Since eight-out-of-ten web
users track down useful
sites through a search
engine, a successful site is
one that is search engine-
friendly, says David Green.

Stand out in a crowd

According to Forrester Research, search sites (engines and directories) originate 80 per cent of all web site traffic. With individuals and companies widely using the internet to research buying decisions, visibility on the web is critical. IDC report *Web positioning as a critical e-marketing tool,* based on a survey of 792 companies in the UK, Germany, France, Spain and Italy, noted three strategic objectives in optimising a company's presence on the web.

Firstly, it noted that visibility on key search sites was critical in the early stages of web site and market development. This involves being listed in the appropriate category of a directory listing and search engine results, directly related to the company's core target market. The second key objective is to generate qualified traffic for targeted marketing of products and services. The third more tactical objective is the respective ranking of a company with its competitors.

To achieve these goals, web sites must be optimised for indexing by search engines. This requires web copy that incorporates the keywords relevant to the target audience, effective customisation of the page/browser title and meta tags on every page, design issues such as tables and frames, and securing quality links to your site.

Once optimised, the web site must be submitted to computer-compiled search engines and manually edited directories for inclusion in their indexes. Companies can adopt a more quantitative approach by choosing to automate this process using specialist software or services. Alternatively, they can adopt a more qualitative approach by submitting selected optimised pages manually. This can be done either internally or using a specialised external agency.

While companies can pay for inclusion with a search engine or directory, an increasing number of companies are willing to pay for performance, whereby they bid against competitors to sponsor keywords relevant to their business. If a user conducts a search using the sponsored keyword or phrase, the sponsor's paid listing will appear near the top of the first screen. These paid-for results used to be innocuously incorporated within the general editorial search results until the US Federal Trade Commission recently recommended that search services improve disclosure of paid content within their listings. As a result of its move, search results that match sponsored keywords are now usually differentiated clearly,

The better netter: benefits of improving your web site's presence

■ Specified objectives readily translate into measurable deliverables and metrics. These can demonstrate the return on investment, providing a solid basis for securing future funding for existing and additional activities.
■ Given the global homogeneity of the web, the processes and documentation that you will have produced can be easily replicated to other parts of your organisation, such as the code of practices for

other countries. Not only does this demonstrate a good knowledge of sharing practices, it also generates economies of scale for the organisation as a whole.
■ The improved reporting and referral information generated by such a project will be invaluable for online/web promotional activity that will increasingly become an integral element of future direct marketing and advertising campaigns.

for example, by being positioned to the far right-hand side of the screen.

Securing a strong search ranking requires effort – and on an ongoing basis. According to Inktomi, 75 per cent of users click on the top five results of a search engine. Companies should typically set themselves a timeline of up to one year for evaluating results. Even before one evaluates successes

in terms of generated sales, customer leads, competitor benchmarking and brand awareness and perception, there are several other obvious benefits to improving your web site's presence on the net (see box above).

The goal is not to drive greater volumes of traffic to your site per se, but greater volumes of relevant traffic to the relevant sections of your site.

While web sites are designed with their audience in mind, the needs of an important constituent of that audience, search engine spiders, are often overlooked. Typically this leads to companies instigating an expensive post-launch review of the site in a drive to make pages more amenable to indexing by search engines.

So how do you target search spiders? Create

succinct, descriptive and unique titles for all pages – these are the first things spiders read. Always use the keyword and page description meta tag fields. While not all search engines will consider keyword meta tags, some use them to categorise your page. Both the page title and page description will be displayed in a search engine's results so encourage searchers to click on your link and not a competitor's.

Within the content that appears on screen, you can kill two birds with one stone. Usability tests show that web site visitors prefer to scan pages for visual clues, such as words in bold or hyperlinks. Although relevance-ranking algorithms vary between search engines, they generally attach greater weight to words near the top of a page, in bold, as part of a subhead or a hyperlink.

If you were to grey out all plain text words on your webpage, what is left is typically referred to as microtext. These words in bold, subheads and hyperlinks should give visitors an indication of the content on the page at a glance and help them decide quickly if the page is relevant. This same microtext also helps ensure your page ranks highly for the keywords you've emphasised. Writing for the web is a very different discipline to other marketing communications.

Always use alternative text on all graphic items except any blank GIFs that may be used to control layout. Similarly, provide text files that correspond to Flash files, as Google and Inktomi do not crawl Flash files. Some search engines also won't list a site that opens with a splash page as redirects are often construed as spam. Tables and frames can also cause some problems for spiders. For expert advice you may wish to consult a search engine consultant – a whole industry has grown up around search engine optimisation.

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Identify consultants and agencies at www.seopros.org and www.seoconsultants.com. Search engines give greater weight to sites that have many other sites linking to them, particularly if the referring site is a high-quality, topic-related site (a popular web directory or industry portal, for example).

Another way to boost link ratings is to identify, approach and solicit links from relevant third-party web sites. There are several advantages to conducting this systematically. The first is it will bring about an increase in quality traffic. Links from related sites will bring greater volumes of relevant traffic to the appropriate pages; for example, links from university careers web pages and recruitment web sites would be directed to your careers web pages.

The second is branding. Increasing the presence of your company on groups of related web sites not only creates brand awareness, it helps brand identity so that your company becomes associated with a particular service the web user may not have known about previously. The likelihood of users clicking on the hyperlink to visit particular pages on your site will be much greater if they are repeatedly exposed to it.

When improper or out-of-date references are detected, ask the offending sites to amend their listing. This works in their benefit since it updates the information on their own site.

Remember to 'hug' a competitor's presence – identify and target sites that have links to competitors' web sites and if appropriate, approach the editors of these sites and request a link to your site also. Conducting research on search engines and directories would identify such sites. For example, although the syntax varies across search engines, you can easily identify all of
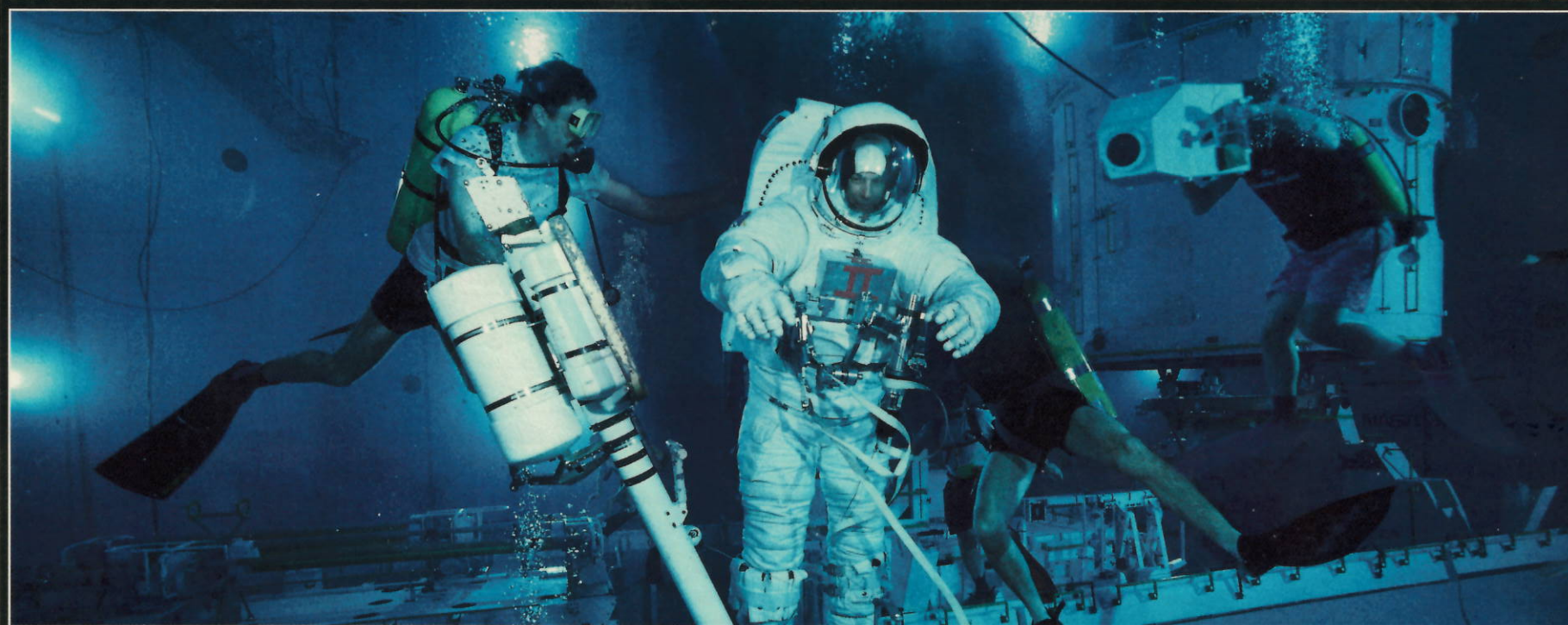
the sites that link to your own site by entering 'link: www.mysite.com'.

It is important that all research results and requests to third parties for a link to your site are documented. This provides an audit trail and a record of all correspondence in the event that you later request that a web site remove the link to your site. Documentation also allows more effective management reports and greater measurement of activities and success.

You can also consider reciprocal links with selected sites – this would benefit both parties. However, because you should determine and communicate the protocols for establishing such links, devise a weblinks policy that defines which sites are desirable and which are undesirable. And avoid artificial links from link exchange programs and link farms. These do not constitute quality links and will not improve your ranking on search engines, indeed they could be construed as a form of spam and end up being detrimental.

David Green is web and e-marketing manager EMEA at Deloitte & Touche.

Next month: the process of submitting your site to search engines. Why are manual submissions winning over automated positioning software, despite the functionality such tools provide? Following Lycos' announcement that it is to enter the paid-performance market and compete with Overture, E-Spotting and Google, search engines are becoming central to online marketing activity, whether by building brands or generating qualified leads.