

SEO...

The Newest Profession?

Search Engine Optimisation is emerging as the newest kid on the block. Already well established in the US, there is a growing demand for the unique skill sets that make up a rigorous SEO strategy and execution plan. SEO consultant Jacqui Jones is one who has watched SEO grow from its early roots – she gives us some history, and some insights...

When I was in my final year at High School in 1990, the world wide web didn't exist. Search engines hadn't been invented and the role of Search Engine Optimisation Consultant (SEO) hadn't even been heard of. Computer classes were barely on the school curriculum as it involved a group of 30 students surrounding a monitor and keyboard, each taking a turn to type basics on screen. It was hardly the ABCs of computing.

My first full time job was at Queensland University of Technology as a computer assistant trainee. The job was to backup humongous mainframes the size of three to six large refrigerators stuck together. Each evening, we would pull out and insert new reels of tape. Screeds of paper would spit out from the dot matrix printer with numbers and text that I did not understand. All I had to do was find certain numbers and write them down in a book. It was all very tedious which led me to great boredom.

One day in 1991 I was introduced to "news groups" at the University. To my delight, this kept me entertained for hours at a time. I was amazed that people from the other side of the world would leave messages according to their topic of interest and others would respond. I didn't know it then, but this was the beginning of the Internet. It was about people, connecting with one another, sharing information.

The traineeship period came to an end. I had to reapply for the role and when asked what my 5 year plan was, I insisted that I would be working in the film industry. Naturally, my colleague, the other trainee, and who was also a German body builder whom ate two size 13



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chickens for lunch every day, landed the role.

I didn't miss the computer assistant role, but boy I missed News Groups and all those people around the world who were also interested in music, film and acting.

A few years had passed, after working in the film and tv industry and doing a stint of travel to Holland and the United Kingdom. Finally back

in Brisbane in 1994, I joined a small multimedia company called DVP Media where we were involved with bleeding edge technologies such as CD-I, CD-ROM and IBM video on-demand services. Video production was required for the education training CD-ROMs we were creating, but later, the business was bought by Telecom New Zealand with a different strategy in mind. Our new focus was the Internet... and in particular, we were tasked with building the first websites for Telecom Xtra, Yellow Pages, Wilson and Horton and more.

The process for creating multimedia and video productions paved the path for creating websites. At that point, no one really knew what they were doing. Together, along with other web agencies and individuals, we were creating the profession of website development. We didn't have project managers... we were called "web producers". We all stood in awe of watching graphics and text load onto Netscape Navigator 1.2 as we huddled around one of our lead writer's computers. Within days, we were all given the same access to explore the world wide web on the information super highway as we clicked away on hyper links (the greatest web invention of all time).

Search engines of the time were Alta Vista, Excite and Hot Bot. Even though these search engines didn't always bring back the results you were specifically looking for, I just accepted that was the way it was. I didn't question "is there a more accurate search engine"? Our team was focused on building websites and did not correlate what we were doing, with what we were searching for online. We did not ask "hey, how

can we get our websites into search engines”?

Our preoccupation with “building” the website, was not unique. Thousands of other web development agencies around the world were in the same boat. Even today, this preoccupation with getting the job done exists in the minds of web designers and developers. Web designers and developers are “creators”, so the thought of ensuring the website is found in search engines in most cases, is secondary to the launch of the site.

By the beginning of 1998, I started a web development agency with two others in Auckland called WEBENZ. It was the same year that Google launched. We had a team of designers, developers, project managers and account managers. We prided ourselves on professionalism and delivering the best website possible for our clients that translated into real business results for them. Unfortunately we kept on losing our staff to an outfit called Web Media. They were hell bent on creating websites that were cool, utilising Flash animation.... and they were indeed incredibly cool. I was still in my early 20's and sometimes wished I worked there too. Even though the temptation was there, we persevered with what we were doing.

Our philosophy was a little different. We wanted to work with clients that wanted their website investment to translate into achieving their marketing goals such as online sales, phone calls, email newsletter subscribers and more. Our websites were not cool. They were highly functional and informative to the end user. WEBENZ attracted clients who were not in the business of entertainment, but rather were retailers or small businesses who required a website to be their active sales person online.

Even though I proclaimed Hot Bot as being my favourite search engine, as soon as I started using Google, I forgot all about the other engines. Pretty much, everyone had the same experience too.

Clients started to ask us about search engines and how they could get to the top of search results. Again, being preoccupied with delivering websites, our 17 year old intern Tony Katavich was given the task of investigating how we could in fact get to the top.

Tony was a quirky character, and he prided himself on being so. We all loved him for being that way. We loved his cowboy hat, his love of wearing safety gear and his passion for treating

search engines like a game. Soon after, Tony reported back the secrets of natural search. Just like the old days of News Groups, people were conversing online centred around the topic of search engines. Emerging leaders in this space, and still are, were the likes of Danny Sullivan, a journalist dedicated to search engine news. We would listen, gather information, tried the techniques and confirmed whether they worked or not.

Tony wasn't a technical person. He wasn't a web designer or programmer. His main strengths were his entrepreneurial spirit, his writing skills, his ability to communicate with people around the world online, his wicked sense of humour and his inquisitive trial and error learning style. We discovered that those very cool flash animated sites would not get found within search engines at all.

Certain search phrases that were used within meta data and within the body copy of text on the site helped get rankings. Sometimes we would even repeat the same word over and over again to get the ranking we wanted. Later this became known as keyword stuffing and was a technique to spam the search engines. Unbeknownst to us, we were involved in black hat (bad) and white hat (good) SEO techniques. Most of the SEO that we did was optimisation of content, and mostly, the industry was focused on this.

No university or school in New Zealand or Australia offered any courses in search engine optimization or paid search placement during that time. I felt a little embarrassed when university lecturers would ask us to write web marketing case studies for their text books, when we, at the time, did not have university qualifications.

SEO and pay per click advertising became a successful part of the business. We used the same approach with affiliate marketing programs. It became a cash cow and essentially was money for jam. Even though this part of the business was taking off, the other half of the business of website design and build was struggling. We were not very good at quoting, we always spent more time on the project than what we were getting paid for and we were losing a lot of cash every month. Eventually we closed the business and the partners went in different paths.

Later I was asked to join Netconcepts, a

How To Spot An SEO Professional...

1. A true professional goes beyond meta tags. They understand SEO is more than keywords on a page.
2. They follow best practices and do not spam search engines.
3. SEOs are obsessed with the number of site pages indexed and their search engine rankings – they like to see these two numbers increase regularly. It's an addiction.
4. However, they are more concerned about generating qualified traffic, than keyword rankings. Some “search phrases” do not generate any traffic at all.
5. Delving in the mind of the user, SEOs explore the true intent behind search queries targeting the right market for their website.
6. SEO experts have wider online marketing skills like site conversion improvement and social media optimisation. Search engines are not just Google, Bing and Yahoo!
7. They do not make any guarantees or false promises. Beware of snakes.



Our philosophy was a little different. We wanted to work with clients that wanted their website investment to translate into achieving their marketing goals such as online sales, phone calls, email newsletter subscribers and more.

leading SEO agency in NZ and US, with Stephan Spencer, Dave Cooper and Nigel Varcoe. Very excited about this prospect, I jumped at the opportunity. I learnt that SEO wasn't all about content, but the way the site was constructed also played a huge part in pages being spidered and indexed by search engines. I lead the SEO consulting team and together we worked with clients in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand, helping them to generate traffic to their sites through the natural search channel.

We found that technically optimised websites contributed to SEO success. This included urls that needed to be clean and tidy, a site structure that was easy for spiders to follow and use of text based navigation, rather than images or flash animation. Technical optimisation and content optimisation were two pieces of the organic search puzzle.

Although a SEO practitioner may not be a programmer as such, they need to know how websites are constructed and be able to speak tech speak with developers in order to educate them on how to build technically optimised sites. Many web developers as mentioned previously are not aware of technical optimisation best practices due to being focused on their task at hand which is developing a website.

When a client technically optimised their site, the content that was being hidden to search spiders, opened up to be accessed. Almost overnight, many clients experienced a 10 or 20 fold increase in their traffic. For clients that did not have content, we educated and worked with their teams to create the type of content their target market actually search for online, thus matching information with search queries.

Over the years, the web has become extremely competitive. In these situations, the third piece of SEO, "building authority" of the website is paramount. This involves requesting and establishing relevant links from on-topic websites to communicate to search engine spiders that the client's content is relevant.

Link building, as it is known, is not an easy task. It is extremely time consuming, however it is worthwhile if implemented correctly. Persistence, communication and relationship building is key. Link building is a type of Online PR. To build links naturally, a website most focus on being the best site it can be with a splash of originality. If people like your site, if they find it useful, entertaining or make them

feel as though they belong, they will link to it from their blogs and social networks.

Sometimes when I see job ads for web developers, they are often asked to also be SEO experts. Asking a person to have excellent development skills, writing skills, relationship building and negotiation skills, creativity and entrepreneurialism is a tall order. Having all these skills in one package is quite rare. I'm sure that some of these people do exist, but more often than not, these people are working for themselves, because they can make more money doing that, than working for the man.

Google was launched in September 1998 and a whole industry has been born out of this invention. There was a saying in the early days of the web that the Internet was like dog years. Every three months equalled one year. It was fast moving and something new was being launched every day. For those in the industry, search engines like Google undergo continual change on a daily basis. Sometimes we don't even appreciate the amount of change that is taking place and we do take it for granted. The old boys are jaded and it takes a lot to impress them.

The Internet and SEO has been the majority of my working life and even though I feel that I've been in the game for quite a while now, the profession itself is relatively new. The SEO profession requires maturity, particularly with tools and methodologies. For most, the humble spreadsheet is the tool of choice for SEO management and at times, this limits efficiency and accuracy.

When my teacher at high school asked me what I was going to do with my life, I had no idea that I would become an SEO Consultant. SEO didn't exist. What has contributed to my own success online is the culmination of all my experiences and interests. Even though I'm not an actor, I speak at public events about SEO. Even though I am not a programmer, I speak their language and we understand each other. Even though I'm not a film producer, I have produced online videos to be found within video search and written articles to assist with link building objectives. Even though I no longer sell lemonade to my neighbours (like I did when I was a kid), my entrepreneurialism helps me help my clients sell more online. 

Key Components of an SEO Strategy

- 1. Creation of a Keyword Strategy**
A roadmap of target search phrases and keyword markets.
- 2. Technical Optimisation**
Programmatic changes to the website to allow search engines to crawl and index pages of the site.
- 3. Content Optimisation**
Massaging targeted terms into existing content or creation of new types of content. Content can include articles, product descriptions, videos, powerpoint slides, images and more.
- 4. Link Building and Online PR**
The analysis and implementation of sites linking back to the target site to increase its authority and relevance more so than its competitors.
- 5. Conversion Analysis and Reporting**
Continual monitoring of website traffic and conversion performance from natural search channels and referrals.



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