

Finding the Right Search Engine Optimization Contractor

By Paul J. Bruemmer

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Marketers outsource search engine optimization because it pays to have an expert optimize your site correctly. You get more traffic more quickly and you can devote your time to core business while getting a good return on your investment. The dilemma is knowing who to hire.

There are a number of reputable providers, but there are also many you should avoid. MarketingSherpa's Buyers' Guide to Search Engine Optimization Firms profiles 55 reputable U.S. and Canadian firms. Another resource is SEOPros.org, with information and articles on what to expect from search engine optimization companies.

There are a number of important issues to explore when evaluating SEO contractors. Start by defining exactly what services you'll get for your money. You'll also want to check out the contractor's experience and expertise. Other areas to research are customer service, contract requirements, and the reporting provided.

Defining SEO Services

Services can be categorized into four areas: (1) site analysis and optimization, (2) manual submission process, (3) offsite optimization, and (4) monthly reporting.

1. Site Analysis and Optimization

Keyword/Category Research: Strategic keyword phrases are developed by discussing terms to be used with the client (server log files or WebTrends) and further research and analysis on keyword popularity (Wordtracker or WordSpot). Campaign cost depends on the number of terms used. Keyword reevaluation after the initial report should be included to refine keywords if necessary. Category research is required for directories to determine the best category selection.

Page Optimization: This includes HTML optimization for your home and subpages (title, description, meta-tags, alt tags, keyword density and location) and general site suggestions (navigation, subpage guidelines, site map, etc.).

Copywriting and Content Review: Copywriting and editing to seed your strategic keywords throughout well-written prose, including a review of content quality and placement.

Directory Compliance Review: Directories like Yahoo!, LookSmart, and ODP have very specific guidelines for good placement. This review ensures site compliance and makes any necessary changes.

Dynamic Site Review: Some robot search engines still can't crawl dynamic sites. This review optimizes the homepage by suggesting site modifications (creation of a few crawlable dynamic pages). Requires creating additional content and custom subpage submissions for specific directories.

Framed Site Review: Subpages within framed sites are difficult for search engine spiders to index. Making them search-engine friendly require site modifications to ensure subpage indexing and ensure that the subpage listings will call up your framed site correctly.

2. Manual Submission Process

All sites under 100 pages should be submitted manually. Below is what's required.

Submit to Major Search Engines and ODP: Start by working with Open Directory Project (ODP) editors to acquire the best possible category listing as ODP provides search results for Netscape, AOL and numerous others. Should include submission and monitoring of your home and subpages.

Paid Directory Submissions: This is a critical element of any SEO campaign. Directory submissions require very special care once each year. Requires decision on which pay-for-inclusion search portals are advantageous for your positioning campaign.

Yahoo Business Express: This listing is mandatory for every serious business. Requires working with Yahoo! editors to determine your best possible category. Also requires precise submission procedures in compliance with guidelines (keyword density and placement in the title, description, and URL).

LookSmart LookListings: Recent pricing changes make this a pay-per-click buy, which requires some evaluation to decide whether or not this is going to give a good ROI. Requires working with LookSmart editors to determine your best category and following its submission guidelines.

3. Offsite Optimization

A certain amount of development can be done offsite to improve your rankings, such as the creation of customized pages and link popularity efforts.

Custom Keyword Optimized Pages: High rankings can be obtained by delivering unique Web pages customized for a particular search engine's algorithm. Requires creating, submitting, monitoring, reporting, researching, and resubmitting a keyword-phrase-optimized page for each keyword phrase to individual robot engines per their algorithm preference.

Improved Link Popularity: SEO pros can help you get relevant content links to your site from popular, content-rich Web sites. This requires a site analysis to match your content with relevant content from complementary sites, relevant online publications, and topic-focused articles.

4. Monthly Reports

Positioning Reports: These monthly reports provide positioning data for each URL and keyword phrase. Learn exactly where your homepage, subpages, and optimized keyword pages are located. Reports list the page number and location (number 1 through 50) of each keyword phrase query.

Log file Analysis: These reports are produced by evaluating your server logs to identify the results of your search engine optimization campaign. These stats are useful for many purposes, including determining ROI with search engine marketing.

Campaign Costs

The SEO services you select should be itemized when pricing an SEO campaign. Different businesses require a different mix of services, and the number of key phrases will vary because some industries require more SEO resources than others. Get itemized pricing for all the above services in a proposal that distinguishes one-time versus monthly costs. Each recommended service should be described in a technical support document explaining the need for every item in your campaign.

Search engine positioning requires a long-term commitment and a realistic understanding of the technical and human resources required. Search engine marketing requires a significant investment and continuous maintenance. SEO campaigns generally fall into three service levels: Under \$10,000/year; \$10,000 to \$100,000/year; and \$100,000 to \$1M/year. A reputable SEO company will admit to designing its services around only one of these three levels. For the benefit of the client prospect, vendors will often refer prospects to each other when a job is too small or too large.

Contractor Experience and Proficiency

Experience and reputation are important when selecting an SEO vendor. The following questions can help determine the experience and proficiency of the vendors you consider.

- How many years of SEO experience do you have?
- Do you specialize in SEO or do you also provide other marketing services?
- Do you specialize in SEO for any specific industries?
- What clients are on your customer list and can we contact them?
- What kind of results have you achieved for past clients?
- How soon can we expect to see results?
- Does optimization impact my existing site?

Customer Service

SEO services are complex with many nuances. You need access to qualified technicians through an account manager who understands every aspect of your campaign in order to discuss any questions or unexpected issues. Be aware of what support services are provided and any extra costs involved.

- Can you describe the customer support services provided?
- How is support provided (by phone/email) and is there a limit (hours/number of emails)?
- Will I have one-to-one, direct contact with an SEO specialist?

Contracts and Reporting

You should learn whether or not a minimum contract is called for and what the charges are for consulting. Ask about guarantees and traffic hosting. SEO results may not be guaranteed because results are in constant flux due to the nature of indexing. Therefore, maintenance and reporting are important to check positioning over time.

- Do you have a minimum contract requirement?
- Do you charge extra for re-optimization?
- Do you guarantee positioning or traffic?
- Who owns the domains used and pages created to build traffic?
- What maintenance do you provide and what is the monthly cost?
- What reports do you provide and how often?

Taking the time to get answers to the questions above and subsequently comparing vendors can

help you make a decision you'll be comfortable with. MarketingSherpa's SEO Buyers guide is also a good reference.

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