Securing Search Engine Success

GOT A WEBSITE? GREAT. NOW IT'S TIME TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO GET YOUR CUSTOMERS TO FIND IT.

By Paul Lima

So you've put your store online. Now what? How do you lure potential customers to your retail website?

There are many ways to promote your website: ads and flyers, in-store POP, e-mail newsletters, even banner ads on websites that attract your target market. However, if you have not optimized your site for search engines, you are missing one of the most effective — and cost-effective — ways of attracting visitors.

On average, Canadian Web surfers conduct about 40 searches per user per month, with more than 85 per cent of the Canadian Internet population conducting at least one search a month, according to comScore Networks. However, most websites are not properly optimized to take advantage of, or rank high in, searches. To put that in real-life terms, that's like setting up shop in a cornfield, where

only the passing crows know you are in business.

To show up in search engine results, a website must be indexed in search engines like Google or Yahoo. It can take several months from the day the site is submitted to the search engine to the day it appears. However, if several other indexed sites are linked to your site, you can show up faster.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is all about relevant content and link popularity. To rank high in search engine results, your site content should use keywords that your target audience would use when searching for the products you offer and other sites with relevant content should link to your site.

However, don't think you can set up pages filled with keywords, or create dozens of sites that link to your site, and consider yourself well-optimized. Search engines can detect these bogus

SEO techniques and de-list sites that use them.

When it comes to keywords, make sure you include them in the title you use on each site page. For instance, rather than simply starting your company name in the page title — *Here Comes the Bride Inc.* — use keywords and the company name: *Wedding gowns and bridal accessories in Hamilton; Here Comes the Bride Inc.*

Also:

■ Use keywords in a logical manner on site content, embed them into your site description and site keywords metatags (Web design code not seen by visitors), and ensure hyperlinks on your site contain keywords. For instance, instead of *"Click here for more information,"* use more descriptive words: *"Designer Wedding Gowns — click here."*
■ Ideally, when optimizing your site, design for your target market, but optimize for search engines. For instance, if your audience expects images, use them. However, place text captions (with keywords) below images and embed keywords in the code used to display images. Visitors won't see the embedded words, but search engines will pick them up.
■ To get legitimate links to your site, request them from like-minded sites such as associations, vendors, suppliers or websites with content that relates to the products you sell.

In addition to the above SEO techniques, consider setting up a blog where you discuss topics related to your products or industry. By their very nature, blogs contain keywords. In addition, if other bloggers find interesting content on your blog, they will create links in their blogs to yours, boosting your SEO.

You can also create a discussion board and invite customers and prospects to chat about issues that pertain to your products or industry. Discussion boards contain related content, and can make your site "sticky," which is to say they keep people coming

back. In short, what you are doing here is creating an online community that is loyal to your site. On your blog and your discussion boards, you can also include links to your homepage, specific product pages, special promotions and so on. (You are, of course, also opening yourself up to critical comments, so you want to make sure you have your customer service act together if you are going to create discussion boards.)

The bottom line? It costs money to create an impressive website, but it does not cost a whole lot more to optimize it for search engines. If SEO is ignored, there is a good chance that visitors will not find your website, but not for lack of trying. As the stats prove, visitors are out there using search engines to help them find needles in the haystack known as the Web. If you want your share of traffic, you have to use SEO to make it easy for potential visitors to find you. ◼

"MAGNIFYING GLASS" PHOTO © ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Pay per click: Tips and tricks

Pick a term and Google it. Chances are, to the right of the free listings, you will see a series of three-line ads connected to the search term you used. The companies that run the ads do not pay a cent to the search engines until someone clicks on them — hence the term Pay Per Click (PPC) ads, which are offered by Google, Yahoo!, MSN and other search engines.

Generally, PPC ads are ranked based on the amount that the advertiser is willing to pay for a click based on a specific search term. Most search engines let you see the PPC bids for specific keywords so you can decide how much to bid for the terms you want to associate with your PPC ads.

When companies set up PPC campaigns, they can establish a daily or monthly budget. If the budget is reached, the ads no longer appear or the company can alter its budget.

PPC analytical tools let advertisers see how many times their ads were displayed and how many clicks they generated. An

A typical ad when you type "Shopping" in Google.

advertiser can even track which pages on its website the PPC customer visited and can track sales generated by PPC.

If considering a PPC ad campaign, there are a number of key components to keep in mind:

■ Determine keywords to associate with your ads.
■ Write effective ads that hook readers and cause them to click.
■ Set the right price per click. Set a budget.
■ Bring visitors to a specific website page designed to fulfill the promise of the ad.
■ Monitor the results of PPC and adjust campaigns accordingly.

– P.L.