

# Search Engine Optimization

*Want to buy a bridge? How about vacation land in Florida? Do you need your website optimized?*

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*by Randy Gunter*

Everyone wants their website to be one of the top listed results when people “Google” a phrase. There are workshops and seminars where you can spend thousands of dollars to learn about Search Engine Optimization (SEO). There are groups out there that will guarantee top placement on search engines if you hire them. Others will submit your web information for you to hundreds of different search engines. So what is the story on SEO and are any of these worth the money for your company?

First of all, let’s make sure everyone understands what SEO is exactly. Search Engine Optimization is anything you do to create or add features to your website to get higher rankings on search engines. And of course, search engines are the websites where you look up information online to find other websites that have the information that you are looking for. The most commonly used search engines are Google and Yahoo.

Along with the website where searches are carried out, the phrase *search engine* can also refer to the actual company (Google or Yahoo for instance), or the computer program that does the searches. For this article, we are lumping these three areas all together, we don’t feel that we need to distinguish between the different components for our illustrations.

## **How do search engines work?**

Let’s first talk a little bit about how search engines work. A common phrase used when talking about search engines is “algorithms”. For some of us, we remember algorithms from math classes from high school. (Not that we necessarily understood them, but we remember them.) An algorithm by definition is a set of rules or a process that govern calculations or other problem-solving operations. Why is this important? Because search engines use algorithms to get information about your website.

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*“Search engines use algorithms to get information about your website... they send what is known as a ‘spider’ or ‘bot’ ”*

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Some people assume that when they submit their website to a search engine for review that someone, somewhere is going to sit on a computer to review their website and decide how it should be placed within their lists. But, if you think about the millions of websites that are out there, you begin to realize that this is an impossibility.

So the search engines have developed programs to review your site. We refer to this operation as their algorithm. They develop proprietary algorithms and, like the Coca-

Cola recipe, these programs are highly guarded secrets. They don’t tell anyone how they work for obvious reasons... first of all they spend a lot of money developing and refining their programs. No sense giving that away to their competitors. The second reason this information is held close to the vest is that it helps keep people from “gaming the system”. (More on that later.)

So if someone is not personally reviewing the site, how does the search engines get information? They send what is known as a “spider” or “bot” (robot). A spider is a program that runs to visit your website and collect information. It doesn’t view your website like people do, it actually looks at the source code. (If you ever want to look at code on a website, you can look under the “view” heading on your browser and drop down to “source”.) It takes this information back to its home where the algorithms go to work, in essence cataloging your website and deciding what is relevant.

Relevance is a key word in search engine optimization. The more relevant your site is to search parameters, the higher up on the list it will go. And this is probably the number one thing that you can do to get better placement for your website. In fact, when you are designing your site you should put together a list of key words that people will likely search, then use these words in your copy.

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Taking the copy a step further, don't just think about key words, but think about key phrases. If someone types in "Chevy Corvette" in their search, you will get better placement if you have the words "Chevy" and "Corvette" next to each other, rather than "Chevy" on one page and "Corvette" on another. In addition, repetition is good within a website. Use those key phrases in different areas.

### **Metatags: Do they work?**

So what about metatags? Metatags are words and phrases placed within the code that aren't necessarily included in the copy on the site. (You don't see these at all when you look at the site.) At one point in time, these metatags were picked up by the search engines and used as part of the list placement. However, this created a lot of issues where people were using metatags to move their placement up on the search engines, regardless if their site was actually relevant to the phrases.

The bottom line is that very few search engines use metatags for placement in today's world.

"Gaming the system" is a phrase that pretty much can translate to "cheating". When someone creates a website that tries to fool the search engine algorithms, it is gaming the system. Although there still is some of that going on, the search engines are a lot more sophisticated than they used to be. It is tougher to pull a fast one on the search engines, and if you try, it can have adverse effects.

BMW's German page was removed from Google's search results after allegedly writing content that didn't fit Google's search protocols. They said "sorry" and Google eventually let them back into their system.

### **Paying for rankings**

So how about these companies that claim that they are going to put in the metatags that are going to help you get higher rankings? There are certainly some "do's" and "don'ts" in the metatag world, but I would be wary of anyone claiming that their metatag usage is going to make

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your site jump to the top of the results list.

As mentioned earlier, there are some companies that claim that they will add your name to hundreds (if not thousands) of search engines. Our advice is to pick the top three\* to five search engines and do it yourself. It certainly doesn't hurt to submit your site to more search engines, but we would be surprised if you get much value out of it.

If your site is new, or recently revamped, do submit your information to the main search engines. But, to be quite honest, if you have any kind of presence already, the spiders will find your site without a new submission.

And what about companies that guarantee your placement on the first page? Read the fine print. If you put enough descriptors in the search, eventually they'll get you on the first page. But how many times are people going to search for your company name, including the company's president's name, the town he grew up in, and his favorite drink?

### **So what are some of the other real tips to move up in the rankings?**

We already talked about relevance as probably the primary key to get results on your search engine marketing. Another factor that most search engines take into consideration is tied into relevance, that is, how relevant is your site to the rest of the online community? In other words, are you a player?

The only way the search engines can make this decision (remember, its all algorithms, not people making decisions) is to look at how many people are actually looking at your site, or referring people to your site. That can be sort of a catch-22, how can you get people to refer to your site if they aren't finding it in the first place?

The answer is to find other ways, besides search engines, to get people to hook up to your site. This can be done with referrals, getting people to link to your site from their site. One of the best ways to do this is to generate publicity through online press releases. We like our clients to get online news stories with links to their sites. Of course national

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press is great, but most local news sources also have their websites with local information.

The common exchanging of links is also a way to get referring sites to find your site. Some are done more tactfully than others, as a marketing company we advise using good judgment on these types of referrals. It is more important to maintain brand equity than to get a few extra links to your site. But if you can get other sites, especially popular sites, to put a link to your site, it also helps get your search engine ranking up higher.

People on blogs also can link to your site. There are big companies that pay individuals to get their names and links on blogs, although there are some "gaming the system" issues with this, and if it's not done correctly, it can create a backlash.

A problem with referrals could arise if your site is linked from what is referred to as "link farms". You've probably seen them when you typed in a wrong domain address, these are pages with no real content and simply links to other sites.

### **Paying for placement**

So can you pay to get placement? Yes, and you should look into it. There are two ways to pay to get your site viewed. One is to pay for advertising, typically banner ads, on other sites that link to your website. The strategies and purchasing of online advertising is still evolving, but it is getting more established and the pay per

click model is still a major way to purchase online advertising.

The other way to pay for getting your site viewed is simply to participate in the search engine's paid results. This is a lot simpler, and may be cheaper, than most people realize. These are the "sponsor results" listed on the side of the search engine results. You "bid" on key words that you want to own. When someone types in those key words, you are placed in relationship to how much you bid. For instance, you can "bid" 25¢ for key words. If no one bids more than 25¢, you get the top placement. Let's say if someone bids 30¢, they move ahead of you on the ranking. If someone is at 10¢, they are below you.

The price is per click. Just because your listing comes up on the page doesn't mean that you are going to pay that amount. What it does mean is that *if someone clicks on it* and is directed to your website, you then pay.

The other part of the equation is that you decide a limit per month on how much you are willing to pay. For instance, you can decide that you never want to pay more than \$50 a month. Once you hit that amount, your listing is taken down until the next month.

The downside to this scenario is that there is some worries about your competitors clicking on your link to raise your monthly bill. There are some safety measures in place to keep this from getting out of hand, but a little of that might occur.

Search engine optimization is clearly an important tool to use to get your website ranked higher on the searches. But be wary of companies that have their secret ways to improve your rankings, it's probably more snake oil than actual legitimate processes. And last, but not least, remember to be relevant. Not a bad suggestion regardless of whether you are trying to get better search results or looking for a new business philosophy in general.

*\* Not sure who the top 3 search engines are? In order, Google, Yahoo, and MSN are the top search engines by total hours used.*

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