Driving Clients/Customers/Visitors to Your Website: A White Paper with 10 SEO and Web Marketing Strategies for Building Website Traffic from Near and Far

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What's the point of building a Website to market your business if very few people will ever actually find it and consider requesting your services or purchasing your products? The problem is not with building the Website, though some Websites are certainly better designed than others, the problem lies with the Website once it is up and running.

This white paper is designed to enhance your strategic thinking about how you brand, market, and optimize (for search engines) your personal or business Website – so that you not only increase traffic to your site, but you increase the quality of that traffic. It doesn't matter if you are attempting to market yourself, your small business, or a Fortune 500 company – following the advice in this white paper will lead your marketing efforts to greater success.

Are you ready to invest time and effort to enhance your site so that prospective clients or customers can find it – whether through a keyword search in Google (or some other search engine) or from clicking a link from another Website linking to yours or from typing the name of your site into their browser based on seeing the URL from some other marketing strategy? If so, then you've found this white paper at just the right time to take your Website to the next level using proven search engine optimization (SEO) and marketing strategies.

[Editor's note: Find links to a SEO and marketing glossary, as well as other key SEO and marketing resources at the end of this document.]

National SEO and Marketing Strategies

1. Research Web Competitors and Target Audience

Marketing intelligence and market research are critical to your success. Business owners must understand their primary and secondary competitors, as well as have a clear picture of their target audience.

Using the keyword phrases you expect your visitors to use to find you, conduct a Google search and uncover your key competitors. Experiment with a few keyword variations. Complete a detailed analysis of your top competitors, examining things such as products and services offered (and prices charged), Website appearance and navigation, marketing tools (such as testimonials, industry certifications, social networking/bookmarking tools), and SEO items (including title, description, keywords – which you can obtain from the "view page source" command on any browser).

If you are not currently collecting research on your Website visitors and customers, now is the time to develop a short survey so that you can begin to better understand who you are serving – including how they found your Website and why they chose your services over the competition. Also install Google Analytics on your site so you can gain a better understanding of how your visitors find, navigate, and use your site.

2. Develop or Enhance Your Site for National SEO

The three most important things you can – and should – do to enhance your overall rankings deal with metadata, site navigation, and sitemaps.

Metadata -- including page titles, descriptions, and keywords (keyword phrases) – are essential shortcuts that search engines and directories use to understand your Website. While metadata is not as essential as it used to be, it's still an important element of good SEO. All three elements should be unique and descriptive to **each** page of your site. You can certainly brand your site using your company name here, but you'll also want to pull in the specific content of each page.

- -- Your title should generally be about no more than 60 characters (including spaces).
- --Your description no more than about 150 characters (including spaces).
- -- Your keywords should no more than about 600 characters, with no keyword or keyword combination repeated more than five times.

The site navigation you employ can actually affect how the search engines spider (visit and record) your site. Using frames, image maps, pulldown menus, Flash, or deep subdirectories as part of your navigation strategy can cause many search engine spiders to become confused or stuck. The solution is to keep your navigation as simple and streamlined as possible.

The other important SEO element is developing and publishing at least one sitemap, though consider publishing two – one for the search-engine spiders and one for your visitors. The search-engine sitemap can be easily generated using a free or inexpensive program that produces a file called sitemap.xml, which you then place in your Web directory. An HTML sitemap helps your visitors find exactly what they seek – and it, too, is a tool for search-engine spiders (which follow the links within your site).

3. Create a National Advertising and Promotional Strategy

Whether you have a new business or simply operate in a competitive market space, you need an advertising and promotion strategy that will help drive visitors to your site.

The first step is developing a budget. Among the many ways to develop your budget, the best is simply to allocate a percentage of your total revenues for advertising and promotion.

The second step is deciding how to spend the promotion budget. Once you have an idea of how much money you can invest – and it is an investment when spent wisely – experiment with the best methods to reach your target audience with a call to action to your site. Larger companies can consider both traditional and Web-based promotional methods, while smaller businesses should probably stick to Web-based tools – including text ads (such as Google Adsense), contextual ads (such as Kontera), and banner ads (such as Burst Media).

The final step is evaluating your promotion strategies and changing and correcting them as needed as you strive toward finding the ideal mix for your business.

4. Cultivate a National Linking Campaign

It's essential for all Websites to plan and execute a strategy for developing high-quality inbound and outbound links. Inbound links have the potential of driving traffic to your site, while outbound links assist your visitors in finding complementary sites you endorse – and both types of links can potentially increase your site's reputation and ranking with search engines.

Quality inbound organic links – those that occur with no reciprocal link strings – are the best types of links. These links typically come about from the strong content on your site (see the next section for improving your content); someone finds your site and likes the content so much that s/he provides a link to it from a Website or blog s/he publishes.

Inbound links also come from search engine and directory listings, so if you have not done so – or done so for your entire site (including new content-rich pages as you develop them) – submit your site to the major search engines and directories. Do not waste your time submitting your site to the thousands of "free-for-all" directories – sites that will automatically link to your site, but with a link that has no real value.

The next best in-bound links come from reciprocal links – from quality sites, not from link farms or directories that automatically link to each other's sites. As you develop your linking strategy, focus on sites that (ideally) have at least a PageRank of 4. Email the site's owner and suggest mutual linking – or even better, link to the site first and then email the owner with the URL of the link and requesting a reciprocal link.

A final source of quality inbound links is through the development (or use of) an affiliate program – where other Websites (your affiliates) provide multiple links to your site in return for a small percentage of any sales resulting from those links.

Do provide links to other useful sites – including internal links to other pertinent areas of your site – but remember to keep the number of links on a page to fewer than 100.

5. Produce Web Content That Drives Visitors to Your Site

You may have heard the phrase that content is king and considered it passé, but this axiom is still true today – content drives traffic and raises search engine-rankings.

No matter what your business, you should be able to develop any number of ideas for articles, tutorials, tips – such as how-to's, insider's guides, or top 10 lists. The idea is to create content that is unique, valuable, and useful to your readers – and, of course, that can also help lead them to purchasing your goods or services. One warning here: do not make the articles just an obvious sales pitch for your products or services; the content has to be useful to readers. Once you create and publish your content, remember to submit the page(s) to key search engines.

But don't stop with just adding content to your site. Consider submitting articles to one or more of the article directories – with a bio blurb that has links back to your company site. You might also consider becoming an expert for Yahoo Answers or some other site – again, sharing your expertise while providing a link back to your company site. If your industry's professional association has a Website or newsletter, consider providing content for it occasionally – or permitting them to reprint a piece of content from your site.

Finally, you might consider starting a blog that you or your employees contribute content to regularly. The trick here is maintaining it and frequently adding relevant content.

6. Use Networking That Drives Traffic to Your Site

Building relationships helps business. The more people who are aware of your expertise and products and services, the more business that may be indirectly sent your way through informal – or formal – recommendations.

Become a member of your industry's professional organization(s).

Build your professional network through LinkedIn and industry networking sites. Follow key industry movers and shakers – and cultivate your own follower's – using Twitter.

Contribute to industry blogs – providing valuable information in response to a posting and/or guest-writing blog entries.

Use other social-networking and bookmarking sites to showcase your expertise and build relationships.

7. Facilitate Customer/Client Actions That Deliver Results

One of the most powerful tools – if not the most powerful tool – in marketing is word-of-mouth (WOM), which deals with what people are saying about your products or services. Positive comments can send your sales skyrocketing while negative remarks can deeply cut sales.

Your goal should be to find and cultivate the true believers of your products or services – the evangelists, who given the chance, will sing your praises far and wide.

Collect testimonials and publish them prominently on your Website. Surveys show that the testimonials section is one of the first sections prospective customers visit when evaluating a new business.

Develop a social linking strategy to allow your users to bookmark and share your site with their friends. A popular tool for assisting smaller individuals and businesses is AddThis.com.

8. Build a Direct Marketing Campaign

An inexpensive and cost-effective method for keeping your name in the minds of your current and former clients – without spending massive amounts on advertising – is developing a direct-marketing campaign.

A direct-marketing campaign can comprise something as simple as an email or blog entry reminding and updating information on your services to something more elaborate, such as a weekly or monthly informative e-newsletter or sales flyer.

A direct-marketing campaign requires you develop and maintain an email database of all your prospective, current, and past clients – which you can easily collect when a visitor submits a request for more information or makes a purchase.

One warning: guard the privacy of your list, do not ever sell your list, and be very careful of not spamming your list with too many messages.

9. Utilize the Power of Publicity and the Media

Publicity is about receiving positive news coverage about yourself, your products, or your business. While the media may find you on their own, typically publicity is the result of a concentrated public-relations effort on your part to build connections with the local media.

Develop a list of reporters and editors who write about business – or your area of specialty – and let them know of your availability to serve as an expert source on relevant stories. Cultivate relationships by commenting on some of their previously published stories.

Join Websites such as HARO (Help a Reporter Out) http://www.helpareporter.com/ -- or PitchRate.com, which list queries from reporters seeking sources for stories. If your expertise matches what the journalist is seeking, you'll end up getting some good exposure for yourself and your business.

Create, publish, and email news releases. Some experts suggest publishing at least one news release monthly. Use the news release to announce newsworthy information about new services, products, or employees. While there is an art to writing media releases – and you can certainly hire a public-relations firm or publicist – you can learn how to write quality releases, such as with this article: A How-To Guide for Writing Successful News Releases -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/prhowto.html.

Once the release is created, email it to your media list, publish it on your site (and submit the page to search engines), submit it to one or more news-release Websites, post a link to it on your blog, and send a tweet about it on Twitter.

10. Monitor Marketing Efforts and Make Necessary Adjustments

Once you have implemented the previous nine steps, laying the foundation for making a giant leap in the awareness and ranking of your Website and increasing the number of visitors to your site, your work is not done.

This last strategy is one that is often overlooked or ignored, which unfortunately can lead to wasted efforts and declining results. While the bulk of the time and effort you commit to the marketing of your site lies in the first nine strategies, you must implement this strategy so that you can evaluate the performance of the others.

At some regular interval – say every six months – evaluate how each of the nine strategies is working for you and make necessary adjustments and corrections to improve your performance – or to make changes necessitated by the changing landscape of your business, your competitors, and the world.

Local Web Marketing and SEO Strategies

1. Research Local Competitors and Target Audience

Marketing intelligence and market research are critical to your success. Business owners must understand their primary and secondary competitors, as well as have a clear picture of their target audience.

Grab the local phone book, Pennysaver, chamber of commerce listing, and any other directory of local businesses. Review ads and offerings. Visit their Websites if they have one. Gather competitive information.

If you are not currently collecting research on your drop-in and local customers, now is the time to develop a short survey so that you can begin to better understand who you are serving – including how they found your business and why they chose your services over the competition.

2. Develop or Enhance Your Site for Local SEO

The two most important things you can – and should – do to enhance your ability to be found by local customers searching the Web deal with metadata and "local" business Websites, such as Google Maps, Yahoo! Local, and MerchantCircle.

Assuming you are trying to attract customers from within a certain geographic range, you'll want to include the names of the towns, counties, and neighborhoods you serve in your metadata. Your potential customers and clients are likely to use a search engine in the way phone books were used in the past – searching using both a geographic and product/service keyword, such as "Kettle Falls electrician" or "Kettle Falls, WA, electrician." Use all variations of the names and spelling of your geographic niche – keeping in mind that typical customers will not travel more than 20-30 miles for most goods and services.

The other key local SEO tool for your business is submitting your location to Websites that feature local business.

For Google Maps, it's as simple as going to Google Maps -- http://maps.google.com/ -- and clicking "put business on Google Maps." You can add and edit your listing – including contact information, pictures, payment options, coupons, and more. You'll also be able to track visitors, and creating this tool for your business may also help enhance your site listing under regular search results. This free tool is a must-have for any business that attracts local and walk-in customers.

For Yahoo! Local, you have a few options, but start at Yahoo! Local -- http://local.yahoo.com/ -- scrolling to the bottom of the page and clicking on "add a business." Basic listings are free, but you can also upgrade (for a monthly fee) to either an enhanced listing (including company logo and photos) or featured listing (which includes premium placement and greater exposure for your business).

For MerchantCircle.com, all you need to do is find and "claim" your business using your company's telephone number. Once you register with the site, you can complete your free listing and decide on whether you want to pursue premium options, including assisting you with blog creation and search-engine advertising. MechantCircle.com seeks to replace the phone book listings, stating this on their site: "We think the yellow pages are feeble relics of the rotary phone era, ineffective and unworthy of their outrageous prices."

3. Create a Local Advertising and Promotional Strategy

It is sometimes much easier to develop a strong promotional strategy when your customers all live in a specific geographic market.

The first step is developing a budget. Among the many ways to develop your budget, the best is simply to allocate a percentage of your total revenues for advertising and promotion.

The second step is deciding how to spend the promotion budget. Once you have an idea of how much money you can invest – and it is an investment when spent wisely – experiment with the best methods to reach your target audience with a call to action to your visit your business.

Some options for local advertising include: billboards, radio, newspapers, Pennysavers, sponsorships, and phonebooks. Part of your audience research should examine the media and information-gathering habits of your prospective customers so that you can target them in the places they are likely to look for a company or service to solve their problem. (One hint: whenever possible avoid yellow page advertising, as many, many businesses relate horrible stories of misquoted, over-priced, and sometimes incorrectly printed ads that go unresolved for an entire year until the next edition is published.)

Finally, to help stretch your marketing budget further, consider working with a non-competing local business or two for joint promotions and shared advertising.

4. Cultivate a Local Linking Campaign

It's essential for all Websites to plan and execute a strategy for developing high-quality inbound and outbound links. Inbound links have the potential of driving traffic to your site, while outbound links assist your visitors in finding complementary sites you endorse – and both types of links can increase your site's reputation and ranking with search engines.

Quality inbound organic links – that occur with no reciprocal link strings – are the best types of links. These links typically come about from the strong content on your site (see the next section for improving your content); someone finds your site and likes the content so much that s/he provides a link to it from a Website s/he publishes.

Request inbound links to your site from local Websites, such as libraries, schools, community organizations, and chambers of commerce. Request reciprocal links from non-competing local businesses by emailing the site's owner and suggesting mutual linking – or even better, linking to the site first and then emailing the owner with the URL of the link and requesting a reciprocal link.

Do provide links to other useful sites – including internal links to other pertinent areas of your site – but remember to keep the number of links on a page to fewer than 100.

5. Produce Localized Content That Drives Visitors to Your Location

You may have heard the phrase that content is king and considered it passé, but this axiom is still true today – content drives traffic and raises search engine rankings.

At the local level, the content you develop is less about what is published on your site and more about what is disseminated to the local community – and to your target market.

Approach the local media – nearby newspapers (daily or weekly) and radio stations – and make a pitch for providing content. You could write a regular column for the newspaper, perhaps provide expert advice for radio listeners during a general talk show – or your own show, or produce podcasts for distribution on local media and Internet radio Websites.

Content can also be in the form of local workshops or presentations you deliver at the library or to one or more community organizations.

6. Use Networking That Drives Traffic to Your Site

Building relationships helps business. The more people who are aware of your expertise and products and services, the more business that may be indirectly sent your way through informal – or formal – recommendations.

Join your community's chamber of commerce and other business or economic boards and organizations. Join advocacy groups that relate to your business and consider board memberships on local banks or charitable organizations.

Finally, join or start a networking club for local small businesses. The idea of these clubs and organizations is to share information, ideas, and referrals.

7. Facilitate Customer/Client Actions That Deliver Results

One of the most powerful tools – if not the most powerful tool – in marketing is word-of-mouth (WOM), which deals with what people are saying about your products or services. Positive comments can send your sales skyrocketing while negative remarks can deeply cut sales.

Your goal should be to find and cultivate the true believers of your products or services – the evangelists, who given the chance, will sing your praises far and wide.

Collect testimonials and use the best on all your marketing literature. Ask your satisfied customers for referrals (possibly in return for promotional items or discounts on future purchases).

8. Build a Direct Marketing Campaign

An inexpensive and cost-effective method for keeping your name in the minds of your current and former clients – without spending massive amounts on advertising – is developing a direct-marketing campaign.

A direct-marketing campaign can be something as simple as a twice-yearly postcard or letter reminding and updating information on your services to something more elaborate, such as an informative newsletter or sales flyer.

A direct-marketing campaign requires you develop and maintain a database of all your prospective, current, and past clients. You can also buy "lists" from marketing companies of individuals who are a close match to your target market, but go into these purchases only after researching the reputation of the company selling you the contact information.

Keep in mind that many consumers consider direct mailing to be junk mail – and that your message may never get a chance to be read – but the tool can be especially helpful as reminders for annual check-ups, oil changes, and the like.

9. Utilize the Power of Publicity and the Media

Publicity is about receiving positive news coverage about yourself, your products, or your business. While the media may find you on their own, typically publicity is the result of a concentrated public relations effort on your part to build connections with the local media.

Develop a list of local reporters and editors who write about business – or your area of specialty – and let them know of your availability to serve as an expert source on relevant stories.

You should also send out regular media releases that announce newsworthy information about new services, products, or employees. While there is an art to writing media releases – and you can certainly hire a public relations firm or publicist – you can learn how to write quality releases, such as with this article:

10. Monitor Marketing Efforts and Make Necessary Adjustments

Once you have implemented the previous nine steps, laying the foundation for making a giant leap in the awareness and ranking of your Website and increasing the number of visitors to your site, your work is not done.

This last strategy is one that is often overlooked or ignored, which unfortunately can lead to wasted efforts and declining results. While the bulk of the time and effort you commit to the marketing of your site lies in the first nine strategies, you must implement this strategy so that you can evaluate the performance of the others.

At some regular interval – say every six months – evaluate how each of the nine strategies is working for you and make necessary adjustments and corrections to improve your performance – or to make changes necessitated by the changing landscape of your business, your competitors, and the world.

Final Thoughts

While the focus of this white paper is on marketing and SEO strategies for driving visitors to your Website, there are also some important Web publishing techniques that can affect your search engine rankings and level of site traffic. While beyond the scope of this while paper, these issues include things like the naming of file names for Web pages and how you use and name images and graphic files. To assist readers in understanding these Web publishing issues, you'll find a list of helpful articles and resources to help you enhance both your site as well as your SEO and marketing efforts.

One final important item to consider that is beyond the scope of this white paper is understanding and improving upon your conversion ratio. While driving targeted traffic to your local office and/or Website is extremely important, it's equally important to learn the best strategies for converting visitors and browsers into paying customers and clients. Conversion rates are influenced by a number of items, including site appearance and navigation, services/benefits offered, pricing options, customer service availability, marketing pitch (including your call to action), satisfaction guarantee, and ease of purchase.

Website Marketing and SEO Tools, Articles, and eBooks

Sadly, there are many useless, gimmicky, and downright bad SEO and marketing sites on the Web. These sites are like weeds – partially blocking out the results of better sites – and can lead unsuspecting Website owners down a path of Black-Hat SEO strategies that can result in your site being banished from the search engines.

The sites that follow all provide quality marketing and SEO tools, information, and resources. The list is not exhaustive by any means, but presented as some of the best of the best – resources you can use to empower your SEO and marketing strategies.

EnhanceMyMarketing.com Marketing and SEO Tools

EnhanceMyMarketing.com: Best Web Publishing and SEO Practices -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/successful-website-criteria.html

EnhanceMyMarketing.com: Re-Develop a Marketing-Driven Site -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/improve-website.html

EnhanceMyMarketing.com: SEO Primer for Enhancing Websites -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/SEO-primer.html

EnhanceMyMarketing.com: Starting a Small-Business Website -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/starting-business-Website.html

EnhanceMyMarketing.com: Top SEO and Web Publishing Mistakes -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/SEO-Web-publishing-mistakes.html

EnhanceMyMarketing.com: Website Marketing and SEO Glossary -- http://www.enhancemymarketing.com/SEO-Website-marketing-glossary.html

Other Excellent Marketing and SEO Tools:

Search Engine Optimization Tools from RankingToday.com -- http://www.rankingtoday.com/seo/

SEO Tools from SEOChat.com -- http://www.seochat.com/seo-tools/

SEO Tools from webconfs.com -- http://www.webconfs.com/

SEO Tools from seomoz.org -- http://www.seomoz.org/tools

Free SEO Tools from SEOToolSet -- http://www.seotoolset.com/tools/free tools.html

Marketing Ideas for Small Businesses from businessknowhow.com - http://www.businessknowhow.com/marketing/index.htm

Marketing Tools from About.com -- http://marketing.about.com/

Small Business Marketing Tips from Inc. -- http://www.inc.com/guides/marketing/

Internet Marketing Tips for Small Business from the Internet Digest -- http://www.theinternetdigest.net/

Marketing Tips from 5MinBusiness -- http://www.5min.com/Category/Business/Marketing

Social Media, Marketing, PR from TheFutureBuzz -- http://thefuturebuzz.com/

The Secrets of Marketing in a Web 2.0 World from the Wall Street Journal -- http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122884677205091919.html

Personal Branding & Career Self-Marketing Tools for Job-Seekers and Career Activists from Quintessential Careers -- http://www.quintcareers.com/branding_self-marketing.html

Small Business Marketing Advice from Small Business Branding -- http://www.smallbusinessbranding.com/

Personal Branding Blog from Dan Schawbel -- http://personalbrandingblog.com/

Google's Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide -- www.google.com/webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf

Webmaster Tools from Google -- www.google.com/webmasters/tools/

XML Sitemap Generator -- http://www.xml-sitemaps.com/

SiteProNews -- http://www.sitepronews.com/