



This month, **Bernard Collin**, Founder, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Safecom Co. Ltd. explains the mysteries of search engine optimization and offers some helpful advice on how you can improve your website ranking and get more potential customers to visit your site.

SEO: How to bring your web site to the top of Google

What would you say if the owner of Siam Paragon, one of Thailand's premier shopping malls, offered you a prime location on the main floor for half your current rent? Assuming there were no strings attached, you would probably say 'yes'. This is the effect professional Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, can have on your company website. Your website might look fantastic and your products and services can be state-of-the-art at 'can't resist' prices, but 85% of the potential customers searching the Word Wide Web don't look past the first page of their search results. Unless your site is one of the ten sites listed on that critical first page, chances are you are losing sales.



Most customers are not very skillful when it comes to searching for information on the web," says SafeComs Bernard Collin, a 20 year veteran in the field. "Potential customers will spend a few minutes, at most, looking for a product or service. If your website isn't listed on the first screen, chances are a competitor who invested in Search Engine Optimization will get the business."

"SEO offers tangible, measurable benefits for your business."

If you have only recently heard about SEO, don't feel left out. The constant pressure on companies to be ever more competitive is driving the search for new Internet technologies to extend their reach and to have more impact in the marketplace. Bernard predicts that, "We are going to see websites without effective SEO fall farther down the rankings very quickly over the next few years."

Great return on investment

SEO could be the best investment you make in your website. It's estimated that 15 percent of all sales in the Thai economy are now completely online. For 90 percent of the people using the Internet, search engines like Google and Yahoo are how they find what they are looking for. Of those people, 85 percent never look farther than the bottom of page two of the search results, and 77% never click on paid or sponsored ads.

SEO offers tangible, measurable benefits for your business. The first, and perhaps most important, is that SEO helps more potential customers find your site. It's working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and can give your products and services a high international profile for a comparatively low cost.

Google search engines rank sites by how often other sites link to you, not by the content on your site.

On the technical side, a well optimized site will work with all World Wide Web compliant browsers, which means your site can be viewed by the greatest potential number of visitors. SEO also ensures that all your links are working correctly and that all the pages in your site are accessible to search engines, which makes your site easy to index. What this means is that visitors to our site have a much more enjoyable experience, which encourages them to come back for more.

Making the grade: Getting listed on the first page of search results

While not exactly new, SEO has become an increasingly important factor in website impact. Simply put, Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, is a way of getting internet search engines like Google, Yahoo or MSN to list your website near the top of the list, it displays in response to whatever keywords a potential customer types into the search box. Sounds simple enough. But remember, you are competing with thousands, perhaps millions of websites that may be using the same or similar key words.

“When a visitor opens your website, it should immediately be clear what you want them to do.”

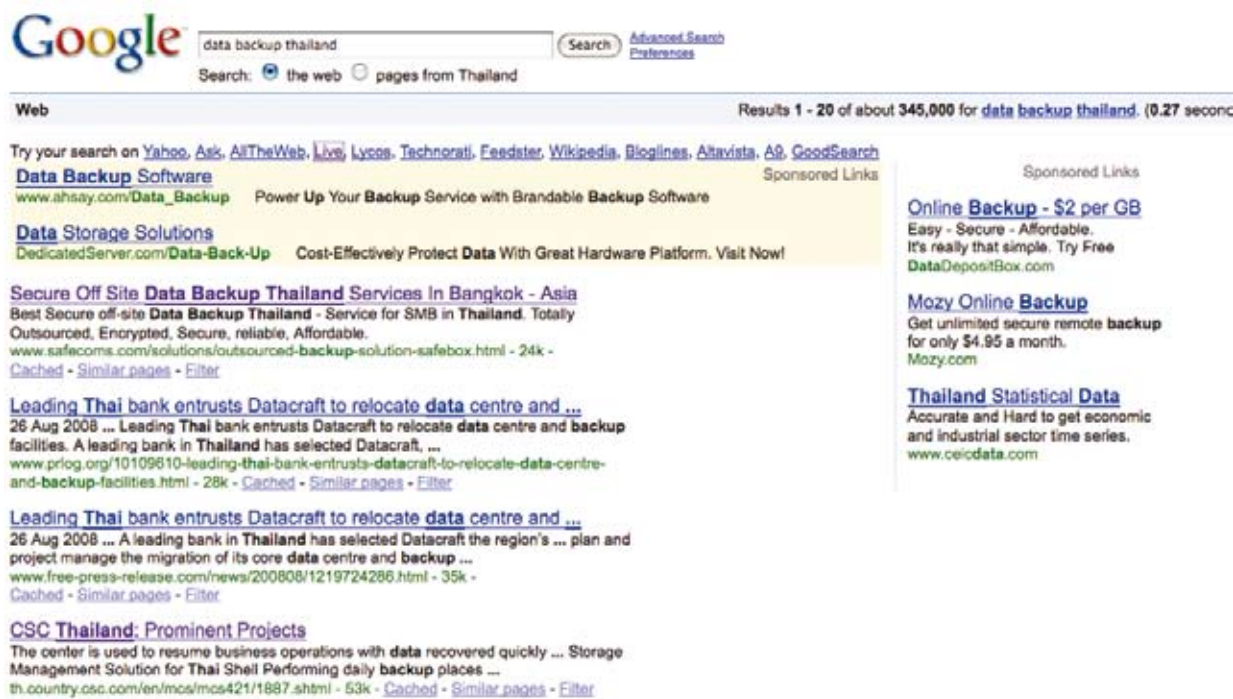
First, you need to understand a little about search engines and how they rank those 100 million websites. A ‘search engine’ is just a fancy name for a set of computer programs that search an index or master list of websites and returns matches to the specified keywords. According to Nielsen NetRatings, the most popular search engines by market share are Google, Yahoo and MSN. Exactly how that works isn’t important; what’s important is how a search engine ranks your website within an index. Google search engines rank sites by how often other sites link to you, not by the content on your site, They do, of course use content to determine whether your site is relevant to the keywords in the search, but more about that later. The point is; the higher your site ranking, the more likely customers are to find your website quickly and start looking at your content.

High ranking; the first step

Bernard cautions website owners, “There is a difference between Search Engine Optimization and Search Engine Marketing, or SEM. SEO helps get your website to the top of the search engine ranks. That’s an important first step. If visitors don’t immediately see good information, well written copy, great visuals and easy navigation, they very quickly move on to the next website, and you’ve lost a potential sale. SEO helps potential customers find your site, SEM helps ensure they actually look at your pages and become customers. This means well organized, high quality content, good writing and an easy flow leading to a purchase. “It’s the basic principle of good sales,” says Bernard. “When a visitor opens your website, it should immediately be clear what you want them to do, like download a test version or a white paper or send an email to get more info or click on the buy button. SEM ensures there is a flow from finding your site on the search engine to transforming a visitor into a customer. You need both for an effective website.”

Boost your website ranking

Getting a high ranking for your website is not rocket science, but it does take some work. The theory is simple enough if you pay attention to a few simple guidelines.



Do not do-it-yourself. The bookstores, and the Internet itself, are full of do-it-yourself website design guides. They all tell you how easy it is and how you can have your website up and running in no time at all at little or no cost whatsoever! That’s fine if your website is a family photo album or your passion for Dutch tulip bulbs. If you have sales targets to reach, you need a professional design team. “Website design and search engine technology has got to the point where a single individual can no longer master all the skill sets needed to construct an effective website,” says SafeComs Bernard Collin. A professional website design team needs, at minimum, a graphic designer, a copywriter, and a programmer who understands the numerous technical ins-and-outs of exciting and mysterious topics like domain name registration, hosting, HTML, meta tags, spiders, Cascading Style Sheets and Search Engine Optimization.

Provide quality content. People who shop on the Internet want solid information, not advertising bumpf. “People don’t read web pages,” says Bernard Collin, SafeComs SEO expert, “they scan a page looking for keywords.” Good copywriting can increase reader attention by over 100 per cent. “On a web page, less is more,” advises Bernard.

Focus on the goal. The goal of SEO is to bring new customers to your website. It is not about getting every possible keyword listed in a search engine index. “Many people try to get as many high search engine rankings as possible,” says SafeComs Bernard Collin. “It’s not important that your website is listed for a lot of keywords; it’s important that your site is listed for the right keywords.” Pick the wrong keywords and all your efforts are wasted.

Use effective keywords. ‘Effective’ key words are words that potential customers are most likely to use. This is where SEO really makes a difference, because it isn’t possible to guess what thousands of potential customers might be thinking when they sit down to do a search. The term ‘keyword’ is actually misleading. As Bernard explains, “Hardly anyone uses single keywords anymore. Nearly 30 percent of all searches use two word phrases, another 30 percent use three word phrases, and about 20 percent use four word phrases. “Getting the right keywords is just the beginning,” says Bernard. A critical aspect of optimizing your website is gathering and analyzing user statistics. For this, an SEO professional like SafeComs will use tracking tools that will tell you not just how many people visited your site, but who they are, where they are, how they found your site, what search engine they are using, how your site performs compared with other web sites in the same category or country and lots more useful information. SEO uses this information to fine tune your keywords so you know which keywords lead to sales and which are just taking up space. This can push your ranking up an-

other notch or two, more than enough to make the difference between a miss and a live customer contact.

“A fully optimized website is no guarantee that your site will retain its rank forever.”

Create convincing web pages. If you don't have web pages that appeal to potential customers through quality visuals and brilliant copy, visitors don't become customers. That's why you need the graphic designer and the copywriter. Here are some simple guidelines for creating effective web pages:

- Use a Plain English writing style and the minimum number of words necessary to get your message across
- Use Cascading Style Sheets for layout, avoid using Frames
- Use page titles that describe page content
- Use lots of headings and sub-headings
- Write an opening paragraph that summarizes page content

Link or die

“Search engines are constantly evolving,” says SafeComs Bernard Collin. “A fully optimized website is no guarantee that your site will retain its rank forever.” From the day the World Wide Web took form, people started looking for ways to manipulate their rankings. The cat-and-mouse game continues, which means that search engines are constantly developing increasingly sophisticated methods to rank pages. “You have to understand the mathematical algorithms and keep pace with new developments and trends to keep your ranking at or near the top,” says Bernard, “it's a never-ending learning curve.”

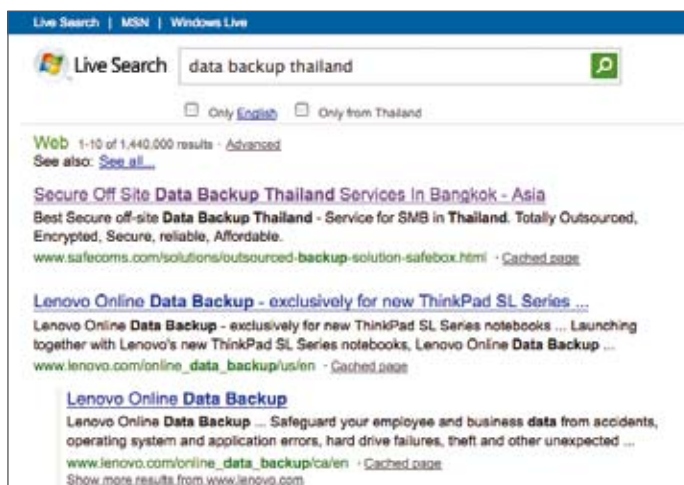
One of the big factors these days is the number of links into and from your website pages. Suppose, for example, your company sells an exciting new fire fighting technology. If you put links on your website pages that connect to websites for fire fighting associations, municipalities using your product, and sites for international fire safety standards, that's going to be very good for your ranking. If those sites put your website address on their pages, that's going to be really fantastic for your ranking!

Why are links so important? Because most search engine designers feel that when one page links to another page, it's like casting a vote for the other page. The more votes that are cast for a page, the more important the page must be. Also, the importance of the page that is casting the vote determines how important that vote is. Search engines calculate a numeric value or PageRank that reflects the importance of a page based on the number of votes cast for it. PageRank isn't the only factor that search engines use to rank pages, but it is an important one.

Today, search engines incorporate a wide range of undisclosed factors in their ranking algorithms to reduce the impact of link manipulation. Google says it ranks sites using more than 200 different factors, information it guards closely. The trend in ranking algorithms these days is toward factors such as the age, sex, location, and search history of people conducting searches. “Effective SEO is not a hobby,” says Bernard Collin. “Professional SEO practitioners invest a great deal of time participating in online forums and attending conferences, workshops and seminars to keep pace with developments in search engine technology.”

Good versus bad SEO

SEO practitioners talk about 'white hat' SEO and 'black hat' SEO. No mention of magic wands, at least not yet. White hat techniques are about creating content for users, not for search engines, and then making that content easily accessible. Black hat SEO uses deception to trick search engines into giving them a high rank. White hat techniques tend to produce results that last a long time. Black hat SEO works on the principle that a site will eventu-



ally be banned, either temporarily or permanently once the search engines discover what they are doing.

“Successful search engine optimization for international markets often requires professional translation of web pages.”

Search engines may penalize sites they discover using black hat methods, either by reducing their rank or by banning them altogether. Such penalties can be applied either automatically by the search engines' algorithms, or by a manual site review.

Expand your market

If your market is international, you

need SEO that takes this into account. Search engine market share varies from one country to another. Google is currently the US market and overall world market leader with about 85%, followed by Yahoo and MSN. In markets outside the US, Google's share is often larger. In Thailand, Google claims 98% of the search engine market. In Russia, local search engine Yandex has 50% of the paid advertising revenue, while Google has less than 9%. In China, Baidu leads in market share, although Google has been gaining. Successful search engine optimization for international markets often requires professional translation of web pages, registration of a domain name with a top level domain in the target market, and web hosting that provides a local IP address. A good SEO company should be able to advise you on these matters.

Be on top

According to the latest survey, as of August 2008, there were 176,748,506 websites on the Internet. How do potential customers find your site before they find a competitor? Search Engine Optimization is the key advantage. SEO is a positive, proactive step you can take to help ensure that potential customers see your website on the search results page before they see a site offering the same or similar products and services.

SafeComs Bernard Collin advises people interested in SEO that, “Search Engine Optimization is not a just a technical solution, it has to be part of your overall marketing and communications strategy and include effective SEM as well. In terms of return on investment, it's hard to think of anything that gives you a bigger 'bang for your buck' than SEO.”

Want to know more?

Netcraft Web Server Survey

http://news.netcraft.com/archives/web_server_survey.html

Netcraft provide monthly Internet research reports on the hosting industry and specialize in phishing detection and countermeasures.

SEO News

<http://www.seo-news.com/>

Offers “search engine strategies for webmasters”.

Jakob Nielsen's Website

<http://www.useit.com/>

Jakob Nielsen is the world's leading expert on website usability.

Plain English

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>

Practical advice on writing crystal clear web page copy.



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