience and the nature of your business. SEO is one of many marketing practices and can be part of your overall marketing strategy. Your marketing strategy can include both offline (traditional) and online marketing techniques.

Effective SEO techniques help you get more potential customers to your website. Websites that have higher rankings (i.e. presented higher in the search results) are identified to a larger number of people, who will then visit that site. Ensure that you define your market first before engaging in SEO techniques.

innovationpei

How is SEO Relevant to Small Business?

To enhance your website presence you need to consider marketing strategies such as SEO. Just setting up a website is not enough. Your website has to be marketed and promoted. According to research, the majority of online consumers use a search engine to look for products, services or business information. The majority of web traffic is driven by the following search engines: www.google.com (the most commonly used search engine); www.yahoo.com, www.MSN.com, and www.ask.com (Source: Rand Fishkin, Beginner's Guide to SEO, 2006). Targeted visitors to your website are more likely to result in new customers and increased sales.

As a small business, your marketing budget is likely limited. However, there are some cost-effective SEO techniques that you should be aware of (e.g. editing your web pages to ensure you have good quality content and the right keywords). These techniques will bring more people and the right kind of people (i.e. potential customers) to your website. Using effective SEO techniques can put your business on a more level playing field with larger companies.

By carefully considering your budget, timelines and your marketing needs you can choose SEO techniques that will give you the most value for your money. SEO is a long-term process. However, you can work towards improving your website's ranking by taking small steps over a period of time.

How Do Search Engines Work?

To develop effective SEO techniques you need to consider how search engines work and what people are looking for. There are basically two types of search engines that collect information in different ways.

Types of Search Engines*	
Crawler-Based Search Engines (e.g. Google and AltaVista)	**Human-Powered Directories** (e.g. Yahoo Directory and Business.com)
Search engines are complex software applications that are automated to survey ("crawl" or "spider") the Internet to find websites. A Search Engine crawler is also referred to as "robot" or "bot".	Human-powered directories are directories that are compiled by human reviewers, who review, examine and evaluate short descriptions of websites provided by people who would like their websites listed online. Reviewers rate the content of submissions using criteria that are generally not known to the public.
Implications for SEO	**Implications for SEO**
These search engine 'bots" generally index sites based on their content and links (i.e. how many websites link to your website). Therefore, quality and organization of content and link popularity are critical to optimizing your website.	Changing your website will not automatically have an effect on how or whether your website is included in this type of search engine.
Changing the content of your web pages will affect the order you are listed in the search engine. The crawler will eventually detect changes in your website.	For these type of search engines, you generally have to pay a fee to have your website reviewed by an editor before it is listed in the directory.
	Submission of websites to web directories is a possible SEO strategy as it can increase links to your website (i.e. link popularity).

* Note that many current search engines present both crawler-based results and human-powered listings. For example, Yahoo! provides both a crawler-based search engine and a directory service (searchable separately from the crawler-based search engine).

Crawler-Based Search Engines

Crawler-based search engines consider many factors when indexing websites. Search engines are designed to try to find and rank the best websites (i.e. most usable, most informative, most credible). One of the most important ways for a search engine to rank your site is to consider the **number and quality of websites that link to your website**. In addition to the number of websites that link to your website, a search engine might also consider the **credibility of the website** that is linked to your website. A link from a trusted news source, for example, will carry more weight than a link from a spam site (i.e. low quality website).

The exact methods used by crawler-based search engines on how they rate content for rankings is not public knowledge. In addition, these rules change over time. There are, however, some common techniques that can help you optimize your website to increase traffic to your site.

Search Engine Optimization Techniques

SEO involves a wide range of techniques, some of which you may be able to do yourself and others that will require web development expertise. Techniques include increasing links from other websites to your web pages, editing the content of the website, reorganizing the structure and organization of your website, and coding changes. It also involves addressing problems that might prevent search engines from fully "crawling" a website.

If your website is currently being developed, ask your web developer what SEO techniques they are using. **A well-designed website that is easy to navigate and use and that contains high quality content should increase traffic to your website**.

As was mentioned, one of the most critical ways to improve your website's ranking in the search engine results pages is **improving the number and quality of websites that link to your site. Google PageRank** is a system for ranking web pages used by the Google search engine. PageRank assesses the extent and quality of web pages that link to your web pages. Because Google is currently the most popular search engine worldwide, according to comScore Inc. (Press Release, June 2008), the ranking of your web pages received on Google PageRank will affect the number of visitors to your website. Techniques to improve your page rank are discussed below.

On Page and Off Page Search Engine Optimization Techniques

On Page Optimization Techniques	Off Page Optimization Techniques
As the term suggests, on page optimization includes those techniques that can be done on the pages of a website. On page optimization relate to those things that are within your control – i.e. the content of your website. On page optimization techniques help the search engine crawlers read the website content. A readable site helps to show quality and will result in higher ranked web pages.	Off page optimization includes those techniques that can be done off the pages to increase traffic to your website such as link swaps, directory listings, blogging, and forum postings.

NOTE: On page optimization techniques (i.e. a website that contains high quality content) alone will not be enough to increase traffic to your website. You need to combine both on and off page techniques.

Here are some more SEO techniques (both on and off page) that may increase your website's ranking on crawler-based search engines such as Google and AltaVista.

Ten Tips to Optimize Your Website

1. Ensure that your content is fully accessible. Provide direct, HTML links to each page you want the search engine crawlers to index. Keep in mind that search engines typically do not read graphics. If you use Flash (animation software) or JavaScript, it should be tagged with a label that contains a description of the graphic (i.e. a tag) so that search engine crawlers can read the label.

2. Consider creating interesting content (e.g. top ten list, an article on a topical issue, a success story) or useful tools (e.g. a checklist for assessing service or product quality) that are relevant to your business. This type of content can lead to an increased number of people using and linking to your site.

3. Ensure that all of your web pages (or the pages you want indexed) are linked to your main page. Ensure your site has crosslinks (links that connect to other web pages within your website). This makes it easier for crawlers or bots to navigate your site.

4. Use keywords and key phrases regularly throughout your website, including your main page, and page titles and URL.

5. Organize the content on your website into well defined topic areas. One idea is to create a web page for each type of product or service you sell.

6. Update the content of your website on a regular basis.

7. Ask other businesses and relevant and credible organizations to include your website address on their website (referred to as link swaps or reciprocal links). If possible obtain links from external websites to your website that link to individual pages, in addition to links pointing directly to your main page. The more websites that link to your website, the higher your page rank. Keep in mind that the page rank does not depend solely on the number of links. Search engines typically will rank you more highly if relevant or trusted sites are linked to your site.

8. Use original and high quality content for your website (i.e. original in the sense that you write the content or you hire a professional to develop the content). Ensure that your home page also contains high quality and relevant content.

9. Customize your keywords to suit your target audience. For your potential and existing customers to find your site using search engines, your web pages must contain keyword phrases that match the phrases your target audience types into search queries. Therefore, your keywords need to be selected carefully. Consider using a range of keywords beyond commonly used (or highly competitive) keywords that better targets exactly what users might be looking for. If you only use competitive keywords, you may have a difficult time competing with more established companies. You should consider if people will use more than two keywords to find your product or business as people are increasingly using 3 or more search terms to find what they are looking for.

10. Regularly monitor your search results on the main search engines. Type in key words or phrases to see how your business ranks. Use this information to improve your marketing techniques.

Finding the Right Keywords

Steps for finding the right keywords (or search terms)

1. Figure out what your existing and potential customers might be looking for. Ask your current customers what terms they would use to find the products and services offered by your business.

2. Brainstorm a list of keywords that are related to your business.

3. Check out the competition to see how many other websites are listed in search engines (particularly Google) for that keyword. You can use tools such as **Google PageRank** – which goes from 1 to 10 (10 being the best ranked) – to see which websites hold the top positions.

4. Select the best keywords – the ones most suited to your business and target audience.

5. Ensure that the content on your website is high quality and is consistent with your keywords.

There are various online resources (some that are free) that will help you assess the relevance of your keywords. Check for various online resources by typing "keyword tools" into a search engine such as www.google.com.

Pitfalls to Avoid – Things That Will Prevent a Search Engine from Indexing Your Website

On the other side of the coin, there are a number of things that might prevent a search engine from indexing or ranking your website. These include:

• Broken links (i.e. URL links that no longer work and cannot be accessed).

• A web page that has too much content.

• A web server that experiences a lot of downtime or slow server speed.

• Content that is broken up by ads or pop-ups.

• Using frames or Flash without tags or labels (Frames are sections of the browser display area. The contents of each frame are taken from a different web page).

• Overly aggressive or manipulative SEO techniques (e.g. loading too many keywords in the website's content). These practices might get your website excluded from a search engine.
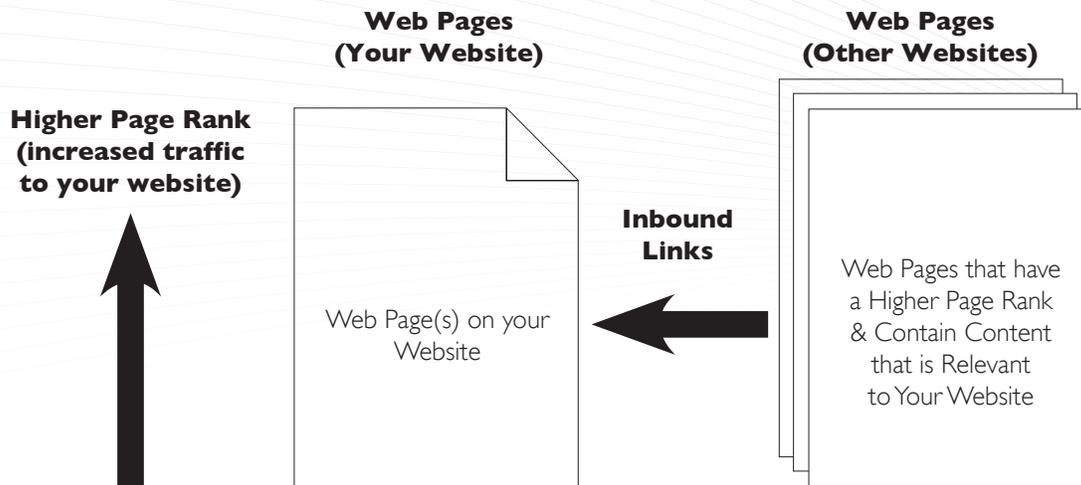
Link Popularity – A Key Factor for Increasing Your Website's Page Ranking

Link popularity refers to the number and quality of links that point to your website. Increasing your website's link popularity is critical. A Web page that has links from many pages that have a high Google PageRank receives a higher rank itself. The absence of links means that there is no support for that page and it will not get a high page ranking.

In addition to the number of sites that link to your website, you also have to consider the quality of the links. It is to your advantage to have sites with high page rankings link to yours. A link from a site with a page ranking of 7 will push your site higher up in the rankings than a link from a site with a page ranking of 5, for example.

Links from web pages that are appropriate to your website and are of good quality should increase your page rank.

The diagram shows the importance of not only increasing the number of links to your website, but also making sure that inbound links are from good quality web pages (i.e. web pages that are highly ranked and contain content that is appropriate to your website).

Higher Page Rank (increased traffic to your website)

Web Pages (Your Website)

Web Page(s) on your Website

Inbound Links

Web Pages (Other Websites)

Web Pages that have a Higher Page Rank & Contain Content that is Relevant to Your Website

More About Increasing Link Popularity

The table highlights some tips for increasing link popularity. Remember for best results make sure links to your website are relevant.

Tips to Increase Link Popularity	Description
Use Link Exchange Forums	Members of a link exchange forum advertise the sites they want to get links to, and will in turn offer to link back to these sites. Note that the links generated through these services are subject to review.
Distribute Articles/Press Releases on Other Websites	Build inbound links by distributing articles/press releases through websites and article directories. Make sure that the articles contain a link back to your website.
Participate in Link Campaigns	Businesses can ask partners (e.g. suppliers), other businesses, professional organizations, chambers of commerce, and customers to add links from their websites. Be prepared to link back to their sites.
Create Interesting Content	Also known as link baiting. Provide interesting information that users may find useful. Offer tips to benefit users (e.g. Pitfalls to Avoid When Hiring Contractors). Create tools that people will use (e.g. Product Quality Checklists)
Participate in a Blog	A blog is a website that can be maintained by an individual or organization that allows other people to make regular entries (comments, information, advice, notice of upcoming events, news) into the website. Other people respond to these entries and the blog becomes a running commentary, usually on particular topic areas. Blogs can be used for personal or business purposes. If you enter comments or information in blogs then you can link to your website via the URL field in blog comments. This would provide more opportunities for people to link to your site.

cont'd

Tips to Increase Link Popularity	Description
Submit a Description of your Website to Appropriate Directories	A directory is a website that links to other websites. These links are usually categorized by subject areas. Some directories are very general and include a wide range of categories and/or regions. According to www.wikipedia.org examples of well known, general, web directories are Yahoo! Directory (http://dir.yahoo.com) and the Open Directory Project (ODP) (http://www.dmoz.org). There are also specialized or niche directories, which focus on certain industries/sectors, products/services or regions (e.g. shopping directories contain a list of retail e-commerce sites). You could submit your site to a specific product directory to help market your product. You can submit a description of your website to appropriate directories. Some directory submissions are free whereas some require a fee for listing the submitted link. Go to the Directory site of your choice for guidelines on how to submit your website. Directory submissions can help increase the traffic to your website.

Tracking Your Progress/Website Analytics

You should regularly check your search results on the main search engines. Type in keywords or phrases that describe your business to find out how your business ranks in the search results pages.

There are things you can look at to track your progress and help you make decisions for improving your website and your marketing strategies:

Popular website analytics and statistic packages include:

Web Trends – www.webtrends.com

Google Analytics – www.google.com/analytics

Microsoft adCentre – www.adcenter.microsoft.com

AWStats – http://awstats.sourceforge.net

Yahoo Site Explorer – http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com

Google Webmaster Tools – www.google.com/webmasters

Sources: www.canadabusiness.ca and www.wikipedia.org

• Web pages that attract the most visitors. Web pages that are the least popular.

• The number of inbound links or backlinks.

• Where are visitors coming from (e.g. via a search engine or another link)?

• The number of clicks on links that lead away from your website.

• The number of pages each visitor views.

There are a number of resources that can help you track your progress (for example the number of visitors to your website, inbound and outbound links) such as Yahoo Site Explorer and Google Analytics.

SEO Action Plan

Action Items	Status
1. Organize and enhance existing website content.	
2. Identify keywords people are most likely to use when searching for information about your business. **References:** There are various online resources (some that are free) that will help you assess the relevance of your keywords. Online sources of information may be found by typing "keyword" in a search engine.	
3. Get links from other websites, blogs, and press releases. **Tips:** Ask other businesses and relevant and credible organizations to include your website address on their website. Be prepared to do the same for them. Conduct a search on the Internet for good quality websites that complement your business. Place a link to them on your website. Ask the website owner if they would consider placing a link back to your website, suggesting a location where the link would be appropriate. **Reference:** • http://www.seochat.com/seo-tools/pagerank-search SEOChat's PageRank Search is a free search tool. A useful tool if you want to find out which websites have a high PageRank. It gives you Google search results as well as the PageRank. You type in a key phrase and can quickly see the PageRank of pages optimized for that phrase.	
4. Track your success using online tools such as Google Analytics or Yahoo Site Explorer. **References (Website Analytics):** • Web Trends – www.webtrends.com • Google Analytics – www.google.com/analytics • Microsoft adCentre – www.adcenter.microsoft.com • AWStats – http://awstats.sourceforge.net • Yahoo Site Explorer – http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com	

Source: Adapted from Creating an Online Presence – David Ciccerelli, www.Voices.com

Where Can I Obtain More Information About SEO?

There is an abundance of information available on SEO. If you want to do your own search – just enter the term "search engine optimization" into a search engine (e.g. Google, Yahoo!, AltaVista).

An Overview of Internet (Online) Marketing Strategies

As was mentioned, SEO is one type of marketing strategy. Below is an overview of other Internet strategies. When deciding how to market your business you should consider whether any of these strategies will suit your needs and budget. Also keep in mind that an overall marketing approach will likely include both offline (traditional) and online strategies.

Type of Internet Marketing Strategy	Description
Affiliate Marketing	A business contracts with other individuals or companies ("affiliates") who market the company's products for a commission (on sales or leads). Affiliate marketing overlaps with other Internet marketing methods because affiliates can use a variety of marketing strategies. Those methods include SEO, paid search engine marketing, email marketing and display advertising. A common type of affiliate marketing occurs when a Web advertiser or merchant recruits webmasters to place banner ads or buttons on their websites. Webmasters will receive a referral fee or commission from sales when the customer has clicked the affiliate link.
Social Media Marketing	Social media marketing (SMM) is essentially a strategy that promotes your business through word of mouth via online networking. It involves methods for generating publicity through social media and online communities. Examples of social networking sites include www.facebook.com, www.myspace.com, and www.nexopia.com (a popular Canadian social networking website). Examples of SMM methods include: Joining relevant online communities or social networking sites to help promote your business; adding RSS feeds to your website (RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and is a simple format that can be used to regularly update content); and blogging (where you add content to blogs); or creating a business blog. For more information about this type of marketing strategy see the booklet entitled: Web 2.0 Marketing Strategies.
Online Display Advertising	Use of the Internet as an advertising medium where paid promotional messages (i.e. display ads or banner ads) appear on other websites and search engine results pages. These promotional messages are paid for by the businesses or are exchanged between websites. For more information about this type of marketing strategy see the booklet entitled: Successful Online Display Advertising.

Glossary of Key SEO Concepts

Algorithms: An algorithm provides a set of instructions for completing a task. Crawler-based search engines use a set of instructions to index and rank websites. Search engines use a variety of algorithms to determine relevancy ranking. Some of these include determining whether the search term appears in the META keywords tag, others whether the search term appears in the body text or URL of a web page.

Backlinks: Links from external sites that connect to your website. Also referred to as inbound links.

Blogs: A blog (short for weblog) is an online journal. Most blogs have an open format that allows any Internet user to post entries (comments, questions) to other bloggers. Blog discussions are usually organized according to certain themes or topics. A blog can reflect the personality of the author or the purpose of the Website where the blog is located. A blogger is an author of a blog. Many blogs syndicate their content to subscribers using RSS (Real Simple Syndication, a popular content distribution tool).

Crawlers: (also spiders, robots, or bots). A web crawler is a program, which searches or browses the Web in a logical, automated manner. Search engines use crawlers to find up-to-date information. Crawlers are mainly used to create a copy of all the visited pages. These pages are processed by a search engine that will index the downloaded pages to provide fast searches.

Crosslinks: Refers to links within a website.

Frames: The browser display area (web page) is divided into two or more sections (frames). The contents of each frame are taken from a different Web page.

HTML (Hyper-Text Mark-up Language): A programming language used to create sites and pages on the Web. This is the primary language of websites.

Link Popularity: The number and quality of links that point to your website (i.e. back links). The number, quality and credibility of these links can influence your page rank.

Link Building: The process of gaining links to other websites that link to your website.

Link Baiting: The process of creating high quality and interesting content on your web pages that will attract more visitors to your website.

Link Swap: An exchange where site owners agree to mutually link to each other.

Meta tags: Meta tags are keywords, description and content that describes your website that is contained in the section of HTML coding and is not visible on your website. While not as important as they used to be with respect to page ranking, it is still important that Meta tags are included within your HTML code. Search engines still use this information to help index your site correctly. When you enter keywords into a search engine the search results include a title and a description of the website. The Meta description tag is what some search engines will display in the search engine results pages – so the description should be carefully written to ensure that it adequately describes your site.

Outbound Links: Links from your website to other websites.

Reciprocal Links: Exchange of links between websites.

Search Engine Results Page (SERP): The pages that result from a search engine query run by a user. You can run a search using certain keywords to assess where your web pages are ranking.

Spamdexing: The use of manipulative techniques (e.g. repeating unrelated phrases, keyword stuffing, link farms) designed to increase the page rank of a website. Many search engines check for instances of spamdexing and will remove these pages from their indexes. Search engine organizations may block an entire website if it has used spamdexing. Keyword stuffing occurs when a web page is loaded with keywords in the Meta tags or in content. A link farm is also a form of spamdexing. A link farm is a Web page that is nothing more than a page of links to other sites. You should be wary of service providers who promise to help you boost your link popularity by automatically entering you into link exchange programs linking your page with websites that have nothing to do with your content (link farming).

Submission: The process of submitting a website to search engines so they are aware of the website and can crawl it. Website submission can be fairly simple. Even without submission, if you use sound SEO practices, a search engine will eventually find your site and index it.

Acknowledgement