

Drawing In More Customers By Improving Your Search Engine Ranking

How **Google**, **Yahoo** and **Bing** Can Generate More Sales For Your Shop

By Phil Sasso

They say the three most important things in real estate are: location, location, location. The same is true in your Internet search engine rankings. Web sites listed on the first page of Google get much more business than those on page two or three.

Want to know how to appear on the top of search engine listings like Google, Yahoo and Bing for “Service Station,” “Garage” or “Automotive Repair?” I’ll let you in on a little secret: Everyone reading this article would like to be the first listing, too.

And only one business can be number one.

The first step in getting to the top of search engines is to set a realistic goal. Top Google rankings can be a powerful marketing tool, but don’t mortgage your shop with the hopes that a number one 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.

Marketing vs. Optimization

There are two ways to get top listing on search engines: Search Engine Marketing (SEM) and Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

SEM is basically buying ads on Search Engines like Google or Bing. You do that by bidding on keywords and phrases. Those ads are the listings in the box at the top when you do a search. Search Engine advertisers don’t pay for their ad to show up. They only pay when someone clicks on the ad. Google Adwords, for instance, can cost anywhere from a 10 cents to \$100 per click-through.

SEO, on the other hand, is basically structuring your site so that it appears “organically,” or free, at the top of the search engines. There are many firms that specialize in providing SEO services. Unfortunately, their services can cost more than SEM and often fall short in delivering on their promises.

Beware SEO Scams

A few years ago a client called to ask me to cancel his Google Adwords campaign. I asked if it wasn’t generating business anymore. He said he didn’t need it any longer. He had signed a contract with a “SEO consultant” who promised him a

first-page ranking for only \$199 a month. Now, he didn’t need Adwords anymore.

So, 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 in the number seven spot — four entries *behind* the number three spot I had secured for my client’s site for no monthly fee. I didn’t use any sneaky or unethical tricks. We just designed a very simple Web site using some basic SEO strategies. As I write this I felt compelled to check the ranking. Sure enough, he’s still among the top five “organic” listings. I don’t say that to brag. But it’s important to point out that top rankings can and do fluctuate.

Think Strategically

Take it with a grain of salt if an “SEO strategist” promised you top ranking. No one can guarantee you any ranking. That’s because top ranking is a moving target. Even Google will tell you that every month they change their algorithm (the equation they use to determine search ranking). Google does that 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.

SEO has some unique benefits. One is that people will most often choose the “organic” listing before they’ll click on a “sponsor” link. But, although SEO seems free, someone still has to take the time and effort to optimize your site. That’s either you or someone you pay. I suggest a mix of both SEO and SEM to give you the best of both worlds. Today, I’ll give you some simple SEO strategies to improve your rankings. I’ll focus on the consistent basics, and try to avoid trends that could be over tomorrow. I’ll also focus on what’s working on the undisputed leader, Google. The same tactics will produce similar results on other search engines.

Choose Your Words Carefully:

The first step is to figure out what words or phrases your prospects use when looking for a garage or service station.

Often shop owners will use words and phrases they think customers would search for, like “service station.” Unfortunately your customers and prospects may not be thinking in the same terms you do. A better technique than guessing

is to research what prospects actually are searching. Google Keyword Tool is a handy online to research the search terms people are actually using.

Using Long Tails:

I like using long tail phrases. A long tail is, as the name suggests, a long and specific search term. I recommend long-tail search phrases because they usually connect with prospects that are in buying mode. For example, as I write this, if you wanted to get the top spot for “garage” on Google you’d be competing against about 331 million Web pages (“service station” gets you down to 115 million).

But no one is going to just type in “service station,” they are going to type in a location which will narrow the playing field. For example, “service station Toronto” which pulled 466,000 Web pages; “Service station Don Mills” reduces that to 268,000 pages and “Mercedes service station Don Mills” cut that number to 33,800 competing Web pages.

I’m sure you see where I’m going with this. By focusing geographically, not only do you reduce your competition, you are also a better fit for your prospective customer’s needs. In this case, you aren’t interested in customers in Vancouver, and your prospective customers aren’t interested in service stations in British Columbia.

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.

Being Popular:

Another factor Google uses in their algorithm is popularity — that’s measured by links for your site from others. Links 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” like many SEO firms use.

To determine the quality of a site, Google uses a concept called Page Rank. To find out the Page Rank of various Web 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 website (www.philsasso.com) ranks 0/10. (Note to self: work on that.)

The best way to boost your popularity is to get links to your site from any other business or organization that you are affiliated with.

There’s Nothing Worse Than Old News

Keeping the information on your site current is very 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 information including sales promotions, new services and other news.

Now, before you roll up your sleeves and start to put these 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 working on that Dodge out back? I think it’s best to stick to what you do best and like best.

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 number one spot. And in more competitive categories it could take as long as a year just to get anywhere on the first page. Be patient. **SSGM**

Scan Me!



This is a QR Code ... the smart phone scannable code used by companies like Air Canada, PR Newswire and the New York Times to generate reader interest and link print copy to the Internet. Just use one of many free reader apps on any smart phone platform, including i-phone, BlackBerry and Android, then click. **SSGM** has full QR-capability ... we can create codes, host landing pages, track usage and create QR-unique ad and advertorial content just for smart phone users ... an excellent way to reach the tech-savvy and early adopter demographic. **SSGM** can create QR codes which can be positioned like display advertising, within editorial copy or added to your existing ad creative ... as well as custom products like mailers, pressure sensitive labels and promotional literature.

Call Marc Gadbois, Publisher, SSGM at 416-510-6776 or marc@ssgm.com for more details



Phil Sasso is the president of Sasso Marketing (sassomarketing.com), an automotive after-market advertising, public relations and Internet services agency. He’s also a speaker and strategist. Sign up for his free weekly marketing tip email at philsasso.com/blog.