ComputerWeekly.com

Guide to buying SEO services

How to choose the right SEO supplier for your business

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of business operations and marketing via the Internet has resulted in fierce competition between websites for the users' attention. It is thus of utmost importance that your website has maximum exposure, and search engine optimisation (SEO) can greatly enhance this.

Search engines are generally internet users' first and main source of information. When users search for sites using words that apply to your web site, it is important that it appears as close to the top of the search results as possible. A high placement for relevant terms should lead to more qualified traffic to your site, and subsequently (so long as your website is up to scratch) generate qualified leads for your business.

What an SEO company offers in the most basic terms is the modification of a website in such ways that it achieves a high ranking in search engine listings for relevant terms to your product or service offering. In addition to this it involves a process of obtaining quality links to your site from other websites in your field of expertise, though there are many other aspects to SEO.

This guide will show you the concepts behind SEO and some ways it works in practice, along with some advice on choosing an SEO company and a guide to prices.

We have pre-approved UK based SEO companies who are able to provide you with professional search engine optimisation and marketing services. Start by submitting your outline requirements from our simple enquiry form to receive free no obligation quotes from 6 leading companies in the UK. It's as simple as that.

What is SEO?

The rapid proliferation of business operations and marketing via the Internet has resulted in fierce competition between websites for the users' attention. It is thus of utmost importance that your website has maximum exposure, and search engine optimisation (SEO) can greatly enhance this. What search engine optimisation basically entails is the modification of a website in such ways that it achieves a high ranking in search engine listings for relevant terms to your product or service offering. A high placement for relevant terms should lead to more qualified traffic to your site.

About search engines

The ultimate goal of SEO is to make search engines favour your site over others. To understand how this can be done, it is important to also understand the principles by which search engines operate.

Search engines aim to provide internet users with the web sites and pages they are looking for. At the most elementary level, this occurs by matching the words the user has used for their search (the query) with web pages that contain these query words. As there are literally billions of web pages, most words will occur very frequently. Looking at the number of results in a typical, broad Google search demonstrates this. In order to provide the user with the most relevant and appropriate results, search engines employ a number of techniques.

Indexing

When you use a search engine, you are not really searching the internet. You are searching the search engine's index, which is its own database of web pages and their contents. Search engines build their indexes with computer programs – 'spiders' which 'crawl' the World Wide Web. This crawling consists of loading web pages, analysing and storing their content, and following the hyperlinks to

other pages or sites. An index allows the search engine to store information about web pages in a format that allows easy searching.

Simply indexing the World Wide Web is not enough to provide useful search results and a good user experience. Search engines use various other kinds of information in order to rank web pages. While these kinds of information are often trade secrets, and can be numerous (Google uses over 200 'signals' in rating web pages), but some are fairly well known.

Link analysis

The World Wide Web is a massively interconnected network of pages. This structure is what makes browsing the web possible, and it is exploited by search engines to rank search results. Imagine that you had just formulated a unified theory of physics, life, the universe and everything, and posted it on your blog. It's a fair assumption that such an historic event would attract a lot of attention and as a result, many other web sites and blogs would write about your theory and – importantly – link back to your blog. By taking a wide, overall view of the web, search engines can analyse what links are pointing where, and will generally judge that a site with lots of incoming links is a useful or important one, especially if the linking sites contain similar words to the linked-to page (in our example these words might be 'unified', 'theory', 'physics', 'life', 'universe', 'everything'). Additionally, the 'quality' of a given site, which will be based on a combination of factors, can be taken into account, so links from a prominent or reliable site will improve the ranking of sites and pages which are linked to. This is a key way in which search engines rank sites, and consequently also of high importance for SEO.

Relatedness and relevance

As implied above, when you perform a search with a given query, your search engine will search in its index for pages containing those words or that phrase. As such, web sites or pages which contain the query words many times will generally achieve a high

ranking, since this implies that the page or site is related to the search query.

For example, if you performed a search with the query 'cricket bats' then you would hope to find a site discussing or selling cricket equipment, specifically bats. Clearly a web page discussing the history of the cricket bat would mention the words many times, as would a listing of an online shop's range of cricket bats. Aside from the text visible to users, HTML web pages include descriptive text (for example, the 'alt text' attribute for images is used by screen reading software to describe the image to vision impaired users) which may also contain the words in the search query.

A potential problem, however, arises from the ambiguity of natural human language. Searching for 'cricket bats' you might well find a page about wildlife, describing the feeding habits (crickets) of animals (bats). Because of situations like this, search engines employ sophisticated text analysis techniques to better determine the subject of web content.

Exploiting search engines

Given that some techniques used by search engines to rank web pages are known or can be inferred, and the value of top search engine rankings, SEO has rapidly developed with webmasters trying all sorts of techniques to fool their algorithms. The two most common of these are keyword spamming and link farming.

Keyword spamming works by placing certain words within a web site's pages multiple times. This can be done with useless pages, or hidden in the HTML code of the pages. The idea is that search engines will then rate the page as more useful for those words and thus rank it higher in its search results pages. A link farm is a collection of separate web sites, all of which link to every other one. Here the idea is that search engines will improve each site's rankings because of the links. Typically link farming is done

automatically. Most search engines are now sophisticated enough that their software will recognise basic attempts to manipulate page rankings like these. For example, Google's patented PageRank algorithm attaches a weight or importance to links it analyses, so a link to your site from, say, a government website, would likely be judged as valuable, whereas a link from a link farm would not.

Search engines use all sorts of other methods to improve their search results, while webmasters continue to find new ways to improve their rankings by exploit these techniques. As such there is a kind of ongoing game of cat and mouse. It is always worth remembering, however, that search engines are trying to provide the best possible service to their users, so if you make your site useful to users, it has a better chance of being ranked highly. This is the concept behind link baiting (see below).

The value of professionals

Having only scratched the surface of search engine technology and SEO methods, it should be clear that the SEO process is not a simple one, and as such it should be left to the experts. Equally important is that these experts must be reputable. Aggressive and unethical search engine optimisation tactics have resulted in many websites being penalised and even banned from search engine indexes. At the other extreme, inefficient and incompetent work will result in you paying for an insignificant change in your site's ranking. Thus for the average businessperson who is not well versed in search engine technology, the job of selecting a reputable search engine optimisation company can be a daunting and dangerous one. However, do not be put off, as the Return on Investment of this marketing tool can be huge in comparison with traditional marketing methods.

SEO TECHNIQUES: WHITE AND BLACK HATS

As described above, some SEO techniques involve honest design methods and following search engines' recommendations in order to achieve a good page ranking. Others involve 'tricking' the search engines and forcing improved rankings by exploiting their algorithms. Borrowing terminology traditionally used to categorise computer hackers as to whether they have honest intentions like securing IT systems, or bad ones like stealing credit card details, SEO can be either 'white hat' (in the former case) or 'black hat' (in the latter). Whereas white hat SEO is focussed on creating quality, accessible web sites for people (which consequently will be highly ranked by search engines), black hat SEO is intentionally malicious, in as much as it ignores the search engines' rules and recommendations. As such white hat SEO tends to produce lasting results, while black hat SEO may temporarily produce better results, with the downside that sites are often banned from search engines. Unless you are working on some kind of a get-rich-quick project, for business purposes you should really only consider using white hat SEO techniques.

White hat SEO is all about users. Since search engines want to give precedence to sites which their users will find useful, good practice in web design naturally leads to good rankings. Many white hat SEO techniques, then, improve the user's experience of the web site. Below is a detailed description of some common white hat SEO techniques, with a brief summary of some black hat alternatives.

Good HTML

HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is the code with which all web pages are written. While the topic of writing good HTML can, and does, fill volumes, there are few key things to remember which help make better web pages and thus better search engine rankings. HTML defines the structure of a web page, so it is important to make use of all its features. For example, HTML pages have a 'title' attribute, so this should be descriptive of the content of the page

(rather than just your company's name). HTML also provides hierarchical headings (H1, H2, H3 and so on), and structuring the content within this hierarchy helps search engines analyse the page's content. Meta tags provide space for information about the page that is invisible to the user, and are another good place for descriptions and keywords. Many HTML elements like images and hyperlinks have attributes for descriptions. For images, this is displayed if the file cannot be loaded, or if a screen reader 'reads' a page to a vision-impaired user. For links, this text will pop up as a 'tool tip' when a user hovers their mouse pointer over the link for a time, and again can be read by screen readers. Both provide more space for descriptive content which search engines will analyse, quite apart from being good web design practice. Using CSS web design, you can separate the content and structure of a web page from the styles (in a separate file) that determine how it is displayed. For SEO, this is useful as it means there is less irrelevant text in each HTML page, making your pages easier for search engines to analyse, as well as increasing the ratio of keywords to other text.

Site setup

The overall way that your site is set up can have a dramatic impact on both its usability and its search engine ranking. For a start, a domain name that includes the right keyword(s) will help. For example, www.download.com is a site offering file downloads. The directory (folder) and file names can also be used to describe their contents and include keywords. For example, the URL www.stories.com/childrens/the-bear.html implies that the web page will contain a children's story about a bear. This technique is often used on blog and news sites, where article titles are used in the URLs, for example, the URL www.news.com/Obama-wins-presidential-election gives you, and a search engine, a big hint about what is contained in the page.

A site map, which is essentially the contents page for your web site, is also important for both usability and SEO. Since a site map should link to every page on your site, it means that search engines' spiders

will be able to get to them all, easily. You could also include descriptive text which will help search engines to determine the contents of the page on your site.

Content

Content is possibly the most important aspect of SEO, since it is content that users want, and content that search engines try to recognise as useful. At the highest level, it is helpful to have a definite theme for the content on your website. For example, if your two main interests were music and football, it would make more sense for you to run a separate blog about each subject. This way, each blog site will have more value in its own subject area, since it is not convoluted by irrelevant content – there is little crossover between the two.

In general and up to a point, a high keyword density is helpful for SEO. Rather than artificially repeating the keywords, try using them in headings, descriptions, and in your text more than you might normally, ideally in every paragraph. Be careful, though – if your web pages have to high a density of keywords, this could have a negative effect on its ranking, as it might be judged by search engine software to be keyword spamming (see above).

Quality

Although it may be tempting to write keyword-heavy articles, be sure that you write or otherwise create content for users first. Good quality content will attract users and hopefully links to your site (see link baiting, below), and is more likely to be judged to be useful by search engines. Copying content from other sites will not necessarily add much value to your own, since search engines will likely have a record of the original and spot the duplication. Duplication of content within your site is unlikely to help either.

Quantity and frequency

Aside from quality, having a large quantity of content is a good idea too. Two sites competing for search engine rankings might differ only in the number of pages, posts or articles on their chosen topic, so (all else being equal) a search engine will likely prefer the bigger site. In the same vein, regularly updating your content makes your site more useful, attractive, and favourable to search engines. In the respect, having a blog on your site can be a boon, as blogs are designed specifically for regular updates and content can be written without any specialist web design knowledge.

Link baiting

The core idea of link baiting is to create a piece of content which is centred on a set demand from a specific audience. Some of the most common link baiting techniques are to talk about a specific community, give people a way to feel important about themselves, someone they care about, or something they feel should be important. The idea is that people will then link back to your site, and this in turn will improve your search engine ranking. There are a number of factor that will make content successful link bait.

Identify and connect

Human emotions are your motivation. Tap into the sense of empathy. Make sure that your idea is implemented in such a way that it especially appeals to one group (or especially offends another). If other people are fighting over guessing your intentions you will get quality links. Make your link bait look comprehensive. Remember, perception is more important than reality.

Create belonging/community

It's a part of human nature to want to belong and to be a part of a community. Give your readers a place where they are part of a community and you will find that they'll link to it from their blogs. People quite often link to the comments section of posts, or

comment threads that they themselves have participated in rather that the post itself. Many bloggers also participate in and link to discussion forums. Use this to your advantage.

Scoops

Most of us like a good scoop. If you're related to being the first to break a story in your niche, use the opportunity. The amount of others that link to you giving you credit for being the source of their own news post can be quite massive, particularly if your scoop becomes national or even international news.

Go the extra mile

To further your progress, cite research, further reading, and link out to related resources from within your content. You won't realise it at first but it makes your story look well researched and associates your work with other trusted names or brands in your field. Consider citing a few people that you want links from, then dress up your link bait using quality design or relevant images from sites like iStockphoto.

Free Tools

We all require tools, or would just like to have them to make life a little easier. Give other website owners a useful, fun or cool tool that they can use on their blog. Make sure it links back and points back to your own.

Quizzes

We've all completed a quiz, or at least attempted it. Quizzes, surveys and tests are widely popular on the web. So, why not make great use of it? A quiz can serve as a 'tool' if it helps people assess their knowledge, and can help spread the word about your site if people link to it or share it with friends via email.

Humour

Laughter is the best medicine but can do so much for your link baiting too. Some of the best and most effective link baiting content has a humorous edge to it. It could be a cartoon, a funny photo, a story or even a title that gets a laugh. People enjoy humour and are always ready to pass it on.

Design

Designs can do wonders when it comes to generating incoming links. It's a clever move to design something that others use in large numbers. A good blog theme or template, with an inbuilt link to its designer, might be chosen and used widely to create a huge number of incoming links. So, aim for your designs to be picked up as default themes.

Rants

A well written, well argued and passionate rant is very link worthy. The reason is that people get stirred up easily when you get passionate and the links will often flow naturally as a result. On the other hand, when you write a rant you need to expect that people will react both positively and negatively. So, be ready on both accounts, but remember that, on the World Wide Web, interest – whether positive or negative – breeds links.

Attack!

Offend someone. Another way to get attention is to pick a fight with another blogger. Your aim is to tempt them and others to bite back. You need a reaction. However, realise that if you do this, you and your business's reputation may be affected, so be sure that your attack can be justified and is aligned with your core values. If you're going to build a blog purely on offending people you'll need to be ready to be offended too. You should also bear in mind that this approach can be rather difficult to sustain.

Shock

Shock tactics can have a similar effect as attacking others. It's a technique that some people use quiet effectively – in fact, it's been done for years in other mediums. So, it is no wonder that people are using this technique on the web too. You can illustrate shock via language, extreme views, showing controversial or titillating pictures or video etc. This is definitely a tactic that some use with real effect, but again bear in mind the implications for your image, and any relevant legislation.

Research and Stats

If you research a popular or topical subject and provide results that can be used by people, you'll be able to generate incoming links effectively. Links are made when you have interesting statistics that directly apply to something people are passionate about.

Give a Freebie

When Oprah has her giveaway shows, there are loads of women screaming her way. That's the power you get when you give things away. People love to receive. In fact, some people don't give a hoot what you're giving away, as long as they don't have to pay for it. Remember, the giving of gifts can create the buzz that may give you that edge.

Black hat techniques

Black hat is the dark side of SEO, and focuses on subverting search engines' systems to achieve quick results. You should not really consider black hat SEO techniques as their success tends to be short-lived and can result in your site being banned from search engines, as when Google banned BMW in 2006 for using questionable practices. Below is a summary of some of the methods which are commonly used.

One black hat technique uses text that is hidden, either as text coloured similar to the background, in an invisible HTML div element, or positioned off screen. Another method redirects users from a page that is built for search engines to one that is more human friendly. A method that sends a user to a page that was different from the page the search engine ranked is black hat as a rule. The black hat practice of serving one version of a page to search engines' spiders and another version to human visitors is called cloaking. Note that search engines may penalise sites they discover using black hat methods, either by reducing their rankings or eliminating their listings from their databases altogether. Such penalties can be applied either automatically by the search engines' algorithms, or by a manual site review.

CHOOSING AN SEO CONSULTANCY

Since SEO can dramatically affect the amount of visitors and web site receives, and ultimately its success or profitability, SEO is big business and there are a huge number of companies around offering SEO services.

Using the Approved Index, you can enter some details about the services you require, and receive up to 6 quotes from SEO companies. With this list of suppliers you can choose the right company to provide your training. Below are some factors to consider when making a final choice between SEO companies.

Your goals and budget

The first step in the process of finding an SEO consultancy should be working out your aims and how much you have available to invest in realising them. Although no company can guarantee you a number one position on all search engines, it is essential that you define goals in search engine ranking that you would like to reach. This will allow you to easily assess the success of the campaign at a later stage, while giving the consultant a clear idea of what you need. Decide if you require short term or long term optimisation, as this will affect your budget and also point you to specific services suited to your goals.

For example, you may want to implement and maintain search engine optimisation for your site on a long term basis, and you may want to have added to this a more assertive short term exposure for your business or product over a specific period. For this short term objective, services such as Pay-per-click (PPC) or Pay-for-inclusion (PFI) may be suitable. These services entail giving your site prime placement in either the actual search results listing or on the same page as high ranking sponsored links, for which you pay a fee. It is not necessary to understand the intricacies of these systems and services, just be certain of your marketing goals and strategy, and what you intend to gain from search engine optimisation.

In terms of SEO, it is worth remembering that packages are differentiated by the number of keywords (which could be a single word, a combination of words or an exact phrase) which the site is being optimised for. This is because making your site appear top in the search results for 'designer clothing' as well as 'designer shirts' and 'designer jeans' is essentially three separate tasks.

Narrowing down the list

The vast number of available firms may be intimidating. In order to narrow the scope, consider these suggestions:

- Use search engines to search for companies. Search engine optimisation companies which have web sites that rank highly in engine listings should have the skills to do the same for your business.

- Scan web directories. A company that belongs to a directory or listing may possibly be approved according to certain standards of practice and expertise. Similarly, any associations or societies of SEO agencies may be a good place to start. The Approved Index is one such directory.

- Ask other companies for recommendations. Word of mouth is usually the safest and most reliable method of selecting a service.

- Companies to avoid are those that send you unexpected email inviting you to join free-for-all link systems.

- Use the Approved Index! By completing a simple form on our website outlining your requirements, you can receive up to 6 free quotes from approved SEO companies.

  www.approvedindex.co.uk/indexes/SEO

Range of services

As implied above, SEO is part of the wider field of online marketing, which also includes various forms of online advertising, viral marketing and affiliate schemes, among other practices. Although some companies may limit their services to the field of SEO, many will offer this as part of a wider package, which may include web design, development and Flash design, to name a few. Using one company for all your online needs can have benefits as it may cost less overall, and dealing with just one company for all your needs may be a more effective method. Alternatively, you may want different suppliers focussing on different aspects of your business, with each being specialised in and dedicated to their own niche.

Past performance and references

It is recommended that you pick a firm that is experienced in the industry and has valid references and reports to prove it. Check references to ensure that specific job claims were actually achieved by the firm that you are considering. Also ask these companies whether the SEO agency delivered in terms of service and results. You will quickly discover if there is anything suspicious or unsatisfactory about the agencies by talking to their other clients.

The company should be able to show you reports clearly detailing success in search engine ranking for their current or previous clients. Success is indicated by a good website placement across a range of the most popular search engines, for a variety of relevant and popular keywords or phrases. A high position for one unpopular keyword on one obscure search engine does not equal success. The reason for this is that SEO companies add key words and phrases to your site content and HTML coding for a search engine spider to detect. If these terms are hardly or never typed into search engines, their addition to your site is completely useless. In the same way, a high ranking on an obscure search engine is meaningless. For current ratings of the popularity of search engines, investigate the Nielsen Netratings page at Search Engine Watch

(www.searchenginewatch.com). Wordtracker
(www.wordtracker.com) is a program that is helpful in determining
the popularity of keywords or phrases as searched by internet users.

The reports should also show that good results are maintained over
a period of time (at least six months). SEO is a very competitive
field, with search engines regularly changing their rules and
algorithms, requiring that a site's ranking be constantly monitored
and any problems or decline in position addressed. When viewing
these reports, enquire as to the frequency of reporting (it should be
monthly), as well as the methods of presenting the information.
Reports should contain unprocessed data in addition to
comprehensible summaries of the data (e.g. in chart form which
allows for easy comparison between variables) and suggestions for
any improvements or adjustments.

Methods used

Enquire about the techniques employed to optimise sites. Steer
clear from firms that use methods of redirection such as 'cloaking',
'doorway' or 'bridge' pages. These methods basically involve pages
hidden to the internet user that are heavily loaded with popular
keywords. Many search engines, in particular Google, claim that
these tactics are deceptive and unethical and they will heavily
penalise (and even remove) sites that use them. Your site should
not need to link to the SEO agency's site. This often implies a
redirection method which is not only risky but will also potentially
reduce the amount of exposure and traffic to your site. Make sure
that the company manually submits websites to indexes, and does
not use software to do so. They should also provide you with a
receipt of submission. Also be careful of companies that plan to
submit your site to thousands of search engines – this method
prefers quantity over quality and is quite futile.

The company should help you with selections of keywords and
phrases which are relevant to your business and popular with
search engine users. Check their optimisation plans for your site,

and the extent to which they may want to change your site content and design. Ideally you do not want to compromise on your site design or visitors' ease of navigation. It is generally beneficial to employ SEO services at the beginning of your site development process, so that money does not get wasted on site redesigning.

Link popularity is another optimisation strategy used, which involves linking popular sites to your site. However this is not a simple process and double check that it does not involve free-for-all 'link farms' (mentioned earlier) which will only detract from your site's ranking and ensuing exposure.

Quality and ethical business practices are two aspects that you definitely do not want to compromise on when it comes to selecting a search engine optimisation company. Generally, a more experienced company will charge higher fees and should guarantee you a successful, low-risk campaign. Younger companies may exist that can do the same thing at a cheaper rate, but be sure that you are convinced of their competence and reliability before you sign them up. If in doubt, wait until you find a company that you are comfortable with.

Beware of companies that avoid your questions or are not open about their techniques – this usually implies dishonest business operations.

Costs and payments

Agencies differ in payment methods. Some charge a monthly fee and guarantee a certain amount of top 10 or top 20 results. Others make use of a Cost-per-click system which involves paying a fixed fee for every click made on your website link. This means that you only pay if traffic is directed to your site, although there is a danger of going beyond your budget.

Be clear on the quotation breakdown and what is and is not included, ensuring that you understand which fees apply to long-term inclusion in search results and which apply to short-term advertising (such as Pay-per-click or Pay-for-inclusion campaigns).

Making the decision

After scrutinising candidates according to the above-mentioned factors, you should have a shortlist of potentials to choose from. If you are faced with a number of suitable prospects, pick the company that you are likely to get along with best, i.e. follow your gut reaction. If you do not feel particularly secure with any firm, hold on and keep looking. You will most probably be starting a long-term partnership with the SEO company, in which case you will want to be certain of your choice.

Before signing a contract, be sure that the agency will not simultaneously work with any of your competitors, as this could severely jeopardise your campaign's effectiveness. You should also have full ownership of the optimised pages, in case you discontinue the service or replace the firm. These conditions should be stated in the contract. The contract should also state the company's commitment in adhering to ethical standards of practice. Expect to wait at least 2-3 months before you see any results.

PRICE GUIDE

As with many services, it is very hard to give even an estimate of the cost of SEO services for your web site. This is partly because every web site is different, and so the exact type and quantity of services you require will vary. Additionally, SEO companies usually offer a range of services beyond SEO, and you may want to make use of these too. Thirdly, each company is different, and will have its own pricing structure. Some companies may be more expensive but more effective than others. Some may make a regular charge for their ongoing services, instead of, or in addition to an initial fee. The below is given as a guide only – the only way to get accurate prices is by requesting quotations for the services you require.

Some companies offer a 'DIY SEO' service. This generally means that the company will perform some analysis on your web site, and provide you with a report on areas where the site could be optimised, with instructions and examples of how to do this. This can be a very cost effective option, particularly if the company will re-analyse your site after you have made changes to monitor the improvements. DIY SEO packages start at around £250 for very small, basic websites, rising for larger and more complex sites.

Full SEO services are sometimes bundled as packages, or available separately or as add-ons. £750 will buy you optimisation for a small number of pages and keywords, including HTML/meta tag and content optimisation, a small number of high quality incoming links, plus manual submission to search engines and reporting of results after a set period.

For all but the smallest, simplest web sites, a serious SEO package will be required. Starting at around £2,000, this should include optimisation of all elements of the site across most, if not all pages, search engine submission and a good number of decent incoming links.