

Analyzing Real-Life Examples of Top Ranking Sites

By Robin Nobles

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Have you ever wondered how top ranking sites are spending their advertising dollars? Do they advertise offline? Do they outsource their SE positioning work, or do they optimize their own sites in-house? What are they doing to increase the visibility and popularity of their sites?

For this article, I chose two highly competitive keyphrases and one moderately competitive keyword and then contacted three companies who are having success in getting their sites ranked at or near the top and asked them a series of questions.

The two competitive keyphrases:

- * homes for sale
- * used cars

The moderately competitive keyword:

- * shortwave -- (as in shortwave radios)

Of course, the examples used in this article reflect the positioning of these sites at the time of writing. Naturally they are bound to fluctuate up and down in the listings. Even so, you'll likely find them placed closely to where their positioning is described below. And, regardless of where they're positioned at the time you happen to read this article, the examples and the analysis remain strategically valid.

First Example . . .

Keyword phrase: homes for sale
Site: HarmonHomes.com (<http://www.harmonhomes.com>)

HarmonHomes.com boasts the following top 10 rankings for the keyword phrase, homes for sale:

- * #1 in AltaVista
- * #3 in Google
- * #4 in Fast/All the Web

* #7 in Lycos

* #3 in Yahoo! Web Pages

* #4 in pure Inktomi results (<http://169.207.238.189/search/>)

It's important to note that HarmonHomes.com is owned by Trader Publishing Company out of Norfolk, Virginia, which also owns several other large Web sites, such as CareerWeb.com, ForRent.com, Parenthood.com, and Roomsaver.com. Erin Cullipher, Marketing Manager of HarmonHomes.com, gave a quick summary of the site:

"Headquartered in Virginia Beach, Va., HarmonHomes.com is a leading provider of online real estate classified ads. As a division of Trader Publishing Company and part of the family of Trader Web sites, HarmonHomes.com provides a comprehensive homes- for-sale database for home buyers while serving as a convenient and effective advertising forum for real estate professionals."

According to Erin, Trader has a complete Web development team that is responsible for each of their domains, with the exception of Roomsaver. It's also important to note that the main page of HarmonHomes.com is a straight HTML page. However, most of the interior pages, since they are a classified ad site, are database delivered.

Erin answered the following interview questions:

Question: Do you do anything special to boost your site's link popularity?

Erin: We are lucky to have a strong, built-in system of links due to our company's network of highly trafficked sites. We have links to HarmonHomes.com on all sites within the network and we, in return, link to all of them as well. In addition, we have agreements with two companies who provide Web sites for real estate agents. To offer a national real estate listings database to the mostly local visitors to these agents' sites, our link is typically placed under a "Search Homes Nationally" button. In addition, we are pursuing a links page and reciprocal links program with businesses affiliated with residential real estate.

Question: How do you spend your advertising dollars for your Web site?

Erin: Our online business is somewhat unique in that we have two target markets: we sell our advertising products to real estate professionals in order to serve home buyers. So, while we market our products to agents, we also have to drive consumer traffic to the site to satisfy our agent clients and further build our business. As far as our trade advertising efforts, we concentrate our dollars and efforts in the following areas: trade shows, email marketing, print ads, direct mail and online ads. To attract consumers to the site, we concentrate on the following areas: SEO, home show sponsorships and email marketing. To reach both of these markets, we also place our URL on the front cover of every issue of Harmon Homes magazine (78 million issues annually) and advertise the site in the publication. We also conduct intensive media efforts nationally. Both of these initiatives are high impact and relatively low cost, if not free.

Question: Do you purchase keywords from the pay engines like Overture? If so, approximately how much do you spend each month on Overture advertising?

Erin: Yes, we feel that pay engines are integral to our SEO efforts, especially here in the beginning when we're trying to establish a strong Web presence. We do have an account with Overture. We spend less than \$300 on Overture and other PFP engines.

Question: How much actual search engine optimization work do you do on the site?

Erin: Optimization is done on an almost daily basis. In order to serve our customers, the site changes daily. Being graphically heavy and with most of our pages being dynamically generated, we have worked to increase the amount of text on our pages. We have paid special attention to relevancy factors by maximizing keywords and phrases.

Question: Are you using cloaking technology on your site?

Erin: No, we do not use any cloaking technology. Our pages are submitted to search engines manually with no doorway pages, agent name or IP delivery.

Question: Do you hire a professional SEO or outsource your SEO work, or do you do the search engine work yourself?

Erin: We have a full-time Web Promotions Specialist who handles SEO for HarmonHomes.com, in addition to three other Trader-owned sites. She has a Web development background and conducts extensive research on SEO topics. Even with a full-time person allocated to these efforts and significant strides made already in SEO, we realize that we still have a lot to learn and a lot of work to do.

Question: Do you check your rankings periodically?

Erin: While we formally check our search engine rankings weekly based on our keywords, we also informally spot check our rankings throughout each day. We also check random words and phrases periodically to see if there are 'quirk' areas from which we are gaining traffic.

Question: Do you monitor your traffic? Do you analyze your traffic and use that knowledge to strengthen your site?

Erin: Yes, we do monitor our traffic. Since we are a data-driven site, we are working very hard to increase and improve our listings. With that, the user experience will improve, traffic will grow and the hard work we do in the area of SEO will pay off even more. We analyze traffic weekly and use the information to improve our placement in search engines.

Analysis of Harmon Homes

Remember that rule number one regarding site optimization is: never mess with success! That said, there are some interesting observations worth mentioning regarding this site.

* Noteworthy is the fact the keyword phrase -- homes for sale -- does not appear in the main page's title, description, or keyword tags. However, the keyphrase Houses for sale does appear.

This apparent oversight actually lends itself as evidence that the appearance of the keyword home in incoming links that point to the Harmonhomes.com site is a more important factor than having the keyword in the title, at least on some engines. By the way, we've determined this by checking LinkPopularity at <http://www.linkpopularitycheck.com/> where our search revealed the following results for HarmonHomes.com:

- * AltaVista: 23,630 incoming links
- * HotBot: 3,500 incoming links
- * MSN Search: 5,221 incoming links
- * Lycos: 1,007 incoming links

Impressive! And our research revealed that every single link on every linking page that we

happened to spot-check had the keyword homes somewhere in the link. This fact builds an overwhelmingly strong case that incoming links that include your keywords are critical to high relevancy scores. In many cases ONLY the single keyword "Homes" was used to link to the Harmonhomes.com site.

* By taking into account that "Houses for sale" DOES appear in the title, and that there is slightly less competition for the "houses for sale" keyphrase, coupled with the finding that Harmonhomes.com is listed way down at position #20 for houses for sales, we could further conclude that keywords in the incoming links are MORE important than keyword(s) in the title.

* Having the keyword "homes" built into the URL is a smart strategy. We found many of the incoming links listed as Harmon Homes -- which certainly gets the keyword homes into the incoming link.

* The fact that HarmonHomes.com is a "theme-related" site with only a single minded focus -- homes for sale -- should also be considered a crucial element of its successful SEO model.

Now, let's look at another top ranking site.

Keyword phrase: used cars

Site: Used Cars Online - <http://www.ausedcar.com>

Used Cars Online boasts the following top ten rankings...

- * #1 in Yahoo! Web Sites (directory)
- * #1 in AltaVista
- * #3 in Lycos
- * #3 in pure Inktomi results
- * #8 in Google

Used Cars Online is just what the domain name suggests: a Web site devoted to buying and selling used cars. Phil Anderson is one of the site's Webmasters and he's in charge of the search engine marketing aspects of the site. Phil was good enough to answer the following interview questions:

Question: Do you do anything special to boost your site's link popularity?

Phil: We just ensure that we are on every search engine, and we work with several affiliates in sort of a link exchange. We are also linked to or bookmarked by several hundred Web sites.

Question: How much business do you get from your Web site?

Phil: We look for a 2% sales rate based on the number of people that view our site and make it as far as the sales page. (Most of our money is made by people placing ads). We usually make this 2% quota.

Question: Do you purchase keywords from the pay engines like Overture?

Phil: No, we are listed high enough on enough major search engines that we don't feel it's justified to pay for keyword search engines. Incidentally, we still end up on some of them any way.

Question: How much actual search engine optimization work do you do on the site?

Phil: This was one of the things we spend the most time on. Having a small advertising budget

when we first started out, this was a crucial way of 'getting the word out.' We have directly correlated most of our success to Yahoo, even though we are on many other search engines. Our biggest obstacle is Yahoo continually shifting its index in the search for 'used cars.' We also worked a long time on our META tags, which are vital for a good position on most other search engines. In fact, we have noticed several competitors that directly copied both our tags and our wording, and they indeed get placed right with us on the search engines.

Question: Do you use cloaking technology on the site.

Phil: I'm not sure what you mean by cloaking technology, so I suppose the answer is no.

Question: How do you spend your advertising dollars for your Web site?

Phil: Most of our advertising is done through newspapers and trade magazines, as this is where people would look when they are going to buy or sell a used car. We also use a good amount of signage in the Baltimore/DC area where we are based. Also, there are many sources of free advertising on the Internet.

Question: Do you check your rankings periodically?

Phil: Yes, as this is vital for our income.

Question: Do you monitor your traffic? How much traffic do you get to the site (user sessions)? Do you analyze your traffic and use that knowledge to strengthen your site?

Phil: We do indeed monitor our traffic; however, we do not give out our actual numbers. Traffic is analyzed to determine the best way to attack any future advertising/search engine placement.

Question: Do you have a search engine marketing person on staff, or do you hire an outsource company?

Phil: I am in charge of this, and if you'll notice, we are not just top at Google, we are also at the top in almost every major search engine. There are some inside secrets to getting these positions, but I think the number one thing is longevity ...we have been around since 1996 which is ancient in the Internet world.

Question: How important do you consider search engine marketing to be in the success of a Web site?

Phil: Extremely important if you don't pay for national TV or banner advertising. It's the only way besides word of mouth to get hits. We started out with around 100 hits a day in December of '96. Then in January '97, Yahoo! put us at the top and our hits increased ten fold.

Question: How large is your Web site?

Phil: As far as number of pages, there are few for the actual site (maybe 10-15), but if you include the car ads themselves as pages, then there are hundreds.

Analysis of Used Cars OnLine

Again, incoming keyword links are the main ingredient contributing to the high ranking of this site.

Our search on LinkPopularityCheck.com, revealed the following numbers of incoming links...

- * Lycos: 855
- * AltaVista: 575
- * MSN: 120
- * HotBot: 87

* Most interesting is the fact that Used Cars On-Line was consistently THE keyword link used in every case we spot-checked. Obviously, Phil or someone within the company suggested, precisely HOW their site's descriptive link should be listed. The success they've enjoyed as a result of this focused strategy is the payoff.

* In addition, it should be noted that the biggest link relevancy gorilla on the block, Yahoo, rated the site #1 for their target keyword phrase. This alone significantly enhances the site's relevancy because a Yahoo link is given much more relevancy weight than virtually any other site on the net.

* Worth noting is the fact that on the home page the title and description tags begin with the keyword phrase. Generally speaking, this strategy will always help, and will never hurt, a site's relevancy.

* Another boost, especially on Yahoo, is attributable to the fact the keyword phrase is present within the URL.

* Another factor that can only help and will never hurt is that the target keyphrase appears in the company name itself.

* Notice that the keyword phrase is only used once in the visible body text; evidence that repeating a keyword phrase within the text of a page isn't as effective as some webmasters believe it to be.

* As with almost all high scoring sites, the focus is on one topic, or theme, only! ...and that theme is buying and selling used vehicles.

As Phil pointed out, the site has been around for a long time. Although he attributes a large portion of their success to "longevity," we suspect it's more attributable to the link popularity that blossoms from a strategic campaign focused on gaining incoming links. Such a strategy, of course, takes time to build resulting in erroneous reports that "longevity" is responsible for success when in fact it is the accumulation of incoming links over time that becomes the actual key factor. And, when links like Yahoo add a major degree of relevancy, site positioning can suddenly improve significantly and traffic can increase, as Phil noted, "ten fold" overnight.

Our next example site is an online store that sells shortwave radios and accessories -- a category we'd consider to be only moderately competitive. This classification reflects, perhaps, a more middle-of-the-road analysis that would be typically applicable to the average retail store doing business online.

Keyword: shortwave

Site: The Shortwave Store - <http://www.shortwavestore.com>

Let's look at the site's top 10 rankings for the keyword, shortwave.

- * #6 and #7 in AltaVista
- * #7 in Google
- * #2 in About.com Sprinks
- * #1 in AOL Web Sites

* #2 in Netscape

For this article, I interviewed Keith Carcasole, owner of The Shortwave Store.

Question: Do you do anything special to boost your site's link popularity?

Keith: I used to ask for reciprocal links. However, there doesn't seem to be enough time in the day for that any more.

Now I carefully choose popular non-commercial sites where I can inexpensively advertise via a small text link. It is rumored that some search engines take the quality and popularity of the sites linking to you into consideration when determining the ranking of your site.

Recently I purchased a popular domain (<http://www.worldtimezones.com>) and paid to have the Web site designed. It is dedicated to time zones of the world. This handy site is great for travelers, business people and those interested in world politics. These are the same people who might be interested in purchasing a shortwave radio to pick up world news and to listen to free speech stations! Not only do I get to advertise there for free, but I get a quality link that will help increase the popularity of my shortwave site. In some ways, this is actually better than a doorway page because people are visiting the site for another reason. This exposes my site to customers who may not visit otherwise.

I highly recommend this technique to anyone who has time to develop a popular site that offers a service that may be of interest to potential customers but at the same time has nothing to do with the subject matter of your main site.

Question: How much business do you get from your Web site?

Keith: It has been extremely difficult for us to gauge how much business we get from the net because we still have customers who refuse to do business online. This is especially true around Christmas time when people want reassurance that the item that they are about to order is not out of stock and will arrive in time for Christmas. If forced to venture a guess, I would estimate that 80% of our total business from our shortwave division comes from the net, either by phone order or by secure online order. It appears that the remainder comes from radio ads and referrals from friends.

Question: Do you purchase keywords from the pay engines like Overture? If so, approximately how much do you spend each month on Overture advertising?

Keith: We buy keywords on a number of pay-per-click engines. We are currently paying about \$125 per month to Overture. The sum of the rest probably totals \$25 per month.

Question: If you feel comfortable with this question, I'd like to know if you're using cloaking technology on the site.

Keith: None of our sites use cloaking at this time. I plan to use cloaking on one of our other sites in the very near future. We are not doing this to 'fool' the search engines. When we change technology on our site, we will lose many of our high-ranking positions. I plan to keep our old pages cloaked so that we do not lose traffic.

Question: How do you promote your Web site offline?

Keith: Business cards, print ads in magazines and newspapers, radio ads, and when customers call our store we often direct them to the site.

Question: Do you purchase banner ads?

Keith: Not really, however this does not mean that I don't have banner ads.

1. I do advertise via FREE banner ads on my own sites. If you own another high traffic site (related or not), there is no harm in advertising your products there. Even if you create a site just for your banner, the CPM will still be a fraction of what it would cost to buy impressions elsewhere.

2. I have purchased tile ads and convinced the webmaster to switch me to small text ads for the same price. I find that this yields a higher click-through ratio.

3. Some pay-per-click search engines give you free banner impressions for your top positions, I believe.

Question: Do you monitor your traffic?

Keith: I seldom look at our stats any more. If the orders were to suddenly stop, I would take a closer look. When I look at our stats my main focus is the referrers rather than the volume of traffic.

Question: Do you analyze your traffic and use that knowledge to strengthen your site?

Keith: I like watching where our traffic is coming from. Every few months I calculate how many visitors it takes to generate one sale just to make sure we are getting a reasonable return on our advertising dollars. I use this to adjust our advertising campaigns rather than to strengthen our site.

Question: How much traffic do you get to the site (user sessions)?

Keith: So far this month...(on the 21st day of November): The Web site received 22,945 visits. A typical visitor examined 8.81 documents before leaving the site. A typical visit lasted for 1.25 minutes. The longest visit lasted for 79 minutes. Visitors came from 9,150 distinct Internet addresses. Please note that we expect to 'spike' in December.

Question: How large is your Web site?

Keith: Here's proof that size doesn't matter. Our site is only 33 MB including all images, cgi-bin, and downloads.

Question: Do you have a search engine marketing person on staff or do you hire an outsource company?

Keith: No one on staff is dedicated to this job. What little work we do is done internally. I get to it when I get to it. If something important comes up, I'll do a little work. Our positions on the search engines are not carefully monitored any more. I think it is important to watch it in the beginning. Make sure the site is fully functional first. Make sure you are competitive and then dedicate some real time to positioning. If you do it right once, you will only have to touch things up from time to time.

Question: How important do you consider search engine marketing to be in the success of a Web site?

Keith: We would not be here without it. Just because we don't watch our positions every day doesn't mean it's not important to us. We know we're doing well and we can tell by the number of orders we receive every day that everything is working.

Analysis of The Shortwave Store

This example is a good one because it typifies a fairly common approach that many online businesses take in regards to their commercial Internet presence. As Keith noted, he did his search engine optimization work in the beginning and initially spent time soliciting reciprocal links in general and then (rightly) shifted focus to securing incoming links from high quality and popular sites.

Based on his answers, one gets the feel that he is currently letting his strategy ride and tends to check his positioning on an as-needed basis. He uses his sales activity as an indicator of whether or not his SEO efforts are in need of a booster shot. In checking his LinkPopularity we find the following numbers of incoming links...

- * 157 in AltaVista
- * 108 in Lycos
- * 97 in MSN
- * 52 in HotBot

...not bad, but not great either. And when digging a little deeper to determine the quality of those incoming links in an effort to tell whether or not they are helping the site's relevancy we find something lacking. What's missing is the keyword (shortwave) from the link descriptions.

Unlike the two sites profiled above, The Shortwave Store site lacked the keyword in any of the incoming links that we found. Instead, we found banner graphic links or non-keyword text links such as...

A comprehensive list... More Stations from Around the World

...and although the above link pointed to the URL:
<http://www.shortwavestore.com/shortwave-stations.html> , it did not contain the keyword shortwave anywhere in the link description.

A better link description would have been...

Shortwave stations
...or at least,
Shortwave stations from around the world

Another example we found of an unoptimized incoming link was...

You can also order online via our secure server at our shortwave web site. Click **HERE** to order.

...unoptimized because "Click **HERE**" is not a relevant keyword for the Shortwave store.

A better incoming link would look like this...

The Shortwave Store

And...

*Worth noting is the fact that it's not necessarily the number (volume) of incoming links that's important; it's the quality of those incoming links. Factors such as link relevancy (i.e., are relevant keywords being used to describe your links) coupled with the link popularity of the referring site (i.e.,

Yahoo is a very popular and excellent referring site) are factors that help determine the validity and weight of a site's incoming links which in turn help determine a site's overall ranking.

*On the plus side, the site focuses on a single theme and uses the keyword in the title, description, and headline tag at the top of the page -- all solid search engine optimization strategies.

*The site is also no-nonsense -- without frames, Flash, JavaScript, or dynamic content. Design simplicity is always a solid search engine strategy.

*Most importantly, the domain name contains the keyword which can only help and will never hurt a site's scoring chances.

Regardless of whatever shortcomings we've found, this site is testimony to the satisfactory success an online store can experience in a moderately competitive keyword arena simply by getting some of the search engine optimization factors right. In other words, your strategies don't have to be perfect to work well enough.

In Conclusion

Remember this important fact: You need only to "outrun" your competition, not the whole world. It's unlikely you'll ever have to do everything perfect -- you only need to outperform your competition.

Success comes from knowing the game, analyzing your competition, and just doing a better job than they do. And when you start solid and plan for the long haul, you can often enjoy the luxury of letting your work ride while it continues to produce satisfactory results with only occasional adjustments and minimum effort.

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