

SEO SECRETS: WHY IT MIGHT NOT WORK AND WHAT DOES

There are two strong reasons for caution when responding to anyone wanting payment to SEO your web site: Hits don't equal sales; and their tactics rarely work.

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Visit job matching sites like Guru, Elance, etc. and you'll find hundreds of requests for SEO experts to write web copy, and a host of so-called SEO professionals boasting about their writing skills.

Web design companies often use claims of superior SEO skills or 'guarantees' to get your site to the top of search engines in their advertising and client presentations, and so-called SEO experts quote extortionate fees to get you to the top of the search lists, and keep you there.

Don't be fooled! There are two strong reasons for caution when responding to anyone wanting payment to SEO your web site.

SEO does not involve any mysterious or little-known secrets. There are no tricks involved. Search engine creators have spent years and millions of dollars learning all the tricks and figuring out how to ensure the bots thwart tricksters. They punish those who use them. (Look for articles about the "Google Slap" to learn more.)

Companies claiming to know more about SEO than you do are often acting on out-of-date information. Worse, their 'tricks' can either get you banned, or, in a worst case scenario, cause website malfunctions that will cost you time and money to repair. (Rainbow Works' staff know of one case where a user of a specialized content management system engaged an SEO 'guru' and paid \$7000 for his services. Because he didn't understand, or pay attention to, the way the content management tool worked, he managed to mess up the site so badly it cost \$1000 to repair, and last we heard the customer was still battling for a refund from the so-called guru.)

SEO is simple. The rules are clearly stated on search engine websites and in numerous 'how to' guides published on the Internet. Anyone can follow the guidelines to create a search-engine friendly site. You CAN'T drive huge increases in sales through SEO. SEO may drive hits. Hits do not equal sales.

Yes, SEO is simple. What isn't simple is site promotion that attracts PROSPECTS. You see, high search engine ratings may bring lots of hits, but you don't want hits. You want qualified prospects. And while legitimate SEO devices may bring qualified prospects, there are far simpler and more effective ways to achieve this goal.

Hits vs. Prospects

The first requirement for selling on the Internet is an effective web site. It goes without saying that regardless how many visitors hit your site, a bad site attracts no interest, no repeat visits, and no sales. SEO devices might attract a million hits, but they will be of no use. A few hundred visitors a day can generate a fortune, and a few million \$0. It's all down to how effectively your site is designed to attract your most wanted response—not to where your site appears in a search engine listing.

You can actually buy hits. Google will sell them to you for an outrageously inflated price. But it's not the number of hits that matters. It's the number of genuinely qualified prospects, how long they remain on your site, how often they return, and what response they give you that determines your success.

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website. In fact, you might find that, in time, your site ranks well despite **not** paying any attention to SEO and never submitting. Activity and popularity can drive your rating up. Google (the most important search engine) ranks sites on relevance and popularity, so if you invest your time making your site credible, interesting, timely, and relevant, and promoting it effectively off-line and via methods other than SEO, you are likely to find that, after a couple of months, it rates well despite your lack of attention to the recommendations of so-called SEO gurus.

Heard some anecdote about a business hiring an SEO expert who got them to the top of Google? Or about someone buying a book or software that guarantees you top billing and finding the method they invested in worked? **It's a coincidence.** I could tell you how to appear at the top of Google too, if I was inclined to be deceptive. But trust me, when you uncovered the truth behind my tactics you would be furious and embarrassed about falling for the scam. And it definitely wouldn't bring you targeted site visitors.

The Search Engines

There are thousands of search engines. Only a handful bring significant numbers of people to your website. The major engines are Google, MSN and Yahoo. Most of the rest use Google software, so optimizing for Google will ensure your site is friendly with them as well.

Want the secrets of optimizing for Google? Go to <http://www.google.com/webmasters/>. It's all there, and it's free to access and simple to follow.

Simple rules

Meta data

Meta data appears in hidden HTML code at the top of your web page. Use VIEW SOURCE in most browsers to read it. It contains your Page Title, Page Description (the brief summary that appears in the search engine listing), and a list of keywords.

Your Title Tag appears like this: `<title>Rainbow Writer Home Page</title>`. It should be the heading that appears on your page, because it is the title that will appear in search engine listings.

Don't use the same title for multiple pages. This confuses the bots. They won't look beyond the title tag if they have already examined a page with the same tag, so give each page a distinctive title.

Your Page Description appears like this: `<meta name="description" content="If you love writing, we can help you achieve YOUR writing, publishing and e-publishing goals, and make money doing what you love." />`

Make sure it summarizes accurately what your website is about. It should be worded to attract the interest of your prospective customers.

Meta Data may also contain information about the content of your website, copyright, etc., but our third focus is on 'keywords'. These appear as `<meta name="keywords" content="writing, publishing, e-publishing, writing courses, writing resources, writing tools, authors, writers, online courses, online learning" />`

Keywords are separated by a comma and a space. Each may be a single word or a short phrase. When someone types a word or phrase into the search engine, the engine scans indexes created by its 'bot' to identify sites that contain that keyword. Sites are rated by the 'bot' according to perceived relevance to the search key, so that hopefully the viewer sees the sites most likely to contain the information they seek at the top of the list, and more broadly relevant sites on pages 4 to 6 and beyond (if they bother to read that far!).

You can make long lists of keywords, but search bots (sometimes referred to as 'Googlebots') rarely look past the first three words. Then they scan your page content to see if these words are, in fact, relevant to the content. If they are not, you may be penalized for attempting to mislead.

A common 'trick' used by so-called SEO experts in the past was to load the keyword list with irrelevant or only vaguely connected words, so that the site would appear in searches despite having little or no relevance. There are two negatives here:

- ▶ The search engine companies disapprove and may penalize you.
- ▶ Site visitors are likely to be annoyed and leave your site quickly, vowing never to return.

Body Content

Your page content should be written with three key objectives in mind:

- ▶ To hook reader attention quickly and hold it. Site visitors are impatient. You have only seconds to capture their attention, and they are fickle enough to leave the site immediately at any point that they become weary or disinterested.
- ▶ To build viewer confidence and trust. The web is a dangerous place for buyers. There are lots of scammers out there. To attract buyers, you need to present consistently as a trustworthy person who has the best interests of your customer at heart—someone whose offers are genuine, who fulfils their promises, who deals fairly and offers good value.
- ▶ To drive readers to the point of giving you your 'Most Wanted Response'. What do you want from your site visitor? Every phrase on your site should be carefully worded to gradually drive your visitor to the point where they will give you that response. (And don't forget to state clearly what that response is and to make it easy for the viewer to give it!)

The most effective way to gain search engine recognition is to add at least one new, relevant, well-written article to your website or blog every week. Google will love you for it, because it pleases your audience, and what pleases your audience is good for Google.

Site content must be well-written, relevant, and timely, and deliver value to the reader. Give them something of worth. Nonsense articles filled with keywords were popularly used in the past to try to trick search bots. They are awake to this tactic now, and will penalize those who try it.

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Keyword dos and don'ts:

- ▶ DO make sure your keywords are highly relevant, and try to use your keywords in page content.
- ▶ DO try to identify a single keyword that classifies your site and use it on every page of your site. This helps the bots to recognize that your website is a coherent whole unit.
- ▶ DON'T add meaningless or irrelevant words to try to trick the engine. It won't work!
- ▶ DON'T listen to anyone who says they know how to cheat. The engines are awake to them!
- ▶ DON'T add invisible words to your page. This is a trick that was used years ago—adding a string of keywords somewhere on the page set in the background color so they couldn't be seen by readers but the bots would read them. The bots are very smart, and sites are occasionally checked by humans to ensure that the bots haven't missed anything.
- ▶ DON'T keyword stuff. Write in concise, easy-to-understand language, and ensure content is relevant, timely, and useful to your site visitors.

Links

All pages on your site should link back to the index page.

NOTE:

Sometimes referred to as the Home Page, the index page is the page named with your domain name and no page extension. Its title appears as <http://www.rainbowriter.com/>, whereas other pages may be named something like <http://www.rainbowriter.com/Services.php> or <http://www.rainbowriter.com/AboutUs.html>.

As far as possible, every page should have a link back to every other working page (but not to special purpose pages that are only intended to be viewed in particular circumstances, such as a Thank you for Joining page.)

Google will rate you higher if you have other sites linking to yours, because it is assumed that the more links there are TO your site, the more popular and relevant your site's content must be.

There is a simple and effective way to ensure other sites link to yours. Join or start a 'Web Ring'.

NOTE:

Never sign up to 'Link Farms', however. These companies promise to raise your rating by creating back-links to your site. You are likely to be penalized for employing this tactic.

A Web Ring is a group of like-minded business operators with complimentary (as opposed to competing) products and a similar target market. When you join a web ring, you offer support to all other members of the ring in return for their support of your venture. For example, a real estate agent might join a web ring with a removalist, conveyancing firm, interior decorator, florist, and plant nursery. The

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landscaper provides a small plant and the florist a small flower arrangement that the real estate agent can gift to house buyers as a thank you and house warming gift. The removalist, conveyancer and interior decorator offer small discounts to the agent's clients. The agent recommends these businesses to home buyers and, of course, links his sites to theirs. It would be smart for him to post articles by each of them, providing useful advice to home buyers. They link to his site, thanking him for giving their gifts/ discounts to his clients, and potentially posting an article by him. For example, he might write articles for their sites about how home presentation (interior décor, landscaping, fresh flowers on tables, pot plants around the patio, etc.) help him make sales at the best possible prices.

Tags

When placing links and/or images on your website, you have the option to create a caption that will display when a user's cursor hovers over the image or link. Automated site building programs usually include a field in the dialog box in which you select or specify your link or image. This is sometimes referred to as "Alt text", as it traditionally displayed when a user's computer didn't have the capacity to show the actual image or link. While it is rare these days for a device to be unable to show an image or link, you should ALWAYS include a tag when creating links or placing images. It gives extra weight that assists search engine recognition.

Entry Pages or doorways

Don't recreate an entry page or 'doorway'. You know those annoying pages that say "Click here to enter site". Why? I already clicked a link or search engine entry to come to your site. Surely that let you know I wanted to visit? Why should I now have to stand at the front door and knock again?

Ideally, a site visitor should be able to find anything on your site with no more than four clicks. Don't make them waste one of those just gaining entry!

Ghost sites and Mirrors

Another trick employed in the past was the creation of a host of mini-sites that all led back to your main site. Of course novices will assume that since this device ensures lots of links back to your site, it qualifies as a legitimate device for improving ratings. **WRONG!** Again, bots are smart! They check out the ownership of and content on sites on which links to yours are displayed. They'll detect quickly if you've used 'smoke (ghost sites) and mirrors'.

Traffic and Other Signs of Popularity

What search bots look for, above all else, is signs that a site is popular and the creator is well-respected for his knowledge and integrity.

Bought hits don't rate. How do bots know they are bought? I assure you, they have powerful detection systems. They can trace the origin of hits, and obviously lots of hits on multiple sites from a single source indicates foul play.

Active site promotion through social networks, forums, e-zine articles, and web ring activity, mail-outs and advertisements that drive prospects to your site, and off-line promotion that sends visitors to your site will drive higher search engine ratings.

**LEGITIMATE
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Site Submission

Submission Rule 1: Never use a submission service or submission software. There is, quite simply, neither need nor benefit. In fact, doing so could result in penalties.

Submission is simple. Go to <http://www.google.com/addurl.html> and follow the instructions provided.

Submit once only. There is no need for repeat submissions. Nor is there any need to submit more than one page. Robots can follow links. Provided there is a logical link trail, your entire site will be indexed.

The Good News...

LEGITIMATE improvement of search engine ratings means increased visits from genuine prospects. Increased visits from genuine prospects means more Most Wanted Responses, and more sales.

Now why would you pay someone to use tricks that might get you penalized when the legitimate devices are so easy to employ, well-advertised, and guaranteed to deliver far more benefit than just an improved search engine rating?

And a Final Caution:

If, after reading this article, you are still tempted to engage an "SEO Guru", go to <http://www.google.com/webmasters/seo.html> and read the warnings published there before you part with your hard-earned dollars.

Author: Lorraine Cobcroft. © Brisbane, Qld december 2011.

Nudge the world a little....

Rainbow Writer provides writers with:

- ▶ Learning resources
- ▶ Editing services
- ▶ Help with writing marketing copy, submission letters, bios, reviews, loglines, synopses, etc.
- ▶ Brand and image building assistance
- ▶ Publishing and e-publishing services or help
- ▶ Marketing help