

Driving Traffic to Your Website

Making Your Site Visible to Your Best Prospects

A White Paper from Site ROI
Better Results from Your Website
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Overview

By now, it has become standard practice for almost every size business to have a presence on the Internet. Whether you sell a product or a service, a website can act as a virtual salesperson for your company, available 24 hours a day. In the dot-com boom of the late 'nineties, companies rushed to erect websites, with or without storefronts. Design firms and web hosting providers offered to get your domain name, create a five page business website, and host it for you for a reasonable fee.

If your company was among those that created a website, have you stopped to consider the return the site is bringing to your business? Is your website bringing in new leads? Are prospects and customers using the site to find out more about new products and services you offer? Is your site getting the amount of traffic you expected?

In many cases, the answer to the above questions is no.

In order to get the most from your site, your prospects need to be able to find it on the Internet. The world's best-designed site won't do you any good if no one visits it. This white paper explores how to improve your website's ROI by making it accessible to your prospects and customers.

Most new visitors to your website will find it using a search engine. Therefore, your site should be search engine friendly in its design. It should also be optimized so that it ranks highly when people searching for your product or service view the results of their searches.

You can also drive traffic to your site by using Pay-Per-Click advertising. Unlike the scattershot banner advertising of a few years ago, Pay-Per-Click provides targeted, measurable results that you only pay for when visitors click through to your site.

Finally you should take advantage of other linking possibilities, including website directories, and sites that are complementary to your own.

The following pages explore each area in more detail.

Optimizing Your Website for Search Engines

Getting referrals from search engines has become much more than applying a few keywords and Meta tags to your HTML. As the Web has expanded over the years, search engines have become much better at delivering results that match the user's query. To do this, they measure the quality of the site's content and the believability of the site. The

quality of the site's content is measured by its relevance to the user's question, and the believability of the site is measured by examining if users go to the site when it shows up in the search results, and whether other sites with similar content link to this site.

Let's take as an example a residential remodeling company's website. The company offers kitchen and bathroom remodeling, as well as basement finishing. In order to improve search engine rankings, the site should have pages devoted not only to the general subject of remodeling, but also to specifics of kitchen and bath remodeling, as well as basements.

In addition, the site should link to other sources of kitchen and bath remodeling information. The company should try to get links to its site from other associated with the remodeling industry, such as trade associations, suppliers, and other sources of industry information.

Website Design Affects Search Engine Results

The technical design of your website can affect its rating by the search engines. Search engines can't see graphics, for example. If the essence of your site is communicated through graphic headlines, the search engines won't know about it. You can see what the search engines see by looking at your site with graphics turned off in your browser.

Search engines read the pages on your site in a linear manner, from beginning to end. This is probably not the same way you read them. The design of many websites places menus, JavaScript, and other control information at the beginning of the page. Even though the text of the site may display at the top of the page, physically, it may be at the end of the file. This will cause your pages to rank less favorably than if the most important text was physically at the beginning of the page.

The way your site is constructed may prevent search engines from seeing all the pages on your site. If your site doesn't use traditional HTML links for navigation, the search engines won't be able to find other pages in your site. Search engines tend to only follow links one or two levels down from your home page. If most of your content is only referenced from deep in your site, search engines may not see it. Finally, search engines will not process correctly many links that include arguments as part of the reference. A link's argument is anything that appears after a question mark in the page address, for example, www.companysite.com/page.html?PRODID=1234.

Unfortunately, many web page design firms are not aware of how to create a site that is both attractive to the human eye, as well as to the search engine spiders. Under pressure from the client to create a site that is visually attractive, they can prevent it from being found by users. The client, believing that the site must be good because it was designed by a professional, wonders why he never gets any visitors.

If you are planning on a redesign of your website (or if you are just getting started creating one), you can ensure that your site is both visually attractive to the eye and technically attractive to the search engine spiders by involving an experienced search engine marketer early in the design process.

Keywords: A Critical Component

As you design your website, you should determine the keywords or search terms that you want to emphasize. This can be a difficult task, but it is critical if you want to use your website as an effective marketing tool for your business. Here are some suggestions:

- Start with the most generic term for your product or service, and then get more specific with brands and models. If you are a car dealer, start with cars and trucks, and then move to Chevrolet and Pontiac, and finally Monte Carlo, Silverado, Firebird, etc.
- Think of synonyms for your terms. If you are a car dealer, think of cars, automobiles, transportation, vehicles, etc.
- If you specialize in something, make sure you include your specialty in your keywords.
- If your business is specific to a geographic location, you should include your location in your keywords.
- As you are developing your keywords, think of your business as the customer sees you, not as you see yourself.

You can use your website logs to determine which keywords and phrases visitors to your site are using to get there. While this information is useful, it does not directly provide information about the terms people are using for searches that do not lead to your site.

There are also tools available that will show you the exact search phrases people are using that contain specific words, and how often those phrases are used in searches. This may give you some more ideas for search terms you should select.

Once you have selected the words and phrases you want to use, determine how your site ranks for those phrases before you change anything. You can either do this manually, by typing the phrases directly into the search engines and looking at the results, or by using a program such as WebPosition Gold, or by using an online service.

Testing your phrases provides several important benefits. It provides a benchmark you can use to determine the effectiveness of the changes you will make to your site to improve your rankings. It also identifies the pages on your site that already rank highly for your selected terms or phrases. If a page is already doing well, you may not want to tweak it further.

In order to be effective, pages on your site should rank in the top thirty positions within the search engine results. Most users will either find a link that they like within the first three pages of results, or they will give up and try another search phrase.

As you begin to optimize your pages for specific keywords, think like the search engines do, which is much the same process humans do to determine the content of a page. Adjust the title and headings of the page to reflect the chosen keywords. Then, make sure that the page content also reflects the keywords you are targeting.

Unless you have chosen very few keywords, you cannot emphasize every keyword on a single page of your site. You may need to create additional pages with appropriate content for the keywords you are targeting. Remember that not all search engines rank the relevance of a page in the same way. If you have a high ranking for a keyword in one search engine, but the keyword does not rank well in another, you will need to create another page targeting that keyword for the other search engine.

Monitoring and Improving on the Results

Once you have completed your site, you will need to have the search engines index the revised content. If the search engines have spidered your site in the past, they will pick up on the revised content fairly quickly. If your site has not been indexed in the past, you will need to submit your site to the search engines, and then wait for their spiders to visit your site.

After the search engines have recognized the new content, see how your chosen search terms rank compared to how they ranked prior to making changes. If necessary, make further changes to your pages until you see the results you would like.

Optimizing your site to attract more referrals from search engines is time consuming, and requires some practice and trial and error to get right. However, once you have achieved that high search engine ranking for your chosen keywords, the benefits of additional visitors to your site that are already interested in your product or service will continue for a long time.

Because most business owners or marketing staff do not have experience in search engine optimization, it may make sense to enlist the help of a professional. Although quite a bit of effort is required in the initial phases, search engine optimization is not a full time job, since once the site is optimized, only periodic checks of current rankings and minor tweaks need to be made to maintain the rankings by the search engines.

In addition, the experience of a professional will reduce the amount of time it takes to achieve a high ranking, since less trial and error will be required to optimize the content for the desired keywords.

Web Advertising

As an alternative to search engine optimization, or in conjunction with it, you might want to consider web advertising, particularly Pay-Per-Click advertising offered by Overture and Google. Pay-Per-Click advertising displays your text ad and link in line with, or adjacent to, the search results for specific keywords you have chosen. If your ad is clicked on, you pay a per-click fee to the search engine. Otherwise, you pay nothing.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Pay-Per-Click

Pay-per-click offers several advantages and disadvantages compared to standard search engine listings. Pay-Per-Click offers almost immediate results, with your ad appearing within a few days at most. Search engine submissions can take several weeks before you will see results. Pay-per-click also lets you display a specific message in the ad that relates to the search term, and then take the user to a page you designate. For example, you could announce a special offer or sale that would be visible on the search page, and then go to a page on your site with an order form.

Another advantage of pay-per-click advertising is that it allows you to better track the source of your leads compared to search engine referrals. In your Pay-Per-Click ad, you can specify a custom URL that the user is directed to. By using a different URL for each keyword or program, you can gauge the effectiveness of each. You do not have the same level of control with search engines, which take the user to the page the search engine determines from the query.

Finally, Pay-per-click lets you have a top search engine position for terms that might otherwise be impossible to achieve with normal search engine optimization. For example, take a term like 'travel'. With such a widely used term, in a very competitive marketplace, achieving a top search engine ranking would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. An example is the term 'Travel'. There are lots of travel agencies and lots of travel web sites, all with the word 'travel' in them. Trying to get your website to the top of the search engine rankings for travel would be almost impossible. However, if you were willing to pay the price, (over a dollar per clickthrough at this writing) you could be listed at the top of the search results.

The downside to pay-per-click is its ongoing cost, and the amount of maintenance that it requires to ensure a top result. Since you pay each time a visitor clicks through to your site, pay-per-click programs represent a continuing cost to the marketing budget. Once you stop your ad, the clickthroughs stop as well. In the long run, the higher initial fixed cost of optimizing your website for the keywords you are targeting will be less than the ongoing expense of Pay-Per-Click advertising

The Pay-Per-Click Pricing Model

The amount of maintenance required for Pay-Per-Click advertising is a function of its pricing model. Pay-Per-Click advertising is sold at auction, with the highest bidder getting the top position, the next highest getting the second position, and so forth. Since the auction is conducted each time someone makes a search, and bids could be changed at any time, this led both to situations where an advertiser could, without warning, find his message buried under a list of other advertisers who were willing to pay more, or worse, find himself paying much more per click than the advertiser in the position below.

To guarantee the best position at a minimum cost, advertisers were forced to monitor the bidding for their search terms frequently, and adjust their bids to meet the current bids of other advertisers. To remedy this problem, Google and Overture added sliding scale bidding programs where the advertiser sets a maximum amount per keyword that they will bid. The price of each clickthrough is then automatically adjusted so that the cost is one cent more than the maximum bid of the next lowest bidder.

While this system reduces the amount of tweaking required to maintain the best position at the lowest price, advertisers must continue to monitor their search terms and bids in order to maintain their desired position in the results.

Using Pay-Per-Click Effectively

To get the best ROI from Pay-Per-Click advertising, you should choose your keywords as carefully as you do when selecting search engine keywords. While it doesn't hurt to bid on a keyword that brings no clickthroughs, you don't want to miss keywords that could produce good leads. You should compare the rankings of your search engine keywords with your Pay-Per-Click keywords. It may not make sense to place a Pay-Per-Click advertisement for a keyword when your site ranks highly in the search engine results for that term.

Finally monitor the price you are paying per clickthrough compared to the number of leads you are receiving from that clickthrough. If you set up a tracking system that lets you determine which keywords provide the most leads or sales, you will be able to determine your ROI for each Pay-Per-Click campaign.

Getting Links from Other Sites

In addition to search engine referrals and advertising, businesses should try to have their website URL placed on as many other relevant sites as possible. This helps you in two ways: You get referrals from the sites on which you are listed, and search engines use information about the sites that link to your site to determine where you rank in their listings.

The first places you should think about getting listed are the major Internet directory services: Yahoo, LookSmart, and The Open Directory. Unlike search engines, which regularly crawl the web to search for content, directories contain lists of websites

organized into categories. Each website listing is accompanied by a short listing describing the site. In order to be included in a directory, the website must be submitted to the directory owner, which will review the submission, and approve or disapprove of your listing. Some sites, particularly Yahoo, charge a fee in order to become listed.

Once you are approved, your site will appear in the list of sites for the category or categories you fit into. Your site will also be listed in the results of directory searches if the description of your site matches any search keywords.

Because the description of your website is used to determine results for directory searches, you should try to make sure that the description you provide reflects those keywords. Don't go overboard, though, because the description is subject to editing, and if it is all keywords, or doesn't make sense, it will be edited to something you may not prefer.

When submitting to a directory, you should make sure that your description and categories are exactly what you want, and that they conform to the editorial guidelines of the directory you are submitting to. Once you are listed, it is very difficult to get your information changed. If your submission does not meet the editorial guidelines of the directory, it will be rejected, and you will have to pay an additional fee to resubmit your site. This is particularly true with Yahoo's directory – probably the most important one.

Depending on your product or service, you may want to list your site with additional directory services. You can use a search engine to look for directories related to your business. Use an appropriate description with your keywords when submitting your site.

As you consider directories and search engines for listing your site, keep in mind that too much of a good thing may actually hurt. The major search engines – Google, Inktomi, and FAST – determine the ranking of your site from your site's content, the relevance of external links on your site to the content of your site, and the relevance and importance of the sites that link to your site.

If your site has links to sites with content that complements your site, and if there are links to your site from sites that are significant and have relevance to your site, your site will rank better. Consider links to your site as letters of recommendation. If someone were to consider your resume and letters of recommendation, they would give more weight to a recommendation from an authority figure in your field than they would from someone in an unrelated industry.

Google and AltaVista, among others, have advanced search options that will show you a list of all the pages linking to a website. You can use a search like this to determine if a directory or website is worth using.

There are plenty of services that claim they will list your site on 35,000 search engines. Other sites offer link exchanges, where they will put a link to you on their site if you link to them on yours. If these sites are not relevant to your business, your site's ranking in

the major search engines, which is where 95% of your traffic will come from, will be reduced.

Because the requirements and purpose of each directory are different you should manually submit your site to each appropriate directory. It may make sense to enlist the services of a search engine marketing specialist to get the best results possible, and to avoid making mistakes that would result in inappropriate classification of your site.

Summary

Unfortunately, the “Build it and they will come” philosophy does not work when you are trying to get visitors to your website. In order to attract the most qualified visitors to your site, you need to ensure that your site is designed in a manner friendly to search engine spiders, in addition to your human visitors.

Once you are sure the search engines can index all the pages in your site, you should make sure you are using the right keywords throughout your site so that you will be found when users search for terms relevant to your business.

Consider promoting your site with Pay-Per-Click advertising. Pay-Per-Click can provide almost instant results, compared with the time required to get listed on the search engines. However, you should be as careful selecting Pay-Per-Click keywords as you are in choosing search engine keywords.

Finally, work to get links to your site on directories and lists that are appropriate to your industry and geographic location. See if you can work with suppliers, customers, and trade associations to exchange relevant links.

If you follow the suggestions listed above, you will find that the number of visitors to your site increases tremendously. Because they were searching for your product or service, they should be well-qualified leads.

About Site ROI

Site ROI is a website marketing company located in Atlanta, Georgia. It was founded with the belief that many companies with websites are not fully leveraging the power that the Internet can bring to their businesses. Many small to midsize companies have not taken advantages of the opportunities available to them to develop more leads and get more sales from their websites, either because they did not have the technical know-how, or the personnel to implement a marketing plan.

Site ROI can develop an implement a marketing plan that will increase the return on investment for a company’s website. If you would be interested in growing your pipeline and increasing sales, please feel free to contact us.