

## Readers Concerned about SEO Ethics

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

Two recent columns I wrote about organic search engine marketing have generated a larger than normal amount of reader response. Two weeks ago I wrote about how search advertisers, eager to see immediate results for their investments, were turning to paid-search advertising while ignoring optimization for organic placements. Earlier this week, I wrote about a survey that showed almost 2/3 of search advertisers neglecting to implement SEO recommendations made by third-party vendors (SEO firms). Judging by some of the emails I received from folks who read the articles (some of which were quite pointed but all of which were polite), there are a lot of frustrated advertisers trying to work the Internet. Just to be clear on this, the vast majority were NOT frustrated Viagra advertisers or affiliates but regular business folk, the merchants and marketers we know from Main Street.

The crux of the majority of the emails focused on the subject of trust. Organic search engine optimization is understood to be a best-attempt service and that "best-attempt" attitude has obviously been exploited by the unscrupulous. I received a lot of email from folks who've been burned by unethical or unskilled SEO firms. As a profession, it seems SEO has a long way to go to earn the trust of consumers.

At the same time, search advertisers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their knowledge of the search medium, much of it driven by the massive spike in interest surrounding paid-search advertising. Several smaller advertisers wrote saying basically that paid-search offers guaranteed visibility for their investment and SEO offers potential headaches without guaranteeing anything at all.

Dalen from Dallas TX wrote a long letter in response to the [first article](#) expressing issues he faced when trying to work with organic SEOs who were less expert than they claimed to be. Here is a part of his email, (printed with permission).

"We (the little guys) are faced with scores of so-called SEO "experts" who all claim to be able to get us there, but the truth is that too many of them are just hype and bluster and we have no way to determine who knows what they are doing and who does not. So we are faced with the daunting gamble of dumping money into what can only be at best a good guess. That can be economically unfeasible for most. I have wasted thousands on experts who almost destroyed my rankings because they only looked like they knew what they were doing, and would justify their lack of performance with the worn-out excuse that you can't make any promises in the SEO game, and that it always takes months to see results. By that time, they are gone with your money looking for the next victim." - Frustrated but still hopeful, Dalen

Another reader, Mike Bemis CEO of [Voiceserv.net](#), wrote a short response to the [second article](#) (again, reprinted with permission).

"... I think you missed a point.

We are a young company and watch our pennies pretty carefully. We have been hustled by a couple SEO firms recently. Give me \$6000,5,4,3...Just sign up with us today and we'll do wonders for you. The pitch always sets off alarms.

In addition, I worry (and I suspect others do) that an SEO will successfully get my site blackballed and I'll be worse off than ever."

There's really not much to say about unethical SEO firms ripping off consumers. It is ugly. It is unprofessional. It stinks. Unfortunately, it happens. More than one reader asked me why they should trust the services of an SEO firm. En masse, here is my response.

Search sells stuff. Its medium is made for marketing. Marketing is the sharing of information with consumers through one or more forms of media. Information shared with consumers is generally jazzed up a bit to make it more marketable, regardless of the media in or on which the information is communicated. Search Engine Optimizers (SEOs), the geekier side of the Search Engine Marketing (SEM) industry, have two unique types of consumer to think of when jazzing up a client's website; live visitors and electronic spiders. In order to please both groups, SEOs need to be able to write strong site copy that reads well for humans and spiders. They also have to understand how to structure several different types of sites to provide the most optimal paths for spiders to follow. Good SEOs are creative technicians. Some lean more towards the creative side and others lean more towards the technical side, both of which can be extremely interesting. Great SEO firms staff themselves to create a strong balance of characters and expertise working in a team environment.

SEO is a best attempt service. That means your SEO vendor will make their best attempt. It also means that many attempts to achieve placements are made if the first attempt does not work. Eventually, the vast majority of clients will be satisfied though it might take a few months to get there. Even for the best and most ethical SEO firm however, a small number of clients won't be. It works the same in other forms of advertising. A newspaper ad for one store might draw lots of customers while an ad for a second draws few. There's lots of ways and reasons to explain it but the bottom line is always the same. Some clients are left unsatisfied.

That, in a nutshell, is what ethical organic search engine optimizers can and should do for their clients. There are literally dozens of little alterations SEOs make on client sites and no end to advice a good SEO can provide his or her clients. Quite often, many of these changes and much of the advice might appear to be minor tweaks but when implemented collectively, they should provide a significant boost in search engine placements.

The only way to know whom to trust is to do the research. Every business has a history and for experienced SEO firms, that history is splayed across the web in vivid colour, the good, the bad and the ugly. The easiest way to do this is to go to the major search engines and type in a company name. Everything from positive client testimonials to complaints in various discussion forums will appear. If your potential SEO vendor has been in business for a while and is notable in one way or another, you should find information there.

Any good marketing firm knows the best marketing comes from word-of-mouth experience. Ethical SEO firms tend to be good marketers. Most have agreements with current and previous clients to provide testimonials and most of those clients are happy to share their experiences in a short email or phone conversation. Your potential SEO vendor should be happy to share a list of confirmable past clients to provide verification of their services.

Lastly, sites such as the [SEO Consultants Directory](#) and guides such as the MarketingSherpa [Buyer's Guide to Search Engine Optimization Agencies](#) have gathered information on credible SEO firms. The SEOConsultants directory is a free service that vets entries before listing them. MarketingSherpa's Buyer's Guide surveys previous clients and monitors SEO firms from year to year to provide consumers with invaluable information before investing thousands in organic search marketing.

Organic search engine marketing does work though. Advertisers can avoid getting ripped off by being diligent and learning about the search environment before investing in an SEO firm's services. As the basic sector of the fastest growing facet of mainstream advertising, SEOs need to be more professional, offering a much more accessible and open service to their clients. The sector not only needs to act ethically, it really needs to appear to be ethical. This, from what I gather, is the biggest obstacle faced by professional SEOs.