

Risky Business

What you don't know about search-engine optimization can hurt you

by Ryan Miller

The Internet has enormous power to convey public visibility, and a good Web site has become the sine qua non for doing business as a plastic surgeon. Studies show that 80% of computer owners use the Internet to find physicians and research medical procedures. With Internet access in nearly three out of four US homes, that's a lot of prospective patients.

However, it's not enough to have a credible Web site; you must make sure that people see it—preferably before they see your competitor's. The race to the top is won with search-engine optimization (SEO)—the art and science of getting your site noticed by Google, Yahoo!, MSN, and the other services people use to obtain information on the Web.

It's a high-stakes race that everyone is bent on winning. And, as in any competitive arena, it attracts the unscrupulous and the unethical.

Some SEO professionals use questionable tactics to try to manipulate search engines. They do this to gain their clients' gratitude—and money—but eventually, their cheating backfires. When the search-engine companies discover their antics, you as the client may have to pay a very heavy price.

As an SEO professional and the owner of a boutique Web-marketing firm, I have been called upon all too often to rescue physicians from badly administered SEO. Make no mistake: Selecting the wrong SEO professional will not only waste your time and money, but it could even result in getting your site banned from search engines altogether.

Even worse, careless or fraudulent SEO could place your medical license, board certification, or society memberships at risk.

Sustainable Results

If you want to achieve sustainable results from SEO, you must put some time and effort into finding the best professional. Don't look for shortcuts. Invest some energy up front, and learn about the differences between ethical and unethical SEO strategies and the vendors who use them.

When it comes to SEO, what you don't know can really hurt you. Here are 10 tips to help you shop for SEO services:



Tip 1: Begin with a business objective.

Many surgeons approach our firm desiring “the top position for liposuction” or some other procedure. At first glance, it seems like an admirable and ambitious goal. But think about it: What business objective would that satisfy?

If your goal were to build the world's premier online liposuction information resource, that objective might make sense. Or if you wanted to receive hundreds of general email inquiries with every manner of liposuction question from all around the globe, the top spot for the keyword “liposuction” would be good.

For most plastic surgeons, however, almost all business is local. You just need to attract inquiries from people considering liposuction who live within a few hours of your office.

Rather than dictating a specific list of keywords to the SEO professional, explain your business objectives and your market. It will be possible to fulfill realistic objectives with ethical—sometimes termed “organic”—SEO techniques.

Grandiose objectives will draw promises from SEO professionals who know that they can't fulfill that dream, but who, to win your business, may stretch the limits of best-practice SEO guidelines.

Tip 2: Don't assume that top rankings correlate with top surgical skills.

Even if you are an expert surgeon with an excellent reputation, you still must prove yourself to the search engines. In the world of SEO, the great Web sites—not necessarily the great surgeons—rise to the top of the ranks.

What are the criteria for a great Web site? It is full of original, informative con-

tent, the kind that solves problems and answers questions. It also contains appropriate keywords as part of this helpful content.

Search-engine firms are in the business of helping searchers, not promoting businesses. That's why content is king. Choose an SEO vendor who can explain how his or her work earns you top rankings by making your site more attractive.

Tip 3: Demand full disclosure.

All search-engine companies have clear guidelines for what it takes to achieve high rankings. They are also clear about practices that will hurt your position. Therefore, SEO vendors have no need to be secretive. There should be no mystery about the services they provide and how they achieve their goals.

SEO professionals who offer shortcuts, tout “newly discovered” secrets, or flaunt “proprietary” techniques are trying to manipulate you. SEO professionals who will not discuss their practices openly are probably using tactics that the search-engine firms expressly disallow.

Understand that SEO professionals who try to outsmart or trick search engines will, with absolutely certainty, set your Web site on a path toward search-engine exile. Choose a vendor with an ethical approach—one who will tell you what he or she will and will not do in the name of top rankings.

Tip 4: Distinguish between optimization and paid placement.

With any major search engine, the results pages (the pages Internet users see after they click “go” or “enter”) will display sponsored links and Web results. The sponsored links appear at the top or right side of the results pages. These are paid listings, similar to advertisements in a magazine or newspaper.

The listings under Web results in the main body of the screen are the sites selected by the search engine as being most worthy of the reader's perusal. This is the meat of the search, and savvy Internet users know it.

True SEO is all about earning top Web results. Many SEO vendors can easily provide you with sponsored links; however, don't confuse these paid listings with the

kind of merit-based Web results that deliver the quantity and quality of potential patients you desire.

A balanced search-engine marketing campaign will include both true optimization and paid listings. True optimization should be your primary focus, however, because searchers familiar with the Internet understand the difference between paid and unpaid listings. They prefer true Web results to sponsored links by about three to one.

If SEO is what you want, make sure that SEO—and not sponsored links—is what you get.

Tip 5: Don't be lured by guarantees.

By spending enough of your money, any SEO vendor can buy sponsored links at the top of a results page. But no one can simply place your site at the top of merit-based Web results pages. For that reason, no one can guarantee you top positions on the Internet without buying the links.

Some SEO companies will guarantee some or all of your money back if they do not achieve a certain level of performance. This kind of guarantee is not a scam, but be sure that you understand what is guaranteed.

And be careful what you wish for. With their livelihoods on the line, even ethical SEO professionals may feel pressured to use tactics the search engines condemn.

Do you guarantee your patients' surgical outcomes? Choose an SEO vendor the way that patients choose a surgeon. Select a firm with experience and proven results. Sit through several consultations, then choose someone you feel you can trust.

Tip 6: Read the fine print.

If you have found a great SEO professional—and there are many—you must still review the contract to make sure that you understand the fine print. As with most business dealings, the devil is in the details.

The contract should clearly delineate payment terms and policies, how guarantees are measured, and how failures are handled. The severability clause should include reasonable terms. Take the time to understand your service agreement, and pay special attention to what happens when you sever the relationship or when your contract expires.

Tip 7: Get what you pay for.

Clarity concerning content ownership is critical. You need to know who will own the Web site and the content of optimized pages if and when the contract is terminated.

If your agreement doesn't stipulate that you own the content, many optimization

Avoid "Doorway Pages"

One of the most common tactics used by SEO professionals is creating "doorway" or "landing" pages—despite the fact that this tactic is discouraged by every major search-engine firm.

Typical doorway pages are loaded with keywords, but lack substance. Most are poorly written and formatted. They may obtain good rankings, but their conversion rates are low.

Savvy searchers will be annoyed by the ploy and will quickly use their "back" buttons. Not-so-savvy searchers will assume that the page is authentic and will conclude that you somehow made it through medical school without learning proper English or developing an eye for detail.

Select a vendor who does not use landing pages. Opt for a solution that enhances your existing pages, adds more valuable content, and builds your site's value.

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vendors will confiscate their work when your contract ends. All that work—and your rankings—could be lost.

There are firms that will give you ownership of all the SEO work you've paid for. Finding them is definitely worth the search. Within their standard agreement, it will be clearly stated that you own all of the sites, pages, text, and graphics produced under your contract with them.

Tip 8: Protect your name and reputation.

You are personally and professionally liable for any text published on the Web on your behalf. Poorly written text will tarnish your reputation and can make you look juvenile or inarticulate. Clinically inaccurate text, or text that confuses your qualifications and certifications, can land you in serious legal trouble.

Check any text produced by your SEO vendor for compliance with American Medical Association guidelines and the business and professions code of your state's medical-licensing board. This is a big responsibility, and it will take some time. If you can't invest adequate time in this step, you will hinder your SEO vendor's efforts and will likely defeat the campaign's purpose.

Above and beyond any other contract issue, you must demand that you have copy approval for everything that is published in your name. It is your responsibility to cooperate with your SEO vendor to review new text in a reasonable time frame.

Tip 9: Watch those links and ads.

An activity called "link building" has become a cornerstone in SEO. Sites with

lots of links are often perceived as "popular" by search engines and receive a boost in their rankings.

Exchanging links with another Web site is one of the easiest ways to secure links back to your site and gain this advantage. But be aware that your visitors will think you personally endorse any site to which you link.

I've seen ambitious, but thoughtless, SEO vendors place links to male-enhancement-pill sites, weight-loss-supplement sites, pornography sites, and dating-service sites on a physician's site, without the physician's knowledge. Even worse, I recently ran across an instance in which an SEO vendor placed advertisements on a surgeon's Web pages—without his permission. This unscrupulous individual was earning ad revenue promoting everything from luxury travel to preventing erectile dysfunction on a site owned by a board-certified plastic surgeon!

Be sure that your SEO contract gives you the right to refuse any and all kinds of links and ads.

Tip 10: Don't overdo it.

When it comes to SEO vendors, more is not better. Be very careful not to impulsively and indiscriminately buy SEO packages. Two vendors are likely to perform similar work, and search-engine firms hate duplication. Overlapping optimization actions may offend these firms and actually hurt your search-engine ranking.

If you hire two firms that offer different services, and you don't perceive an overlap, you should still make sure that the vendors are aware of each other and that they communicate often and well. Designate the firm that you trust most to oversee your overall search-engine marketing agenda.

Only You Can Protect Yourself

I've seen too many disasters inflicted on gifted plastic surgeons by search-engine vendors. These physicians had spent years building fine practices based on impeccable values and genuine care. A moment of carelessness while reviewing an SEO contract turned them into victims.

Don't be blindsided by opportunists who take advantage of some physicians' lack of sophistication about the Internet. Use these tips, and learn to separate the SEO wheat from the chaff. **PSP**

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