

## **Don't Trade Your Professionalism for a Great Search Engine Listing**

When was the last time you visited the website of a Search Engine Optimization specialist (SEO) and thought, "My goodness! That's an *exceptionally fine-looking website!*" Unless that SEO is paying *mucho dinero* to buy a bit of your attention, the answer is, necessarily, never.

I'll begin by admitting my bias: I'm a web designer. Like most of my artsy colleagues, I have a fondness for well-organized tables, graphical buttons and titles, beautiful typefaces and Flash animation. I'm also a reader and a writer, and love a well-crafted sentence. It's painful but true that each of these niceties can damage a page's potential ranking in the search engines. Do I still use them? Yes, with caution and an understanding of their effects. My clients wouldn't pay me for a badly designed, awkwardly worded site.

The SEO has a very different mission. To them, lovely typefaces be damned, they're aiming for number one. After all, *their* clients wouldn't pay them for admitting "I only got you to number twelve, but it sure is a good-looking site!"

I confess, it's tough to argue with that oft-repeated SEO refrain, "What's the sense of having a website if no one can find it?" And there are many, many companies for whom a great search engine listing far outweighs the benefits of a well-designed, well-worded site. Plumbers, for one. Electricians. Private Detectives. But if you're a larger organization with a reputation at stake (or you're aiming to be one) you shouldn't opt for a badly designed, badly worded site to get a great search engine listing any sooner than you'd consider changing your name to AAAA, Inc., to get a great yellow pages listing. It simply isn't worth it.

If your organization is like every other, you want a professional site *and* a great listing in the search engines. If you're willing to spend a bit of time and money, there's no reason you can't have both. But it's important to understand the compromises that must be made, and decide which side of the fulcrum is best suited for your business. Following are some of the ways in which search engines and professional appearance don't always play nice.

**Implementing Keywords.** One way the search engines index your pages is by the frequency and placement of keywords and phrases. An SEO will suggest wording your page to include the repetition of certain keywords and phrases as many times as possible, in both your headline and your content area. Unfortunately, this leads to such lovely writing as this:

"Archteria Architecture is a residential architecture firm and design studio with architects specializing in contemporary, custom house designs. If you desire an architect designed custom home of the quality found in notable architecture design magazines such as Architectural Digest, then a house designed by the Minnesota architects of Archteria Architecture may be for you."

**Including Misspellings.** If an SEO feels the need to pull out all the stops, he may also suggest implementing common misspellings in the content of your site, slipping in the word “architekt” for people who mistyped, can’t spell, or don’t know English very well. While your site may be seen by a larger number of potential clients who are also bad spellers, it will also be seen by users who can spell. This is a technique that can damage your reputation. Avoid it at all costs.

**HTML, straight up.** Unfortunately, to a search engine, a page with a particular keyword in a headline or at the start of the content seems more relevant – and is therefore better indexed – than one with the same keyword at the bottom. Additionally, search engines can’t read graphics; therefore, slightly better rankings may be achieved when headlines are standard HTML text in one of the very few fonts almost all computers will recognize. Your SEO will suggest using only HTML text and very few, if any, graphics or intricate page layouts.

**Doorway Pages.** If you’re competing for a particularly sought-after set of keywords, your SEO will most likely suggest creating doorway pages. These are pages created to be indexed well under a particular keyword in a particular search engine – a mid-sized site could have dozens of these pages. The downside of these pages is that they are the entry point to your site, hence the name doorway page, making them the first impression of anyone who finds you through the search engines. Unfortunately, since they’re typically almost all HTML text and no graphics, they’re necessarily, well, ugly.

So how can you get a good listing and still look professional?

**Encourage others to link to you.** Search engines, in their constant battle to squelch spam and encourage relevant listings, look very fondly on sites that have a lot of other sites linking to them; after all, a site can “fake” its relevance by repeating a keyword, but a site with a lot of links to it is most likely a good resource. These links, however, need to be from places that are relevant to your industry – don’t bother with free-for-all pages or LinkExchange banners. Instead, take the time to find directories geared toward your industry. Ask your web designer to create a “Resources” page for you, and contact companies you’ve referred or worked with to ask if you can exchange links.

**Utilize pay-per-click links.** Yes, you can buy your way to number one, and it doesn’t have to be that expensive. Pay-per-click search engines such as Overture ([www.overture.com](http://www.overture.com)) allow you to bid on keywords – these can cost anywhere from 5 cents to \$8 and beyond per click-through. If you’re one of the top three bidders on a particular keyword phrase, your site will be listed at the top of Yahoo!, MSN, InfoSpace, Lycos, AltaVista, and Netscape. To avoid paying that ridiculously high latter figure, do your research to find the best keywords – those that are specific enough to encourage relevant traffic, but have had a fair number of searches in the past. Usually, the most cost-effective phrases target your local market (for example, “architects in Texas”).

**Spend money on the directories.** Yahoo is \$300 a year; LookSmart has paid inclusion of around \$230 a year. They're worth it. Sign up.

Search engines are not the be-all-end-all of marketing, any more than is print, direct mail or the yellow pages. You can drive traffic to your site in any number of ways: Put your URL on everything you print. Tell people about it. Write articles. Spread the word in chat rooms. Just don't compromise your professionalism with a site that will drive people away as soon as they arrive.

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