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It pays to think like a marketer
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Business to Business

Many Web projects start with a simple objective - build a Web site that meets all corporate requirements and make it fast, user friendly and aesthetically appealing.

With this mandate, the development team sets off to draft a project plan, lay out the information architecture and get the graphic artist working on the look. Meanwhile, the HTMLers and back-end programmers get to work programming the site. Rarely is a thought given in this process to the issue of search engines.

If you're one of these people, heads up: marketing departments throughout the world are learning about the power of Search Engine Marketing, known in the industry as SEM. They even have conferences dedicated to the topic of SEM like the recent Search Engine Strategies this past March in Boston. During this conference, marketing types from all over the world were learning all the little tricks to help them get their Web sites listed higher in search engines.

You may be asking yourself, "So what does that have to with me, a Web slinger type?"

While you might have been busy discussing the benefits of XHMTL over HTML, or JSP versus ASP, conference attendees were learning about paid inclusions, sponsorship opportunities and, best of all, how to get better listing for free by designing the Web site to be more search engine-friendly

While I've always thought about search engine optimization in the sites I build for clients, it never occurred to me that this was its own industry, or that many marketing departments have woken up and seen the opportunity that lies in search engines. Take some advice from me: before your marketing department starts knocking down your door wanting to talk about your site and search engine placement, be proactive and tackle a few of the little things on your own. Specifically, examine your Web site and check for the following:

That every page has a meta title tag and that the title makes sense for the page content. Page titles should not be the name of your company, but should relate to the information on the page. For example, if you have a page describing a widget, the page title should be Widget Description and not Company XYZ (all search engines use this meta tag).

That the keywords meta tag has also been utilized. While not all search engines use this tag in their evaluation, some do, so why waste an opportunity? Once again, the key words should be descriptive of what's on the specific page.

That each page is using the meta description tag. Again, this needs to reflect the content of the page.

Search engines use these meta tags in addition to the page content to form word density, a major component in ranking high in search engines.

After checking these three little things, be proactive and approach the marketing department (before they approach you) and ask if the titles, keywords and descriptions are appropriate for what potential customers would be entering into search engines to find the products or services your company offers. If the existing programming of your site doesn't allow for unique information on each page, let the marketing people know about this before they ask for it. Be prepared to give a time estimate and cost to modify the site. You can still be effective with static titles etc., but you need to be more creative with the descriptions.

Other things you can do help your company get better ranking include:

Examine the directory structure - all too often programmers get cryptic in their naming conventions. Name the site's directories in clear and meaningful ways. If you have all your widget product information in a directory currently called "widgprodinfo" change it to "widget-product-information." This has two benefits: better word density for the search engines and an easier to understand information architecture for everyone.

Apply the above point to the file naming convention. Remember to use "-" instead of spaces. Most search engines hate spaces in file names

While there are other things that developers can use to help increase the word density of key words or phrases, tackling the few that have already been mentioned will go a long way in improving search engine ranking.

And by being proactive with the marketing department, you can become their hero instead of their scapegoat.

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