

March 18, 2005

Bad Business – The Sad State of SEO Perception in the Mainstream Media

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Die-hard baseball fans have spent the past few days watching heavy hitters like Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire testify in front of a US Congressional sub-committee about the use of steroids in baseball. That the world of professional athletes is deeply enmeshed with performance enhancing drugs use is not really a shock for most people. Compounding their need to perform as well or better than their competitors, there are tremendous commercial and financial pressures placed on athletes in our culture. Civic economies are affected by the performance of their sports teams. Multi-million dollar endorsement contracts are awarded to star athletes. An increasing number of athletes are falling to the temptation to boost their performance with artificial assistance. Every major professional league in North America has been contaminated, calling the ethics and integrity of professional sport into question. Based on a few recent articles appearing in the mainstream press, the SEO/SEM world is risking a similar censure.

Yesterday, an article by Adam Penneberg ran in Wired Magazine under the title, "[Search Rank Easy to Manipulate](#)". The piece focused on Greg Boser, CEO of WebGuerrilla, a search marketing firm in Ventura California. Boser has represented the "dark-hat" side of the industry at search conferences and is candid about his use of tactics that nearly everyone else in the sector tend to shy away from. The article, which is a must read for anyone who wants to defend the SEO sector in the future, also mentions link-density tactics used by SEOInc and Submit Express that rely on obtaining thousands of links from seemingly unrelated sites, including, "...cheesy guest books, online diaries, blogs, zany products, porn sites and anyone who honors link exchanges..." The article sums itself up by noting a few other techniques used to fool search engines, including cloaking, blog-link spam, and doorway-pages. It concludes with Boser's statement on spam, "It's any site that ranks above mine."

After reading Penneberg's piece, one might be led to believe that search engine optimization is entirely about manipulating search results by deception. This view is obviously held by long time tech writer Tom Foremski who equates SEO with "black magic" in his recent [SiliconeValleyWatcher](#) entry, "[The purity of search results challenges Google and offers an opening to rivals](#)". Foremski has been writing about tech issues since before some of us were born so let's not dismiss his ideas too quickly. His article actually touches on a familiar lament for many SEOs; the results at Google have been horribly tainted by the massive interest in PageRank exploits. Foremski does mention that there are ethical SEO firms but the thrust of his thoughts goes towards manipulation of Google by the "...few bad ones that have given SEO a dodgy reputation."

Both writers miss the point about search engine optimization and both make a number of assumptions that are simply not based in the reality most of us work in. At the same time however, both point out one of the greatest challenges the sector faces as it and the search-environment mature. The SEO industry is facing a distinct lack of credibility in the mainstream world. Like the taint of steroids in baseball, the lack of credibility isn't news to most in the sector; it is a bit of a setback though.

For years, many in the SEO industry have tried to demystify our sector to combat the "dark-arts" myth. Starting with the granddaddy of search-journalism, SearchEngineWatch, a growing number of

publications give our "secrets" away for free, everyday. SEOs are not magicians but rather a mixture of good writers with technical knowledge. There is no hidden text, slight of hand, or weak links in our chains of success, just very hard, focused work. As an SEO, I spend more time trying to figure out how a particular client's server is set up than I do thinking about how Google's are. Realizing how important long-term credibility is to the growth of our sector, several SEOs have taken individual and associative stands on SEO Ethics though no standard definitions or common codes of conduct have been adopted by the industry.

Nick Wilson, editor of search-focused ThreadWatch.org notes this in his posting, "[Search Marketers Divided, Time for New Definitions?](#)" Wilson sees two distinct types of SEOs, one of which uses aggressive algorithm manipulation, the other using search friendly design and content. He correctly suggests, "Although both groups call themselves Search Engine Optimizers, it's been clear for many years that neither group considers the other to be part of their own." Wilson makes brief points about both groups and offers an important disclaimer for the necessity of generalizing in his explanations. He sums up his post with a call for clarification, one which was echoed by well known SEO Scottie Claibourn when writing about Pennenberg's Wired piece,

"It's this quote that bothers me, *"An entire industry of search engine optimizers, called SEOs, has sprung up, many of which take advantage of loopholes in the way rankings are calculated."* Again, lumping SEO's into the "taking advantage of loopholes" category and ignoring the fact that many of us make real improvements to sites, removing technical obstacles, improving navigation, targeting in on better keywords, and actually building content worth linking to. Oh, silly me... it's all about loopholes and buying links... I've just been doing it the hard way, I guess."

There is a deep divide in the organic side of the search marketing industry and mapping the edge of the ethical abyss is often seen as a matter between practitioner and client. There are serious penalties for failing to note the edge of the ethical abyss as clients of a couple of well known SEO-Spam shops found out last year when they slipped and fell out of Google's index.

Even though the penalties are harsh, some SEOs continue to use dodgy if not outright deceptive tactics as, for the most part, it is the client not the SEO who suffers most in the end. It is important to note however, most SEOs don't use deceptive or illegal tactics. Most are honest hard working combinations of writers and techies who feel a comparison with Web Guerrilla is like comparing a cattle-rancher with Jessie James. Stories of gross manipulation of search engine rankings through deceptive tactics do not serve the honest in our industry well.

The search marketing industry is almost ten years old. So far, only a handful of initiatives have been taken in forming industry associations. The first, [SEMPO](#) has recently elected a new board of directors and is again starting to release studies and whitepapers. Two others, the [SMA-UK](#) and [SMA-NA](#) are struggling to emerge.

This will be a decisive year for many in the SEO sector. The stakes are getting higher and the practice is getting harder. SEOs are cautioned to stay away from use of deceptive tactics. The temporary gain one might get from cheating and spamming is much like the temporary high baseball had two years ago when Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa were chasing the Home Run record. All highs end, and like with our home run hitting heroes, the bigger they become, the harder they fall.

