

SIX THINGS TO KNOW WHEN CHOOSING THE BEST SEO FIRM



INTRODUCTION

In order to choose the ideal SEO company, it is important to address the essential six factors that make an SEO firm the best fit for your organization. There is an abundance of SEO firms competing in a dynamic and fast-paced industry and it sometimes can be difficult to differentiate the good from the bad. The following six tips were written to help C-level Executives, Entrepreneurs, Marketers, and Small Business Owners navigate the mass of SEO firms to ensure they choose their best fit.

The following information can also provide a method of evaluation for companies already under contract. The content below will help them question their SEO firm to ensure they are leveraging their advertising resources to generate maximum return on investment.

1. COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

One of the most important considerations when hiring a successful search engine optimization company is the quality of communication and transparency. A quality SEO firm should operate as a partner and an extension of your business. This cannot be a successful operation if the company responsible for improving marketing initiatives has inefficient or unclear communication. Undoubtedly, the most successful relationships are built when both parties have purposeful engagement and clear communication.

Ask potential SEO companies to explain exactly how they optimize websites. Investigate the processes that they use by specifically asking “what are your link-building strategies?” or “how do we stay in touch during the process?” These important questions will provide excellent insight to how the company conducts SEO and communicates with their clients.

Experts agree that less than 50% of SEO firms actually communicate effectively? with the company they are working for.

Because the Internet is constantly evolving, a heightened level of communication is necessary in this industry. Successful SEO companies maintain weekly correspondence with clients to communicate updates on the status of campaigns and to make further recommendations. Unfortunately, very few SEO companies practice this, but the ones that do typically provide their clients with optimal results.

How is success communicated? Do they send reports? Do they use analytics? What steps do they take to reach their goals? Analytics and reporting are extremely beneficial, as they keep both parties on the same page throughout the process.

2. ETHICS: WHITE-HAT OPTIMIZATION VS BLACK-HAT OPTIMIZATION

The search engine optimization industry has unfortunately been saturated by unscrupulous firms that abuse search algorithms to inflate their rankings. The interesting part is that there is an overwhelming majority of SEO firms that endorse and utilize some sort of Black-Hat optimization tactics for their clients. The good news, however, is that these tactics can be identified by investigating the SEO company and asking specific questions that include the following:

- *"Have any of your clients been banned by Google or any other major search engine?"*
- *"What are your link-building strategies?"*
- *"Do you use software or human capital to achieve results?"*

If search engines determine that the SEO company does, in fact, utilize black-hat optimization practices, the website will be penalized and drop from the search results on all relevant terms outside branded ones. Imagine devoting precious resources to an SEO campaign, only to find out that they were invested in an unethical process. The results are devastating and there can be a lasting impact on the reputation and revenue of your company. The following represent major black-hat optimization practices:

BUYING LINKS

Some SEO companies purchase links because the strength of links has an immediate impact on search rankings. Quality and quantity count most, but "some SEOs and webmasters engage in the practice of buying and selling links that pass PageRank, disregarding the quality of the links, the sources, and the long-term impact it will have on their sites"

(<http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=66736>).

CLOAKING

Cloaking involves hiding content so that the search engines see more than is actually on the page. These pages are set up to deliver one version of the page to search engine crawlers, packed with keywords and links, while another version is actually displaying to the end-user.

When the keyword is searched in the SERPs, the website returns the heavily stuffed page to an IP address that is usually associated with search engine IPs. Then the user is rerouted to the other version.

LINK FARMS

Link farms emerged as early as 1999, due to their effectiveness in satisfying search algorithms. Since Google places heavy emphasis on the quality of an inbound link, black-hat SEO companies have found link farms to be an extremely useful way to inflate their Google PageRank. Simply put, Link farms are a group of websites that each link back and forth to each other. At the end of the day, one is left with a snowball effect that gains a mass quantity of links. There is limited quality to these links, however, as reputable domains and URLs are unlikely to be involved. Thus, the value is generated from the mass quantity.

A fairly simple method of investigation for the end-user is to ask the SEO firm about their link-building strategies. If the firm discusses the possibilities of generating a multitude of links and sharing them with their network, tread lightly.

Most SEO firms that use link farms will resort to software that essentially spins a set amount of links into the Internet in hopes that some are picked up by link farms. Some send template e-mails that offer to exchange links and create directory pages in the hope that a variety of sites will publish their links.

Search engine algorithms, specifically Google's, has been able to identify common attributes associated with link farms and is able to prevent these sites from being indexed by their search engine results; because of this, the highly unethical tactic has become less prevalent in present-day search, though some black-hat firms still practice it.

CLICK FARMS

Click farms deal mostly with paid search campaigns and are typically used to burn through a competitor's paid search budget. This is due to the fact that paid search campaigns are set up to generate website traffic. Each time a paid search advertisement is engaged, the firm pays on a "cost-per-click" basis. A black-hat SEO firm may suggest establishing a click farm to quickly eliminate a competitor's paid search campaign. The process typically involves an off-shore network.

And speaking of the role of click farms in SEO, websites now feature social media buttons including Facebook's "like," Twitter's "tweet," Pinterest's "pin," and Google's "+1" (See pages 9-10 for gaining social media authority). Since social engagement and creating authority are contributing factors in SEO, a new version of the click farm has emerged. This involves hiring someone to mass-click the website and URL of specific pages in order to inflate the authority of the domain. Google has stated that favorable website visibility will be granted to those pages that amass a lot of +1s, as it is a sign that web users are giving their seal of approval to a website. Thus, hiring someone to constantly +1 a website will falsely generate authority and PageRank will climb.

This tactic is fairly simple to catch, as Google Analytics provides social media engagement tools. Webmasters can carefully track the amount of social engagement and see where the traffic is coming from. If the overwhelming majority of social engagement is stemming from one specific area, this can be a red-flag and the client should contact the SEO firm instantaneously.

PLAGIARIZING CONTENT

Plagiarizing content online involves copying material that is already on the web, possibly making a few changes, and publishing the work as if it were your own. Writing copy is vital to a successful SEO campaign and, as we already know, search engines favor fresh, new content (including website content, blogs, wikis and forums). If a black-hat SEO firm is using copy / paste for a client, they are fully engaging in plagiarism. Some will do this because they are under-staffed and do not employ enough personnel to have a full-time content writing division. Others may do this to build extravagant campaigns in a short amount of time. They simply lack the resources to devote to writing authoritative content and updating it regularly.

There are some great tools on the web that can be used to identify this practice. Copyscape.com offers a free tool that will generate a list of webpages that contain similar content, keywords, and keyword phrases when users enter a URL. Virante also offers a duplicate content tool that will reach a step further, and investigate 404 pages and default page errors, and even scan the index.html. Some advanced methods, including searching source code for identical titles and meta description tags, can be utilized as well.

Search engines have developed their own methods of discovering duplicate content and will typically drop one version as they rank and index.

Engaging in plagiarizing content will decrease the crawl rate, since search engine bots are too busy sifting through the mass of duplicate content, and PageRank will be reflected in this.

Some black-hat optimization firms will steal content by using software that is designed to generate website copy based off of specific URLs. This is another reason that clients need to ask whether the SEO firm is using human capital or software.

3. LINK-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Link-building is one of the most effective techniques of search engine optimization. Since link-building plays such a vital role in search engine optimization, this is one of the major areas that those hiring SEOs should pay attention to. For example, ask the firm “what is your back-linking strategy?” and “How do you work with your clients to establish links?”

It is also important to determine whether a company uses human capital or software in their link-building efforts, as the most effective links are established through online networking. Online networking can be accomplished through relationship outreach, public relations, content marketing, and more. Online networking cannot be accomplished in the same fashion using software-based SEO. One of the many factors that set an SEO firm apart from the rest is how they build links. The most authoritative methods involve reaching out to likeminded people in the industry and establishing communications. Some further examples of link-building strategies include:

RELATIONSHIP OUTREACH

Manual custom outreach to highly relevant and authoritative sources will aid in expanding your relationships within the industry. Relationship outreach also helps develop and expand your brand with strong, high quality links and to establish authority within your industry.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Through press releases and media pitches, public relations helps expand brand awareness and get your company name out through various leading news sources. Press releases generate publicity for important news regarding your company while media pitches generates exposure and solidifies authority within your specific industry.

CONTENT MARKETING

Also known as guest blogs, a content writer will work to research and write an informative and engaging post on a trendy topic to secure an editorial link to your site on a high-quality, relevant website.

SPONSORED PREMIUM CONTENT

After posting a high-quality blog post to your blog, links to this content will appear on premium news sites as recommended reading to already-engaged users. By placing a link to your blog on these high-traffic sites, chances are increased of that content being seen and read by users who are more likely to convert.

4. IN-HOUSE VERSUS OUTSOURCING

Throughout this document, the importance of communications and human capital with SEO initiatives has been stressed. These two components play vital roles in SEO, and whether the company conducts their work in-house or outsources it becomes another important factor in choosing the best SEO firm.

When SEO companies outsource their work, typical locations for outsourcing include China, Korea, India, and the Philippines. This also means that there could be a 12 hour time-zone difference (or more!), thus making it extremely challenging to communicate with the team handling the optimization initiatives. The main reason SEO firms may outsource to these countries is that it's simply less expensive than conducting work in-house. Workers can be paid less money, but this often means the quality will be compromised.

The first question that any client should ask an SEO firm is “Do you outsource your work or is it conducted in-house?” The quality of the staff and their knowledge of best practices can be the difference between a high-quality SEO firm that maximizes ROI and an average SEO firm that goes through the motions. This is not to say that any SEO firm that outsources provides poor quality, but the level of quality can only reach a certain point since communication, transparency, and overall industry knowledge play such an important role.

There are major advantages to conducting in-house SEO. The quality of the work is more consistent, as the company has their own guidelines and parameters. It is harder to maintain high quality and consistent work among campaigns and projects when the company is outsourcing. Due to different time-zone and language barriers, it is more challenging to communicate objectives to third party vendors. Additionally, it is simply hard to communicate the specifications of each client to an additional party. With each added degree of separation from the company quality can easily be compromised, as can the level of transparency.

For example, an in-house SEO firm may call a team meeting to discuss the status of a campaign. This meeting can include a project manager, web designer, link-builder, content writer, and other involved persons. Rather than hopping on a call late at night to discuss objectives, an in-house SEO firm can simply call a team meeting during the workday.

5. ADDED VALUE

The best SEO firms are ones that understand their clients lines of business and are proactive to present opportunities for success. Interestingly enough, many SEO firms don't understand the industry that their client is operating in, and this disconnect can cause a major problem with the quality of work. SEO firms that listen to the concerns of their clients automatically put both themselves and their clients in an advantageous position.

Enhancing the offerings by going above and beyond the contract is a sure way to return value to the client. For example, when guaranteeing an estimated amount of links, some SEO firms may low-ball the projection and end up delivering more links than previously discussed. As some SEO firms consider themselves outsourced vendors, they treat each and every client as a strategic partnership. Identifying dedicated and knowledgeable SEO firms can be quite a challenge, as each one will proclaim they are the best and that they return the most value to their clients. At this point, as a potential client, ask the SEO firm who some of their high-profile clients are. If a firm can claim the honor of being a "Fortune 500 company," clients can take comfort in their integrity, knowing that reputable, well-known businesses trust their work.

Other forms of added value can include quoting the business owner in a "client testimonial" section of the webpage and including a back link. Providing news and relevant resources as they pertain to the client and their industry is also valuable.

Finding an SEO company that understands the needs and organizational objectives of the client is not always easy with all of the firms out there. Clients should ask the question "How knowledgeable is your staff in my industry?" Furthermore, the best SEO firms will offer recommendations as opposed to sitting still and waiting for work to be handed to them. These firms are out there, and finding one that goes "above and beyond" can have a dramatic effect on the overall ROI.

6. STAYING “UP TO DATE”

Since the search engine optimization industry is changing rapidly each and every day, SEO firms that remain stagnant and fail to reevaluate their processes can be discounted as poor quality firms. The best SEO firms regularly conduct research and stay one step ahead of the game. For example, Google has openly stated that it makes algorithm changes each day, so SEO firms that do not stay in touch with the fast-paced industry can be quickly left in the dust. Mediocre SEO firms can be using optimization tactics that were once useful and endorsed, and may have little effect at present.

Some SEO firms employ a staff of industry experts whose sole job is to survey the landscape regularly and scan for changes in the industry. This can be easily done, and some companies will even set up default webpages that include certain ranking factors and observe changes in PageRank.

There are SEO experts on social media platforms and blogs that can be followed to ensure the SEO firm has their finger on the pulse. Google Alerts is a free tool that can be used to search for keywords and keyword phrases. For example, “Matt Cutts” and “Google Webmaster” are two important keyword phrases to receive alerts on as industry experts. This way, any updates, including blog posts, tweets, and articles, discussing this topic will be automatically e-mailed to the user.

The SEO firms that stay informed in the industry have proven highly successful; SEO firms that do not stay up-to-date can easily fall behind. The latter will lose precious advertising dollars for their clients, as they fail to evaluate and refine their processes to deliver the most updated product to their clients.

CONCLUSION

In review, the search engine optimization industry is highly dynamic and quick-to-change. This document was constructed to illustrate key areas that should be considered when deciding to contract with a specific SEO firm. The SEO industry is saturated with companies that each proclaim they are the “best.” However, these six key components can be used as a benchmark to evaluate existing firms and their potential to provide optimal service and maximize clients' return on investment. Communication, ethics, link-building strategies, in-house personnel, added value, and industry knowledge are the key areas of emphasis.

