

Search Engine Optimisation – and how to choose your company wisely

SEO is an acronym that pops up at virtually every client meeting. Most people have heard of it and some know a bit about it but the pros keep their knowledge close to their chests. It's the inability to prise this knowledge away from their clenched fists which leaves the industry shrouded in mystery and has caused some less than ethical behaviour, making it increasingly difficult to hire SEO with confidence.

The very fact that it's one of the most effective online marketing strategies means the market is struggling to maintain a sense of self-regulation, so alongside the quite excellent companies who will make a tangible difference to your business, are the ones who just don't have a clue, don't give a damn and don't understand the fallout from miss-managing a company's reputation.

Bearing all this in mind, how does one go on to choose an organisation to deliver a successful campaign?

There are certain cues to listen out for and if you hear them, think carefully before you sign:

- ❑ We can get you to #1 on Google
- ❑ We'll list your site in 100s of directories
- ❑ We have a partner company that looks after the linking
- ❑ We'll reach your targets within a few weeks
- ❑ We'll use hidden text for keywords

These are likely to involve **black hat techniques**. Be most wary as Google's response will be incontrovertible. Back in 2006, BMW's German site was blacklisted from Google's pages for using 'doorway' pages to boost their rankings. A doorway page is a stand-alone page stuffed with keywords (in this instance it was 'new car') which will capture huge numbers of searchers and then surreptitiously redirect them through to the BMW site unaware of their diverted journey.

Last year, JC Penney, the American store was exposed by the New York Times for link buying. What this meant is that for hundreds of phrases, the store consistently came out top, even beating the manufacturers of products they sold, such as Samsonite. Someone had paid for 1000s of links placed on many sites that all led back to JC Penney. It's the deception that rouses Google's wrath.

So, if a company hints at employing any of these techniques, it's probably best to decline their offer.

Not all companies are going to deliberately deceive and manipulate, however; they may not have much experience of running campaigns and getting results. At this juncture, ask for evidence that illustrates how they had a positive impact on a business, look at case studies and check the client websites for yourself.

You should expect the following to be included as a bare minimum:

- ❑ A baseline metrics report and then one every month
- ❑ Keyword research and an agreement between yourselves on which will be targeted first
- ❑ Realistic targets and returns based on your website's status, your industry and your competitors
- ❑ A shared goal for what is to be achieved

Some final points to assist the process:

- ❑ Ask who will be running the campaign and if they have any experience of your industry
- ❑ How will they handle content writing
- ❑ Will they use a mix of traditional SEO, social media and search marketing
- ❑ Will there be regular meetings to discuss progress
- ❑ If the site is redesigned, insist on 301s being put in place
- ❑ Will they use long tail key phrases for targeted results
- ❑ What will be implemented at 3, 6 and 12 months
- ❑ And yes, Google's not the only search engine so how will they target others such as bing and Yahoo
- ❑ There are no quick fixes or fast track routes. SEO is an endeavour that needs constant attention.

Supporting business through .NET web and application development

Overbyte Interactive Ltd cannot be held responsible for any recommendations or misuse of information as this article is meant as a discursive device to highlight options.