

Unlocking the Keys to Your Web Site Traffic - Web site promotion and search engine strategies

By Philippa Gamse

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Introduction Introduction

It is estimated that up to 60% of new traffic to your Web site will come from search engines. This means that unless you are already so well known that people will be using your name to search for your site, you need a search engine strategy. Thousands of new Web sites are created daily, so the axiom "Build it, and they will come" does not apply.

Effective Web site promotion requires a serious and continuing investment of time and resources, whether you do it yourself, or hire a professional. It is not a one-shot deal, but an ongoing process, meaning you should evaluate the return on your investment. You can collect a vast amount of crucial information about your traffic, and make strategic business development decisions, in ways that are unprecedented in the real world.

Setting your goals

We've all met the person who boasts of "thousands of hits a day" on his Web site, and maybe we felt a little envious. But let's debunk the hype

It's important to distinguish between individual visitors, and "hits". The latter refers to every piece of your site that is downloaded, and this includes all graphics files separately. Thus, one visitor viewing your home page, which contains text and four images, will generate five "hits". If that visitor explores your site further, he or she will generate more hits, but it's still the same user.

You want to ask yourself whether you want every visitor that you can get - which could be thousands of indiscriminate, unqualified people, or whether you would prefer 20 highly qualified decision makers per day, looking for exactly what you provide?

There are no right or wrong answers, but you should have goals for the volume and quality of traffic that you would like, so you can measure results (more on this later!)

Designing keywords

The next step is to identify some keywords and key phrases that will differentiate you. Imagine if we all used "professional speaker" as our main key phrase. How many of us would show up on top of

the search engines?

Furthermore, there are too many results for the typical search. So, visitors will be combining "professional speaker" with something that narrows down what they are looking for - perhaps "customer service" and "banking", or maybe a location, such as "teambuilding" and "Chicago". You will discover the keywords that work best for you when you run a log analysis - for now, make your best guess.

Think about the topics you offer, which industries you specialize in, which locations you serve, and anything else that sets you apart. Make sure that your keywords are in the language that your clients use, and not industry jargon - I have never seen the phrase "keynote speaker" in actual searches.

Then, build these into a set of keywords and phrases. Because of the frequency of most single words, phrases often work better in narrowing a search. Include your name, common misspellings of your name, and any other key element of your site. Use both singular and plural forms, and mix capital with lower case letters, except for proper names (some search engines are case sensitive and will exclude lower case searches for words that you have capitalized).

As an example, here are the key words and phrases for my site:

Philippa Gamse, Phillipa, Games, CyberSpeaker, internet speaker, internet seminars, Internet marketing programs, internet marketing speakers, search engines, online marketing strategies, Web site promotion, traffic logs, internet consultant

Not an exhaustive list, but a good start ;-)

When you have the keywords and phrases, use those to build:

1. a page title containing your most significant keywords. It doesn't matter if the title doesn't read well - it's the piece that appears in the colored bar of the browser at the top, and very few people see it. Contrary to popular belief, titles are for search engines, not people!

2. a brief "knock their sox off" description. This will be displayed in the search engine results, and will attract visitors to come to you. Most search engines display 2 lines or less, so wording such as

"Welcome to My Company - a full service provider of . . ."
is probably most of what you'll get - and you haven't said anything yet! So keep it pithy, and include the keywords.

Now - do this for every significant page of your site!

Your site is (or should be) more than your home page. The spider search engines that index every word on a page allow you to submit multiple pages. So do it! This increases by many times your exposure, and the angles that you can use to promote yourself.

For example, I have an article on my site about choosing an Internet Service Provider (if you want to read it, check out my list of articles). Many people searching for this topic find this piece as their entry point to my site. If they want to find out more about me, they can follow the navigation aids back to get more information.

Reviewing and updating your pages

When you have your keywords, key phrases, titles and descriptions ready, it's time to insert them into every significant page of your site. You may need help from your Web designer to do this.

First, you need to incorporate these elements into the header record for each page - in special

places called "meta tags". These tags, which aren't visible to visitors, are used heavily by several of the major search engines.

As an example, the header record for my home page looks like this:

HEAD

TITLEInternet speaker, Internet marketing speaker, internet seminars, online marketing programs/TITLE

META Name="keywords" Content="internet speaker, internet seminars, Internet marketing programs, internet marketing speakers, search engines, online marketing strategies, Web site promotion, traffic logs, internet consultant"

META Name="description" Content="Kick-Start your Internet marketing! Philippa Gamse, CyberSpeaker, is an online business expert and professional speaker"

/HEAD

Also, make sure that the text of each page includes the main keywords again - but don't spam - that is, repeat them incessantly. At best, the search engines will ignore more than about 7 occurrences of each word, at worst they may even exclude your site.

While you are reviewing your Web site pages, look for any hidden roadblocks for the search engines that your Web designer may have unwittingly introduced. These can include:

- * Frames: the separation of the screen into different sections. Several search engines will not go inside these.

- * Java: a programming language used to create "cool" animation effects, and other applications on your site - again, the search engines will not work with Java script.

- * Images: pages that contain only graphics with no text, (even if words are part of the graphic) will be passed over by the search engines unless you include alternative text tags for the images.

Note: there are big differences between the various search engines as to what and how they will index. My suggestions here will help you well through the basics, but for much more detailed information, check out "The Webmaster's Guide to Search Engines".

Submitting to the search engines

Now it's time to submit to the search engines.

By the way, they all (currently) accept your listing free of charge - they raise revenue from the advertising banners at the top of their pages.

You may have already received some unsolicited e-mail (not from me!) offering to submit your site to 500+ search engines for a seemingly very low price. My advice would be to avoid these services, for several reasons:

1. Most of the 500 search engines will be obscure (such as "Fred's Cool Links"), with few people ever visiting.

2. These services will submit your site to all the engines on their lists indiscriminately, whether or not it is applicable. Worse, some of them may be adult-oriented.

3. The services use software to submit your site automatically, which means that they do not take the time to ensure that you appear in the optimum category within each directory. Also, some of the search engines are now rejecting automated submissions.

If you decide to do your own submissions, these are the ones that I recommend using:

Alta Vista; AOL Netfind; Excite; Google; Hotbot; Infoseek; Lycos; Microsoft Network; Northern Light; Webcrawler;

Be aware that the search engines take vastly differing amounts of time to list you. Alta Vista and Infoseek are usually very fast, while Excite and Lycos can be delayed by several weeks.

You should also get yourself listed in the major directories - these are reviewed by human editors, so make sure that your site is ready for close scrutiny! These include:

Looksmart; Snap; Yahoo!

If, and only if, you are selling product directly from your Web site via a secure server, you can apply for Yahoo!'s Business Express Service. This costs a one-time fee of \$199, but seems to virtually guarantee you a listing - and Yahoo! is still by far the highest trafficked directory.

And, if you are willing to pay per click (visitor to your Web site), check out Goto. This search engine is arranged on an auction system - you bid per keyword or phrase (bids start at \$0.01), and the highest bidder's site is displayed first. Your account is debited by the amount of your bid when someone clicks on your listing. Again, this site is controlled by human editors, so the results are pretty clean.

Traffic analysis - evaluating results

Once your site is promoted and starts appearing in the search engines, you can evaluate your traffic. Your Internet Service Provider (ISP) should provide your site's usage logs, which give you incredibly useful information. (And if they don't, take your business elsewhere!)

You will need a good analysis tool to break down this data (some ISP's and / or professional Web site marketers provide this service as well). I currently use Hitbox, which is excellent.

The report will show you how many individual visitors came to your site, as well as the hit count. You can see which pages of the site are the most popular, and which pages draw little traffic. Maybe this is because you haven't made them enticing enough in your links.

Armed with this analysis, you can intelligently review your site structure and content. For the purposes of this discussion on search engine promotion, look at the sections on search engines and keywords (you can find these by using the navigation links in the left-hand frame of the report):

"Top Referring Sites"

"Top Referring URL's"

"Top Search Engines"

"Top Search Phrases"

"Top Search Keywords"

These charts and tables show you which search engines (or other Web sites that link to you) are driving the most traffic to your site, and what keywords and phrases people are using to find you, broken down both by individual search engine and overall. Here's where you start getting some great feedback. You may have been fairly sure that you knew the keywords that your markets would use to find your site, but you could be wrong! With this information, you can adjust the titles, keywords and descriptions in your pages, and then resubmit the site. This ongoing process helps to improve your position in the search engines where you may not be so well placed.

This also provides wonderful market research on your audience. Rita Risser's company, Fair Measures, provides legal training for managers in the area of employment law. Her Web site is an extensive information resource, attracting over 6,000 visitors per month.

Rita told me that her logs showed that many visitors were searching for a specific topic that was a total surprise to her. But there was such demand for this subject that she decided to write a book on it.

If you view the Webtrends report while online, you can click on the most popular search strings and perform that actual search. This will show you how your site appears, and also what other pages are being returned. So if your competition is ahead of you, it may be possible to look at their promotional techniques and work out how they do it!

Conclusion

Take your Web marketing seriously. The Web affords you the opportunity to track the results of your marketing investment in ways that you never could with traditional advertising. You can learn something about literally every visitor to your site.

Get serious about your Web site marketing; set your goals, invest in an ongoing strategy, and then become even more successful!

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