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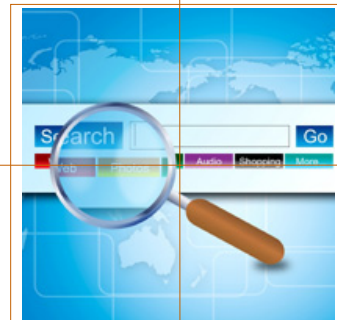
SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING FOR EXPORTERS

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It is now common knowledge that people don't really surf the internet any more; they search it. At the same time, businesses are realising that publishing and keeping an up-to-date website is no good if people can't actually find it.

Search engine optimisation (SEO) holds the key to this conundrum, and the advice from marketing experts, web developers and the search engines themselves is to put a little time and effort into making sure that the investment made in launching a bells-and-whistles website is not wasted because no one can readily find it.

"Companies don't understand the huge number of people who are searching online and they won't be told. Yes, people still want to go to, say, the forecourt to talk to a salesman in person to buy a car, but they will have done their research online first. Businesses need to know that consumers are using their website for research, and they need to know who is visiting it, where they came from and which pages they are likely to look at on it," claims Anthony Quigley, managing director of Online-Marketing.ie.

Falling behind

Richard Hearne, search analyst at Red Cardinal, a firm that specialises in SEO and internet marketing believes that the rise of "social media" such as [blogging](#) is one major development that is not being taken advantage of. Bloggers insert links to other relevant blogs within their online journals, and this has had a profound effect on leading search engine Google, which tends to rank webpages in terms of how many legitimate inward and outward links they have.

Hearne says many Irish firms are still investing heavily - spending tens of thousands of euro every month - in [paid-for search engine adverts](#) rather than trying to develop "organic rankings" based on the authority and relevance of a well-linked page. "There are no hard and fast figures available but it seems as though 80 or 90 percent of people are clicking on organic search results rather than the paid-for search ads," he says.

The hard figures we do have, courtesy of Captivate Digital, point to the fact that more than three-quarters of internet users rely on search engines to find all their online information, and that around 60 percent of all websites receive more than half their traffic from search engines. With this in mind, Irish companies could be losing out to overseas rivals - particularly if they fail to register high up the page with leading search engine Google.

Looking abroad

Google is the dominant search engine in Europe, and in dozens of other territories. Although exact statistics are a matter of debate amongst researchers, the Californian search giant is generally acknowledged as the leading search portal in the US and across Europe. "Google is, by far, king in this space," says Quigley. "Yahoo, Microsoft Live, Ask, AOL and Netscape are all looking for a slice of the action, but they have a long way to go. If you optimise for Google, the others should follow suit."

To optimise for British search sites, it's important to be listed on all of the dot-co-dot-uk (.co.uk) versions of the following search engines: Yahoo, Google, MSN, Go.com and AOL. Meanwhile, the general advice for being found in Europe is, again, to go for Yahoo, Google and MSN, but SearchEurope.com shouldn't be overlooked either.

SMEs looking to sell their wares online to developing markets in Asia are advised to research the local situation first. Quigley recommends Asiabiz.com and Asiaguide.com as two search engines to target. "Also, ask your Asian partners where they search and start to get listed there too; use local expertise," he advises.

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In the huge Chinese market, Baidu.com claims to be the most popular search engine, and the site's managers have cleverly introduced a phonetic search called "pin-yin" that allows users to type in Chinese keywords using English characters. Meanwhile, in Korea and Japan - both Southeast Asian markets increasingly targeted by Irish businesses - Yahoo is the leading search engine among internet users.

"Most of the main search engines have country-specific search sub-sites that let you target customers in specific geo-targeted locations. Then there are engines like [MIVA](#) that have a great reputation for delivering traffic from a UK-based audience," continues Feargal O'Byrne, CEO of the Irish Internet Association.

To target certain geographic areas, therefore, it's worthwhile developing links with locally focused authoritative and appropriate websites related to your business area or product. Linking to locally respected and relevant trade bodies, agencies and professional associations is a prime example. This should drive your website's title text up the rankings on the country- or region-specific version of a search engine, e.g. Google.co.jp for Japan, or Yahoo's dedicated Asian portal, asia.yahoo.com.

Linking up

Although there is a vast quantity of search engines available on the net, all functioning along different lines, current thinking among web professionals is that the best way to approach optimising your website is to include as many outward and inward links as possible to established and well-trafficked sites.

Seeing as the world's leading search engine, Google, operates by organically ranking websites by the number of links they have, a good place to start is to work out exactly how many valid links your website actually has.

Using [Google](#), this can be done by typing "link:www.yourwebsite'sname" (e.g. link:www.enterprise-ireland.com) into the Google search bar (without any spaces). You can also do this for deeper pages of your website, e.g. "link:www.yourwebsite'sname/aboutus". Yahoo's [Site Explorer](#) offers a similar service.

O'Byrne says this first step in search engine optimisation can be a real eye opener. "Most businesses think they have thousands of links, only to find two! Linking is very important but often overlooked. Remember, links send traffic to your site even if Google never existed, but they also comprise part of the Google algorithm."

"Link building is probably the most difficult part of search engine optimisation," says search engine analyst Richard Hearne of Red Cardinal. "And not every link has the same value." For example, links embedded within text tend to carry more weight with search engine spiders - the automated programs that crawl and categorise the web for search engines - than links contained in a list.

This is where emarketplaces and online directories can serve another useful purpose. By publishing your website address on these websites (but taking into the advice above), thereby increasing the number of links to your website, you may be able to improve your search engine ranking.

Tracking and tagging

According to Anthony Quigley, managing director of Online-Marketing.ie, one easy step for online SMEs to consider is to set up their website to track usage by visitors before engaging an expert to implement wholesale search engine optimisation.

"For example, it's no good just recording that someone downloaded your brochure; it's useful to know which link that potential customer used to get to your website, and on what pages did they linger and for how long before making the decision to seek further info," he says. "It's like a big department store knowing which entrance door is most used by shoppers: it affects a lot of other decisions to be made later on."

Quigley says the three most important aspects an optimiser should look at are title tags, content, and inbound links. Title tags are the (usually blue-coloured) text a surfer clicks on a search results page to get to your website, while getting the content right means choosing the right keywords or 'metatags'. Metatags are HTML tags written into the website and indexed by some search engines but not actually displayed on the site.

"It took the airline industry years to get this right," says Quigley. "People don't search for [the term] 'low cost flights', which the airlines had entered as one of their main keyword combinations. Instead, people type 'cheap flights'."

[Google Analytics](#), a free service, can monitor a site, and statistics can show the number of visitors every day. This Google tool has a range of other useful applications such as revealing with what keywords visitors find a particular website so that the website owners can see whether the traffic is targeted or not.

Professional help

Beyond these rudimentary tips for search engine optimisation, many businesses are looking to employ the skills of web professionals to upgrade their sites so that search engine spiders are more likely to index their online offering. There are plenty of expert SEO practitioners to choose from. Whether you go down this route will depend on factors such as your business model, budget and existing in-house expertise.

Hearne sounds a note of caution before engaging the services of an SEO specialist. "Shun anyone who 'guarantees' a number one position for your website." He says no one can truly ensure any search engine will rank a site at the top of its list, and that "schemes too good to be true probably are."