

Improving Your Web Site Visibility

Take These Steps to Drive Better Results with Search Engines

By *TONY DOUGLAS*

Imagine a new store opening along a main road. Now imagine that shoppers can't find the front door. What kind of business will that shop generate?

What is merely an odd concept in the bricks-and-mortar world — storefronts aren't invisible, after all — is a real concern in the realm of E-commerce. Building an attractive, interactive Web site to do business is one thing, but attracting customers — in other words, making the store 'visible' through effective use of search engines — is quite another.

The issue is more relevant every day, as the growth of the Internet shows few signs of slowing down. Today, nearly 30% of households now connect to the Internet through a high-speed connection, a 50% increase from a year ago. The use of broadband along with dialup connections will birth an 'Internet lifestyle.' As many people will be online shopping, gaming, and gathering information as people watching TV or shopping in stores.

This change in lifestyle will drastically affect the bottom line for many retailers that are not easily found on the Internet. By offering the consumer a chance to purchase a product or service over the Internet, the merchant greatly increases his or her ability to compete in an ever-changing global market.

And the number-one marketing tool used to locate a product and/or service on the Internet is the search engine. What follows is a primer on how these search engines work, and how your business can best utilize them to drive sales and profits.

Fueling Interest

The search engine is now the major vehicle used to look for information on the Internet. Surveys show that the vast major-

ity of people on the Internet use search engines and directories to find what they are looking for.

Yahoo! and Looksmart are referred to as directories. They have human editors who review the sites submitted, then assign them to a category. These categories are based on the search engine's submittal process and are reviewed by real people. Once your listing has been indexed on a directory, it is hard to change, so be sure your submissions are accurate. Search engines, such as Google, AltaVista, and others, gather their information by sending out autonomous software, called 'bots' or 'spiders,' to gather information for their databases. This information is what comes up in a search query.

Site owners are wise to have their Web presence optimized for both directories and search engines. These engines and directories use complicated formulas in determining who offers legitimate content and who is offering mere spam. Once a search engine considers a site spam, it removes it from the index, and it is very hard to get re-indexed.

Web site owners often say, "I spent many hours designing and building my Web site, and it doesn't bring me any more business." Your company's Web site is your Internet showcase, and taking the time to drive visitors to your site will be well worth it. A well-designed site won't do you any good if your potential customers can't find you.

Getting indexed with the major directories and search engines will be time well spent. However, just being listed isn't enough. If your page doesn't show in the top 30 to 40 results returned, chances are your page won't be found. So what can a business owner do to increase his chances of getting

indexed in the directories and search engines? Here are a few things you can do to optimize your Web presence and improve your search engine visibility.

- **Content:** Remember the saying, 'content is king'? Well, in search-engine optimization, the saying is more relevant than ever. Search engines and directories look for sites that are content-rich and then rank the page or site based on the relevancy of the content.

- **Meta Tags and Keywords:** These tools allow a search engine to easily index your page. These tags are found in the underlying HTML code to the page. Popular HTML editors such as Macromedia Dreamweaver and Microsoft FrontPage allow the easy implementation of these tags in your site. Use care in selecting your keywords for your meta tags. They should be descriptive of the content contained within the page. This example shows how meta tags could be set up set up for a Web site whose main theme is musical instruments.

```
<META NAME = "keywords"
CONTENT = "music, instrument,
flute, guitar, drums">
```

These keywords will help the search engine better understand the meaning of your site and index it accordingly. It is true that some search engines now put less emphasis on meta tags than they did a few years ago, but they're still part of the recipe for good search engine placement. Today, about 25% of sites use this tool to increase their overall page rank. A good idea is to have your target keyword begin with a capital letter, since searches for the word 'flute' include 'Flute' as well as 'flute.'

- **Keyword Density:** This is the

occurrence of your selected keywords in relation to the other text on the page. For example, if we take the musical instrument site and we want to target the keyword 'flute' and we have 200 words on that page, no more than 1% to 5% of these 200 words should contain the word 'flute.' Any more than that, and a search engine spider might consider the site as spam and not index the page.

Another strategy to consider is the 'keyword phrase.' Surveys show that terms first put in a search query box sometimes return results that are too broad. Searchers then go back and add more words to the search query. In designing your site, using three words for a keyword phrase is usually sufficient, and you should not exceed this limit. Take our musical instrument site, for example. Using keyword phrases targeting flute players, we might put: 'silver flutes,' 'open hole flutes,' 'flutes for sale,' and any other combinations on the word 'flute.' Remember, if you're targeting these keywords, put the keyword string in the title and at the top of the content of the page.

- **Title Tags:** Many search engines give weight to words found in the title tag, the name given a particular page that you see at the top of a browser window. Be as descriptive as possible in choosing your title. These title tags are especially significant if the words in the title (keywords) are also found in the body of the text. Be careful not to overuse the keywords, as some search engines consider that spam.

- **Link Popularity:** Many search engines now rely on link popularity as of one of the major factors in securing a high listing. Link popularity is a measure of how many

other Web sites are linking to your site. In some cases, this is the most important factor in getting your site listed. Getting other Web site owners to link to your site is also the most time-consuming of the optimization techniques discussed.

It's not a good idea to have a link to your site from everywhere. The quality of the link is as, if not more, important than the link itself. Look for quality sites to request links from. You can request links from complementary sites by sending an E-mail to the site Web master and offer to exchange links with them. Be leery of what are known as 'link farms.' These are Web sites that offer to list your site along with hundreds of others. Many search engines consider this spam.

• **Hosting:** When it comes time to put your site live on the Internet, you would be wise to host your site

with an Internet service provider that does not host spammers or pornographers. Many search engines have an 'ISP spam index' and actually ban certain ISPs from their index that host these types of sites. If your ISP is banned from an index, chances are that your pages will also be banned.

When trying to improve your ranking with the search engines, avoid the overuse of your specific, targeted keywords, and don't use keywords that have no relevance to your content. Also avoid using colored text on the same colored background. This was popular a few years back, and the directories and search engines are wise to the technique now and may ban your pages if you use this technique.

• **Paid Inclusion:** A relatively new way to get to the top of the list in search results is called 'keyword

bidding.' Many search engines display sponsored results at the very top of the page.

What you do is bid on certain keywords that are relative to your site, and then when a person types these in a search query box, your site comes up number one if you are the top bidder. This technique is very specific and can be costly.

For example, in June there were 942 searches for the phrase 'environmental testing' in the major search engines. The current bid for this string of words is \$7.59. This means if you type in the words 'environmental testing' in the Internet's major search engines, the top result will be the company that has paid to be there. If you then click on that company, their account is charged \$7.59.

As you can see, if you do the math, if a significant number of people click through to the Web

site, this can be a costly endeavor.

There are certain restrictions a company can initiate to reduce their expense, but in order to use this technique effectively, the more click-throughs you get, the better your chances of selling your product or service.

The Internet is becoming a major factor in many companies' sales and marketing strategies, and a well-designed Web site optimized for the leading search engines — using keywords, content management, keyword density, meta tags, title tags, link popularity, and paid inclusion — is a formula that can't be ignored.

Tony Douglas is a full-time Web master for MicroTest Laboratories in Agawam, where he does consulting, Web development, Internet marketing, and search engine optimization; (413) 786-1680.