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WEBSITE MARKETING, PART 2

Fine-Tuning Business Website For Search Engines Guides Prospects To Internet-Savvy Vending And Coffee Service Operating Companies

By JOSEPH PRESTON

In the April issue, I began this article series on making effective use of the Internet to attract prospective customers for vending and office coffee service firms. The first article examined four elements:

- *Why search engine optimization is a critical tool in your marketing strategy;*
- *How search engines work;*
- *Keyword analysis techniques;* and
- *Site and page optimization tactics.*

This second article on Search Engine Optimization explores ways to make sure that prospective customers will find your website. I will discuss "Google PageRank," the need for quality inbound links directed to your vending or OCS website, as well as innovative strategies for website promotion to raise your search engine rankings.

Before we address these new topics, let's do a quick review and define some of the important terms related to search engine optimization and website marketing.

In this day and age, your company's website is a very important contributor to defining your brand to your prospective customers. When customers and prospects visit your website, your brand image is on full display.

The experience your prospective customers have while finding your website – and interacting with it – is crucial to your long-term success. Let's face it. Perception

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equals reality. Great branding via your website results in generating sales leads and new customers. Maintaining positive long-term customer relationships in the vending and OCS business is paramount to profitability.

What is search engine optimization? It is the process by which your website undergoes fine-tuning and enhancements to properly communicate your keywords such as "vending chicago" or "coffee service illinois" to search engines such as Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Ask.com.

In order for your website to rank highly among the search engines – that is, to appear near the top of the list displayed to the searcher – you must have an understanding of how sites are ranked.

Search engines rank websites on a variety of factors. First, unique content with relevant keywords must be placed throughout the website. Second, the number of quality inbound links directed to your website is fundamental to effective search engine optimization. Other factors include the architecture of your site, the visibility of your content and the HTML (HyperText Markup Language) code used to program your site.

HOW TO RANK FIRST

A search engine is a service designed to allow users to search the Internet for websites that offer information about specific topics, such as coffee products and vending services. A search usually returns free listings and paid listings, which are then ranked. A listing's rank is better when it appears nearer the top of the list.

For example, a vending operator's website may be listed in a response to a search for "vending services." The "rank" indicates where, exactly, the website listing appears: is it on the first page of the results, the second page or the 75th page?

Obviously, in our age of consumer impatience, you want to be listed on the first page. Potential customers are not going to scroll down through 75 pages to find you.

A ranking (or listing) is the information

that appears on a search engine's results page in response to a search. Free rankings or free listings occur when a website appears because a search engine has deemed it editorially important. Paid listings (or "sponsored links") are rankings or listings that search engine providers sell to advertisers, billing them on a "pay-per-click" basis (as known as PPC).

Essentially, with PPC, advertisers only pay for ads that are "clicked" on by a prospective customer. The reason Google's stock is trading at around \$400 per share is because the company is generating billions and billions of dollars in Pay-Per-Click advertising revenue. In addition to performing search engine optimization services for my clients, my marketing solutions firm also manages PPC advertising campaigns for various clients.

The first step in ensuring your website ranks high in a customer's search is to create a list of the 20 words most frequently used by prospective customers to look for your services. Next, ensure that those keywords occur in the text throughout your entire website, and appear in high density in the site's architecture, meta tags, title tags, description tags, internal link structure and sub-pages.

The next step in attaining high rankings is securing incoming links from other websites that are well-established and share common themes with your business and website. This brings us to PageRank and Inbound Links.

GOOGLE "PAGERANK" EXPLAINED

Google explains PageRank as follows: PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the Web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B.

"But Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links, a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves 'im-

portant' weigh more heavily and help to make other pages 'important.' Important, high-quality sites receive a higher Page-Rank, which Google remembers each time it conducts a search."

Google combines "PageRank" with sophisticated text-matching techniques to find pages that are both "important" and relevant to the prospective customer's search. Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page; it examines all aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for the prospective customer's query.

In order to determine a website's "Page-Rank," you will need to download the Google toolbar at toolbar.google.com. Once you have this downloaded, every time you visit a website, the toolbar will display the Google PageRank of the page you are viewing in your browser.

INBOUND LINKS

Links are an essential element of successful websites. Thus, the term "link popularity" refers to a raw count of how "popular" a Web page is, based on the number of inbound links it has. The more sites – typically with a PageRank of 6 or greater – that link to yours, the better your PageRank will be. Links from content-relevant sites (such as popular vending and OCS websites as well as food, beverage and coffee supplier sites) are much better than random links.

As you well know, competition is tough in the vending and office coffee service industry. However, it is much easier to successfully optimize a vending and OCS website than sites maintained by businesses in other industries. Residential real estate brokers, for example, already have hundreds of established, optimized competitor websites in every local market around the country. Depending on the market area your vending or OCS company is competing in, your website may only need a PageRank of 4 or 5 to get listed on the first page of a search.

How do you check the number of inbound links to your website? You can visit most search engines and check manually. For example, visit the Google home page and type in the search query window the following:

link: followed by your domain name

A specific example is:

link: monumentalvending.com

You can also find out who is linking to you by examining your referral log files. The company that hosts your website usually offers a statistics package to track your Web traffic. These Web statistics typically list the sites that are "referring" your website or linking to your website.

Keep in mind that the sites that are linking to you will help you *only* if search engines are

aware of these websites. Therefore, if the site that is linking to you is not already listed in a search engine, submit that website to all the major search engines.

If you own additional domain names that are related to the vending and OCS industries, one way to increase your inbound links is to create links between those web pages and your original or main vending or OCS website. When you do this, be sure to include your most important keywords and phrases in the actual links. These sometimes have a higher perceived value for some search engines.

WEB DIRECTORIES

A Web directory is often a human-maintained index of the Internet. For example, the non-commercial Open Directory Project (dmoz.org) is maintained by more than 72,000 volunteer editors, who have reviewed more than five million websites in more than 500,000 categories. (By the way, it has a PageRank of 9.) After submitting your website for review and having it listed in this directory (for free), it is wise to submit the page with your link on it to all major search engines. In addition, I suggest making use of paid directories such as looksmart.com and business.com.

Free of charge, my firm will submit your website or a site that is "referring" or linking back to your website to approximately 200 different search engines, including 7Search, A9.com, About.com, AllTheWeb (Lycos), AltaVista, AOL, Ask.com, Earthlink, Enhance, EPilot, Excite, Galaxy, Go.com, Google, HotBot, ICQSearch, Ixquick, Kanoodle, Mamma, MIVA, MSN, Netscape, Search Feed, Search.com (CNET), Teoma, Tygo, Web Crawler, WiseNut, Xuppa, and Yahoo Web Results.

Now let's expand your marketing strategies to target an audience that can influence your potential market – the media.

What business journals, magazines and newsletters are the most widely read by your target market? Do they have online editions?

For instance, if you're providing office coffee to law firms in the Washington, DC area, you need to subscribe to *Legal Times*. Or maybe you want to provide vending services to government contractors. Then, you need to subscribe to *Federal Computer Week* or *Washington Technology*. Develop relationships with the editors and reporters, who easily reach thousands of your prospective clients. Send the journalists a news release on your company's new "Healthy Vending" program specifically designed for law firms or government contractors. These journalists should be first on your call list when you have news or information to share.

When these journalists write a positive ar-

ticle on your vending or OCS company, you are likely to receive a very beneficial inbound link to your website from the publication's website. Also, you will also have a positive press clipping that can be reprinted and presented to prospects in your brochures, direct mail, new business presentations and proposals.

So make sure you integrate your online marketing strategy with your existing public relations efforts, to ensure maximum success.

RESULTS AND EXPECTATIONS

In March of this year, my firm completed the new design of the askamador.com website for our client, Amador Coffee & Vending (Dublin, CA). Since Amador focuses on serving customers in northern California cities and towns such as Dublin, San Ramon, Livermore and Pleasanton, Vision North America implemented various localized search engine optimization strategies and tactics. In a short period of time, we were able to optimize the askamador.com website so that the site is ranked on the first page of multiple searches in the Yahoo search engine. Here are some of the rankings we achieved for our client:

Search Rank #1 on page one for "healthy vending san ramon";

Search Rank #1 on page one for "coffee



Within a month of launching its new website (above), Amador Coffee and Vending gained a number two ranking (yellow highlighted section below) in the free Yahoo search results when prospective customers in the Pleasanton, CA, area search for "vending," "service" and "pleasanton."



vending dublin”;

Search Rank #2 and #3 on page one for “vending service livermore”;

Search Rank #3 on page one for “coffee service dublin”;

Search Rank #7 on page one for “vending pleasanton”;

Search Rank #7 on page one for “healthy vending northern california”;

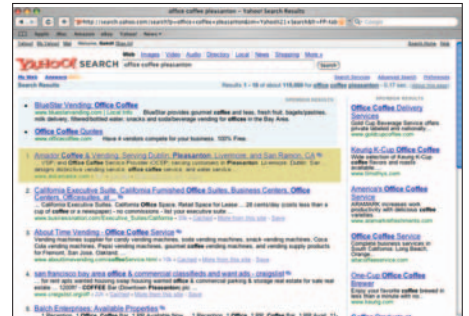
Search Rank #9 on page one for “vending dublin.”

With Yahoo handling about 25% of all Internet searches, this is prime positioning for our client. However, obtaining such high-ranking results in Google may take anywhere from three to 12 months. Optimizing your website for higher search rankings takes persistence, patience and strategic thinking. In addition, since the search engines regularly adjust their indexing algorithms to reformulate search rankings, you must constantly fine-tune and optimize your website to stay ahead of the competition in the rankings.

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.



Most search engines will use your website’s title and description tags (found in your site’s source code) to create the text link that appears in the free search engine results pages (yellow highlighted section above). Out of 178,000 Web pages containing the words “coffee,” “service” and “pleasanton,” prospective customers who click on the number one ranking in the free search results will see the landing page of Dublin, CA-based Amador Coffee and Vending (right).



Vision North America designed the AskAmador.com website (left) and performed search engine optimization tactics that yielded a number one ranking (see yellow highlighted section below) among 115,000 web pages in the free search results containing the words “office,” “coffee” and “pleasanton.”