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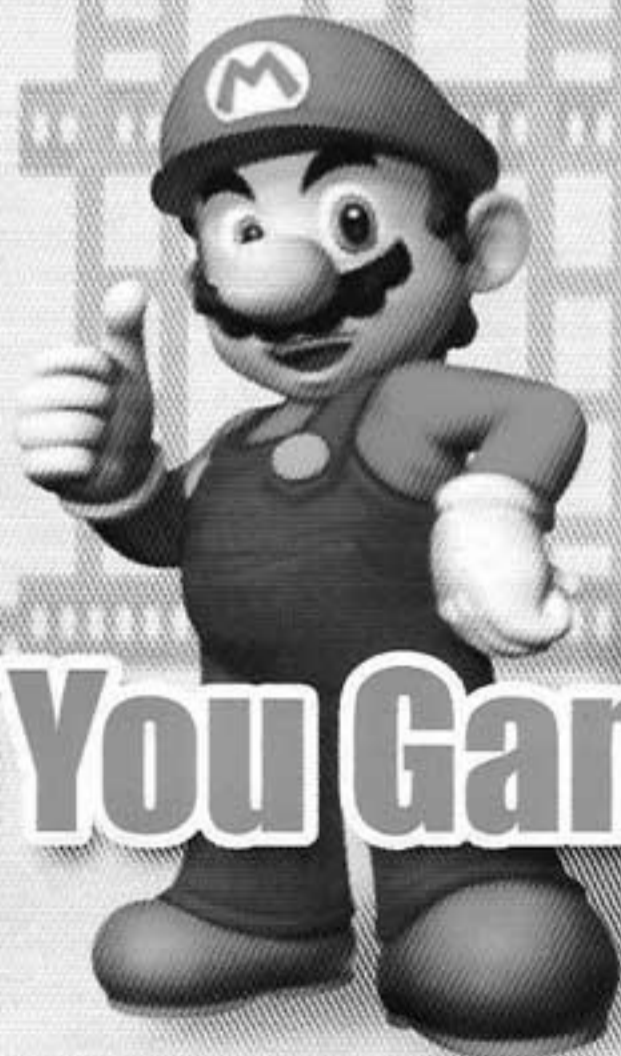
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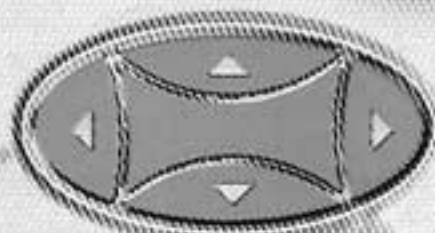
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SMEs and Search Engine Marketing

Tim Lyons*

In the vast morass that calls itself the World Wide Web, it is quite easy for a little company to get lost amongst the clutter. This article talks about how an SME get noticed on the web.

Most organizations these days have a Web presence of some description and many have even made the effort to provide some formal window into their organization via the Web. Some have gone beyond the simple Web space and have designed something they consider to be strategic. There are even a number of these who have worked on strategies for communicating their presence on the Web via advertising and other traditional forms of marketing communication. Unfortunately, few seem to have thought about 'being found' on the Web other than through expensive advertising campaigns. Ultimately, as an SME, being discovered on the Web by potential customers seems unlikely.

So, the question then is, "If you have something to say and no one can find you, then is it worth really saying it?"

Have you ever done a search on Google or some other form of search engine for a small business? Try typing in electrician or advertising agency and don't be surprised if you are overwhelmed by the response. Electrician gets you 'just' five and a half million results on Google and advertising agency 60 million results. How about you hone your search and add the term 'India' to it. Better—now it is 450,000 for electrician and 9 million for advertising agency. Let's try getting something a little more specific and substitute Mumbai for India. Electrician now shows 70,000 results and advertising agency 990,000. Who would you like to be? An electrician or advertising agency in Mumbai, relying on a Web search for your customers to find your Web space?

This is exactly the problem being faced by many small and medium-sized businesses that choose the Web as a mechanism for reaching their customers. Yes, they have built some form of Web presence. Probably, they are doing some form of online advertising/communication. But, according to a recent study at the IESEG Business School in Lille, France, very few are making the effort to end up, on the first or second page of a Web search by their customers. Many of these same companies, however, are spending inordinate amounts of money to reach customers via advertising on the Web. The short explanation is that they know and understand advertising, but don't know and/or understand search engine optimization. So, what exactly is Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and why should they worry about it?

The abridged version of the answer to this question is: Getting to the top of a search on a search engine. So, why is such an activity so important? Simple:

* Assistant Professor in Marketing, IESEG School of Business, Lille, France.

- Over 85% of all searching on the Internet is done via search engines.
- Over 90% of all individual searches stop after the person searching has reviewed two pages (usually about 20 results).
- Yahoo and Google drive about 75% of the searches on the Web. So, high ranking on these search engines alone can produce real results.
- Most of the activities required to optimize a website are free.


It's hard to identify the most important fact. Taken together, they certainly represent a picture of a mechanism that could promise to deliver the Web to SMEs as possibly their most important marketing tool ever—cheaper, understandable, and accessible. So, why aren't more of them using it?

There have been a number of studies conducted on the use (and misuse) of search engine optimization by large business, but few have been done on the subject of SMEs. Intuitively, SMEs should love this type of marketing approach. The evidence is that they are actively using the Net to reach their customers—witness the growth in online advertising with services such as Google's ad-words. Such growth does seem understandable, as such services promise an 80% reach into the Web for a relatively small outlay. But, given their predisposition for reaching customers via the Web, why aren't they using the near free SEO activity to reach the same (or greater) audience?

In a study conducted on the top 100 Australian SMEs (as determined by a leading Australian business publication), it was found that fewer than 10% were designing their websites with SEO in mind (on-page optimization) and fewer than 5% were building links to other sites with a view to improving their results in searches (off-page optimization). This on and off-page combination is the key to getting better placements in the major search engines. So, while many of them were quite content to spend time and money designing advertising campaigns for the Web, few were willing to spend (mostly) time and (rarely required) money on developing an effective SEO campaign.

The study at IESEG measured on-page optimization such as key word density (number of times a key search word/term is mentioned in a webpage); key phrase embedding in the html code (for example, elements of a website construction called 'meta tags' and 'H1/H2 tags') and perhaps, the simplest of all techniques—placing the most important key phrases within the title tag, so that pages would appear with the key word/phrase in their title at the top of the page.

While these days, on-page techniques are (arguably) not as important as off-page techniques, they are still important to some degree. They seem to be particularly important for the likes of MSN and Yahoo. Off-page techniques appear to be growing in importance from a search engine point of view but the results of the study conclude that they barely register with respect to SMEs online marketing strategies. Off-page strategies consist mainly of links to other websites and specifically links to other ideally important websites. Virtually no SMEs undertook a comprehensive linking campaign despite such a technique being virtually free. This is a critical miss by the SMEs, as Google which accounts for over 50% of all search-engine traffic, relies almost exclusively on this technique when it comes to indexing sites.

What the study reveals is that most SMEs overlook a very inexpensive and effective online marketing tool. What is difficult to tell at this stage is exactly why this is. The fact that virtually no one is using such techniques is a startling discovery. The good news is that they can almost immediately change this situation to their advantage. With very little effort, they will be able to use the Web to create connections to their customers that they perhaps never dreamed of. 

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