



## Ask an Expert

Steve Strauss

### Searching for business? Look to your Web marketing

**Q:** My company's website doesn't attract nearly as much traffic as I think it should. I have used services to submit it to a variety of search engines, but that hasn't helped. What do other businesses do to drive traffic to their sites?

**Christina**

**A:** What you are talking about, Christina, is something called search engine optimization (SEO). When you type key words into Google and those fortunate few websites get listed first, that is search engine optimization. When a website is specifically designed so that it is friendly to the tools that search engines use to analyze websites (called spiders), that is also search engine optimization. And when you decide to re-design your site so that it gets higher rankings, that too is search engine optimization.

To better answer your question, I spoke last week with a SEO expert. Alyah Rafeh runs a top-notch Richmond, Va.-based company called **ActiveNation** ([www.activation.com](http://www.activation.com)). **ActiveNation** specializes in creative web design, using online marketing principles and the latest Web programming technologies. Alyah specifically brings years of international marketing expertise to the question of using your website to grow your business.

While there are several things you can do to your site to make it more attractive and thus to increase its search engine compatibility (see below), the main thing to understand is that SEO is "a popularity contest," says Rafeh. The important thing, she says, is that you have a site that is clean, visually pleasing, and easy to navigate, that way "people will like the site, have a good user experience, and want to come back." This translates into increased traffic, and the more popular your site is, the better insofar as SEO goes. So an easily navigated, well-designed site is the foundation upon which you must build.

After that, there are several other things you can do to increase your search engine rankings:

**Consider carefully your site setup:** Rafeh warns that traditionally, search engine spiders have had a hard time indexing sites which rely heavily on Flash programming and as such reducing the amount of Flash on your site may increase its SEO. That said, Google apparently has been beta-testing software that would allow its spiders to analyze Flash offerings, but that is still in its infancy, so don't overdo the Flash animation. The same is true for sites designed with frames.

**Know what your customers are searching for:** Whatever keywords your customers would (hopefully) use to find your site must be used throughout your site, but especially in your meta tags (the title and words describing the page). Choose and use these keywords carefully. Avoid using broad terms like "skis." Instead, you want to use more specific terms like "Solomon freestyle skis."

If you want to get really geeky about this, type in the keywords you want people to use to come to your site or page and see what competitive sites come up. Then surf on over to those pages and view the source HTML code and look at their keywords in their meta tags.

**Link up:** Because one thing search engine spiders look at is the quality of links in and out of your site, be sure to get some quality links. One way is to pay for a commercial listing at Yahoo! Having Yahoo link to your site helps, even if you have to pay for it.

It is similarly a good idea to engage in some quality link exchanges with other good sites.

**Advertise your site:** Alyah Rafeh stresses that SEO should be considered part of your overall marketing efforts, and as such, you should advertise your site, both online and off, so that your web traffic increases.

Finally, she notes that even if you are not selling online, one of the first things people do these days when looking to buy goods and services is to check out a company's website. So her first piece of advice — have a good, clean website — pertains to all of us, whether SEO is our goal or not.

**Today's tip:** Phil Holland is the founder of Yum Yum Donuts. He says that the single biggest mistake people make when starting a business is not picking the right business. "If there is a business for which you have special insights that will give you a competitive advantage, it would be a mistake not to include it at the top of your list of businesses to evaluate for yourself," he says.

Ask an Expert appears Mondays. You can e-mail Steve Strauss at: [sstrauss@mrallbiz.com](mailto:sstrauss@mrallbiz.com). And you can click here to see previous columns. Steven D. Strauss is a lawyer, author and speaker who specializes in small business and entrepreneurship. He is this year's SBA Small Business Journalist of the Year. His latest book is The Small Business Bible. You can sign up for his free newsletter, "Small Business Success Secrets!" at his website — [www.mrallbiz.com](http://www.mrallbiz.com).