



## 12 tips for zooming to the top of search engines

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*Source:* bCentral / MSNBC / 1.04.04

Getting listed on the major search engines is Priority No. 1 for promoting your business on the Web. But getting good listings is no easy feat.

Many small businesses tell tales of woe about their difficulties getting listed on Yahoo!, MSN, AltaVista and others. In my previous column, I outlined three options for getting your site listed, depending on how much time and/or money you have to focus on the problem: 1) doing it yourself, 2) using an automated search engine submission service, or 3) hiring a firm to manage the process for you. Today's column offers some tips for improving the results of your search engine submission.

Getting a good listing on the major search engines is kind of the Holy Grail of Internet marketing, and it's not always obvious how to do it. As Scott Marino, owner of WebUndies.com, notes, "The search engines don't want you to know how they work."

There are ways to improve your chances of getting listed, but it's important to keep your expectations in line. If you are selling CDs online, there isn't much you can do to get listed above Amazon.com in most search engines, except maybe to name your Web site Aggressive CDs, since some search engines list sites alphabetically within a category. In general, there is a limit to how quickly you can move your site up against a long list of competitor sites. But check out these tips to help get you listed and to identify which categories you want to be listed under, to avoid being lost amid hundreds of competitor sites.

### Search engines vs. directories

Many people use the term "search engine" to refer to any site, like Yahoo, MSN, AltaVista or Google, where you go to look for something on the Web. However, there are two distinct categories of search sites, and they use vastly different mechanisms to determine whether and how to list your Web site. Directories such as Yahoo!, LookSmart (which provides directory results for MSN, Excite and AltaVista) and Open Directory employ people to evaluate Web sites and make individual decisions about whether a site should be added to their directory. Search engines such as Alta Vista, Google and Excite use complex automated processes to evaluate sites for listings. Most search engines scan your Web pages and the page title and metatags to determine where and how to list your site.

Getting your business listed on search engines and directories requires slightly different strategies. To find out some key strategies for listing on each type of search site, I talked with Jamie Silvestri, who manages bCentral's search engine submission service, Submit It!, and Rich Wichmann, senior account executive at Webster Group International (WGI), a St. Louis company that specializes in online promotion services. Silvestri and Wichmann offered the following suggestions for getting well listed.

### Tips of encouragement

1. **Be patient.** Realize when you start that you will not get listed right away. Most of the search engines and directories can take four to eight weeks to list your site. You can speed up the process at Yahoo! and LookSmart by using their fee-based express listing services.

2. **Be persistent.** If you don't get listed after the first eight weeks, don't get discouraged. It's pretty common. Submit your site again; persistence pays in this game. It'll save you time if you keep copies of the information you submitted to each engine. Many of the search engine submission services like bCentral's Submit It! or Submission Pro! will save the information for you. If you have disappointingly low hit rates the first time out, check out the search engine tips on sites such as Submit It! or Search Engine Watch, and tweak your submissions before resubmitting.

#### Tips for listing on directories

With directories like Yahoo! and LookSmart, always remember that real people are reviewing your site. Try to put yourself in their shoes. They need to quickly decide whether your site looks interesting and somehow "good enough" to be listed, and whether it is a good fit for the categories you've chosen. Try the following:

1. **Pick the appropriate category.** Make sure the primary category you propose for your Web site fits your site's front page extremely well. Choose a category that clearly matches what is on the front page of your Web site so the reviewer can quickly look at your site and have no question that it's appropriate for the category. The person reviewing your site can choose to change the category, but he or she is just as likely to reject you if the match seems a bit off. For example, if your front page features printed invitations for all occasions, you'll have a better chance of getting listed in a broader category like "Printing: Invitations and Announcements," than in something more specific like "Wedding Invitations." If you also want to get listed under wedding invitations, in this example, you can either list it as a second category (Yahoo! allows two alternative category suggestions) or create a separate Web site to highlight your wedding invitations and submit it separately.
2. **Spruce up your Web site.** The directories are all about trying to put together what human beings feel is good and interesting on the Web. "They've got to be making the call based on the look of the site," says WGI's Wichmann. The better your Web site looks, and the more interesting or useful it is, the better your chances of getting listed. If the major directories reject you more than once, consider overhauling your site to improve its look or content. You can check out a recent column for ideas on how to improve your site's design.
3. **Submit to the geographic section of Yahoo!** Yahoo! has regional listings (for example, you can search for "dry cleaners Minneapolis"). If your business has geographical relevance, consider making one of your two alternative categories a geographical listing. Silvestri says Yahoo! is actively trying to build its regional listings, so you may have a better chance of getting listed there.
4. **Avoid sales jargon in your site description and title.** The directories dislike sales jargon. Again, put yourself in the reviewer's shoes: She or he is trying to create an objective listing of the best sites offering your product or service. Silvestri says you are much more likely to get listed if you describe your site with a phrase such as "Online sales of baseball mitts, baseballs and other sporting goods," than with a description like "Lowest-priced baseball mitts on the Web! GREAT DEALS!!! Buy now!"

#### Tips for listing on most search engines

Search engines such as Alta Vista, Excite and Inktomi use algorithms and rules to scan your Web site and decide where to list it. Each search engine has its own criteria and processes, but the following tips are useful for most of them.

1. Choose keywords that match how customers speak and search.



2. Be a big fish in a small pond.
3. Create pages with a specific focus.

#### Tips for "special case" search engines

A couple of key search engines operate differently than the others. Google is probably the most important since, as of August 2000, it replaced Inktomi as the provider of search results for Yahoo! While Yahoo!'s primary results continue to come from its own directories, the secondary results now come from Google.

Google's search engine looks at how many sites link to your site, as a proxy for how popular or interesting your Web site is, and uses the results to rank your site in its search results. The type of sites linking to you also is important. A link from a popular site (i.e., one that has many others linking to it) counts for more than a link from a wallflower site that has few linkers of its own. Direct Hit uses a similar approach. To improve your listing on Google, and indirectly on Yahoo!, try the following:

1. Develop reciprocal links.
2. List products or services with online malls.
3. Build online press coverage.

Getting your site listed with the major search engines can take major time and effort. Services such as bCentral's Submit It! can lighten the burden — the service not only submits your site automatically, but also helps you keep track of your listings and periodically resubmits your site.