

Search Engines for Dummies

Search engines are an Internet institution. It feels like they've been around forever. But despite their status, many people are still unconvinced of their importance: one of the most effective and inexpensive marketing mediums. Search engines, if utilised correctly can send you a stream of high-quality prospective clients.

By [James Campbell](#) 19 May 2002

But, even if you recognise their importance, they are still one of the most misunderstood and, subsequently under-utilised Internet marketing tools. Perhaps, though, that should come as no real surprise – the sheer number of search engines out there, the fact that they all operate differently and the time and effort involved in submitting are all enough to make the average business give up before they've ever really tried.

But despite the difficulty involved, they remain one of the best marketing tools and, if taken advantage of properly, can offer fantastic ROI. Outlined below are some basic strategies to help you make the most of your search engine submissions or at least help you understand what your search engine specialist is doing.

Let's Start At The Very Beginning...

There are essentially two main ways that you can submit your site to search engines – manually (this is done by visiting the search engine and typing your site's URL and other prerequisite information), or with the aid of auto-submission software. Both approaches have definite disadvantages: manual submissions are extremely time-consuming and when you're dealing with 142 search engines that can be a major problem. On the other hand, auto-submission software, while it definitely saves time, is clumsy, often ineffective and can frustrate search engines. Ideally your search engine strategy should involve a blend of manual and automatic submissions.

As far as having a site fit to submit there are a number of potential technical pitfalls, ranging from problems with images, Flash animations and a variety of strange characters often used in web development. Not to worry though – any search engine submission company worth its salt will be able to give you advice on how to optimise your site before beginning submissions.

However the majority of website optimisation issues will revolve around your site's page title, keywords, content and page descriptions.

Page Title, Keywords and Content

Page titles, keywords and META tags are embedded in the HTML code of your site and define certain things on a web page – for example, the page author, a description of the page, etc. The page title, as the heading that search engines display in their search results, is highly important. Keywords and META tags are generally used by search engines to determine which search results your listing should be in. In other words if you're a cheese factory and someone searches for "cheddar" they should find your site, as long as one of your keywords is "cheddar". A good idea is to make sure your keywords and site content complement each other. Obviously a keyword like "mp3" is useless if your site is raving about how fantastic your Brie is. Something else to remember is the value of having keywords that are specific to your target market. Again using the cheese factory example, if you specialise in Gouda then focus on keywords related to Gouda,

rather than cheese in general.

How Often Should You Submit?

This is a tricky question because, believe it or not, once is not enough. But on the other end of the spectrum search engines don't appreciate it if you submit too often. For the most part when you submit a site to search engines it will be reviewed by a "spider" – a spider is, in essence, a software program designed to scan your site's content and slot your site into the rankings accordingly. By submitting too often you could get your site blacklisted, which will really put a damper on your e-marketing efforts. So the key is to strike a balance. Once a month should do the trick.

The 80/20 Rule

Getting results from your search engine submissions takes time, persistence and patience. In fact it's doubtful that you'll see any results before 3-6 months. (It is, in large part, also dependant on the market for your product or service out there. For example, if there are only three searches for cheese per month, it would be unrealistic to expect 50,000 visitors.) But once you do start seeing results it's likely that you'll see an interesting trend emerging – 80% of your traffic will come from 20% of the search engines your site is submitted to. This happens for a number of reasons, but primarily because different search engines have different criteria – one may focus more on content, another on META tags, and so on. Having one site that appeals to all of these criteria is an impossibility, so depending on the way your site is designed your site will be ranked higher on some search engines than on others.

Once you're aware of which search engines are ranking your site high up it's a good idea to optimise your site to perform even better on these sites. The logic is simple – because the majority of people rarely look beyond the first 20 search results it's far better to be ranked between one and twenty on 10 search engines than between 20 and 50 on 50 search engines.

Conclusion

This could, in fact, be a never-ending article; such is the nature and complexity of search engines. As such this could only cover the tip of the iceberg here. But should you want extra info, here are three great resources

- northernwebs.com/set/
- www.searchengines.com/ranking_factors.html
- www.searchenginewatch.com

In closing let me leave you with this: search engines are notoriously difficult to understand and even harder to conquer. They're complicated, they're temperamental and they regularly change their criteria. And as such they are best left to professionals.

If you only take one piece of information away from this article, take this: the best route is always to hire a professional to handle search engine optimisation for you rather than doing it yourself. Apart from the fact that a professional has an already established understanding of how these beasts work, they also have a finger on the changes and trends affecting search engines, and will save you vast amounts of time, effort and money. Perhaps the best investment you can ever make into the medium of Internet marketing is to shop around and find a competent company to handle search engine optimisation for your firm's online presence.

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