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Three important letters for your Web site: S-E-O

Let me tell you a dirty little secret of Internet marketing: some of the most beautiful, interactive, inspiring Web sites are completely invisible to search engines. Ugly, pretty, Google doesn't really care.



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What's the difference between a site that just sits there wasting money, and one that brings in new customers and makes the cash register sing? It's search engine optimization (SEO) — understanding and planning around the simple fact that search engines have different needs than people do.

SEO is the sculpting of a Web site's external references, structure and content to make sure it becomes a top result on Google searches. As much as SEO can be viewed as a formal campaign to rework a troubled site, it is also a foundational mentality of planning to make Web pages that are search-friendly from Day 1. Here are some of the basic components of SEO:

Research: The goal of SEO isn't to increase traffic, it's to increase sales and conversions. SEO uses a range of tools to analyze traffic, keyword competition and browsing behavior to make sure that they are targeting the most effective terms.

Design: For all of its advancements, Google is still a very basic machine that can't reliably read pictures or advanced programming such as JavaScript, AJAX and Flash. SEO seeks to make Web-site code that is completely readable by Google, as well as user design that funnels visitors toward a clear call to action and

compels them to return to the site in the future.

Authority: Ultimately, a good listing is a matter of earning trust from a search engine. Web sites earn trust the same way that people do: when they have something valuable to say, and when other people say good things about them. SEO addresses two things to help sites earn more trust:

- **Content.** Information is the currency of the Internet. If a site doesn't have content that is worth visiting, all of the SEO in the world won't help it. Sites that can provide real value will also see links and visitors increase, which also raises SEO standings.

- **Links.** Links to your site vouch for the quality of your content, making them one of the search engines' most important ranking factors. Building link quantity and quality is one of the most important, time-consuming parts of any SEO campaign.

Given enough time and the right know-how, any business can optimize its site. Some companies go so far as to hire dedicated SEO staff, or look for Web developers who also perform optimization. That said, SEO shouldn't be entered into lightly. Done incorrectly, SEO can damage a Web site, destroy its reputation or get it banned from searches entirely. Proper training is essential, and businesses should be careful never to hire an SEO firm that uses so-called "black hat" techniques.

Like the evil cattle rustlers in old westerns, "black hats" fight dirty, preying on innocent businesses. In SEO, black hats use spammy, deceptive and even illegal tactics to raise a site's search results:

- **Guaranteed No. 1:** Good SEO will make your traffic trend upward, but no reputable company will ever guarantee the top search position. Search results change on a moment-to-moment basis because of differences in geographic location, changes to Google's

programming (which, the company makes on a daily basis), user browsing history and more.

- "Priority submission," or special relationship with Google: There's no such thing.

- **Deception:** If it's meant to trick search engines, it's a good way to earn a permanent ban from the listings. Don't do anything to make a site rank for terms unrelated to the page content. Examples include stuffing a page with random keywords, making hidden content that only Google can see and "doorway" pages that automatically redirect to unrelated content.

- **Paid links, link spam, link exchanges:** Search engines want sites that link because of trust in your content, not because you paid for it or were reciprocating (advertising is OK, too, provided that the sponsorship is made clear). Link spamming is where the SEO posts links to your site in the open comment areas of blogs, newspaper sites or forums.

Just like any other contractor that a business uses, time spent by an external company should be carefully vetted to make the most of the investment. Know what your SEO consultant will do with your money, and head for the door if it uses any of these shady tactics.

In the end, in-house and consultant optimizations each should have the same effect. Combine a content-rich site with well-executed SEO campaign and you can propel a one-man shop to greater authority than a Fortune 500 company. A good SEO campaign will keep paying off for years to come — a wise investment indeed.

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