

One of the major ways that people find information on the internet is by using a search engine. By understanding how they work, you can raise the profile of your website and so attract more visitors.

CONTENTS

WHAT IS SEARCH ENGINE POSITIONING?

THE BENEFITS

HOW DO SEARCH ENGINES WORK?

OPTIONS

CHOOSING KEYWORDS

IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST

FURTHER HELP AND ADVICE

WHAT IS SEARCH ENGINE POSITIONING?

Simply put, the internet is vast: there are billions of web pages, with millions of new ones added every day. Unless your business is an established global brand, you will face enormous competition trying to attract people to your site. Research has shown that only 10% of web users will look past the second page of results on a search engine. This means that if your website isn't rated as one of the twenty best matches for someone's search, you stand little chance of picking up passing trade. In fact, for search engines to deliver a significant amount of visitors to your site, you really need to be one of the top five matches.

While this can sound daunting, there are lots of things you can do very cheaply to improve your rating on the major search engines. Read on to find out more about how search engines work; how you can boost your positioning; and whether you should consider using an agency to help you.

THE BENEFITS

Think of search engines like a business directory. If you don't tell the publisher what category to

put your business in, then you're just one name amongst many hoping for customers to stumble on you at random.

If you do take steps to position your website for search engines, then your customers will be able to find you in all kinds of ways by what you do, where you are, how you work etc. The most obvious benefit of search engine positioning is straightforward: more visitors to your website. And that means more people will be exposed to your goods or services, which could boost your sales.

Because many aspects of search engine positioning take time rather than money, and don't require expert help, it is also one of the most cost-effective ways of acquiring new customers.

Finally, because some search engines work by rating sites according to the number of visitors and links, improving your search engine positioning can create an upward spiral. Boosting your positioning attracts more visitors and links, which further boosts your positioning, which in turn attracts more visitors and so on.

HOW DO SEARCH ENGINES WORK?

Not all search engines work in the same way, which means you need to tailor your approach according to which search engine you want to position yourself on.

Even if you intend to hire an agency to do your search engine positioning for you, it's worth reading up on the mechanics of search engines because it will help you decide what service you need and which agency to go for.

There are two kinds of search engines:

- directories
- web crawlers.

DIRECTORIES

Directories are staffed by human editors who consider every new website submitted and, if they decide it is acceptable, assign it to the appropriate category or subsection. Examples of directories include Yahoo! and Open Directory. Some website owners try to cheat computerised search engines by claiming their site is relevant to lots of popular subject when it isn't some, for example, try to attract passing traffic by claiming to sell cheap CDs or electronics. This is much less likely to happen with directories because entries are reviewed by hand. The result is that, if you get your site included in a directory, it will be competing against fewer entries and users will regard the results as more authoritative and reliable.

WEB CRAWLERS

Web crawlers are automated systems that catalogue websites by sending out special programs to check web pages and absorb information from each web page like words or phrases which can be used to generate search results. These programs, which are known as 'spiders', 'crawlers' or 'bots', can check up to 100 web pages per second. Although this might seem quick, the sheer size of the web can mean that it could take up to two months from a page being 'spidered' (visited by a crawler program) before it appears in search engine results.

Examples of web crawler search engines include Ask Jeeves, Google, Lycos and AltaVista. How do web crawlers assess your site?

KEY WORDS

When web crawlers visit websites, they look for key words or phrases that help them create entries for search engine indexes. Spiders from the various search engines have slightly different collection criteria some ignore common terms like 'a', 'and', and 'the'. Most have a finite number of keywords they take from any website. And all look for key words and phrases in different ways. To get a high placement on a search engine, it's critical to understand what make good key words and where to put them on your website.

ARCHITECTURE

The way your site is built (its 'architecture') can help or hinder web crawlers. This is because crawlers follow hyperlinks and categorise what they find. If your website uses frames (the pages split into several separate areas the can be scrolled independently) or if the pages are generated by databases, it can confuse web crawlers and result in your site being excluded from their search.

LINK ANALYSIS

As well as key words, some programs, like Google, rank sites according to the number of sites that link to them and the quality of these links. If a site that links to you has a hundred other sites linking to it, this will give you a higher rating than if the site had only 10 sites linking to it. In this way, web crawlers try to establish the popularity and relevance of websites.

You can boost your search engine placement by approaching other websites and suggesting you link to each other. Good sites to link to are industry bodies and discussion sites that your customers might visit.

RANKING ALGORITHMS

Most web crawlers use a mix of the above criteria for assessing pages. Where they differ is how they weigh and balance this information to rank pages. This is done by complex mathematical formulas called ranking algorithms. After their brand names, these pieces of software are the search engines' most valuable assets and, as such, they are closely-guarded secrets.

OPTIONS

When should you use search engine positioning? The more you've invested in your website, the more it's worth investing in search engine positioning. For single page or homepage websites that simply establish a presence on the internet and provide contact details, there's little point in trying to drive more traffic to them. However, sites that promote products and services, and e-commerce websites that allow customers to browse, order and pay for goods online, should consider employing search engine positioning to improve their visibility, popularity, and profitability.

You also need to consider your audience and the purpose of your site. If your website aims to serve existing customers or grow through word of mouth, then perhaps your search engine positioning won't be a priority.

However, if you are trying to acquire customers, you work in a price-sensitive market or you offer a niche product or service, then you might want to try and use search engines to entice visitors.

Paying extra

Over 90% of all referrals to e-commerce sites come from the four largest search engines: Google, Yahoo!, MSN and AOL. Because search engines have considerable brand loyalty from

their users, they have developed a range of premium services that can bump your site up in the rankings for a fee.

Pay for inclusion

Although most web pages are eventually assessed and included automatically by web crawlers, the size of the web can cause a delay. Generally, crawler search engines will let you bypass this by submitting your URL to them. In addition, most also offer the option of paying to speed up the process still further. Looksmart, for instance, charges about £150 for submission of new sites.

Directories also let you jump the queue. Yahoo!, for example, offer an express service which costs £199 a year.

Pay per click

Most search engines will let you buy a position in the search listings. The highest bidder for a particular keyword or phrase appears first, with the second highest appearing second, and so on. You can often specify how much you are willing to pay per click anywhere from about 15p to 35p per click. How much you pay, and how many click-throughs you receive, determines your position in the search engine's ranking. Google also offer a flatfee based option with a minimum spend of between £5,000-£10,000 a year.

In-house or agency?

The amount of time and money you have invested in your website will be your best guide. If you hope that your website is going to generate significant commercial returns, it may well be worth spending the extra money to engage the services of a professional search engine placement agency. If you are a small company with a limited budget, and your

website is just one of several channels to market, you may be better off with a "toe in the water" DIY approach. If things go well you can always revisit your search engine placement strategy at a later date.

If you do decide to go for an agency, ask for:

- proof of its success with previous clients it should be able to show you high listings in popular search engines it has achieved
- the cost-per-click of the extra traffic it can generate
- an analysis of your current website's suitability for search engines, including suggestions for improvements and for how results can be tracked after changes have been made.

Choosing key words

If you decide to tackle search engine positioning yourself, the most important task is to choose the right key words for your website. Search engines will look at the title and content of your web pages, as well your domain name and the metadata attached to your web pages. This means that once you have chosen your key words, you'll need to change the page names, metadata and page content to include them, preferably near the beginning of each page.

What is metadata?

Metadata is used to describe or define the content of your website. You can see the metadata of a web page by selecting 'View' and then 'Page Source' or 'Source'. A screen containing the page's HTML code will appear. You'll see the page title first and then you can check the metadata for the page between the <HEAD> and </HEAD> tags. First you'll see the META NAME 'keywords' tag, which is usually a list of keywords many search engines place particular weight on this data.

Next, look at the META NAME 'description' tag again, this should contain keywords, but this time in a sentence that clearly conveys the content of the page. Many search engines display this description in their results pages, so it should be an accurate and stimulating one.

What makes a good key word or phrase?

Most web users have discovered that the more specific they make their search terms, the more likely they are to find what they are looking for. By creating a list of key words and phrases associated with your business and what it offers, you can increase your chance of reaching your target audience.

Start by looking at the sites you admire most on the Web, and visiting your competitors' websites. Try to work out what key words and phrases would list these sites through a search engine.

Generate a list of key words or phrases for your site. Take into consideration that:

- vague key words, such as rare, cheap, recent, will not generate much traffic
- obscure key words, such as technical product jargon, will not generate much traffic
- good key words need to be specific enough to generate the targeted traffic you want, but general enough for users to actually search on, eg language schools, car spares.

Bearing those points in mind, start generating your own key words by listing any products or services that your site will be selling. If you are not actually selling anything then just list the reasons people might have for visiting your site. Once you have your basic list, add to it by generating synonyms and misspellings for your key words, along with plurals for any nouns, and different tenses for any verbs.

Maintaining your position

Once your listing is established, keep trying to maintain your website rankings, and improve them. Keep your pages fresh so that visitors find something new each time they visit, and constantly try to establish more links to high profile sites.

Track how you are doing with the search engines, to see where traffic to your website is originating, and which traffic sources prove the most rewarding. If you have outsourced the process to an agency it should provide traffic statistic. Alternatively, you can find websites that will provide the monitoring and reports you need.

Better search engine positioning can lead to dramatic increases in business, so be ready to cope with higher demand. There's no point attracting additional customers, only to frustrate them with poor service. You can find a host of useful tools, including web metrics (monitoring and measuring devices that will tell you the volume of traffic your site is attracting, and where it is coming from) for free at <http://http://www.extreme-dm.com/tracking/>

Other ways of marketing your website

Search engines aren't the only source of traffic for your website. Most websites get more than half of their visitors through:

- direct navigation where people already know the web address
- web referrals from site links and banner adverts.

Direct navigation

As well as being one of the best way of generating web traffic, it is also the cheapest to implement simply make sure you include your web address on all printed material: business cards; letters; flyers; newsletters; posters etc. If

you have chosen a simple URL, it will be easier for people to remember it from any adverts that you run or personal recommendations.

If you operate exclusively in the UK, choose a .co.uk address. If you trade abroad, you might want to consider a .com address as well. To make it easy for someone to find your website, avoid hyphens or other punctuation in your web address.

Web referrals

There are number of ways you can generate these:

- Include your web address as a standard part of all e-mail footers.
- E-mail marketing targeted electronic newsletters and offers to customers can be very effective. If the offer is interesting, it is also very easy for people to pass the e-mail on to colleagues.
- Online advertising the use of banner and pop-up adverts on other websites to drive people to yours is a contentious issue. Response rates tend to be very low, but, the amount of money spent on them continues to increase. If you are considering paying for online advertising, it's essential to have a clear idea of your objectives and to take advice from an agency on the best way to reach your audience.
- Reciprocal marketing this involves finding sites with complementary content and agreeing to have links or banners to each other's sites, such as your trade association.

IMPLEMENTATION CHECKLIST

Research & analyse

Set objectives

- Set goals for search engine positioning for example, do you want to acquire more customers or promote your business abroad?

- Agree specific, measurable objectives for what you want to achieve, such as a higher ranking for certain key words, an increase in page views or visits from overseas web users.

Cost benefit analysis

Compare the costs of search engine placement like research time, recoding pages or paying an agency with the benefits, like increased sales and a more effective web presence.

Consult

Professional advice

If you lack the skills in-house, contact a Business Link adviser (or equivalent if you are in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland), in the first instance, for help on how best to:

- outline your requirements
- establish how much you can afford to pay
- scope the project
- advise on implementation
- provide training and software support.

Plan & test

Evaluate options

- Decide which search engine you want to boost your rankings on and check how it compile its results.
- Compare the costs of doing the work in-house with hiring an agency.
- Check out the tactics of your competitors see how they rate on search engines and which key words they use.
- Consider whether you would benefit from paying a fee to speed up your listing on a search engine.
- Consider whether you would be better trying to drive web traffic using direct inputting and web referrals.

Plan the rollout phase

- If you're doing the work in-house plan how long

it will take and when you aim to see results.

- If you're employing an agency, interview several and agree firm performance targets and deadlines.
- Ensure you have a sufficiently robust infrastructure to deal with any increase in site traffic and any consequent orders or enquiries.

Act

Implement search engine positioning

- Collate your key words, recode your site and resubmit it to your chosen search engine(s).
- Set up reciprocal links with other websites.
- Change you procedures so that drawing up key words is an integral part of the creation of new pages.
- Assign someone to monitor progress on an ongoing basis.

Evaluate

- Monitor and review the impact on your business and against your objectives.
- Review your positioning regularly and make changes to your key words as necessary.
- Get feedback from staff, customers and suppliers on the changes especially new visitors who found you through a search engine.
- Evaluate the impact after 6 months and 1 year. Have you achieved your objectives? Establish how you could improve things further.

FURTHER HELP AND ADVICE

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com> good overview of current and future trends in search engine technology plus plenty of practical 'how-to' advice.

<http://www.searchenginehelp.com> how to get the most from search engines.

<http://www.searchengineforums.com> discussion of

search engine issues.

<http://www.submitit.co.uk> provides simple low cost placement solutions.

<http://www.spannerworks.co.uk> provides a consultancy approach.

<http://www.extreme-dm.com/tracking/> free tracking statistics for your website.

<http://www.submitcorner.com> guides and tools to help search engine ranking.

<http://www.webposition.com> help and software for improved search engine results.

UK search engines and directories

<http://www.yahoo.co.uk>

<http://www.google.co.uk>

<http://www.looksmart.co.uk>

<http://www.lycos.co.uk>

Global search engines

<http://www.excite.com>

<http://www.about.com>

GENERAL BUSINESS ADVICE

For more information on achieving best practice in your business: Contact your local Business Link advisor by visiting the website at <http://www.businesslink.gov.uk> or calling 0845 600 9 006.

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