

# The Small Business Guide to Search Engine Optimization and What It Means for Your Website

**An AtlasWebs White Paper for Better Business Practices**

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# The Small Business Guide to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and What It Means for Your Website

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**More traffic to your business website will result in an increase to your bottom line.**

Because customers are crucial to the success of any business, drawing the right prospects to your website is essential.

A website ranked highly by the search engines results in more exposure to your business and products. Achieving this high ranking can be one of the most cost effective means of marketing your business can employ. Search engine generated leads result in the most Internet revenue and cost less than leads from other direct marketing technique.

Because search engines provide consistent, regular traffic to your site, developing an effective SEO strategy will give your company long-term consistent success more efficiently than other advertising strategies. An effective search engine marketing plan is probably the best advertising your company can invest in.

With a website that is well ranked under the appropriate terms for your business and products you ensure that every visitor that comes to your site is a warm lead actively looking for your offer.

## Organic Listing versus Sponsored Campaigns

Organic listing refers to the ordered website results for a key word or term input into a particular search engine. Traffic from organic listings tends to have high conversion rates (buying product) because the visitor has sought them out. This creates credibility and trust.

A sponsored link is a link to a website that appears alongside the organic listing, but as a designated sponsored site (i.e. it is clear that these are not search engine results, but advertising). Businesses have paid to have their websites listed there. They are paying by pay per click (PPC) or number of times the sponsored link is shown to the viewer. A benefit of sponsored advertising is that the return on investment (ROI) is easily and accurately reportable, where ROI for organic efforts is difficult to determine because it is not directly measurable.

Before purchasing any sponsored campaigns, be sure to have a long term (yet flexible) search engine strategy in place. It is well worth the time to plan what the expectations of the campaign are and how they will be measured. Using PPC campaigns is appropriate for immediate benefits, but a long term SEO strategy for organic listing will provide better branding benefits that will last longer and provide a better ROI. A good approach to search engine optimization may be to initially use PPC while waiting for organic SEO efforts to take effect. Because it takes time and perseverance to get well ranked in the organic listings, using the sponsored areas until your website is able to climb in the search engine makes sense as part of your SEO strategy.

Once you have good positioning in the organic search results, you will receive free traffic and can then consider decreasing your dependence on the sponsored campaigns. Decreasing PPC spending combined with increased sales revenue from better traffic conversion can make a huge impact on the business bottom line.

Traditional search performs very well at certain points in the buying process. When consumers are gathering information about a product or service, they show preference for organic listings over sponsored listings because organic listings are considered unbiased and non-commercial. Search engines work to put websites with the most relevant information for that key term at the

You can always buy your way to the first page with sponsored advertising. This will put you in a sponsored listing area along the side the organic listing for a dollar amount determined by the key words value (determined by how many bid to use that term). However, end users typically click on the organic listing first when looking for relevant information. For companies dependent on search engine leads as part of their lead generation efforts, optimization must be a priority and part of the overall online efforts.

By tracking results from a PPC campaign, you can track which messages perform the best, which search terms have the best conversion rates, and what destination URL is best for specific users to land on. Over time, this knowledge can help you to improve and refine your business strategy.

## **Where do I start?**

The first step to SEO is to have a clear and executable marketing strategy for your website that includes SEO as an objective. If your business model depends on your website to bring in new leads and customers, it is imperative that SEO is discussed early on in your website's design. It doesn't matter how much money you spend on your site or how attractive and informative it is, if it is not getting ranked, no one will see it.

Some points to consider when planning to implement search engine optimization:

- What are the key products and services?
- Who are the target buyers for your products/services?
- What is their search behavior?
- How do they purchase?
- What results do you want to achieve with your SEO program?
- Is your company scalable for increased volume of sales and/or communications?

## **How to Improve Your Organic Listing**

Not all businesses need to have their websites optimized for the worldwide web (web or WWW). It depends on an organization's business model and how you expect to communicate with your customer base. If your site is simply an online brochure that you personally direct and recommend clients to, then save yourself the expense and effort of implementing SEO.

However, if your business depends on being discovered via the web or by use of search engines, then SEO is important. And because 40 percent of online shoppers and researchers choose Google as their search engine, it pays to use Google as the standard when optimizing your site for search engines.

SEO employs techniques throughout your website to increase the rank search engines give. The best approach is to implement your strategy when building your site. Just as you can add plumbing and HVAC functions after a home is built, but at much greater expense and effort, you can optimize after the site is built, but it will be harder and more costly. If you want to implement SEO techniques to a developed site, it may still take considerable redesign to get the website well optimized for search engines.

Realize that paying for SEO now can more than pay for itself within the first year of good rankings. Being well ranked by the search engines can bring tremendous exposure to your website, and in concert with a well designed site, convert viewers to customers. Being ranked on page one of Google for your key term will give you more exposure and click-through to your website than any other source.

Search engine optimization is not about the way your site looks. Designing an award-winning website will guarantee high ranking. SEO is truly a science of its own, and can be taken anywhere from simply building your site in an optimized fashion, to hiring someone to maintain and optimize your site on a semi-regular basis, to having a full time staff that continually works to optimize your site and keep it well ranked.

If you plan to implement SEO at any level, you should have a clear strategy in place and discuss it with a certified search engine marketer. The success of your SEO efforts will be largely determined by the SEO techniques your web person uses, and by budget and staffing levels.

## How are Websites Ranked in the Search Engines?

Search engines use various algorithms to 'sniff' your site. Thousands of new sites are added to the WWW each week and you could wait years for a search engine to happen upon your website without some prompting. After a site has been built (ideally in an optimized fashion), it should then be submitted to the search engines to get the site's URL on the search engine's radar. It will still be in a queue after submission, but wait time will be significantly decreased.

The best way to start your site promotion is by manual submission to directories. Because the directory submission process is different for each particular directory, you must submit your web site manually. An automated submission program can not adequately submit to a specific directory because it isn't able to study the directory's structure and determine which category is best. Different search engines will have different requirements for submission, but have on hand a brief defining statement about your company's products and /or services to use for the submission process (these statements are typically character limited, so be prepared to pare down versions of this statement).

More surfers use Google than any other search engine, followed by Yahoo. Google's search algorithms are used by many other search engines to produce their results, such as Lycos, Netscape and AOL. To see an excellent illustration of the relationships search engines have to one another, visit <http://www.bruceclay.com/serc.htm>.

## What Do Search Engines Look For?

Search engine "spiders" crawl websites for the keywords that were entered in their search box, in order to direct potential buyers to relevant content. Search engines have automated engines that run through the code of a website. They focus heavily on particular html tags such as: keywords, title tags, and meta tags. They also look at the copy and links within a page and determine if the copy within the page is similar to the title and meta tags. Search engines also sniff the site's URL. A site that sells yarn would rank more favorable if the term "yarn" is in their URL (i.e. [www.boise-yarn-shop.com](http://www.boise-yarn-shop.com)). This would be reinforced with title tags, keywords and copy all having to do with yarn. Also, search engines are better able to define words in a URL and give them weight when they are divided by a hyphen. Boise-yarn-shop.com key words (Boise, yarn, shop) are more recognizable when hyphenated than boiseyarnshop.com listed as a single word with less distinguished meaning.

If customers know your URL without the hyphen, then try to purchase the domain with the hyphen or another descriptive hyphenated term for your business and have it point to your site. URL's are an inexpensive way to add more product/service credibility to your company in the eyes of search engines. Your business name may not have anything to do with your products or services (i.e. [www.cougarmtn.com](http://www.cougarmtn.com) sells point of sale and accounting software) however, having the URL [www.point-of-sale-accounting.com](http://www.point-of-sale-accounting.com) point to your site in addition to the Company name URL will increase your chance of being found by those searching by the terms point of sale and accounting.

## Keywords

As discussed earlier, a major objective of search engine optimization is to achieve higher search rankings for a large number of relevant keyword phrases. These are real phrases searched for by real people wanting to purchase real goods and services. Single word terms generally don't fit this description.

Keep in mind that with millions of websites on the WWW, competition for many terms is already very stiff. For example, it would be very difficult to rank well under the keyword "Real Estate", however, with a well designed site you could expect to rank well with a key term such as "large acre ranches in the north west".

## Copy, Copy, Copy

Do not build a site simply to get good search engines rankings. Build a quality site about your products and services using the techniques that the search engines would *want* to put at the front of the line because that site contains relevant information about that particular product or service. Search engines try to rank sites so that the sites an end user would want to find using those key terms comes up first. Compelling, unique content goes a long way toward helping your website be found in the search engines. Work within your niche to be an authority and build a reputation of excellence for your site.

Spend time understanding what keywords or key terms your customers are using and will use to find your business, products and/or services on the search engines. Use these terms to create keyword rich page copy, but do this in an ethical, informative way – always keeping the end user's experience in mind. Someone who has been lured with tricks to a page, is not likely to want to do business with you.

It is also important to have enough copy on a page; too much white space will lose viewers and lower your rank.

## What Not To Do

Do not resort to tricks to artificially boost rankings. Search engines eventually catch up with these scams and will readjust accordingly. Do not use link farms: they may work for a few months but sites depending on them are eventually weeded out and penalized with a lower ranking. Especially do not try to hide copy in website background.

Practice ethical SEO for a long term marketing strategy. There is simply no shortcut to ethical SEO. It requires patience and hard work and does not give immediate results. However, you will get lasting, real results. Unethical tricks such as keyword stuffing where a core paragraph is repeated throughout the site will only lose customers.

## Directory Architecture

In addition to the code and copy, the file structure of your website is important to search engines (again I default to Google here). A web page about gastric bypass (with appropriate title tags, copy, etc.) will have more weight if it is in a file folder within your website directory labeled gastric-bypass (again using the hyphen).

In addition to building a site that is ideal for search engines (appropriate directory structure, all title, tags and copy in agreement) there are additional steps needed to make it easily accessible to the search engines. You want your site to be as receptive as possible to being crawled by search engines. As mentioned before, many professional search engine marketers primarily gear their SEO strategies for Google. Google requests large sites (or sites very serious about optimization) to create a Google sitemap so that Google can better search and organize the sites information. Google provides instructions and examples of site maps at their site.

## **Incoming Links – Reciprocal Link Exchange**

Another facet of SEO is link exchange. In the 'eyes' of search engines, your website is deemed more reputable if other websites link to it. Generally, sites with more inbound links will be positioned higher, than similar sites with fewer incoming links. It is deemed even more reputable if the incoming links to your site are themselves quality websites of similar business or product type. A site that has "similarly themed" inbound links will rank better. For example, a site that sells accounting software will rank better with incoming links from other businesses associated with accounting and/or software. To be recognized by the search engines as a similarly themed site it is important to use the other arbitrary requirements in your website such as titles, descriptions, meta tag, alt properties, heading tags, etc. It is more important to have fewer incoming links from quality, relevant sites than more incoming links from unrelated sites or sites that employ link farming techniques.

To initiate a link exchange, a business must find companies of similar interest, contact them and ask if they wish to exchange a link for mutual benefit. Smaller businesses often do not see the value of SEO and therefore cannot justify the time to add this section to their sites. It is sometimes up to the initiator of the link exchange agreement to educate the potential link partner about the benefits of exchanging links. A professional search engine marketer will find a directory of related goods and services to contact for a link exchange agreement. The anchor text you use in your incoming link you provide to the link exchange partner should be written for maximum effectiveness. Google will search each of these sites and the more sites linking to you, with your title and what product/service you are promoting the better. Link anchor text is the wording that appears on a clickable link to another website. Anchor text is one of the most important components of the search algorithms and easily the most important off-site content consideration.

It may be worthwhile to have your designer work pursue high quality incoming links. It is possible to purchase incoming links in some situations. To use an extreme example, a link from a large site like any well known company (Quickbooks, IBM, Yahoo, Target, etc) will provide more than 5000 links from minor sources such as blogs, guest books, online diaries, etc.

Talk to your peers about exchanging links. Discuss it at networking opportunities. If they have a website and get any business through web searches, they should want to exchange a link with you. This is another benefit of good content - other websites will want to link to you if you have content that interests their users.

Managing link exchanges can be a time consuming, therefore expensive, process. Again, your SEO strategy should include a budget and a plan for link exchange.

## **Outsourcing Your Link Building**

Many 3<sup>rd</sup> party companies will manage the link exchange portion of your website for you. They contact the potential partner, build the pages that the links would reside on and monitor the other party's continuing link to your site. The cost-effectiveness of outsourcing link depends on your SEO strategy and the results you expect. It takes time to build a large repository of link exchanges and then follow through with ensuring that the company has and continues to place your link on an agreed upon page. Fees for such service can range from \$1000 – \$15,000 depending on guaranteed end results. Ask for examples of customer success stories before committing to a particular service provider.

In some instances it may be more cost effective to hire a professional search engine optimization specialist and in others, hire a third party company that specializes in link exchange farming. Discuss this while developing your SEO strategy. AtlasWebs is a professional search engine specialist and can assist you when planning your SEO strategy.

If you elect to hire a third party link exchange company, compare their guarantees. Some examples are:

- Inbound links from websites with PageRank 2 (PR2) and higher (PR explained below)
- The links will be in Google's cache
- The link pages will be optimized for spiders to crawl
- Static hyperlinks only from static pages or home page of the other websites
- Links from the home page can be reached within 2 to 3 clicks
- No links from porn, hate, racist, gambling sites, or from link farm programs
- Each link from a unique domain name
- No links on doorway, redirect sites, no follow attribute or other robot tags, guest books, free-hosting personal websites (e.g. Geocities), or discussion forums
- Maximum 50 links on a page
- English language sites only
- No links on popup, pop-under style windows
- No links on blogs or RSS/XML feeds

## Page Rank

As explained earlier, search engines want to see other sites linking to your site. The more sites that link to pages on your site, the higher your site will rank. Google takes all the factors mentioned above and gives every webpage it has sniffed a page weight or Page Rank (PR). The range is 0-10, ten being the highest. You can download a Google toolbar that will tell you the weight of any page at: [toolbar.google.com](http://toolbar.google.com).

So now we know not only is it important to have an incoming link from a business that is similar to yours, but also to have the incoming link placed on a page with a high PR. Obviously there are combinations and trade-offs in these agreements and these decisions are made by your professional SEO specialist or third party employed for this service.

A good web master can determine if SEO efforts are working and you are climbing the rank ladder. This can take anywhere from three to six months and if search engines change their algorithms you can be dropped overnight.

The following paragraph is Page Rank explained by Google:

"PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important."

Important, high-quality sites receive a higher PageRank, which Google remembers each time it conducts a search. Of course, important pages mean nothing to you if they don't match your query. So, Google combines PageRank with sophisticated text-matching techniques to find pages that are both important and relevant to your search. Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page and examines all aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for your query. "

## Final Words

SEO is an on-going and evolving process which requires some level of expertise to be successful. AtlasWebs can help you create an information-rich website - using SEO best practices - to get new customers and achieve a greater ROI on your Internet marketing investment.

Although a high rank is an important objective of SEO, another equally important objective is to improve the site's content and increase the number of conversions of that higher visitor rate to paying customers.

Buying decisions are not often immediate. Though some people do buy in one step, the vast majority have to get to know and trust a business first, prior to becoming customers and clients. Again, this is all part of recognizing and understanding your target market and spending the time on a well thought-out SEO strategy. For that relationship marketing aspect, AtlasWebs has found e-mail newsletters and blogs, along with other proven relationship building techniques, to be effective.

At AtlasWebs we increase your bottom line in three ways:

- Bring more visitors to your website
- Convert more of those visitors into customers
- Generate greater revenue for your business

Can we be sure that all of this results from SEO? No. Product, seasonal and other effects contribute. However it is safe to say that a significant increase will result directly from the SEO.

The bottom line: search optimization has a real and measurable impact on traffic, conversions and revenue (or lead generation) improvement. Given that these clicks begin to approach free after amortizing the cost of SEO over time, the ROI for SEO is compelling. Added to the branding benefits no marketer or business owner should doubt the value of search engine optimization.

With impeccable content and excellent service, your hard work will pay off and you will gain the trust of your customers as you continue to rise in the page rankings. With ethical SEO, you get reliable results and permanent benefits. At the end of the day, that's what really matters. You may get to your goal slowly but you'll get there eventually, and when you do, you will be ready.

For more information on how AtlasWebs can help you market your online business, please go to [www.atlaswebs.com](http://www.atlaswebs.com) or call (208) 870-9926.