



Search engines can drive your company's sales

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If you build it they will come. This adage may work for baseball, but it doesn't apply at all to small-business Web sites.

An all-too-common refrain among small-business owners is: "I spent all this time (or all this money) creating a great Web site, but no one is visiting it."

Helping people find your business on the Web takes time, patience and persistence, but it can definitely pay off. The first step is to get listed on the major search engines and then to make sure you stay listed in the ever-changing search-engine landscape.

Getting listed on major search engines can give your Web site a significant traffic boost. WebUndies.com, out of Cranford, N.J., shows the importance of search engine placement. If you go to Yahoo!, search for "boxers", and then click on the third category, "underwear," you'll find WebUndies as one of only four businesses listed on the first screen. WebUndies.com owner Scott Marino says, "The search engines are wonderful for us. Yahoo! brings us probably a quarter of our sales."

Or say you are looking for a new brass door knocker. The folks at Niagara Castings Custom Foundry in Ontario, Canada, hope you will find them if you search the Web for a new front-door ornament. If you search Yahoo! for door knockers, Niagara Castings is listed on the first screen. Search engine listings have brought them some very lucrative business, including a property management firm in Bermuda that has become a frequent repeat customer.

Such success stories aren't the rule in the search engine world, however. If you've ever tried listing on search engines, you know that getting search engine listings like WebUndies' and Niagara Castings' is no easy feat. Here is how Marino sums up his own frustrating experience, "It was really rough getting on Yahoo! I submitted and nothing happened, and submitted again and nothing happened."

If you haven't yet tried getting your business listed and you want a glimpse of how tough it can be, check out this cynical user's essay This tongue-in-cheek site offers a ceremonial sacrament purported to help you get listed on Yahoo!'s directory. The site suggests a series of daily chants such as "feel my thoughts and words almighty Yahoo! Feel my pain."

So how did WebUndies and Niagra Castings do it? They followed one of three basic models to getting - and staying - listed on search engines:

1. **Do it all yourself:** You can familiarize yourself with the major search engines, and submit your site to them yourself. This is the least expensive option, but it can be time consuming. You not only need to make sure you get listed the first time, but to monitor your position on the search engines weekly or monthly to be certain you don't get bumped down the list or knocked off completely. (Paul R. Ellis, showroom manager for Niagara Castings, says he spends about six hours each week checking his company's listings on the major search engines and submitting Niagara to a broader set of search engines.) You'll also need to learn a lot about the ins and outs of search engines and directories. A good place to start is atSearchEngineWatch, a very useful font of information about various search engines.

2. **Use an automated submission service:** You might call this "do it yourself, with a bit of help." Several online services will submit your Web site to search engines for you. They can save you a lot of time and teach you things as well. They've already done the work of gathering forms from dozens or hundreds of different engines, and have them all in one place. One of the most popular search submission services is bCentral's SubmitIt!

Through this service, your site's name will get submitted for listing on up to 400 search engines, including all of the major ones. It will also resubmit your site automatically every month to reduce the chance that you will fall off the listings. And it allows you to check that you are still listed and where you are listed on an ongoing basis. The service runs \$60 per year, or is included in a broader online marketing package for \$19.95 per month. Other submission services include Submission Pro! and Get Submitted! Many hosting companies also offer a tool to list your site with search engines. You'll need to learn about search engine jargon and how search engines work, but many of these services are rich with tips and suggestions. You'll also need to be vigilant about checking your listings and making sure of your listing on an ongoing basis.

3. **Hire someone to manage the process for you:** If you want to avoid the time and hassle altogether, there are firms that will manage the entire process for you for a fee. Some will even guarantee a certain level of placement. Bissinger French Confections, a St. Louis maker of fine, handmade chocolates, hired Webster Group International (WGI) to handle its search engine listings. WGI managed to get Bissinger among Yahoo!'s top listings for "chocolates." WGI offers a money-back guarantee to clients, promising to get them a predetermined number of top 20 listings in the major search engines. It charges \$1,999 for an initial three-month campaign to list clients on the major engines and then about \$600 per month to maintain listings. For those fees, WGI personally submits your site to the 12 top search engines and directories and stays abreast of how the engines work to optimize page views for its customers. You'll have a project manager give you weekly updates about your site's search listings and rankings. If you can afford to outsource, you can leverage expertise and save considerable time working with a company such as WGI. There are literally hundreds of firms offering this service. I would ask for a list of clients, then go search for those clients in the major engines when choosing a company.

Worth the trouble

Even if it means time and money, it's worth getting your Web site listed on the major search engines. Christine Seebold, owner of C & J Paper, which allows clients to print wedding invitations from their computers, says the search engines have significantly expanded her customer base. "We do business all over the world," she says. "We got an order today from Nicaragua."

But not only have search engine users discovered her business; the biggest search engine of all noticed it too. And Yahoo! now buys invitations for company events from C & J Paper, Seebold says. When a Yahoo! representative first called, she recalls asking, "This is Yahoo!?! THE Yahoo!?" Chalk up another good reason to get your small business listed on a search engine.