

I generally find the human race a wonder - as in I wonder why such an intelligent species can be so remarkably naïve so much of the time. Now a warning - we're venturing into the realms of one of my pet hates in this article - website positioning (aka search engine optimisation).

So many websites were, and still are, sold on the back of the promise of increasing your business by bringing web surfers through your door, usually by ensuring you're always at the top of search pages returned by search engines such as Yahoo, MSN, or Google. The simple premise being that you have completed the mantra of:

Must have website, everybody else does  
Must be listed, or nobody will visit it

I've stated my feelings on the first line of this chant in the article 'A Website for your Business', so I won't recant the dubiousness of this statement for many businesses. What I want to do here is to try and puncture the inflated notion that having to be on the first page of a search engine's results page is actually worth spending a cent on. Most of the time it isn't; and if you are using it as a basis for your sales forecasting I suggest you prepare to be very friendly with your bank manager.

## Does search engine optimization work?

This is where my wonderment at the human race comes in - how can people be so naïve? Lets take a simple example - you're looking for a dentist. In my copy of Yellow Pages for the city of Perth where I live there are over 500 dentists listed. If each one of them gets a website, pays for it to be optimized for search engines, how are they all going to be on the first page of ten when I search for Dentist in say, Google. It relies on me being specific enough when I search - a skill many web surfers find hard to master. Oh come on, you say - anyone will know to enter 'Dentist Perth' in the search bar! Even I was a bit surprised when I tested it for this article - I got back 10,600 matches! Being savvy to geography I wisely added 'Western Australia' to the search - and reduced the count to 2210 - the first of which was intriguingly entitled 'Dentist on a Camel'. In fact, not one of the 10 entries on the first page of the search results was actually a Dentist's website!. So I went the very specific route - named the suburb where I live - my search string was now:

dentist "south perth" "western australia"

'That's the ticket', you say. Now you're being sensible. Actually, I still got back 58 hits, and only two of the entries on the were actually named dentists, and even then one was only listed because he was an Office Bearer for the Australian Society of Endodontology, and the other's entry didn't immediately catch my eye because it was titled 'Advice to Parents'. If I had a toothache, by now I would putting the last fragments of my computer in the bin!

So what's gone wrong here - is it that Dentist's don't have websites, for as it happens my search found only one listed dentist websites for South Perth in my 58 results, while my local Yellow Pages helpfully has a 'Dentists by Locality' section, so I was able to find that South Perth has 13 dentists, and at least 2 had websites. I feel a new niche market opening up which I will address shortly after finishing this article.

What this simple, practically orientated exercise shows is one of the key problems with search engines. To get the specific entries I want, if they exist at all, I have to construct a carefully thought out search request. My apparently well crafted search terms returned one dentist's website, another dentist's entry in a national directory, several government documents which mentioned the word dentist, a number of family history sites where a family member had been a dentist and another family member had lived in South Perth, a beauty supplies company which included dental products, a bunch of council minutes, and somewhat worryingly a page entitled 'Hospital Morbidity Data System'. Seeing what I want amongst all this static takes skill, particularly where the web designer, as in the case of the one true dentist's website which did come up, hadn't thought through the naming of the site's pages clearly enough to make it easy for me to see it was actually a dentist's entry.

The other problem, which didn't occur in my example because obviously most of my 13 dentists don't have websites (at the time of writing that is, but its something which I shall be endeavouring to correct very shortly) is what would have been the result if all 13 had perfect sites for which they'd paid a designer to optimise to ensure the 'Top 10 ranking - guaranteed' that is so often advertised. Excuse my poor arithmetic here, but how do you make 13 fit into 10? Someone, or more exactly 3 businesses in this example, are going to have wasted their money unless you can also prove to me that  $4+3=5$ .

So is being asked to pay for having your website submitted to search engines, and having it optimised for appearing high in the search results a con job? Are search engines a waste of time? The answer to both questions is a very qualified No.

Personally, I certainly wouldn't spend my money on a service like this one I recently saw advertised:

"We **guarantee**<sup>6)7b)</sup> a **Top 10** position (within the period of the service contract of **at least 6** months) in 3 major search engines<sup>1)</sup> for **at least** one of the mutual agreed keywords or phrases."

All the carefully worded little clauses and the additional sub-notes should probably be enough to make sane businessmen and women with good common-sense instantly move on to another supplier, but there is something about the web which seems to cause even the most cautious, down-to-earth businesses invoke a common-sense bypass circuit you'd never otherwise know they had.

Any good web design company should put in adequate keywords and structure to ensure that your website appears in the appropriate results for reasonably specific searches - that is the type of searches people will actually enter when looking for the services or products you supply. They should also ensure that page titles act as sensible hints to the page contents and at least one page has a title which will direct the potential customer to the your site - 'How to contact the dentist' works perfectly well with me for instance. I would do these as a standard part of my site development rather than a paid-for extra because I consider them a basic part of my craft; and I know most web designers would feel the same.

I wouldn't necessarily pay to submit a site to a group of search engines. To be honest, half the search engines you'd get submitted to you probably won't even have heard of. The key search engines are Google, MSN Search, and Yahoo. Submission to Google and Yahoo is free and simple; MSN Search is a bit more tedious to submit to, but again offers a free service. In most cases it will take 6 to 8 weeks before your site will appear in the search engine results, providing the search engine provider's reviewers think the site is up to scratch in Yahoo's case, which any well-designed site should be.

In addition, your site should be submitted to the Open Directory Project, again a free service. If 6-8 weeks for inclusion sounds too long you can pay for submission and be fast-tracked, but I'm not convinced its money well spent, as I'll explain shortly.

Certainly you should have submission to the search engines, particularly where you provide a comparatively specialised service or product set, nationally, regionally or locally. And those are the keys to ensuring the search engines work for you - make sure that when someone wants your speciality in the area you serve you appear on the results list. The simple logic of geographical distribution of your competitors should do the rest.

An example of this philosophy in our own client base is a pest control company in Gloucestershire, England. We set up Able Pest Control's web pages so that anyone searching for pest control specialists in that locality should see the site in the listings (search term: pest control Gloucestershire). We did free submissions to the main engines, and ensured the pages were properly keyed for the search engines to index reasonably well as part of our general design process. In Google, that has meant the site comes 4th in the search results (at the time of writing), and is the first actual company site to appear (again the first 3 entries are forms of the results static I referred to above). The site gets low, but steady hits from the traffic analysis we maintain: nothing startling - about 150 distinct visitors a month, and no doubt many of them are from companies try to sell to Able Pest Control or search engine crawlers rather than true potential customers. We hadn't heard anything from our client for nine months to suggest the site had generated any business for him, then out of the blue he emails to tell us that he'd just won a £2500 contract on the back of someone seeing his entry in the search engines - he was a very happy man as that paid for his site many times over. So being on the search engines definitely works, but only if you can ensure people can find your entry easily - Able Pest Control offer a specialist service in a distinct geographical area, with a reasonably small competitor base - perfect.

If on the other hand you are trying to compete in a crowded market or on a global basis with a common product, I feel you should look to other means of getting traffic to your website. Spending a lot of time and money on search engine optimisation just doesn't add up!

## Generating website traffic

So what are the alternatives? You have your website. Its been given suitable keywords, has useful page titles, and has been submitted to the main search engines. But you've a lot of competitors or a large geography that is going to make 'Top 10' rankings in the search results a dubious expectation for realistic searches.

Firstly, go back to first principles with your marketing strategy. What is the website there for? Are you trying to use the website as an online advertising hoarding to direct people through your shop or office door, pick up the phone and call you, or email you a request? Or is your website an integral part of your business which you're using to directly sell product or services to your customers, or to disseminate information to your customers more efficiently than using post or fax?

If your site classifies as an advertising hoarding then you should consider paying for special inserts on the search engine result pages as a way of increasing your site visibility. All the main engines include an option of paid advertising such as the advertising boxes you see on the right-hand side of Google. They work by charging you a few cents for each time someone clicks on your advert, which takes the 'clicker' straight to your website. They are fairly simple to set up, allow controlled budgets to ensure you don't get a cost blow-out if too many people (or your competitors) click through the

ad, and can be well directed through keyword selection to only appear to your relevant audience. Personally, I feel they are a far better way of spending your web development budget than betting it on going for 'Top 10' ranking.

Search engines like Google use complex algorithms to determine where your site appears in the search results; algorithms that they constantly evolve to try to defeat web design companies attempting to skew the results by tricks like keyword stuffing on a page. One of the things that search engines look for is the concept of relevance - how important is a particular page in the context of the search term entered. For example, if your website has 20 links from other websites to it, that would be seen as adding weight to it being more relevant, and therefore deserving a higher ranking, than a competitor's website which is only linked to from 5 other websites. Again, don't get too hooked on this though as a method of ensuring a high-ranking position. The search engine providers like Google have a number of mechanisms to verify if an unscrupulous web design company is trying to trick them, for instance by having lots of links coming from dummy websites they put up purely to force links to your site. Despite the caveat, it is certainly beneficial if you can get your site listed on other sites, so as part of your marketing strategy for your 'advertising hoarding' look for online directories you can be added to. Most professional bodies and trade associations have websites these days, and more and more of these have online directories of members which include email and website links. Equally, look for local Chamber of Commerce sites and local directories that take entries for their online directories. If you supply products, see if your suppliers have an online stockist list they'll add your site to; and of course see if any of your major customers would be willing to add a link back to you on their website.

These approaches will work just as well for when you are using your website as an integral part of your business. But where the website is more than an 'advertising hoarding' you need to fall back on traditional marketing as well to ensure you bring the traffic in. Hard as this may be for so many web design companies to understand, the best way to get people to your website has nothing to do with the internet - its called product placement, and involves that old thing, print media. Adverts in local newspapers, appropriate journals and trade publications, mail shots, leafleting campaigns - all these are still far more effective at bringing your business and your website to most peoples attention. Just don't fall into the common trap of having your website address stuck at the bottom of the page in small type. If you're using the website as part of your business make sure it features prominently, and the benefits it's offering to customers are clearly described. Never forget as well the value of word-of-mouth. A well-designed website which looks good, adds value, and is easy to use is much more likely to get mentioned in conversation between customers and their friends and colleagues than something skimped on or too bland. Use the money you'd pay out on search engine optimisation to improve your website instead. One of the main search engine 'how-to' sites suggested budgeting between £200 to £500 to speed up search engine listing and include a month's ad placement on the main engines. That could buy quite a bit of extra look and feel for your website with a decently priced, quality, web design company, and give you a far better long-term return from referrals to your site and good reviews from customers.

So do an old web designer a favour. Unleash the common-sense hounds in your mind and do the arithmetic. Don't let 'search engine optimisation' come to mean 'search engine optimistic' for your website.