

## **How to Improve Your Website Visibility**

Is your salon website lost among thousands of competitors on the Internet? If so, you're not alone. In their rush to bring their businesses online, many salon owners put up a website without having an Internet marketing strategy in place. No thought is given to how customers will find their website or what they'll do when they get there. For many, inadequate planning contributes to a disappointing foray into cyberspace. Don't let that happen to you.

In this article, we'll look at ways to promote your site, improve search engine ranking and draw customers to your website. Online gurus refer to this as Search Engine Marketing (SEM). It encompasses: Banner Ads, Search Engine Advertising, Search Engine Optimization, and Paid Submission Programs. Successful SEM campaigns help you:

- Expand your market reach
- Build brand recognition
- Acquire new customers
- Increase sales

### **Search Engine Marketing (SEM) for Salons**

SEM allocates your Internet marketing dollars to various search engines and directories to gain exposure for your business. Think about your offline marketing efforts. Those dollars are spread between newspapers, yellow pages, direct mail, and other media. So too, online spending should be distributed across various channels.

#### **Banner Ads**

By now, everyone is familiar with banner ads. Advertisers pay a flat CPM rate based on the cost per thousand impressions. Banner ads can be used to generate quality traffic to your website. Consider placing ads on women's site related to beauty or in the online version of your local newspaper.

#### **Search Engines and Directories**

To gain optimal visibility for your salon website, submit your website to the most important search engines - Google, Yahoo! and MSN. The most important directories are Yahoo! Directory and DMOZ. Links coming from them are very valuable.

Search engines and directories fall into two categories: paid and unpaid. Paid models are classified as: Paid Submission, Paid Inclusion, and Pay-per-Click.

#### **Paid Submission Model**

The paid submission model applies to directories that employ human editors to review your website. You pay a yearly fee to be placed in the directory. There is no guarantee that your listing will be approved. However, in most cases it will. The Yahoo! directory carries a hefty fee (\$299/year) so you'll have to consider whether this listing works with your budget. On the plus side, if your website is approved, you'll be included into the directory within seven business days.

The process of directory submission is relatively easy but time consuming. Each one has its own guidelines so be sure to read the instructions.

Choose the appropriate category, and craft a description that includes keywords used to describe your site. You'll find plenty of examples of proper descriptions by looking through others in that category.

Be sure to adhere to character and word count restrictions. Changing directory descriptions is often difficult and sometimes impossible so be sure you're satisfied with your description before you submit. Directory editors make the final judgment on category placement and descriptions. They may change your description or even place it in a different category.

### **Paid Inclusion Model**

With this model, you pay a fee to have your website indexed by the search engine. Inktomi is an example of this model. Inktomi results are found on MSN, Overture, HotBot, and many others. Submit your salon website to Inktomi through one of its partners, such as Lycos or Fast.

Small salons can control costs by only submitting their homepage while larger day spas may find it profitable to list several of their most important pages. Your website is guaranteed to be listed within 72 hours and refreshed every 48 hours. Although paid inclusion guarantees your listing, it does not guarantee where it will rank.

In March 2004, Yahoo! introduced a new search engine called *Site Match* that couples paid inclusion with a pay-for-click model. *Site Match* distributes results across networks including Yahoo!, AltaVista, AlltheWeb and others. *Site Match* services may prove expensive for small salons. Luckily, Yahoo! now offers free search – which is covered later in this article.

### **Pay-per-click Model**

The two most important pay-for-click models are Overture and Google AdWords. Each company distributes listings across partner networks guaranteeing a large audience for your salon website. You'll find these listings at the top and sides of partner sites generally marked "Featured Listings" or "Sponsored Links."

This model operates like an auction with participants bidding on search terms. For instance, if you sell skin care products on your website, you may bid on the search term "skin care products". Each time your ad is clicked, you'll incur a "click" charge based on the bid. When using Overture, be sure to keep your bid in the top five listings for that term. That assures that your listing will appear on partner networks across the Internet.

The key to successful pay-for-click campaigns rests on:

- Keyword selection
- Ad copy
- Bid price
- Distribution partners
- Effective landing pages

Like directories, each pay-per-click engine has its own guidelines. Read them carefully. Write short titles and compelling content for each ad. Be sure to direct customers to the appropriate page on your website. For instance, if your ad is for a "dry skin product," be sure to take your visitor to the page on your website that features dry skin products. Don't make your visitors search for the product when they get there. That's a good way to lose a sale.

Successful pay-per-click ad campaigns start with keyword research. Your research should identify affordable, high-value, "high-odds" keyword phrases that your visitors might use to find your website. Both Overture and Google have tools to research keyword phrases. Use them and refine them to work for your business.

## **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**

Who says there's no free lunch? "Free" search does exist and you can tap into it by building a content rich site that follows guidelines set up by the search engines. Your salon website can appear in the top listings on all three of the major search engines: Google, Yahoo!, and shortly on MSN. To do this, build your website by focusing on important keyword phrases used in your industry. You'll also need to implement measures to ensure your site is indexed.

Over the years, search engines have perfected complex algorithms that return relevant search information based on a number of factors. Three basic elements used to index your site are:

- Keywords and keyword phrases
- Links
- Navigation structure

### **Keywords and Keyword Phrases**

When a web surfer types in the keyword phrase "dry skin product", the search engine goes out and scans millions of documents to find those words. The search results list web pages where those words are found. Search engines look for those words to be strategically placed in the title, visible text, and links.

### **Links**

Links are pathways that allow you to move from one page to another or from one website to another. Both the number of links and the quality of those links determines your link popularity. Search engines rank your site higher based on link popularity. Obtaining quality links from respected sites helps improve your website visibility.

### **Navigation Structure**

Navigation structure allows visitors and search engines to find pages. Examples are: buttons, hyperlinks, and drop-down menus. Just remember, when it comes to navigation, simple is best.

Fix broken links. Search engines and visitors alike can't follow broken links. A broken link is a "dead end" that results in a page error. It's frustrating for visitors and detrimental to ranking because search engines will not index your entire site.

## **Dos and Don'ts**

### **Do build a quality website that features real content.**

The Internet was built to deliver information, hence the term "Information Highway." People are looking for real information to make informed decisions about your products and services. Fill your salon website with useful content, and you will achieve high rankings.

### **Do create an Internet marketing plan and budget – and stick to it.**

Successful day spas and salons earn hundreds (if not thousands) of dollars by using effective online marketing. For as little as \$20-\$100 per month, you'll attract hundreds of visitors to your website.

### **Do submit your website to several search engines and directories.**

Select those that work with your budget, and manually submit using the guidelines posted on each site.

### **Do monitor your search positioning.**

Observe pay-per-click ad campaigns carefully but DON'T get into bidding wars for search terms that you can't afford. Stick to your budget, and make search terms work for you. Concentrate on low cost keyword phrases that describe your website. Get creative.

### **Do seek professional assistance.**

Professional Search Engine Marketing (SEM) improves your chances of getting your website right the first time. Professional SEM saves you lots of time and money leaving you free to do what you do best – run your business.

### **Don't use professionals who promise high rankings.**

Your ranking is dynamic. Search engine algorithms change frequently and what works today may not work tomorrow. Ethical practitioners know this and won't make promises about top positions. The goal of search engine positioning should be a high return on your Internet marketing dollars, not necessarily achieving the number one or two spot on search engines.

### **Don't use tricks with search engines.**

Do-it-yourselfers and unscrupulous professionals are constantly trying to find ways to "trick" search engines. All tricks are eventually discovered and damage your ranking. Google has been known to ban websites that use spam or tricks such as doorway pages. If anyone tells you there is a shortcut or trick, steer clear.

### **Don't use software to "bulk" submit to search engines.**

They simply don't work. Follow the guidelines set out by each search engine and directory. Don't use websites that claim they will submit to thousands of search engines for a nominal fee. They may submit to thousands, but your website won't get into the important engines that were referenced earlier. You need to manually submit. There is no shortcut.

## **Summation**

To attain high rankings in search engines, devise a website strategy that combines search engine and directory submissions with natural or "free" search engine

optimization. Put that plan in place before building the website. A well thought-out strategy will save you time and money on expensive site re-design.

The world of search is dynamic due to technological changes and strategic alignments between companies. What was pertinent last year may not be this year. Keep abreast of the churn within the industry to assure that your Internet marketing dollars are spent wisely. If possible, seek professional advice to improve your marketing return on investment. Professionals know the industry and will keep you apprised of important changes that may affect your ranking.

The subject of search engine services is very complex, but learning the basics will improve your search engine visibility. A high quality website drawing a steady stream of visitors translates into more profit for your salon.