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SUMMARY REPORT
Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Introduction

Senior Consulting, LLC has a dual focus in its business purposes, providing business plan consulting and preparation as well as health care consulting, and it has two Web sites, one for each focus. www.thebusinessplanconsultants.com is the newer of the two Web sites and was launched in December 2007 with the intent of dramatically improving and upgrading the Web site in the near future to maximize traffic and views to the site. Many of Senior Consulting, LLC's clients depend on a Web site for their "brick and mortar" business, even more so for a number of clients that have Web-based businesses. Being able to be found in searches is critically important to many of these businesses.

Senior Consulting, LLC strongly recommends independent and experienced SEO consulting firms be retained by its clients when Web traffic is an important marketing component of the business plan. Based on our respect for SEO work, we endeavored to complete this Summary Report which is condensed from a much more detailed report and research that included an assessment of what we believe to be the Top 10 SEO consulting firms in the United States. The subjective parameters utilized to create our Top 10 SEO firms were: quality and depth of information on the SEO firm's Web site, the facts related to SEO emphasized on their Web site, utilization of White Hat techniques, data regarding the range of fees they charge their clients, inclusion in the Internet Marketing, Rankings at www.topseos.com and the SEO Company Directory of Seomoz.org, a leading SEO consulting firm.

SEO is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a Web site from search engines via "natural" ("organic" or "algorithmic") search results for targeted keywords. The earlier a site is found in the search results or the higher it "ranks", the more searchers will visit that site. SEO can also target different kinds of searches, including image search, local search, and industry-specific vertical search engines.

Webmasters and Search Engines

Some search engines have also reached out to the SEO industry, and are frequent sponsors and guests at SEO conferences and seminars. In fact, with the advent of paid inclusion, some search engines now have a vested interest in the health of the optimization community. Major search engines provide information and guidelines to help with site optimization. Google has a Sitemaps program to help Webmasters learn if Google is having any problems indexing their Web site and also provides data on Google traffic to the Web site. Yahoo! Site Explorer provides a way for Webmasters to submit URLs, determine how many pages are in the Yahoo! index and view link information.

Getting Indexed

The leading search engines, Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft, use crawlers to find pages for their algorithmic search results. Pages that are linked from other search engine indexed pages do not need to be submitted because they are found automatically. An algorithm is a procedure for solving a mathematical problem in a finite number of steps that frequently involves repetition of an operation or a step-by-step procedure for solving a problem or accomplishing some end especially by a computer. Search engine crawlers may look at a number of different factors when crawling a site. Not every page is indexed by the search engines. Distance of pages from the root directory of a site may also be a factor in whether or not pages get crawled.

Another method of ensuring that a link to a company's Web site appears on the first page of results when using a search engine is Pay Per Click (PPC). PPC is based on the company paying a fee every time someone clicks on its Web site link. The more money paid for each click, the higher up the link will appear on the results page.

White Hat Versus Black Hat

SEO techniques are classified by some into two broad categories: techniques that search engines recommend as part of good design and those techniques that search engines do not approve of and attempt to minimize the effect of, referred to as spamdexing. Some industry commentators classify these methods, and the practitioners who employ them, as either white hat SEO, or black hat SEO. White hats tend to produce results that last a long time, whereas black hats anticipate that their sites may eventually be banned either temporarily or permanently once the search engines discover what they are doing.

An SEO technique is considered white hat if it conforms to the search engines' guidelines and involves no deception. As the search engine guidelines are not written as a series of rules or commandments, this is an important distinction to note. White hat SEO is not just about following guidelines, but is about ensuring that the content a search engine indexes and subsequently ranks is the same content a user will see.

White hat advice is generally summed up as creating content for users, not for search engines, and then making that content easily accessible to the spiders, rather than attempting to trick the algorithm from its intended purpose. A spider is an automated

Web browser used by search engines to access Web sites and work through all the pages, indexing the content and following links. White hat SEO is in many ways similar to Web development that promotes accessibility, although the two are not identical.

Black hat SEO attempts to improve rankings in ways that are disapproved of by the search engines, or involve deception. One black hat technique uses text that is hidden, either as text colored similar to the background or positioned off screen. Another method gives a different page depending on whether the page is being requested by a human visitor or a search engine, a technique known as cloaking.

Search engines may penalize sites they discover using black hat methods, either by reducing their rankings or eliminating their listings from their databases altogether. Such penalties can be applied either automatically by the search engines' algorithms, or by a manual site review.

Black Hat SEO

Taking advantage of the weaknesses in some algorithms used by search engines, some people developed unethical techniques (known as Black Hat SEO or Spamdexing) for increasing the Web site rankings:

- Hidden text – usually text that has the same color as the Web site's background therefore only visible to spiders
- Keyword stuffing – adding long lists of keywords on the page, hoping to attract more search engines
- URL stuffing – adding too many keywords in the URLs
- Generated sites – also called scraping, this technique allows Webmasters to quickly create hundreds of Web sites in just a few minutes; since content is gathered from different sources by robots, most of the phrases don't even make sense to a human
- Link spam – probably the most popular Black Hat SEO technique involves linking to Web sites with help from robots in the most unexpected places.
- Sneaky redirects – the users is rapidly redirected from the landing page (usually build with scraped content) to the “real” page.
- Cloaking – creating two different Web pages, one for humans to see and another one for robots.

Most of the Spamdexing tools are sold on the “black market”, but some are available as free, open source software. Search Engines are constantly fighting against these kinds of unethical practices.

White Hat SEO

All the search engines such as Google, Yahoo! & Live (MSN) reward & value the following:

- Short loading times
- Frequent updates
- Sites that contain contact information
- Unique content
- Pages primarily designed for humans, not spiders
- Sites that link to additional sources of information
- Sites that provide secure connections, especially in the case of e-commerce sites

SEO Consulting As A Marketing Strategy

More search engine referrals does not guarantee more sales. SEO is not necessarily an appropriate strategy for every Web site, and other Internet marketing strategies can be much more effective, depending on the site operator's goals. A successful Internet marketing campaign may drive organic search results to pages, but it also may involve the use of paid advertising on search engines and other pages, building high quality Web pages to engage and persuade, addressing technical issues that may keep search engines from crawling and indexing those sites, setting up analytics programs to enable site owners to measure their successes, and improving a site's conversion rate.

SEO may generate a return on investment. However, search engines are not paid for organic search traffic, their algorithms change, and there are no guarantees of continued referrals. Due to this lack of guarantees and certainty, a business that relies heavily on search engine traffic can suffer major losses if the search engines stop sending visitors. It is considered wise business practice for Web site operators to liberate themselves from dependence on search engine traffic. A top ranked SEO blog Seomoz.org has reported, "Search marketers, in a twist of irony, receive a very small share of their traffic from search engines." Instead, their main sources of traffic are links from other Web sites.

KentCampbell.com states that the Benefits of SEO are numerous. Most people know that being first in search results is important, in fact recent studies show that the first position in a Google search garners a whopping 42% of clicks, whereas the bottom position on the first page earns slightly less than 3% of clicks.

Other studies show that 62% of people click on a search result from the first page. 28% of people click on a result from the second page of search results, yet most experts believe 10% or less is more appropriate. The important thing to remember is that the benefits of SEO come to those on the first page; and not only the first page but the top five positions on the first page. The numbers are all over the place depending on the study. www.KentCampbell.com advises its clients have seen 1800% increases in sales between pages three and one.

Higher Search Engine Rank

MarketingTitan.com states that a client's knowledge of Internet marketing will evolve the longer it works at it. At first, pay-per-click search engines will seem to be a boon. For some sites, this is the end solution. This occurs when the client has a high enough profit

margin on its product or services to make the return on investment worthwhile. For most sites, however, SEO and high search engine rankings are the key.

With search engine rankings, the key is to get in the top 10 of the rankings. Doing so puts the client on the first page of results, where most people will look. If the client is on the second page of results, say in position 12, it has greatly diminished value. While some experts believe it has virtually no value, other believe and have provided some supporting evidence that business people will go into the second 10 or beyond up to 10% of the time. For companies seeking results for common terms or phrases, the second 10 therefore will have defined value.

Getting a higher search engine rank for the pages of a site takes hard work and persistence. A company must tailor the pages of its site to be search engine friendly. This is done by focusing on a specific keyword on each page. The keywords should come from keyword research. Each page should have the keyword as the title and then at least 250 words of text incorporating the keyword in a natural manner. After the company builds pages, it needs to increase the relative ranking of its site by getting other sites to link to its site. This is done by either trading links with other sites or publishing articles with links in the byline to the company's site.

Improve Search Engine Ranks

MarketingTitan.com states that search engine rankings are a bit misunderstood. Use a keyword analysis tool like Word Tracker to identify the exact phrases being used by the company's prospects. Once the correct phrases are ascertained, incorporate them into the meta tags and text on your pages. The business name should never be in the meta tags. Once the keyword phrases are identified, use only one on each page.

In concert with the title, it is important to make sure to include the keyword phrase at least once in the first paragraph. The first 100 words of the page are critical in getting rankings. The keyword phrase should be in the title and at least once in the opening paragraph.

How to Get In Google

MarketingTitan.com states that millions upon millions of dollars have been made by sites getting ranked highly in Google. Of course, these sites are optimized to get to rankings. While optimization is critical, it is also vital to get all the pages of the site indexed in Google.

The good news is it is fairly easy to get in Google. There are a couple of different ways, but the company needs to do one thing before worrying about getting indexed.

Site maps are rarely clicked on by most visitors to a site, but they are critical nonetheless. A site map is not vital because it helps a visitor get around the site. It is vital because it helps the search engine indexing robots find all the pages on the site. In this case, a site

map for your site will ensure the “Googlebot” finds all the pages. Google actually has an xml site maps tool, but some SEO consultants prefer to actually make sitemaps since they want Yahoo and MSN to index the site as well.

Once the Web site has a site map, the easiest way to get into Google is to create a free blog. Go to Blogger.com and open a free account. Once the account is open, create the first blog entry. Type anything you want, but make sure to include a link to the home page and the site map in the entry. Hit the enter button and the Web site is on the way into Google.

A second way to get in Google is to write an article. Create one on a subject relevant to the site. Make it about 400 words long or about a page in length. Open an account with an article directory like articlecube.com.

Selecting An SEO Consulting Firm

Yesupseo.com discussed the main optimization tactics and how they affect pricing. More complex Web sites and greater provider overhead costs will influence your final SEO bill. Your company's SEO budget will probably have to take into account the following services: initial evaluation, keyword/search term research, site/page optimization, basic directory submissions, link campaign(s), site progress reports, and search engine news public relations (i.e. press releases).

In the world of SEO, there are several optimization factors which influence pricing:

1. How hard your site will be to optimize.
2. How many terms you want optimized.
3. How many pages you want optimized.
4. What overhead expenses, such as sales reps, your optimization firm will apply against your account besides the cost of the actual technicians involved.

In general, for professional optimization from an experienced SEO firm, you should count on spending anywhere from just under \$10,000 per year to \$50,000 per month, the latter being a large, complex site or a client with multiple sites. There are probably not more than 10 companies worldwide paying the latter fee, or \$600,000 annually, for SEO consulting according to Alchemist Media, Inc. at www.alchemistmedia.com.

Businesses with a local focus or those that have a limited market may be able to find a smaller SEO consultant. For small sites or sites that change infrequently it is a much more affordable option.

There are seven important factors to be considered for an SEO consulting firm including the following:

1. Initial evaluation
2. Keyword/search term research

3. Site/page optimization
4. Basic directory submissions
5. Link campaign
6. Reporting
7. Search Engine News PR

For larger businesses and ventures that have the potential for a large market share for a particular region, nationally or internationally, the rule of thumb would be to spend proportionately on SEO consulting relevant to the expected revenue that would be forecasted from marketing efforts related to the company's Web site. SEO consulting costs for mid-sized companies that have the potential for a substantial national presence and market share for their products and services that can generate seven-figure revenues would be no less than \$40-50,000 over a 4-6 month time frame in addition to \$2,500-4,000/month thereafter, depending on the phrases or keywords that need to be a focus to drive Web traffic and, therefore, sales.

Conclusion

SEO consulting is a valuable commodity, with successful firms that have established track records in high demand. Like any costly or important component of a business, understanding an SEO consultant's track record, obtaining references and its defined services are suggested. Unlike some engagements, those goals and objectives should be defined, yet there can be no assurance of being Googled in the Top 5 or 10, let alone the Top 1 or 2. There are many factors including key words, such as those on our Web sites "planned growth" or "business plan", which affect the ability to be searched and found by many search engines, with Google in the lead. Phrases that may be critical to driving your Web site, for example "business plan" for us as consultants/authors of all components of a business plan, may also be important to other business such as companies that provide software or templates as in our case.

Expectations need to be realistic and clearly defined. Just as in finding other consultants, a cost benefit analysis based on being educated about as many facts as possible is important for executives or other professionals. That said, we strongly suggest all businesses that believe Web traffic is a major component of their success assess the benefits of SEO consulting and a Web site of substance for as many consumers as possible to find and buy their products and/or services.