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**Getting your hands dirty – Applying SEO tactics**

**By Rob Sullivan**

Sometimes there is an advantage to hiring a smaller SEO firm. This is because in some cases the firms that only do consulting lose sight of the details. This is because they have forgotten how to take care of the details.

In this article I explain why you need to keep focus on those details and how you can do it, especially if you are one of those SEO "consultants."

In my day job I am one of the "consultants." With most of my clients I define the long term strategy required to ensure their online success. I've taken sites with zero visibility and virtually no pages indexed to having over 4 million indexed pages and more than tripling their search engine referrals in an extremely competitive market space.

I've also worked with still other sites in other very competitive industries and been able to bring them the most qualified traffic, increasing their conversions by four fold and more.

And it did it all without once opening a web editor or FTPing a file.

Yet sometimes I miss the old days. The days when I used to build sitemaps and create meta tags. Nowadays most of my clients are database driven sites that have teams of tech's in foreign countries that implement my recommendations.

And that's why I keep a few clients that need the hands on experience (That and I have my own sites to play with). I do this because I don't want to lose my edge - my ability to properly optimize a page.

Because while I can still draw satisfaction when I see a client crack the top 3 on a competitive phrase for the first time, and I can rejoice with them when their sales hit a new all time record, I sometimes wish I could have been more a part of that success then just a voice at the other end of the phone.

But I've also learned something else in my time in this industry. That is, you have to have sites you can touch and "get your hands dirty" so that you can more intimately understand what is really affecting

the engines.

Let me give you an example.

I recently had a client who sold discount test vouchers for technical exams. It's a pretty competitive market in that you are always competing for Microsoft for "MCSE test" and Comp TIA for "A+ exam" but it was rewarding because this client said to me "do what you need to." And that's what I did (short of cloaking and other black hat tactics mind you - I kept it all above board).

So I had a bit of a routine. On one month I'd optimize, on the second month I'd do link building and on the third month I'd build/tweak content and re-optimize.

I kept this routine for over a year and in that time I saw his rankings and traffic steadily improve.

But the way I did it wasn't merely consulting - extolling the virtues of best practices. It was in the doing - the looking at the currently ranking pages to see what they did, and then emulating it if I felt it was appropriate. Trying to find the little loopholes which could make a big difference to my client.

It was a time when I could put on my headphones, turn on my favorite music and tune out the world as I analyzed rankings, counted keywords, tweaked meta tags and bolded specific phrases.

To me this is search marketing. It's not always the grand long term plans that make the difference, it's the small changes that can have the most impact sometimes. Should I punctuate my title tag and throw off my character count? Should I use commas in my keywords tags? All these simple little questions that, while I do deal with on a daily basis, I was able to actually work on myself and see the results.

Sometimes I think it is the big consultants who miss out on this stuff.

You see, too often we in the industry have clients to which we say "go and write your content to target both your user and the engines" and generally they ask one of two questions: "How?" Which is relatively easy to answer and "Why?" Which is harder but not impossible.

Now, you can give them the canned response. You know the one I'm talking about - we all use a variation of it: "You write for your user by ensuring the text is compelling enough to encourage them to click. You write for engines by ensuring "x" number of keyword occurrences happen every "y" times within the body text" or something to that effect. It's a pat answer. It's a safe answer.

But sometimes you get caught when they ask why?

Now again, there is a pat answer to why, but when the client digs deeper because they aren't satisfied with your response, you can get stumped.

It is the hands on experience that you need to maintain to help you really answer why. Without it, one day you will get caught by a client who asks why. I've seen it happen time and time again when a

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"consultant" who hasn't got their hands dirty in quite a few months or years gets asked the most basic of questions, but they can't answer because their knowledge isn't up to date.

This is why I have a stable of hands on clients, and also why I have an assortment of my own sites. Because I can test on my sites and if successful I move it to my clients. Then if it's still successful (which in most cases it is) I make it part of my consulting routine.

It is also because of this hands on routine that I can answer questions like "what is the sandbox." Because I've seen the effects and I've experienced what could be considered a "sandbox" (it's not really a sandbox by the way. You can read my opinion of it here) so I can explain it to my clients.

In fact most of my knowledge is hands on. I can explain why a blog is beneficial because I've seen my own blogs take off. I've set up search engine friendly discussion forums and designed search engine friendly web sites on my own, so I can properly walk clients through what they need to do.

You see, I've earned my SEO education differently than many others in the industry. I've learned it

through doing, while many merely read through a few search engine forums and proclaim themselves "experts." Granted, there are those that are more technically inclined than me, and some have more true marketing experience than me, but no too many can combine practical knowledge with a vision of the future to devise an all encompassing search marketing strategy to take them through the next year or two.

Now I know some will be saying "with the state of flux of the engines, you can't plan a 2 year SEO campaign." But I have to tell you that you can. I've done it. I have clients that we started doing targeted, relevant link building two years ago. Do you know what happened with them and Jagger? They improved.

I'll agree that most of my campaigns are shorter - 6 months to a year - but I also like to shoot for the moon - plan what will be the next big tactic to employ. In fact, I'm going through such a process right now with some clients. Telling them what they need to plan for in the next 2 years and you know what? Based on what I've seen in the previous few years, I don't think I'm that far off.

And it's all because I can not only tell you what to do, I can show you. How many SEO consultants can say that?

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## **What Makes For Ethical Search Engine Optimization Tactics?**

**By Gabriel Adams**

If you've hung around in the search engine optimization industry (a.k.a. SEO industry) very long, you've probably heard the debate on ethical SEO tactics. Or, as it is often put, white hat tactics versus black hat tactics.

What exactly makes a search engine optimization tactic ethical or unethical? According to the dictionary, an ethical practice is one "conforming to accepted standards of social or professional behavior". For search engine optimization, I believe that we should get at least some of the "accepted standards" from the search engines themselves.

Some SEO experts would interject that the search engines don't want search engine optimizers to exist at all, so if we ask the search engines, all search engine optimization is unethical. That's not true, though. Google itself says that "Many SEOs provide useful services for website owners...However, a few unethical SEOs have given the industry a black eye."

So...what makes an unethical SEO? Once again, Google has an opinion on the subject: "Avoid tricks ...to improve search engine rankings. A good rule of thumb is whether you'd feel comfortable explaining what you've done to a website that competes with you."

Perhaps a better way to put it would be this: You've gotten a phone call from Sam, who is a Google search results quality enforcement officer. He says: "John, I see that you are ranked #1 on the keyword xyz. I want to be sure that you did this in an ethical manner. What methods did you use?" If you feel comfortable telling Google how you got top ranked, then you're probably OK.

Of course, those are only general guidelines. Read the Google and Yahoo webmaster guidelines. You'll find many specifics. You'll also find that the golden rule of ethical search engine optimization is: "Don't do anything to trick the search engines, or to represent your pages differently to the search engines than you do your human visitors."

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