

Finding the Company that Gets You Found on the Web

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Some interesting trends were revealed by a 2009 study conducted by the University of South Carolina's Center for the Digital Future:

- Internet users in the United States spend an average of 17 hours per week online.
- 65% of Internet users look for information about various products and services on the Internet and buy online
- 22% of users have a specific search engine dedicated as their home page.

What does this mean? It means that people are using the Internet — a lot — and that the marketing landscape is changing.

What does this mean for you and your business? It means that you need to (1) have a significant presence on the Internet, and (2) make that Internet presence known to current clients/customers and prospects. One of the best ways to ensure your business appears when Internet users are searching for the services/products you provide is through [Search Engine Optimization \(SEO\)](#).

What is SEO?

SEO is often misunderstood and unfairly labeled as a “technical” specialty. Put simply, SEO is a process that allows more users to find and view your web site when searching on a search engine. The SEO process analyzes search engine algorithms to discover how these search engines look for specific pieces of information in specific places on the web sites. SEO professionals then input the right info in the right places on a web site so search engines can find you—and find you fast.

Because SEO is a form of Internet marketing executed through technical means — and is not an IT function — choosing the right SEO firm to help optimize your web site can generate significant results. So how can you find the right firm?

What to Ask — and When to Run

SEO seems complicated only because those in the industry have made it unnecessarily so. SEO is a marketing function executed through the use of technology (not the other way around). Your SEO firm should be ready and willing to explain all aspects of their process to you.

Here are a few items that should raise red flags on your search for the right SEO firm.

The “We are web programmers who also do SEO” Red Flag: This should raise a red flag because SEO is a marketing function — not an IT function. You wouldn't give an IT person the power to write your brochure, so you shouldn't give them power to SEO your site. IT programmers can usually handle SEO basics, but all in all, SEO is a very different skill set from what they're used to doing.

The Keyword Confusion Red Flag: If your SEO company asks you what your keywords are, there's trouble. They should be handling this and giving you a list of words to review. Your SEO company should have spoken to you extensively about your company's mission, product and message — and they should convey this in your keywords.

The Minimum Red Flag: If your SEO firm says that you just need to optimize a few pages, you need to find a new firm. While it is true that maybe your terms and conditions page doesn't need to rank in search engine results, you should still have your title tag and descriptive tags in place, because every page should be treated as a homepage. On the other hand, if you have a 5,000-page site, you might only want to focus on 500 pages. If you have a smaller site, though, your firm should be recommending that you optimize the entire site to get the best results.

The No References Red Flag: If your SEO firm cannot or will not give you references, they may be trying to hide nonexistent or weak experience. Make sure to find an SEO firm willing to show you a portfolio of proven results, and take note of the clients who stand behind their services.

The Guarantee Red Flag: If your SEO firm guarantees that your web site will have high search engine rankings or a high number of leads, they're lying. No SEO company owns Google or Yahoo!, nor has complete control over their search engine algorithms. Good SEO firms know what influences these algorithms and can help you gain a significant ranking, but if you get a placement guarantee—run!

The Opaque Red Flag: Hidden practices are a tip-off. If you are not receiving regular reports on progress and rankings and are being educated about these reports from your SEO firm, this is a bad sign. Methodologies should be transparent, and you should understand what you are paying for. Set up status calls or check-in meetings with your SEO firm and ask questions about their processes and methods.

The “Get ‘er Done” Red Flag: Beware of firms who say that SEO is a “one-time thing” and guarantee that your site is good to go once they've finished calibrating it. The start-up process—just the basics—can be a one-time thing, but continual results require long-term maintenance.

SEO is not — and shouldn't be — a mystery. SEO helps organizations better market their services/products to the current Internet-driven consumer population. You can start by looking for your SEO firm at SEMPO.org — a site listing of search engine marketing professionals. Before committing to a firm, know that good SEO practitioners take a collaborative approach. You will be asked to review their implementation strategies and provide feedback; it will involve a time investment on your part, but it will be worth it in the end. In short, when it comes to SEO, educate yourself, do your research, select a great SEO firm, and then watch how a well-executed SEO strategy can enhance your overall marketing efforts.

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