

Organic SEO – Getting Started with Larger Sites

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Commercial websites are getting larger. Driven by the rapid evolution of content management systems, shopping carts, e-biz facilitation, and by the increasing sophistication of Internet retailers, “small” business sites averaging 500+ pages have become common.

Some large sites are very well focused and present relatively few problems for SEOs. Most larger sites however list a wide array of products, services and information. The optimization of large retail sites presents multiple issues for SEOs to work through. Achieving product-specific placements for sites featuring numerous products is much more difficult than achieving placements for smaller, more focused sites. Fortunately, good SEOs are good problem solvers and almost every technical problem has a solution.

A placement campaign for a large site is a long-term venture and clients approaching SEOs should be prepared to be involved in the campaign and to exercise patience while waiting for results. It might even take a few days for the SEO to prepare a preliminary plan for the campaign. There are a number of questions and challenges clients should expect from their SEOs.

First of all, the SEO will want to define a broad range of goals and expectations for the campaign. Meeting a client's expectations is made easier when both the client and the SEO have taken the time to define what those expectations are. Most conflicts between clients and good SEOs tend to stem from a lack of communication regarding client/service expectations. Issues such as perceived time-lines, delivery dates, the staggered nature of achieving Top10 results under multiple keyword phrases and long-term communications are frequently the greatest causes of mid-campaign client concern. Most clients don't fully understand the challenges or the process. Wise SEOs help their clients to understand the process, find ways to mitigate the challenges and temper their expectations with an honest version of campaign realities.

Meeting a client's goals is infinitely less challenging when the client has realistic expectations. Initially, the client's goals are often very straightforward. Clients tend to want Top10 placements under a number of keyword phrases describing their businesses or it's products. After hearing about the wonders of optimization, clients don't always understand that achieving these placements is always easier said than done. With a multi-focused site the idea of achieving multiple keyword targets can set some fairly high expectations. Establishing a series of goals for a large-site campaign is a smart way to create a manageable campaign plan and to manage client/SEO expectations.

Long-term campaign goal setting can be likened to mountain climbing. The climbers study the terrain and create a goal-orientated plan before climbing. When they do begin climbing, they aim to reach a series of plateaus to rest and re-group. Thinking about a long-term placement campaign in terms of attainable plateau-goals creates the conditions for better results.

The first goal should be “brand name” recognition, or placement of the Index page under a narrow range of highly descriptive phrases. These phrases should be the mainstream market keywords describing the best selling products or the types of product the company wishes to brand their site under. With the power of multiple pages, a common theme can be woven through titles and anchor text. Once placements for the Index page under easier keyword phrases are achieved, it is somewhat simpler to reach other plateaus. Subsequent goals would include Top10 placements for the second-level internal pages and eventually, specific-product placements under an increasingly wider array of keyword phrases.

The third set of goals can present another series of expectations and challenges for both clients and SEOs. The Internet allows retailers to “stock” an infinite number of products. For some, the temptation to build huge sites is matched only by the incredible availability of products to sell. As long as they can ship the product to the consumer, they can list the product on their sites. How many keyword phrases does the client wish to rank under? Are there multiple keyword phrases that could be used to find individual products? How deep does this database go anyway?

After establishing initial goals and expectations, the SEO will want to know as much about the client's industry, products and services as possible. Knowing about the sector and the competition helps the SEO learn about the potential visitors the client wants to visit their site. Are the target-visitors corporate buyers or individuals purchasing products from their homes? Are there industry-specific keywords that are used by buyers in the industry? How does the competition market itself? Answering these questions helps SEOs target the “right” visitors and hone in on what should be the strongest performing keyword phrases.

Choosing keyword phrases is half the battle. The other half is using them properly when optimizing the site. The optimization process of a large site is often very complex. Just as SEOs should provide detailed information about techniques and progress in the campaign, clients should provide huge amounts of product detail at the beginning of the campaign.

In most cases, a full SEO effort requires rewriting text. The more detail SEOs receive from their clients, the easier it is for them to craft descriptive, keyword enriched text. When the site in question is a multiple product site, having as much detail as possible is indispensable for SEOs as they struggle to find the right words to build well-crafted sentences. When you are working on someone else's business site, correct is critical. SEOs should not be afraid to request or even demand more information from their clients if they feel it is necessary or if the information provided by the client is insufficient.

Another typical large-site scenario challenging SEOs is the array of Content Management Systems (CMS), shopping carts, and E-commerce facilitators such as Yahoo-Shopping. Each of these types of systems can cause unique issues for different reasons. While most CMS systems share similarities, each presents a learning curve for SEOs used to working on code or in a standard HTML Editor such as Dreamweaver. Every shopping cart, even the most SEO friendly will present challenges for SEOs, and optimizing Yahoo Shopping sites can be as frustrating as polishing a tuba with a tooth-brush. Nevertheless, there are solutions for all problems presented in a technical universe. With complicated sites however, these solutions are often best found working in collaboration with the client's staff. Clients should be prepared to help their SEO smooth over rough patches with other web-technicians working for their business. When negotiating the original agreement, the client should, if possible, supply the SEO with a technical liaison and the contact information for the ISP running their content management system or shopping cart.

Difficulties posed by differing CMS systems and shopping carts can often lead to higher costs for the client. SEOs can shave some time from their estimates by providing SEO consultancy services as opposed to direct hands on services. In other words, the SEO can prepare a document outlining all modifications recommended for the site. This can cut hundreds or even thousands of dollars off the cost of optimization and prevent the SEO from getting bogged down under a steep learning curve. A quick word of advice on this tactic... Prepare and present your consultancy document in NOTEPAD and include line-numbers. The first time I offered consultancy over hands-on work, I presented the information in a WORD document without considering that WORD-formatting code might spill over into the site if the client's IT person cut and pasted the suggested modifications to their site code.

The last major topic a client and SEO will want to cover is long-term responsibility for maintaining and updating the optimization effort on the site. There are dozens of factors to be considered from changes to search engine algorithms (rare) to changes to the client's site (very common). As time moves on, new additions to the client's site and those of the competition will affect rankings gained through the optimization process. Having a maintenance plan or a monthly review of the client's rankings and site should be a part of every optimization contract. Reputable SEOs provide exclusivity under keyword phrases to their clients based on the simple idea that even the best SEO can't make more than one site #1 under any given keyword phrase. Long-term maintenance contracts often serve several purposes. First of all it offers

two levels of insurance for the client by extending keyword-exclusivity and guaranteeing if there is a change in rankings, the SEO will be on top of it as soon as possible. Long-term maintenance agreements also serve to compensate the SEO for lost business stemming from having to turn away other businesses competing for the same keyword phrases. As a large-site campaign is a long-term commitment on the part of the client and the SEO, this form of compensation is more than reasonable.

Finally, the client should be prepared to pay for submission of their large site to directories such as Yahoo, Joe Ant, WebAtlas, and other paid-inclusion directories. The costs of these submissions might end up around \$500 but the effect of making the submissions will be beneficial in the long run. As this is a large site with a staggered optimization plan, the two – three months it will take to fully optimize should be enough time for the site to be reviewed and included in the directories. SEOs should also submit the site to the Open Directory Project (though they should be prepared to be patient) as Google continues to give weight to sites found in the ODP.

When the optimization and submission processes are complete the SEO and client can relax for a couple of weeks to await results. When the results begin to show on the search engines, either more work or immediate kudos are in order. Either way, by this point, the relationship between the SEO and the client should be strong and communicative. Large sites can mean long-term business for an SEO firm and a good SEO can mean increased traffic and strong sales for the client. Keeping the optimization effort simple in the face of complexity pays off in the end with a happy and educated client, and good placements for both the client and the SEO.