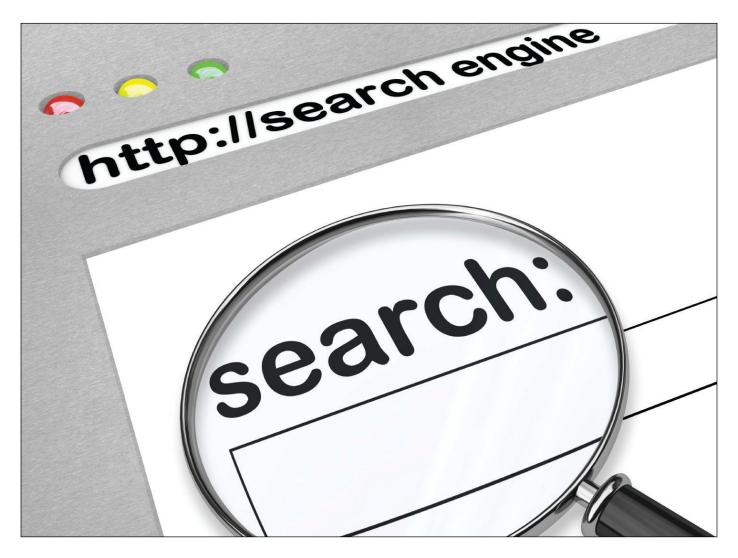# If You Build It, They Will Come

An Investigation in Search Engine Rankings

PART 5 OF 5

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During the last four months we've delved into the primary steps in preparing your website for the search engines. This month we will talk about geography and search engines, and staying current with search engine changes and website marketing. If you have not read my December 2010 through March 2011 *Recognition Review* articles, please read them before proceeding, as we will continue building upon what you have already learned from those articles.

Geography and the Search Engines

Every company wants to appear on page one and rank one of a search engine. Unfortunately, it's impossible for every company to take the leading spot. This is where geography comes into play. We have noticed that Google appears to use geography in determining what sites will rank where. For instance, I've done the exact same searches within Google at the exact same time of day on the exact same day from California servers and again

from Florida servers. In my analysis, sites ranked in different orders based upon where the search originated. A site where the company location of that site was closer to Florida appeared higher in the rankings when searched from a Florida server versus when searched from a California server, causing that same site to be ranked lower.

Exactly how much emphasis Google places on geography when determining rankings is not known, but it appears it does play a role. To analyze this phenomenon further, I performed the same tests on various sites in various locations around the country. In each case, rankings of my test sites consistently adjusted based upon where the search in Google was initiated.

I wanted to see if this same algorithm was present in Yahoo and Bing, but could not see the same type of site shifting occurring in these other two search engines. Google is used for the majority of the searches on the Internet, so this does indeed bring us to how geography plays a role in search results, and what it might mean to you as a site owner. It means that instead of competing for ranking among 110 million websites, at least in your local geographical region, you are competing for ranking on a much smaller scale. (I can hear you complaining as I write: *"But we want to compete nationally!"*).

Unfortunately, we are where we are on the searches, and Google will utilize its algorithm to make determinations of where sites will rank. That is not to say you won't rank high for national business, but it will take more than geography to rank high in other regions of the country. Google uses 200 pieces of criteria to determine rankings—geography is one of them, which leaves 199 other criteria that you can use to rank higher on a national scale. The good news is making sure you rank high within your geographic area, which is easy. It's simply a matter of publishing your website address and adding your city and state to your meta keywords and description. Using Google Webmaster tools, you can also let Google know whether you wish to stay local or go national. Google

Places will also help facilitate the local geography of your business. All of these will play a role in how Google will evaluate your website on a geographical basis.

The other day someone asked me why a BizWizard ShopKart website did not rank as high as a basic website that looked really shoddy. Both companies represented by these sites were located in the same region. The first thing I looked at were the keywords and title tags of the site that ranked higher than the ShopKart site. I discovered that the owner of the ShopKart site did not place his geography information in the title tag of his ShopKart site, nor did he place his city and state in the meta keywords.

The ShopKart site did indeed rank high—in fact, on page one within the city in question—but it didn't rank at the top. Simply adding the city and state to the title tag and the meta keyword tags most likely will move that ShopKart site to the rank top position for geography.

Be sure you have your company's geographic location identified. Then you can focus on the other 199 pieces of criteria that help you rank higher in search engines.

Keeping Up With Search Engines Changes

Google, Yahoo, and even Bing are constantly improving their search engine algorithms. Unfortunately, this can also affect your rankings. It is a never-ending battle trying to understand these changes. Sometimes the changes will be posted in public forums, and sometimes they are kept top secret. So how do you keep up?

Allow me to digress. In 1995 in the days before Google, we had 5 primary search engines: Yahoo, Alta Vista, Excite, Lycos, and Seek-It, the last owned by me. I started the Seek-It search engine back in the early days of the Internet (way before websites began using great graphics) as a hobby. Unfortunately, that hobby grew out of control. Even though three other coworkers helped me with it on a part- time basis, we still didn't have the time to manage its growth and it went out of control.

I sold Seek-It in 2000, and prior to

the sale, spent many hours changing algorithms to provide better search results, then testing the search result code changes to make even more changes. Anyone who learned our secrets for determining rankings would code the html of their own websites to take advantage of the newly changed algorithms to achieve a higher ranking. When we would change the algorithm—which would result in them ranking lower—they would change their site when they again determined how to cheat the system. It was a never-ending battle.

The battle was my determination to provide accurate and usable search results versus website owners determined to rank at the top no matter what. This same battle goes on today with the primary three search engines. The bottom line is this: To rank high, you must do a good job of coding your site(s) accurately, provide good accurate content, keep it formatted in outline format, and ensure that you use correct title tags, meta keyword tags, meta description tags, and image alt tags along with ongoing marketing. Let the search engines do their job, which they will do well if you let them.

Please understand that it's a full-time job to keep up search engine changes. Typically only those companies that are trying to find ways around the algorithm are the ones constantly wracking their brains to analyze, *"What did they do now?"* That's why the best rule of thumb is to strive for good site design, outline format and HTML coding. Let the chips fall where they may, especially due to the fact that social media plays a huge role in rankings, along with popular world and news events. All of these factors adjust site rankings on a daily basis, and sometimes even hourly.

In the awards industry, around World Cup time, you may see an increase in rankings (even if you didn't make any changes to your website) simply because of all the reporting and awareness of this worldwide sporting event. Sites that key in on that search term will find themselves increasing in the rankings, while those that aren't rankings lower. When the World Cup

ends, the rankings will begin readjusting, depending upon the buzzwords pulsing through the Internet. It's a big teeter totter, and there is really is no way to get off. Your best bet is to simply ride it with grace and style, while following Google Webmaster Guidelines.

But you say, *"I have an awards business to operate! I don't have time to do all this?"* You're right—you don't—and that's what your webmaster, SEO firm, or shopping cart software should be doing for you. There are many aspects of Google WebMaster Guidelines that your website software can do automatically, but make sure you apply due diligence on any company you hire (see previous articles in this series) to ensure they are following the webmaster guidelines. Your website, SEO firm, or shopping cart software should alleviate 50-80% of the work—leaving you with minimal tasks such as picking your keywords.

Don't be frustrated if your site fluctuates in rankings. And don't expect the rankings to change overnight. Stay focused on your marketing and it will fall into place. Don't do any tricks to try and cheat the system, which will only gain your site a one way boot out of the Google Search Engine.

Ongoing Website Marketing

There are many other things you can do going forward to drive traffic to your website and increase your overall rankings, such as social media, sending out press releases, entering website contests, and blogging. Social media keeps your customers aware of your company. Blogging provides interesting information about your company or about other topics of conversation to an audience. Tweeting on Twitter keeps your information in front of millions of Internet users throughout the day. Holding a "scavenger hunt" on your website can also increase traffic via click-through and click-arounds. Each of these methods (and there are many others) helps increase your website's popularity—an important part of the 200 pieces of Google ranking algorithms, and an important aspect of website marketing.

Put your website address on everything—in your flyers that go to sport team moms. Put it on your BizWizard Order Manager receipts and invoices, and on press releases you issue when your company achieves a milestone or wins an award. Put it on the sticker you place on the bottom of every award and trophy you produce. Make sure it is on your business cards and in your phone book, newspaper, billboard ads—and even in the back window of your car, in the signature of every Internet forum posting you make, and in the signature line of every e-mail you send out.

Spend time each week reviewing your website to keep it fresh and up to date. Be sure to focus on your website graphics. Take some pride: If your website looks unprofessional,

people will click their back button and go to the next one in the list.

In closing, I wish to sincerely thank everyone for indulging me in this article series, and I hope the information I provided has helped many of you out as you work on your own websites. Here's to high search rankings for everyone! ▲

David Matney has more than 20 years experience with Internet application development and search engine optimization. He is the developer of BizWizard ShopKart.

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