

datadial

The smart buyers guide to Search Engine Optimisation

If your business aims to be successful online, appearing in the search engines is going to be a defining factor. Because when you're relying on people finding you, visibility is vital.

When making purchasing decisions, 81% of consumers in the UK use search engines to find new websites.

Breaking down the market share of each search engine shows the importance of being ranked in the 'big three':

Google – 79% MSN – 9% Yahoo – 8% Others – 4%

Within the results pages themselves, the top 30 results for a search query receive over 90% of all traffic for that search term.

In fact, the top 3 results receive 60% of all traffic for a particular search term.

**So if your company isn't there,
your customers can't find you.**

Choosing a Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) consultant can be confusing. The majority of people hiring a consultant have a very limited understanding of the services they are buying.

Unfortunately a lot of unscrupulous sellers take advantage of this. They sell un-necessary, sub-standard services, or in the worst cases they just take your money and run.

Generally a good rule of thumb is that if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is. Less than honest SEO consultants tell you what you want to hear, but the good ones always present you with reality.

Luckily, Datadial have compiled a list of the more common tricks and scams used by people who are just after your money.

Search engine submission

There are hundreds of companies offering to submit your website to ninety-nine million search engines for £59.99. However, submission won't mean your site is actually ranking for anything in them. There's an important distinction between submission and ranking.

Submission to all of the major UK search engines is free. Anyone can do it easily with no expert help. It's also worth noting that search engines are pretty good at finding sites through incoming links without actively submitting to them.

SEO at a low low price!

A price that looks too good to be true generally is. It's worth asking yourself how much the consultant values their time, or how little time will be spent working on your website. In most low cost cases, it will probably be none at all.

A good strategy allows for consultation, analysis, keyword research, page optimisation, link building campaigns and reporting. Make sure you check all of this is being included in your price.

We know a guy at Google

Really? I know a guy at Coca-Cola but I don't know the secret recipe. Beware of anyone alluding to know someone at one of the major search engines. It's another very well known trick.

Long contracts

Don't be tied into long contracts. Reputable firms will advise you how long it will take them to achieve your rankings, but they won't tie you in to any binding contracts.

Fast Rankings

Getting sites ranked in a short space of time is possible. However, getting them ranked for competitive search terms that people use, generally isn't. Buying services from people promising to rank your site within 24/48 hours will probably leave you ranking for search terms nobody actually uses.

Worthwhile competitive rankings can take months. Ask yourself - if it's that quick and easy, why isn't everyone doing it?

'Secret' methods

The process of search engine optimization should be completely transparent and ethical. You'd be wise to avoid consultants hinting at secret strategies. At best they don't actually have any secrets. At worst they could be involved in practices that could get your site penalised or banned by the search engines.

So, ask about the ranking process. Any good SEO consultant will be happy to talk through the strategies they're using, in terms that you can understand.

Keyword Choice

Make sure you make the final decision on the keywords you're targeting. An SEO consultant should advise you on the search phrases they target. It's a common trick to railroad a client into targeting 'easy' search terms that are quick and simple for the consultant to attain. Remember the final choice should lie with you.

Thousands of links

Promises of thousands of links to a site for a low price or automated link schemes and link networks are common. In almost every case these are low quality directory links delivering few visitors, but they can have a harmful effect on your website link profile. In some extreme cases you can even damage your search engine rankings.

Judging your links by the quality of referring links and the websites they are on is a much better metric than quantity.

'Guaranteed' rankings

Be very wary of these. They're another service that sounds too good to be true. A few scoundrels use the 'guarantee' hook to take your money and you'll never hear from them again.

Other favorite tricks include rankings in minor search engines that people don't use, temporary paid listings using sponsored links, and rankings on uncompetitive search terms that people don't search for. Google themselves warn against such tactics - "No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google. Beware of SEOs that claim to guarantee rankings".

Ownership

Ensure you retain ownership of all of the work. If the firm you employ starts to register new domains or add pages on other websites, this should ring alarm bells. Not only could this be a sign of unethical practices, it will likely make it much harder to cancel the contract.

You should also watch for companies using unethical practices that go against search engine guidelines. In some cases such strategies can result in your site receiving a penalty or a ban.

Here are some examples of strategies to avoid:

Cloaking – Delivering one version of your content to your visitors and another version to search engines, usually through an automatic redirect or refresh.

Doorway pages – Creating new pages specifically aimed at search engines rather than visitors. Often these look nonsensical to a user and don't make sense to read.

Automated link-building – Link building is good, but anything automated or participating in large reciprocal schemes is almost certainly bad.

Hidden text – Hiding text and/or links on a page is bad. All content should be visible to users.

Large changes to pages – Any good SEO consultant will tweak the content of your pages. Making wholesale changes and rewriting the content for search engines is a bad sign. Visitors should come first, search engines second.

The right SEO Process

A good SEO strategy should include the following stages. Make sure your SEO provider covers all these, and if not, ask why.

- Consultation
- Analysis
- Keyword research
- On-page optimisation
- Ongoing link development
- Monthly analysis and reporting

Optional services

- Social media marketing
- Reputation management
- Email Marketing

If you're happy the SEO companies you're talking to aren't involved in one of the common scams, that's good. And if they're not about to get your website banned from the search engines, even better. Now you'll probably want to check they're actually capable of doing what they claim they can do.

Don't be afraid of asking questions. Any reputable company will be happy to spend some time explaining how they work and dealing with any concerns you may have as a client. So...

- ✓ **Find out how long they've been in business.** Avoiding newer agencies can mean avoiding inexperienced consultants.
- ✓ **Check the campaign won't be subcontracted.** Try to avoid companies that subcontract large parts, or even the entire campaign, as quality control can be far harder to maintain.
- ✓ **Ask for a face-to-face meeting.** It's much easier to build trust by visiting your consultant in their offices.
- ✓ **Ask for some references.** Four or five existing clients who have been using their services for at least 6-12 months should give you a pretty fair impression. Get telephone numbers and call them. Check they're happy with the quality of the work and received what the consultant promised them.
- ✓ **Ask for sample rankings they've achieved recently.** They should be able to provide at least a shortlist of competitive 2-3 word phrases currently ranked.
- ✓ **Ensure their strategy allows for both on-page changes and a link development strategy.** Search engine optimisation is a two part process. Firstly, page contents tell a search engine what the page is about. Secondly, the quality of links pointing to a page shows how important it is and so where it should be ranked. A comprehensive strategy includes both.
- ✓ **Ask what they do to achieve rankings.** They should be happy to explain this. The process should be transparent and ethical with no risk to your site.
- ✓ **Ensure you have final control over keywords you are targeting.** A good SEO company should advise on keyword selection, but not restrict it.
- ✓ **Ensure you agree on your targets and metrics.** Are the measurements of success based on traffic, signups, sales or revenue?
- ✓ **Ask about any additional services they provide.** Most reputable agencies also offer copy-writing, online PR, social networking strategies, reputation management, Pay-Per-Click advertising, analytics and email marketing. Having one supplier for all services simply cuts down on costs and communication.

301 A permanent server redirect - a change of address for a web page found in the htaccess file on apache servers. Also useful for dealing with canonical issues.

algorithm (algo) A program used by search engines to determine what pages to suggest for a given search query.

alt text A description of a graphic, which usually isn't displayed to the end user, unless the graphic is undeliverable, or a browser is used that doesn't display graphics. Alt text is important because search engines can't tell one picture from another. Alt text is the one place where it is acceptable for the spider to get different content than the human user, but only because the alt text is accessible to the user, and when properly used is an accurate description of the associated picture. Special web browsers for visually challenged people rely on the alt text to make the content of graphics accessible to the users.

analytics A program which assists in gathering and analyzing data about website usage. Google analytics is a feature rich, popular, free analytics program.

anchor text The user visible text of a link. Search engines use anchor text to indicate the relevancy of the referring site and of the link to the content on the landing page. Ideally all three will share some keywords in common.

authority (trust, link juice, Google juice) The amount of trust that a site is credited with for a particular search query. Authority/trust is derived from related incoming links from other trusted sites.

authority site A website which has many incoming links from other related expert/hub sites. Because of this simultaneous citation from trusted hubs an authority site usually has high trust, pagerank, and search results placement. Wikipedia, is an example of an authority site.

back link (inlink, incoming link) Any link into a page or site from any other page or site.

black hat Search engine optimization tactics that are counter to best practices such as the Google Webmaster Guidelines.

blog A website which presents content in a more or less chronological series. Content may or may not be time sensitive. Most blogs use a Content Management System such as WordPress rather than individually crafted WebPages. Because of this, the Blogger can choose to concentrate on content creation instead of arcane code.

cloak The practice of delivering different content to the search engine spider than that seen by the human users. This Black Hat tactic is frowned upon by the search engines and carries a virtual death penalty of the site/domain being banned from the search engine results.

content (text, copy) The part of a web page that is intended to have value for and be of interest to the user. Advertising, navigation, branding and boilerplate are not usually considered to be content.

conversion (goal) Achievement of a quantifiable goal on a website. Add clicks, sign ups, and sales are examples of conversions.

conversion rate Percentage of users who convert - see conversion.

duplicate content Obviously content which is similar or identical to that found on another website or page. A site may not be penalized for serving duplicate content but it will receive little if any Trust from the search engines compared to the content that the SE considers being the original.

frames a web page design where two or more documents appear on the same screen, each within its own frame. Frames are bad for SEO because spiders sometimes fail to correctly navigate them. Additionally, most users dislike frames because it is almost like having two tiny monitors neither of which shows a full page of information at one time.

Google juice (trust, authority, pagerank) trust / authority from Google, which flows through outgoing links to other pages.

Googlebot Google's spider program

hit Once the standard by which web traffic was often judged, but now a largely meaningless term replaced by pageviews AKA impressions. A hit happens each time that a server sends an object - documents, graphics, include files, etc. Thus one pageview could generate many hits.

in bound link (inlink, incoming link) Inbound links from related pages are the source of trust and pagerank.

index Noun - a database of WebPages and their content used by the search engines.

index Verb - to add a web page to a search engine index.

indexed Pages The pages on a site which have been indexed.

inlink (incoming link, inbound link) Inbound links from related pages are the source of trust and pagerank.

keyword - key phrase The word or phrase that a user enters into a search engine.

keyword research The hard work of determining which keywords are appropriate for targeting.

link An element on a web page that can be clicked on to cause the browser to jump to another page or another part of the current page.

link bait A webpage with the designed purpose of attracting incoming links, often mostly via social media.

link building actively cultivating incoming links to a site.

link exchange a reciprocal linking scheme often facilitated by a site devoted to directory pages. Link exchanges usually allow links to sites of low or no quality, and add no value themselves. Quality directories are usually human edited for quality assurance.

link text (Anchor text) The user visible text of a link. Search engines use anchor text to indicate the relevancy of the referring site and link to the content on the landing page. Ideally all three will share some keywords in common.

long tail longer more specific search queries that are often less targeted than shorter broad queries. For example a search for "widgets" might be very broad while "red widgets with reverse threads" would be a long tail search. A large percentage of all searches are long tail searches.

META tags Statements within the HEAD section of an HTML page which furnishes information about the page. META information may be in the SERPs but is not visible on the page. It is very important to have unique and accurate META title and description tags, because they may be the information that the search engines rely upon the most to determine what the page is about. Also, they are the first impression that users get about your page within the SERPs.

metric A standard of measurement used by analytics programs.

natural search results The search engine results which are not sponsored, or paid for in any way.

pagerank (PR) a value between 0 and 1 assigned by the Google algorithm, which quantifies link popularity and trust among other (proprietary) factors.

reciprocal link (link exchange, link partner) Two sites which link to each other. Search engines usually don't see these as high value links, because of the reciprocal and potentially incestuous nature.

redirect Any of several methods used to change the address of a landing page such as when a site is moved to a new domain, or in the case of a doorway.

sandbox There has been debate and speculation that Google puts all new sites into a "sandbox," preventing them from ranking well for anything until a set period of time has passed. The existence or exact behavior of the sandbox is not universally accepted among SEOs.

search engine (SE) a program, which searches a document or group of documents for relevant matches of a users keyword phrase and returns a list of the most relevant matches. Internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo search the entire internet for relevant matches.

SEO Short for search engine optimization, the process of increasing the number of visitors to a Web site by achieving high rank in the search results of a search engine. The higher a Web site ranks in the results of a search, the greater the chance that users will visit the site. It is common practice for Internet users to not click past the first few pages of search results, therefore high rank in SERPs is essential for obtaining traffic for a site. SEO helps to ensure that a site is accessible to a search engine and improves the chances that the site will be indexed and favorably ranked by the search engine.

SERP Search Engine Results Page

site map A page or structured group of pages which link to every user accessible page on a website, and hopefully improves site usability by clarifying the data structure of the site for the users. An XML sitemap is often kept in the root directory of a site just to help search engine spiders to find all of the site pages.

social media Various online technologies used by people to share information and perspectives. Blogs, wikis, forums, social bookmarking, user reviews and rating sites (digg, reddit) are all examples of Social Media.

social media marketing (SMM) Website or brand promotion through social media.

trust rank a method of differentiating between valuable pages and spam by quantifying link relationships from trusted human evaluated seed pages.

URL Uniform Resource Locator - AKA Web Address

user generated content (UGC) Social Media, wikis, Folksonomies, and some blogs rely heavily on User Generated Content. One could say that Google is exploiting the entire web as UGC for an advertising venue.

white hat SEO techniques, which conform to best practice guidelines, and do not attempt to unscrupulously “game” or manipulate SERPs.

Source – www.seomoz.org

Who are Datadial?

Datadial have ten years experience working with search engines and promoting websites effectively, ethically and successfully.

The logo for Datadial, featuring the word "datadial" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font on a red rectangular background.

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