How to Get to the Top
Of Search-Engine Results

By Alan S. Horowitz

A television commercial was once the biggest marketing coup for a small business. Today, getting your company listed in the first page of a search on Yahoo or Google can transform an also-ran into a front-runner.

For Baldwin/Welsh & Parker Insurance Agency in Wayland, Mass., the Web has become the firm's best source of sales leads, outside of direct referrals, because a high listing in search results attracts quality prospects.

"There's not a big downside if we're not listed high, but there's a big upside if we are," says the firm's principal, Dave D'Orlando.

Businesses can take some simple steps to improve the relevance of a Web site for search engines -- and traffic and hopefully business -- without spending lots of money on search-engine optimization. (*StartupJournal will have tips on hiring a search-engine optimization consultant in a future article.*)

Search engines like Google, Yahoo and MSN send out spiders (also called bots or crawlers) to scour the Web and retrieve certain information from sites that is then analyzed using complex algorithms.

The spiders look for keywords that searchers tend to use, as well as how often they appear on a Web page. That is called word density, and generally you want 3% to 5% of the words (or phrases) on a page related to words people use for searching, recommends Dave Knight, manager and co-owner of dMedia LLC, a search-engine optimization and Web development agency in Park City, Utah.

If a page has 300 words, the keywords or phrases searchers would likely use should appear nine to 15 times on that page. For example, an auto-repair shop in Phoenix would add the keywords "auto," "cheap repairs," "24/7" and "Phoenix" to its home page to draw potential customers looking for low prices or late-night service.

Mr. D'Orlando focuses on selling home insurance in the town where his agency is located, so the phrase "Wayland, Massachusetts" appears in the title bar (the very top of Web browser), under the company's logo, and in the text of the firm's home page. The word "Wayland" also mentioned one more time.

"If you are looking for home insurance in Wayland, Massachusetts we would rank pretty high," says Mr. D'Orlando. The firm's site comes up second in Google's results for that search. However, those looking for

home insurance who just type in "Massachusetts," will not likely find Mr. D'Orlando's site among the top results. That suits Mr. D'Orlando's strategy of specifically looking for home owners in the Wayland area.

The quantity of keywords counts as well.

"The most important thing is to make sure you have plenty of relevant content on your site," says Lynn Pilewski, owner of 1 Stop Sites, Taylors, S.C., a Web site and graphic design agency which created Mr. D'Orlando's Web site. "Be as in-depth in content as you can."

It's best to place the text in HTML code, which search-engine spiders can read, and not as Web graphics, which spiders can't read and won't boost the relevancy.

"The more pages the better, as long the content is relevant. Search engines love content," says Eric V. Melin, president of president of SpiderSplat Consulting, a search-engine marketing firm in Boston.

Also use metatags, which are hidden data written into a site's HTML that provide information about a page, such as its title and description. Spiders often rely on these metatags to index pages, notes Russell Klein, director of emerging technology research at Aberdeen Group, Boston.

A Web site's authority is determined by how many other sites link to it.

"The number one factor in most algorithms is how important or authoritative you appear to others," says Mr. Melin. "If you sell books online, you want to get as many people as possible to link to you."

The more prestigious the site linking to yours, the better. "If Amazon is linking to Joe's bookstore, Joe becomes more prominent," notes Mr. Melin. There is reflected glory when you are linked to from a well known site, and your site's importance to search engines goes up, he says.

How do you get other sites to link to yours? Respond to postings on popular blogs so they mention your Web page, recommends Aberdeen's Mr. Klein. Google, in particular, searches blogs for references to other sites, he says.

Contact Web masters of relevant sites and ask for a link-up. SpiderSplat's Mr. Melin says you should go to vendors, partners, clients, customers -- anyone you can think who has a site relevant to yours -- and arrange reciprocal links.

IFREC Real Estate Schools, Orlando, Fla. has reciprocal arrangements with about 50 real-estate brokers. Robin Shumate, vice president of business affairs, says the brokers' Web sites refer potential students to IFREC and, in return, IFREC refers students to the brokers so they know who is hiring. The school's site also is linked to from RealtyU, a national network of real-estate schools. Ms. Shumate says these links help boost IFREC to the top, or near the top, of search rankings.

She says hits on IFREC's Web site increased 37% in 2004, 39% in 2005 and are expected to increase 35% to 39% this year. While she can't quantify exactly how much of this is a result of search-engine optimization, she believes much of it is.

Another way to increase your credibility to search engines is to get mentioned in articles or have press

releases related to your business distributed by news services.

"Any way that you can get as many possible Web sites in the world pointing to yours increases your chances of ranking highly," says Mr. Klein.

Higher rankings do not come immediately, no matter what you do. There may be weeks between visits by spiders to your Web site. Also, the algorithms used by the search engines are constantly changing, and that may call for some tweaking to a Web site. Experts say it may take as long as six to nine months to move near the top of a search.

Beware the search-engine consultant that promises to boost search rankings quickly. "If a company promises that you will be at a certain ranking within a certain amount of time, run from them. It's not possible," warns Ms. Pilewski. Of course, if you have a bizarre search term -- Part Number 2438, for example -- you may quickly move to the top. But, generally, it takes time and work to get to the first page of rankings.

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