

# Boosting Your Search Engine Rankings

Getting to the bottom of getting to the top.

By Phil Sasso



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**W**ant to know how to appear on the top of search listings like Google, Yahoo and MSN? Interested in the latest tricks of the trade of becoming the No. 1 listing under “Restyling Shop”?

I’ll let you in on a little secret: Everyone reading this column would like to be the first listing, too. And only one business can be No. 1.

The first step in the search engine optimization process is that you need to be realistic. Top Google rankings can be a powerful marketing tool, but don’t mortgage your shop with the hopes that a No. 1 ranking can make you a millionaire. Investing thousands in getting to the top of the most popular search engines is no guarantee you’ll earn back that investment.

There are two ways to get top listing on search engines. One is to bid on keywords and phrases and become a search “sponsor.” That’s called search engine marketing. Sponsors are the ads you see in the colored boxes when you do a search. Those advertisers don’t pay for their ad to show, but they pay every time someone clicks on their ad. Google Adwords, for instance, can cost anywhere from a nickel to \$100 per click-through.

The other way to get your site listed near the top is called search engine optimization. SEO is basically structuring your site so that it appears “organically” or free at the top of the search engines. There are firms that provide SEO services, but let me warn you: they can be expensive and often fall short in delivering on their promises.

For example, a few months ago a client called to ask me to cancel his \$50-a-month Google Adwords campaign. I asked

if it wasn't generating business anymore. He said he had signed a contract with a "SEO consultant" who promised him a first-page ranking for only \$199 a month. Now his business was appearing on the first page of Google and he didn't need to advertise anymore. I Googled the phrase he was promised top ranking for: "shuttle bus Chicago." Sure enough, a special web page this SEO firm designed came up as No. 7—four entries behind the No. 3 spot I had secured for my client's site for no monthly fee.

(As I write this I felt compelled to check the client's ranking again. Today my client was in the No. 4 spot for that phrase and No. 1 for "Chicago shuttle bus." I'm not saying that to brag. I'm saying that to point out that top rankings can change quickly. I didn't use any sneaky or unethical tricks. My team just created a very simple web site using some basic SEO strategies.)

So, if you get a call from a "SEO consultant" who promises you top rankings, take it with a grain of salt. *No one* can guarantee you the No. 1 spot in the natural results. That's mostly because the No. 1 spot is a moving target. Search engines are constantly changing their algorithms (the equation they use to determine search ranking) to keep the playing field level. Their goal is to produce the best possible results for searchers while weeding out web sites using underhanded tactics.

SEM and SEO are two very different beasts. So, I'll focus on SEO this column and deal with SEM at another time. SEO has some unique benefits. One is that people most often will choose the "organic" listing before they'll click on a "sponsor" link. Another is that it is virtually free. I say virtually, because someone still has to take the time and effort to optimize your site and that has a cost attached—even if it's just opportunity cost.

As I outline my SEO tips, I'll try to focus on the consistent basics, and avoid discussing trends that could be over by tomorrow. I'll also focus most of my attention on what's working on the undisputed leader, Google, and assume the same tactics will produce similar results on other search engines.

### **Search Terms**

The first step is to figure out what words your prospects are searching for. Often restyling shop owners will make a list of words and phrases they think customers would search for: like "Restyling Shop." Unfortunately your customers and prospects may not be thinking in the same terms you are.

A better technique than guessing is to research what prospects actually are searching. Google keywords is a handy online tool that you can use to research search terms to determine what prospects are actually typing in. Google won't tell you how many people are using a word or phrase but will give you a bar showing relative popularity and related words and phrases. Yahoo has a similar tool.

For instance when I researched *restyling shop* I found that last month, virtually no one used that phrase. More people searched for *auto restyling*. What I found still more interesting is that even more people searched for *automotive accesories* (yes, misspelled).

### **Variations**

That leads me to another point: try to think about variations in phrases as well, including common misspellings. For instance if you want to optimize your site for *truck hitch* also consider including *truck hitches* and common misspelling like *truck hiches*.

### **Long Tails**

A *long tail* search is a long, very specific search term. I like long-tail search phrases because they reduce the number of sites you're competing with, and usually connect more with prospects that are ready to buy. For example, as I write this, if you wanted to get the top spot for *automotive restyling* on Google you'd be competing against about 186,000 web pages.

However, if you wanted the top spot for *Omaha automotive restyling* you would only be competing against about 10,000 sites. By focusing geographically, not only do you reduce your competition, you are also better fit for your prospect's needs. In this case, you aren't interested in customers

in Boca Raton, and your prospects aren't interested in shops in Florida either.

By refocusing your keyword efforts even more to *truck bed rails Omaha* you can reduce the number of competing pages to less than 400. And by adding a specific brand name, like Raptor, you can get the list down to about 100 competing pages.

Now that you researched the words and phrase that prospects are searching, you'll want to make sure those words are in the headers, body and metatags of your site. But be careful not to overdo it. Search engines will penalize you for overusing words to try to trick them. In fact, some *black hat* tricks, like repeating words in invisible text, have actually got sites blackballed!

### **Popularity**

Links to your site are a powerful part of SEO—but not just links from any site. The better the quality of links to your site, the higher you'll rank. For instance a link from General Motors' web site will get you better page ranking than a link from a "link farm" that's only purpose is to link to sites for a fee.

To find out the page ranking of sites—as well as your own—download the Google Toolbar. Among the tools is a page rank indicator. It ranks sites on a scale of one to ten. As you might expect, Google's site ranks 10/10 and my personal site ([www.philsasso.com](http://www.philsasso.com)) ranks 0/10! (Note to self: work on that!)

### **Recency**

Keeping the information on your site current is not just important in SEO, it's even more important in making your site useful to your customers. I suggest having someone on your staff responsible for updating your site at least monthly with news and information including upcoming events, new products and sales.

The best thing about studying SEO is that everything is rather transparent. If you want to know what a top site is doing, you just need to look at it. In fact, when I'm working for a client I often study high-ranking competitors' sites to determine what they are doing right. In my mind it's

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like a football player viewing game footage of the competing team before the game.

Now, before you roll up your sleeves and start to put this ideas to use, ask yourself one question: what do you really want to do with your time? Would you like to invest hours optimizing your web site or would you rather be restyling that Dodge out back?

I've warned you to avoid expensive SEO firms that charge hefty fees and promise you the moon. But that doesn't mean I

expect you to do this yourself. There are a lot of firms out there that are trustworthy. Chances are the company that built your web site can help you implement most of the simple tips I outline here.

The key to success is to remember that you won't jump to top rankings immediately. It took months for my shuttle bus client to get to the No. 1 spot. And in more competitive categories it could take as long as a year just to get anywhere on the first page. Be patient.

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