

**THE TRUTH
ABOUT**

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

“Searchers either
find you, or they find
your competitors...”

Rebecca Lieb

Internationally known Search Engine Optimization expert

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Foreword

Rebecca Lieb is a marketing super-maven. I first met Rebecca when she was writing about search, as well as interactive marketing and advertising, as ClickZ's Editor-in-Chief. The company I founded way back in 1996, search engine marketing firm iProspect (sold to Isobar, a division of UK Advertising holding company, Aegis PLC, in 2004), had PR agencies and internal PR teams that worked hard to win her favor in the hopes that she would write about our news. When she was done interviewing me on those occasions when I was fortunate enough to be included as a source, I would always ask her for her take on the news of the day.

Rebecca brings a lifetime of deep marketing experience to her opinions on digital marketing and search marketing. Also, she always had a fresh perspective or an interesting context through which she viewed a particular industry development.

When she told me she would be writing a book about SEO, I was excited for our industry. Books can elevate important ideas to new audiences of important decision makers and expand people's understanding of the priority and importance of an area of study. This book will accomplish exactly that, and I'm certain it will help to elevate the marketplace's understanding of the importance of SEO as the bedrock of search marketing. Though there have been many books written about SEO already, most have been very tactical and dealt exclusively with the particulars of tweaking your HTML or building inbound links. Although Rebecca's book surely contains SEO tactics that can immediately be put into practice to gain higher rankings, her unique perspective as someone immersed in marketing both online and offline ensures that the book speaks to the boardroom or the marketer, and not exclusively to the webmaster.

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This is because Rebecca brings deep marketing experience and a unique historical perspective to every subject she covers. Think about it: Every development at every major search engine over the

last several years has been covered by her, or by one of her reporters whose work she reviewed and approved. She was often privy to inside information and advance notice on most important industry developments. Rebecca has chronicled the rise of the Web and of Google, the decline of MSN and Yahoo's market share, and the important developments in our industry.

She has been to almost every industry conference, and enjoyed ringside seats to the rise of digital and the evolution of traditional advertising to a more digital footing. That someone of Rebecca's stature and brainpower has thought it worthwhile to write about SEO is a powerful development, in and of itself, for all of us who make our living working in search.

For years, SEO has been unfairly treated like the ugly stepchild of digital marketing—too complicated and technical for the boardroom or the chief marketing officer. All too often, it has been relegated to the IT professionals to argue about meta tags. PPC search advertising is much sexier than SEO and has lately become the domain of advertising agency types who have greater access to the most senior marketers at major brands.

SEO is the foundation, the bedrock of online marketing.

SEO, or Search Engine Optimization, however, is the foundation, the bedrock of online marketing. It isn't just the foundation of search marketing; I submit to you that it is the

foundation of all marketing. This is exactly because we live in a world where increasingly, Google dominates the search landscape, and Google has taught people to love to search.

When people see an ad on TV and they want to learn more, what do they do? They go online and search. When a natural disaster strikes, what do people do? They search. When people have questions about life, about science, about business, about education, about travel, or about their health, what do they do? They search. The behavior of search is becoming an entrenched, and widely adopted, human behavior. We don't even think about it anymore. We just search for anything at all.

In the 12 years or so since search engine marketing has been in existence, we have learned this one truth: All media, all marketing, and all communication have one thing in common—they all drive people to search. And in a recent study conducted by Jupiter Research, of all the people who were stimulated by an offline cause to go online and search, some 40 percent of them actually made a purchase.

And when someone types a keyword into the search box and presses that search button, there are only two possible outcomes:

1. They will find you.
2. They will find your competitor.

Google's market share in the United States is nearing 70 percent of all searches, according to HitWise. Across Western Europe, Google has a 91 percent share of search audience—91 percent!

But Google's dirty little secret is that fully 72 percent of all people who search Google click in the natural or organic search results, not the paid ads. For this reason alone, SEO must be the foundation of your search marketing campaign. If you learn how to cause your website to appear at or near the top of the search results when someone searches for a relevant keyword, you can harvest traffic from Google, free traffic, all day long, month after month—at no incremental cost.

Pay-per-click, or PPC, search advertising has its place, too. It is immediate, and you can control your position and the keywords that trigger your ads to a greater degree than with SEO. But PPC search advertising has significant limitations, too. Every click has a cost. And for most verticals, no marketer can afford to buy every click for all of their keywords. Google will literally throttle your search ad on and off all day long to ensure that you do not exceed your set daily budget. That means that hundreds, sometimes thousands of searchers will never see your ad or know that you exist while searching for various keywords—that is, unless you are also found in the natural search results by using SEO.

SEO ensures that once you attain a top ranking on a particular keyword or group of keywords, every searcher will see your listing—all day long, all night long, every day, week, month, or sometimes even for years at a time.

In this way, every additional ranking you achieve through SEO has incremental value at little, if any, out-of-pocket cost. However, with PPC search advertising, the moment your budget expires so, too, does your visibility. If you run out of money, you are instantly invisible.

To engage in a search marketing strategy that does not first include a foundation of good SEO, which targets the area of the search results page where the vast majority of search engine users click, is like filling your car with gasoline but forgetting to add the oil. It will start right up, but it may not go very far.

And recently, SEO changed dramatically, again. When Google announced “Universal Search,” SEO got even more interesting and valuable. No longer were the search results simply “10 blue links,” but suddenly search results were colorful with images of videos from YouTube and thumbnails of photographs and news all integrated into the search results. Today, being found at the top of the search results cannot be ensured by merely optimizing your website’s HTML. Today, SEO necessarily includes optimizing a variety of different types of media that your company produces, such as video content, PDFs, and photographs. It involves distributing and optimizing each of these forms of media for a variety of different kinds of social media sites and vertical search engines. SEO also means securing listings in the major search engine’s “tabs” if you hope to consistently be found on the first page of the search results.

And today, the mass market typical search engines such as Google and Yahoo! are no longer the only ones that matter. YouTube is a search engine of video content, Amazon.com is a search engine of books and products, and Flickr is a search engine of photographs.

Although PPC search advertising can reach into these properties and ensure your ad is displayed alongside this content, SEO strategies can ensure that you are the content being displayed. And remember, search engines are listening to your customers as they discuss and link to your brands in a variety of social media settings, and they’re using this information as “signal data” in their relevancy algorithms. Because of this, “social media optimization” now influences your ability to achieve top rankings in the major search engines.

In a world where people search using keywords, and every major website is, to some extent or another, a search engine of specialty content or a source of relevancy information to a major search engine, understanding the concepts of SEO grows in importance every year.

Fredrick Marckini

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Introduction

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the art and the science of getting a website to appear prominently in organic search engine results when a search submits a query relevant to that website.

In other words, it's about standing out from the crowd. It's being front-and-center when a searcher raises his proverbial hand and says: "Hey! Over here! I've got a question and need an answer. Who's available to help?"

Often, that question relates to "Where can I buy...?" or "Who can I do business with?" A well-optimized website, therefore, is something akin to the Holy Grail of marketing. It provides the right message to the right person at the right time.

And who's the person in question? Well, everyone. Very close to literally everyone, given that the overwhelmingly majority of people in developed countries are online—and searching. Search long ago became the second-largest online activity (after email). Search has evolved from merely providing answers to stated problems and queries. Today, it's the way most people navigate the Web. The major search engines are so good and so fast, search has largely replaced even the necessity of bookmarking favorite online destinations. In recent years, we've even seen the search bar come close to taking the place of the navigation bar in most major web browsers.

Even the most casual searcher has noticed that search is changing. It's becoming deeper, more specific, more personalized, and more customized. Now, searchers can search for (and site owners can optimize for) shopping, blogs, video, images, local resources, books, or audio files. There's almost nothing on the Web that can't be found by, or optimized for, search engines, from the Big Three (Google, Yahoo!, and MSN) to a clutch of highly specialized search engines.

If marketers didn't think being found on search engines was critical to their business strategy, the Big Three would hardly be so big. A company like 10-year-old Google rocketed from obscurity to becoming a multibillion market cap company because marketers are confident that investing in search engine advertising is a wise move. That's why paid search advertising accounted for 41 percent of the \$17 billion spent on interactive advertising in 2007. Search is the fastest-growing marketing segment of the Internet, which, in turn, is the fastest-growing channel in the history of media.

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to the basic precepts, principles, strategies, and tactics inherent in search engine optimization. It's about how to make your website "findable" by the right person at the right time.

It's not a book for geeks. It will not teach you how to write code, or get you up to your elbows in programming. But whether you're a small webmaster or a chief marketing officer overseeing a search optimization initiative, you will learn tactics, strategies, and best practices for wrapping your arms around this whole search thing.

If you've got a business with a web presence, not being findable on the major search engines is akin to not being listed in the phonebook—only worse, perhaps.

How can you possibly afford to pass up the opportunity to be there when potential customers or clients come looking for you? At the same time, how can you ensure that they find you for the right queries? Your "steel drums" may be musical instruments, or they may be industrial parts. A properly executed SEO strategy helps you be conspicuously "there" for contextually relevant search queries. The goal, after all, isn't just to attract traffic to a website, but qualified traffic. Both the site owner and the searcher alike benefit from solid SEO.

Finally, a note. Although this book deals with optimizing for all search engines great and small (including some you've likely never heard of), you'll find a preponderance of references to Google, and with good reason. By May 2008, a mind-boggling 71.5 percent of all searches in the United States were conducted on Google (source: Compete). Yahoo! lags far, far behind with 13.3 percent, and the remaining 15 percent or so is splintered between MSN, Ask.com, AOL, and others. If the tactics and practices in this book favor Google as the benchmark of all things search, that's because it is. Google is bigger than the proverbial 500-pound gorilla. In search, it's more like Godzilla. I've, therefore, made an effort not to favor Google in this book, but to present today's market realities that will doubtless hold true far into the foreseeable future—and beyond.

Rebecca Lieb

New York City

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Site stats share the bad
news, too

Just as analytics tools and site stats are an essential aid in optimizing a site's searchability, so too can these tools flag warning signs, bad news, and other signals that the website in question is not meeting searchers' expectations.

In such cases, bad news is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, we're talking search engine *optimization*. By definition, SEO is a continuous, ongoing process. Without any negatives, what would you optimize?

In the broadest sense, the goal of SEO is to increase organic search engine referrals to a given website. Therefore, tracking unique visitors from search engine referrals as a percentage of a site's total unique visitors is an essential part of measuring the success of any SEO effort. You want unique search engine referrals to rise, or at the very least to hold steady. It's worthwhile noting that unique search engine referrals are measured not in their totality but as a percentage of

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traffic because nearly every business is affected by cyclical variance, ranging from news cycles to seasonality. If the only thing you're selling is snow tires, you'd expect a decrease in traffic (as well as in snow tire-related searches) in the summer months, wouldn't you?

The traffic to your site is rising steadily. Great news, right? Well, not so fast. If traffic to the website is going up, but sales, lead-generation, or the other goals of the website are flat or in decline, something's wrong. It could be site issues, of course, but if flat performance is directly linked to organic search engine referrals, it's all but a sure sign that the site has been optimized for the wrong keywords.

Keeping an eye on those pages users visit—and those they don't—is another important set of stats to track. Search engines drive traffic to specific pages in a site, not just to the homepage (see Truth 8, "You don't have a homepage anymore"). This holds advantages both for the user and for the site owner. Through search, users are able to navigate directly to the page that most specifically addresses their search query. They needn't bother to poke around a site to navigate to relevant information.

The edge for site owners is that each and every page of a website affords new and specific opportunities for optimization. Each page has a specific and individual set of keywords that can be adjusted and optimized. Copy can be revised and rewritten. Both outbound and inbound links can be improved. Certainly no site gets consistent levels of traffic across all pages. Some are simply bound to perform better than others. But that doesn't mean underperforming pages deserve to be ignored. They should be considered optimization opportunities.

Even the most rudimentary site analytics tools provide more data than many site owners are prepared to deal with. What matters is determining which datasets are important, and then carefully monitoring and tracking those statistics on a regular basis—daily is great; monthly at a bare minimum.

Overall, the most fundamental site elements to track include the following:

- **Visitors**—What could be more basic than knowing how many visitors have come to your site in a given time frame? Be careful to differentiate between unique (or individual visitors) and overall site visits, which account for the total number of visits to the site, combining unique visitors with people who visit multiple times. Although knowing the number of visitors to a site won't help increase conversions, it's a good indicator of how search engine rankings and links from other sites affect traffic.
- **Referrers**—Where's your site traffic coming from? This metric lets you know which search engines send how much traffic to your site, as well as which links to you on other sites impel users to visit.
- **Keywords**—Ranking well for keywords is one thing. Getting traffic from them can be something else altogether. Keyword stats—those words and phrases searchers are using to find you—let you know exactly how much traffic keyword rankings actually generate.
- **Time spent and bounce rates**—Traffic is only part of the goal. Encouraging visitors to actually stick around and do something, such as buying or otherwise converting, is a much more critical benchmark of site performance. Assessing how much time visitors spend on a given page, or on the site overall, is a strong indicator

of how well it fulfills the expectations of users who followed a link from a search engine, or any other referrer, for that matter.

- **Exit pages**—Exit pages can be a strong indicator of flaws in a website. This stat indicates pages, processes, or other flaws in a site that frustrate, annoy, confound, or disappoint visitors—enough so that they leave. A site page that does not indicate the end of a desired process (for example, the “Thank You” page that following a completed transaction) is likely not a good place to lose visitors. This metric is highly effective at revealing fundamental problem pages on a site.

After collecting the preceding data over several weeks, patterns should begin to emerge that should inform both the search optimization and site strategy. Here’s a hypothetical example. Say a site was optimized for the phrases “video production services Cleveland” and “video post-production Cleveland.” The site ranks well for both keyword phrases, and both generate a healthy amount of traffic. Yet while the first page generates leads (phone calls or filling out a form leading to a “Thank You” page on the site), the second phrase generates traffic, but no conversions.

You’ve got a problem. It could be a site issue, or perhaps a subtle optimization tweak is in order. Seasoned SEOs will tell you that even an apparently meaningless change, such as “video post-production services Cleveland” or “*digital* post-production Cleveland” or “video production Ohio,” can do the trick.

The number of tweaks, adjustments, and calibrations you can make to any search optimization initiative approach the infinite. But without consistently tracking results with a web metrics program, it’s simply impossible to know what works. And what doesn’t.

