



Google It!

When consumers are in need of a product or service that they don't utilize on a daily basis the #1 place they are turning for answers is Google. As a business owner you already know that you need to have a presence on the major search engines to remain competitive, but where should you focus your efforts for best results? Let's forget for a second Bing, Yahoo! and the rest and focus momentarily on the complexity of Google alone. With new products added regularly: Google+, Google Business, Google Places, Google Apps, Google Maps, Google AdWords, Gmail, etc. it can seem a daunting task for a company without a dedicated full time marketing department. Throw in the mix that Google uses over 200 factors in ranking your website and they will never tell you most of these factors, or their relative importance, because their algorithms change over 500 times per year!

Luckily for the small business owner you don't have to spend a ton of time or money to help boost your web presence on Google. If you don't want to spend a hefty sum for a paid listing, which probably won't be all that effective at reaching your target market anyway, you can focus your SEO efforts on the 7 areas below. Focusing your online marketing efforts on the most important factors will help you achieve higher natural search rankings, not just on Google but on all of the major search engines.

1. Content Is Crucial

Fresh and relevant content is absolutely crucial. Search engines like Google use what are called "bots" to regularly comb your site. These bots use a myriad of factors to determine the quality of a page's content. Every time fresh content is added it is reassessed for relevance and positioning. If your site hasn't been updated in two years then whatever ranking it was initially given by the search engines has continued to decline over that time period as new competing businesses have developed an online presence or have been more diligent with their online marketing practices.

Struggling to come up with new content ideas? It's really quite simple. If you just completed a new job, expanded your service area, offered a new product or service, a seasonal promotion or even just acquired a new piece of equipment you've got new content to add to your site. Updating content regularly is a must if you want your online presence to remain relevant and help you to acquire additional business. At a minimum your site should be updated quarterly but monthly or bi-monthly updates are even better still.

2. Keywords Are Key

Keywords are descriptive phrases prospects type into the search engines when looking for products and services. Your content should be keyword rich but still remain relevant to the user. When creating content for your site it should be tailored to your prospective clients, not the search engines. Search engine technology is sophisticated enough to know when you

have meaningful descriptive content that provides your visitors with the information their looking for and when you are simply cramming as many keywords as you can into a paragraph to try and boost your search ranking.

Not only will "keyword stuffing" not improve your ranking but it will actually negatively impact your placement within the search engines. Try to use as many different words as possible to describe what your business does while keeping to a central theme. Avoid keywords like "best" and "cheapest", while descriptive they don't focus on your actual product or service. Smart business owners know that long term success can not be accomplished by competing on price alone and bravado like "the best there is" doesn't carry a whole lot of sway when closing a deal.

3. Pictures - The Good, The Bad, The Ugly

When prospects visit your site they are going to want to see pictures of your products or past services rendered. Well placed, visually appealing pictures can do a lot for a site. At the same time poorly placed and improperly formatted pictures can be equally as detrimental. For starters you will want to make sure your images are properly sized using an image editing program and then properly named (tagged). You want to tag your image with something short but descriptive that tells the search engines what the picture is. You should also provide "alt text" with your images. Alt text is a descriptive sentence about the picture to be included in your site. If for some reason your image fails to load the alt text will show instead providing users, and the search engines, with a caption about what the picture is.

Try to avoid using pictures as links on your site, text is much more effective, and at all costs avoid excessive use of picture files. What constitutes excessive use? Any time you have large picture files that take a long time to load you will lose prospects who don't want to sit and wait 20 seconds for your picture to load. Probably the worst usage of graphics in web design that I've come across, quite frequently too, is the use of graphics that incorporate text. I've seen whole sites where each page was nothing more than one large graphic. They may look visually appealing to the human eye, but to the search engine bots they're literally invisible. Any words that are incorporated into a graphic can't be scanned and indexed by the search engines. This means if your entire company description is actually incorporated into a graphic you might as well have a blank page because that's in essence what the search engines are seeing.

4. Links Are Good.... Right?

Yes, if done correctly. Google's famous PageRank algorithm works by counting the number and quality of inbound links to a page (links to your site coming from another site) to determine roughly how important your site is. The assumption is that more important websites are likely to have more links coming from other websites. Larry Page, Google co-founder and CEO, has this to say about PageRank: "PageRank reflects our view of the importance of web pages by considering more than 500 million variables and 2 billion terms. Pages that we believe are important pages receive a higher PageRank and are more likely to appear at the top of the search results. PageRank also considers the importance of each page that casts a vote, as votes from some pages are considered to have greater value, thus giving the linked page greater value."

Do to the unrelenting persistence of search engine spammers to reach the upper echelon of the search rankings, millions of "junk" pages are created everyday, many of which are linking schemes with pages that exist simply to link to other sites to try to improve their ranking. In an attempt to combat this plague PageRank counts not only the amount of inbound links your site has but also assesses the sites where your links are hosted for relevancy. Be wary of paying companies to increase the amount of inbound links to your site. Unless they have a clearly defined placement strategy to increase links that they're willing to share with you, chances are the inbound links they are providing won't be within Google's accepted SEO methods and hence provide little to no value to the overall page ranking. The links within your site it's self are also important for search engine placement. Ideally the links should be text based, not image based, and provide a concise description of the page it's linking to. Links like "click here" or "Page 2" are not making your website any easier to navigate for your prospects or the search engine bots.

5. Site Design - Keep it Simple

Your site should have a naturally flowing hierarchy of pages. You want to make it as easy as possible for prospects to go from your homepage, where you provide general information about your business, to other areas of your site that provide more detailed information about your products or services. Keep your navigation simple, making your links text based located on either the left hand side or top of your page. You'll also want to incorporate a Site Map page with links to all the other pages of your site. If your navigation is too hard to follow you will lose prospects who become frustrated and your content may not be properly indexed by the search engines. To be certain your page is correctly indexed by Google it's a good idea to create an additional XML Sitemap to submit directly to Google via the free Google Webmaster's Tools.

6. Domain Name

Believe it or not your website's domain name, and the names of your additional pages, can play a pivotal role in your site's natural search ranking. Just because the name of your company is Longo & Vanzetti, LLC doesn't mean that the best name for your site is longoandvanzettillc.com. For starters your domain name should be descriptive and tell the search engines what it is your business does. Say the above company happens to be a bathroom remodeling company that services the Jersey Shore area. A more apt site name would be jerseyshorebathremodel.com, njbathroommakeover.com or jerseybatheexperts.com. You'll want to avoid excessively long domain names like longoandvanzettijerseyshorebathroomremodelers.com.

Assuming your website has more than one page you'll also want to name your subsequent pages in the same way, concise yet descriptive. Continuing on with our example let's say that this company's website has a page devoted solely to ceramic tile where they showcase various jobs on which they had installed new ceramic tile. Instead of naming that page jerseybatheexperts.com/page1.htm you might want to consider something like jerseybatheexperts.com/ceramictile.htm. This will help the search engine bots individually rank each page of your site in turn boosting your natural search.

7. Frequency and Duration of Visitors

Multiple visits to your site by viewers along with extended time on the site are important factors that go into your page's placement. Google, and some of the other search engines, are able to monitor how many visitors are coming to your site, where these visitors are coming from (via their unique IP address), how long they're staying on your site, which links they're clicking and pages they're visiting. How do you improve upon these areas? Following the SEO practices outlined in this guide is a good starting point. If you focus on the areas above you should increase your local search presence which will in turn drive new traffic to your site. If you follow rule #1 and remember that Content is Crucial, you will ensure that your prospects always have fresh, well written content available. Compelling content along with a simple site design will extend the amount of time prospects spend on your site.

Google and the rest of the major search engines are constantly coming up with innovative ways to keep your search queries relevant and stay one step ahead of the spammers. This makes staying on top of the best and most current SEO practices nearly a full-time job in itself, let alone finding the time to implement them all while running all the other aspects of your business. A perfect example of frequent changes to the way search engines query results is Google's recent algorithm update known as "Panda". The change impacts nearly 12% of Google searches and was designed to catch and demote poor quality sites that lacked value and did not provide useful original content while at the same time boost rankings for high-quality sites with original content and information. The Panda update is just one of hundreds of changes Google typically makes to each search algorithm each year.

Most small businesses don't have the time, resources or expertise to stay on top of all the changes to the way search engines function and perform all the regular maintenance necessary to have a strong web presence in the search engines. This doesn't mean you can't maintain an up-to-date professional web presence with a premium natural search ranking. Contractor Power offers outsourced marketing solutions for small businesses starting at only \$99/mo. We work closely with each business to help develop an online marketing strategy that will increase your web presence and help generate new sales. Contractor Power's Marketing Services are tailored to meet your individual needs. In addition to our SEO and SEM services we also offer email marketing, newsletter creation and circulation, web / content development and more. For a full list of our services or to request more information about Contractor Power's Marketing Services visit our website - www.contractorpower.com

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