

Avoiding Disaster - How to Choose an SEO Firm

There has been a flurry of entrants into the Search Engine Optimisation market in the past year or so. Judging by the horrendous rates some are charging, money rather than service seems to be the main motivation. Judging by the horror stories from clients who have arrived on my doorstep after being ripped off by sharp operators, in some instances there is evidence of a serious deficiency in both ethics and skills in some cases. I have a new client who spent almost \$30,000 last year, with no work having been done on the actual site, no evidence of link increases, and according to traffic statistics, site visitors have gone DOWN by 60% - so read the following sections carefully. So, how do you choose an SEO firm to entrust your business to? I believe that there are some simple checks to put in place before committing yourself to any SEO proposal, no matter how attractive it might seem. How To Shorten Your SEO Short List The following sections list a few ways you can find some potentially good SEO firms, and also eliminate some dodgy ones and thus reduce your chances of being disappointed. How Well Does Their Own Site Rank? Do a search for search engine optimisation, seo rates and/or seo firm on the country-specific version of each of the big 3 major search engines - e.g. Google.co.nz, Yahoo.co.nz or XtraMSN.co.nz. Alternatively, go to the main Google.com etc site, and search for nz seo, seo rates, or new zealand search engine optimisation (or your own country-specific version of those). The market SEO has become very competitive out there, but you should expect the SEO business you are contemplating doing business with to be on Page One on each search engine! If not, drop them from the list of possibles, because how much help could they possibly be to you? A list of 3-5 potential firms should quickly emerge from this process. Request For Proposal From your initial research, you should have a list of contenders you are considering entrusting your business to. Contact each, and request a site review. This will invariably result in a detailed analysis of your site, and a proposal which sets out what remedial action is required and an indicative costing to achieve this. Having now received a series of these, apply the following criteria against each one. Guaranteed Inclusion in Google/Yahoo/MSN If an SEO firm offers a guarantee of inclusion into any major search engine, or assures you that they have a special relationship with a search engine, immediately drop them from the list of possibles. Frankly, search engines simply do not enter into such relationships. That would be as likely as a close friendship between a poacher and a gamekeeper! What Are They Proposing? There are two key ingredients to web site optimisation, and if both are not assessed and addressed, drop the SEO firm's proposal from the list of possibilities! The first is on-site optimisation of individual pages to improve organic or natural search engine rankings. This involves keyword research with associated analysis of the business products and services. This is the most important aspect because it delivers ongoing traffic which is essentially free after the initial work is carried out. The second key element is link analysis and recommended remedial action. Basically, the more links to your site from trusted sites carrying high page rank, the better. Insufficient links means your site is not worth indexing. Proposals to increase your 1-way back-links from web directories and other trusted sites are good. However, should there be any suggestions for participation in link propagation schemes, or place main emphasis on reciprocal link strategies etc, drop the SEO firm from your list because they are not up to date with current best practice. Google Adwords & Yahoo Search Marketing Some SEO firms boast that they are certified Adwords practitioners etc. That's all well and good, but what they mean is that with YOUR money, they are real confident of getting you top placing in the keyword bidding warfare! There can be some short term benefits in that, but guarantees along those lines are not overly helpful to your business. If a proposal places primary emphasis on Pay-Per-Click, slip it down to the bottom of the pile! References Can your SEO firm provide you with some reference sites they've worked on successfully, case studies, and/or some clients you can contact for comment? Bear in mind that there are likely to be some commercial sensitivities that apply constraints. Is There Value in 1 Year Contracts? Frankly, no! The hallmark of a professional, ethical operator will be a fixed price contract to carry out the initial remedial action on the site. As a reassurance, they will usually let you know that ongoing support is available if required, because the rules of the SEO game do keep changing. The best SEO practitioners do not attempt to lock you into 1 year contract because they know the initial work will often take 8-12 weeks to deliver full benefits, and the project cost will usually include a built-in monitoring component over that initial period. It is, in my view, a little unethical to double-dip on the project costs! Not only that, but what if you are not happy with the results of the SEO firm or their level of service? A 1 year contract might just guarantee you receive a full 12 months of unsatisfactory services! My advice - do not lock yourself into a long-term contract until you have grown comfortable with the SEO team you are dealing with Fixed Price Contracts Insist on one! A professional SEO firm will set out exactly what is wrong with your site, and explain the precise remedial action in a coherent and logical fashion. The actual work will be specified and a total cost provided. It is customary to require payment in advance. This is usually 100% for smaller jobs, which I would define as less than \$1500. For larger projects, expect to pay a 50% deposit with balance on completion and/or when Top 30 rankings on agreed keyword terms show a demonstrable improvement. How Much Should It Cost? Well, each proposal should come down to a judgement by each SEO firm on how many hours of work are going to be involved in the project. However, some seem more inclined to make an assessment of your ability to pay in big chunks! There can be obvious, huge discrepancies - its common to see variations of 1000% e.g. you will see that some firms initial cost proposal can be 10 times that of competing operator! From your point of view, you want to know how many pages are going to be amended, what will be done by way of increasing incoming links, are articles being published, and if so, how many? Reduce it to a known quantity, compare apples with apples! When you are systematic about it, the choices become more obvious, and a decision becomes easier! You Need to Know What Will Be Done An SEO professional will involve you at each step of the process, providing you with a preview of all site changes before implementation. You will be able to measure progress of the work on a page by page basis, and see the results in your site traffic statistics as well as SE ranking reports. As in all aspects of life, failing to plan is planning to fail! If there is no plan, no road map, don't expect a happy ending or any rights of redress. Black Hat vs. White Hat SEO There are other danger signs to be aware of. If your SEO proposal suggests cloaking, redirections, doorway pages, hallway pages, invisible text, multiple domain names for duplicated content etc, immediately drop the company from the list of possibles! There are many Black Hat SEO operators who prefer to attempt to subvert the Search Engine

guidelines, essentially looking for rapid, short-term ranking gains by ANY means, instead of taking a responsible, professional approach. If your site is caught up in any scheme like this, banishment from search engine indexes is assured! Essentially, good White Hat SEO involves thoughtful restructuring of site content, within the SE guidelines and parameters, and taking no risks of any kind. Who Are You Dealing With? Does their site have some personal profile information? Are you dealing with a seasoned IT industry professional, a kid fresh out of high school, someone moonlighting from their primary job, or maybe somebody who has English as a second (or third) language? SEO is very much about words, semantics, languages skills and this, plus broad SEO project experience over several years, should be a key indicator to consider! Partnerships Your web site is an integral part of your business. The people you work with should have an intuitive understanding of your business, products and services, and should by now have demonstrated that they have given your particular circumstances some personal attention. Some, on the other hand, may have merely used automated site assessment tools. From the initial proposal, and exchange of emails with questions and answers to clarify any issues that have arisen, do you feel a sense of rapport with anyone? The best people to work with are those you are comfortable with. I hope that this has proven a useful and thought-provoking summary of how to weed out the space cadets, cowboys and make-a-quick-buck operators. I really hope you do find yourself a competent, professional SEO practitioner, because they are out there toiling away, doing a great job for great people like you! Good luck!

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