Ralph F. Wilson

is the author/editor of *Web Marketing Today*, which *Business Week* called 'bar none the best e-commerce resource out there', as well as of numerous books on a variety of web marketing topics. Ralph Wilson holds a DMin from Fuller Theological Seminary.

James B. Pettijohn

is the author of numerous academic journal papers dealing with web marketing and the use of the internet in management education. James Pettijohn holds a PhD in business administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Search engine optimisation: A primer on outsourcing key tasks

Ralph F. Wilson and James B. Pettijohn

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the basics of search engine optimisation (SEO) and is the third in a series of SEO primers published in this Journal by the authors. The paper discusses the topic of outsourcing SEO, particularly outsourcing the tasks of obtaining incoming links to the site in question and optimising a select group of the site's pages on certain keywords. Its content, which includes questions to ask when interviewing an SEO vendor and a listing of sources of information on various SEO-related topics, should be applicable both to the online marketer and to those who teach e-marketing.

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Introduction

Paid advertising through pay-per-click (PPC) advertisements on search engines can be quite effective, yet it also can be quite costly. Given the potential for a high cost, it is important for online marketers to understand how they can increase their site's ranking in 'natural' or 'organic', unpaid search results. In other words, it is important that they understand the importance of search engine optimisation (SEO). SEO can result in substantial ad spend savings, while at the same time serving to enhance PPC ad campaign results.

For those who practise or teach e-marketing, comprehending search engine ranking can often seem like trying to see a vehicle approaching in a dust storm. Just when the observer believes (s)he is starting to comprehend the fundamentals, the wind gusts, what one is looking at changes and the vehicle the onlooker thought was there vanishes within the dust cloud. When it comes to search engine rankings, one causal factor behind the comprehension block is the fact that the rankings business continues to change. Those activities that several years ago were viewed as best practices can today land a website on some search engines' blacklists.¹

Despite (or perhaps because of) this ever-changing landscape, SEO remains a very important topic in the field of e-marketing. Therefore, after summarising the fundamentals of search engine rankings and

James B. Pettijohn
Department of Finance
and General Business
Missouri State University
901 S. National
Springfield
MO 65804, USA
Tel: +1 417 836 6174
Fax: +1 417 836 6224
E-mail: JamesPettijohn@
MissouriState.edu

SEO, this paper will discuss the topic of outsourcing SEO. Because Google dominates the search engine market with a 66.4 per cent share, this paper primarily focuses on Google's approach to ranking.² This discussion draws extensively from the experiences of one of the authors as an e-commerce consultant and publisher, and as an author of numerous books dealing with e-marketing, including one focusing on SEO. It also capitalises on the lessons he has learned and the knowledge he has accumulated in 14 years as manager of a commercial website. In addition, the content draws on the second author's decade of experience teaching and researching in the field of e-business.

**Past SEO tactics
may be viewed as
spamming today**

The basics of search rankings

In the early days of the internet, a site's ranking was entirely based on the words and HTML code found on its webpages. Thus, all online marketers had to do was repeat a keyword dozens of times on their webpages, and the pages would rise to the top of the rankings. The world of search is different today, however, and such practices are viewed as a type of spamming, a type that can result in a website being penalised regarding its rank in search results or being totally removed from a search engine's index.

Google made another change in the rules of the search engine game several years ago when it introduced another set of factors (in addition to keyword density) into its ranking algorithm: the quantity, quality and context of *incoming* links to a website. The result of this change is that linkages to a particular website have a *very* significant impact on how high it is ranked with respect to a particular keyword. Thus, today the search engine ranking of a webpage is based on two primary factors.

**The search engine
ranking of a webpage
is based on two
primary factors**

1. The keywords on the page: the more focused and clear the content is on the webpage, the greater the chances are of ranking high for the main keywords on the page.
2. The pattern of links to the website: that is, the quantity, quality and context of incoming links to the site's domain name.

Google employs a complex, proprietary algorithm based on these two primary factors (together with a few of less importance) to decide which sites rank high for any given keyword search. Google explains the process in the following manner:

'PageRank (ie the software behind Google's ranking technology) performs an objective measurement of the importance of web pages by solving an equation of more than 500 million variables and 2 billion terms. Instead of counting direct links, PageRank interprets a link from Page A to Page B as a vote for Page B by Page A. PageRank then assesses a page's importance by the number of votes it receives. PageRank also considers the importance of each page that casts a vote, as votes from some pages are considered to have greater value, thus giving the linked page greater value. Important pages receive a higher PageRank and appear at the top of the search results.'

Google's technology uses the collective intelligence of the web to determine a page's importance. There is no human involvement or manipulation of results ...'.

'Google's search engine also analyzes page content (through a process Google calls "Hypertext Matching Analysis"). However, instead of simply scanning for page-based text (which can be manipulated by site publishers through meta-tags), Google's technology analyzes the full content of a page and factors in fonts, subdivisions and the precise location of each word. Google also analyzes the content of neighboring web pages to ensure the results returned are the most relevant to a user's query'.³

Steps 1–4 should be completed by an in-house webmaster or by a website designer, whereas, steps 5 and 6 may be outsourced to a SEO firm

Basic steps in the SEO process

Once one is acquainted with the basics of search engine ranking, perhaps the next logical element in the process of learning about SEO is studying a summary of the basic steps that comprise SEO. With this in mind, our experiences show that the process involves the seven steps shown in Table 1.

If the website in question is already up and running, the e-marketer will need to make certain that steps 1–4 have been effectively completed. If, on the other hand, one is constructing a new site, a 'good' website designer (ie one with e-marketing savvy) should be able to assist with the first four steps. In fact, it is the opinion of the authors that a new website owner can and should work on steps 1–4 with the website's designer or webmaster. On the other hand, steps 5 and 6 may be accomplished in-house or outsourced to a specialised SEO firm. Step 7 is precautionary, but should not be overlooked.

Since an effective explanation of how the two factors (keywords and linkages) affect website rankings is quite lengthy, the authors have dealt with each factor in a separate paper published in previous editions of this Journal. Readers desiring an introduction to those topics are referred to these earlier papers. Sources of additional information can be found in Appendix A, which provides a summary of what the authors have found to be excellent reference sources on a variety of SEO-related topics. Finally, readers who are not acquainted with a particular term used in this paper are referred to the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organisation's (SEMPO) 'Search Engine Optimisation and Marketing Glossary' (http://www.sempo.org/learning_center/sem_glossary/) for an extensive list of SEO terms and their definitions.⁴ The remainder of this paper discusses outsourcing SEO, that is outsourcing steps 5 and 6 listed in Table 1.

Outsourcing SEO

Online marketers can take a number of steps in-house to make their webpages and website navigation system 'search engine friendly'. The goal in this case is to assist search engine spiders in *finding* and *accurately indexing* the site's webpages. Web marketers can also

Table 1: Steps in the SEO process

Step	Description
1. Conduct keyword research	Determine the keywords for which the site wants to rank high on the search engines.
2. Determine current ranking	This is the 'red dot' of SEO. Just as a red dot on an amusement park map tells the reader 'You are here', a website's present ranking in the search engines tells online marketers the base, or starting point. Knowing it will help them measure how much improvement their SEO efforts produce.
3. Make the site's webpages search engine friendly	This task involves providing abundant clues on every webpage that help search engine spiders 'understand' the content of each page.
4. Help search engines index each page on the website	Search engines cannot index and rank a website if their spiders cannot find it. This task involves taking steps to ensure that the spiders can locate each of a site's webpages.
5. Obtain incoming links to the website	Incoming links, specifically their quantity, have a great impact on a site's search engine ranking. Online businesses conduct 'link campaigns' to increase the number of incoming links to their websites.
6. Optimise key webpages	This involves selecting perhaps a half dozen critical webpages on a site and carefully designing their keyword density so that one of these pages will rank as high as possible for one of the site's most important keywords.
7. Keep from getting banned by the search engines	Online marketers must understand the rules and ethics of SEO so that their site does not get placed on a search engine's blacklist.

accumulate *links* to their sites. Once these tasks have been accomplished, two questions remain to be answered.

1. What is the next step, if the site in question still does not have a high search engine ranking?
2. What if the marketer has neither the time nor the skill to optimise his/her webpages and incoming links?

The answer to both questions is that it may be the time to outsource SEO. As mentioned earlier, it is the topic of outsourcing SEO that is the focal point of this paper.

Why outsource SEO?

Quality SEO vendors employ state-of-the-art optimisation techniques to obtain a high ranking for a website. The techniques they employ are based on specialised knowledge of how search engines operate and do not involve 'spammy' or quirky tricks, such as same-colour text as background, small invisible text, cloaking and the like, to pack webpages with keywords.

Many SEO vendors use state-of-the-art optimisation techniques based on specialised knowledge

While the average online merchant should acquire 'proficient' knowledge of SEO, most cannot afford the time it takes to master the ever-changing 'transient' SEO knowledge base.

For the purposes of facilitating this discussion, the authors have identified two types of SEO knowledge. The first is what they refer to as 'persistent knowledge'. It is comprised of basic, enduring know-how with respect to making webpages friendly to search engines. The authors refer to the second type of knowledge as 'transient knowledge'. It includes 'tricks of the trade' that exploit little-known search engine peculiarities or loopholes that most likely will disappear within a few months.

It is the experience (and advice) of the authors that the average online merchant, e-marketer or consultant can and should become proficient in 'persistent knowledge'. On the other hand, it is the authors' opinion that mastery of 'transient knowledge' comprises a completely separate discipline, which involves the study of how to capitalise on various anomalies of search engines that are identified on search engine discussion forums or that a particular SEO vendor has uncovered through proprietary research and empirical observations drawn from its clients' websites. Most online marketers simply cannot afford to spend the time it takes to acquire and maintain the transient knowledge base.

A related issue discusses the fact that it is quite difficult today to rank at the top of search engine results, particularly if one desires to rank there for competitive keywords (ie those that are common and sought after by numerous online businesses). In an interview with one of the authors, Bruce Clay, a widely recognised leader in the SEO field, summarised this problem with the following statement:

'The number of sites trying to be in the Top 10 has doubled in the last 2 or 3 years. As a result, more companies are using SEO firms, making it 20 times as harder to achieve a Top 10 ranking than previously'.⁵

Assuming that Clay's expert opinion is correct, if online marketers want to rank near the top for competitive words, they really cannot do it themselves because the learning curve is too steep and the body of knowledge required to rank in the Top 10 is simply too large and changes too rapidly for the average online merchant to effectively and continually master. The only other answer is to outsource SEO to a quality vendor.

What SEO vendors do

Not surprisingly, the authors have observed that the services provided by SEO vendors differ from vendor to vendor. Furthermore, comparing vendors' services can be frustrating because all offered services are not necessarily reflected in a given vendor's description of services. These facts notwithstanding, however, we summarise and describe 'typical' services in Appendix B. Reviewing the entire list should help the reader understand how each service fits into a comprehensive SEO strategy.

In addition to the services listed in Appendix B, e-marketers might also arrange a private consultation and a customised analysis of the competition with a carefully selected SEO vendor. (*Note: A list of*

questions designed to assist in the vendor selection process is presented later in this paper.) If the e-marketer is in a competitive industry, (s)he will need to be aware of tactics competitors are using to obtain high rankings so (s)he can exceed those rankings. An SEO vendor might advise, for instance, that the e-marketer needs to select less competitive keywords for optimisation. A comprehensive competitive analysis can prove to be expensive because of the time it requires, but paying an SEO vendor to devote two or three hours to an overview of the marketer's site with the objective of identifying problems and making associated recommendations has the potential to yield a good ROI (Appendix B contains a comprehensive listing of SEO vendor services).

Most SEO vendors levy extra charges for reciprocal linking campaigns

SEO vendors and reciprocal linking campaigns

As mentioned earlier in this paper, a significant determinant of a site's search engine ranking is the number of incoming links to that site. Reciprocal linking campaigns are designed to obtain incoming links to the e-marketer's website from partner sites in return for a link to the partner sites from the former site. The authors' research and experience reveal that the majority of SEO vendors do not include reciprocal linking campaigns as part of their 'regular' packages; instead, they charge separate fees for these campaigns. An *ad hoc* sampling of these fees found one company offering to obtain 100 incoming links for \$3,000. In other words, its fee was \$30 per link, with other firms charging anywhere from \$10 to \$75 per incoming link. These fees are relatively high because reciprocal linking campaigns are quite labour intensive; that is, successful campaigns generally require telephone conversations and/or exchanges of several e-mail messages to establish the linking agreements. Because of their cost, the authors ordinarily recommend conducting reciprocal linking campaigns in-house, or even hiring trustworthy (and properly trained) teenagers or college students at relatively low wages to make the necessary contacts. In addition to charging significant fees for them, SEO vendors seem to be of the opinion that reciprocal linking campaigns often result in links from sites with low Google PageRanks. Because they hold this opinion, they sometimes avoid becoming involved with reciprocal linking. As an alternative, these vendors will generally assist in securing incoming links by submitting one's site to specialised directories with which they are acquainted, by offering free articles containing links back to the e-marketer's website from other sites, and by submitting press releases to appropriate outlets. They may also outsource the task of acquiring links to a client site to a specialised linking firm.

Differences between market-leading SEO firms and smaller SEO vendors

The authors have observed significant differences between the market-leading SEO firms and smaller vendors. Perhaps the primary difference involves how much time the SEO firm spends optimising a given webpage or website. In general, smaller firms optimise a select group of webpages (perhaps 10 or 20) by making them search engine

The primary difference between large and small SEO vendors involves how much time the firm spends optimising a given webpage or website

friendly. Smaller firms may also employ some advanced search engine indexing methodologies and usually can help a site obtain higher rankings than it had previously. On the other hand, few smaller firms will repeatedly return and attempt to move the page(s) ever higher in the rankings. Furthermore, smaller firms seldom conduct proprietary research designed to uncover the kind of beneficial ‘transient knowledge’ that has been discussed above. Instead, smaller vendors tend to rely on search engine forums containing content that has been posted by other smaller SEO specialists who are willing to share what they have learned.

Larger SEO firms (primarily because of their size) have a wider range of resources available to serve their clients. Some, although not all, large firms conduct in-house research designed to help them keep abreast of the current operating procedures of the leading search engines. Thus, when a search engine alters its ranking algorithm, the firm conducting the research is able to quickly evaluate the effect the change will have on the sites of its clients (assuming, of course, that it is constantly monitoring those sites).

Interestingly, many of the larger firms do not offer a broader array of services than smaller firms. The authors have observed that a number of larger firms tend to specialise in recommending and helping conduct PPC campaigns, rather than concentrating on optimising a particular set of keywords related to the client’s site. Although PPC campaigns can be both appropriate and valuable, some larger firms have been known to quickly recommend using PPC so that they do not have to perform the difficult, time-consuming tasks required of SEO.

Some large firms do offer a portfolio of services that can be quite valuable. For example, one of the authors interviewed Bruce Clay, who operates a large SEO firm with approximately 30 employees who serve more than one hundred clients.⁴ The range and type of services offered by Clay’s company appear to the authors to be as broad as, and perhaps even broader than, most firms in the industry. Clay told the author that his company devotes between 35 and 40 hours per webpage on tasks such as account analysis, keyword editing, keyword ‘tweaking’ and telephone consultations with clients. For an online firm in a competitive industry, investing in this level of service can be worth the fee (Clay’s firm was charging approximately \$300 per webpage per month for full outsourced search engine optimisation at the time of this interview).

Identifying a reliable SEO vendor that fits the needs of the online marketer

Like most investments, the benefits promised by a particular SEO firm, be that firm large or small, are not the determinants of success. Actual results and ROI are what count, and these are not known until after the investment has been made. Because of the latter fact, it is quite important to know the types of questions one should ask when trying to decide whether to hire the services of a particular SEO vendor.

Table 2 contains a listing of questions the authors have found beneficial

Table 2: Questions to ask of potential SEO vendors

Question	Comments/guidance
What methods do you use to achieve top rankings?	As the answer is given, be aware of comments that imply the vendor makes use of doorway pages, cloaking, bait-and-switch redirect pages and link farms, all of which can put a site at risk of being banned by the search engines. Techniques such as these may be temporarily successful, but they are quite risky and could get the offending site placed on a search engine's blacklist.
How can you help me get links to my site?	E-marketers do not want incoming links from businesses that have no relation to their sites. Again, the marketer should look for disguised explanations of what are actually link farms or cross-linking schemes between a vendor's clients. In other words, there should be nothing suspect — nothing that could get the marketer's site blacklisted by the search engines — in the answer to this question.
Do you subscribe to a Code of Ethics? If so, which code? Are there some elements of the code with which you cannot agree?	The importance of dealing with ethical providers of any service is important. With SEO, not only does the marketer want to receive the services for which (s)he is paying, but (s)he wants services that are ethical; once again, unethical services can have short-range benefits, but long-run adverse consequences.
How long does it take to do your job? How many hours do you spend on a typical webpage? Over what period will you be working on my account?	Obviously, sooner is better, but the reader should be aware that it can take several months — as many as three or four — for SEO benefits to be realised.
What kind of guarantee do you offer?	The reader will discover that most guarantees offered by smaller SEO vendors are flimsy; that is, they establish such a low goal that it can be achieved by minimal work. Generally, marketers should be suspicious of performance guarantees, but when they are offered, they should ask whether the vendor guarantees that it will refund the client's fees if their site is penalised by the search engines because of the vendor's SEO work.
How does your pricing work?	Pricing, which is addressed in more detail later in this paper, should be reasonable and easy to understand and a written contract that includes all fees should be negotiated.
Can you give me examples of competitive keywords and keyphrases you have optimised for specific clients?	Try to determine the techniques the SEO firm used to optimise these keywords. You can determine the relative value of keywords (and thus the competition for them) by checking their PPC cost on Google or Yahoo! Search Marketing.
Are you associated with any trusted industry organisations?	If the SEO firm is a member of BBBOnline and/or a nationally recognised SEO professional organisation such as SEMPO (www.sempo.org), then the marketer can contact these organisations and ask if it has received any complaints regarding the SEO firm in question.
Do you, or someone in your organisation, speak at SEO conferences?	While not all SEO firm owners/employees are good speakers, speaking at conferences implies that they are trusted by their peers. (This should not be an absolute requirement, but it can add to the facts being gathered to make the decision to hire/not hire a particular SEO firm.)

Table 2: Continued

Question	Comments/guidance
How is <i>your</i> site ranked for SEO keywords?	Leading SEO vendors validate their skills by obtaining high search rankings for keywords/phrases such as 'search engine optimisation', 'SEO' and other terms related to SEO (all are very competitive terms). This achievement is most important to online firms that need to optimise on a highly competitive keyword or keyphrase. On the other hand, if the marketer's line of business is not very competitive, it may not be as important to hire the highest ranking SEO firms.
Can you give me the names and phone numbers of several clients you have worked with?	Be sure to check these references. Ask how easy the company was to work with. Ask if they feel they're still getting their money's worth. Ask about the company's work ethic and follow-through on promises. Ask the client if he could recommend the company unconditionally and without reservation to others.
Can you give me a detailed written proposal?	The proposal should carefully specify the vendor's SEO plans, the time period involved, fees and fee payment schedule, and legal recourse for the client if the SEO vendor does not do what it promises.

to the process of identifying trustworthy vendors who offer the types of services e-marketers might need for optimisation of their sites.

Fees for SEO

Although there is no simple approach to explaining and/or determining SEO pricing, there are several common methods that SEO vendors use to bill for their services. Each of these methods is discussed below.

Package of services

The great majority of SEO firms offer clients 'special' packages of services that include optimisation of a certain number of webpages along with a specified number of keywords. The authors' unscientific research revealed fees for such packages that ranged from as low as \$500 to \$10,000 (or even more). Ordinarily, the vendor will customise a particular package to fit the needs of an individual client. Thus, bottom line prices can vary from sample pricing shown on a given vendor's website. When billing for packages of services, the usual practice is for the SEO firm to request a significant upfront payment, with additional payments required when specific tasks have been completed.

Maintenance fee

Following the preliminary optimisation of a website, some SEO vendors impose a monthly maintenance fee as compensation for continued monitoring and fine-tuning of the client's site. Other vendors offer 'specials' that include one year of monitoring and fine-tuning activities in the price of the initial package.

No single vendor fee structure exists

Pay-per-click

The authors discovered a small group of vendors, including some legitimate SEO firms, that develop 'non-spammy' and appropriate doorway sites (often called 'focus pages') designed to draw traffic to their clients' site as an alternative to a package of services. In this case, what the vendor is essentially doing is 'selling traffic' to the client. This approach, usually called the PPC approach because the client only pays for click-throughs from the doorway page to its website, can be an attractive alternative for e-marketers who know how much they would have to pay to generate similar traffic for the same keywords and keyphrases using Google AdWords and/or Yahoo! Search Marketing. On the other hand, the authors recommend avoiding vendors that *only* offer the PPC approach, because no matter how carefully the doorway sites are designed, some search engines might still view them as spam. Finally, one very significant disadvantage of the PPC approach is that once the client stops paying for the clicks, all the traffic generated from the doorway site also stops.

Hourly rate

It is possible for the online marketer to hire an SEO vendor on an hourly basis and pay only for the time involved to accomplish the work performed. While this approach might prove to be appropriate for additional work from a trusted SEO firm, the authors do not recommend it being used with a vendor with whom the marketer is not familiar.

Unethical or 'spammy' SEO tactics can reduce a site's pagerank

SEO ethics: Methodologies to avoid

In addition to the variety of sizes of SEO vendors and the diversity of the services they offer, the authors have found that, as sometimes is the case in other industries, there is also a great deal of variation in their ethical standards. More specifically, some vendors strive to be so ethical that they will do nothing to a client's website that could cause difficulties with the search engines. On the other hand, some vendors use a Pandora's box of techniques that, if identified by a search engine or a competitor, could get a client's site penalised or even banned by the major search engines. For example, through his consulting business, one of the authors recently learned that Google penalised a top SEO vendor for employing questionable practices by leaving the offending vendor listed in Google's search results but giving it no PageRank. Since it lacks a PageRank, Google's ranking algorithm lists that vendor at or near the end of relevant search results.

In light of the preceding comments and to protect the online marketer's website, it is especially important to inquire about the methodology any SEO vendor employs to produce high rankings. In fact, the authors advise the e-marketer to ask, 'Do you employ any methods prohibited in the guidelines recommended by each search engine for site inclusion?' An example of these guidelines is shown in Table 3, which lists what Google refers to as its 'Specific Quality

Table 3: Google's Specific Quality Guidelines⁶

<p>Avoid hidden text or hidden links. Don't use cloaking or sneaky redirects. Don't send automated queries to Google. Don't load pages with irrelevant keywords. Don't create multiple pages, subdomains or domains with substantially duplicate content. Don't create pages with malicious behaviour, such as phishing or installing viruses, trojans or other badware. Avoid 'doorway' pages created just for search engines, or other 'cookie cutter' approaches such as affiliate programs with little or no original content. If your site participates in an affiliate program, make sure that your site adds value. Provide unique and relevant content that gives users a reason to visit your site first.</p>

Guidelines'. For a more extensive listing of Google's SEO guidelines, see the Google website.⁶

The online marketer should be extremely cautious when approached by SEO vendors that use entry pages or doorway pages (as opposed to the legitimate focus pages that were described above), because doorway pages can result in penalties from search engines. Likewise, penalties can be imposed due to links to link farms developed by an SEO vendor.

In April 2008, the authors' search on the phrase 'SEO code of ethics' on Google resulted in approximately 14,600 results. While Bruce Clay's 'SEO Code of Ethics' was in the number one spot on that list and some SEO vendors have agreed to adhere to Clay's code, as of May 2008 there was no industry-wide ethical standard.⁷ Given the fact that Clay's code holds the top ranking on Google, the authors advise readers to ask any potential SEO vendor being interviewed whether they are willing to agree to Bruce Clay's Code of Ethics. If the response is 'no', the reader should follow up by asking the vendor to identify the aspects of the code to which they cannot agree. Following this advice should help the online marketer determine a vendor's views of, as well as its approach to, the SEO process.

Additional guidance regarding appropriate SEO practices can be found in 'Google Information for Webmasters — Search Engine Optimizers', which points out things to watch out for in hiring an SEO vendor.⁸ In that discussion, Google suggests that the online marketer should 'walk away' from an SEO vendor that

- owns shadow domains (definitions of the terms Google uses in this list are included following the list itself)
- puts links to their other clients on doorway pages
- offers to sell keywords in the address bar
- does not distinguish between actual search results and ads that appear in search results
- guarantees ranking, but only on obscure, long keyword phrases you would get anyway
- operates with multiple aliases or falsified WHOIS info
- gets traffic from 'fake' search engines, spyware or scumware
- has had domains removed from Google's index or is not itself listed in Google.⁸

The SEO industry has no single code of ethics, but Bruce Clay's code holds the number one spot in search results for such a code

The most obscure terms used by Google in the preceding list are defined below.

- *Shadow domains* are websites that are made entirely through cloaking so that search engine users will be redirected to another site, usually a company's main site. These pages are optimised for search engines and never viewed by search engine users so the text does not make sense grammatically but has content that is fairly relevant to a web page's focus.⁹
- *Doorway pages*, also known as portal pages, jump pages, gateway pages and entry pages, are created to rank high for particular keywords. They are relatively simple to identify because they have been designed primarily for search engines, not for human beings.¹⁰
- *WHOIS* is a protocol that searches official domain name registration databases and displays results such as registrant information, DNS, domain expiration dates, etc.¹¹
- *Spyware* is software that secretly gathers information about a user while (s)he navigates the internet. This information is normally used for advertising purposes. Spyware can also gather information about e-mail addresses and even passwords and credit card numbers.¹²
- *Scumware*, which ordinarily is installed without consent, is software, scripts or programs that are specifically designed to circumvent or steal revenue and traffic from legitimate websites. Because most scumware includes programs that transmit personal information, it is also considered a type of spyware.¹³

Three-paper JDDMP primer series on SEO

Conclusions

This paper is the third in the authors' series of primers focused on the basics of SEO. The first two papers, which were published in earlier editions of this Journal, dealt with fundamental tasks involved with keyword optimisation and securing incoming links. This paper discusses the topic of outsourcing SEO, particularly outsourcing the tasks of obtaining incoming links to the site in question and optimising a select group of the site's pages on certain keywords for e-marketers whose in-house efforts have not produced the desired increases in search engine rankings. Fundamentally, outsourcing SEO can have a positive ROI because of the specialised knowledge possessed by some SEO firms. Related to this expertise are the 'typical' services provided by SEO firms, which are summarised in Appendix B. This summary will be helpful to e-marketers in determining whether their firms might benefit from SEO outsourcing. Those who decide that outsourcing SEO could help their online businesses will benefit from the annotated list of questions that the authors have found to be useful in the process of identifying trustworthy SEO vendors who offer the types of services needed (ie Table 2).

Finally the authors strongly believe that, while ethical conduct of business is important in any industry, the use of tactics considered by

the leading search engines to be unethical and/or manipulative can have extremely negative consequences to the offending website. Specifically, the e-marketer should be aware that unethical practices can at the least lead to ranking penalties being imposed by the search engines and at their most severe can lead to a ban by one or more of the leading search engines.

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Appendix A

See Table A1.

Table A1: Selected SEO information resources

Resource/category	URL	Description/comments
<i>E-mail newsletters and blogs</i>	While googling on 'search engine marketing blog/newsletter' will yield tens of thousands of results, the authors have found the following blogs and newsletters to be particularly content rich.	
Bruce Clay Blog	www.bruceclay.com/blog?wtc=05blog	Useful and up-to-date comments on a variety of SEO-related topics by SEO expert, Lisa Barone.
ClickZ	www.clickz.com/experts/search/results/	Includes columns by SEO experts Mike Grehan and Sheri Thurow.
High Rankings Advisor	www.highrankings.com/advisor.htm	Free e-mail newsletter with over 25,000 subscribers written by Jill Whalen, an SEO pioneer whose firm works with companies in more than 40 industries.
Link Building Blog	http://textlinkbrokers.com/blogs/weblog.php	Covers a variety of topics related to search engine marketing with Rob Sullivan and Jarrod Hunt of Textlinkbrokers, a global company servicing the search marketing needs of professional SEM agencies as well as individuals.
Marketing Pilgrim	www.marketingpilgrim.com	Blog by SEO pioneer Andy Beal and his team of bloggers. Several blogs per day keep readers informed of news in the field of search marketing.
Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google and SEO	www.matcutts.com/blog/	Blog by Google spokesman Matt Cutts, whose comments are carefully scrutinised in the SEO industry for clues to Google's policies and factors included in Google's secret ranking algorithm.
Mike Grehan's Blog	www.mikegrehan.com	Blog by Mike Grehan, Global KDM Officer of a Top 10 search agency located in New York City, has been involved in online marketing since 1995 and is recognised as a leading search engine marketing expert.
Search Day	www.searchenginewatch.com/searchday	Daily newsletter from SearchEngineWatch.
Search Engine Guide	www.searchengineguide.com	Edited by Jennifer Laycock, a former search marketing consultant and in-house trainer, this resource offers a blog, weekly newsletter and daily ezine and bills itself as an educational website aimed at translating the search marketing world into something that small business owners can understand.

Table A1: Continued

Resource/category	URL	Description/comments
Search Engine Land	http://searchengineland.com	News and information covering search engine marketing, searching issues and the search engine industry, by journalist Danny Sullivan, who has been covering search for over a decade.
SearchEngineWatch.com	www.searchenginewatch.com/sereport	Provides tips/information about searching the web, analysis of the search engine industry and help to site owners trying to improve their ability to be found in search engines; offers a free monthly newsletter that focuses on SEM.
SearchNewz	www.searchnewz.com	A blog/news site covering the latest trends and developments in the search engine world; syndicates A-list search and search marketing bloggers like Steve Rubel, Andy Beal, Jeremy Zawodny and Lee Odden.
The StepForth Weekly	news.stepforth.com	Offers three SEO news resources, including the SEO Blog, a Web Marketing Newsletter and archives from past year newsletters and featured SEO articles. Frequently contains insight from StepForth's founder and CEO, Ross Dunn.
Online forums	SEO professionals often frequent online forums and provide current tricks and rumours related to search marketing. Some professionals are even willing to answer questions asked by online marketers. Unfortunately, however, most secrets that SEO professionals possess are not shared, because of the competitive advantage they represent.	
Best practices search engine forums	www.ihelpyou.com/forums	Includes a number of forums related to SEM, including a forum about country-specific search engines.
High rankings forum	www.highrankings.com/forum	Posts a variety of SEO and SEM forums as well as a 'Technobabble' forum containing comments concerning technological issues related to page design in SEM.
Search engine watch forums	forums.searchenginewatch.com	Primarily composed of forums on individual search engines and directories, search engine marketing strategies and general search issues.
Webmaster world	www.webmasterworld.com	Described as 'a service to the website administrator community', this site provides a forum for members to share and gain knowledge in operating and promoting a website.
Conferences and training	The authors have found the following conferences and training opportunities to be particularly valuable; however, the reader might also research training offered by local universities, community colleges and technical schools.	
Search engine strategies (SES)	www.searchenginestrategies.com	Held annually in New York, Chicago, San Jose and several overseas locations, this conference focuses on SEO and PPC search marketing, includes tracks for novices as well as experts and hosts several well-known featured speakers. Has an extensive exhibitions area for vendors.

Table A1: Continued

Resource/category	URL	Description/comments
SMX Search marketing expo	www.searchmarketingexpo.com	A search engine marketing conference from Third Door Media, the company behind the Search Engine Land news site and the Search Marketing Now webcast series. SMX is programmed by well-known search marketing experts, Danny Sullivan and Chris Sherman. Ten conferences are planned for various locations around the world during 2008.
Search engine workshops	www.searchengineworkshops.com/about_us.html	Training and certification workshops offered by Robin Nobles, first online instructor in search engine marketing strategies on the internet, and John Alexander, who has taught onsite search engine marketing workshops to people from over 80 different countries.
Bruce Clay SEOToolSet training course	www.bruceclay.com/seo/training.htm?wwtc=06training	Three- to four-day training courses held in Simi Valley (Southern), California on a monthly basis (excluding June and December) and twice a year in the firm's European, Australian and South African offices.
<i>Miscellaneous resources</i>	Although most of these resources are referred to in the body of this paper, we list them here as a convenience to the reader.	
Bruce Clay's SEO Code of Ethics	www.bruceclay.com/web_ethics.htm?wwtc=04ethics	Discussed in the 'SEO ethics' section of this paper.
Buyers' guide to search engine optimisation firms (MarketingSherpa)	www.marketingsherpa.com/	Regularly updated, this guide provides guidelines for pricing and selecting an SEO firm, with profiles of 120+ firms.
Google's information for webmasters — Webmaster guidelines	www.google.com/webmasters/guidelines.html	Outlines what Google views as permissible and impermissible SEO techniques.
Google's information for webmasters — Search engine optimisers	http://www.google.com/webmasters/	Summarises Google's guidelines for selecting an SEO vendor.

Appendix B

See Table B1.

Table B1: Typical services provided by SEO vendors

Keyword research and analysis to discover keywords best suited for a business	In consultation with the client, determines the most important primary keywords (three–five) as well as secondary keywords and keyphrases (perhaps 20–25) that may bring in additional traffic.
Initial ranking report	Provides a report showing rankings of your site on various search engines for various keywords and keyphrases. This report becomes a benchmark from which to measure future progress in rankings.
Optimisation of webpages	Optimises an agreed-upon number of webpages, always your homepage and 5–25 other webpages on your site. Each would be optimised with metatags, title, headings, body text, alt tags, hyperlinks, etc to rank high for particular words and phrases. Each webpage might be optimised for three–five keywords or keyphrases, keeping in mind a primary keyword for that particular page.
Analysis and correction of navigation system	Examines your site navigation system looking for trouble areas and offers suggestions to correct problems that may be present, such as frames, lack of HTML links to interior pages and dynamically generated pages. The normal package price doesn't usually cover correcting these problems.
Site map	Creates a webpage pointing to all webpages in your site — or, for larger sites, a site map to your most important webpages and a Google SiteMap in XML.
robots.txt file	Creates a small file that tells the search engine spider what <i>not</i> to index on the site.
Submission to key search engines	Submits by hand your homepage and any key webpages to all the important search engines for your region.
Submission to Yahoo! Directory	Uses Yahoo! Express (\$299) to submit your site to the Yahoo! Directory — important for PageRank analysis of incoming links to your site.
Submission to Open Directory Project	Submits your site to the Open Directory Project (dmoz.com) and follows up until the entry is included in the directory.
Submission to other appropriate paid directories	Submits your site to appropriate paid directories such as LookSmart Directory, Business.com and perhaps others. Paid submission beyond Yahoo! Directory varies from one SEO vendor to another.
Submission to other appropriate free directories	Submits to all significant directories covering the website's particular industry or field.
Monthly ranking reports	Provides monthly ranking reports so you can track ranking progress for your keywords and keyphrases. Progress is usually visible after three–four months.
Minimum number of incoming links	Obtains a minimum number of incoming links to the website. This may include links from directories above. Usually, linking campaigns are not included in the basic package of services offered by an SEO vendor.