



## Search Engine Marketing for Financial Advisors

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As the Yellow Pages continue their slow decline toward obsolescence, financial advisors must find new ways to help local prospects discover them.

Web portals now provide instant access to a wealth of information. The fact that search engines have become the starting point for the majority of people seeking services has transformed them into a veritable marketplace—one where business owners, journalists and marketers all compete for attention.

With over 141 million unique visitors in February 2010, according to Compete.com, Google is currently the world's most popular website. Given the high traffic that Yahoo!, Bing and other second-tier search engines also receive, information seekers represent a huge opportunity for your business.

But is search engine marketing worthwhile? It certainly requires more effort than the now-outmoded Yellow Pages model, where you could simply buy an ad in the proper section and passively watch the slow but steady trickle of leads roll in. "Searchers either find you, or they find your competitors," says former *ClickZ* Editor-in-Chief Rebecca Lieb. Is search engine marketing worthwhile? Only if you want potential clients to find *you* instead of your competitors.

### **The Basics: PPC and SEO**

So how do you take advantage of search engine marketing as a financial advisor? The goal of search engine marketing is to ensure that your website appears on as many results pages as possible for queries that relate to your business.

Every time your listing is displayed, that's an "impression." You can generate impressions for your listing in two ways. One tactic is pay-per-click (PPC) marketing, wherein you pay to be included as a search result. The other is search engine optimization (SEO) – tailoring your site to be search-engine friendly and to rank highly on searches in your category.



## ***Making the Right Impression: Keyword Selection***

For both PPC and SEO, the first step to a successful search engine marketing campaign is picking the right keywords. Not all impressions are created equal, and search engine marketing is inherently competitive. Only one website can rank first for a given search term, so pick the right battles.

For financial advisors, location should be the primary filter to use in keyword selection. The majority of your prospects will only want to work with local advisors. Add city, state, county, or other location modifiers to more general keywords to narrow down your target.

Let's say that you are a financial advisor located in Anytown, USA. An impression on the search "Anytown financial advisor" is much more valuable to your business than more general terms like "finance" or even "financial advisor." While broader terms are searched more frequently and can potentially drive lots of traffic, this traffic won't be targeted, and it gives you a lower chance of success.

When selecting keywords, start with five to ten terms that describe your business. From there, online tools can help expand your set of keywords. An effective – and free – service is Google AdWords' [Keyword Tool](#), which generates not only keyword ideas, but also the estimated number of searchers per month, the price to appear as a top-three sponsored ad result for each keyword, and a general scale of competitiveness. This will help you choose keywords with enough search traffic to matter, while steering clear of overly competitive terms.

You can also spy on your competitors for ideas. [SpyFu.com](#) is an analytics tool that accesses your competitors' top PPC and SEO keywords. You can also view your competitors' website code and look at the "meta" fields in the HTML code to see how they describe themselves to

### **SEO/SEM TOOLS**

There are many useful tools and widgets to help build and track your search engine marketing efforts. Here are a few to help you get started:

#### **PPC NETWORKS**

**Google Adwords:**

<http://adwords.google.com>

**Yahoo! Advertising:**

<http://advertising.yahoo.com>

**Microsoft adCenter:**

<http://adcenter.microsoft.com>

#### **PPC TOOLS**

**Google Adwords Keyword Tool:**

<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>

**Spyfu:**

<http://www.spyfu.com>

#### **SEO TOOLS**

**Yahoo! Site Explorer:**

<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/>

**Raven SEO Tools:**

<http://raven-seo-tools.com/>

**SEO Check:**

<http://seocheck.org/>

**Google Analytics:**

<http://www.google.com/analytics>

#### **DIRECTORIES**

**Open Directory Project:**

<http://www.dmoz.org>

**Yahoo! Directory:**

<http://dir.yahoo.com>



searchers – and uncover their target SEO keywords in the process. (See Figure 1 below).

Compile all the keywords that fit your criteria into a spreadsheet. This will be your master keyword list representing the entire search marketplace where you would like your website to appear.

### **Pay-per-click advertising**

Now that you have the right keywords, you can move on to reaching your customers. The three top search engines (Google, Yahoo! and Bing) all have advertising platforms that allow you to pay per click for inclusion in search results. These are the results that show up on either the top or right-hand side of the page and are referred to as “sponsored listings.”

Before we explore the PPC model, let’s take a moment to think about what we’re hoping to accomplish.

*What’s not going to happen:* Someone sees your listing on a search engine results page, visits your website, pokes around, and immediately wires you a large sum of money. While this would be ideal, relationships and trust still matter. Your PPC campaign and website alone are not going to close the deal.

*What might happen:* Someone sees your listing on a search engine results page, visits your website, pokes around, and contacts you to set up a meeting or request more information. Your website may not be able to turn visitors into clients, but it can certainly turn them into leads.

### ***Campaign structure***

Search engines allow you to organize and customize your PPC campaigns using “ad groups,” which contain related keywords, and you can designate different “ad copy” to appear for each ad group, tailored to fit that specific set of keywords. You can also determine a corresponding “landing page.” It’s important to understand all three of these concepts, so let me elaborate.

*Ad groups:* Groups of keywords may be organized into buckets called “ad groups.” The keywords in your ad groups should be closely related to one another semantically. This will allow you to write highly targeted ad copy that’s relevant to all keywords within the group. You can create multiple ad groups (up to 2,000 per campaign), so don’t feel the need to cram too many keywords into one group. An ‘asset location’ ad group might contain the following keywords, for example: asset allocation, retirement asset allocation, strategic asset allocation, asset location, asset location article, etc.

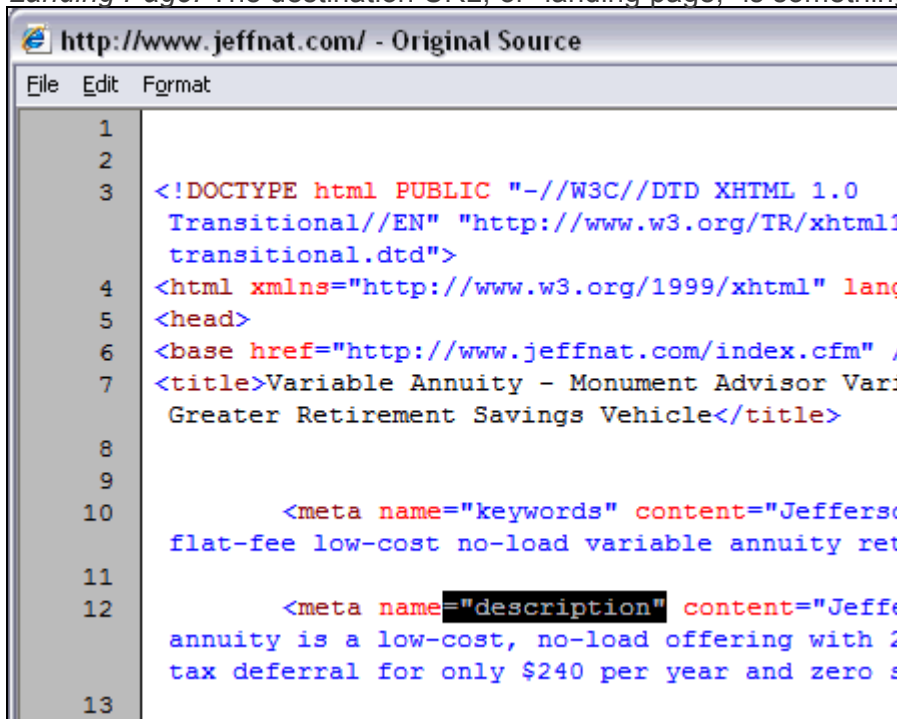
*Ad copy:* Now that your keywords are categorized into ad groups, the next step is to write ad copy that speaks directly to the individual who would be searching for that term. PPC has a distinct advantage over other types of lead generation mechanisms in that you can identify the criteria used in each search. If you draft your ad copy accordingly, you'll have much greater success. Search engines have strict character limits on the length of your ad copy. When developing your ideas for ad copy, stay within these general limits:

- Headline: 25 characters*
- Two lines of Body Copy: 35 characters each*
- Display URL: 35 characters*

For the 'asset location' ad group, for example, one could craft an ad like the one below:

*Asset Location*  
*Download a Free Article on How*  
*Asset Location may Increase Returns*  
[www.JeffNat.com](http://www.JeffNat.com)

*Landing Page:* The destination URL, or "landing page," is something that a searcher will never



```

1
2
3 <!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.0
  Transitional//EN" "http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml1
  transitional.dtd">
4 <html xmlns="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml" lang
5 <head>
6 <base href="http://www.jeffnat.com/index.cfm" /
7 <title>Variable Annuity - Monument Advisor Vari
  Greater Retirement Savings Vehicle</title>
8
9
10 <meta name="keywords" content="Jefferson
  flat-fee low-cost no-load variable annuity returns" /
11
12 <meta name="description" content="Jefferson
  annuity is a low-cost, no-load offering with 2
  tax deferral for only $240 per year and zero s
13
  
```

see – but it is perhaps the most important part of your ad copy. It is where the searcher will be directed if he or she clicks on your ad. When designing the page where a specific ad will land, consider the keywords being searched and the assertions of your ad copy – then *make sure* that the page you direct them to reinforces these themes! Click [here](#) to see a landing page for the 'asset location' ad group example cited above.

*Figure 1: In the Internet Explorer web browser, select 'Source' from the 'View' menu to see keywords your competitors are targeting in their meta data.*



Searchers are highly motivated; they are looking for information, goods or services. Your landing page must have an obvious call to action or next step. Make it clear that if the searcher likes what they see, you'd be happy to talk with them in person or discuss their financial goals over coffee. If your website doesn't have a way for people to submit their contact information and requests, incorporate one.

### ***Budgets and bidding***

You can spend as much or as little as you like on PPC campaigns, so you don't have to worry about high upfront costs as a barrier. That said, how much should you budget? One approach is to compare the value of a new lead to your acceptable cost-per-lead. This depends on the percentage of visitors you expect to leave their information, also known as your onsite conversion rate. If a new lead is worth \$150 and your onsite conversion rate is 2%, you don't want to spend more than \$3.00 per click.

If you're not sure what your conversion rate might be, consider running a pilot campaign with a small budget to find out. From there you can adjust your cost-per-click bids to fit within your allowable cost-per-lead. Higher bids yield higher placement on the search engine results page – and ultimately more traffic. Lowering your cost-per-click will be more efficient on a cost-per-lead basis, but it will also reduce the total number of leads that you will generate.

### ***Location targeting***

PPC campaigns give you the option of running your ads in geographically-targeted areas. Google Ad Words allows such targeting by country, state, city, or user-defined regions. Financial advisors should draw a 50-mile radius around your zip code as an effective proxy for your market. By targeting only searchers in those areas, you reduce wasted clicks and unnecessary spending, as local visitors are more likely to become leads, and local leads are in turn more likely to become clients.

### **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**

PPC campaigns are fast, low-commitment and relatively easy to implement. But while they are a great way to generate quality traffic and quick feedback, they also cost money.

Over time, it's possible to generate the same amount of traffic to your website organically – and free of charge – with search engine optimization (SEO). A properly optimized site will rank as a top result for searches you care about, making your site easier for prospective clients to discover at no cost to you.

What's the catch? SEO requires more time and effort than PPC. Typical SEO campaigns can take six to 12 months to realize a significant boost in traffic.



### ***What does being optimized mean?***

When your website is indexed by a search engine, there are two basic questions that the search engine attempts to answer:

- What is your website about?
- How does your site rank (relative to other websites) in terms of its relevance to a search term?

Search engines determine the answers to these questions according to a host of factors, both internal to your site and outside it.

Your website code is one of the easier SEO variables to control. That code includes things that appear on the page (text), and things your visitors don't see (like metadata). Keep these things in mind as you work on your 'onsite' optimization.

### ***Metadata (On-site)***

The metadata on each page of your site tells search engines what you want them to know about your website. The two main types of metadata are your meta-keywords and meta-description. Both describe your site, but whereas keywords are limited to single words or short phrases, descriptions consist of one or two complete sentences.

Because lots of people made a habit of cramming irrelevant keywords into their 'meta keywords' fields over the years, search engines have all but phased meta keywords out of SEO algorithms. Your meta-description, however, is still important, and you can work important keywords into it.

Your description must accurately describe your business and include keywords that you want to optimize. Search engines index your site from the top down, and they assign more weight to items at the top. Always put your most important keywords first, and consider starting your meta-description with your most-coveted keyword as well. Be sure to create metadata for *all* of your website pages.

A good meta description might also include your key value proposition and should be limited to roughly 150 characters. "Louisville financial planner John Doe builds successful retirement plans using tactical asset management to navigate volatile market conditions," would be a strong meta description for a tactical asset manager in Louisville, KY.

### ***Site structure (On-site)***

Search engines also judge a website based on how it is built and organized. Your home page is the most important page. Pages accessible from the home page come next,



followed by pages that are only accessible from subpages. Ensure that the pages on your site are organized in a hierarchical flow from the home page down. Put your highest-value keywords on the home page and less important ones further down in the hierarchy. Because the URLs of your pages impact SEO, consider integrating your high-value keywords into the actual URLs of top-level pages: i.e. 'louisvillefinancialplanner.htm' could be the 'about us' page for a financial planner in Louisville, KY. Keywords may even be integrated into your domain name: '[www.louisvillefinancialplanning.com](http://www.louisvillefinancialplanning.com),' would be a terrifically optimized domain name.

### **Content (On-site)**

Last, but certainly not least: fine-tune the content of your website to improve search results. Search engines are essentially "reading" your website several times a day. Make sure that the keywords you care about appear in the text of the page being optimized. If the page is about your retirement plan management, optimize it for keywords related to retirement, such as retirement planning, IRA, 401k, annuity, and retirement income stream. Also note how often your keyword appears in the text – a factor known as "keyword density." Ideal keyword density is an often-debated topic, but one appearance in every 30-50 words is generally considered a good range.

Consider developing new content to build out the breadth of your website. Many firms achieve this with a blog. Blogs offer a relatively low-maintenance way of adding search engine-friendly content. If you write topically, you may find that some of your articles rank high for terms related to the news of the day. Having a wealth of content will also be valuable as you move into offsite optimization.

With proper optimization, Google and other search engines should accurately understand your website and which keywords are (or aren't) relevant. So on-site techniques can help make sure that, when someone searches for "Anytown Financial Advisor," you'll be in the mix for a top spot. But how do search engines determine who deserves to be shown first?

### **Inbound links (off-site)**

One of the most critical factors that search engines consider is how many inbound links, or "backlinks," point to your website. A backlink serves as a third-party "stamp of approval," which helps search engines determine your level of authority on the web. All backlinks are not created equal. Every website has an "authority rating," and a backlink from a high-authority site – such as the online edition of *The Wall Street Journal* – matters more than one from a low-authority site.

You can use the Yahoo! [Site Explorer](#) tool to track the number of inbound links your website has. You can also use it to see how many backlinks your competitors have and identify the sites that are linking to them. Any site that links to your competitors may be willing to link to you.



Any content you distribute online should contain a backlink to you. This can include a mention of your company in a local article, a press release or white papers that you publish. Article submission sites like [SubmitYourArticle.com](http://SubmitYourArticle.com) and [iSnare.com](http://iSnare.com) will post original articles for a small fee and distribute them throughout the web. This can be a powerful way to translate content and thought leadership into valuable backlinks that will improve your SEO.

### **Directories (off-site)**

Search engines also rely on directories to value and categorize websites. The two main directories to consider for registration are [DMOZ Open Directory Project](http://DMOZ.org) and [Yahoo! Directory](http://Yahoo.com). Registering with DMOZ is free, while Yahoo! is a paid service (\$299 a year). Before you register with these directories, explore the categories available and make sure you submit your site in the most relevant category possible. As with keyword selection, the more specific you can be with categorization, the greater the likelihood that search engines will properly index your site.

### **Track your success**

SEO requires consistent and dedicated effort. Without a way to track your success, it can be easy to fall off course. Fortunately, there are several tools that track your rankings for targeted keywords and allow you to view your progress. [Rank Checker](#) is a free Firefox plug-in that will output current rankings for up to 50 keywords at a time. [Raven SEO Tools](#) and [SEO Check](#) are paid services that will track your current rankings, record your changes over time, and produce reports for you.

Web analytics tools are another important way to measure success. Google offers a free, comprehensive analytics package, [Google Analytics](http://Google.com). Simply insert a snippet of code in your pages, and Google will compile traffic data across a large number of metrics. These reports allow you to see the top keywords driving traffic to your site along with total traffic from search engines, both paid and non-paid. If your SEO initiative is successful, you should see non-paid traffic from search engines rise steadily over time.

With a concerted search engine marketing effort, you will be able to drive qualified traffic and leads to your website. PPC and SEO, combined with the other tools in your marketing toolbox, can help you feed your pipeline and grow your business.

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