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# ONLINE<sup>TM</sup> strategies

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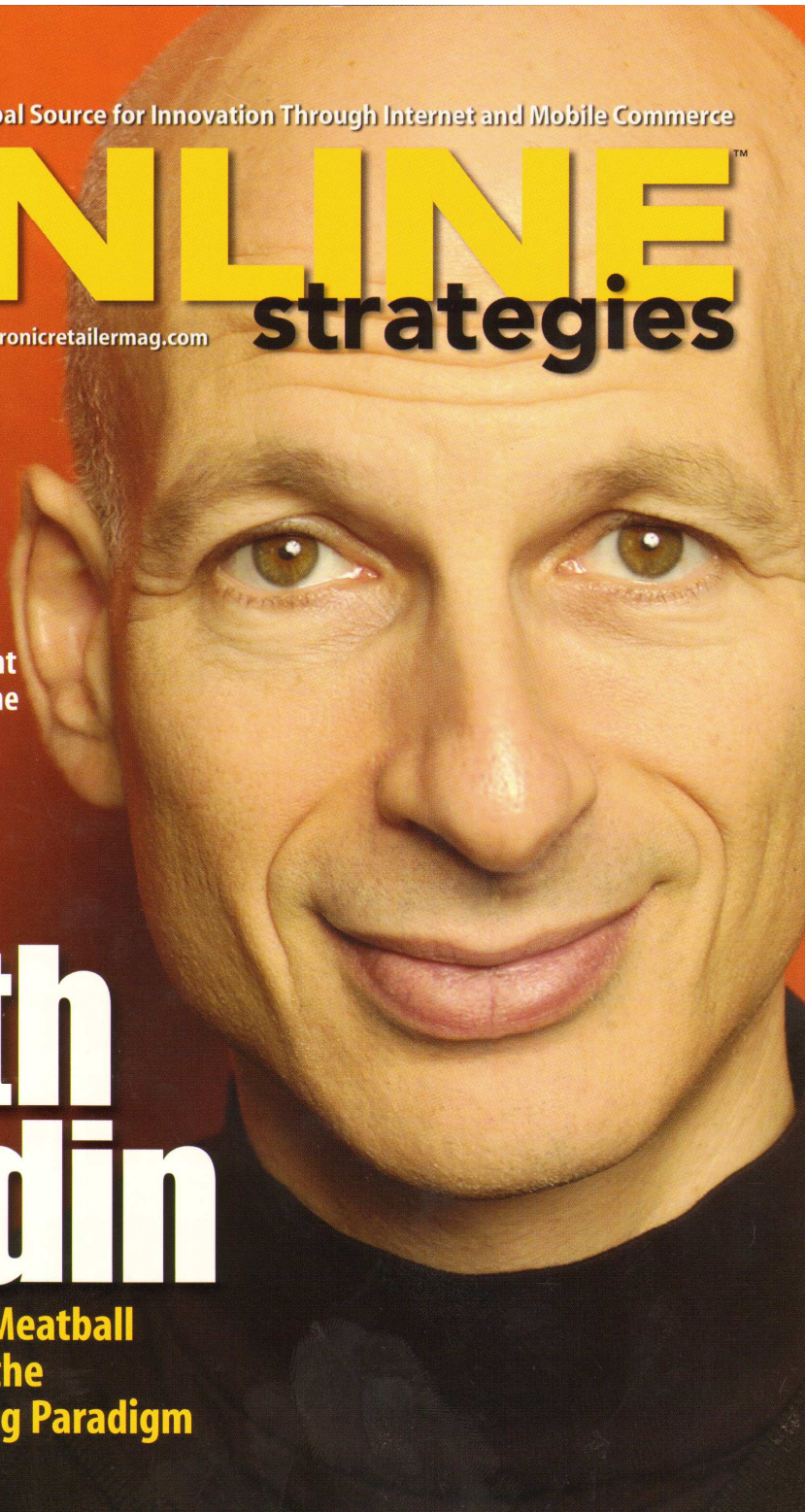
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## Techniques That Stand the Test of Time



BY PAM WESTBROOK

Online businesses are increasingly dedicating marketing resources to search engine optimization, with a recent TopRank survey suggesting that 36 percent of online marketers intend to emphasize search engine optimization over all other Internet marketing efforts in the next six months. Search engine visibility of a website correlates positively with increased exposure and sales, so it comes as no surprise that SEO has made its way to the top of many online marketers' to-do lists.

Some site owners engage in questionable, "black hat" tactics designed to "trick" search engines and game the system, but such an approach is not suitable for businesses seeking SEO benefits that will stand the test of time and pay dividends over the long term. Ethical SEO involves working to make a website better for both search engines and users.

The following five tips will help put your website on track for SEO success:



### 1. CHOOSE THE BEST KEY PHRASES FOR EACH WEB PAGE

Finding the right keywords creates a foundation for the rest of your search engine optimization efforts. A general rule of thumb is to choose the most relevant three to five keyword phrases to target on each page of your site, including each category and product page if you have an e-commerce site or

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online store. Keyword phrases targeted on your home page may describe your business or overall offering, while those used on each interior page should describe the specific contents of that page. Tools such as Keyword Discovery and Wordtracker can help you find the best keywords for each page of your site.

### 2. GIVE EACH WEB PAGE ONE-ON-ONE ATTENTION

Every page of your website should have content unique to its topic, including category and product pages if you run an e-commerce store. The title tag is an

important element for both user click-through rates and search engine relevance, so the first step in optimization is incorporating the key phrases for each page into the title tag of that page. Remember that the text in your title tags appears as the link to your site in the search engine result pages, so ensuring that they clearly communicate to users what they will find on the page is an important goal.

A common problem in many online stores is a lack of unique content on interior pages. A prime example is the use of manufacturer-provided product descriptions on product pages, which is often duplicated across numerous competing sites selling the same products. Creating *original* detailed product descriptions on each product page will add value for your visitors, and will increase the likelihood that the page will appear in search results to give your online business an edge over the competition.

One technique for adding value while differentiating your product pages is providing customer reviews. Not only do consumer reviews add unique user-generated content to your product pages, they are also a powerful tool for closing sales. Online shoppers appreciate honest feedback from peers in making purchase decisions.

### **3. OFFER MORE THAN A TYPICAL ONLINE STORE**

Besides selling products, what does your store do? How can you make it more useful to a larger percentage of your target market? The answers to these questions will vary depending on your industry. Perhaps potential customers need to perform background research before purchasing, so why not give them the resources to both conduct research and purchase on your site? Some other ideas for building con-

tent that have proven successful include how-to tutorials, industry news, surveys or polls, informational articles and competitive advantage evaluations. This, however, is anything but an exclusive list—you're limited only by your imagination.

## **A sitemap itself is not intended to help your site achieve better search engine visibility, but having more of your pages in each search engine's index increases the likelihood that your *interior* pages will appear in the search results for users to find.**

### **4. ENGAGE WITH THE ONLINE COMMUNITY**

Social media has only recently become a popular platform for building business relationships, but it has already forever altered the way consumers interact online. Online shoppers are increasingly turning to online communities to establish relationships and seek feedback on companies and products, and companies that get genuinely involved in the conversation are reaping big rewards.

Social networking is about connecting, so the best approach to social media is to engage in conversation with members of your target market (as opposed to talking *at them* with overt promotions or sales efforts). Building relationships with people in your target market can lead to direct sales as well as opportunities for exposure and inbound links that will help your site's long-term search engine visibility. Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are a few of the largest social networking sites, but there are many more. If you want to get involved in social media, be sure to research user demographics of different communities to determine where your target market is active.

### **5. INSTALL A SITEMAP ON YOUR WEBSITE**

Adding an XML sitemap to the root level of your site will help search engines find interior pages and crawl their contents more intelligently. A sitemap itself is not intended to help your site achieve

better search engine visibility, but having more of your pages in each search engine's index does increase the likelihood that your *interior* pages will appear in the search results for users to find. This may even improve conversion, because these interior pages may be more relevant. For information on creating, validating and adding an XML sitemap to your website, pay a visit to [Sitemaps.org](http://Sitemaps.org).

Search engines analyze hundreds of factors to rank websites, including the quality and quantity of natural inbound links to the site, so each bit of advice here is one piece of a larger puzzle. Since search engines try to determine the highest quality, most content-rich pages for a given search query, SEO has the overreaching goal of making a site as valuable to users as it can be. The level of work and time that a business owner must invest in order to reap the long-term benefits of search engine visibility depends on the competitiveness of the industry online. ☒

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