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WEBSITE MARKETING, PART 1

Search Engine Optimization Is Critical Marketing Tool For Operators

By JOSEPH PRESTON

Today, your prospective customers are using the Internet to find a new Vending Services Provider (VSP) or a new Office Coffee Service Provider (OCSP). Their first stop is an Internet search engine such as Google, Yahoo, MSN or Ask.com. Is your company appearing on the first page of the “free” search results on these popular search engines?

Search engine optimization for your company is a strategy that will enhance your website positioning, and ultimately guide potential customers to your site by ensuring that it ranks among the first free results when the prospective customers turn to the most popular search engines on the Internet. Optimizing your website for higher search rankings takes persistence, patience and strategic thinking.

With some technical savvy, dedicated research and a bit of creativity, you can dramatically raise your website’s search rankings and be visible among the first results of many vending and coffee service searches being conducted by your prospective customers. This article examines some of the basics of successful search engine optimization.

HOW SEARCH ENGINES WORK

Let’s take a look at the popular search engines. According to the latest findings of Internet research firm ComScore Networks, Google’s share of U.S. search queries rose to 42% in February 2006 from 36% a year earlier. Yahoo’s share is 28%, while MSN’s

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share is 14%. In order to generate new business leads for your Vending or OCS company, you need a top 10 position (on the first page of search results) in the free rankings for searches for “vending” or “coffee service” in your local area.

The search engines do not reveal the secret processes they use to assign website rankings. But, with some experimentation, many time-tested strategies and tactics are available to you in order to successfully optimize your website to increase your standing in those rankings.

What are the components that make up a search engine? They are: the “spiders” (also called “crawlers” or “robots”), the directory, sponsored results (also called advertisers) and the actual search engine.

Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask.com send their “spiders” throughout the Internet to visit and scan the text of millions and millions of Web pages each day. These spiders automatically jump from the links of one website to another.

If your website is never linked to any other sites, the “spiders” cannot find your website unless it is manually submitted to the search engines.

After a “spider” finds and analyzes a Web page, the information is transferred to the search engine’s indexing program. This employs sophisticated algorithms to evaluate the text, links, code and other content of the Web page, identifying specific “keywords” that are most likely to be used by Google, Yahoo, MSN or Ask.com users.

When you use a search engine, it does not search the Web directly, in real time, on your behalf. Instead, it searches through its own index database, which contains keyword phrases retrieved from the billions of pages on the Internet. The “spiders” fetch the material for the index database.

When a user searches for a topic by entering keywords, the search engine algorithm determines the relevance of each Web page in the index, in terms of those keywords.

An “algorithm” is defined as the logical sequence of steps for solving a problem; it’s often written out as a flow chart that can be translated into a computer program. Please keep in mind Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask.com each use different proprietary algorithms. In fact, the search engines often

tweak and change their algorithms to index websites in such a way to deliver distinctive search results. This keeps search results fresh – and Internet marketing companies like mine on their toes!

Besides indexing the Web pages and determining keyword relevance, the search engine algorithms determine the “authority” or “clout” of a website and its pages. For example, a vending operator website that is linked to by many other sites is presumed (by the search engines) to possess more power or clout than a similar vending operator website that has no inbound links connected to it. Google, for example, calls this process “Google PageRank,” and it allows Google to arrange or rank similar results into more relevant and theoretically more reliable results.

With a basic understanding of how search engines work and how they can help you generate qualified leads and increase your sales, it is time to examine how to optimize your website for improved search engine results.

KEYWORD ANALYSIS

The first step to crafting your search engine optimization strategy is defining keywords. That starts with a focused and well-defined target market.

Who is your target audience? Who are the decision-makers you want to influence in the sales process? Are you trying to reach facilities managers, office managers, CFOs, purchasing managers, directors of guest services, school principals, school nutrition directors, or all of the above? Understanding who you want to communicate to is crucial to effective search engine marketing.

What are you trying to sell? Many of my vending and OCS clients are focused on selling a service rather than a product. They are not selling the snack and beverage vending machines to their customers. Rather, a typical VSP conveniently offers cold beverages, snacks, coffee, fresh food and other fine refreshments to its diverse client base by ensuring that their vending machines will be installed promptly, serviced reliably, stocked consistently, and cleaned frequently. In the case of our OCS clients, many are not selling the coffee brewers...they are selling the Service in Office Coffee Service. They are, how-

ever, selling the associated products such as coffees, teas, creamers, filters and cups. Your search engine optimization strategy must recognize this distinction.

Where are your prospective customers located? To maximize the effectiveness of your search engine optimization strategy and tactics, it is imperative to understand specifically where your prospective customers are located. What specific towns, cities, counties, states and even ZIP codes are you targeting? This critical business intelligence is necessary when you're trying to position your company's website on the first page of a local search for "vending" or "OCS" in your target market.

Your website should effectively address the who, what and where of your business and operations. With more than 625 million searches conducted online each day, your prospects and customers are making use of search engines instead of phone books to find the services they need. In this competitive environment for winning new customers, your website needs to stand out from the crowd with a professional design and well-written copy. In a creative manner, be sure to clearly define in your website the following:

Who is your target audience?

What are you trying to sell?

Where are your prospective customers located?

Also, you must conduct a comprehensive competitive analysis. Know your competitors and where their websites are ranked in the search engines. What keywords and phrases have they used in their websites? If their websites are ranked ahead of yours in the search engines, it is critical for you to understand why and to respond accordingly. Undertake this yourself or hire an Internet marketing firm to gather this intelligence.

Examine each competitor's website objectively and put yourself in the mind of your prospective customers. Was the website easy to find? How many unique search words or phrases did you try? Do you like the look and feel of their websites? By comparison, is your website more professional looking, better designed and easier to read than your competitor's?

Let's take a look at the search habits of Internet users. According to a market research firm, 80% of all searches on search engines such as Google are for two-word combinations, or combinations of more than two words. Only 20% of searches are for single words such as "vending."

This shouldn't be surprising. Think about your habits when you are using a search engine. You may start with one word, but the results you get usually are not specific enough. As a result, you add additional descriptive words to your search to find exact-

ly what you are looking for.

Put yourself in your prospective customer's shoes. Imagine for a moment that you are an office manager for an industrial parts distributor with 300 employees, located in Philadelphia, PA. Your company is not pleased with your current vending operator for one reason or another. As the person tasked to find an alternative service provider, you go online and visit google.com to search for other local vending operators to bid on your business. You type in the word "vending" – and, unfortunately, the search results presented are not relevant to your company's needs or location. You are looking for a vending service provider in or around Philadelphia, not gumball vending machines or vending machine business opportunities.

Then, to localize your search, you might try the following search terms in Google:

vending pennsylvania

On the first page of the search results, you may find one or two local vending operators, but your boss said to get three or four competing proposals. And then you remember that the CEO recently remarked that he wanted to see more "healthy" selections in the vending machines in the breakroom. Now you try it again with more descriptive words that further localize and narrow your search:

healthy vending philadelphia pa

Just as prospective customers will refine their searches to find exactly what they are looking for on the Internet, you need to refine and optimize the keywords and phrases on your website to meet those search criteria.

When it comes to Keyword Analysis, I recommend you focus on compiling 20 keywords and keyword phrases that customers or prospective customers would use in search engines to find your website. These 20 keywords and phrases will need to appear with reasonable density in the Web copy (text) on each page of your website.

SITE AND PAGE OPTIMIZATION

On your website, it is critical to have a separate Web page for each unique service, product or location you serve. It will greatly assist the search engine optimization process, and thus will set you up for success. For example, let's suppose your company's website address (Universal Resource Locator, or URL) is:

www.xyzvending.com

For URL name optimization, you will want to have a separate directory for each unique service category. Since "healthy" vending is certainly on the minds of many customers today – and so in many Internet searches performed by your prospective

customers – make sure your website has a section dedicated to "healthy vending" such as:

www.xyzvending.com/healthyvending/

For file extension optimization, I recommend using up to three keywords for your page file name. It is important that the file extensions are static .html (HyperText Markup Language) files. Dynamically generated file extensions that use "%" or "?" in the query string often confuse search engines. Here is a good example of file extension optimization:

www.xyzvending.com/healthyvending/p hiladelphia-pa.html

This file extension optimization will assist in the search engine process, and allow a visitor looking for "healthy" vending options in Philadelphia to find you more easily.

My marketing solutions firm designed the askamador.com website for one of our clients named Amador Coffee and Vending. We made sure that "Healthy Vending" was a prominent link in the left hand navigation for the askamador.com website.

Make sure the links on your home page employ keywords for "anchor" text, and link directly to your second and third page levels. For askamador.com, we strategically placed several keywords and keyword phrases as links within the home page Web copy and throughout the entire website. Having strong, keyword-rich navigation within your site is very important to optimizing your website for higher search engine rankings.

For page optimization, cover one key service, product or topic per page and keep each page fairly brief, no more than 400 words of copy per page. Keyword density (the number of times a keyword is used on a Web page divided by the total number of words on the page) and keyword relevance (the frequency with which keywords that are related to each other appear on the Web page) are very important concepts in page optimization. Some search engines only measure keyword density and relevance over the first few lines, not the entire page, so you need to pay close attention to how each Web page begins.

The "Meta Description Tag" is currently used by some search engines for website descriptions in their results. This is an HTML tag that, unlike the usual ones, does not affect the appearance of the page; rather, it contains information about whose page it is, how often it's updated, and the keywords that appear in it. Serving as a description to your website, write your Meta-Description so that it reads well, invites users to click the link to visit your website, includes keywords in reasonable density and correctly describes

the target page.

The "title tag" is also essential to search engine optimization. Displayed in the top of your browser window, the "title tags" also are sometimes used by search engines to produce the link that appears to your Web page in the results listing, and which are used as bookmark titles for your page.

When your website displays images (or animations) of vending machines, coffee brewers or product brand logos, keep in mind that you should properly name the image files with descriptive text because "spi-

ders" are not able to see or understand images, flash movies or what is occurring in your Java script.

Your company's website should be visually appealing and well-organized to direct the user, and also the "spiders" – so they too can be guided efficiently to your website's content.

In Part Two of this series, I will present innovative strategies and tactics for website promotion to raise your search engine rankings, as well as a thorough discussion of Google "PageRank" and the need for qual-

ity inbound links.

Although the vending and office coffee service industries are very competitive, it is much easier to successfully optimize a vending and OCS website than (say) a residential real estate website that already has hundreds of established, optimized competitor websites in every local market around the country. Keep in mind that your company's continued success hinges on how well future customers can find you on the Internet.



BEFORE AND AFTER: Above, Amador Coffee & Vending's home page before professional upgrade; it provided a very brief description of some of their product and service offerings. Below, eye-catching redesign establishes a professional image, invites visitors to learn more about the company's coffee expertise.

EXTREME HOMEPAGE MAKEOVER: Amador's home page (above) did not have the proper number of keywords, nor the keyword density, to produce the best possible search results. After Vision North America's redesign (below), the website is visually appealing and well-organized for prospects and search engine "spiders."



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