



Unmasking Search Engine Myths and Mistakes

A lot of confusion exists in the search engine world, and some of those ideas and omissions can hurt your search engine positions. Read, and take heed.

Myth: It's all about meta tags and submissions

This is the most pervasive and harmful myth of all, one held by many Web designers and developers. All you need to do, many believe, is code your pages with the right meta tags — the KEYWORDS and DESCRIPTION tags, and things like the REVISIT-AFTER and CLASSIFICATION meta tags — and then submit your site to the search engines.

This notion is completely wrong, for various reasons. Most meta tags aren't particularly important, or aren't used by the search engines at all. Without keywords in the page content, the search engines won't index what you need them to index. And submitting to search engines doesn't mean they will index your pages.

Mistake: You don't know your keywords

The vast majority of Web sites are created without the site owners or developers really knowing what keywords are important. (That's okay, perhaps, because most sites are built without any idea of using keywords in the content anyway.) At best, the keywords have been guessed at. At worst — the majority of the cases — nobody's thought of the keywords at all.

Don't guess at your keywords. Do a proper keyword analysis. Two things are bound to happen. You will find that some of your guesses were wrong — people aren't often using some of the phrases you thought would be common. And you'll also discover very important phrases you had no idea about.

Mistake: Building the site and then bringing in the SEO expert

Most companies approach search engine optimization as an afterthought. They build their Web site, and then think, "Right, time to get people to the site." You really shouldn't begin a site until you have considered all the different ways you are going to create traffic to the site. That's like starting to build a road without knowing where it needs to go; if you're not careful, you'll get halfway there and realize "there" is in another direction.

In particular, though, you shouldn't start building a Web site without an understanding of search engines. Most major Web sites these days are built by teams of developers who have little understanding of search engine issues. These sites are launched, and then someone decides to hire a search engine consultant. And the search engine consultant discovers all sorts of unnecessary problems. Good business for the consultant, expensive fixes for the site owner. In addition, Web developers usually don't enjoy working with search marketing experts. They think that all the search engine experts want to do is make the site ugly or remove the dynamism.

This is the furthest from the truth, and a Web developer who refuses to work with an SEO expert may just be worried for his or her job.

Myth: Bad links to your site will hurt its position

Another common myth is that getting links to your site from "bad neighborhoods" (such as link farms, or Web sites unrelated to your site's theme) will hurt your search engine position. This isn't exactly so. It won't help, but it won't hurt, either, unless it is obvious that you are actively interacting with link farms or FFA (Free For All) link pages.

If bad links did hurt your site, you could assassinate your competition by linking to their sites from every lousy link farm and FFA you could find. So the search engines can't use such links to downgrade your site.

Mistake: Your pages are "empty"

This one is a huge problem for many companies; the pages have nothing much for the search engines to index. In some cases, the pages have little or no text that a search engine can read because the words on the page are embedded into images. In other cases, all the words may be real text, but there are very few words . . . and what words there are, are not the right keywords.

To a search engine, *content* means text that it can read and indexed. And whenever you provide text to a search engine, it should be the text that does the most for you, text that will help you be found in the search results. And the more content, the better.

Next time you do a search at a major search engine, keep your eyes peeled for search results that don't say much: the description says *Copyright 2004*, for instance (or, worse, *Copyright 1997*), or *All Rights Reserved*, or perhaps something like *Home · About BMC · Products · Testimonials · Links · E-mail BMC*. These are pages with insufficient content.

Myth: Pay per click is where it's at

Pay per click can be a very important part of a Web site's marketing strategy. It's reliable, predictable, and relatively easy to work with. But it's not the only thing you should be doing. In fact, many companies cannot use PPC because the clicks are too expensive for their particular business model (and click prices are likely to keep rising as search marketing continues to be the hot Internet marketing topic).

The growth in pay per click has been partly caused by the lack of search engine optimization knowledge. Companies build a site without thinking about the search engines, and then don't hire professional expertise to help them get search engine traffic, so they fall back on PPC. Many companies are now spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on PPC; they could complement their PPC campaigns with natural search engine traffic for a small fraction of that cost.

The wonderful thing about PPC advertising and SEO is that the two work hand in hand. Want to know if a word is important enough to optimize for? Get a hundred clicks from your favorite search engine through PPC and look at the conversion rates and ROI (Return on Investment). Want to expand your PPC keyword list? No problem, look at the words that people are already

using to find you as a baseline, and grow your list from these words. (For example, if they are using *rodent racing* to find you, why don't you buy the words *mouse rodent racing*, *rat rodent racing*, and so on?) Many companies are using PPC profitably; just don't assume it's the only way to go