



## Is Search Engine Optimization Worth It? SEO and the ROI Debacle



Search Engine Marketing allows you to meet prospective customers at the exact moment they're interested in your product or service.

By Michael M. Murray  
Vice President  
Fathom SEO  
[www.fathomseo.com](http://www.fathomseo.com)  
216.369.2220  
866.RANK.YOU  
©Copyright 2006 Fathom SEO



## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>An Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Measurement Failings</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Making An Educated Decision About Whether SEO Might Work</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Working Against ROI</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Failure May Not Be SEO. It Might Be You</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>10 Ways Search Engine Optimization Firms Waste Your Money</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Protecting Against the Wrong Move</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Return on Investment (ROI) Trends</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>What If Your Website Is Deficient? SEO Worthiness and Readiness</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>B2B Search Engine and Internet Interest</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>Consumer Online Search Behavior</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Clearing Up the One-Time Effort Myth</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>Remember, It's All About ROI</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>SEO and ROI Summary</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>About Fathom SEO</b> .....	<b>39</b>



## Executive Summary

Don't waste your money on search engine optimization (SEO).

It doesn't mean you should avoid spending money on search engine optimization.

But be smart about it. Decide soon whether it makes sense to pursue SEO at all through outsourcing, hiring an expert or training your staff.

Your decision comes down to the following:

1. Competency of your SEO team
2. What you sell and how you sell it
3. Viability of your website (is it first-rate?)
4. Whether there is an online market (even people who research online and then buy using other means)
5. Money

Among your many questions as you ponder this decision should be this whopper: How many products or services do you need to sell over what period of time (including the lifetime value of customers) to justify the expense of SEO?

As you proceed, be aware of the fact that your profitability through search engine optimization can be hindered by a convergence of forces, including:

### 1. Tactical Ignorance

If your staff or consultants lack expertise, intuition or both, a program is destined to fail in some respects.

### 2. Labor Shortage

Nearly 60% of marketers believe a shortage has affected their strategy or *will* impact it in the next 12 months, according to MarketingSherpa's 2006 "Search Marketing Benchmark Survey."

### 3. Credibility Woes

Controversies abound about best practices and training. SEO leaders find themselves in a frenzy over everything from how to weave keywords into copy to link popularity building techniques. The polarization among SEO experts spills over to marketers in the rest of the business world who aren't always sure which side is correct.

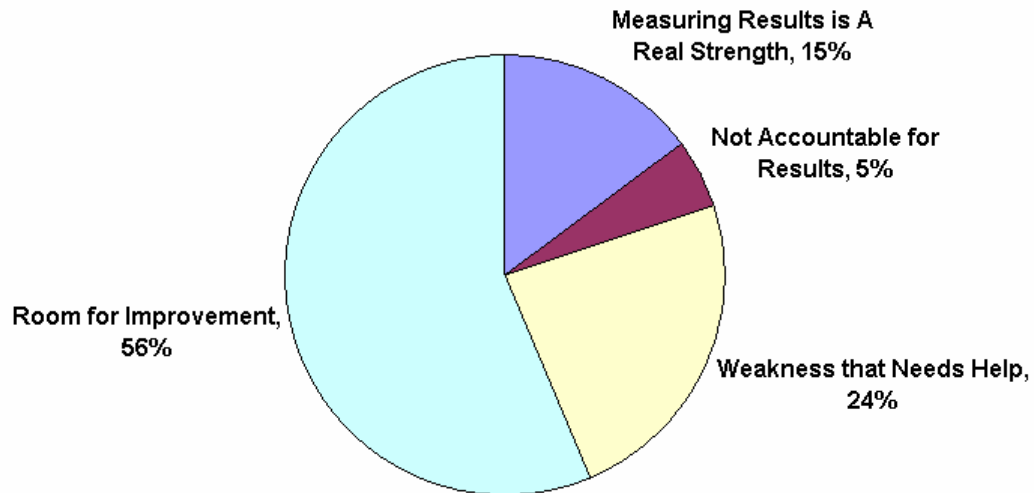
### 4. Lack of ROI Accountability

If a business has measurement shortcomings (lack of log files or a weak web analytics program), it makes it tough to define and obtain a healthy ROI. Marketers need to be held accountable for what they pledge to accomplish, and a good review of a site's log files on a consistent basis can provide a wealth of information. Too often, someone's job isn't on the line because they're busy putting out other fires with the many roles and duties they assume.



### How Would You Currently Rate Your Organization's Web Marketing Performance?

Source: 2006 WebTrends CMO Web-Smart Report



Our white paper tackles a wide range of issues, including factors to consider when analyzing the competency of the experts you use, the merits and condition of your own website and your ability to effectively define and measure ROI.

It's easy for people to trumpet the growth of the search engine optimization industry. And it has been increasing – one national study shows an improvement of more than 100% in just the last two years. The SEO market is estimated to generate at least \$800 million per year in revenues. Some could easily say the total is much higher because of spending that simply doesn't get recorded in surveys.

Unfortunately, many companies are just throwing their money at the wind, much like they do with paid advertising (also known as pay-per-click or PPC). In fact, PPC is the main reason some believe the global search engine marketing industry will reach \$33 billion by 2010.

But back to ROI *for* SEO.

If your staff is going to tackle the algorithmic dance that is SEO, and yet lacks time or core competencies in this area, you very well may spend valuable money and crucial resources for little or no gain. Get the wrong consultant and you might feel robbed. Your own company won't help matters if your ROI strategy has holes.

In other words, do you really understand your conversions, customer acquisition costs, website



usability, calls to action and how to measure everything? If you rank well for competitive keywords and phrases and get the corresponding traffic, will visitors buy? Do you have a compelling message, a great product or service, and incentives? What's your reputation?

Here's the good news: Many businesses don't need to sell many products or services to pay for natural search engine optimization. Prices and margins may vary, but there are many examples across different industry lines where the volume doesn't need to be a burden. Tracking SEO's role in the sale requires more thought.

We'll examine all of these questions, as well as explore industry trends, SEO credibility issues, B2B and B2C search behavior patterns, how effectively companies measure ROI and much more.

For starters, go to Google and search to see if your industry is represented when you enter logical phrases. Where are you? At the top or nowhere to be seen?

It's amazing how companies can still sit on their hands after looking at their poor search standings compared to how frequently people search for what they sell. We've encountered five main reasons:

1. They just don't get it! All of the facts in the world won't persuade them about the efficacy of SEO.
2. They're financially depleted. Marketing is often the first expense to be frozen. Why spend money to attract business when you have no business?
3. They're doing just fine without the extra revenue search engine optimization could trigger (paid advertising could be driving traffic – at a steep price).
4. They don't know what step to take or how far to go (We call this being "SEO-challenged").
5. No one is accountable. Clearly, no one gets chewed out very much and no one worries about losing their job for negligent job performance. "Lighting a fire" under someone in this scenario is foreign to the culture.

Is SEO worth the money? It is if you align an ongoing search engine optimization program with an effective website. Neither has to be perfect, but you need to have seasoned and committed professionals in place to make reasonable headway.

Search engine optimization can be likened to gardening. You need to start with good soil and faithfully nourish the plants for them to grow. SEO requires regular attention and care as well.

Let's show you how to get started.





## An Introduction

*"Advertisers should be spending more time, effort, and money towards improving their natural search results."*

-- Geoff Ramsey, eMarketer CEO, commenting at a 2006 conference on earlier SEO user preference and conversion trends

Corporate online sales growth will continue to suffer amid the fury of four nasty and powerfully disconcerting search engine optimization forces: tactical ignorance, an industry labor shortage, credibility woes and limited ROI accountability.

Can you say "Opportunity Cost?"

Black marks like those don't bode well for naïve or lethargic businesses that may simply be turning a blind eye to how people search and the search engine visibility advances of companies in their own industries.



Although companies may be good at calculating ROI in some marketing disciplines, they can't show positive SEO numbers if they lack online measurement skills (or execution) and just sitting around waiting for something to happen.

The owner of a regional furniture chain we approached seemed surprised that someone would search online and not reach one of his stores through traditional means. After offering that sales had slowed, he showed a slight interest in SEO. He left the next steps to marketing executives who have yet to initiate any search engine optimization endeavor despite monitoring the industry for several years.

SEO gridlock prevails when jobs aren't on the line and there is no pressure to measure.

"The number of clients who are willing to pay for top-of-the-line services is still increasing, but smaller clients are not increasing," according to the "Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Firms Buyer's Guide 2007" from MarketingSherpa, a marketing research firm. "We suspect smaller clients may not be educated enough to realize SEO exists or that it's important (if not more so) than PPC ads for their sites."



MarketingSherpa asked marketers why they don't invest in SEO. The No. 1 reason: "Don't understand SEO, overall complexity."

The future looks considerably brighter for search engine optimization employees or consultants – if they have a knack for this field. They'll continue to be in high demand when companies at least begin to grasp SEO and actually make a point to pay attention to their competition.

Even without a firm handle on ROI, they can succeed because quality SEO can bring targeted traffic that leads to sales despite ROI blemishes in ROI tracking systems and procedures. *Ad Age* recently charted agency growth in its Top 20 Search Engine Agencies list. Robert Half International includes "Search Engine Optimizer" among a new list of cutting edge jobs.

National studies and our conversations with numerous business executives indicate the following patterns:

#### **1. Tactical Ignorance**

Businesses and consultants alike often lack true SEO know-how. If they can't make the right moves or find a successful combination, search engine optimization will fall short of any expectations.

#### **2. Labor Shortage**

It's no wonder that companies often compromise or dilute their SEO efforts. They end up adding this role to existing jobs. It's not like many individuals are well-versed in design, programming languages, server technology, research, client relations, marketing, writing and much more. Businesses don't really ensure that they're adding the sharpest minds to their payrolls. And if they do have seasoned search engine optimization strategists, they often must tend to other tasks. In other words, search engine optimization gets short shrift to other corporate marketing pursuits.

Nearly 60% of marketers indicated that the shortage has affected their strategy or will impact it in the next 12 months, according to MarketingSherpa's 2006 "Search Marketing Benchmark Survey."

#### **3. Credibility Woes**

Get familiar with "black hat" and "white hat" arguments (black is bad). Spurious consultants and so-called "expert" employees abound. Unfortunately, people will try just about anything to rank highly on search engines. Credibility also suffers because of great debates about pricing, duration of work, whether "tweaking" is acceptable or an evil manipulation, what constitutes keyword stuffing, and how to define success.

#### **4. ROI Accountability**

If you don't know what you're doing and your staff is stretched thin, ROI is going to pay the price. And many consultants – with various levels of limited expertise and insights – can make it difficult for a business to see a full ROI picture. But the buck really should stop with each company. If accountability



has its limits and heads aren't allowed to roll, ROI will come up short. Corporate marketers fall short when it comes to measurement. They want to achieve top rankings, but the quality of their techniques is questionable and studies in the last two years underscore that serious ROI isn't the strong suit for many businesses.

ROI also gets pelted by competing corporate interests that constantly thwart otherwise sensible online marketing initiatives. Clearly, businesses have yet to find a way for marketing to consistently work with sales, or sales and marketing to cooperate with operations. Add the IT team - including webmasters - and you have colossal turf battles while everyone tries to find or define ROI (or ignore it altogether) in the land of corporate finance.

Search firms produce far better traffic results and work more effectively than in-house programs (given their focus, expertise and collective wisdom).

The SEO industry has made strides (i.e. training, services and performance). And, increasingly businesses do identify budgets for search engine optimization – just not much of a budget given the number, size and nature of companies. For example, national studies indicate that SEO spending is up more than 100% in the last two years, according to MarketingSherpa. But that's still less than \$800 million for the industry.

Again, industry growth can deceive. Savvy, strategic thinking increases the odds of success. Mere spending never ensures profitability. Along the way, our industry will be dotted with ill-timed and costly misfires that counteract the impressive campaigns.

With that kind of spending increase, search engine optimization is a hot market. But money must be accompanied by competency and effective ROI measurement. Sadly, untold numbers of businesses haven't even left the gate.

Hiring the right SEO in-house crew or a firm with a great reputation can help businesses use their cash wisely rather than just burn right through it.

Despite millions of competing website pages for a single strategic phrase, eager clients who cooperate well with successful SEO firms can rush by their competitors who are content to sit by the phone. Old-school thinkers may still be relegating SEO to their IT department or part-timers in just about any company role. It's the equivalent of a busy or preoccupied parent telling a child: "Johnny, just go outside and play now."

However, SEO is far from child's play. It has tremendous financial implications – good and bad. An SEO staffer or consultant can take a business to new heights or run amok, curtailing traffic and cutting deep wounds into conversion rates.



It's not just a self-imposed stupor that holds company's back. SEO has a credibility problem as well. The industry is laced with a shady "consultants" who break all of the rules and also a multitude of Mom and Pop enterprises that lack a deep bench of trained players who can weigh in on everything from programming to making reasoned recommendations based on key performance indicators.

In study after study, Internet users (B2B and B2C alike) prove that they like search engines and use them to research and buy products. Whether at home or work, they're spending time on Google, MSN, Yahoo! and a host of other industrial, shopping, news, music and special interest websites.

Aware of Internet behavior, marketing executives agree that the online commerce tide is undeniable. As a result, they're continuing to make adjustments by investing in online marketing programs.

Yet, more than 12 years after its debut, search engine optimization continues to get overlooked. In some respects, it's become the neglected first son of the search engine marketing family that could process \$33 billion a year on a global level by 2010 (but watch how much of that goes to paid search).

Businesses seem reluctant to spend money on a marketing approach like SEO that they don't understand and one that typically comes with no guarantees.

With paid search, you can get traffic right away. You just need to pay when someone clicks and for your staff (or a consultant) to manage the budget. You'll get visitors. Ultimately, it's your fault if you go with the wrong keyword, ad copy, offer and landing page.

Skepticism of SEO is natural but not totally understandable. You need to determine whether search engine optimization is worth the time and effort before dismissing the opportunity altogether.

Instead of putting your head in the sand, type in the keywords **and** search phrases that you believe would bring you some sales. Go to Google. Who is in the top 10? Are you? Do you care which competitors made it? Are they comparable in size to your business?

Perplexed and confused, many companies clearly don't make it an imperative that their marketing crews embrace and maximize a search engine optimization strategy. Studies show that corporate leaders are aware of SEO, but we've found that they're not fully grasping the value of taking action or putting the pressure on staff to perform and effectively measure their efforts.

When we approach companies about search engine optimization, we explain what it entails, how they lack visibility for sensible terms on search engines, and what it will take to succeed. We hear comments like:

"I didn't know."



“That's interesting.”

When confronted with the fact that their competitors rank well for excellent phrases, companies are at a loss about who is to blame. Maybe that's because it would be ludicrous to chastise an employee for not getting better search results if everyone knows SEO is only tended in their spare time.

Even the largest companies in the world – with vast marketing budgets – don't devote much attention to search engine optimization. You might be stunned by the major brands that don't appear in the top 10 natural Google results for search phrases like **notebook computers**, **homeowner insurance**, and **cordless drills**.

Admittedly, SEO is very young compared to other marketing pursuits and few firms have emerged as trusted names in the industry.

For consultants to succeed, they will need to build exceptional track records and go out of their way to educate companies about the benefits of search engine optimization. A continued movement toward specialization – firms that focus primarily on PPC or SEO – may help marketers appreciate the skill sets and the distinctions between both valuable practices.

But what's the alternative? Do nothing? Maybe throw some token dollars at search engine optimization with a one-person shop or an overworked employee? And while they do what they can, the Internet traffic will keep going to someone else.

Between 2004 and 2005, the North American search engine marketing industry grew to \$5.75 billion – a 44% increase over 2004, according to the **“State of Search Engine Marketing 2005”** – an annual survey by the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization.

Where did much of the money go? It ended up in the bank accounts of Google and Yahoo! Paid placement (also known as Pay-Per-Click) got an amazing 83% of that industry total (with search media engines gobbling up a 74.1% share of paid advertising dollars).

What about natural search engine optimization? The SEO portion of the \$5.75 billion total was a paltry 11.2% or \$642 million (as with PPC, the vast majority of SEO spending went in-house).

“Although most of the SEM budget is allocated to paid search media, strategic SEO is a high priority,” according to the SEMPO annual survey. “To the extent that the search engines can support the legitimate efforts of marketers to get their sites found when relevant to searchers, there is both an opportunity to capture more revenue and to better service those business customers.”

The true number of dollars spent on SEO may not be known, but it's a safe bet that it's somewhat higher than the \$642 million SEMPO figure. Many businesses simply don't convey their online marketing spending or it's reflected in other budgets, such as IT.

Even so, it's likely low given the incredible number of websites across diverse industries that don't actively engage in serious search engine optimization.

In the U.S. alone, there are more than 25 *million* businesses. Surely they can spend more to promote *billions* of website pages. If just 1% of them (250,000) spent \$10,000 a year, that would be \$2.5 billion (a little bit healthier).



Apparently only a small percentage of businesses hire or train employees to skillfully lead the way with search engine optimization. In rare cases, they're outsourcing the job to consultants. Some consultants fall on their face. Other experts exceed and build their client list one referral at a time.

Don't make the mistake of confusing rankings or traffic with ROI. They're metrics, not ROI.

If you want leads or customers, now you're talking about real ROI. And who is responsible for generating the lead or a new customer? Traffic helps, but chances are the sale may or may not go through depending on the website design, the offer, the price, the user experience and much, much more.

Whether they find the funding in profits or existing budgets, businesses should pay serious attention to search engine optimization in-house or through outsourcing.

In the fray, success stories abound. Undoubtedly, there are companies who remain profitable without indulging in the presumed "mysterious" search engine optimization arena, where true professionals of all stripes hone their skills over the years (programmers, website designers, marketers, writers and more).

After all, companies rank well all of the time – 24/7 as they say. Some apply techniques and work their way to the top of the rankings charts for the most prized search terms. Others wonder how it really happened at all. Kudos to them for somehow getting the right parts in place, even if only by accident!

But what does it ordinarily take to succeed? It requires consistent design, domain longevity, reasonable keywords, quality links from authoritative websites, and text.

Why do these elements seem so tough to pull off? If there is a deficiency in any of these and other areas, overcoming the obstacle won't be easy if the business gives search engine optimization little more than a half-hearted try. A systematic, ongoing effort is necessary to see a gradual increase in rankings.

Embrace the SEO field with patience and the results can be extraordinary.



## Measurement Failings

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

-- Albert Einstein

Marketing executives didn't give exceptional ratings when asked to size up their staff's knowledge of the latest web marketing trends, strategies and technologies, according to the 2006 WebTrends CMO Web-Smart Report.

On a 1-10 scale, the weighted average for knowledge was 5.5% (only 4% rated themselves and their staff as experts).

Most marketing executives in the survey indicated that they will increase marketing spending this year (26% are targeting growth between 25% and 50%).

Spending makes sense considering online trends. Measurement is a different story.

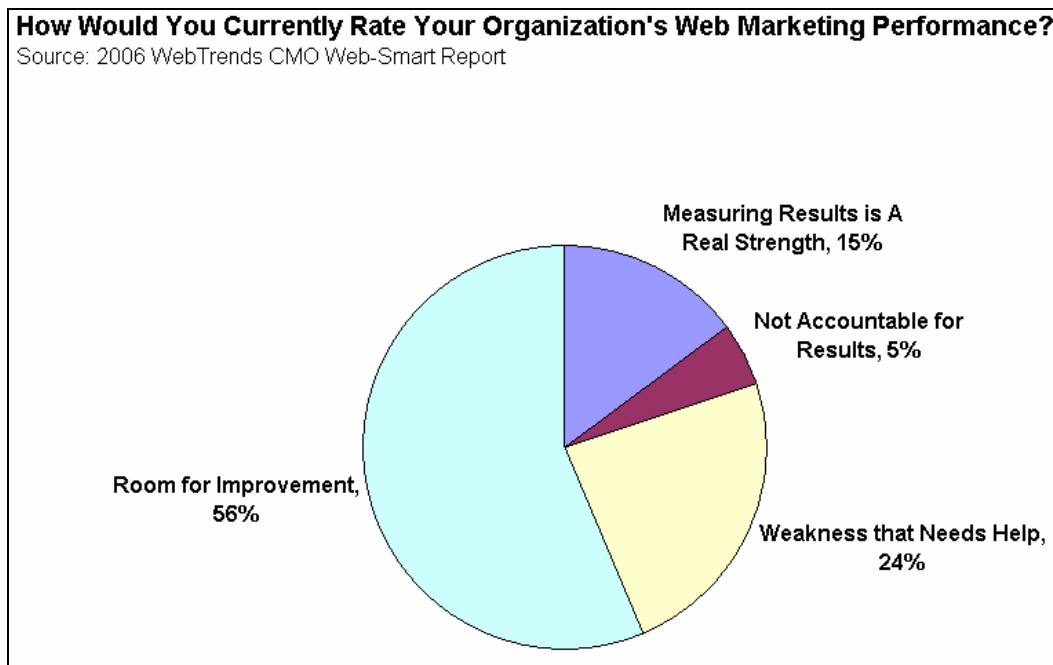
For example, these executives were asked: "How would you currently rate your organization's ability to measure web marketing performance?"

- 54% said they had data but there was room to improve
- 23.6% said marketing is a weakness and needs considerable improvement
- Only 15.1% said marketing is a strength in their companies



### How Would You Currently Rate Your Organization's Web Marketing Performance?

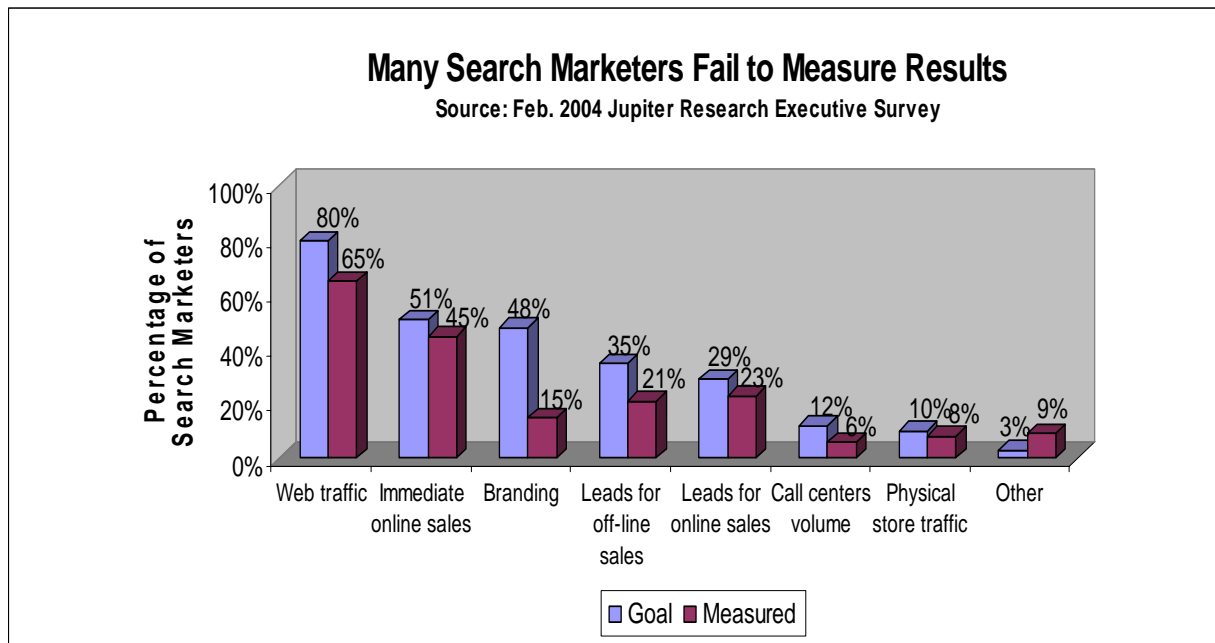
Source: 2006 WebTrends CMO Web-Smart Report





Two years ago, the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Council polled senior marketing executives about their marketing performance measurement systems. "Almost 80 percent of the senior marketing executives polled were dissatisfied with their ability to demonstrate their marketing programs' business impact and value," according to the CMO Council.

A JupiterResearch survey in 2004 also revealed the disparity between marketing goals and what actually gets measured:



If they can't properly track advertising, how can they begin to assess the implications of search engine optimization?

Surprising data also came out in 2006 from the Association of National Advertisers in its third annual Marketing Accountability Survey (prepared with Marketing Management Analytics).

Marketers themselves may be doing a better job of measuring and following through on ROI data, but only 36% manage to coordinate their accountability efforts with finance or other cross-functional teams. In fact a quarter of respondents said their measurement activity is "siloeed" inside the marketing ranks.

In 2005, an Association of National Advertisers survey found that 61.5% of marketing respondents believe advertising accountability should be defined and measured. But only 19% say they're positioned to do that kind of evaluation.

The marketing firm PARTNERS+Simons in 2005 examined the spending tendencies and perceptions of senior-level marketers at leading life sciences enterprises, including the instrumentation and pharmaceutical fields.

Although 59% indicated there is a process for "tracking and developing sales leads," only 27% called those processes "good," 45% rated them "fair" and the remaining 28% were divided between "poor"



and "dismal."

VisionEdge Marketing, a consulting firm, in 2006 surveyed marketing executives who included measuring marketing performance as one of the three biggest priorities. And yet, a stunning 86% conveyed that they aren't pleased with their existing tracking.

Companies may very well be giving search engine optimization some attention, but it's clear that they're not succeeding.

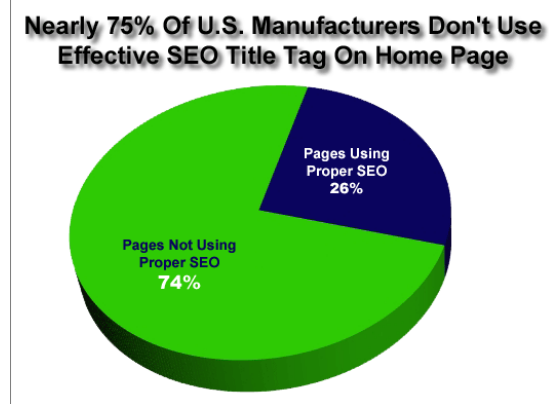
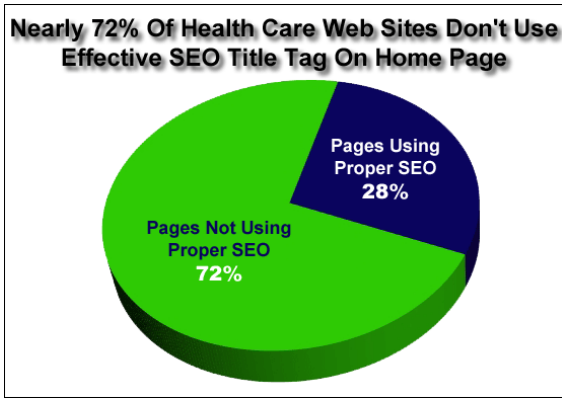
JupiterResearch in the 2005 "Outsourced SEO Metrics & ROI Study" for iProspect tracked marketers who coordinated paid advertising while outsourcing SEO. Yet only one in seven actually measured the overall ROI combination of both the SEO and PPC programs.

Another 2005 JupiterResearch report for iProspect, "Natural SEO Outsourcing Study" found that 64% of businesses that outsource SEO "encounter obstacles that prevent them from implementing their vendor's SEO recommendations." Companies cited a lack of personnel, budget, and time related to site or document updates. The study also indicated that SEO firms don't always establish reasonable goals or client expectations.

Among the top 44 largest software firms – many Fortune 500 – 25% were not sufficiently optimized for search engine visibility, according to MarketingSherpa's "2006 Business Technology Marketing Benchmark Guide."



Fathom SEO in 2005 conducted studies of health care companies and manufacturers (350 each) to determine how they handle basic SEO. They didn't come close.



### Implementation Obstacles

If a company does have an in-house expert, chances are that they will be pulled in any number of directions. How can they do a good job and keep up with the SEO industry if their responsibilities are stretched thin?

<b>Job Functions Performed by Search Engine Marketers in the U.S. – 2006 (% of respondents)</b>	
88%	Search engine optimization
77%	Paid search advertising
58%	Website design
57%	E-mail advertising
49%	Marketing communications
44%	Market research
41%	Competitive intelligence
38%	Banner advertising
28%	Print advertising
26%	Public relations
26%	Information technology
22%	Direct mail
9%	Radio advertising
7%	TV advertising
7%	Analyst relations
4%	Outdoor advertising
2%	Investor relations
6%	Other

Source: JupiterResearch for iProspect 2006



In the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO) 2005 survey, 37% of companies said that senior management was at least moderately interested in search engine marketing practices. More intense interest and buy in would go a long way.

The following business survey suggests there is more interest in SEO than we've seen, but it may be a case of activity – not necessarily effectiveness.

For example, more than 50% of companies use search engine optimization to some degree to improve their Internet visibility, according to Interland's 2005 "Summer Small and Medium-sized Business Barometer."



## Making An Educated Decision About Whether SEO Might Work

If a company's potential customers rely on the Internet and search engines in particular, it would be foolish not to take reasoned measures to rank well for strategic keywords that could drive traffic.

As a starting point, look at the cost of search engine optimization (consultant, employees, etc.), profit margins and sales volume.

If you sell industrial equipment, search engine optimization may be a wise choice. If you own a trophy shop, maybe SEO won't help much. Again, what is your market? Could someone in the year 2006 actually go to a search engine instead of the Yellow Pages and enter: "My Favorite City trophy shops." You bet. Maybe you would need only a small search engine optimization program.

Look at Google. Who is ranking? Do you care? Here are some other questions to explore:

- What do you sell?
- How much do you charge?
- What is the value of a customer – initially and long-term?
- How is your other marketing working for you? What is the cost per lead? What is your customer acquisition cost?
- How many items or services would you need to sell to be comfortable paying for SEO?
- Can you train someone or a team on staff? Who will evaluate their knowledge and skill?
- Can you hire a consultant?
- What does the SEO vendor charge per year?

Don't get in over your head. Insist that the SEO vendor starts small. Choose a finite number of keywords and make those work for you before spending more.

Need keyword ideas? Check traffic databases to see how people search.

If you have a store that could be influenced by online search behavior, take some surveys. Ask actual customers how they heard about you. Ask them if they ever searched online before buying.

Fathom SEO's **TrafficScout**, an Internet keyword marketplace activity report, helps online marketers find out whether people really search for their products and services. The complimentary service offers a number of features, including:

- Predictions of how many annual searches are conducted for select keywords and phrases in a given industry
- Projections of website visits based on natural search engine visibility
- Lists of key questions to consider when assessing the cost of lead generation resources

The **TrafficScout** report is available at: [http://www.fathomseo.com/forms/SERV\\_form.asp](http://www.fathomseo.com/forms/SERV_form.asp)

It's a great introductory glimpse into your market and the future. But Fathom SEO is about more than a quick look. Precise keyword/phrase section is a core part of what we do with ongoing programs..

If you sell a low-priced item like baby bibs you may need to think seriously about how many orders it would really take to cover the cost of SEO. Depending on the consumer interest level, it's possible to succeed especially if you offer depth in colors, sizes, prices and a selection of complementary products.



### **In-House is the Norm**

If you're going to go the in-house course (and most business do), you'll need to factor in payroll, benefits and training costs.

In MarketingSherpa's 2nd Annual Search Marketing Survey (released in 2005), respondents said traffic grew a great deal more after six months when an agency was involved:

Agency optimized 110% increase  
In-house optimized 38% increase

SEO firms may be better at what they do, but most companies aren't concerned enough to outsource.

For example, two thirds of companies with an online presence report that they handle 100% of their search engine marketing programs in-house (including paid advertising and natural search engine optimization), according to the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization annual survey.

MarketingSherpa's Search Marketing Benchmark Guide 2007 notes that 74% of companies take care of SEO on their own.



## Working Against ROI

Successful businesses recognize that reasoned aspects of ROI involve far more components than rankings, traffic and the age-old question: “Did I make more money?”

The search engine optimization ROI debacle doesn't rest squarely on employees, SEO consultants or companies. Yes, some may point to a business and insist that it bears responsibility for its marketing endeavors. Yet, in very practical terms, everyone shoulders the blame for ROI miscues that affect companies and the integrity of the search engine optimization industry.

Businesses and consultants botch up or influence ROI on many fronts. A mistake in most any area can easily ensure failure or at least limit profits. Here are a few marketing, operational, tactical, traffic metric and other considerations that can unlock or shut off a successful ROI:

- Defining business goals
- Understanding the target market
- Keyword selection
- Website condition (age, domain name selection, number of pages, location text, etc.)
- Page title adjustments
- Content updates (type of and timing)
- Consistency of measurement and reaction to updates
- Number and quality of inbound links
- Cost of search engine optimization program
- Cost of employees (including training and benefits)
- Sales (including product/service margins)
- Ability or desire to track conversions
- Immediate and long-term value of a customer
- Customer service
- Not giving sufficient time to adequately implement an SEO program (we recommend a minimum of one year before the iterative efforts of SEO can be adequately measured)



Unfortunately, that's an abbreviated list and doesn't adequately reflect all that needs to be weighed.



## Failure May Not Be SEO. It Might Be You.

A search engine optimization campaign can bring more relevant traffic and still be perceived as having failed without a sales spike. But there are many ways to measure SEO success – improvements in search traffic (even among specific engines), visits to particular sections of a website, targeted forms being filled out, etc. Sales is just one consideration that's susceptible to many influences.

If a business gets a ton of fresh search engine traffic – but not sales – the inclination is to fault the SEO effort. And keyword selection could be the key. Many factors affect ROI that go beyond basic SEO, including:

- Phone numbers (number choice, color, font and location)
- Calls to action
- Website design and usability
- Copywriting
- Response forms (location, order, nature and number of fields, etc.)
- Products
- Pricing
- Testimonials (quality of vs. the appearance of fake names masked by initials)
- Shopping cart
- Shipping policies
- Reputation
- Perceived expertise
- Assurance of secure ordering
- Affiliations
- Membership with Better Business Bureau

## How Businesses Doom Search Engine Optimization

If you want to do well with search engine optimization, you need to be wise about what to avoid or minimize. Your search engine optimization efforts will be vulnerable if you:

1. Have a closed mind
2. Insist on too many broad keywords
3. Fail to seek incoming links
4. Refuse to adjust a website design
5. Don't accommodate text changes
6. Aren't willing to test out new title tags
7. Use lousy website analytics
8. Charge too much
9. Offer inferior products or service
10. Stand in the way of timely website updates
11. Expect a quick fix
12. View search engine optimization as a desperation move to stay in business



## 10 Ways Search Engine Optimization Firms Waste Your Money

The problem with many search engine optimization firms is that they don't know what they're doing.

It's not that they'll necessarily take all of your money and do nothing. Some of their efforts may produce results – just not nearly as many as they should. In some cases, you'll never see any return. Much of search engine optimization is intuition, so don't give your consultant too much of a hard time if you disagree about an approach once in awhile.

Here are some common mistakes they make:

### **1. Failing to size up a company's business objectives and target market.**

If they can't grasp what you do and who you do it for, the whole program will be giant waste of time.

### **2. Rushing through keyword research.**

It's all well and good to prefer to spend time optimizing a website (i.e. META data, updating visible text, etc.) but your keywords are the foundation of any SEO campaign.

### **3. Insisting on only long-tail keyword phrases.**

It's definitely a good strategy to feature some search terms in the four-word category, but some companies overdo it a bit because they're afraid to go after competitive search terms. If you've got the link reputation, page depth and website longevity, it's possible to succeed over time for two and three-word phrases. Broad terms get a bad rap sometimes because they don't convert as well as long-tail phrases. But sometimes it's worth playing and celebrating the volume game. Get visitors and customers from among the crowd – if you can rank high.

### **4. Choosing broad keywords.**

Again, with a limited grasp of your website's ability to support competitive keywords, some search firms run with them anyway. Like you, they may be enamored by the amount of traffic they bring. But if your website isn't positioned to rank for them, they could just spin search engine optimization wheels and burn your cash.

### **5. Keyword stuffing.**

Without a sound writing background, search engine optimization firms may end up placing keywords in places they don't belong or repeat them too many times in a short space.

### **6. String keywords in page titles.**

Depending on the content, you may get by with one, two or three phrases in a page title, but unprofessional SEO consultants sometimes litter page titles with too many keywords.

### **7. Poorly written META descriptions.**

They should feature strong search terms, your business name, an offer and/or a corporate attribute.

### **8. Ranking focus.**

Rankings are essential but they're not the main attraction. Search engine optimization "experts" sometimes pay too much attention to rankings and not enough to traffic trends.



### **9. Analysis failings.**

Some consultants take a shallow approach to their next moves. For example, if a search phrase ranks #8 on Google for one page on the website and #14 for the same phrase on another page, the tendency may be to make future updates on the page ranking #8 while ignoring the one ranking #14.

But it's critical to be mindful of variables before making any decision. This is the heart of SEO work – being able to interpret data and make effective moves in view of the website's ability to support SEO.

What other search terms is that #8 page supporting and how do they rank on which search engine? What is the call to action on the #8 page and the on the #14 page? Which page might convert better in the long run? Can the #14 page rank better over time? Will the #8 page hit a ceiling? What other search terms can the #14 page support? How many content updates are likely on each?

What search engines do most customers use (in the past, present, and what is the likely trend moving forward)? Is the percentage breakdown such that it's worth getting traffic from all of the major search engines? How is that being accomplished?

### **10. Not being consultative.**

If your SEO firm isn't driving the program with keyword selection and content updates (including making sure you don't make bad moves on your end), you've hired the wrong consultant.



## Protecting Against the Wrong Move

Some businesses simply are afraid of making the wrong move and finding out that search engine optimization is nothing more than a phantom.

It doesn't need to be a waste of money if you're careful about how you proceed. Here are 5 tips and safeguards:

1. Choose an SEO vendor that's esteemed in the industry. If they're widely quoted and asked to speak at national conferences, that's a good sign.
2. Don't just check out their client list. Look at their efforts. Are they getting prized top spots for competitive phrases (how are they pulling that off)?
3. Look for an out clause. It's abnormal for SEO firms to offer "guarantees" (and you have to be suspicious of those who do), but they may give you a chance to test the waters, get to know their process and learn some of their approaches (and how they're interact with your business). Fathom SEO offers a 60-day right-to-cancel policy.
4. Don't bite off too much. Start with a small (but diverse) collection of keywords and work with them. Don't let a search engine optimization company sell you more services than you really need.
5. Ask the consultant to give you some ideas up front (about areas of your website they may need to touch). Will they respect the spirit of your design? Will they plan on an Extreme Makeover?

A recent prospect said it would be great to join the top 10 crowd in rankings, but he's not the least bit optimistic he can achieve it. It's not easy for him to comprehend how a search term that's not even in the top 300 or more can ever move up to the top 10. In other words, he's afraid he'll spend a bunch of money only to advance from #95 to #55.

His choices are limited and include continuing to do nothing, hiring someone in-house and hoping they know what they're doing, or hiring an SEO consultant who achieves high rankings for search terms that didn't even make the top 300 in Google when a program started.



## Return on Investment (ROI) Trends

SEO gets high marks for ROI in MarketingSherpa's "Search Marketing Benchmark Guide 2007."

In a new "Search Marketing Benchmark Survey" marketers gave natural search engine optimization the highest ROI ratings among diverse marketing strategies for product websites (68.7%) and lead generation websites (69.7%).

Company-managed email marketing came in second -- 56.4% for products and 64.2% for lead generation. Paid search rounded out the top three -- 52.5% for products and 64.1% for lead generation.

Unlike PPC, rankings achieved through SEO efforts continue to drive traffic even after a program ends. It's a nice reality when you're talking ROI. With paid advertising, if your account or well runs dry, the ads don't appear.

With conversions, the SEO/PPC victory debate goes back and forth with individual case studies. Two national reports in 2006 essentially pit both neck-and-neck with PPC as a slight leader.

WebSideStory, Inc. says PPC has a slight edge over natural search engine optimization (based on more than 57 million search engine visits this year). Paid advertising had a median order conversion rate of 3.40 percent at B2C e-commerce sites compared to an organic conversion rate of 3.13 percent.

Ali Behnam, Senior Digital Marketing Consultant for WebSideStory, indicates on their website that paid search marketers have "better control over the environment, including the message, the landing page and the ability to eliminate low-converting keywords."

Fair enough.

But conversion opportunities -- whether PPC or SEO -- vary with product types, time of year, site architecture, product descriptions, purchase incentives, prices, brand and countless other factors.

The WebSideStory numbers (although giving PPC a minor edge) are related only to e-commerce. And within those transactions there will be diverse conversion trends that favor either PPC or SEO. So it would be short-sighted to make strategic decisions around one or two conversion studies. In fact, Behnam added the conversion rates are higher than overall e-commerce site conversion rates because "our clients are steeped in web analytics best practices."

In addition to its overall ROI data, MarketingSherpa looked at conversions in its 2006 survey. Again, PPC nudged out SEO (4.19% to 3.92%). Among the top ¼ of respondents (those who had the highest conversions), the PPC average was 10.34% and the SEO average was 10.13% - both double the top 5.11% average for all website visitors.

Natural search, for example, is limited in part by what a search engine specialist can pull off without wearing a black hat or disrupting the user experience (i.e. beefing up content in unusual ways).

A widely cited JupiterResearch study in 2004 found that nearly six of seven commercial sales related to search engines actually came from organic search results.

Keep in mind that even a seemingly low 0.5% conversion might be golden for one company and a destroy another.



## What If Your Website Is Deficient? SEO Worthiness and Readiness

Every website will have some issues. Even if many keywords rank well, they'll never be perfect on all of the major search engines. In other words, there is room for improvement.

We usually discover one of the following problems listed in order of their common severity:

- Limited links
- Poor keyword selection
- Ineffective title tags
- Sparse content
- Site architecture defects

### Four Faces of Search

The search engine optimization landscape often has four faces that confuse people. Marketers don't know whether to regard SEO as easy ("hardly rocket science" they say) or joke that it's a bizarre operation akin to Willy Wonka's Oompa Lumpas. Some may approach SEO as a soothsayer who knows 82 secrets few people possess.

The confusion stems from the manner in which influential search engine algorithms and website elements come together. SEO mood swings are possible, but SEO stabilizes as website ranking factors mature.

Depending on the severity, there can be any number of options. Let's look at a few scenarios:

#### Smart Web Design

With keywords in page titles and content, some websites are succeeding without much help from employees or consultants. Quality links, clean website design, a reasonable amount of text on the pages and website age can go a long way.

#### Support for Tough Keywords

For competitive search terms, businesses typically need someone on their payroll or an SEO consultant to pull a program together and make the most of keyword and search term themes. They can have slight problems in any area, but usually more than one element needs to be strong. For example, great links and average content can do wonders if the specialists are given time to test out different scenarios and tactics.

#### Limited to Full Support for Easier Keywords

Useful but not intensely competitive keywords can succeed for a website burdened by design, content, website age and link shortcomings (although those limited links may affect Google in particular).

#### Worthless Struggle, No Support

SEO firms and company staffers really do spin their wheels to no avail when a website has a lot working against it, including a new domain, new pages, limited content, few incoming links, etc.

#### Limited Budget? Do It Yourself.

We recently heard twice from the same golf website over six months. Our minimum \$600 a month fee was way too high for the prospect looking for a \$100-a-month solution. Unfortunately, that breaks down to little more than one hour's worth of work.



What can they do? Obviously there is an education/appreciation deficit. Money could be allocated from another source, but that would take a new way of thinking. They could train a staff member (or maybe a volunteer in this case) and make the most of it. It doesn't sound like they would want to hire someone in-house or an SEO firm.

Search engine optimization takes some know-how. If they don't rank high, maybe they shouldn't because they either refuse to make the effort or can't afford to make headway. Maybe they can train themselves. We've met more than one small business owner who thinks nothing of working past midnight to play with SEO.

### **Biggest Barrier: New Website**

It's one of the most common problems we encounter. We applaud companies that embrace the Internet. If it's a new enterprise, it's understandable if they're just launching a new website. If they've been around awhile, they really don't have an excuse. Search engines, especially Google, reward longevity.

Patience is the best solution.

As with wine and cheese, website age has benefits and can do a little SEO magic. At the same time, a marketer should go out of his or her way to ensure that the website is as user-friendly as possible, with several paragraphs on each page (including text headers). Link building is another key.

### **Best Hope: Established Website**

If the link reputation is sound, usually it will help a great deal to insert better keywords into the title tags and content. Large companies do have a significant edge because it's easier for them to get even more good links, update content and have many website pages – critical factors in rankings.

"The number of clients who are willing to pay for top-of-the-line services is still increasing, but smaller clients are not increasing," according to the MarketingSherpa "Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Firms Buyer's Guide 2007." "We suspect smaller clients may not be educated enough to realize SEO exists or that it's important (if not more so) than PPC ads for their sites."

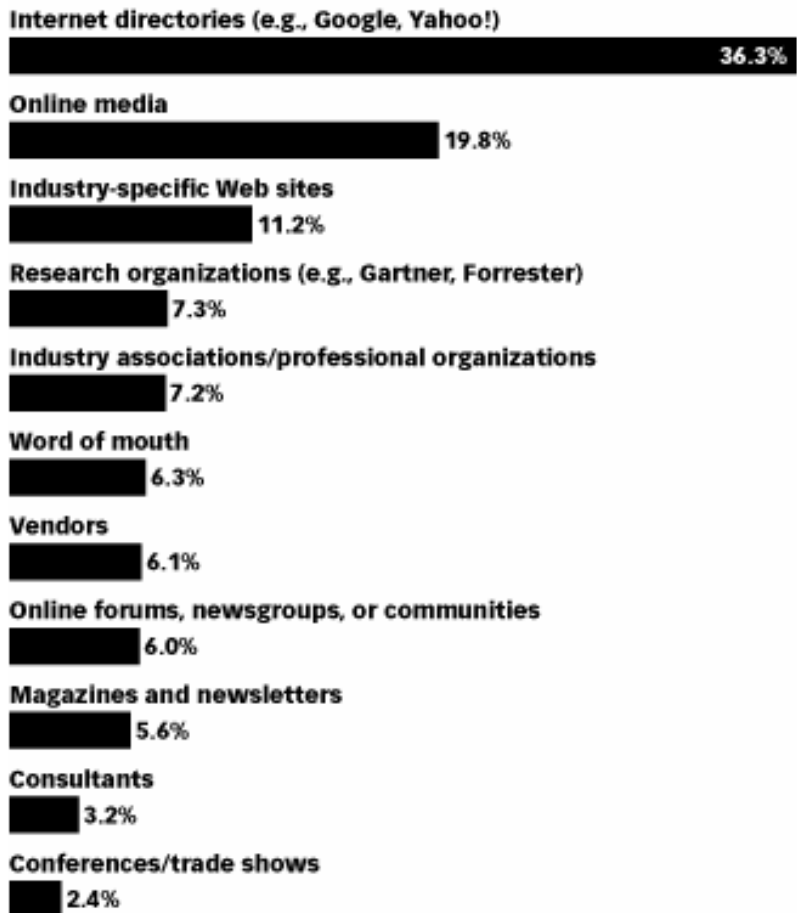


## B2B Search Engine and Internet Interest

In its 2005 report, "Define What's Valued Online," the CMO Council focused on business technology who view the "Internet as their primary resource for purchasing decisions." Nearly 70% indicated that search engines and directories are the first place they look when going online to research technology products, services and solutions.

According to Interland's "Spring 2005 Business Barometer" two thirds of business executives said their websites either drive sales directly or were responsible for influencing purchases made offline.

### Resources US B2B Buyers Go To First when Researching IT Solutions, 2004 (as a % of respondents)



Source: KnowledgeStorm, July 2004

062266 ©2005 eMarketer, Inc.

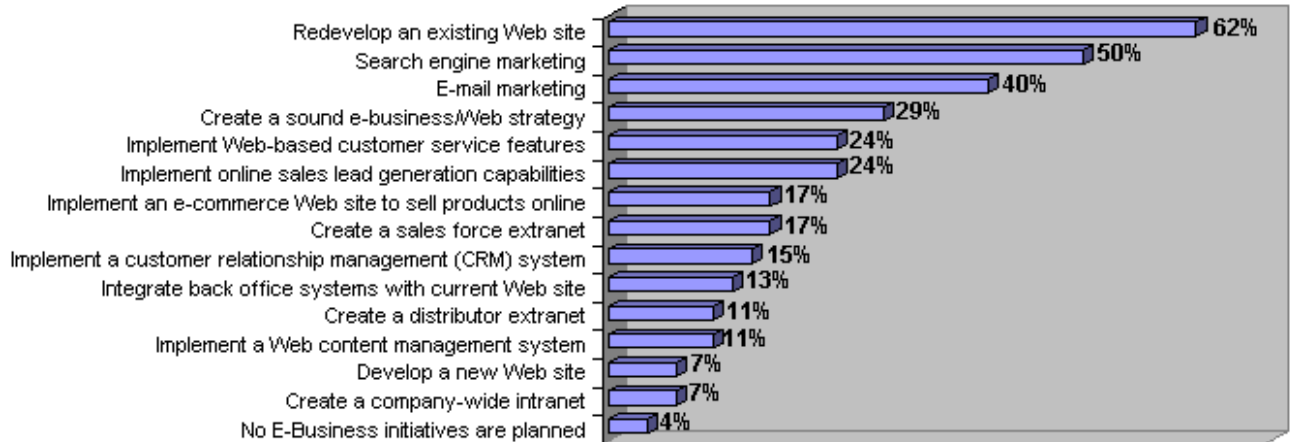
www.eMarketer.com



In this 2005 study, 50% of manufacturers said they expect to focus more attention on search engine marketing:

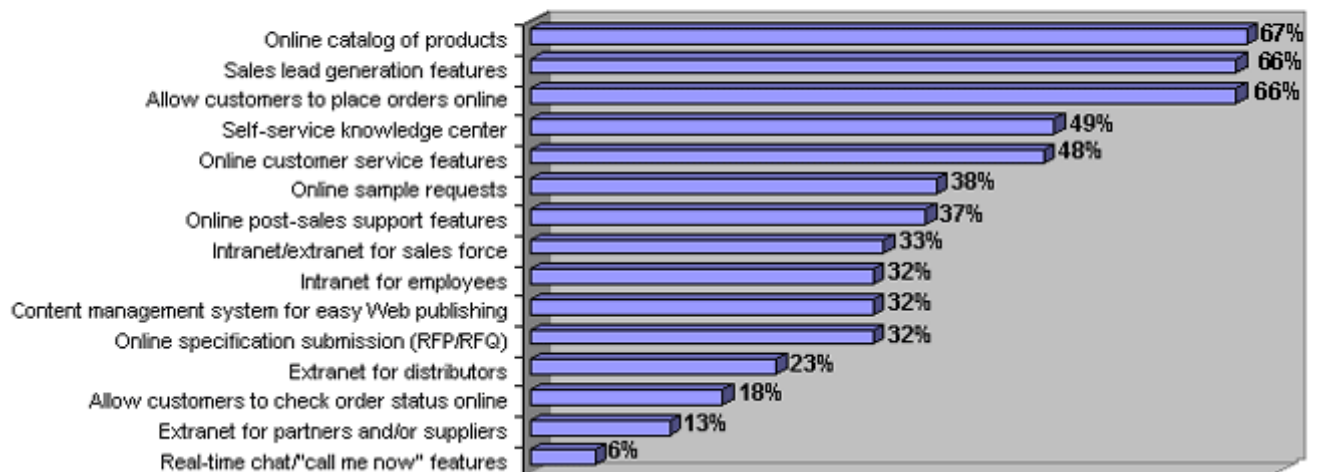
### "What e-business initiatives will your company be undertaking in the next 12 to 18 months?"

Source: "Manufacturers Embrace E-Business," SVM E-Business Solutions



### "Does your Web site offer the following capabilities?"

Source: "Manufacturers Embrace E-Business," SVM E-Business Solutions





**Nearly Half of B2B Marketers Are Using Online Marketing**

“Which of the following B2B/trade marketing tactics has your company used in 2004 and/or 2005? Which will you use in 2008?”

In-Person Events	60.2% - 2004/2005 <b>60.8% - 2008</b>
Online marketing	48.7% - 2004/2005 <b>54.6% - 2008</b>
Direct Mail	56.2% - 2004/2005 <b>48.7% - 2008</b>
Industry specific/trade magazines	45.4% - 2004/2005 <b>48.3% - 2008</b>
Custom publications	45.8% - 2004/2005 <b>44.1% - 2008</b>
TV	41.4% - 2004/2005 <b>44.1% - 2008</b>
Public relations	37.7% - 2004/2005 <b>41.6% - 2008</b>
General business magazines	41.3% - 2004/2005 <b>38.6% - 2008</b>
Newspapers	46.9% - 2004/2005 <b>35.6% - 2008</b>
Printed newsletters	43.5% - 2004/2005 <b>35.1% - 2008</b>
Radio	35.3% - 2004/2005 <b>33.0% - 2008</b>
Printed directories	26.8% - 2004/2005 <b>24.8% - 2008</b>

Source: Forrester 2005

Marketers plan to boost their search engine marketing spending 8% during the next year, according to a 2006 JupiterResearch report, “Benchmarking to Drive Effective Search Engine Marketing.”

About 56% of industrial and manufacturing executives also planned to increase their online marketing spending in 2006, according to GlobalSpec’s new “Marketing Trends Survey.”

In the survey, 37% of respondents said they would spend 21% to 35% of their 2006 marketing budgets online.

Search engine marketing rated fairly high (52%) as a preferred marketing channel for the industrial and manufacturing marketing professionals and managers (online directories and websites led the way at 64%).



Interland's "Summer 2005 Business Barometer of Small Business Activities" report had a similar result for search engines.

Online Tools Favored By Small and Mid-size Businesses	
60%	E-mail Marketing
54%	Search Engines
27%	Online Coupons
20%	Paid Advertising
19%	Blogs

MarketingSherpa research reflected in the 2006 "Business Technology Marketing Benchmark Guide" indicates that small business technology firms spend 58% of their marketing budget online on activities like search engine marketing. However, the largest companies spend only 7% of their marketing budgets online.



## Consumer Online Search Behavior

Google may not be the best source of traffic in all cases, but it's enormously popular. In October 2006, there were 6.8 billion searches in North America with Google grabbing 44% of the market, according to comScore qSearch.

Here is one telling forum entry that reflects Google's appeal:

*"Hey Ad-Agency, I Tivo & skip your commercials, don't read the newspaper, much less magazine ads, I throw away all snail-mail advertisements, filter email spam, listen to my Ipod (not the radio), ignore highway billboards, and haven't touched the yellow pages in years. I am the next generation - where are you going to advertise to me? Google. That's where."*

Let's face it. People love to go on the Internet no matter where they happen to be at the moment.



### Search at Work

In the seventh annual "Web@Work" 2006 study by Harris Interactive for Websense, 61% say they surf non-work-related websites (about 3 hours a week).

What kind of sites do they visit? Typically, it's a work-related website (93%). But travel (56%) and shopping (48%) are popular Internet destinations.

### Search Engine Fans

Internet users have a high comfort level with search engines. The Pew Internet & American Life Project sized up their attitude in this 2005 "Search Engine Users" report:

"Search engines are highly popular among internet users. Searching the internet is one of the earliest activities people try when they first start using the internet, and most users quickly feel comfortable with the act of searching. Users paint a very rosy picture of their online search experiences. They feel in control as searchers; nearly all express confidence in their searching skills. They are happy with the results they find; again, nearly all report that they are usually successful in finding what they're looking for. And searchers are very trusting of search engines, the vast majority declaring that search engines are a fair and unbiased source of information."

Other trends from Pew Internet & American Life Project – 2005/2006

- 73% of American adults (age 18+) go online to use the internet or email.
- 91% have used a search engine to find information
- 67% buy a product
- 78% research a product
- 66% or 97 million use Internet daily



### **Holiday and Online Sales**

Holiday shopping is expected to be a big hit on the Internet again this year, according to new survey conducted for the National Retail Federation by BIGresearch. Shoppers could spend \$791.10 each this year on holiday merchandise with one-fourth (28.9%) of purchases made on the Internet.

In fact, nearly half of consumers intend to buy at least one item online (47% compared to 36% three years ago). Most consumers (88.7%) regularly or occasionally look at products online before eventually buying at a store.

### **Local Search**

Increasingly, savvy Internet searchers are making the effort to find local businesses when they use search engines.

For example, the frequency of search engine use to learn about local companies increased from 47% to 55% (a 17% increase) between 2003 and 2005, according to The Kelsey Group.

The Kelsey Group's annual forecast predicts global local search and online classified advertising revenues will grow from \$15.7 billion in 2005 to \$31.1 billion in 2010. The local search segment will grow from \$3.4 billion in 2005 to \$13 billion in 2010, with online classifieds growing from \$12.3 billion to \$18.1 billion during the same period. Global local search includes Internet Yellow Pages, local Internet search and wireless directory-based search.

"We expect numerous local search start-ups to challenge the predictable revenue flows that the large established marketplaces for automobiles, real estate and other key segments have enjoyed for decades," Matt Booth, vice president and program director, interactive local media, said in a news release. "At the heart of these profound changes is the phenomenal growth in local search traffic as more and more global consumers turn to the Internet for researching, comparing, shopping and transacting very small and very large purchases."

### **Heavy Internet Users**

Universal McCann and InsightExpress in 2006 found that 84% of heavy Internet users – those accessing the Internet 11 times within seven days – have researched a future purchase on the Internet. Similarly, 84% purchased a product. Both led a list of the most popular online activities (other popular activities included entering sweepstakes, playing games and listening to Internet radio).

More than half of U.S. online adults use search engines most or every time they're online, according to "How America Searches," a 2005 Harris Interactive study for iCrossing.



### **Top Categories for Search**

Hitwise, which monitors more than 10 million U.S. Internet users, found that 20% of all traffic from 20 categories came from search engines in September 2006. Health/medical led the way with 43.19% from search.

According to the Pew Internet Project, "Online Health Search 2006," 66% of health seekers began their last online health inquiry at a search engine. In fact, 80% percent of American Internet users, (about 113 million adults), have searched on one or more of 17 health topics.

### **Search Influence on All Purchases**

ROI Research has made some great headway in quantifying the influence search has on purchases - online and offline alike. The agency offers some interesting data as well about how Internet users who search more often also tend to spend more as well no matter where they ultimately shop. For example, ROI Research found that search accounts for 49% of online purchases and 42% of retail purchases.

### **When and How They Buy**

With any potential customer, you need to keep in mind some key factors. Just because someone comes to your website doesn't mean they're ready to buy what you sell. Maybe they're in a different stage:

- Simply looking around
- Beginning research
- Narrowing their choices

Some studies suggest that B2C searchers are inclined to buy more quickly than B2B customers. Although that may be true in some cases, it's not always the way searches play out.

In its "Search Before the Purchase" report, comScore Networks looked at these product categories: travel, apparel, computer hardware and sports/fitness.

With travel, for example, about 75% of purchasers made a travel search at some point in the 12 week before they actually bought a travel service. In fact, people averaged six searches before a purchase.

More than 60% of purchases related to search actually happen offline in retail stores, according to comScore's "The Role of Search in Consumer Buying" study that tracked 83 million consumers during the 2005 holiday shopping season.

Overall, online retail spending surpassed \$81.6 billion in 2005, up 24% from \$65.8 billion in 2004, according to comScore.

More than 70% of potential buyers keep abandoning online shopping carts before they complete their transactions, according to Web Surveyor Corp. Shipping costs, limited time and comparison shopping were among the leading factors.

Keep in mind that some customers look for one product or service you offer and then decide to buy something else you sell. In other words, the search term Internet users start with doesn't always match the ultimate transaction.

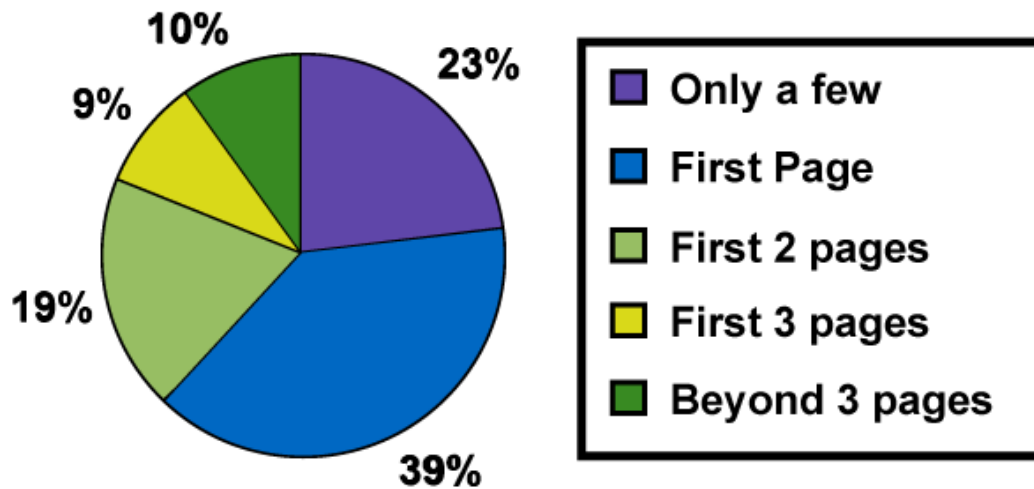
### **Men and Women**

Online shopping is among the popular Internet activities for men (68%) and women (66%), according to "How Women and Men Use the Internet," a 2005 report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project. In fact, online shopping increased 40% for men and 43% for women between 2000 and 2005.



### How Many Results Internet Users Tolerate

In 2006, the "iProspect Search Engine User Behavior Study" by JupiterResearch found that 62% of search engine users typically stick with the first page of results. That's not too surprising, except that combined data shows that 90% say they'll check out one to three pages (although only 9% actually will look at all the three pages). Back in 2002, 48% limited their search to the first page and only 81% were willing to look a one to three pages.





## Clearing Up the One-Time Effort Myth

Some search engine optimization critics like to mislead companies into thinking that SEO is relatively easy or requires little more than a one-time concerted effort. SEO consultants get blasted for selling modern day snake oil and taking a year or more to apply it in small doses (collecting hefty monthly checks along the way).

Every industry – from paid advertising and car sales to insurance and medicine – has its share of bad apples or shady players surrounded by inept professionals who mean well but offer limited value.

Search engine optimization is no different.

It's absolutely true that a well-researched search engine optimization strategy can make a huge difference if implemented in a sound manner. But an initial spike isn't the same as continuous improvement. OK, so 8 of your 20 marquee search terms make it into the top 10 on Google and top 5 on MSN. What about the other terms? What about Yahoo! What about phrases ranking #8, #9 and #10 that need to be higher?

Of course it takes a long time – up to a year in some cases for some keywords depending on when updates are made (and how well). Even then, reasonable SEO activities can go on year after year as website owners and consultants refine efforts in light of discoveries about the way people search, search engine algorithmic changes, revised content, new products/services and new website designs.

Is SEO a cakewalk? Hardly.

Sometimes the ongoing effort takes a great deal of effort and communication between the client and a team of search engine optimization experts with different disciplines in SEO best practices, marketing, copywriting, design and programming.

David Pasternack, president and co-founder of Did-it, launched the latest volley of criticism with his DMNews article, "Troubled Times for SEO Firms." After being lambasted, he followed up with "An SEO Critic Answers His Critics."

Pasternack used a skin doctor analogy to describe SEO:

"If your doctor behaved the way many in the SEO crowd believe SEO firms should work, he'd run some tests, come up with a treatment plan, but wouldn't give you the medicine to rub on your skin. He'd keep this medicine (labeled "Super Secret SEO Sauce") locked up in a vault in his office. Then he'd make a series of appointments for you to come in so that he could rub this medicine on your skin, charging you hundreds, perhaps thousands of dollars for each visit."

Maybe a single doctor isn't apropos.

Fathom SEO believes our industry is akin to a team of medical specialists. We delight in receiving websites with serious ailments, maybe even operable cancer. We spend a lot of time with them because one or many of their conditions simply demands the effort. Ranking Paralysis requires a great deal of care over a long period as. Other diseases and injuries include Content Atrophy, Link Deficiency, Internal Source Code Bleeding, Second Degree Design Burns and many more.



## Remember, It's All About ROI

If you want to succeed with search engine optimization, you need to have an appreciation for web analytics and what it takes to keep a visitor on a website.

The following is about B2B, but the nature of it could apply just as easily to B2C. It's good if they buy something right away or several months down the line.

To make a good impression and build interest in your company, be sure to feature content that will get visitors' attention. The longer they stay on your website, the more likely they are to learn about your business and encounter different aspects of your offerings.

<b>Content Businesses Frequently Download and Read, or Pass On</b>	
Source: "Define What's Valued Online," the CMO Council (2005)	
58.3%	Vendor White Papers
53.8%	Product Reviews
52.2%	Analyst Research Reports
51.6%	Product Literature
40.2%	Competitive Product Analysis
33.3%	Website Information
33.3%	Articles by Industry Journalists
30.2%	Surveys and Studies
29.6%	Vendor Case Studies
17.2%	Category or Product News
4.0%	Archived Event Transcripts
2.2%	Other

### Key Questions

Ask yourself key questions about your online activity even if the only connection is a phone number or a one-field response form. Here are some examples:

1. Can you identify your Key Performance Indicators?
2. What is the gap between what you can measure and what you can't measure?
3. Who can help you with this lack of knowledge?
4. Who is actively looking and reacting to web analytics?
5. Who tracks visitor trends and helps with conversion analysis.
6. Do you really know your market?
7. Who are your customers?
8. How do your prospects search?
9. What motivates them?
10. Where do they like to search?
11. What do they like to do on websites?
12. How can you make them buy and not just research products and services?
13. Why do they abandon the purchase they should be making?



**Here are other questions to weigh:**

- Who has the time for SEO work?
- Who knows how to select the right keywords?
- Can anyone determine correct pages titles?
- What is the ideal META description tag?
- Should you bother with META keywords?
- What does an internal linking strategy look like?
- Is your site architecture effective for search engines?
- What would changes entail?
- Are there risks to link building?
- Do you have to link back to sites? When?
- Is the SEO expert trained? What will it take to train them? How will you know if they're actually good at what they've been hired to do?
- Can IT and Marketing get along? Who will supervise SEO?
- Who has a handle on ethical SEO tactics?
- What is the value of page cache tracking?
- Does A/B testing make sense for SEO?
- How will SEO relate to pay-per-click?
- Who will be responsible for web analytics? How far will this go?
- What are the costs if you go in-house? How much will an outside consultant charge?
- Is there an "opportunity cost" if you go in-house?



## SEO and ROI Summary

Companies sometimes expect SEO firms to solve ROI problems beyond the increased traffic the tactics generate.

And that's OK if the SEO firm has any experience with what happens **after** a visitor reaches a website. But be ready to pay for the depth of their advice.

No one, including the SEO firm, can really make a website visitor fill out a form for a conversion, let alone compel that visitor to actually buy a product or service.

Fortunately, collaboration between sites and SEO firms is possible. Regardless of whether SEO is mastered in-house or outsourced, you may want to think about (and answer the following):

- If the web site isn't user-friendly, who is responsible?
- If the site looks like an amateur put it together, who bears the blame?
- If the product or service prices are too high, could that affect the ROI? Who should recommend price changes?
- What conversion strategies are in place?
- How are conversion e-mails tied to sales?
- When should shipping be free or discounted, and how is this communicated on the website?
- Is the checkout process simple or laborious?
- How is customer service for the site?
- What's the fulfillment process like on the website?
- Are there refer-a-friend features?
- Is the product or service a good deal or valuable?
- Who will track the customer along the entire path, particularly through robust web analytics?
- Who is best equipped to coordinate offline marketing with online initiatives?
- Is there a way to match the e-mail on the initial response form with customer data in order to measure the initial purchase and future purchases by the visitor?
- Who will monitor the full spectrum of web analytics, including tool selection and upgrades, metric analysis and adjustments like pricing and website content?

Obviously, that's a lot to plan, track and adjust to over time. Search engine optimization can be an instrumental part of any marketing program. Often overlooked or simply used in short-term ways, SEO will always be only one of the players in the game called ROI.

How deep your roster and what does your last scorecard look like?



## About Fathom SEO

Fathom SEO is a leader in ethical search engine marketing and placement, including search engine optimization, link popularity building, pay-per-click and related analysis. We also offer integrated permission-based e-mail marketing programs. We turn web sites into sales machines.

Our diverse team of SEO specialists has expertise in business management, marketing, programming, copywriting, website design and other disciplines. They handle more than 100 clients, including Eaton Corp., FedEx Custom Critical, Bissell, Sauder and the Cleveland Clinic.

Fathom SEO is a member of the Search Engine Professional Organization and the Cleveland chapter of the Better Business Bureau. We're also included in the 2007 MarketingSherpa Buyer's Guide to Search Engine Optimization Firms. Fathom SEO has produced a series of popular industry guides and special reports, including a white paper on search engine marketing and studies on how health care companies and manufacturers use SEO. Michael Murray, our vice president and an online marketer since 1997, writes extensively about the industry and speaks at local and national events, including the prestigious Search Engine Strategies conferences. He also is a regular contributor at ReveNews and iMedia Connection.

Visit us at [www.fathomseo.com](http://www.fathomseo.com) or call 216.369.2220 or 866.RANK.YOU (726.5968).



Fathom SEO Named Among Top 20 Search Engine Agencies by:

**AdvertisingAge**

