Search Engine Success: Pages and Words

THE DAYS WHEN YOU COULD FILL IN A FEW MAGIC META-TAGS AND PUSH YOUR WEBSITE TO THE TOP OF SEARCH ENGINE RESULTS ARE GONE, IF THEY EVER EXISTED. IN FACT, THIS WAS NEVER A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS EVEN THOUGH SOME SHADY SEO "EXPERTS" MADE A LOT OF MONEY SELLING THE IDEA.

To succeed with search engines, you have to think like a search engine. And if you're a search engine, you have to think like somebody who's searching for something.

Search engine expert Peter Kent has written books on the subject but part of the solution is as simple as this: Lots of pages with lots of words. The pages must be reasonably named and structured. The words must be appropriate to the subject at hand and should be formatted in a way that's pleasing to both the human visitor and the search engine spider. Titles and headings need to be applied appropriately. But the most critical point is lots of words on lots of pages.

No Field of Dreams

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL NOT COME. A WEBSITE WITH HALF A DOZEN PAGES WILL SINK LIKE A STONE, NEVER TO BE REPORTED BY ANY SEARCH ENGINE. THAT'S BECAUSE THE SEARCH ENGINES ALL DO THEIR BEST TO SEND PEOPLE TO SITES THAT OFFER WHAT APPEARS TO BE THE MOST COMPLETE ANSWER.

You're selling a widget and 3000 other people are selling similar widgets. Maybe your widgets are higher in quality or lower in price. Maybe you offer faster delivery. Maybe you're a better sales person. But if your website doesn't show up in the search results, it will never have a chance to tell your story.

Consider two websites: The first has 2 pages, one that has a photo of the widget and another with a contact form. The second has 173 pages that include explanations of how the widget works, pricing information, PDF copies of the instruction manual that ships with the widget, photos from various angles of all models, comparisons of the company's 14 models of widgets, service manuals, information about the company's founders and its history, testimonials from dozens of satisfied customers, white papers explaining how to integrate the company's widgets with other devices, and ... well, you get the idea.

Ever notice how sites such as Amazon.com usually pop up when you're looking for almost any product or service?

Peter Kent, who has done consulting work for Amazon.com, explains it this way in his book, *Search Engine Optimization for Dummies*: "Creating a useful site is the key. Even if your sole aim is to sell a product online, the more useful the site is to visitors, the more successful it's likely to be."

Kent notes that Amazon wasn't the first online retailer of books and music but it has been successful because it doesn't just sell products.

WHEN I WANT TO FIND YOU, WILL I BE ABLE TO?

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Amazon makes itself useful by providing "tons of information about the products it sells."

This makes some website owners nervous but it doesn't seem to bother the folks at Amazon: Information on the site is useful even if you don't buy from Amazon. You can research widgets on Amazon and then buy from someone else. Or you can bookmark the information on Amazon and return to make the purchase later.

"Would Amazon be so successful if it just provided lists of the products it sells instead of offering visitors a veritable cornucopia of useful stuff?" Kent asks. He then answers his own question: "Absolutely not."

The Web is all about information and to be successful, your website must be designed, structured, and developed with that truth in mind. No

magic bullet exists, regardless of what the snake-oil seller of the day would like you to believe.

It's Not About ...

- **Facebook, Twitter, and Blogging:** If your website already has a lot of traffic, creating a blog might be helpful. If not, you're just sitting in front of your computer and talking to yourself. Facebook and Twitter can also be helpful but if your website has no content, your followers won't stick around for long.
- **Links:** Maybe you've heard that you should have lots of links to other sites. Hundreds! Thousands! The more the better! Stop to consider what happens when you link to another site and a visitor clicks that link. The visitor is gone and might not come back. The judicious use of links can be helpful but adding links won't make search engines happy and will do nothing more than siphon off your visitors.
- **Discussion Boards:** Developers who specialize in setting up discussion boards say that installing one will cause visitors to flock to your site so that they can talk about your widgets. How many times have you visited a website, noticed a discussion board, and found that it contains 16 posts (the most recent of which was written 3 years ago)? Sad sight, isn't it? It's also a sad site.
- **Making it "Cool":** Add a Flash-based front page. Plaster animated GIFs all over the place. Make the site talk as soon as people arrive. Search engines hate this crap and most human beings aren't too wild about it, either. Take a look at Amazon or any of the other big online retailers. If they're not using a technique you want to use because it'll make your site cool, maybe you should step back and re-evaluate the decision. Peter Kent again: "I've been writing this since 1997: **Forget cool; think useful.**"

It's not a secret. It's not complicated. It's not even hard. But it does take time and commitment to build site popularity. What will be of interest to people who will want your widgets even if they don't yet know that they need your widgets. **What problem does your widget solve?**

One of the oldest examples in marketing is the drill bit: People don't buy drill bits because they want to own drill bits; they buy drill bits because they need to create holes in something. If I need a hole and I don't know drill bits exist, what would

I search for? If you sell drill bits, those terms are ones that should be included in page names, page titles, headings, and text on your website.

Think like someone who is searching for the benefit your widgets provide. Then think like the search engines. Easy, isn't it?
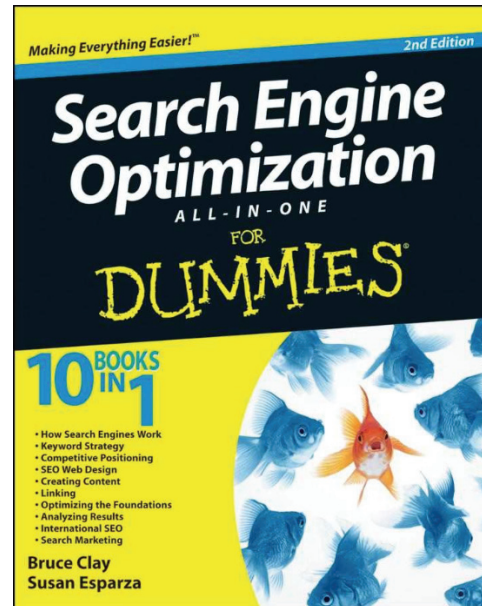
Buy the Book & Go By the Book

Peter Kent's book and the time you'll need to read it are excellent investments in the success of your website. The book is available from Amazon.com (of course) in both print and Kindle versions so you can buy the book and start reading it in less than a minute. If you don't have a Kindle, the Kindle reader is available for nearly every electronic device made.

Kent speaks an unusual language, one that we don't hear too often these days. It's called common sense.

Example: "When you're planning your Web site, think about what kinds of folks you want to attract to the site. Then try to come up with ideas about what features and information might be useful to them."

If you're Sony Pictures and the site you're creating is promoting the killer movie that you hope will attract teens (and their money), maybe you need a lot of Flash animations. Maybe you need games. Maybe you need fun. But if you're selling a widget or a business service, bear in mind that people won't come to your site to be entertained. They will come if and only if your site promises the information they're looking for.

Additionally, they will stay only if you deliver on that promise.

More common sense from Peter Kent: "Maybe your target audience hangs out in MySpace; if so, perhaps you do need a MySpace site ... and Facebook and Twitter accounts, too." How do you know if you need these things? You think. And "the important first step is to think about what you can do to make your site more useful."

It's not about how many key words you can cram into your site's meta tags. Search engines ignore those and give a lot of weight to the words and phrases that they find in page titles, headings, and plain old text.

Paying attention to what the competition is doing is important if you want to rank well. If the sites that compete with yours have a lot of useful information, you need a lot of useful information.

Some people mistakenly pay for quick, shoddy writing that contains key words and phrases thinking that this will attract search engines. They're probably right and the search engines will carefully note all those words. You might even snag a top spot in the search rankings.

But then people will come to your site, find poorly written articles that are useless, and leave.

There's an old saying among advertising professionals: **The best way to kill a company is to develop an outstanding ad campaign for a lousy product.** So if you want to kill your website, stuff it to the brim with badly written dreck.

Otherwise, do your homework. Think about what people are really looking for. Play to those strengths. Oh, and avoid things that search engines hate: Frames, invisible navigation, dynamically generated content, Flash animations, text embedded in graphics, external content, and dirty tricks. Particularly dirty tricks. When the search engine operators discover the trick (and they will) your site will be penalized.

So it all comes down to using common sense and thinking like a search engine. Easy! Ω