

Search Engine Optimization (SEO): A Clear Perspective on a Complicated Process

By Eric Majchrzak

Given recent trends that show technology playing a larger role in marketing professional accounting services, many firms are undertaking efforts to incorporate search engine optimization, or “SEO,” into their marketing mix. There are some important things to consider when implementing an SEO program. Unless you do your due diligence, you could be missing out on what SEO can really offer and the true opportunity it affords accounting firm marketers. The insights in this article are intended to provide clarity on how public accounting firms can approach SEO implementation.

What is SEO?

The common definition of SEO is “the process of making a Web site and its content highly relevant for both search engines and searchers through the use of targeted keywords and phrases.” The process includes strategies and tactics undertaken to improve Web pages so they gain a higher ranking in real or “organic” search engine results. The best scenario would be for your firm’s Web site to be listed on the first page of search engine results when your targeted keywords and phrases are searched. In order for your site to drive targeted traffic, your Web site needs to be “optimized” for these terms. To accomplish this, it is necessary to make search engine-friendly enhancements to your Web site, such as:

- Altering and prioritizing content to be more keyword-centric
- Manipulating HTML Code and meta-data to be more keyword-centric
- Developing a more intuitive navigation and URL structure
- Regularly updating contents
- Ensuring there is strong internal linking and the acquisition of relevant “inbound” links (*i.e.*, links on other Web sites that send visitors to your site)
- Ongoing analytics and diagnostics to measure results and identify potential problems



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SEO is not the same as SEM

You do not have to pay search engines like Google or Yahoo for organic search results. However, search engines offer paid advertising in the form of pay-per-click, paid inclusion or sponsored ads. This should not be confused with SEO. Paid inclusion falls under the larger umbrella of Search Engine Marketing, or “SEM,” which is defined as a form of Internet marketing that seeks to promote Web sites by increasing their visibility by using SEO, paid placement and paid inclusion.

It's about conversion

SEO is not just about achieving high rankings. Your Web site can achieve high rankings all day long, but to what end? What's the value? Increased traffic? Branding? That's a start, but SEO can accomplish much more than this, so don't just settle for high rankings.

The goal is leveraging your high rankings in order to entice your visitors to perform a specific call-to-action, more commonly known as a “conversion.” Before you can do that, though, you have to figure out what the end goal of conversion is. Is it generating new business? Setting appointments? Receiving requests for proposals (RFPs)? Increasing newsletter or podcast subscribers? Getting media interviews? All of the above? If you are considering implementing an SEO program and conversion strategies are not being discussed, you are missing the boat.

The highest and best use of SEO is as a tool to direct targeted traffic to investigate your

“offer.” Ultimately, your marketing department should be charged with the responsibility of creating a compelling offer within the pages of your Web site. If your SEO function is outsourced, work with your consultants to define your conversion techniques. Most reputable SEO practitioners preach “conversion” and “high rankings.” Hold on to your wallet if the outside SEO firms you are talking to are not talking conversion strategies!

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The opportunity SEO provides for accounting firms

Firms that are doing it right have learned that, when implemented properly, SEO can be a serious lead-generation and business-development tool. These firms are effectively using SEO as a medium to help pack their sales pipeline with dozens, if not hundreds, of “qualified” leads per year. SEO-related goals and objectives are clearly defined in firm marketing plans, and the more progressive firms are even incorporating revenue-based goals.

SEO can be a major source of new business revenue when it is combined with a Web site that provides a value-based experience for visitors. The combined

effect is like having a business development officer that works 24/7/365. Six and seven figures of SEO-related new business revenue are being achieved by some firms every year. The potential is there, and the accounting industry is starting to take notice. 2008 will mark a record year in terms of the numbers of SEO-related webinars and educational sessions being offered to accounting marketers by industry vendors, consultants and the Association for Accounting Marketing.

SEO and the accounting profession: The dynamics at play

Why is SEO becoming such a buzz item now? SEO has been around for more than a decade, so perhaps it is safe to say that accounting marketing hasn't been the most progressive industry. More likely, however, it is the context in which the accounting industry operates today that is driving the push for SEO. *Raintoday.com* recently issued a survey that stated 57% of professional accounting services “buyers” are willing to switch providers. The figures suggest that relationships between firms and their clients are fragile at best. Sarbanes-Oxley and heightened corporate governance, new standards and more compliance are all contributors that are driving clients to do their own homework on issues that impact their business. When combined with increased fee pressures and average to poor service, Google becomes an empowering tool for corporate chief financial officers (CFOs). The dialog begins.

How do you get leads?

Increasingly, CFOs and other purchasers of professional accounting services are turning to the internet to find clarity and answers to the pressing issues that impact their business. That's the crux of the opportunity. Many times, these decision-makers are using Google to supplement the information they are getting from their trusted advisors. For example, in the past year, hot-button items like "SOX Compliance for Non-Accelerated Filers" or "R&D Credit extended through 2007" were very popular searches on Google. Thousands of searches each month were conducted for these "issue-based" terms. Firms that could obtain high rankings for these terms drove targeted traffic in a mass fashion to their Web sites in order to begin a dialog with the visitor. The dialog can literally manifest itself in the form of a prospect filling out a Web form in order to get clarity on an issue or to ask for a fee quote. Again, the goal is to convert visitors so they complete a call-to-action. You have to figure out what your call-to-action is going to be.

Still, even in the face of mounting evidence of SEO success stories in the accounting industry, there still are nonbelievers. You will encounter them in your efforts to launch SEO. It goes something like this:

Statement: "The businesses/organizations we are trying to target don't use search engines to find their next CPA firm."

Translation: "Do you know who I am? We are much too important to be reduced to a Google search." Sound familiar? If only SEO people could have a nickel for every time they hear that!

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Bringing SEO in-house

A common question swirling around accounting marketing circles is: "Can we do our own search engine optimization in-house?" The answer is that it can be done. In fact, more accounting firms are taking the initiative to develop an internal SEO function. This becomes apparent when you look at how many accounting firm marketers at the Association for Accounting Marketing's Annual Summit are responsible for optimizing their firms' Web sites and at the growing numbers of in-house SEO jobs being posted on Monster, Hotjobs and LinkedIn. The landscape is changing. The talent is available for your firm to find the right candidate.

Making the strategic hire.

You really need a champion to spearhead the effort. Budget issues will dictate whether it is feasible to hire a dedicated SEO professional or outsource.

Consequently, large firms might be in the best position to hire a dedicated SEO person. Smaller to mid-sized firms might want to consider a hybrid approach by hiring an e-marketing person with a background in SEO. The two fields are closely related. Consider making your hybrid marketing person responsible for a combination of duties such as Webmaster responsibilities, SEO work, e-marketing activities, intranet, database, etc.

- *SEO salaries:* A recent study by the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization, published in the January 2008 edition of DM NEWS (*Healthy SEM Salaries Rule: SEMPO Survey*), sheds some light on what the current salary ranges are for SEO professionals. For those SEO practitioners with less than five years experience, you can expect to pay anywhere from \$60,000 to \$100,000 per year. Five years of experience or more, you can expect to pay between \$100,000 and \$200,000 per year.

- *Using existing in-house staff:* The person you choose to be the anointed "SEO Guru" needs to be passionate about Web marketing. A good start for SEO newbies is to have them read Google's Webmaster guidelines on recommended practices. It is available at google.com/webmasters. This comes right from the source. It's a "Do's and Don'ts" of creating a Google-friendly site. Additionally, it is helpful to provide outside training or send your in-house marketing staff to SEO conferences, webinars or SEO workshops.

There are dozens held both at the national and local levels.

If you decide to outsource your SEO

If you are planning to hire an outside SEO to get you the results you need in a timely fashion, you need to consider the cost. Like anything else, it largely depends on the size and scope of your project. If you're thinking about hiring an outside firm, a great time to engage them in is when you are considering a site redesign or planning to launch a new site. Finding a reputable SEO firm among all of the clutter is a task in itself. Do your due diligence and seek referrals. Outside SEO firms have incredible resources, including access to the latest research, trends and methodologies. If you have a firm in mind, ask questions about how they intend to get the job done. Reputable firms will gladly walk you through their process.

Beware of the bad guys. On the flip-side, how can you distinguish the good firms from the bad?

Many questionable SEO firms employ unethical practices, more commonly known as "Black Hat" techniques. Unethical practices may include things like link farming, hidden text, keyword stuffing, doorway pages, mirrored sites or more.

- **Link farming:** Acquiring inbound links from Web sites that provide no real content or value, other than to increase inbound links.
- **Hidden text:** Incorporating text on a Web page which is visible to search engines, but not visible to human visitors.
- **Keyword stuffing:** The blatant over-use of keywords on a Web page to "fool" search engines
- **Doorway pages:** Stand alone pages built for SEO purposes only and not human visitors. They serve as a gateway or redirects to main pages.
- **Mirrored sites:** Exact same site existing at two or more URLs or domains.

These practices are all frowned upon by Google and other search engines, and they can get you into a heap of trouble. Google, for example, permanently bans any Web sites it finds that use these practices.

- Stay away from experts making bold guarantees like "we will make you #1 in the rankings!" or guarantee a timeframe to do so.
- No SEO firm has a "special relationship" with Google or a priority submit agreement. So, beware if this claim is made.

Trust your instincts. If the SEO firm you are considering is not itself listed in Google's index, then something is wrong. Walk away.

Ranges for SEO pricing.

Last year, the reputable Seattle-based SEO firm, SEOMoz, published a pricing guide of common SEO services offered industry-wide, and fee ranges you can expect from SEO firms across the board. This can serve as a benchmark for accounting

Service	Low End	Mid Range	High End
Site Review + Consulting	\$500	\$2,500	\$10,000
Hands-On Editing of Pages/Code	\$2,000	\$10,000	\$50,000
Manual Link Building Campaign	\$500	\$5,000	\$20,000
1-Day SEO Training Seminar	\$750	\$4,000	\$12,000
Keyword Research Package	\$100	\$500	\$2,000
Viral Content Development + Mktg	\$1,000	\$7,500	\$20,000
Web Design, Development + Mktg	\$5,000	\$25,000	\$100K+
Monthly Retainer for Ongoing SEO	\$2,500	\$7,500	\$20,000+

Source: SEOMOZ.org

firms to follow when planning and budgeting for outsourced SEO efforts.

Opportunity abounds

It is important to keep in mind that the field of SEO is constantly in flux, and there is much disagreement about approaches, which tactics are good and which are not. Many even think SEO is more of an “art form” than a science. There is no “silver bullet.”

Still, the race is on.... Firms that can combine high rankings with a value-based Web site that brings the prospect closer to picking up the phone, e-mailing a partner, filling out a Web form or even asking for a fee quote are likely to see positive results. That’s what SEO is all about.

About the author: Eric Majchrzak is a marketing manager with Freed Maxick & Battaglia

CPAs, based in Buffalo, N.Y. Eric has been practicing SEO for nine years and manages Freed Maxick’s in-house SEO function. Eric was honored nationally as the 2006 “Rookie Marketer of the Year” by the Association for Accounting Marketing and currently serves as the chairman of the association’s Web site committee. To contact Eric Majchrzak, e-mail: eric.majchrzak@freed-maxick.com. ♦

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