

How Can You Tell if a Search Engine Marketing Firm is Legitimate?

By Robin Nobles

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Have you ever gotten e-mail similar to this:

"Hi Web Site Owner,

"We noticed that your site isn't found under the keyword phrase, 'freckles on English bulldogs.' With our proprietary software, we can determine your rankings in the top 32,727 search engines, and we guarantee we'll get you top 10 rankings for every keyword phrase that's relevant to your business."

Okay, I exaggerated a little, but you know what I mean. You've gotten these e-mail too.

What do e-mail like this do for the search engine industry? Regretfully, it often lumps us together with e-mail spammers and snake oil salesmen who promise the moon but can't deliver.

It even causes some people to question the professionalism of the industry in general.

So, how does the "average" person know which search engine optimization firms are legitimate? How do you know who you can trust, versus who should be tossed in the same category as the "get rich quick schemes" that never work?

Let's look at a few suggestions.

* Read: "Fees and Concerns of Professional Search Engine Optimizers."

This article, which I wrote a few months ago, offers information on guarantees, pricing structures, and other topics of interest to professional SEO's.

Keep this in mind: As a general rule, it's virtually impossible to guarantee a top ten ranking across the board, as there are way too many factors, including off page factors such as link popularity, that come into play with a successful Web site. However, some of the pricing structures are fashioned around rankings, which means that you literally pay for your rankings. You'll find the article at this URL: <http://www.acws.com/information/pro-se-optimizer-fees.html>.

* Does the SEO firm hire Certified Search Engine Marketers?

Though certification alone doesn't guarantee that the optimizer can achieve top rankings or that the optimizer stays away from shady practices, at least you have a "guarantee" that the person has completed organized and legitimate training and that his or her skills have been certified. All certification isn't alike, however, so be sure to verify that the certifying agency is legitimate and keeps up with the constant changes in the industry.

The Academy of Web Specialists is the best choice for an online certifying agency.

(http://www.academywebspecialists.com/more_info) For onsite certification, choose Search Engine Workshops (<http://www.searchengineworkshops.com>), which I teach with John Alexander (<http://www.beyond-seo.com>).

In the next few months, the Academy will be setting up a job databank of past students, which will be an invaluable resource when shopping for a professional SEO firm.

* Purchase a copy of the Buyer's Guide to Search Engine Optimization & Positioning Firms.

Does the SEO firm adhere to the guidelines and suggestions as outlined in the Buyer's Guide to Search Engine Optimization & Positioning Firms? This excellent guide will help you understand the various pricing and SEO packages that are currently available in the industry, and it even rates 68 firms.

However, just because a firm isn't listed in the Guide does not mean that the firm isn't legitimate. The Guide's authors recognize that it's a work in progress. In fact, they plan on increasing the number of listed companies to 75 when they update the Guide in March of 2002, and they constantly ask for recommendations of additional companies to add.

So, if you're considering a search engine optimization firm, read the Guide to see how the firm "stacks up" against those firms that are listed in the Guide. Use the

Guide as a source of information on what to ask the SEO, and listen carefully to the answers. If anything sounds "fishy" or too good to be true, you may want to move on to a different firm.

What type of information is available in this comprehensive manual?

- * Guidelines for pricing and evaluating services;
- * A "best practices" questionnaire;
- * Reasons for hiring an outside firm versus doing it yourself;
- * "Leveling factors" that allow you to compare apples to oranges, as much as possible. In other words, it's very difficult to compare one search engine optimization firm to another, because pricing structures and services often vary considerably. This Guide, however, allows you to compare different firms by focusing on specifics that can be compared across the board.
- * Rough math to determine how much search engine optimization is worth to your online business; and,
- * Evaluation, comparison pricing, and rating of the included SEO firms.

When reviewing the Guide, remember that opinions vary greatly in what's "legitimate" and what isn't. For example, the Guide believes that cloaking should not be used under any circumstances, and if any of the listed SEO firms participate in cloaking, they will lose points toward the final grade. While I agree that cloaking should not be "required" by an SEO firm, I disagree that cloaking should never be used. If used legitimately and when needed, cloaking can be a highly effective tool in search engine optimization. Of course, because the key word in that sentence is "legitimately," the Guide has felt the need to take a stance against cloaking.

Another example lies in the comments related to automated submission software. While I totally agree that manual submissions are the best, let's be honest here. Manual submissions aren't always feasible.

In that situation, software programs that mimic a manual submission should be chosen. Examples are WebPosition Gold's Submitter, Search Engine Commando, and Commando Pro. In fact, Gold's new version (1.6) does everything possible to emulate a manual submission and even improve upon it. (<http://www.acws.com/information/gold.html>) So, in my opinion, firms that use Submitter or these other programs shouldn't be penalized in the rating structure of the Guide.

How much does the Guide cost, and where can you buy it?

The cost of the Buyer's Guide is currently \$119, and it can be purchased through:

<http://sherpastore.com/page.cfm/1759?a=terry>

(Note: The above URL is for tracking purposes only. We don't get an affiliate percentage for selling copies of the book.)

In Conclusion . . .

If you're considering hiring a professional search engine marketing firm, do your homework, both in terms of the firm itself and what's currently being offered in the industry. Remember that the most expensive firms aren't always the best, and the most well-known firms aren't always the most legitimate.

Look to see if the SEO's skills are certified by the Academy. Then, pick up a copy of the Buyer's Guide to Search Engine Optimization & Positioning Firms. Study those guidelines carefully, and run any firm that you're considering hiring through the Guide's "Best Practices Questionnaire."

This article was written by Robin Nobles, a professional freelance writer and the Director of Training of the Academy of Web Specialists, where she has trained several thousand people in her online courses in search engine marketing strategies. http://www.academywebspecialists.com/more_info . She also teaches onsite search engine marketing workshops through Search Engine Workshops(<http://www.searchengineworkshops.com>), and she has written three books that can be ordered through Amazon.

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