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## TECHNOLOGY

# Why Search Engine Optimization Matters

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Search engine optimization (SEO) is about marketing your accounting practice on the Internet by improving the volume and quality of traffic to your website from search engine results pages. In other words, it's about getting your website found on the Internet when someone is hunting for your services by going to Google, Yahoo! or Bing.

In many ways, SEO is like generating public relations for your accounting practice because it increases brand awareness through an independent third party. That's right, many people view search engines as an independent third party, much like a respected periodical or trusted advisor, to guide them through the hunt for quality information. From their vantage point, the search engine is free of charge, totally independent and has become a reliable resource by consistently delivering quality information and saving them tons of time.

If you are interested in generating more traffic and improving the quality of visitors to your website, then it's important to understand what SEO is and how it can deliver qualified prospects to your accounting practice.

## Do People Really Use Search Engines to Find Accountants?

Over five years ago, accountants would frequently struggle with the notion that small business owners were using search engines to find an accountant because it seemed so impersonal. And for that matter, it was so different from the way information was found in the past. Today, we are seldom asked about this question because they've heard from friends and colleagues that search engines are used to find accountants and do generate new business. Just think about the ways you look for information.

People use search engines to find all kinds of accounting services from the Internet, and they are doing it more often than they used to. Using a search engine empowers them to locate an accountant that provides the exact type of service for which they are searching, has the proper qualifications, went to the appropriate college/university and is the right sized firm for their needs. The number of people searching, and the time people spend searching, continues to increase over time.

In large part, I believe that people are willing to use search engines to locate accountants because they genuinely trust accountants. Conversely, it has been our experience that people do not use search engines to locate financial planners on the Internet because they generally do not trust financial planners. Instead, they prefer to ask around and get a referral for this type of service.

## **Situations That Work Best With Search Engines**

While search engines are amazing at delivering all types of information and providing thousands of matches against your search query, they excel when you are searching for that diamond in the rough. In other words, they can deliver over 30 million matches against a generic keyword search like *tax services*, and at the top of the search results you will find the largest tax franchises. The competition to be on the first results page for a broad keyword search term like *tax services* is extremely competitive. So this is probably not a keyword that you want to optimize your website around because it's too broad and there is too much competition. However, if you provide IRS Problem Resolution tax services, there are less than 400,000 matches against the *tax problem resolution services* keyword. In other words, you are better off trying to be unique and compete for less competitive keyword terms rather than be extremely broad and compete for generic keyword terms.

The harder part is researching exactly what keyword phrases your prospects might type into the search engines for your services. Most often, the prospect will start very broad and gradually modify their search to improve the results. Generally, the

prospect will start with a national search and gradually narrow it through trial and error. Below are examples of what I mean by each of these searches:

**National Searches** (search terms are too broad, too much competition) – CPA firm, accounting firm, accountant, bookkeeper, QuickBooks accounting firm, income tax preparation, payroll services

**Local Searches** (more opportunity because less competition) – Denver CPA firm, Atlanta accounting firm, Gainesville QuickBooks accounting firm, Cleveland accountant

**Industry-Specific Searches** – CPA firm for dentists, accounting firm for doctors, construction CPA firm, accounting for churches

**Service-Specific Searches** – tax problem resolution services, business valuation, international tax and accounting, expert tax witness, outsourced CFO services, non-profit accounting, audit services

**Ethnic-Specific Searches** – Latino CPA firm in Dallas, Italian speaking accounting firm in Chicago, Polish speaking accounting firm in Chicago

Free keyword tools are available from Google and Yahoo! to conduct your own research on which keyword strings are most important for your practice.

## **Results from Accountants**

For those accountants who remain skeptical about the concept that you can truly acquire new business from the Internet, I contacted several accounting firms who were kind enough to share their experiences with me.

Kathy Hess is the Managing Partner for Kathy L. Hess & Associates in Pittsburgh, Pa. Kathy has had a search engine optimized website since 2004 and is highly selective about the clients she accepts. According to Kathy: “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 that they are not proficient with. They are motivated, appreciate our advice, and 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 provides the illusion that we are 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. Steve 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: “The typical website engagement is \$1,200 to 3,000 per year, and the normal client is small. However, I have acquired one business client from my website that yields \$28,000 per year in fees.”

And another accountant who has had success developing his accounting practice using a search engine optimized website is Guy Sperduto in Cooper City, Fla. Guy is the owner of AccountingLinkUSA in South Florida. He receives eight to 10 leads per month from his website. According to Guy, “the prospects that contact me from my website are absolutely worth meeting with because they are ready to do business. As a rule, the vast majority of website leads are real businesses, and my closing ratio for website leads is 90 percent. For someone like me who was not at all convinced on Internet marketing and had no real idea what to expect, I am very pleased with the results. Actually, my concern now is how I’m going to handle the volume of new business.”

*Hugh Duffy is cofounder and chief marketing officer of [Build Your Firm](#), a practice development and marketing company for small accounting firms. Hugh teaches a series of [Accounting Marketing Workshops](#), [develops websites for accountants](#), and helps accounting firms with [developing a niche in their practice](#). He can be reached at 888-999-9800 x151 or at [hugh@buildyourfirm.com](mailto:hugh@buildyourfirm.com).*

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