

Snake Oil and Search Engine Optimization: SEO Scams and How to Avoid Them

By Judy Key Johnson

Search engine optimization (SEO) is one of the best buys for lead generation, with the value increasing every year as keyword searches of the Internet become the standard technique for more buyers seeking to purchase products or services.

Sadly, there's also a lot of shady activity and outright fraud among service providers. A *buyer beware* mentality is essential in shopping for SEO that's not required in placing advertising, booking a trade show, or commissioning new marketing brochures.

There are thousands of search engine optimization companies, and a fair number of them are selling snake oil, while others are simply charging too much.

Why is this? The answer lies in the nature of search engine optimization, which has a lot of nuances.

Guaranteed top rankings? Not always a good thing. Certain techniques that achieve high visibility are viewed as unethical by search engine providers and can get your company's Web site banned from their search engine.

Get listed on hundreds or thousands of search engines? Not as valuable as it sounds – nothing is actually said about which search engines (Lithuanian folk dancers, anyone?) or what ranking your site achieves.

Here's a summary of some of the most popular scams in search engine optimization, so your internal alarms go off when you hear them.

1. **Guaranteed top rankings.** This is, after all, the point of search engine optimization. But keep in mind that the search engines are in 100% control of the rankings process. No SEO firm can guarantee results. So, the question to ask the SEO provider is, *how* do you achieve those rankings? Among the scams are:

- The guarantee top 30 placement within 90 days for 20 of the 30 keyword phrases (KPs) submitted. If the provider submits the KPs to 15 search engines (which may be very minor search engines), they have 450 possibilities for top 30 ranking, so only 20 guarantees is a weak performance indeed.
- They get you ranking well for a short time using illegal techniques, such as cloaking and link farms (see below), then you get blackballed by the search engines.
- The adword scam. They guarantee top 10 placement in major search engines, and then do pay-per-click (PPC) for certain phrases. Since PPC is paid advertising, it lacks the credibility and number of eyeballs of true search engine optimization.

2. **Get listed in thousands of search engines.** You have probably gotten spam with this header. Here's the scam: There are thousands of very minor search engines on specialty topics, and only about 15 search engines that attract broad audiences that may buy your products. Submission to lots of irrelevant search engines is a waste of money, even if it's only \$30 a year, which seems to be the going rate among these firms. The submissions are done by automated programs, which are banned by most search engines. There is a second point – submission is not the same as a high ranking. Being ranked 25,768 in Google under "real estate agents Los Angeles" won't bring you any clients.
3. **Get thousands of links to your Web site.** This is another favorite of the SEO spammers, though the popularity is decreasing as more consumers become aware that "link farms" will get you banned from search engines. In the early days of SEO, search engines used the number of links to a Web site as one indicator of

popularity of that site, which caused their ranking to go up. But after SEO firms created thousands of cross-links between unrelated Web sites the practice was banned by search engines, so avoid this one or your site will ultimately get caught and you'll be delisted.

4. **One-time-only fee for search engine optimization.** That's like saying, "Check out your competition one time, then never again." Search engines are constantly changing their rules for top rankings, and also changing what is legal and illegal. Link firms used to be legal; now they get you banned. Meta tags used to be a major, and static, component of top ranking; that hasn't been true since 2000. Search engine optimization requires ongoing monitoring of your Web site and constant investigation of changes by the major search engines. It's a job for the SEO experts, and it never ends.

How do you avoid getting scammed? The basic rules for selecting a vendor apply, with just a bit more caution.

- **Do you know—really know—the company you are dealing with?** Is there a real person, with a real address, associated with the company? If they take your money and run, can you find them? You could be out

more than your \$30, or \$300, or \$3,000; if they use illegal techniques on your site you could be delisted, and guess who suffers?

- **How long have they been in business?** If they are a real company, then ask them. Ask to talk to some of their customers. Keep your antenna on alert.
- **Ask for copies of their client reports from several actual clients.** This will help you know what you are getting.

With a little knowledge and some common business sense you'll do just fine and enjoy the rewards of search engine optimization.

Postscript: A true story . . . I was just completing this article when the mail arrived, and I got a bill from an Internet listing service for \$35 with a due date of November 12, owed by Key Marketing Group. Description of Services: Annual website search engine listing from Nov. 15, 2004, thru Nov. 15, 2005. There was a customer number and a listing date. But wait—I didn't order it. Oh, look, fine print between two pages of invoice: "This is not a bill; this is a solicitation." I went to their Web site; the company had a post office box in New York and an office in Bermuda. Hmm. I kept my 35 bucks.

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