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How Much Does It Cost To Optimize a Web Site?

By **KELLY SPORS**

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From *The Wall Street Journal Online*

Question: We own a dance-wear Internet store and are completely confused about search-engine optimizers. Are they of value to a smaller company, like us? One optimizer quoted us \$40,000 to enhance our Web site and improve our ranking.

--David Darkoch, Cleveland

Answer: Here's the risk: You shell out \$40,000 hiring a search-engine optimizer to revamp your Web site in hopes of improving your search rankings, only to end up still buried in page four of Google search results for your products.

Online businesses trying to maximize the use of natural search-engine results should aim to land in the top 10 results, ideally the top five, because most online shoppers won't dig through multiple pages to find you. So it's usually not worth spending wads of money on consultants that can't somehow guarantee you'll appear at or near the top of rankings.

Email your questions about starting a business.



Please include your name, city and state. If you don't want your name used in our column, please indicate that. Due to volume of mail received, we regret that we cannot answer every question.

Another quandary for small businesses is that search-engine consultants' prices vary so widely -- often anywhere from \$1,000 to \$50,000 -- sometimes for the same types of consulting services, that businesses don't always feel confident they're getting their money's worth.

Jim Kitchen, president of Spring Break Travel, a Chapel Hill, N.C., student-travel-tour operator spent four years and hired a few different consulting firms to try and propel his Web site's ranking from "basically nonexistent" to the top three for results on popular search terms for his industry including "spring break trips" and "spring break." He's achieved his goal, but not without some frustration and lackluster results along the way. "You really

have to be careful about who you hire," Mr. Kitchen says. "They don't all do the same quality of work."

Small businesses should try improving their search rankings in-house before hiring professional help, says Ryan Allis, chief executive of Virante Inc., a search-engine marketing firm in Durham, N.C., one of the firms Mr. Kitchen consulted. Simply knowing what so-called spiders, programs that search-engines use to harvest information from Web sites and produce results, look for can help you tailor your Web site in a way to boost results.

The most beneficial steps, Mr. Allis says, include figuring out the most prevalent keywords people use when searching for your products online and placing them frequently and relevantly on your Web site, getting related Web sites to link to your site, and adding extra content.

Helpful online tools such as Yahoo's Keyword Selector, available at searchmarketing.yahoo.com/rc/srch, show how often certain words or phrases were searched in the previous month. The phrase "dance wear," for instance, was searched 36,053 times in August, while "dance clothes" was searched only 4,198 times, Yahoo's tool shows. The goal: focus on the most

commonly searched keywords that describe your products with the least amount of competition from other Web sites.

This may take some research and you'll want to pick at least a handful of different words or phrases. You might also pick phrases so local customers can find you, such as "Cleveland dance wear." You'll want to sprinkle the content of your home page and site with the chosen keywords and include at least one in the title tag -- which appears in the blue bar at the top of the Web browser. Don't make the mistake of trying to fool the spiders by hiding keywords in invisible text. Spiders have become sophisticated enough to sniff out sites blatantly manipulating the system and can penalize them.

Another factor in search-engine rankings is how many other Web sites link to yours, especially well-ranked ones. You might, for instance, ask dance schools to post a link to your Web site in exchange for you posting a link to theirs.

Generating extra content -- say a primer on finding a leotard that fits -- that's related to your Web site's products will also help.

If you're unsatisfied with your own attempts to improve search rankings, then think about hiring outside help. But take bids from several firms, and get a list of previous clients to interview and see how much their search rankings improved.

Remember, you can always resort to paid search results using programs such as Google's pay-per-click AdWords program instead of spending thousands on natural rankings.

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