

A Neophyte in SEO Hell



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If you own or work for a company that depends on the web to sell a product, you know the importance of a good SERP (Search Engine Result Position), that is, your website's position within the listing of web pages returned by a search engine in response to a keyword query. If you depend on web traffic, it's fair to say that your position can make the difference between being profitable or bankrupt.

Two years ago, I couldn't have told you what SERP or SEO (Search Engine Optimization) stood for, and I was happily ignorant. The company I worked for was using traditional methods to advertise (print ads, press releases, exhibiting, etc.) along with pay-per-click on several search engines. These methods were driving a reasonable amount of traffic to our website and keeping the coffers adequately full.

And then that changed.

Two things happened: A marketing analysis determined that we weren't getting value for our print advertising (our potential buyers didn't read?). And the cost of pay-per-click jumped astronomically.

Our product had been around for a while. Being among the first companies to employ pay-per-click, we had been accustomed to paying very little for each click, literally cents. Competitors who had been happy to employ traditional selling methods apparently discovered the marketing advantages that the web offers and began to escalate the costs of the keywords we wanted. Pay-per-click had gotten too expensive to rely on exclusively. (Especially as there are sadists who click sponsored links deliberately to cost you money.)

One proposed solution was to increase our website's organic position (that is, the position you get naturally as a result of a search rather than the placement you pay for).

So began my sojourn in SEO hell.

Phase 1: Research

When faced with new technology, you must first research it. These days, that means hours on the web reading articles and forum posts to learn the terminology and processes. I now knew what SERP and SEO stood for. I learned that Google was god-like in the arena of search engines (some writers contended that Google had as much as 90% of the search engine market), highly secretive as to how they computed SERP and cavalier in their willingness to change the rules if they thought people were figuring them out. (The latter was even given its own name: the Google dance.)

I also learned that there was a lot of dubious information being propagated. People were forced to guess at the things that mattered to the search engines (read Google), and there was wide disagreement as to the validity of the guesses. And, of course, there were speakers, authors and companies who claimed to know how to do it, and who would be glad to share their knowledge for a price. SEO optimization had spawned a whole new industry.

Phase 2: Do It Yourself

If you're trying to increase your organic listing in order to save money, your first impulse is not to employ someone to optimize your website, especially not someone who will offer no guarantees but wants to charge you the equivalent of several months of pay-per-click billing. No, first you try to do it yourself.

There seemed to be a few things that were commonly agreed upon:

- Remove any styles or JavaScript from the raw web page. (I never understood this particular injunction. If the search engines ignore script and styles, what's harmful about leaving it in place? Does it contribute to the page count and artificially reduce the density of needed keywords? I never found an explanation of this dictum.)
- Include a series of meta tags on each webpage, paying particular attention to the title, description and keyword meta tags. Don't put important information in graphics and, if you do, add ALT tags to compensate. In fact, ALL graphics must have ALT tags and it's OK to repeat your relevant search terms in those tags.



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- Make sure all of your webpages are linked, and include a sitemap that the spiders and robots can follow. As a corollary, submit your site directly to the search engines. (And there was a whole arcana connected with how the sitemap must look and which formats to put it in. Interestingly, all of that seems to have disappeared as Google now accepts either an XML or text file that consists of nothing but links to all your content.)
- Get lots of inbound links, but avoid directories and paid links, as Google will ignore these. This can be difficult. Who would link to a website that was selling a product and which had no content other than product-specific literature? (A competitor who wanted to claim his product was better than ours and linked to us to prove it?) But most important, the inbound link doesn't help if the linker has a lower page rank than you do so you only want inbound links from higher-ranking sites.
- And one suggestion strongly made in a seminar I attended: If the names of your pages match the keyword (or words) you wish to be found under, your ranking will be higher. This would necessitate renaming all of the pages of our website, but if it would really help, how could I ignore it?
- Social media is now critical. So start a blog, get Twitter and FaceBook accounts, post pictures on Pinterest, videos on Vimeo and YouTube, and don't forget Linked-In.

Those of you knowledgeable of SEO will notice several alarming and critical omissions in the list above. Where's keyword optimization, for example? Unfortunately, that was a topic I somehow missed in all the reading and seminars. I somehow got the impression that having the right keywords in the keyword meta tag would tell the search engine which keywords and phrases I wanted them to connect with my website. I missed the very critical notion that those exact words and phrases have to be found in the searchable text of your web page, and worse yet, they have to be found in the appropriate position and appropriate proportion.

Armed with inadequate and misleading information, I altered our website, changing the page names, inserting a carefully-considered list of keyword meta tags (the same set on each page), removed graphics in favor of text, added a sitemap and submitted the site to Google.

Notice something else: In altering the names of the webpages, I lost whatever page rank the original pages had had by virtue of their ages. Gone. In an instant. The seminar speaker who suggested the naming convention should have said, "Certainly do this if you are building a new site. But be aware of the result if you have an existing and venerable site."

(There was a work-around as I discovered too late. Keep reading to find out what it is.)



Phase 3: Nothing Worked, Hire Someone

There are a lot of tools, some free, that will tell you what your page rank is, what your numerical position in the various search engines is, and a ton of even more esoteric information like keyword density, link popularity, code-to-text ratio, etc. I found a few tools that (a) I could understand and (b) were free, and began to obsessively check the new website for positive progress. Two months later, there was no discernable progress. Our website wasn't in the top 100 for Google and Bing, although I had managed a ranking of 16 in Yahoo. I have no idea why Yahoo liked us better than the other two engines.

Having spent weeks researching the way to increase SERP and then more weeks reworking a website, to find that nothing had made a difference is discouraging to say the least. I got permission to look into hiring someone who specialized in the area. I won't go into the details of

the several discussions I had with prospective companies except to say: They all start by giving you a free analysis of your website, which confirms the awful truth that you are nowhere in the search lists because you are doing everything wrong. If you have a suicidal temperament, avoid these free analyses.

We picked a company that could provide references from satisfied customers and didn't cost the earth. Oh, and one that did not insist on doing the website work themselves. They agreed to tell me what to do, which allowed us to save some money.

Here are some of the things we were directed to do:

- Because we sell two products that have nothing in common, we were directed to create separate websites for each. This meant new domains (worse yet, a .BIZ top-level domain for one of the products because no suitable .COM or .NET domains were available), plus all the work of doing two new websites. "New" is the operable word here, because Google apparently gives points for longevity, and a new domain has none, so the new websites would have to be wonderfully optimized to make up for the loss of longevity points.
- Keyword density was explained and we were advised to optimize for one or two key phrases and to write the text so that those words/phrases were repeated an optimal number of times (4-8% according to this consultant). (As an aside, you'll throw out most of the rules of good writing in order to do this.) We were also advised that the pages should have at least 250 words of searchable text. (Another aside: the consultant noted that the keywords we wanted were very popular and suggested that we optimize for a less popular phrase. Problem is, if you know what potential customers will type, what's the point of optimizing for a phrase no one will ever use? The consultant seemed to think that getting a good ranking for something, anything, should be enough of a goal.)
- We were given a set of meta tags to use and given some general advice as to the phrasing of the description and keyword tags. This advice is standard and expected and I bring it up only to note that one of the meta tags we were told to use is this one:

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<META NAME="revisit-after" CONTENT="2 days">
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Its apparent purpose is to tell the spiders and robots how often to re-examine your site. ("Here Google, Google, Google" as one wit put it.) But, as I later found out, it doesn't exist, doesn't do anything. Do a search for the tag. It's been propagated widely and is often included among the meta tags you are told to add to your web pages. Yet it's bogus. But our "expert" told us to use it. Hmmm.

- We were advised to include a sitemap, and to repeat our navigation links as text, since we were using a style (CSS) to create a graphical menu system on the pages. It is very important, said the consultant, that the engines be able to travel your entire site. In this connection, we were also advised to insert a robots.txt file to eliminate customer-only areas from being crawled.

Weeks later, all suggestions had been implemented and the obsessive checking of rank began on these new websites. A month later, our Yahoo ranking had dropped from 16 to 36 and we still weren't in the top 100 for Google or Bing. I was now torn between looking for another job or hiring another, probably more expensive consultant.

Phase 4: Continuing Misery in SEO Hell

If you're hoping this article will end with a list of useful suggestions or a magical formula for raising your website's rankings, I apologize. If there are any, I couldn't find them. But I do have some conclusions and observations that you might want to bear in mind as you attempt to optimize your own site.

- There are lots of SEO experts out there, many of them charging princely sums. I don't say that we hired a bad one, only that nothing he suggested appeared to work. Then we got lucky: the SEO expert that a client of ours hired turned out to



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know what she was doing, so we hired her. And the things she directed us to do actually worked! If you are going to hire an SEO expert, take the trouble to find a good one. The best way is through a reference you trust.

- There is also considerable argument about whether the keyword meta tags are even meaningful. A number of writers claim Google is now ignoring them. And no way to find out for sure, apparently. Our current SEO expert says they are still useful and even added to the ones we had.
- There is value in longevity. Even if you need a new website, don't destroy the old one (or at least, not all of it). Let it redirect visitors to your new site. The only reason we have a reasonable search engine presence at all is because we turned the landing pages of the original websites into redirection pages. Interestingly, they have little content (way, way under the suggested 250 words), and the content won't change. (How many ways are there to say, "We've moved. Click here for the new site?") But they have been around for a long time and that apparently counts for more than many of the other suggestions you will get. Again, hmmm.
- One of the bits of advice you are given is to examine your competitors' sites to see what they are doing. I discovered that a competitor with a number one spot on Google had a website that apparently violated all the rules. JavaScript and style definitions eat up fully half of each page. Keyword phrases don't show up near the top of the page, nor are they used in <H1> or <H2> tags, nor are they used densely. As best as it is possible to tell, the site simply managed to get a couple of really decent inbound links (one from Microsoft, in fact). Take this fact for what it's worth.
- Another website, a charitable enterprise that is not optimized for anything, has a very high page ranking and excellent SERP simply because it changes constantly (often daily). There are a lot of websites that change frequently (go to any news organization's website). If you rely on changing content to draw visitors, it would appear you don't have to do much beyond that. It takes great creativity to find a way to regularly change a website that is selling something. Nevertheless, it would appear it's worth the effort. In fact, that's one of the reasons to add a blog to your site. (The problem of finding something to say as well as the time to say it, I leave to your ingenuity.)

My final conclusion is not cheerful, but I think it is realistic: There are tons of opinions about how to go about raising your ranking but most of them are just guesses. As noted everywhere, Google uses arcane and changing algorithms and is intensely secretive, so no one but their own employees really knows what will work or not work. And with millions of websites competing for position, your chance of getting to the top of the lists will take work, trial and error, time, and/or a great SEO consultant, but it can be done.



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