

# 6 STEPS TO SEARCH ENGINE BOOKINGS



by Matthew Dunn

- “More than 90 percent of visitors now reach Web sites through search engines, rather than typing in the URL.” (Sally Falkow, quoted on BTB Online)
- Less than 20 million hours a month are racked up in Web searches (Nielsen/Netratings)
- “Hotels” routinely ranks among the top few-hundred terms searched on the general-purpose engines.
- Google alone responds to over 100,000 queries per day for the term “hotel,” not including variations such as “hotel in....”

**G**o to your favorite search page and query on “New York hotels.” Scan the results. Is your hotel (owned or favored) on the list? How high up is it?

Whether you own a hotel in New York or not, if you get customers through the Web, read on.

On the surface the biggest IPO of the year, Google, has little to do with hotels and hospitality. Google and other search engines help people find Web page data. But Google is a viable \$2 billion public offering because search is a business. Let me put it more controversially—Web search results are a marketing channel.

It's anything but that straightforward, of course. What does matching mean? How do bits from different sites relate to one another? And most importantly (from a business perspective) what determines the order of results?

Order of search results is a business issue because people act on what they see. If your site link does not show up in the first 10 to 20 returns from a search, potential customers will probably find a satisfactory alternative within the first 10 to 20. If you do have a hotel in New York and a Web presence and didn't find it in your search results, you may want to think about search engine optimization (SEO).

SEO is a relatively young niche industry, sprung into existence by the popularity of search coupled with its immaturity. The Web wasn't designed around search engines, and search engines' spiders and indices handle Web content in divergent and mysterious ways. It's a perfect cottage industry for consultants and startups; knowledge of search engines and rankings is a valuable commodity.

What this cottage industry realizes is that search re-

sults drive business.

Before delving into the SEO world further, it's important to understand how SEO fits in with the world of paid advertising on the Web. There are companies that provide search services and sell ads. Your search on “New York hotels” would likely turn up one set of pages in search results, and another in sponsored results or banner ads. Consumers are astute about the difference, though. In general, paid-for links do not have the same effect as high search rankings. If you have concentrated your search engine investment solely on paid-for links, you've missed out on more than 75 percent of your potential search engine traffic. That's a great deal of beds that never got booked.

What might a search engine optimization company do for you? Within their niche the more successful (and mature) SEO companies provide assistance with the range of issues that affect your search rankings. These include:

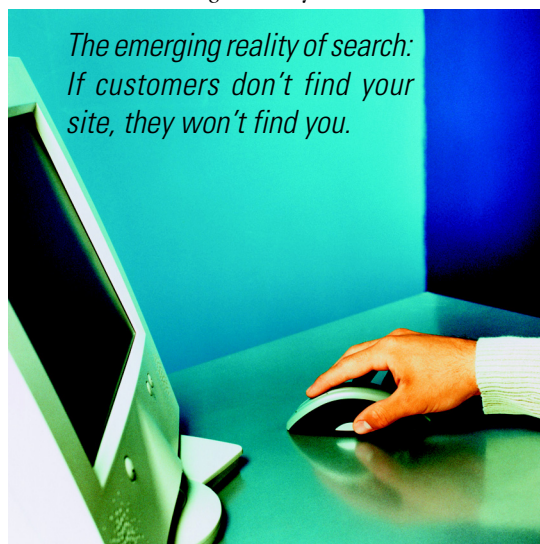
- Validating the HTML structures in your critical search pages (spiders are fussy)
- Managing the key content tags (e.g., meta keywords) which affect search result ranking
- Utilizing the robots.txt file effectively
- Managing the submission processes that make search engines aware of your site

Some of these look to be straightforward technical tasks—things your Web master should handle. For several reasons, they're not.

The search engine phenomenon has evolved rapidly, and each of the major search engines has its own quirks and sensitivities. The raison d'être of the SEO industry is to stay abreast of the evolution of the search engines, and bring that knowledge to bear on their clients' sites. Balancing the marketing strategies of your company against the idiosyncrasies of the search engines is an ongoing task, made trickier still by changes in consumer behavior.

If those factors weren't complicated enough, the Web itself is a dynamic construct, with 10 million new pages every day. The search engine companies themselves are (at this point) cranking out innovations as rapidly as possible to keep up with their mission. Case in point: Google (by far the largest engine) updated the method by which it calculates page rank some months ago. The rankings of many companies in key search results changed overnight—causing, no doubt, both consternation and billable hours in the SEO business.

Looking at search engine optimization companies is kind of refreshing, in a way; they have the feel of the Web companies from a decade ago. There are grandiose claims, secret formulas, oversized egos and exorbitant rates—hyper-



*The emerging reality of search:  
If customers don't find your  
site, they won't find you.*

lubricated by their own profession. (How do you keep secrets in the search business? Interesting paradox.)

Should you invest in search engine optimization? That's not a question to be answered in an article, of course, but it is reasonable to urge you to understand the search engine channel and its effect (actual and potential) on your business. Are you getting business because you're getting found? Are you missing business because you can't be found?

In broad strokes, Web search works like this: Bits of Web site content are read by automated programs—labeled spiders, crawlers, bots and other appetizing things. These bits are analyzed and correlated (continuously) to produce an index of the Web. People inquire about specific words or phrases. Search engines return matching results, ordered in some meaningful way.

The answer to both is likely yes; optimization has the potential to change the ratio between them.

How do you go about choosing the right SEO partner? Well, hopefully most of us learned a bit about hype-deflation in the last few years. Evaluate SEO partners as you would others. Look at the company, people and mission; force quantification and validation of everything; and delve into references.

If your marketing is handled by an agency, it's worth your time to ask about their methods for ensuring your search engine placement. Some of the well-known industry marketing firms—like Thayer Interactive—explicitly include search engine marketing in their list of competencies. If your

agency is new to the SEO discipline, it's reasonable to expect low costs early in their learning curve.

Let me go out on a bit of a critical limb, though, based on experience. While consulting on search optimization may have short-term value, it isn't a long-range solution. The environment is too dynamic; the adjustments required to manage rankings, too arduous and repetitive for hand-crafted solutions. Manual search optimization makes about as much sense as coding Web pages by hand. The firms most likely to stay the course here, in my opinion, are those that provide a customized-but-automated solution, based on SEO expertise rather than continual, expensive advice. One firm worth pointing out here, Metamend, appears to combine set-and-forget SEO services with a hotel focus. Try their freebie optimization test to get a snapshot of your SEO opportunity at <http://hotels.metamend.com/>.

Search is a young and raw phenomenon, an evolution necessary to make the overwhelming Web accessible. It seems unfair that only the top 10 to 20 rankings matter, but it's also natural. Our customers are overwhelmed with choices and will take the most accessible route to meet their needs. They'll act on what they see—perhaps even more than what they remember, despite our attempts to make them brand loyal. Search results are the brand of the Web.

An in-depth white paper titled "6 Steps to Search Engine Bookings" can be downloaded at <http://www.socratech.com/whitepapers/>.

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