Search Engine Optimization 101

This short overview is intended to provide a generalized high-level understanding for how search engine optimization ("SEO") can be used to drive business results.

It should go without saying that a key requirement in selling just about anything is getting in front of the right customers. In the past, understanding where prospective customers might look for your goods or services was a daily challenge, however the rise of the internet has changed all that. When considering the sheer expansiveness of the internet, it's no wonder that "search engines," such as Google, Yahoo!, and Bing have come to play such a central role in our everyday lives. Whether you're looking for movie times at a theater, shoe repair, a nearby wine bar, or a rare collectible - a majority of consumers today (spanning all generations) will go to their desktop, laptop, tablet, or (drumroll) simply grab their smartphone and search for whatever they're looking for - (commonly referred to as 'googling.') In fact, research has suggested that 59% of customers begin the buying process using the internet. With that said business owners should take note of this undeniable pattern - your customers are searching for you online and if you're not competing on the web, you could be missing out on huge profits (and rest assured your competitions are!)

How does a Search Engine Work?

A search engine serves a similar function as the once prevalent card catalog index - it is used to help a *searcher* locate some sought information / document. While the card catalog index provided an effective approach to finding information within a given facility, search engines can perform this task on almost an unlimited number of documents spanning the globe, while doing so much more efficiently - in fact, the average search results are delivered in just about 1 second and are generally fairly accurate.

Search engines are able to do this by scanning the entire indexed internet (that is to say web pages which are on searchable) at some regular interval. The results of the website scan are cataloged for a variety of data, including: the content, inbound links, (sites which point to your site), outbound links (sites that are listed on your website), how much interaction your website gets, etc. With all of this information collected and analyzed in advance, search engines can resort to what computers do best - really fast and complex math. Search engines utilize complex and very secretive algorithms (mathematical equations) to determine which web page best matches the terms entered in the search bar. To help search engines better understand the contents of a web page, web developers can add various "tags" (e.g. the text that shows up when you hover over a link or image) and coding, among other techniques, to "optimize" the website specifically for "search engines" - and so, Search Engine Optimization ("SEO") was born.

To simplify the concept of how search engines work, assume that the algorithm keeps *score* on how close a website matches the search phrase. An exact phrase match may be worth 10 points per usage on a page, while partial matches, imperfect matches, and imperfect partial matches might all score lower on the algorithm. Search engines might also track your behavior on the site - once a webpage is opened, what the user did, how long did they stay, how many pages they visited, did they go back to Google and continue to search, etc. After running the algorithm and tallying all positive matches, results are ranked with the best scoring sites displayed first.

Why the Big Secret?

Search engines are consistently updating their algorithms to both improve results and stay ahead of clever web developers who can (and will) exploit any weakness to their advantage. For example, if you really wanted to get your website up to the top of the rankings, you might include the exact phrase for which you want to be found multiple times, on a single page. And, if more is better, why not simply use that phrase many, many times on the page ("keywords stuffing"). As you might have guessed, some clever developers quickly figured this out and began using the phrase hundreds of times on a single page (often just including white words on a white background.)

At this point, I should also note, there are some rules that are enforced by search engines and if web developers are caught trying to cheat the algorithms using techniques such as keyword stuffing, their websites may be penalized (think page 10 instead of page 1.)

How do I Optimize my Website?

Like much of SEO, there is a fair amount of debate about the best approach to getting your site to that coveted page 1 rank. This is due in large part to the secretive and ever-evolving nature of the algorithms. Regardless, the following techniques are generally considered to be universally accepted as good practice:

- Include high-quality content on your website.
- Keep pages brief (I might suggest an arbitrary figure of less than 1,000 words per page.)
- Follow good aesthetic designs.
- Ensure websites are responsive (that is to say, the site automatically updates to any screen size.)
- Use desired keywords and the key phrases in titles and content.
- Take advantage of available tags.
- Cultivate inbound links to your website (social media can be an easy start)

How Long Does it Take to Get to Page 1 on a Search Engine?

The best answer is, it depends. As noted, each search engine has a different algorithm. While many companies claim 90 days (*some claim as few as 30 days; stay away from these*), a safe estimate is 3 - 6 months. The following factors will also affect your results.

- Competitiveness of Keywords
- How Specific Search the Terms are (think 'business consulting' vs. 'business consulting in Chicago')
- How well the Website has been Optimized
- How much Effort is expended monthly (Budget)
- Age of Website
- Skill of SEO Company
- Number of pages (more content, more tags)

How Much Does an SEO Program Cost?

While the range can vary widely, most SEO programs range between $500 - $1,000/month for small and medium-sized businesses. While this may seem like a steep investment for many companies, SEO typically offsets a firm's marketing spend.
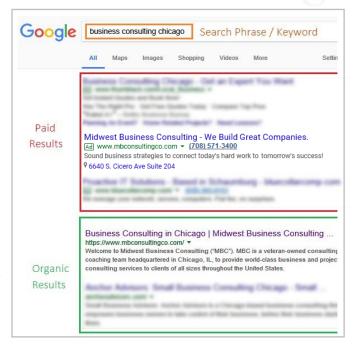
How Do I Get Started?

As you might expect, you can simply search for "SEO services" on (you guessed it) any search engine and you're bound to find a plethora of providers. You can also start brainstorming some keywords and key phrases - that is to say, the specific search terms you think your prospective customers might use to find you (e.g. Business Consulting.) Keywords are generally brief but specific; as noted above, adding a location can help to reduce the competition (e.g. Business Consulting *Chicago*.) Also, keep your list short; 10 – 20 keywords is generally a good list for most businesses - anything more may dilute your efforts.

Should I only Optimize Google?

As noted, your optimization efforts are regularly scanned and cataloged by most search engines. While the reported market shares vary depending on the research you cite, commonly accepted figures put Google at the top with 64% of searches conducted on the internet, followed by Bing with 21% and Yahoo! with 13%. There are many smaller search engines that stake claim to the remaining percentage.

What About Paid Ads, Like Google AdWords?

As the market becomes increasingly competitive, search engines have risen to the occasion. Don't have 4 – 6 months? No problem – your local search engines have a solution. Once again, let me preface this by saying the actual effectiveness of paid ads is hotly contested. Proponents will claim that paid ads account for a whopping 65% of all clicks, while opponents maintain that "organic" searches (those results appearing below the ads due to SEO) are king and rate the effective worth of paid ads much lower, at a measly 16%. For what it's worth, my arbitrary and unqualified guesstimate is somewhere in the middle – you might consider that about 50% of clicks will go to the paid ads, another 40% to the first matching result on Google (i.e. searchers will skip sites like Wikipedia when searching for a good or service provider), 6% to the 2nd, 3% to the third, and 0.9% spread among the remaining pages and finally .1% to be spread among all the following pages in rapidly decreasing fashion (when was the last time you went to page 3 of Google?)

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