

# SBM

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## Unconventional Website Wisdom

### Follow These Tips To Help Your Website Stand Out In A Crowd Of Billions

by Wendy Gauntt

Conventional wisdom: first, you spend lots of money to build a snazzy website, then you spend even more for “Search Engine Optimization,” the so-called science that gets your website to the top of Google’s list. Finally, you sit back and wait for the millions to roll in, right?

Wrong, wrong, and wrong.

First, your website doesn’t need to be snazzy—it needs to be easy to use. Second, search engine optimization started back in the 90s, when you had to differentiate yourself from thousands of other websites. Now, you have to stand out in a crowd of billions. Third, as we’ve seen from the dot-com bust, very few of us will become Internet millionaires. But here are some ideas that will increase the odds.

#### It’s Not About You

Most businesses build self-centered websites, telling what products they offer, where they are, who works there, why they are the best, how long they’ve been around...does this sound familiar? These websites often have dazzling effects like stuff that moves all over your screen, no obvious place to click, maybe even some annoying music.

But picture this: it’s the middle of the night, your prospect is desperate for someone like you, and they need help NOW. Is your website up to the challenge? What about current customers who need assistance? Can they find the answers they need?

With great search engines like Google and Yahoo! just a click away, people won’t waste time browsing sites that don’t have exactly what they want. That impatience has other

implications: no one likes slow-loading pages, excessive scrolling, or complicated sites that require lots of clicks to get where you want to go.

So, what does this mean for your site? First, and foremost, your website should be EASY to navigate and FAST to load. Figure out the top three things visitors will want, then make sure those are accessible from the home page with no more than one **very obvious** click. Test your home page on a dial-up connection to make sure it loads quickly; otherwise visitors will leave even before the home page has finished loading.

Want to sell something? Don’t. People don’t like to be sold, they like to buy. So help buyers understand how to make an informed decision, without appearing overly biased. Provide detailed product information, including instruction manuals and support information, so that current and prospective customers can find everything they might possibly want to know about what you offer. Don’t look for one-time sales—find ways to build trust and nurture customer relationships instead.

Keep visitors coming back by adding fresh new information on a regular basis. Cater to their needs with individualized resources. Give them ways to participate and interact, and make the interaction a worthwhile investment, like customer reviews on Amazon, or buyer feedback on eBay.

#### Peek-A-Boo—Can I Find You?

Early web search sites like Google, Yahoo!, and MSN were quickly followed by consultants who offered “search engine optimization,” a way to get businesses top listings on all the search sites. Back then, search websites weren’t too sophisticated, so it was easy to fool visitors into thinking your

website was the biggest and best, even if it wasn’t. It’s not so easy now.

An example...you may have heard of metatags and keywords. These used to be critical components of any good website, until porn and gambling sites started using fake tags to trick search engines and reel in unsuspecting surfers. Search engines evolved; now they look at the entire contents of your site, making them much harder to fool. There will always be tricks of the trade, but implementing them is expensive and the advantages are temporary.

How high can you get in the search listings? It depends on how you expect people to find you. If someone does a search on my name, they’ll find me right away, because my name is unusual. But if someone needs a technology consultant, my company is just one in a very large pond. Until I become the next Accenture, or maybe Microsoft’s biggest partner, my company is not going to have a high listing. If I were selling purple-eyed puppies, that’s another thing entirely. I’m sure I could get No. 1 placement with that.

What words will people use when they want to find a business like yours? How many competitors will they find? The narrower your focus, the smaller the field and the better your results. Once you figure out what these “search terms” are, repeat them on your site, often. Search engines figure that the more you repeat certain phrases, the more likely your site actually provides information pertaining to those words.

Will people look for you somewhere other than a search engine? Maybe an industry-specific directory or a directory of regional resources? I’m listed on several technology-related sites as well as one of the local papers. I’ve reviewed each listing to make

sure it is clear, specific, and inviting. Links like these not only bring in more visitors, they raise my site's importance in the eyes of the search engines.

Have you considered paid ads? Google Adwords and Overture (which posts to Yahoo! and several others) are inexpensive ways of vaulting to the top of the list, simply because most companies haven't discovered how to use these valuable resources. You set up simple text-based ads, link them to keywords (the "search terms" you identified above), then pay each time someone clicks through to your site, as little as a nickel per click.

Don't forget conventional marketing—press releases, direct mail, and email announcements tell others about your site. An admirer might choose to post a link; press releases can lead to articles, free publicity, and even more links. A technique called viral marketing makes it easy for people to forward specific articles or pages from your website to a friend—the virtual equivalent to "word of mouth" referrals.

### **Ka-Boom!**

About that money rolling in...the short history of the Internet has shown that sites offering a great customer experience are the

ones with staying power. Make yours easy to use, easy to find, easy to come back to, and completely customer-focused. But don't stop there; keep innovating with new information and new ideas so that you stay on top. The dot-com bust is over—get ready for the next Internet boom!

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