



# australian **web** **industry** association

## SEO - Search Engine Optimisation

### Choosing the Right Provider

A Quick Guide for Web Site Owners

An information pamphlet designed to improve your understanding of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).

24<sup>th</sup> March 2009 – v2.0 © [www.webindustry.asn.au](http://www.webindustry.asn.au)

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# SEO – Search Engine Optimisation: Choosing the Right Provider

## What is SEO?

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimisation. It's the art of increasing your site's natural search engine ranking, so that you rank high in the right searches. It entails:

1. **'On-page' and 'On-site' optimisation** – Telling the search engines what your site is about, so they know what searches it's relevant to. This involves making your site 'search-friendly' so their 'bots' can read it, then using the right keywords in your content and code (e.g. HTML) and paying careful attention to how all your pages fit together.
2. **'Off-page' optimisation** – Proving to the search engines that your site is important in its field (i.e. will likely be helpful to searchers). This process is mostly a matter of increasing the number and quality of links pointing to your site.

## Why do you need SEO?

The ultimate goal of SEO is to increase relevant traffic to your website, hence generating more revenue for the web site. Search engines are critical to traffic generation because:

- The Internet is the world's second most commonly used medium after television (Internet Statistics Compendium, 2006)
- Approximately 1.5 billion people use the Internet, worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2008)
- 93% of users worldwide use search engines to find websites (Forrester Research)
- 80% of Asia Pacific Internet Users Go Online to Shop (Visa survey)
- 74% of the Australian population uses the Internet as of December 2007 (International Telecommunication Union)
- 66% of online Americans have purchased a product online (Pew Internet)
- Search engines are the way most people (85%) find new sites, and the way most businesses find new sources for products and services (Direct Marketing Association)
- Roughly 750 million people worldwide over the age 15 conducted a search on the Internet in August 2007 (comScore)
- About 15% of traffic on brand names is landing at competitor, affiliate or 'other' websites in US and AU markets where trademark restrictions are not strictly enforced (Hitwise)

## What SEO is NOT

A silver bullet for increasing your web site's revenue. If done well, it will increase the amount of qualified traffic to your site, but you also need to focus on your site's design, usability and message, in order to increase conversions.

## What NOT to expect from SEO

A top 5 position (or even top 20) after 1 week of SEO. It takes a lot of time and manual labour to rank well. You should expect anywhere between 3 to 12 weeks for moderate results with moderate competition, and up to a year for extremely competitive key phrases. The cost should reflect the results and work involved.

## Engaging an SEO company

Generating links takes a long time and involves a lot of work. Like any other form of promotion, it requires investment - either in time or money. If you decide to pay an SEO company, always ask them exactly what they'll be doing. Ask them what keywords they'll be targeting, and how they'll target them.

There are no secret methods, so if they can't or won't tell you, **DO NOT** engage them. If they tell you but you are unable to completely understand, **DO NOT** engage them. (There are no link generation methods that are too complex for the layperson to understand when explained properly.)

Also, always be clear in your own mind about exactly what you're paying for. Remember that there are two parts to obtaining a high ranking: optimizing your site, and building links back to your site. Always get your SEO company to explain exactly which part(s) they will do for you, and how they plan to do it.

## Things to be wary of

While most SEO providers are honest and decent, a handful are not. They know that Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is an utter mystery to most of their customers, and that nobody outside of Google truly knows Google's ranking rules. So they lie. So before engaging an SEO company, consider the following.

- **No SEO provider has a deal with Google.** That would totally undermine the relevance of Google's results. All SEOs are on the outside, looking in. Doing their best to unravel the complex mathematical mystery that is Google's ranking algorithm.
- **"No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google."** This is from Google itself. If the provider says they can, avoid them!
- **You can't rank for an unlimited number of keywords.** To optimise your site for a keyword or keyword phrase, you just use it more often than any other word or phrase. But because your site has only a finite number of words, there's a limit to the number of keywords you can target.
- **Some SEO providers display misleading logos.** E.g. They might display the logo of a major bank on their Clients page, when all they have ever done for that bank is Pay-Per-Click advertising – not SEO – for a single keyword, once, long ago. So always be sure to ask exactly what your SEO provider has done for each client it claims. And ask for references.
- **There's no point submitting your site to thousands of search engines.** This won't get you a high ranking. The truth is, you usually don't have to submit your site at all.
- **You don't have to spend a lot on Google AdWords** to get a good organic ranking. Paid search advertising is absolutely independent of your site's natural ranking. Google's success

relies on its ability to deliver relevant results. The moment it took money in return for natural search ranking, its reputation for relevance would be justifiably ruined.

## Questions you should ask your prospective SEO provider

Pricing should not be the deciding factor when choosing an SEO provider. You should also consider customer service, results, experience, proven achievements, and whether they offer any written guarantees for their service.

Before engaging any SEO provider, always ask them the following questions.

1. **Can you guarantee the #1 position on Google?** If the answer is yes, avoid them! This is what Google has to say on the matter: "No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google."
2. **Can you provide top results with generic keyphrases?** Make sure the key-phrases chosen for your site are generic terms and are likely to be typed into the search field by users. It is extremely easy to rank well for obscure key-phrases that no one searches for, like "tall handsome rich Plumber and leaks repair perth wa". It's much harder to rank well for just "plumber perth" or "perth plumber".
3. **Do you supply a comprehensive written quotation & guarantee?** Make sure their quote outlines the key-phrases your site will be optimised for, pricing, and the search engines being targeted (Google, Yahoo and MSN). Also ensure you get some form of guarantee (with a stated period for which the guarantee is valid).
4. **Do you follow the guidelines set out by the search engines?** Google, Yahoo and other significant search engines have gone to the trouble of writing up guidelines so they don't have to penalise you for unethical practices. If your SEO provider fails to follow these guidelines, your site will likely be penalised or – worse – banned from the search results, altogether.
5. **How long have you been performing SEO and can I contact your customers for references?** If an SEO provider is unwilling to provide references, this may be a sign that they have something to hide. When checking references, ask about the provider's performance and general quality of service. Also ask if they'd be willing to recommend the provider.

## How do search engines work?

Search engine companies like Google and Yahoo are all about finding content that will bring them more traffic (and thus more ad revenue). In other words, their results must be relevant and high quality. In the words of Nathan Buggia of Microsoft Live Search: "Our whole role in life is to find the best content on the web and bring it together with people who are looking for that content. And to do that, we've invented a couple of algorithms to figure out what people think is good content." (SMX East Search Marketing Conference, New York City, October 2008) Here's a simplistic explanation of how search engines work:

1. **Crawl** – They send out 'bots' (aka 'spiders' or 'robots') that crawl your pages and send back details for processing.
2. **Index** – They then use really complex mathematical algorithms to deduce the subject matter of your site from frequently used words and the text on links to, from, and within your site. This tells them which searches your pages are relevant to.

3. **Rank** – They consider some 200 factors when ranking, but the most important – of those that you can actually manipulate – is the number of external links pointing to your site, where those links come from, and what anchor text is used in those links. If there are lots of links pointing to your site, all from quality sites, and all with relevant words in their anchor text, you're likely to rank well. The logic is that if all those webmasters are willing to link to you and they've used a variety of relevant words in their links (i.e. they're not automated links), your site must be relevant and important.

Note that the age of your site and the consistency of your subject matter over time also impact your ranking; they build site authority.

## SEO vs SEM

SEM stands for Search Engine Marketing: the use of search engines to market/promote your website.

Although many people think that SEM is just paid advertising (e.g. Google Adwords, sponsored linked, etc.), this is NOT the case. SEM is an umbrella term that includes SEO. In other words, SEO is a specific kind of SEM.

## SEO vs Paid Search Advertising

Paid search advertising includes the likes of Google Adwords. Your ad displays whenever someone searches for a word that is related to your product or service. These ads look similar to the natural search results, but are labelled with something like "Sponsored Links". The ranking of your ad depends mostly on how much you're prepared to pay for each click you get.

Usually it costs you nothing to place your ad, but you pay each time someone clicks on it to visit your site. And unlike the natural results, your ad will appear within minutes of you setting it up.

Most businesses find a high natural search ranking (through SEO) is more cost effective than a high rank paid search ad. That's because your SEO investment generally tapers once you achieve a high ranking, whereas your paid search investment will normally continue to increase.

That said, paid search advertising is an effective stop-gap measure. Many businesses use paid search ads until their SEO does its job. Some also use paid search ads for time-sensitive and short-term campaigns (where instant results are required).

SEO and paid search advertising are usually best performed by the same provider, because they've already performed the necessary research, they've consulted extensively with you, and they're in the best position to ensure your SEO and paid advertising complement each other to achieve your objectives.

**IMPORTANT: Paid search advertising does NOT affect your natural search ranking.**

## Glossary

<b>Algorithm</b>	A complex mathematical formula used by search engines to assess the relevance and importance of websites and rank them accordingly in their search results. These algorithms are kept tightly under wraps as they're the key to the objectivity of search engines (i.e. the algorithm ensures relevant results, and relevant results bring more users, which in turn brings more advertising revenue).
<b>ALT text</b>	"Alternate Text" – used to describe an image. This text is displayed by browsers that don't support image display, and by vision-impaired users who use screen readers that read the Alt text aloud to describe the image.
<b>Anchor Text</b>	(aka Link Text) The clickable text of a hyperlink.
<b>Below the fold</b>	Content of a web page that is not seen by the user unless they scroll down.
<b>Blind Traffic</b>	Low quality traffic generated by misleading banners or SPAM.
<b>Bot</b>	Search engines find pages on the World Wide Web by sending out 'bots' that make their way from page to page and site to site by following text links. These bots send back information which the search engines then use to index each site to ensure it displays in the most appropriate searches.
<b>Clustering</b>	In search engine search results pages, clustering is limiting each represented website to one or two listings. Clustering is also used to describe the practice of grouping related web pages together in your website structure.
<b>CPA</b>	Cost Per Action. An accurate measure of the effectiveness of a paid search ad. (The cost of getting a single user to perform a desired action. (Not just click on your ad.))
<b>CPC</b>	Cost Per Click. The cost of getting a single user to click on your paid search ad.
<b>CPM</b>	Cost per 1,000 impressions. A metric used in the administration of paid search advertising. (An 'impression' occurs when your ad is displayed during a user's search.)
<b>Crawl</b>	Search engine 'bots' (aka 'spiders' or 'robots') make their way across your website gathering data to send back for analysis. This process is called 'crawling'. Bots make their way from page to page and site to site by following text links. To a bot, a text link is like a door. Think of it as the search engines reading your site.
<b>CSS</b>	Cascading Style Sheets. A set of standards that govern the appearance of your website (so things like font size, background colour, margin width, etc., don't have to be defined individually in the code of every page).

<b>CTR</b>	Click Through Ratio. A metric used to measure the effectiveness of a paid search ad. It's the number of times users have clicked on your ad to visit your site versus the total number of impressions.
<b>Doorway Page</b>	A web page designed to draw in Internet traffic from search engines, and then direct this traffic to another page or website.
<b>EPV</b>	Earnings Per Visitor.
<b>Google PageRank</b>	How Google scores a website's importance. It gives all sites a mark out of 10. By downloading the Google Toolbar (from <a href="http://toolbar.google.com">http://toolbar.google.com</a> ), you can view the PR of any site you visit. (Note, however, that the PageRank you see through the toolbar is very unreliable.)
<b>Hit</b>	A single access request made to the server. A hit can be many things other than an actual human visit, so hits are NOT a reliable indication of traffic. A web page can register multiple hits due to the number of graphics and/or scripts making up the page.
<b>HTML</b>	HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is the coding language used to create much of the information on the World Wide Web. Web browsers read the HTML code and display the page that code describes.
<b>IBL</b>	Inbound Link (aka backlink). A link from another site to yours.
<b>Keyword</b>	(aka "key phrase" or "keyword phrase") A word which your customers search for and which you use frequently on your site in order to be relevant to those searches. This use is known as targeting a keyword. Most websites actually target 'keyword phrases' because single keywords are too generic and very difficult to rank for.
<b>Natural Search Results</b>	The 'real' search results. The results that most users are looking for and which take up most of the window. For most searches, the search engine displays a long list of links to sites with content which is related to the word you searched for. These results are ranked according to how relevant and important they are.
<b>Outbound Link</b>	A link from your site to another site.
<b>Page Views</b>	The number of times a web page is served/viewed. This is a much more accurate measurement of traffic than "HITS".
<b>PPC</b>	Pay Per Click. A form of paid search advertising where you pay whenever someone clicks on your ad to visit your site.
<b>Query</b>	When someone searches for a word or phrase using a search engine.
<b>Rank</b>	Your position in the natural search results that display when someone uses a search engine to search for a word related to your site's subject matter.
<b>ROI</b>	Return on Investment.
<b>SE</b>	Search engine.
<b>SEM</b>	Search Engine Marketing.

<b>SEO</b>	Search Engine Optimisation.
<b>SEO Copywriter</b>	A 'copywriter' who is not only proficient in web copy, but also experienced in writing copy that is optimized for search engines, and who will therefore help you rank higher. (Glenn Murray, co-author of this document is an SEO copywriter)
<b>SERP</b>	Search Engine (Search) Results Page. The page that displays the results when you click Search in a search engine.
<b>Stemming</b>	Variations to a particular word. E.g. if you search for "design", a search engine that supports stemming may return results that includes "designs", "designer" and "designing".