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**THE JOURNAL REPORT: SMALL BUSINESS****Managing Technology****In Search of Traffic**

A Web site is only as valuable as the number of people who see it. Here's how to make sure customers can find you online.

By **KELLY K. SPORS**

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For small companies, just having a Web site isn't enough anymore. To be successful online, they must learn to harness one of the Web's most powerful tools: search engines.

After all, search engines like **Google Inc.**, **Yahoo Inc.** and **Microsoft Corp.**'s MSN are often shoppers' first stops when they're looking for a product on the Web. So it's crucial for small businesses to show up prominently in search-engine results -- and that's a complicated job.

**THE JOURNAL REPORT**

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**Guerrilla marketing** is a great way<sup>2</sup> for a small business to get attention. But it's a tactic that can easily backfire. Plus, **ads on cellphones can be annoying**<sup>3</sup>, but they can also be a terrific marketing tool.

• See the complete **Small Business**<sup>4</sup> report.

Search engines don't disclose their ranking formulas, making it tough for small companies to figure out how to boost their site's results. Even worse, big competitors can afford to pour lots of resources into that same effort -- putting small companies at a bigger disadvantage.

The good news? While the *exact* ranking formulas are a mystery, there are plenty of clues about how to improve a site's position. Add lots of relevant descriptions to the site's

text, including the search phrases for which you want a high ranking. Have other sites link to it. Offer a blog or other informational content for customers. And if these efforts prove too complicated for a business to handle, not to worry: A whole industry has sprung up to help companies improve their rankings.

Small businesses are discovering other search strategies, as well. They're getting smarter about ads, for instance. Pay-per-click ads that pop up for general search terms (such as "clothing") tend to be very expensive -- so companies are buying ads for much more specific terms to cut costs. Many businesses are also focusing their efforts on search-engine pages devoted to their own geographic area, instead of trying to compete against businesses world-wide.

Here's a guide to the best ways for small businesses to nab better search results.

**DESCRIBE YOURSELF**

Placing high in search results for common search phrases -- known as natural, or organic, results, to differentiate them from paid ads -- is getting ever more crucial. Studies show that Web users predominantly click on the top four results for any particular search, and then move on, says Shar VanBoskirk, senior analyst for Forrester Research Inc. in Cambridge, Mass. Very few dig more than three pages into results.

**SELECTING KEYWORDS**

**PODCAST:**<sup>5</sup> WSJ's Kelly Spors talks with author and search-marketing consultant Aaron Wall for advice on selecting keywords to make your site more prominent in search-engine results.

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One basic way to secure a better search-engine ranking is peppering a site's text with carefully chosen keywords -- the kinds of phrases people would use to find the site with a search engine. The search engines like it best when the keywords appear naturally in the site's text, such as product descriptions, says Aaron Wall, a search-marketing consultant in Oakland, Calif. So a good strategy is to add a generous amount of useful content that uses the keywords frequently, such as beefier descriptions or informational articles.

The keywords on each page should also appear in that page's title tag -- the blue bar that appears at the top of each page. Less important, though still helpful, the keywords should appear in the metatags, the invisible text that gives information about the contents of a page. Some Webmasters try to game the system by hiding keywords in text that blends into the background, but many search engines now penalize such practices with lower rankings.

Smarter use of keywords was one of the first strategies Allan Dick employed to boost business at Vintage Tub & Bath, a Hazleton,

Pa., company that sells reproductions of old-fashioned bathtubs online. A few years ago, Mr. Dick, who helps run the 30-employee company with his brother, found he could increase traffic by using certain words in the product descriptions on Vintage's Web site.

For instance, adding more content and product descriptions that used common search terms -- words like "tubs" and "vintage tubs" -- frequently seemed to boost its ranking on search engines. "It was dawning on me that if you were wording things in a certain way, people would find us," says Mr. Dick. "It was, 'Aha, there's a certain method to this.' "

But that was just a first step. Mr. Dick bolstered his efforts by attending search-marketing conferences to learn about search rankings and new optimization techniques. And the work seems to have paid off: Last year, his company had sales of \$10.4 million, up from about \$8 million in 2005, and well above its \$1.4 million or so of revenue in 2001. It recently surfaced as the No. 2 site in a Google search on "tub," out of 35.4 million results.

### THINK MORE NARROWLY

The big choice for small businesses is which search phrases to focus on. Some companies concentrate on just a few phrases, while others tackle 20 or more. The best number depends on factors such as how many different products are sold on the site, the number of pages on the site (each page can usually hold only a few keywords) and how much time or money a company is willing to spend redesigning its site to attract search engines' attention.

#### QUESTION OF THE DAY



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Would you rather be the CEO of a large, public company or the owner of a small, private business? [Discuss](#)<sup>11</sup>

It's also important to weigh how competitive the search phrases are. Instead of focusing on generic search words, such as "books" or "mortgages," that already have hundreds of businesses wrangling over them, small businesses often fare better focusing on longer, specific phrases, says Mr. Wall.

For instance, he suggests that a used-book dealer who has a book signed by Mark Twain might try optimizing its Web site around terms like "rare used books" or "autographed Mark Twain," instead of just "books." Another advantage of this approach is that more-specific search terms generally elicit higher customer-conversion rates -- turning visits into sales -- since shoppers are more likely to find what they're looking for.

There are other wording tricks small businesses can use to get better results. Businesses aiming to attract a high-end clientele might add the word "professional" to the search phrases highlighted on their site. Or a business might try to boost the search ranking for its top-selling brand name instead of just the generic product type. But "the focus should always be on coming up with terms that customers actually use to find your business online," Mr. Wall says.

#### If You Look for Help...

Before you hire a search-engine optimizer to improve your search results, here are some of the questions you should ask candidates

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|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>How long</b> have you been in business, and how many clients have you had?</li> <li>■ <b>What services</b> do you offer?</li> <li>■ <b>Who will</b> be responsible for implementing changes to the Web site?</li> <li>■ <b>Will you</b> provide a price estimate and a contract that spells out your responsibilities?</li> <li>■ <b>How many</b> hours will you spend a</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>week working for me?</li> <li>■ <b>How will</b> we communicate, and how often?</li> <li>■ <b>How many</b> pages of the Web site will you optimize?</li> <li>■ <b>Can you</b> provide examples of your past clients along with their contact information?</li> <li>■ <b>What kind</b> of reporting will you give about the progress of the search-engine optimization?</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>What search</b> terms or keywords will you be optimizing for?</li> <li>■ <b>What kind</b> of results do you expect in terms of ranking on the major search engines for common keywords?</li> <li>■ <b>How will</b> my Web traffic be monitored and analyzed?</li> <li>■ <b>How will</b> you track my return on investment?</li> </ul> |
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Source: WSJ reporting

Many online forums and free tools can help businesses learn to optimize their sites on their own. Yahoo's Keyword Selector Tool lets users see which terms are typed into search engines most often. Other free tools, such as Google's Analytics software, keep track of a Web site's visitor numbers, keywords used to find the site, and customer-conversion rates. Other free tools available online can track which other Web sites link to a business's site, make content suggestions and scan the site for keyword density, or the percentage of the text in which the keyword is used.

One final wording tip: A business's domain name also plays into search rankings. If the domain is "couch.com," the site will probably rank much better for the keyword "couch" than if the domain name is "tomsfurniturestore.com."

### BE THE EXPERT

Loading up on search terms isn't the only way to improve a site's search rankings. Search engines are getting more sophisticated, experts say, and increasingly they're rewarding sites that offer high-quality, useful consumer content. For instance, becoming an "evangelist" on your industry and posting helpful consumer information on your site is likely to boost its popularity and ranking.

Take [Ice.com](#)<sup>12</sup>, an online jewelry business based in Montreal. Besides selling jewelry, the site includes a diamond-buying guide, a checklist with steps that couples should take before their wedding, a blog and a feature where readers can ask questions about jewelry. The site recently showed up 11th in a search for "jewelry" on Google, and seventh for "diamond jewelry."

### GET LOTS OF LINKS

Another big factor in search-engine results is the number of Web sites that link to a company's site that are highly ranked by the

search engines. The more such sites, the better. Many Web sites that do well in search rankings spend time "link-building," or trying to coax related sites to post links to them. Sometimes companies contact Webmasters directly and try to forge relationships, or they get a link in an online search directory such as Yahoo Directory, which costs \$299 a year. Having interesting or informative content such as a blog also boosts the chance of getting links from another site.

The words used by other sites in links also factor highly into search results. Let's say another site links to tomsfurniturestore.com, which specializes in couches. If the other site uses the word "couch" in its link, it can help boost "tom's" ranking for the keyword "couch."

Keep in mind, though, that no two search engines are the same. "Google's algorithm tends to place more weight on the authority and trust of the site," such as the number of links, Mr. Wall says. "Yahoo and MSN place more weight on the page content."

Vanessa Fox, a product manager for Google, says the search engines "all have different things that we're looking for in our page results."

## GET SOME HELP

For many small-business people, optimizing and asking for links can get technical and time-consuming. So an industry has sprung up in recent years to help businesses with their search results. These companies -- called search-engine optimizers, or SEOs -- come in many flavors. Some are full service, handling everything from redesigning a Web site to writing content to determining which keywords are best to persuading other Web sites to post links.

Others are more like consultants. They provide Web-site audits with recommendations on how to better optimize the site, but the client's Webmaster must implement the changes. Some focus on specific aspects of search optimization, such as writing "search friendly" text or link-building.

But businesses should be careful when hiring an SEO, because not every company offers the same expertise, says Ryan Allis, chief executive of Virante, a Durham, N.C., search-marketing consulting firm. And the results can never be guaranteed, given the changing and sometimes mysterious nature of search-engine rankings.

So businesses should take bids from several SEOs and ask to see the work they've done for previous clients, Mr. Allis suggests. An SEO should also be willing to give regular reports showing how its efforts have affected the business's search rankings for various search phrases.

Then there are fees. The prices for SEOs can be bewildering to many small-business owners. Costs can range from \$500 a month to several thousand -- for what often seem to be almost identical services.

Submit Express Inc., an Oakland, Calif., SEO, charges a "setup" fee of \$2,500 to \$10,000, which includes keyword research, optimization and link-building, says Chief Executive Pierre Zarokian. Then clients can pay a monthly fee ranging from \$750 to \$5,000 for continuing optimization efforts -- mostly link-building, he says.

The fees vary depending on how much work a site needs and how competitive it is already, says Mr. Zarokian. For instance, propelling a site from No. 10 to No. 1 in the search rankings may be a lot easier than moving it from No. 10,000 to No. 10.

## BUY ADS

Ads are another consideration. Marketing experts advise that most businesses are best served by complementing optimization with some paid ads on search engines. It also can be a faster route to getting good exposure in search engines.

Most major search engines now offer paid ads, such as pay-per-click ads, where the Web site pays a set fee every time someone clicks on its ad. Google and Yahoo let businesses bid on their per-click fee for particular search phrases to garner a better ranking for their ad.



Paid results appear right next to natural search-engine results, usually under a "sponsored ads" heading. As with search results, businesses should try to end up in the top few paid ads for common search terms. If the per-click fee is too high for popular phrases, they should focus on more-specific search phrases, which usually cost less -- and convert to business more. For example, the average suggested per-click fee for ranking in the top three paid results for "tennis rackets" recently was \$1.38, according to Google's AdWords Keyword Tool. But "graphite tennis rackets" cost only about 43 cents.

For some small-business owners, paid ads aren't a complement to an optimization strategy; they're an alternative to it. They don't want the headache of learning about search-engine



Peter &amp; Maria Hoey

optimization or hiring a firm to do it, so they rely exclusively on ads.

That's the case with Geoffrey Searles, owner of Apollo Piano Co., a piano refurbishing and tuning business in Grafton, Mass. Last September, he began running pay-per-click ads through Google's AdWords program. He bid on about 25 keywords such as "piano repair" and "antique player pianos," and capped his monthly expenditure at \$200.

Since then, his site has had an average of 270 hits a month, compared with about five a month before he started using ad words. The ads have cost him about \$575 total, and he estimates he has received at least \$20,000 extra in work. He likes the ability to control his monthly spending and stop the ads when he has enough business. "It's just been so successful that I haven't gone any further," Mr. Searles says.

### THINK LOCALLY

Small businesses should also consider focusing their efforts on one corner of the Web. Many small, locally based businesses, such as dry cleaners and restaurants, don't need Web traffic from around the globe. Instead, they want people in their area to find them easily online.

The solution: local search. These listings pop up, sometimes with a map or customer reviews, when somebody searches online for a business type in a particular geographic region.

Type in "Olympia, Wa., pet groomer," at Google, for instance, and you'll get the option to see "Local search results." This calls up a map of Olympia and a list of local pet businesses, with their locations marked on the map.

Google, like other search engines, draws these local listings from third-party directories and other sources.

For companies that want to buy ads accompanying these local listings, the competition is much more limited than with general searches, so the price is lower. Local search also can be particularly useful to small businesses without Web sites. Some specialized local search engines -- such as CitySearch.com, YellowPages.com and Superpages.com -- even provide a free, basic page for businesses that can include basic information about the company, like phone number, hours of operation and address.

A good way to get started in local search is to make sure all the local search directories include a listing for the business and that all the information, such as phone number and address, is accurate. Most local search directories also let businesses embellish their local search listings. Google's Local Business Center, for one, recently began letting businesses post photos, and many local search directories let them post hours of operation, services provided and coupons. Businesses can also buy pay-per-click ads in local search results.

Another consideration: If a local business has a Web site, the owners should be sure all the information there is clear and accurate. Search engines extract some of their local search listings from location information found on Web sites. So it's important for a business to include its address prominently on its home page -- with the state name spelled out, since many search users spell it out when searching. Businesspeople should also include the city and state in the site's title tag to increase the odds search engines will find it.

Danny Sullivan, editor of [SearchEngineLand.com](http://SearchEngineLand.com)<sup>13</sup>, an online forum on search-engine marketing practices, says focusing on local search is easy and can pay off for many businesses.

"Local search is still kind of open, and many businesses don't realize it's an option," Mr. Sullivan says. "So there's a lot of opportunity for that right now."

--Ms. Spors is a staff reporter for The Wall Street Journal in South Brunswick, N.J.

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