

How to Spot Bad SEO Services

10 Signs that Your SEO Firm Isn't Worth the Money



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Introduction

Search Engine Optimization is routinely cited by marketers as one of the most effective tactics for generating leads or sales from your website. But while most marketers understand the importance of SEO, many see the process as a highly technical, almost mysterious discipline that's best left in the hands of experts.



It's no surprise, then, that many time-strapped small- and medium-sized business marketers look to outsource their SEO to trained professionals. A simple Google search for SEO firms will turn up thousands of vendors, offering "incredible" or "fast" results for attractively low monthly fees or even a simple one-time purchase.

Be careful, though: Many of these "professionals" and SEO experts are counting on clients' SEO ignorance to get quick cash without delivering long-term, sustainable SEO improvements. Even worse, some of the practices used by SEO firms can actually hurt your business in the long run.

How can you tell if you're being sold SEO snake oil? Here are ten signs your SEO firm might not be worth the money you're paying them. Take a look at these dubious practices and evaluate your current vendor's approach. Or, keep this list on-hand as you search for a new vendor to take on your SEO project.

Sign #1. Making Promises that are Too Good to be True

Outsourcing your business's SEO is a leap of faith – you're spending valuable marketing dollars on a project and need to show the return on that investment. That's why many marketers are tempted by firms that guarantee top rankings or specific traffic increases, or claim they'll improve your position in as little as 30 days.



But beware of firms that make these kinds of promises. The fact is, reputable SEO firms don't offer guaranteed #1 rankings, fast results, or any other promises that sound too good to be true.

Rand Fishkin, CEO of SEO software company SEOMoz, cites several reasons why guarantees are typically used by shady SEO firms, including:

- Google warns against making such promises in its search marketing guidelines, saying, "No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google."
- Search rankings are notoriously unstable, and subject to a variety of factors such as the location of the person searching and whether they've logged in to Google and are using personalized results.
- Rankings alone are a bad metric for overall performance. It's more important that the search results drive relevant visitors that take a desired action – such as signing up for an email newsletter or making a purchase – once they land on your page.

Claims about rapid improvements in search engine rankings are similarly dubious. SEO is not a quick-fix marketing tactic to deliver results in a matter of hours or days. Instead, it typically takes a diligent, ongoing process that gradually improves your site's rankings.

A good SEO project can take two to three months to begin showing a real impact, depending on a number of factors such as the age of your site, the number of quality inbound links you already have, and the competitiveness of keywords.

Anyone promising you big-time results in just a month is probably overpromising or worse: They could be using shady SEO tactics that might deliver a quick bump at the expense of long-term search engine visibility. (See Sign #2,)

Sign #2. Using “Black Hat” SEO techniques

SEO practitioners have a host of ways to achieve higher rankings for a site, but not all techniques are considered above board. Bending the generally accepted rules established by search engines is called “black hat” SEO. And while black hat SEO is not technically illegal, it is discouraged by search engines and can hurt your business in the long run.



Some of the most common black hat SEO techniques include:

- Keyword Stuffing -- Cramming as many keywords as possible into the text of a webpage, with no attempt to create useful information for a human reader. Long lists of keywords or randomly repeated keywords on a page are SEO no-nos.
- Doorway Pages – Creating standalone, keyword-heavy pages specifically to rank in search engine results, but that automatically redirect visitors to another destination.
- Invisible Text – Using white text on a white background to fool a search engine spider into ranking your page for terms that might not be relevant to the information on the rest of the page.
- Linking Schemes – Offering payment for inbound links, creating new sites solely to link back to a main site (known as link pyramids), or placing hundreds of inbound links on unrelated pages just to boost a specific page’s rank.

Search engines can penalize websites that are found to be using black hat techniques, often dingging those pages way down in the search results or delisting the pages altogether.

Even big brands get burned by black hat SEO: Major retailer J.C. Penney got caught in a black hat SEO nightmare after the 2010 holiday shopping season, when Google found that the company's SEO firm had used a link-buying scheme (paying to place links on hundreds of spammy websites unrelated to the targeted J.C. Penney page) to help the retailer achieve top rankings for dozens broad product terms such as "area rugs," "furniture," "home décor" and "skinny jeans."

Once Google caught on to the scam, it started hammering J.C. Penney's rankings. In just over one week, the average position for a J.C. Penney webpage for 59 search terms dropped from 1.3 to 52, according to a *New York Times* report.

The best way to avoid falling victim to black hat SEO is to ask your current or potential SEO vendors if they use any of these common black hat tactics. If they try to talk you into doorway pages, link-buying schemes, or other black-hat practices, take your business elsewhere!

Sign #3. Targeting the Wrong Keywords

Any SEO firm can come up with a huge new list of keywords as part of their SEO contract services. But in some cases, you're paying for a bad list.

Not every keyword that's relevant to your products or services is appropriate for your SEO campaign. For example, if you're in a crowded space, like office furniture or accounting, you're going to have a hard time competing for top rankings for broad, one- and two- word phrases like "office furniture" or "accounting."



Instead, your SEO firm should help you target long-tail phrases – longer strings of keywords that are more specific and descriptive than broad category terms. These phrases have lower search volume than broad terms, but can deliver better-qualified visitors to your site.

For example, rather than trying to optimize for "office furniture," you could target terms representing some of your most popular brands or products, such as "adjustable leather office chairs"

Likewise, if your business is focused on a particular geographic area, you don't want to compete against the entire world for search engine rankings. Rather than targeting the term "accounting firms," you might target several variations on accounting and your location, such as "accounting firms Albany" or "Accounting firms upstate New York."

Another challenge is when an SEO firm suggests using consumer-oriented phrases for a B2B-focused site, simply because many of the "layman's terms" are high-traffic keywords. For example, an industrial adhesive distributor wouldn't

necessarily want to target phrases that include the word “glue,” because that’s a term that consumers and hobbyists use. On the contrary, its manufacturing clients would tend to use phrases related to specific types of adhesives, such as epoxy or polyurethane.

When it comes to keywords, no one knows your business better than you: You know the kind of language that customers typically use to describe your products/services, the terms they typically employ in their searches, and how much competition there is for those terms within your industry. Don’t let a self-proclaimed SEO guru talk you into keywords you know are inappropriate or irrelevant.

Sign #4. Employing Shoddy Linking Schemes

Attracting lots of high-quality inbound links to your website is essential for improving your website's authority and search engine rankings, so it's no surprise that link-building is one of the services that most SEO firms promise their clients.



The problem is, not all inbound links are valuable -- and some may even harm you. As we mentioned above in the J.C. Penney example, practices such as paying for links or creating link pyramids can get you punished by the search engines.

Other bad link-building practices include:

- Email Link Prospecting – Dashing off dozens or hundreds of generic email requests to webmasters, asking them to include a link back to your website. This is the link-building equivalent of cold calling, and just as ineffective.
- Link Trading – Offering reciprocal links to any site that agrees to place a link to your site on theirs. Although trading links between a few relevant sites in your niche can be a good strategy, simply agreeing to link to anyone who links to you is a recipe for building up hundreds of links from irrelevant or even spammy third-party sites.
- Automated Link Building – Using software programs to automatically send link requests to websites, or to post generic comments (with a link back to your site) on a blog post. Often these are low-quality links from sketchy sites or sites that are irrelevant to your business, and search engines will discount them.

- Rapid Link Building – Adding hundreds or thousands of links to a site that previously had a low number of inbound links, most likely through automated link-building programs. Search engines want to see natural, steady growth in a site’s inbound links. If they detect a site that’s gone from a handful of links to thousands in a short period of time they are likely to discount those links.
- Using One Phrase for all Links – Your site should build a good mix of links pointing to different areas of your website. Creating links with diverse anchor text (the word or phrase that’s hyperlinked) is essential. Adding 100 links with identical anchor text looks like spam, and search engines will discount them.

Link building requires a careful, ongoing effort that naturally boosts your link profile. Google itself says it best: “The best way to get other sites to create relevant links to yours is to create unique, relevant content that can quickly gain popularity in the Internet community.”

Sign #5. Promising to List Your Site in Hundreds of Online Directories

As part of a link-building strategy, many SEO firms will promise to list your site with hundreds or even thousands of online directories. Great, you think, that's hundreds more inbound links!



However, most of those directories don't provide high-quality links. Only a handful of them are considered by the search engines to be authoritative, high-quality sites.

Good online directories include:

- Yahoo Business Directory
- Business.com
- DMOZ Directory
- The Best of the Web Directory

You also don't want to focus on generic, low-quality online directories at the expense of other sources of good links, such as the local business listings offered by Google, Yahoo and Bing. Another smart strategy is to list your company's blog in quality blog directories, such as Technorati.com, Blogsearch.Google.com, and Blogged.com

Remember, if your SEO firm is spending their time on directory submissions, they're not spending time doing the real, hard work that improves your search rankings – like building high-quality inbound links or creating lots of high-quality content.

Sign #6. Redesigning Your Site or Creating New Pages Without 301 Redirects

If your SEO firm recommends you restructure your website or create new pages for existing content, make sure they are using a tool called a 301 redirect to point the search engine spiders and visitors to the new page.

Using 301 redirects preserves the existing URL, but automatically forwards traffic to the new page – allowing your site to retain the search engine rankings of the preexisting page. If you don't use 301 redirects, you're losing all the established search engine juice from that existing page.



Creating redirects can be a tricky, time-consuming process, which is why even big brands sometimes get it wrong. Giant toy retailer Toys 'R' Us recently made headlines when it spent \$5.1 million to buy the Toys.com domain name, but then redirected the entire domain to ToysRUs.com, causing Google to de-index all the Toys.com pages.

SEO experts say the company should have done the hard work of creating a 301 redirect for every page on the Toys.com website to an appropriate page on ToysRUs.com, preserving the rankings Toys.com had achieved and helping ToysRUs.com capture more top results on specific search results pages.

If your SEO firm recommends that you move content to new URLs or restructure your site for better rankings, ask them to confirm they are using 301 redirects from the existing pages. Or, check their work yourself using an online redirect checker.

Sign #7. Focusing on Metadata Instead of On-page SEO

Metadata is information in the core HTML of a webpage that tells search engines and browsers what a webpage is about. It's different from the content that a human viewer sees on the page, and includes the page title, description, and keywords.



Tweaking your site's metadata sounds like the kind of specialized service you should pay an expert to perform for you. But in reality, the major search engines don't pay attention to metadata anymore when calculating a page's ranking.

So while it's important to give each page a unique title that includes keywords, and to have a good, readable page description for human searchers, there's no value in an SEO firm stuffing keywords into your site's metadata.

What's more, if they're too focused on metadata, they aren't paying attention to what really helps improve your page rankings – the content on the page itself. Page headers, (H1, H2, and H3 tags), image captions and the text on the page itself are where your firm should be spending its time with keyword optimization.

Sign #8. Creating Bad Content

Content is king when it comes to SEO. A good blog post, case study, white paper, or other content-heavy page on your site naturally will contain relevant keywords and is likely to attract inbound links.

But that content has to be useful, relevant, and readable for humans. Too often these days, unscrupulous sites are trying to game the SEO system by creating content that's heavy on keywords and light on actual value.



Avoid working with any SEO firm that recommends the following content strategies:

- Content Scraping – Copying content without permission from high-ranking websites and placing it on your own pages in an attempt to boost your site's ranking. Content scraping typically is a violation of copyright law, and a practice most associated with spam sites.
- Keyword-stuffed Content – Using low-paid writers to create low-quality articles clearly designed to attract search bots by repeating a keyword over and over in the text. Remember, your content is supposed to engage the visitor and get him or her to take the next step. It's not just search-bot bait.

What's more, Google recently made changes to its search algorithm to downgrade sites that were using "shallow or low-quality content" to achieve high search rankings. A study by the SEO software maker Sistrix found that the top-25 sites most associated with low-quality content had lost 70%-90% of their search engine visibility after the change.

- Posting Fake Reviews – Masquerading as satisfied customers to write positive reviews of your business on review sites or local search engines in order to get links back to your site. Sites that have been caught posting fake reviews on the Internet have been fined hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Even if your firm isn't using one of these blatantly bad content strategies, make sure that any content they create for your site includes a clear call-to-action or "next step" for the visitor to take. You must have some way for the visitors who land on any page from a search visit to actually buy your product or become a lead.

Just creating content that gets a high-ranking, but doesn't get visitors to actually do something on the page, is a waste of time.

Sign #9. Driving Irrelevant Traffic

Higher search engine rankings and more traffic aren't worth much in and of themselves. You need to judge an SEO firm's performance on the actual business results generated by higher rankings and traffic.



Take a look at key metrics that help you determine what visitors do once they land on your site, such as lead generation conversion rates, online sales, or time spent on the site. Have you seen those rates increase since the SEO effort, indicating that visitors are qualified and engaged by the content they find there?

Or are those rates going down, while other metrics -- like page bounce rates -- are going up? If people are leaving your optimized pages quickly without taking a desired action or exploring other parts of your site, chances are they weren't qualified prospects to begin with. That means your keyword targeting may be off base.

Sign #10. Offering a One-Time Fix with No Ongoing Maintenance

SEO isn't a one-time project -- it's an ongoing *process*. Your site's content has to be constantly refreshed, inbound links added regularly, and your keyword strategy tweaked according to market trends and performance metrics. And that doesn't even take into account ongoing changes to search engine algorithms that make any page's ranking susceptible to fluctuation over time.



The bottom line is that SEO should be a constant focus for your marketing team – and your agency partner. It's more than just a few structural fixes, a burst of link building, and a one-time content generation push.

In fact, MarketingSherpa's "2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report – SEO Edition" found that marketers who have a formal SEO process that they routinely perform tend to convert 150% more leads than marketers who have no formal process or guidelines for performing SEO.

So if you find a firm proposing promising big improvements from a one-time SEO "package," you're not going to achieve all the benefits that SEO can bring to your business – and you're likely to be looking for help again before you know it.

But part of the burden is on you, too. Even when you outsource SEO, someone from your team should be intimately involved with the entire strategy: understanding the tactics they plan to use; contributing to keyword research and content creation; working on link-building; and so on.

You need a long-term relationship with good communication and a commitment to ongoing SEO maintenance. If you don't have that with your current SEO firm, look elsewhere or consider bringing SEO in-house.

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