



Three Tips for Going Local with Search Engine Optimization

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May 5, 2009

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Many advisors are unable to take full advantage of the potential the web offers to help grow their practices. Some are intimidated by the technology or the cost, while others worry they lack the expertise to use online capabilities effectively. Still others fear the global reach of the web is too broad for their practice (which is typically very local) and see online marketing and PR efforts as an inefficient use of their resources – both human and financial.

How do you make the most of the web? How do you maximize the effectiveness of your online efforts? How do you target only the geography and topics in which you specialize?

The answer...Go local using "Search Engine Optimization (SEO)."

Three Tips for Search Engine Optimization

A high percentage of your clients are probably local – whether that's because of the licenses you hold or because your business has grown through referrals. Your marketing, advertising and PR is highly targeted to the geography you serve or where you hope to expand. Trusted "local" resources such as the Yellow Pages and the local newspaper are being replaced by the more "global" search engines Google and Yahoo. Cutting through the highly-competitive clutter and rising to the top of organic search engine results in your neighborhood requires three important steps.

While paid inclusion or pay-per-click (PPC) programs are another way to improve your website or blog's visibility on search engine results pages, this article focuses on improving the visibility of your web site and blog through non-paid searches, or "organic" search results. This is especially important now that budgets are tightening.

1. Choose the right "Keywords" to maximize your exposure. Keywords and key phrases are very important, because they allow you to tailor your online marketing efforts to get the best organic search engine results. Organic search engine listings are the unpaid search results you typically see on the left-hand side of the search engine results page(s) on search engines like Google and Yahoo. Appearing on the first page



of organic search listings will help your marketing efforts tremendously. To get page one organic search listings, use techniques that will allow you to choose the right keywords and then “optimize” them within your online marketing efforts.

To learn how people would find you online, start by researching popular keywords and phrases for your industry within your local markets. It’s easy. You know how people describe your practice. You know how you promote yourself. Keywords which help you optimize search engine results might include terms such as "fee-based financial advisor," "estate planner," "CPA," or "insurance agent." Keywords can also define the services you provide such as "retirement planning," "investment advice" or "wealth management." And, of course, the name of your firm is an important keyword.

Regional differences in the way your services are described affect keywords. Being raised in Kentucky, I always referred to any fizzy soft drink as simply “Coke.” In other regions, people might call it “soda” or “pop.” To sell soft drinks to folks from my hometown, I’d have to optimize my site for the keyword “Coke.”

2. Decide how “local” you want to go. Identify the markets you serve or could potentially serve by including the states where you are licensed, the cities where you practice, the communities where you are active and neighborhood where you live.

Depending upon your niche of expertise, you may choose to target the cities, neighborhoods and communities where there is a high concentration of wealth, a high concentration of young professionals or a high concentration of retirees.

Prioritize your list of target markets by identifying top-tier and second-tier markets. Work hardest to get traction within your top-tier markets. To accomplish this, you’ll need to use the techniques that allow you to optimize your top-tier markets in separate blog posts.

3. Use your keywords in your content *and* in your “meta data” to get best results. “Meta data” sounds esoteric, but it is simply a term for the titles, descriptions, and keywords that search engines use (in addition to your actual content) to index your web site or your blog postings. In some cases you’ll have direct control over the definition of this meta data, and in other cases the meta data for each blog posting will be borrowed by the blog application from your actual blog post’s title or the “tags” and “labels” you assign your blog entry. The closer your overall content matches your meta data, the better.

If you wrote an article about Michael Jordan, but titled it "Fabulous Bed and Breakfast Deals," search engines might score the article higher for searches that include the keyword phrase “Bed and Breakfast” than for searches that include the keyword phrase "Michael Jordan." That's because search engines typically index pages from the top down. Since titles appear at the top of the pages, they are weighted more heavily by



search engines. Likewise, subtitles, first sentences, first paragraphs, links, and other prominent items will be weighted more heavily: Be sure these elements include your most important keywords—such as your specialties and target markets—to optimize search results.

If you are using a technology solution like “Blogger” to set up your blog, you’ll need to use your most important keywords in your blog’s name and description. Your blog’s name will then become the meta data “title” for all pages in your blog, and will be paired with your blog post titles. Whether building a web page or posting on a blog, you’ll need to pepper your keywords throughout your content where appropriate. But exercise some patience and restraint. While keyword density is good, too much of a good thing can be a killer—resulting in what some SEO experts refer to as “keyword spamming.”

Labels and tags are another form of meta data which you can use to optimize your keywords and give an added dimension to the way you organize and describe your content—to potentially boost your organic search engine optimization efforts.

For blogging technology platforms like “Blogger” and “Wordpress,” a community of bloggers and developers has already built tools and “widgets” to help optimize your blog. While there are too many of these to list in this article, be sure to go to the website where you downloaded your technology platform to browse for SEO tools, or simply type “best <insert platform name> SEO tools” to find the solutions for your platform and instructions for installing them.

TCB WITH SEO

If your local branch of the public library had a large portion of books with plain, white spines lacking titles or author names, you’d likely ignore those books in favor of the ones whose titles or authors you could read easily on the spine. Your website and blog postings must be easy for search engines to index—in the way that *you* want them to be indexed. That’s the essence of Search Engine Optimization.

Keeping your keywords in mind whenever you are blogging or searching for ideas for your blog will reinforce the vast opportunities for promoting your expertise via the web. Public policy, changes to local tax laws, retirement news, and all other locally relevant topics that you can relate back to your practice or areas of practice become excellent opportunities for you to promote yourself locally via electronic media.

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