

# **What You Must Know Before Hiring An SEO Company**

How to Spot a Dishonest Search Engine Optimization  
Service  
- *Before You Give Them Your Money*

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## What You Must Know Before Hiring An SEO Service

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**SEO/SEM - Internet Marketing - Copywriting**

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Hiring an SEO/SEM company today can be like the dealing with a dishonest mechanic. You're never really sure that what they're telling you is true. You just have to take them at their word.

That's why you need to be aware of some of the common tricks that dishonest SEO/SEM companies use. This won't protect you against all scams, but knowing at least some of them could be very valuable. It could save you a lot of money and a lot of frustration.

One thing that I should point out is that use of some of the following 'lures' might be the result of an SEO's inexperience, or incompetence, rather than a deliberate plan to separate you from your money. Even if that is the case, hiring that company can end in the same frustrating results. That makes avoiding the honest, but impaired optimizer just as important to you.

Also, please keep in mind that there are a lot of honest Optimizers and Marketers out there, just as there are honest mechanics. You don't need to assume that you're being ripped off. Just proceed with caution.

### **3 of the Biggest Myths or Misunderstandings**

Let's get some things out the way right now:

**#1** You DO NOT need to submit your site to search engines. All you need to do is get a site that is already in the search engine to link to you. The search engine will then find you. Doing it this way will also help you in your rankings for the long term.

Anyone telling you that you need to pay them to submit your site to search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN) is not doing you any favors. There are a few circumstances in which that would actually be a service, but they are very few and very far between.

Furthermore, if they promise to submit you repeatedly in order to 'keep your listing fresh', feel free to dial 911 and rat on them. They're billing you for a worthless service.

[NOTE: Directories are a different story. You do have to manually submit to them. But only once.]

**#2** Anyone promising to get you a Google top ten position in a suspiciously short amount of time – say 3 days, a month, 10 minutes – is probably doing things that could get you thrown out of the search engine database or they're using keywords that are

worthless. By that I mean keywords that may sound applicable to you but won't draw flies to your site. If flies could surf the 'Net.

**#3** As far as ranking is concerned, Meta-Tags are **dead**. Buy the stone and read the will. They are dead. It is true that search engines used them at one time in determining rank, but that era is long gone.

Despite that, you can find millions of web pages that *still* have their Meta-Tags stuffed with every term possible. Some of these tags go on and on and on, listing every word they think might pull somebody in – including ones that have nothing to do with the site's subject.

An old trick in the early days of the Web was to put the name of the latest hot actress or a few 'adult' terms in the Keyword Meta-tag. As simple as that was, it actually worked. It got people to check out the site. For a few seconds. This is still being done, just in different forms.

Today, Meta-tags have one or two practical uses. That's it. Any optimizer you pay to work on the Keyword Meta-tags, in the belief that it'll raise your rankings, might as well be paid to do bird calls. It'll do the same amount of good for your rankings: None.

[Please note that the Description Meta-Tag is still important, so you should continue to use it. Also, be aware that I am referring to the tags that actually have the word 'meta' in them. Some call the TITLE tag a meta-tag just because it is in the HEAD section of code. For this writing, I do not.]

### **That's What They Call Service**

The following are some of the offered 'services' of SEO firms found on web sites of Search Engine Optimization and Marketing companies. The text(s) in quotes are the actual claims and promises taken from these websites. They've been cut and pasted, so you can read the exact wording.

I've done no adding, subtracting or rewriting whatsoever on those. You'll see why they pull people in. And why even you might be persuaded. Until you dig deeper it all sounds great. But as they say - there's more to the story.

**THE LURE #1:** Guaranteed Page 1 Rankings in the above search engines and directories

THE TRUTH: A guaranteed page 1 ranking is meaningless.

Why? Because it could be for any keyword or phrase. How about 'rubber baby buggy bumpers'? Or 'I like to lift weights in a tutu'? Want to be #1 for those? I can guarantee to get you there. If that's what you really want.

Some SEOs make it look good by getting you ranked for keywords that have some application to your business. But these keywords have the same problem - they don't bring the traffic you need; and that's because they're rarely, if ever, used in a search.

Not every term relating to what you do/sell is worth targeting. There's only so many words or phrases that searchers use for a given industry, at least on a mass scale.

Guarantees in the search engine world are often no guarantee at all. In many ways, it's a different world online. Another thing to consider about guarantees is best understood using a hypothetical situation. Imagine a basically honest SEO who usually gets decent results for his clients.

Right now, though, he's got cash flow problems. Luckily, he's just signed a big, new client who he sold on his Page 1 Ranking Guarantee. Now Mr. Big Client is in a *very* competitive industry - say Travel, for instance.

It is about this time that the SEO sees a miniature version of himself in a devil suit standing on his shoulder.

"Listen - We can't afford to lose the income from this job. Remember, you've got to pay off those credit cards *now*. And I'm not giving up my Maxim subscription. Pick some easy keywords to optimize for - he'll get a good ranking, you'll get your money. Everybody's happy."

"I don't know. He might not get much business if I do that. I have to think about this."

"Well, you better make up your mind fast. I gotta hook up with the 'Will & Grace' cast in a few minutes. We're collecting on their souls today."

"Huh?!?"

"Didn't you ever wonder why *that* show was successful?"

“You mean they sold their...– “

“Keep it under your hat.”

Getting a top ranking is not like fixing a DVD player. Part of the process is out of the SEOs hands. Even the best in the industry see their sites plummet from time to time. It's just part of the search engine world.

Google, and the other search engines, change their ranking formula on a regular basis. This can go by with no effect on your site, while some changes have taken sites down so far in the rankings it's as if the site doesn't exist.

What distinguishes a good SEO is ongoing work that will bring your site back up should this happen. It may take some time, but it will turn around if they're doing the right things.

The above SEO is tempted to shoot for a lower target in order to meet the guarantee because he knows *nothing* really is guaranteed in search engines. If it tempts a usually honest SEO, just think what a dishonest one does when he guarantees you top rankings. He won't think twice about targeting lesser keywords just so he can collect.

**THE LURE #2:** "Monthly submission to over 300 search engines like: Yahoo, Google, Hotbot, Altavista, WebCrawler, Excite, AOL, MSN, Ask Jeeves, and hundreds of others"

**THE TRUTH:** Search engines feel the same way about monthly submissions that you do about salesman who won't take 'No' for an answer. It's just bothering them and it can have repercussions.

As we said earlier, there is absolutely **no** need to resubmit your site to search engines, especially the major ones. Once you're in their listings, you're in.

Their spiders will periodically come by your site to check for changes, updates, etc. It's done automatically once they have you cataloged. In fact, resubmitting can **penalize** your site as it is considered 'spamming'. Resubmission is not a service. It's a potential big problem for you.

On top of that, it is better for search engines to find you. They tend to look kindlier on these sites when ranking time comes. Don't ask me why, they just do.

Here's the best way to get into the search engines - When your site is up and ready, have a site already in Google (or Yahoo, MSN, etc) link to you. The search engine spider will then follow that link and catalog your site. It doesn't get simpler than that.

**THE LURE #3:** "No expensive contracts, no per click fees, simply sign up and we will email you your initial rankings within 1-7 business days."

THE TRUTH: Dig deeper into this offer and it starts to unravel.

No contract? Sounds good so far. But what about the 'No per click fees'? Of course there aren't any fees. You pay per-click fees only if you're running a search engine ad campaign, like Yahoo Ads or Google AdWords.

Those fees are paid directly to AdWords or Yahoo Ads when someone clicks on your ad. The idea that you would pay the optimizer instead is a little strange. The one exception would be a commission arrangement, but those aren't very common.

If it isn't a commission deal, then touting that as a plus for their side makes no sense. It's like a car mechanic bragging that he doesn't charge for performing heart surgery. Of course he doesn't. That's not what he does. And would you hire him to work on your loved ones anyway? Sure, the savings are great, but...

What that statement says is 'We can't/won't run search engine ad campaigns for you'. Are they bragging that they don't provide an important marketing service? Who knows? You're wasting your time if you stick around to find out. I'm already in the parking lot starting my car.

**THE LURE #4:** "No need for you to give us your keywords, we get them directly from your website! Nothing could be easier!"

THE TRUTH: No need for us to do any work. Just send a check to our address. Nothing could be easier - for us!

This is a dead giveaway. They might as well put up a flashing neon sign that says 'Get Fleeced Here!'. If you see something like this on a company's website, run away from your computer as fast as you can.



One of the main reasons you hire an SE marketer/optimizer is to *find* keywords that will benefit your business. The optimizing process is useless without keyword research being done. What you might think to be the obvious search terms often aren't the ones being used by your prospects. That's why you research it.

Let me say this - it IS essential for the optimizer to learn from, and listen to, the client. That's absolutely true. You, the business owner, are an extremely valuable source of ideas and experience.

However, you're throwing your money away if the optimizer doesn't research the keywords being used in your industry. Research is vital. It's not an option; it is a basic necessity of optimization. Otherwise, you're getting very little for your money. In fact, you're getting almost nothing.

**THE LURE #5:** Company proudly promises to put up 'beacon pages' to help your rankings.

THE TRUTH: You might as well take your site down yourself. At least it'll save the money you would've paid these guys to do the same thing.

Before we go into the details, read what their page actually says:

"A beacon page is a page of text linked to your site to improve your search engine ranking. It is basically a page of text that mirrors keywords and descriptions throughout your site. Many websites are created using frames and some search engines have a hard time with these. A beacon page provides an inexpensive solution to these challenges."

What this firm is really offering you is the chance to be banned from Google. How generous. Their 'Beacon Page' is just another term for what is known as a 'Doorway Page'.

Doorway Pages are pages separate from the rest of your site. They're created to only be seen by search engine spiders. The pages are packed with keyphrases that the site wants to rank for. The text is often just pure nonsense with the keywords inserted over and over. A page that isn't meant to be seen by people is hiding for a reason.

In short, they're not a natural part of a website. They exist only to boost rankings. Search Engines don't like them and they *do* penalize sites for it. Being banned from search engines is not unheard of. That's a risk that no marketer should ever take with your business. No matter how good the upside looks.

The optimizer may refer to them as bridge, gateway, or entry pages. Whatever they're called, it's unethical and it puts your business on the line. Avoid at all costs.

[NOTE: There are Entry or Landing Pages that are made for SE Ad campaigns. They're the webpage that a person is taken to when they click on your ad. Those are fine, but they do have to be handled correctly.]

**THE LURE #6:** A mix of hard sell and intimidation.

THE TRUTH: One notorious UK SEM Company has combined spamming and other questionable techniques with a hard sell that would make Trump blush. Businesses have reported being called on a weekly basis by this firm. In some cases, they were called more often than that.

Not only do the company reps subject you to bullying and implied insults - suggesting that you have to be an idiot not to hire them – they also refuse to stop calling even when asked. One person who was called numerous times told the salesman to put him on their Do Not Call list. The exchange went something like this:

“ Callee: Put my number on your Do Not Call list. I'm tired of being bothered.

Caller: We don't have a Do Not call List.

Callee: How do I get these calls to stop?!?!

Caller: The only way to get them to stop is to hire us. “

Uncle!

I'm not writing about their ‘pitch’ just for entertainment purposes. These tactics are actually working for them. They have a long list of clients from whom they make a very nice living.

One of their best lures is one that says You Don't Pay Until We Get You Results.

Yes, they do bring traffic to your site. Explaining exactly how they do this would take a long time. It would even need an explanation of the explanation at some points. I don't understand all of the technical end of it myself.

Suffice it to say that they use domains that they, the SEO firm, own to funnel worthless traffic to your site. The numbers look great. Your sales don't.

The upshot is that you rank great – on minor search engines. Yes, you do get lots of traffic, but mostly from online & search engine bots. By bots, I mean the cataloging software used by search engines and others to go over your site.

One business owner posted on a forum about an SEO firm who used these methods on his website. His site had a page where visitors could sign up for a free email newsletter that he sent out. He was very successful at getting subscribers. In fact, 29% of his visitors signed up(!). At least they did before he hired this SEO.

While his site was being worked on by this crooked firm his website stats showed thousands of visits; and yet *there wasn't one sign up for his newsletter*. This went on for some time until the site owner finally caught on. Remember, the online world is like the offline one. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

It should be noted that some honest SEO firms do use a You Get Results Or You Don't Pay offer, or something similar. I use it myself for prospective clients of my Google AdWords services. However, this offer is for Search Engine Advertising campaigns, not for regular rankings in the search engines. There's a difference.

Search engine rankings can sometimes take a few months, which is far too long for most people to wait before being paid. Keep in mind that SEO/SEM is a lot like advertising. You don't hire an ad firm on the basis of guaranteed sales. Keep this comparison in mind when shopping for an SEO firm.

**THE LURE #7:** SEO has secret weapon that rockets your site up in the rankings.

THE TRUTH: Secret weapon usually blows up in client's face.

Here's another example of a company that is completely open about using unethical means to get rankings. These are the ones who make it easy for you to avoid them, as long as you know a few things. The quote below is copied straight from the company's web site. The bold text emphasis is theirs. Here it is, from the horse's mouth:

“There is currently no other technology available or search engine services firm which can offer the degree of sophistication that [NAME REMOVED] in association with [NAME REMOVED] offers you with **our proprietary Shadow Domain services**.

“[NAME REMOVED] has spent years developing the processes and software. They deploy on their servers a search engine-only targeted Shadow Domain site whose **sole purpose** is to drive **page 1-3 listings** on the **top ten search engines**. This stealth web or Shadow Domain site will create a **three-dimensional illusion** and **standalone site** targeted solely for **search engine spiders**. “

Here’s my summing up of what you just read:

“Gimme Your Money. This is a stick up.”

Of course, to truly capture what this company could do to you, the robber would have to also follow you home and demolish your house. Why? Because this company could run you out of business once Google bans your site for what they’ve done. And you can’t pay a mortgage with an income of \$0.

Before going on, think over the phrase ‘Google bans your site for what they’ve done’. That means that even though it’s their dirty work that has gotten you banned, you’re the one who suffers.

Just to make the point one more time - Here’s the view of Google themselves on Shadow Domains.

“One common scam is the creation of "shadow" domains that funnel users to a site by using deceptive redirects. These shadow domains often will be owned by the SEO who claims to be working on a client's behalf. However, if the relationship sours, the SEO may point the domain to a different site, or even to a competitor's domain. If that happens, the client has paid to develop a competing site owned entirely by the SEO.”

Enough said.

## **The Ones You Should Fear the Most**

The most dangerous SEO firms are those that don't/won't tell you that they use 'black hat' SEO techniques. Some will flatly deny it even if you ask them directly. More than a few firms have been caught spamming and using other methods considered illegal by the search engines. What you have to realize is that it's not just their problem if they get caught. Guess who else gets penalized?

When Google or Yahoo ban sites, it makes no difference to them that the SEO firm is at fault. The site owner is the real loser here. It can take months to clear things up and get you back into the listings. Meanwhile you've lost all the traffic from search engines, which can devastate a company's bottom line. It's as if you closed your doors.

You can be part of a class action suit against the SEO responsible, some are being put together as I write this, but they take time. Another thing to keep in mind is that you probably won't win back as much as you lost in business. Plus there are the profits you miss while waiting to get back up in the rankings once you are reinstated.

Suing should still be an option and, as that area develops, it will hopefully deter some of the more dishonest firms. The industry is young though, so this is all in the future. Standards and protections are just not there yet.

If you are a victim of a dishonest SEO/SEM, you do have some options in addition to going to court. If they are in the US, you can complain to some agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). You can file a complaint with them online at <http://www.ftc.gov/>.

Another possibility is the Better Business Bureau. One company based in Nevada has well over 100 complaints filed against them. That count was from a few months back, so it's probably much higher now.

This company got a lot of their clients banned from Google and now a class action suit is being put together against them. Search under 'clients banned Google SEO' to read some of the stories out there. You can learn a lot from those who have gone through this.

The most amazing thing about this case is that Google, for the very first time, publicly acknowledged that they banned this company, and their clients, from their listings. They have never done that before.

Here's a link to a news story about the company and its unfortunate clients. The amazing thing is that this mess has not reached a resolution yet. In fact, the company is still operating today under different names:

<http://www.lvbusinesspress.com/articles/2004/09/09/news/news03traffic.txt>

## Doing Your Own SEO

There are some business people who want to do their own SEO. Whether that's a good decision will be apparent in the results they get. It is certainly option if you have the time and motivation to do the work.

The problem is that there are sharks out there in the DIY world. While they encourage people and pump them up to believe they can do it all, they sell them virtual snake oil.

A perfect example is a gentleman who aggressively advertises on Google AdWords. His DIY kit isn't worth it at 1/3 the price. First – he sells you software that you can get free online. There are many sites that offer free utilities to help you in your SEO efforts. These tools are invaluable and, as noted, they're Free.

Secondly, some of his software tools will cause you nothing but problems. One is a utility that resubmits your site to the search engines regularly. In case it hasn't been made clear before in this writing – **resubmitting to search engines is unnecessary and can derail your search engine presence.**

Lastly, he makes claims that are completely false. For example he claims that Doorway Pages are actually okay with the search engines. According to him, professional SEOs are lying to you about them so they can make money from you. Instead of answering this ridiculous statement, I'll refer you once again to the answer straight from Google's lips:

"Another illicit practice is to place "doorway" pages loaded with keywords on the client's site somewhere. The SEO promises this will make the page more relevant for more queries. This is inherently false since individual pages are rarely relevant for a wide range of keywords. More insidious, however, is that these doorway pages often contain hidden links to the SEO's other clients as well. Such doorway pages drain away the link popularity of a site and route it to the SEO and its other clients, which may include sites with unsavory or illegal content."

There are many legitimate sites where you can learn about Search Engine Optimization and Marketing. There are also SEO forums where you can ask questions of professionals and they're usually glad to help. Just remember to follow forum rules and use common courtesy. A good place to start for articles and information is [SearchEngineWatch.com](http://SearchEngineWatch.com). They also have excellent forums that are well worth reading and participating in.

Treat doing your own SEO work like you would working on your house. Some people will have the ability to do more than others on their own. But there are some jobs that you should hire a professional to do. You'll know when that time comes.

### **One Thing I'd Like To Say**

Before I close, I did want to address some client perceptions I deal with, not only for my own benefit but to help you in understanding the SEO process. I have come across more than a few prospective clients who've been surprised that I wouldn't, or couldn't, optimize their site and get it to the top 10 in Google for \$200 or less.

This situation arises from those widespread misconceptions, which I've addressed earlier in this writing. Those are the ideas that:

1. Getting a Top 10 Google position is easy to do.
2. It only takes a couple of weeks/one month/an hour to get there.
3. A good SEO/SEM should only cost you about \$10/hr - tops.

If we consider the fact that a Top 10 Google position, for the right keywords, can literally be worth thousands, even millions of dollars – does it make sense that someone would give you that kind of payoff that for a few hundred dollars?

In the offline world you'd be suspicious if someone promised to make you huge amounts of money for next to nothing. But that's exactly what's happening when someone says they'll get you top rankings for cheap, cheap prices.

Is someone knowingly going to give you a goldmine in return for the pay of an entry-level temp? Maybe, but it would qualify as hitting the lottery.

Another fact to consider is that you probably have many competitors who also know the value of those top positions. Does it make sense that, since your competition is

wants those same slots, that it should be so easy to beat them? Or at least beat them for the keywords that are paying off?

Remember, you're fighting for a limited amount of valuable space – the top 10 or 20 rankings in a search engine.

SEO/SEM is getting harder as more businesses enter the search engine race. It's still a very cost-effective avenue for marketing, but companies should be aware that this is not a wide-open field. At least not anymore.

You're going head-to-head with others in your industry. Ladies and gentlemen, the cat is out of the bag about the benefits of optimization and search engine marketing.

Above all, keep in mind that Search Engine Marketing is **not a commodity**. It is a skill, a talent, a science and an art. Not all SEOs are equal.

Don't treat it like car shopping. When you want a new car, you visit various dealerships, looking for the best deal. This approach works especially well when you know what make/model you want because it's the same car, no matter what dealership you buy from.

That's not the approach to take in hiring an online marketer. You're not getting the same work, knowledge or ability from every company. If you shop purely on price, you may end up getting exactly what you pay for. And that's not what you want.

Please keep all this in mind when considering SEO companies to hire. A good SEO is probably not going to work for \$10 to \$15/hr. It may be tempting to hire someone at that price, but think twice before you do. It's equally true that a high price doesn't necessarily equal quality either.

End of sermon. Below are some resources that will provide you with good information on the subject of online marketing. And remember – there are many good, honest, capable Search Engine Optimizers & Marketers out there. Just proceed with caution. Best of luck to you and your business.

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## RESOURCES

### Search Engine & Online Marketing Forums

<http://www.SearchEngineWatch.com/>

<http://www.Cre8asite.net>

<http://www.searchengineforums.com/apps/searchengine.forums/>

### Books

NOTE: I haven't read every book out there, but these I have and I recommend them. Books can become outdated quickly in the search engine world, but I believe these have information that is still very useful.

*Search Engine Marketing, Inc.* - Mike Moran & Bill Hunt This book has great information on SEO/SEM. Some of it is directed toward the corporate world (how to coordinate your team, how to convince the executives to back the effort), but there's a huge amount of info that would be good for any size business.

*Winning Results With Google AdWords* - Andrew Goodman Another great book, this one dealing purely with the AdWords world. Writing those ads and handling campaigns is not so easy. This will put you ahead of the game.

*Definitive Guide To Google AdWords (E-Book)* - Perry Marshall There isn't any better way to get started in Google AdWords than getting this e-book. Well worth the money. Available at <http://www.perrymarshall.com/adwords/index.htm>. And, No, I am not an affiliate.

*Don't Make Me Think* - Steve Krug Building a site that's easy-to-use and understandable is crucial. It's a huge, though often overlooked, part of your marketing. It directly affects how people see you and whether they stick around. This book is easy to read and gives you a lot of information that can be applied immediately to make improvements.

Tested Advertising Methods - John Caples Copywriting is a skill that will set you apart from the competition more than anything else. You'll find different lists of Top 10 Copywriting books, but this book is in every one.

It's focused on sales letters, but all of the lessons can be applied to your website copy, email marketing, AdWords ads and just about any other text your company uses. Find the original version, instead of the current Revised one. It's easy to locate a copy online, and for cheap, too.

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