

# CHAPTER ONE:

## EVALUATING WEB SERVICES AND SOFTWARE

Having an effective website can be your gateway to better market presence, more profits and an increased customer base. People use search engines each and every day to look for information and find solutions to their problems. Although it's somewhat difficult to nail down exact search engine use numbers, it's estimated that 49% of all Internet users engage a search engine each day in 2008. Compare that to 2002 when only about a third of Internet users visited a search engine and it becomes clear how important it is to have an effective website. (Fallows)

Doing business online requires a website that works effectively 24/7. Unless you are already in the business in a field related to Internet marketing, you'll likely need a web services specialist or a specific piece of software that will guide you through the complex process of meeting the needs of search engines and visitors alike.

In this book, we'll go over the major categories of search engine optimization and web marketing that your business will need in order to have an effective presence online. Whether it's landing page optimization, content creation or PPC bid management software, you'll find the resources that you need in order to correctly evaluate service providers.

Web service providers come in all different price categories and levels of competency. When you hire a company to work on your website, whether it's working on the content of the website or the traffic coming in, you are handing them the keys to your company's future earnings. It makes sense to investigate their qualifications fully before investing your time and money in working with them. The same goes for any piece of software you may need to help manage your business. You need to understand what it should do for you so you can rely on it for the long term.

Not only is it good business sense to become familiar with the basics of the services you are going to buy but it also protects you from being scammed by the growing multitude of inexperienced providers who are hanging out their shingles. As search engine optimization and other web related services become more important to business, more and more fake experts are emerging in the field. A good looking website and claims of getting you to the first page of Google are not enough to prove the worth of a web services company. This book will arm you with the knowledge that you need to do your due diligence when you are locating and selecting a quality provider, service or software.

## THE KEYS TO FINDING QUALITY PROVIDERS

Throughout the following chapters, we'll look in depth at many important areas of web services. However, there are many characteristics that are common across the board. Looking at these characteristics will help you see at a glance whether or not a company or software is worth your time and your money.

Fortunately, there is a very powerful tool at your disposal for evaluating SEO providers. Any provider worth his or her salt will have a website in place to engage potential clients and show off their skills. Their website will tell you at a glance about their website skills and can give you clues as to how they will approach your site. Even if their services don't relate directly to web design (i.e.: they are a social media optimization company) any provider in the web marketing field should have a good quality website. Make sure the website is updated and see if they have and maintain a blog. If they blog, there should be recent blog posts and lots of activity in the comment area. Keep in mind that a good looking website is not a guarantee of professionalism – but a poorly designed website is definitely a sign that the company doesn't have its act together.

If the website has all of the essential components (which you'll learn about in this book) and is ranking well for the terms you are searching for, then it's a safe bet that the company will be able to meet your needs. Look for a company that ranks within the first page of results for your search terms. For example, if you are looking for "landing page optimization company" they should be ranked high in the search engine results.

In addition to looking at their ranking and their website, you should view the company through the lens of its own specialty area. For example, if you are looking at a content creation company, read the copy on their website. Do a search for articles written by the owner and evaluate the copy. Would you be happy with content of this quality on your website? The same goes for any of the other areas. Look for a strong social media presence for a social media optimization company. Search for videos created by a video SEO firm and evaluate how well they are ranking and the quality of the content.

Another way to evaluate quality providers is to look for official validations and certifications. Depending on the industry, this may not be applicable, but several areas of SEO and web services have official certifications that the providers can test for and receive. Generally speaking, the providers who have taken the time to seek out and get the certification have more experience and knowledge.

There are also several industry wide rankings sites that point out which providers consistently give top quality service to their customers. Sites like [topseos.com](http://www.topseos.com) (<http://www.topseos.com>) evaluate and rank web service providers based on a number of factors.

Look for designations from ranking sites on the provider sites. They can be good indications of the quality of service and the experience that a provider has.

Look for evidence on their website of a portfolio or a previous customer list. An experienced provider should have testimonials, samples or other signs that they have worked with others in the past. If they have a list of previous buyers, you can contact the buyers and inquire about the quality of their work.

Finally, ask around to get leads on quality providers from other website owners that you know. If you belong to any professional organizations or forums related to your industry, it's likely that many of the members have websites of their own and have had experiences with web marketing. Even if their experience was terrible, it will be helpful to know who they used so you can avoid the same fate.

### *General Red Flags*

In this book, we'll highlight red flags that you should watch out for when selecting a SEO company or other type of web services provider. These are practices, strategies or lack thereof that should warn you that a company is not on the level. There are more specific suggestions in each chapter, but here are some general red flags to look out for.

- **Poor quality website:** Since you're interested in improving your own web presence, you know that a professional looking website is a sign of a stable and professional business. Since SEO companies and web service providers are working in this area, they need to have a top quality website that clearly defines their purpose and how they can help you.
- **Guarantees of placement or results:** As you'll learn in the following chapters, SEO and other areas of Internet marketing are evolving and constantly changing. Professional companies do not offer guarantees of getting you in the top spot of Google. The best a company can do for you is to use their knowledge and experience to improve upon your previous search engine, traffic, conversion or other type of results.
- **No clear contact information:** Lack of a contact phone number is a big red flag. Even though most of your communication will probably be done through email, professional companies are available via phone.
- **Underpriced or overpriced services:** By evaluating several companies, you should be able to get a feel for a general price range. Avoid any company that charges rock bottom rates. Their prices may be low for a reason. The same goes for overly

overpriced services, unless your needs in that service area go above and beyond what the average service provider could give you.

- **Negative reviews on the Better Business Bureau or RipOffReport.com:** Both of these sites are great resources for investigating a company's legitimacy. The Better Business Bureau ranks sites on a letter scale and RipOffReport.com collects reports from the general public on their experience with companies of all types. When it comes to the RipOffReport site, be sure to read through the comments because a company has the right to negate or counter the report generated by a former customer.
- **No contract before work starts:** Professional companies spell out exactly what they are going to offer and how much you will be charged beforehand. Do not give out personal information, such as the login name and password to your hosting account, before having a contract with the company.

### *General Questions*

Throughout this book, we'll go over specific questions that you should ask a company who will be providing you with services. However, there are some questions relate to the general nature of a web service company's business practices. Here are sample questions and what to look for in answers to those questions.

- ✓ **What does your pricing structure include and what other services do you offer?**  
They should offer a clear breakdown of what they will do, and what they won't. If they offer this in the form of a formal proposal, the proposal should be informative and not "sales-y."
- ✓ **How long have you been in business? How many clients have you helped?**  
Although their length of time in business is not always a factor in their professionalism, it doesn't hurt to know this. Generally, the longer a track record they have the more likely they'll be able to help your company. However, with some areas that are relatively new, like video SEO, even the experts have short track records with this type of service.
- ✓ **Can I speak with some of your clients?** A professional company won't be afraid to put you in touch with former clients. Since references and testimonials on site can be faked, this is always a good measure of protection.

- ✓ **How much work is expected on my part?** Your web services provider may have different ideas of what you will do and what they will do. Depending on your budget, your needs and your capabilities you may be taking steps with your website before the company gets involved or in the middle of the process. Have them spell out exactly what you'll be required to do so there is no confusion along the way.
- ✓ **What is the payment schedule?** This is good to know beforehand and will avoid any surprises with expected payments.
- ✓ **What type of reporting or results confirmation do you offer?** This will depend on the type of service you are purchasing, but there should be a monthly report or evaluation done on a consistent basis that shows the company's progress in the area you are hiring them to manage.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book will walk you through the basic best practices of each key area in Internet marketing. It will help you to understand what a service provider or software should be offering you in terms of service and help. With any other major purchase for your business, or your personal life, you'll likely do research and figure out what you need before you buy. The same is with Internet services. You need to know what to look for before you can make the right decision.

You can read this book straight through or jump to the section that interests you the most. Each section is a fully contained resource for that particular service area. When you need a new area of service for your website or Internet marketing development, you can refer to this book in order to find the right provider.

There are two basic categories of companies that you'll find in this book – service providers and software programs. There are slight variations in format between the two categories. For the services chapters, we've outlined the important areas of evaluation and included red flags and questions for each specific area. For the software chapters, we've outlined the key areas and then placed a list of red flags at the end of the chapter for your review. Since with a software purchase you'll likely be making your decision based on the website and perhaps a demo, you won't have a need for questions to ask.

It is our hope that this book become a relied upon resource that you can turn to time and time again as your web services needs grow and change. We have done our best to identify major areas of concern and give enough education on these topics so you can become an informed buyer. By reading through the book, learning the basics and paying close attention to the red flag areas, you can buy web services or software with confidence.