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Hugh Duffy • Nov. 01, 2009

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If you are interested in acquiring new business, then you need to understand what search engine optimization (SEO) is and how it can deliver qualified prospects to your doorstep. In other words, SEO is how your website is found on the Internet. A website that has been effectively optimized for search engines can deliver motivated prospects to your firm. On the other hand, a website that is not search engine optimized is essentially lost in Internet space, which renders it worthless from a marketing perspective.

WHAT IS SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION?

Search engine optimization is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic a website receives directly from search engines. Essentially, if you improve your website's position within the major search engines, via descriptive search term phrases and keywords, you will receive more traffic to your website. You will also increase visibility and generate more leads than a website that is not search engine friendly.

While SEO may sound simple and easy to do, it takes considerable planning and knowledge, and may take several months to deliver results. As more businesses employ SEO into their Internet marketing strategy, the more competitive the landscape becomes for securing top search engine placement. And with the emergence of social media tools like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and blogs, an entire new layer of techniques are being deployed to strengthen SEO for progressive accounting firms.

SEO is mostly technical in nature. It combines source code programming with

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engines when attempting to locate specific services. With this knowledge, a developer can practically reverse engineer how the website is developed so that it meets the needs of search engines and your prospects.

WHY BOTHER WITH SEARCH ENGINES?

Search engines are the most important source of “new” visitors to your website. Since millions of people use search engines to find websites, maximizing your visibility can be a powerful and cost-effective part of your marketing program. Search engines are reliable and cost-effective, and they enable web surfers to search thousands of websites in seconds for all kinds of information. Bottom line: Search engines represent an inexpensive opportunity to attract visitors to your website.

SEO has been around since the mid-1990s, and was the primary responsibility of a company's webmaster. By the late 1990s, website owners started to realize the business potential and value of having their websites ranked highly within the search engines, so they started to deploy tactics to manipulate rankings and game the system. To offset these “black hat” SEO tactics and recapture control of which websites received top rankings, the major search engines changed their algorithms and became more complex and proprietary. Today, the major search engines actually ban websites that deploy overly aggressive SEO techniques from their results. Today, Google ranks websites using more than 200 criteria as part of their algorithm.

Search engines have become a huge business and are always working towards improving the technology used to crawl the web and deliver better results to users. However, there are limits to how a website is constructed, which programming languages they work with, and whether the search engines will index a website. Where the right changes can deliver thousands of new visitors to your website,

the wrong moves can hide or bury your website deep in the search results where

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qualifications. The number of people searching online, and the time they spend searching, continues to increase.

In large part, people are willing to use search engines to locate accountants because they genuinely trust the profession. Still primarily a referral-based profession, more and more individuals are moving to the Internet to research accounting firms.

HOW DO PROSPECTS SEARCH?

Most often, prospects use Google, Yahoo! or Bing (MSN's search engine) to search the Internet. These three search engines comprise over 95 percent of the search engine traffic.

The harder part is identifying the exact keywords a prospect to your site might use. Most often, a prospect will start very broad and gradually modify their search to improve the results for their specific search. Prospects tend to start with a national search and gradually narrow their search through trial and error.

The following are examples of keywords and phrases used in the different search levels.

National Searches: CPA firm, accounting firm, accountant, bookkeeper, QuickBooks accounting firm, income tax preparation, payroll services.

Local Searches: Pittsburgh CPA firm, Pittsburgh accounting firm, Pittsburgh QuickBooks accounting firm, Pittsburgh income tax preparation, Pittsburgh business valuation services.

Industry-Specific Searches: CPA firm for dentists, accounting firm for architects, construction CPA firm, accounting for restaurants, cost accounting for

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firm in Chicago, Chinese speaking CPA in Los Angeles.

To conduct your own research on which keyword strings are most important for your practice, paid research tools are available as well as free keyword tools offered by Google and Yahoo!

RESULTS FROM ACCOUNTANTS

For accountants who remain skeptical about the ability to acquire new business from the Internet, the following examples offer real-life experiences from practicing accounting firms.

Kathy Hess is the Managing Partner for Kathy L. Hess & Associates in Pittsburgh, Penn. Kathy has had a search engine optimized website since 2004 and is highly selective about the clients she accepts. She stated, "During the December to March period, we receive approximately 100 leads per month and 20 leads per month outside of that period. From those leads, we carefully screen the prospects and are able to acquire \$25,000 to \$30,000 in new business each year.

Occasionally, we will receive inquiries for business valuation, estate planning and attorneys inquiring about expert witness work. The majority of our website leads tend to be younger (under 40 years old), inexperienced with financial matters, and looking for guidance on matters with which they are not proficient. They are motivated, appreciate our advice, and are pretty much sold by the time they arrive to meet at our office; the choice is ours after the face-to-face whether to allow them into our practice and accept them as a client. The website represents our firm as cutting-edge with technology and enables us to pick and choose which new clients to accept."

Steven J. Graber, CPA, is the owner of Graber & Associates, Certified Public Accountancy in Baltimore. Steve founded the practice in 1993. He was extremely skeptical about the possibility of acquiring business from the Internet

and now receives 12 to 15 leads per year from his website. According to Steven,

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convinced of Internet marketing and had no real idea what to expect, I am very pleased with the results. Actually, my concern now is how I am going to handle the volume of new business.”

Hugh Duffy is co-founder and Chief Marketing Officer for Build Your Firm (www.buildyourfirm.com), a practice development firm dedicated to the accounting profession. Build Your Firm works with small accounting firms providing accounting marketing, practice management and website development services. Hugh has 25 years of marketing experience and holds an MBA degree in Marketing from the University of Rochester.

Technology

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