

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

What You Will Learn

Introduction

The Model: Search Engine Optimization

Overview of the Model

SEO Webpage

SEO Blog

Google Maps

Yellow Pages

Other Directories

Social Media

Quick Conclusion

Top Mistakes to Avoid

Now What?

If You Learn Anything, It Should Be This

The Model In Action



Introduction

SEO is a mysterious term thrown around by computer programmers, web designers and marketing gurus. But what is it exactly? SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization. It simply means doing everything possible to get the attention of Internet search engines like Google or Yahoo. The more attention your website gets from search engines, the higher it will rank in search results when potential customers search online for your business, products or services. You want your website to rank higher than the competition. The challenge is that the online environment changes quickly and as larger technically savvy companies compete online, achieving a higher ranking becomes more complicated.

This model will be helpful for anyone contemplating a website to promote their business, anyone looking to improve their existing business website, or anyone who has a business website and relies heavily on online traffic.

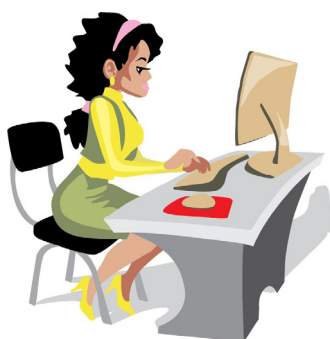
The Model: Search Engine Optimization

	Time Commitment	Cost	Local Focus	International Reach	Targeted
SEO Webpage	High	Low to High	No	Yes	Keywords
SEO Blog	Highest	Free	No	Yes	Keywords
Google Maps	Lowest	Free	Yes	No	No
Yellow Pages	Low	Medium	Yes	No	No
Other Directories	Low	Low	Yes	No	Niche Directories
Keywords	Medium	Free	No	Yes	

Overview of the Model

This model will help you determine how much you really need to worry about SEO and therefore how much time and money you should invest in it. The first question to answer is whether you actually need SEO. There are lots of ways for customers to find you online—search engine ranking is only one. Alternatively, you can use blogs, Google maps, the Yellow Pages, targeted directories and social media tools.

This model compares the different avenues and helps you decide on which to spend your time, and finally how to implement SEO techniques if optimization is the right choice for your business.



SEO Webpage

Using SEO to promote your website takes time. You need a strategy: you need to develop your website and content carefully, constantly update content and add links. Each of these things will help you increase your website's search engine ranking. Depending on the type and quality of website you want for your business, this could be a costly investment. The pros are that you'll have an international reach and you can target your potential customers by using keywords they're likely to use. However, if your main goal is simply for your customers to find you, consider some other options.

SEO Blog

One advantage of a blog over a website is that you can easily manage it yourself. It's free to set up, you can update it yourself (no programmer necessary), and it's user friendly. Don't be fooled into thinking that because it's free, it's low-quality. Your blog's image depends entirely upon how much effort you put in to make it appear professional. Your blog's ranking is determined by how often the content is updated; you have to add content regularly to achieve a high ranking. Similar to a website, a blog has international reach and you can repetitively use keywords to increase ranking and reach a target audience. Don't underestimate the power of a blog. A blog can often outrank a website since the content changes frequently and has more text for search engines to peruse.

Google Maps

Google Maps can be found at <http://www.google.com/local/add/analyticsSplashPage?gl=us&hl=en-US>. Setting up an account is free, takes almost no time, and it ranks you almost immediately.

So why wouldn't someone use Google Maps? Well if your business doesn't have a physical location that you're willing to share (say you work from home, or you list your business address as a P.O. Box), Google Maps won't help you.

If you do decide to use Google Maps, the next question you need to answer is if this provides you enough online exposure. If your clientele are internationally based or if you have more than one location, then you still need more exposure. On the other hand, if you're targeting local customers in your community, this is one of your greatest tools.

Yellow Pages

Listing your business in the Yellow Pages is a quick and easy way to get exposure for your business. Customer service reps offer guidance on advertising requirements. While it does have a cost, it's a great way to reach the local market. And it's available in both print and online versions. However, it's really only for local marketing and doesn't have a broad reach.

Other Directories

Similar to listing in the Yellow Pages, listing in these directories can take little time and can focus on a local market rather than the international scene. Since these directories are often small and target at particular communities, it may cost less to list and you may be able to communicate more directly with your target market. For example, the Pink Pages is a local Toronto directory which targets the gay community. Listing in the Pink Pages is less expensive than in the Yellow Pages and targets a specific local market. Directories can be a useful option for generating exposure for your business.

Social Media

Social media is a popular option for online exposure because of the sheer number of people it reaches. Some examples include Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. It's a free medium, has international reach and allows you to use keywords extensively. Be warned however. Social media requires the largest time and money investments and a huge amount of commitment for it to be effective. See the 'Social Media' module for more information.

Quick Conclusion

SEO is important for your website if you rely on your customers finding you this way. However, there are other ways to be found and you might want to use your website as an online resource to support your business rather than promote it. Your approach to SEO will depend on the type of business you operate and how you generate customers. Some businesses are completely reliant on SEO while others do extremely well without it. Think about what you're actually trying to achieve.

Top Mistakes to Avoid

1. **Thinking about SEO after your website is live**
2. **Thinking only about SEO, not the value and visual appeal to the customer who has found you online. You have to help customers to find you, but you also have to keep them interested in your website.**
3. **Worrying too much about SEO if you're only using your webpage as a support tool**
4. **Achieving a high ranking and then becoming complacent. Your competition will catch up!**

Now What?

- If you have decided that SEO is really important for your webpage, follow these steps first:
- Choose a descriptive URL (domain name).
- Use keywords in your webpage text and repeat them often; choose keywords that you think your customers will use to find your business or your products.
- Keep to one topic.
- Make sure that your chosen keywords are all included in your title tags, meta tags, and are written into the first paragraph of your homepage.
- Link to other websites and have them link back to you. The higher ranking the websites that link to you, the higher your site will rank. Don't know how to find people to link with? Try link exchange networks online.
- Update the content on your site regularly (at minimum every quarter).
- Consider using other online tools found in this module to support your SEO.

If You Learn Anything, It Should Be This...

There are options out there to help your customers find you.

The Model In Action:

Truman owns and operates a small bakery that he wants local residents to learn about. Truman realizes that everyone is online these days and he wants his bakery to appear first on the search engine results when local residents are looking for fresh bread and desserts. He has heard that he needs to worry about SEO to get the highest search engine ranking, but like most small business owners, he doesn't have much time or money to spend on SEO. He uses this model to figure out what he needs to do.

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After going through the model he realizes that SEO might not be right for his type of business. His bread is only sold in the area and doesn't need international exposure. Plus the time and cost factors fit his budget!

