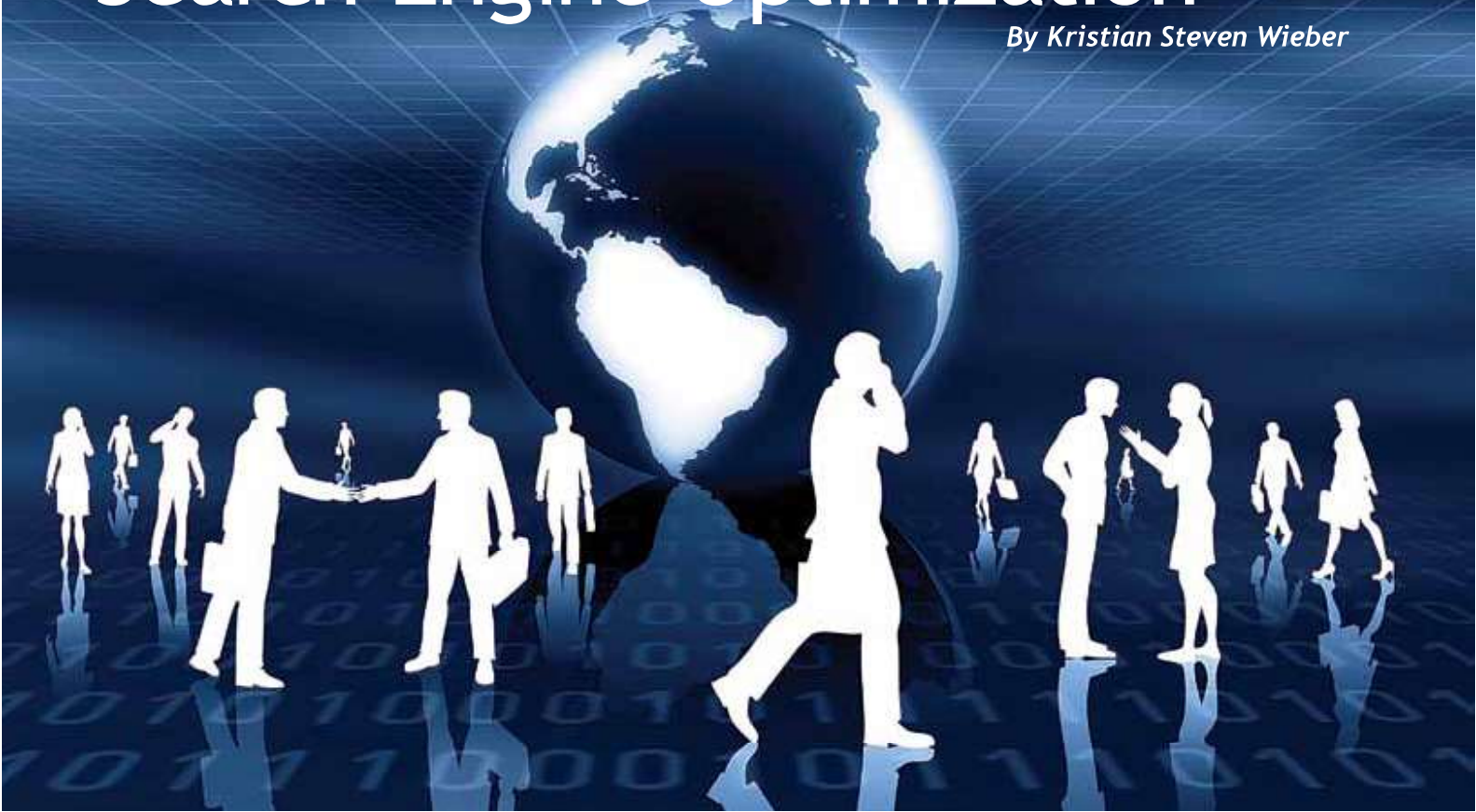


THE SECRETS OF SEO: Search Engine Optimization

By Kristian Steven Wieber



We are two-thirds of the way through the year 2010; it is now assumed that *every* business already has a website. Any business that does not is considered unprofessional by the standards of the 21st century. If your business doesn't have a website, it's time to call a web designer. You can find the number the same way your customers look for the number to your shop—by typing key words into Google and clicking the results.

In 2010, website advice is all about improving the effectiveness of the website everyone assumes you already have. Website efficiency can be improved in many different ways, including involvement in social media, website design, site navigation, menus, content management systems, images, videos, shopping carts and other elements. All of these are components of search engine optimization, or SEO, the process of improving the quality and volume of traffic to a website from search engines by way of unpaid search results.

BRIEF SEO HISTORY

The acronym SEO can also refer to search engine optimizers, an industry of consultants who carry out optimization projects on behalf of clients. It is one of the many industries the Internet gave birth to.

Webmasters began optimizing their sites for the first search engines in the mid-1990s. At first, all they needed to do was submit the URL address to the engine. The engine would then save the page to its own server, extracting relevant information, particularly

keywords, and using that information in ranking and listing their search results.

Companies quickly realized the benefit of being at the top of the list (Really, how often do you even look at the second page of search results?), and webmasters began to manipulate the information they provided search engines to maximize results in their favor. This increased the volume of traffic to their site, though not the quality of that traffic, and it reduced the effectiveness of search engines. In response, search engines developed ever more complicated algorithms to negate this abuse and offer better results to their users.

Ever since, there has been a lot of back and forth. Search engines continually create more complex algorithms and consider more factors in creating search results. Webmasters continue to figure out ways to manipulate those results to their advantage.

It should also be noted that, in most cases, search engine optimization is really about optimizing the searches for one engine: Google. With all due respect to other excellent search engines, such as

Yahoo!, the most dominant search engine in existence is clearly Google.

DEFINING SEO

Wikipedia defines SEO as the process of improving the quality and volume of traffic to a website from search engines by way of unpaid search results.

Eddie Hill, the owner of Award Masters, in Pensacola, Florida, expands the scope of that definition, saying, "SEO is simply the fine tuning of a single web page to rank higher in the search engines for specific keywords. Google, Yahoo, Bing and others will look at on-page and off-page parameters that influence positively or negatively the placement of that single webpage in their rankings. Google holds their cards very tight, but they have admitted that they have over 200 different ranking factors that affect the order of their rankings. Optimization gives the search engines what they want, which in return will get you ranked higher. Think of it as playing the game by Google's rules."

David Matney, the owner of NetSoft Studio Software, in Reno, Nevada, adds, "Search engine optimization is the analysis of your competition as well as the analysis of your current website while identifying the different trending options that are occurring currently with the most prominent search engines. It is the utilization of tools that are available to everybody in the social media world. All of this is done to increase site traffic and the organic search engine listings for a website."

As you may have guessed, in this instance, organic does not refer to the earthy nutrients supplied. "There are two different types of search listings. There are paid listings, where you can actually pay to move your company to the top of the results list for searches on certain keywords. Then, there are organic listings based on how search engines view the contents of a site and the way they rank that site in their search results," explains Matney.

Search engine optimization is all about achieving as high a rank as possible for your website for a keyword, such as "awards," or "trophies."

HOW SEO HELPS

SEO helps because it increases one of the most essential necessities for successful business: customers. We know that SEO helps improve how well a website is ranked, but why does that matter? What difference will it make in regard to the daily transactions of your business? Well, to begin with, there will be more of them.

"If your awards shop is on page one (or

can be better spent on active media (as opposed to passive). There has been a huge shift in the way we gather, research, sift and disseminate information. 'Just Google it,' is now the norm, even for mobile devices. SEO also gives you a unique opportunity to dominate for hundreds of different niches. Obviously we want to rank well for awards and trophies. But, we can also get customers who are searching for rubber stamps, name tags, engraved pet memorials or any of the hundred other things we do," says Hill.

AN ROI CONVERSATION REGARDING SEO

That sounds great, but most things that sound great have a catch, and that catch often has something to do with a financial investment. Of course, when it comes to an investment, the most important catch to consider is the return on that investment.

The question of ROI is never easy to answer because it requires the consideration of multiple factors that vary from one situation to another, and SEO is no excep-

tion. Basically, there are two approaches to search engine optimization. One is to hire a company like NetSoft Studio, and they are obviously going to charge for their time. The other option is to do it yourself.

"What we try to do as a company is teach our customers the tricks of the trade," says Matney. "Instead of doing the search engine optimization for you, and never revealing the secrets to you, we try to teach our customers, 'This is what we do, and this is how we do it.' Doing that, we pass the information that's needed along to the awards retailer. They are then able to take that information, invest one to two hours a week, and work on search engine optimization at no additional cost other than their time."

When hunting for an SEO consultant to work with, Hill suggests business owners get references and historical data. "Just like many other industries, there are

A legitimate SEO company will charge anywhere from \$350 to several thousand dollars a month depending on the search terms you are trying to rank for. It will take several months to get an ROI, but it should be well worth the money invested.

even better, top three) of Google's search results for all your pertinent keywords, you will undoubtedly increase store traffic," says Hill.

Marketing is a tool companies use to increase business. When asked what form of marketing they use, most awards companies have one of two replies: word-of-mouth or Yellow Pages. Some say both, but unfortunately, in today's fast-paced digital age, even that is simply not enough.

Think of SEO as a component of a company's marketing, because that's exactly what it is. It's sort of a digital word-of-mouth. Or rather, it is the way to generate and take advantage of the 21st century's vehicle for the distribution of word-of-mouth: the Internet.

"It's no secret the ROI (Return On Investment) for Yellow Pages' ads is greatly declining, but I wouldn't recommend completely pulling out of Yellow Pages...yet. I do think, however, that time and money



By investing one or two hours a week, organic listings can be improved for free.

plenty of scam artists that will be glad to take your money," says Hill. "A legitimate SEO company will charge anywhere from \$350 to several thousand dollars a month depending on the search terms you are trying to rank for. It will take several months to get an ROI, but it should be well worth the money invested. Remember, Internet marketing is replacing Yellow Pages. The great thing about the Internet is that everything is trackable. It's easy to see what's working and what's not, and that includes an SEO company. You can split test everything and make changes on the fly."

There is another consideration, and that is to simply pay Google or another search engine for a top listing. Matney says that SEO, both search engine optimization and search engine optimizers, help companies by saving them the cost of paying several thousand dollars a month to achieve the same results with organic listings.

If a business can improve their organic listings, says Matney, there is no cost to rank on page one listing number five organically versus to list on that same page through a paid listing. For paid listings, a company could spend anywhere between \$2,500 and \$10,000 a month.

From a cost standpoint, every company should try to work on their organic search engine listings, even if they're doing a pay-per-click campaign.

"Eventually, they can replace that campaign if their organic listings get them to page one. Search engine optimization is extremely important in order to make sure your website is able to organically list as high as possible in the search engines without expending any money on outside resources. Obviously, you will spend resources internally, and those resources are based on the time involved in order to do that search engine optimization, which is usually one to two hours a week, not a huge investment in time," says Matney.

Hill agrees, "Search engine optimization is not a one-time event. Google's index is extremely dynamic, and it will change drastically in a short period of time. Also, SEO is not magical. It's just math, algorithmic math to be exact. Focus on keeping up-to-date, relevant content on your sites, while continuing to grow your inbound links. If you do, Google will reward you handsomely."

Hill also cautions that patience is key when it comes to SEO. "Rome wasn't

built in a day. Even though the speed of the Internet is lightning fast, it may take months before you see a real improvement in your rankings. There are too many variables to explain in this article, but it mostly depends on how tough the competition is. I have seen first page rankings on less competitive keywords happen in a few days. But then again, it has taken me over a year to get ranked nationwide for more competitive keywords."

IMPROVEMENTS

The question of how to improve a website is similar to the question of ROI in at least one respect: the answer varies a great deal depending on the site.

"There are so many different things that are considered into the search engine out-grid. Google has more than 200 pieces of different criteria they use to rank a company. You could write a book just on those 200 items. There isn't any one thing that any one company can do because everybody's website has problems," says Matney.

He adds that, in a sense, a search engine optimizer like NetSoft Studio has to play doctor for each individual business and ask them what their symptoms are. Once they know what the symptoms are, they can identify the problems and then prescribe medicine to fix them, but the prescription will be different for each company.

However, there are a few simple things that every company should do for their website. "The first thing every retail store should do is sign up for Google Places," says Hill. "This is also known as Google Maps. Register your business at <http://www.google.com/local/add>. You'll need to sign up for a Google account if you don't have one. Once your account is active, make sure you add photos, videos, description of services, store hours, types of payment, etc. More than likely, your competitors have not done this. Google Maps is the Yellow Pages of today."

"Second," Hill continues, "focus on getting quality inbound links to your website. You could write an article for an online article directory that gets published which will link back to your site. You could create a blog and link back to your

site. You could network with other local retail stores and harvest some inbound links. If you are a member of the Better Business Bureau or Chamber of Commerce, make sure they link to your site from their site. If you sponsor a golf tournament, get a link to your site. All these things will increase your rankings, and all it will cost you is time."

The more inbound links you have to your site, the higher it will rank. Hill says that Google sees an inbound link as a "vote" for your site. The more links, the more votes. Seven times out of ten, if a site has more quality, relevant, inbound links than their competitor, it will rank higher.

"The other 30 percent comes down to factors like on-page relevance, domain age, title tags, html and CSS errors, broken links, total number of indexed pages, and the actual URL name itself (plus about 192 other factors). Make sure you keep your website updated.

Keep adding new content like new photos, new articles and even new items for sale. Google wants to see that you are updating your site on a continual basis," says Hill.

RANK HIGHER WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

One of the most important things a company can do to improve their search engine ranking is to utilize social media. Social media is extremely important. Google has made some changes to their search algorithms, and with those algorithms, they are listening to what's going on in the Internet.

Matney explains, "Imagine you're standing in a big ballroom full of thousands of people. You hear all of these conversations going on. There are groups of three people, five people, seven people, all having their own conversation. Google is standing right in the middle, but they're not talking. They're listening. Google wants to know

what everyone is talking about, and social media accomplishes that. The Twitters, the Facebooks, the LinkedIns, these companies have constant conversation taking place. There are over a million conversations going on every hour on the Internet through the social media network. Search engines are listening, and they're interested in the hype and what everyone is talking about. Companies can see their search engine rankings move up and down on a daily basis based on the conversations search engines are hearing in that big ballroom, which is the Internet."

Unfortunately for them, a lot of companies are not participating in social media. They don't understand it, and they don't know how to get involved in it. Social media is a free media that is available on the Internet, and it's a lot of conversations. Companies want to boost the number of conversations about their company through social media with things like a blog.

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"It is extremely important to have a blog. Get your customers involved in posting on your blog. When you release a new product that's available in your store, go to Twitter and tweet about it. Let people know. Do the same thing on LinkedIn. Let them know. Social media is something every business can do for no more investment cost than time, but most do not," says Matney.

He adds that social media is used more by adults than kids, who keep in touch with their phones through instant messaging.

E-NEWSLETTERS & E-BLASTS HAVE BECOME OBSOLETE

With all of this talk of how to improve websites for search engine optimization, there is one element of marketing that has been noticeably absent, email.

Matney explains why, "A lot of people think they want to grab their customer's email addresses, and they do, but not for e-mail newsletter marketing."

Unfortunately, the reason many businesses want to grab those email addresses is to send out a monthly newsletter.

"A few years ago, if you had asked me about it, I would have said that monthly e-newsletters are very important. But, at that time, social media wasn't what it is now. What happens to junk mail in your inbox? You delete it. Other people do the same thing. Companies are not keeping in touch with their customers through email blasts. A lot are caught by spam filters. It's one of

the worst ways to keep customers informed. I don't even look at all of the newsletters I subscribe to, but I always look at Facebook. I always look at LinkedIn. I always look at Twitter. Email communication used to be a good method to keep customers informed, but it is probably the worst method now. Social media is the best method because they're not bombarded in their email inbox. If they send out a blast to their Facebook friend, their Facebook friends get the information and they view it when they have time. The communication effort through social media is much better than sending out email blasts," says Matney.

START TODAY

The best thing about SEO is that every company can begin to take action to optimize their website *at this very moment*. If you haven't already, sign up for accounts on Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Go to your computer and sign up for *all of them*. You may even have fun doing it. If you don't like doing it, ask someone else (maybe a teenager) to do it for you, but make sure it gets done one way or another.

After signing up, you may notice that much of the content on those sites are digital videos and photos. If you don't have a digital camera *and* a digital video camera, go out and buy one. If you don't, your business website will remain less sophisticated than the average teenager's Facebook page.

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