

Search Engine Optimization (SEO): A Silver Bullet for Your Business?

This briefing is prepared for our clients who operate small-to-mid-sized (SMB) companies in the business-to-business (B2B) services sector.

SEO, often used interchangeably with “website optimization”, is a tool for online marketing. Like any new tool, it’s essential to consider it within the larger context of a company’s overall business strategy, annual plan and resources in order to use it most effectively.

Our considerable experience tells us that website optimization/SEO is most useful when applied in a way that recognizes both the business sector and the size of the organization in which it will be used. Our point of view is that the match between key initiatives and available resources is critical.

We are introducing “SEO basics” specifically as they apply to our clients. We are highlighting the substantial differences between SEO for business-to-consumer (B2C) companies and for B2B services companies - it is a difference that matters.

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At a recent business lunch I was asked by the owner of a very successful service company if I know much about SEO. Replying “yes”, I inquired why he asked and was surprised to hear his response: “We are not #1 on Google so I’m told that we need it.”

Perhaps.

The real answer is that it depends on your business and its strategy for profitable growth. Being ranked #1 on Google is a business tactic - and a potentially costly one. Using your website effectively in your overall business plan is an important consideration. SEO can be a useful tool but it is not a “silver bullet” for creating more business and it is not a “one size fits all” tool.

Reader Highlights:

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a hot topic - one that has caused some confusion and has had “unintended consequences” .

This briefing, and several others to come throughout the year, will provide business leaders with an informed understanding of SEO in order to best evaluate it and apply it in the most effective way.

Reader Bonus:

A frontline perspective on SEO is offered by John Schwarberg, President of Integrated Web solutions. For more than a decade, John and his staff have designed, hosted, and optimized a large number of successful websites on a cross-industry basis. Noted for his pragmatic business style and deep technical expertise, John’s insights come from his real-world experience.

John’s company is one of our most valued strategic partners in delivering a wide range of services that help to optimize our clients’ websites.

Let's do some basic business checks and get a context for thinking about SEO.

First, how is business? Are you achieving plan? Customer Satisfaction OK? Margins good? Strategic goals on track? Employee recruiting and retention on track?

If your business is healthy and growing, being #1 on Google *may not* make a bit of difference. In fact, it's quite possible to get distracted, and over-invest, in chasing that very elusive goal.

Next, do you provide services (*versus consumer products*) where:

- trust is vital?
- relationship building is key?
- proven experience is essential?
- intellectual property and "know-how" make a substantial difference?
- "commodity" is a culprit and differentiation is critical?

Finally, are you an SMB company where:

- resources are constrained compared to your larger competitors?
- cash flow management is a critical component of the business?
- you specialize in "client intimacy" as a style of doing business?
- your sales and marketing resources are somewhat limited?

If building trust, developing long-term relationships, hands-on delivery of responsive differentiated services are essential to your business, will being #1 (even #2, #3, or #4) on Google *deliver* any of that to your prospects and clients? It's unlikely.

So, we begin the conversation about SEO by noting that there is a *substantial* difference between B2B and B2C when it comes to SEO.

By far the largest segment of SEO services users are B2C companies where their core business can be transacted in an e-commerce environment. High page rankings on the most popular search engines, pay-per-click ads, traffic volume and conversion rates are all hot issues - ones that do matter - in the B2C world. Selling goods ranging from tennis shoes to luxury items can be successfully implemented on the web and to date SEO has largely been targeted to this arena.

B2B companies can harvest SEO ideas from the B2C experience. But, because so much of the SEO story is associated with the B2C environment, it is essential to distinguish between B2C and B2B (especially so for *B2B services*) SEO; the business implications are profound.

B2B Versus B2C SEO: Different Goals

Nothing happens until something is sold and SEO is yet another sales/marketing tool. in the B2C world, SEO touts generating an online sale by getting internet shoppers to your site via a high ranking on major search engines. In a perfect situation, online searchers will easily find your site and navigate through product selection to a checkout process. B2C sites are very focused on website traffic *volume* and *conversion* of traffic into sales; a site visit = a sale is the goal.

Improving your business, as in more sales and less cost, is the goal of website optimization as we see it. Using long-proven techniques that have been subsumed into "SEO" is consistent with our most basic best practices.

We are concerned by the hype that has come along with SEO, and in particular those who "guarantee results". We know of companies that have been "de-listed" and lost their Internet presence for a period of time due to SEO techniques used on their site. This is a "Buyer Beware" market.

**John Schwarberg, President
Integrated Web Solutions**

But if, for example, you are looking for assistance with a complex business project, searching for a new company officer, considering help with your strategic planning process, or thinking about buying or selling a business, an internet shopping cart and quick checkout are of little help. So, what's the goal of SEO in this environment? Getting found on the web is still important, so using SEO helps ensure that your site achieves a *reasonable ranking* and makes good business sense. However, high rankings on a search engine and high volumes of traffic to your website do not have the same effect in a B2B business that they do for the B2C company.

Several research studies show that buyers of services where trust and "know how" are significant influencing factors in a sale, are more likely to go to a potential provider's website *after* learning about the company. A buyer will use the site to learn more and go through a vetting process. It is, therefore, imperative for services firms to use integrated marketing techniques to drive prospects and repeat buyers to their websites and provide the content a buyer is seeking. SEO is not a substitute for other marketing programs.

Content Versus Conversion

Buyers of business services are motivated to learn a great deal about a potential providers because trust is *always* a significant factor; a provider's experience and expertise matter. The path services buyers take to reach you can be as influential as any factor in the sale. For instance, a referral from a colleague (who just happens to be a very satisfied client), or a recommendation made by a trusted advisor, is typically the most valued way for a buyer and seller to come together in the services world. No search engine or website can fulfill that trust role. But using SEO as one of the tools to help raise awareness about your company is a reasonable business tactic when it is integrated with other forms of high-impact marketing.

In the B2B services situation, your website will be used by a visitor in one of two primary ways: (1) as a source of validation to check out what a referral source has said about your company or, (2) as a "positive first impression" for those who found their way to your website on their own. By the way, that does not mean they reached you through SEO and they may just as likely have found your business through a trade article, a business forum, or by hearing a presentation.

In all cases, content is king on your website. One of the chief objectives of B2B searchers when they reach your site is to click through it and evaluate your company and its offerings - it's a vetting exercise. This is a prime reason that we often remind our clients that "Thought Leadership" counts. It is one of the most powerful ways to reach and influence your potential buyers. It is also an effective means of "leveling the playing field" with much larger competitors. A well

On a daily basis, we have clients coming to us begging for more traffic to their website because they are convinced that automatically means more sales. They want to "order SEO" like a Big Mac and they are often confused, believing that it is a purely technical matter; some "new web tool" is going to magically make business better.

The problem with approaching website effectiveness/SEO from a strictly technical mindset is that the strategies employed - from keywords to page headings - will not necessarily be in line with business goals and sales/marketing plans. It perpetuates the "silver bullet" myth.

We have one client, for example, whose "pre-SEO" conversion stats were significantly greater than what they get today (using an internal "SEO expert") and we have the monthly reports to prove it. But, they remain steadfastly convinced that the keyword density technique and a few other "Google-glop" actions on their site are working. Yes, they have more traffic but their site is now considered by many to be "a mess"; the copy has degraded, and actual lead generation is down.

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designed and content rich site helps to generate interest and present the picture of a company to be valued. It is important to ensure that the site has landing pages with well chosen links to other content (inside and outside of your site) that will build credibility - the all-important precursor to trust.

We also recommend using the tools and techniques that proactively drive prospects to your site on a regular basis. For instance, we recommend using one of the email marketing programs that allows you to send messages to your contacts containing hot-links that drive the readers to your site for value-added content. Our clients overwhelmingly favor the analytics they get from this type of system to those gleaned from Google Analytics alone, for instance. While it may be interesting to know the volume of traffic coming to your site, it is not immediately *actionable* data. A string of IP addresses is far less valuable than having the exact email address of someone who visits your site, as well as precise data about what sections they visited; that's immediately actionable data. Using web analytics programs to evaluate stickiness factors, such as length and depth of visits, time spent on specific pages, and whether the number of return visitors is growing, is something we do on a regular basis. We use that data to complement the more informative business intelligence we get from the email program - and other highly targeted initiatives.

Understand Client Preferences

There are a number of search engines, and each one uses its own unique (and constantly changing) algorithms to index content and rank search results. Optimizing for Google is different than doing it for MSN, so it's important to know what your clients use. Research suggests that B2B purchasers overwhelmingly prefer Google and we encourage that as the "Gold Standard" for our clients. We are seeing a growing list of vertical search engines and they may prove interesting for our clients that have strong vertical market practices; we are tracking their progress.

Web Copy Must Be Clear and Compelling

B2B copy is very different from B2C copy. B2B services buyers do considerable research so establishing credibility by writing intelligently and persuasively about your company and capabilities is essential. Not only that, but differentiating your services from other competitors is critical to the overall appeal made to a potential buyer.

Once again, it is necessary to distinguish between the tools and techniques used for B2C sites and those used in B2B services sites when it comes to "the words". Purchased keywords for Google ads (pay-per-click) and similar techniques can benefit a B2C site - but applied to a B2B services site they can destroy credibility. (see inset)

Keywords Are Powerful

B2C shoppers will often search using a brand name, and/or a generic term to identify their desired goods. They know what they want to purchase and they are just looking around for the best deal. Keywords are easy to identify and use in this B2C

Organic Search or Pay-per-Click

Studies reported in Search Engine Guide reveal that the trust level for organic results is much higher than that of paid results—in fact, paid results can be looked upon with suspicion.

Further, research shows that more of the sales that actually result from search engines originated through organic search.

Searchers believe that organic search engine results are non-biased, and, therefore, more credible.

On Google 73% of searchers reported that organic results were most relevant, while only 27% rated paid results as relevant.

Complexity of search words and phrases abounds in the B2B services world; there are many ways to identify a similar service. For instance, a manufacturing manager looking for Supply Chain assistance could use Google to query anything from “inventory management” to “warehouse management systems,” or dozens of other related search terms. Further, there is significant variation in what things are called. B2B services searchers often use search terms focused on the need or problem rather than a product or solution. Moreover, multiple searches are likely to occur during the buying cycle and the buyer may see the issues differently as they move through the sales process. In addition, multiple parties (a CFO, for instance) can influence the sale and may have an entirely new set of interests and ways to describe what they are seeking. The complexity of SEO keyword strategy grows exponentially—and that will have a huge impact on landing pages and site architecture.

We believe that keyword strategy may be the most critical factor in a successful SMB business-to-business services website.

A word of caution: it's important to avoid “Google-glop” or copywriting done specifically to achieve keyword density (the number of keywords divided by the words in the copy) which can have a favorable impact page rankings. But it comes at the cost of sacrificing clear, concise, readable messages. The quest for SEO causes some companies to have an epidemic of this Google-ese disease, so beware.

One more caveat: just make peace with the fact that you will not necessarily achieve a high ranking in every keyword. But there is absolutely no correlation between having the highest rankings and achieving better business metrics (more sales, better margins, etc.).

Links Are Legitimate Traffic Builders

Business professionals like quality subject-matter-related links so it pays to have a link-building strategy for your site.

The most effective one will look very much like your other strategic growth and partnering initiatives. Links are less about technical matters than they are about how your strategic plan calls for building key relationships.

Links can be thought of as “currency” on the Web. They are also important to Google (and other search engines) in determining search results. As a rule, the more links on your site, the better your place in rankings.

“We believe that website optimization is most effectively implemented by consistently and effectively doing business fundamentals correctly.

Here’s the website optimization approach that works time and time again - it’s a proven winner:

- **Develop good content, content and more content**
- **Write clean code (up to HTML coding standards)**
- **Practice good technical design when the site is built and then steadily enhance it**
- **Build and continuously update the keywords used within your titles, headers, text, and meta tags**
- **Register on the free search engines (save your money and skip the paid ones!)**
- **Use a good web analytics program (Google Analytics or any other simple, affordable system) and stick with it, doing at least a quarterly review to assess long-term results**
- **Complement the analytical tool with others that give specific information about the actual visitors to your site - like email marketing programs.**

The way links work, a search engine will place a weighting factor on each link so that a busy site like CNN.com (a high relevance site) will count for more than, say, "Ben's Blog". Creating links going from your site to other sites (ethically done, of course) is a fairly easy and straightforward thing to implement. You can link to relevant news, articles, industry events and trade associations, for example. The challenge is to get "high relevance" sites to link to you. Many a mid-market B2B services firm will find that getting a reciprocal link with a high relevance site is a tough challenge.

Get started. It is important to have a plan in place (completely aligned with your business plan, of course) and then you can construct your links. Start with the most doable actions such as getting links:

- from trading partners (vendors, business partners, etc)
- through directory entries, like a marketing services directory if you are a marketing firm
- through charities and/or civic organizations that your company supports

The worst kind of link building tactic is sending email to web masters asking for a reciprocal link - they are deluged with such requests. Links are valuable so put the resources behind this program to do it right.

Questions - Comments - More Information

We covered a lot of ground and you may want to know more. Contact us or our strategic partner, Integrated Web solutions.

About Marketplace Partners

For more than a decade we have successfully served B2B Services organization in the greater Chicago area. Our management consulting and smarketing services are designed specifically for business owners and executive teams committed to accelerating the profitable growth of their business. Leveraging our proprietary and on-going research with C-level buyers of services, we propel our clients into new services, new markets, more sales, better margins and timely results. We assist our clients in closing the gap between their business plan and the strategic marketing and practical performance required to effectively drive growth and profitability.

Contact Us: 877.250.7524 or learn more at: www.marketplace-partners.com

About Integrated Web Solutions

Chicago-based web hosting and web services company, Integrated Web Solutions (IWS), offers the professional Internet experience required for today's competitive marketplace. Building web solutions since 1993, we provide our clients with the services that solid results. Based on these consistent results, we have achieved a long-term 100% client retention rate in our web hosting subsidiary, IWS Hosting.

Contact Us: 847.726.7962 or www.iwsgroupinc.com