

## Improving Web Visibility

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This is not a 'how-to' guide, it's more of a simple 'what-to-do' guide aimed at those who want to promote themselves online but aren't sure what it involves. This is something you can do for yourself or you can have a professional do for you. As one of those professionals, I like my clients to understand just what it is I'm doing for them and why it can make a difference. In this case it's all about attracting people to whatever you are doing, or growing your business if you have one, by promoting yourself online.

Whenever people think of promotion or marketing, on or off the internet, they usually think primarily of branding and advertising. In brief, something like this:

Make your own brand with a logo, a font and a colour scheme you can use to get people to recognise and associate with what you are promoting - your organisation and its services, products, premises or location(s). Then get some advertising to make your brand known and (hopefully) draw in more people.

### Offline

- Visual & text ads seen on bill boards, in newspapers or in shop windows
- Flyers and leaflets
- Telephone or doorstep campaigns
- Television and radio
- Business cards

### Online

- Banners ads & text ads seen on web sites, in search engine results or in newsletters
- Pop-up ads and email campaigns
- Social network, instant messenger or chat alerts
- Rich media adverts (Flash, etc)
- Email signatures

The process works the same online as it does offline - budgets are fixed, brands are designed and adverts are composed, produced and distributed for maximum effect. However, advertising is only one route to gaining visibility. There are other aspects to marketing, some quite subtle by comparison in the online environment, that shouldn't be overlooked and these are the focus of this article.

These days it's increasingly common to maintain some kind of internet presence whether to communicate on a personal or a business level. Most commonly people have one or even all of the following:

- **Websites** - stand-alone website, microsite, e-commerce account (Etsy, Amazon, Shopify)...
- **Social network accounts, pages or groups** - Facebook, Google+, Linked-In, 38 Minutes, Twitter, specialised networks...
- **Blogs** - Wordpress, Blogger, Live Journal...
- **Full Directory profile** - Google Places, Free-index...

Obviously you don't have to have all of these but what if you have none? There are still things you can do to promote yourself online and I'll come to that later but for now let's look at what you can do if you do have some webspace.

Some networks or blogs are for business or personal use only, some for both business and personal use, and it is possible to use a social network page or a blog in place of a website if you want something simple (in fact content management systems like Wordpress and Drupal expanded to what they are now because of people doing just that). These web facilities are more than adverts, they are ways of doing business and ways of communicating directly with your audience.

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In business, whether you are for profit or not, having a website is equivalent to having public premises like a shop or an office where people can come in, see what you do and even make purchases. Having a social network account, blog or a full directory profile is more like having an information stall at a never-ending business fair or networking event. Just as much care should be given to setting up and maintaining these online outlets as is given to their physical counterparts.

Making sure that people can find your web outlet(s) is important and just as important, but often overlooked in the push to be seen, is making sure people like what they find. If lots of visitors find your webspace but none of them like what they see, it doesn't do you much good to be visible and easily found on the web. It's like having a shop or a stall which everyone looks at but then walks past without a word. To avoid this, it does pay to account for and even to prioritise the human visitor's requirements over the search engine's when choices have to be made.

## The basics

Asides from following advert links, there are three ways for someone to reach your web outlet:

- Direct entry of a web address
- Following a link from someone else's web outlet
- Following a link given in search engine or search directory results.

It's unlikely that everyone will remember your web address, especially if it's complex, and they may mislay your business card, so visitors will most likely come to you by following links and using search engines and directories.

The first thing to note about web visibility is that it does depend on your privacy settings. If you add a file to your website to tell search engines not to view it and if you set your blog or social network facility to 'friends only' type settings, search engines and general members of the social network won't be aware of your web presence in either instance. With social networks, even if someone has the web address to type into the browser or a link to follow they will see nothing if they are not a logged in member of that network on your friend's list. If you are trying to promote yourself publicly, then do make sure you haven't made yourself invisible or placed yourself behind a barbed wire fence with a guard wanting a password!

Another thing of note is the difference between search engines and search directories. Both are basically a giant index of web addresses which you can search, both analyse, rate and rank web addresses primarily by content relevance to keywords and quality but they differ in how that index is made.

- A search engine compiles the contents of its index by using automated indexing programmes (known as web crawlers or robots) which search the web, find web addresses and process them. You can help speed this up by submitting your web address for analysis.
- A search directory's index is compiled, verified, rated and ranked by human beings - by employees of the directory company sifting search engine results for web addresses to process and by people directly submitting their web address for processing.

Both can have adverts, paid listings and free listings but directories can consist entirely of paid listings depending on what they are for.

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### Getting links and connections

One way of increasing your internet visibility is to have other people link to your web addresses. On a website this usually means links in their text or in special sections like 'useful links', 'partners' or 'clients'. On social networks or blogs it means links in their posts or links in their profile. With social networks there is the additional aspect of making connections and building networks between your account and others by having people subscribe to your posts, pages or groups and vice versa.

Obviously some caution has to be applied with either technique. It's like having signs put up telling people where your shop or stall is, but these signs also have to have a contextual value. If you link to someone else's webspace without commentary then that is taken to mean, 'I endorse this...' or, 'you might also like...'. You should only connect to people you approve of on social networks. You should make sure that you never link to anyone or anything which could adversely affect your reputation.

On websites particularly, you should only link to and be linked to by relevant websites and ensure that you do not take part in what is known as 'link farming' where people sign up to a scheme to link to and be linked to by lots of random websites. Search engines do like it when people link to you but being part of such a link network is detectable to search engines and counts as a form of spam (unwanted or unsolicited content, like junk mail).

Unlike special advert links coming from advertising agencies (like Google AdSense), which people and search engines alike can usually recognise as such, general links are taken to be endorsements and count towards the content analysis of a website. Having a shoe shop and being linked to by a website selling nappies won't do you any favours with people or search engines unless you sell or shoes for very young children and the link appears on the nappy site in an appropriate place. To give it even better relevancy to the nappy customer it should point straight to your shoe section for very young children. The converse is also true, you should only link out to the nappy site in the children's shoe section of your website and preferably to the most relevant part of their website.

The form of and text used in links is also important. Links to and from your web outlets should always make sense in the context in which they appear and not annoy people. Having too many reciprocal links or too many inappropriately or randomly placed links on the web does devalue the content ranking of your website and will cause you to come lower in search results. It will also annoy people as links which show up in odd places make them think that there is something not quite right about the link.

### Search Engine Optimisation

This is the process of making your web outlets naturally visible and attractive to search engines without paying for advertising or a top listing and it does mean making alterations to them. It's just the same as making a shop or stall easy to find with good signage and stocking it with things people want.

Using a search engine (Google, Yahoo Web, Ask, Bing...) is like having a personal assistant who will go out exploring the world, indexing and catagorising what is at every address they can find. Then when you ask them to, they can look through the index they've made and give you a list of places you should visit best matching a description of what you're looking for (your search term made up of keywords). If you ask for shoe makers, you should only be given the addresses of shoe-makers shops and even shoe-makers stalls, or people who will tell you all about them. Relevancy of content to a search term is what makes search engines pick one web outlet over another when deciding what to show you - the more general your search term, the more general your results will be.

Just like people, search engines like well-built, well-maintained outlets with good, accessible, well-organised content and will prioritise these in the content relevant search results they return.

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A good rank from a search engine for a given search term means being high in the results list, therefore being more visible. However, a search engine is not able to analyse the visual quality of your content, so it's worth noting that it experiences the internet in much the same way as a blind person does - what it experiences is the quality of your code and your copy text.

Everyone can improve the quality and relevancy of the copy on their web outlets themselves whether they do this directly or through a developer but this can be a tricky business. Again, like people, search engines don't like it if you are trying too hard so it's best to avoid stuffing your content with keywords to match search terms (especially irrelevant ones) or having lots of bold or big text everywhere.

If you or your developer have control over the underlying code for the web outlet (only true for websites usually) then you can also improve your rating and so your visibility by optimising the 'build' aspect. This means you can ensure that your website doesn't cause problems for anyone visiting it and you can affect how accessible your content is (like having braille signs, nice level floors and wheelchair ramps in a shop). With good styling, for example, the layout a sighted user experiences and the layout a blind user experiences can be made different for the same code so that both sets of user can enjoy visiting your website.

## Search Directory Optimisation

Search directories fall into two categories:

- Web directories which list and rate web outlets and therefore require you to have one.
- Contact directories which list your contact details (business or personal depending on the directory) and therefore don't require you to have a web outlet and don't usually analyse any you do have.

Yahoo directory is the foremost example of a web directory. Online phone books and business directories are examples of contact directories. Obviously you can only optimise your web outlet for the former type.

Using a web directory like Yahoo is also like having a personal assistant, but this time, a rather fussy one who checks everything thoroughly and only lists addresses which have content of a certain standard (so only the best shoe-makers and only the people most knowledgeable about them). Optimising for such search directories is very similar to optimising for search engines but since the web outlets are assessed by human beings, you really do have to make sure yours provides a decent experience for human visitors.

Copy doesn't just need to contain relevant information, it needs to read well and be of a good linguistic standard (pretty won't save you if your content is fluff). The layout needs to flow well and to show content not bombard visitors with it, navigation must be easy, accessibility good and the visual aspect should be suitable to the content (not necessarily fancy but definitely not painful to look at or such that it obscures content). You should never submit your web address for rating by a search directory of this sort unless you are sure it is of good quality.

Optimising your web outlet for a search engine or a web directory does involve altering your web outlet but front end (seen) and back end (coding) alterations can be done separately and independently of one another. These processes are also entirely separate from promotion processes in the next section which don't even require you to have a web outlet or make changes to any you do have.

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### Contact Directories

In the physical world not everyone has a shop, office or stall for people to visit and it may be that they do not want one or need one. So besides from advertising, how do they promote themselves? They do the same thing people with premises do and get their contact details listed in a contact directory like the BT phone book, Yellow Pages or Thomson Local. They may also seek to be listed in profession- or area-specific directories.

It's just the same on the web. Contact directories are, as mentioned in the previous section, the second type of search directory and they store your contact details in a profile which they will display varying amounts of in their results. Though often overlooked, they are equally useful to people with and people without webspace. Getting yourself listed in this kind of directory helps to improve your web visibility (so beneficial for getting people to webspace you do have) and can even give you some web search visibility if you have no webspace (no website, blog or social networking page, etc).

Contact directories come in two varieties these days:

- **Map-based directories** which show a map with markers as the primary form of search result. If you are listed, your name and contact details will appear when someone clicks on the map marker at your address location. The results may or may not list details from or links to the profiles or web outlets of the top handful of results next to the map.
- **Traditional listing directories** which will show the conventional contact details lists, often with a link to the profile which will show where you are on a map.

If the directory is linked to a search engine, the search engine will automatically find organisations and businesses to list in the directory. You may appear in such a directory even if you have no proper web outlets so long as your physical address is listed in another directory somewhere (other than as a private individual). This is far from ideal though, as all that happens with auto-listings is that the directory will list the bare minimum of details and declare you to be unverified (not confidence inspiring). If there is no other information to classify you with, this listing will only turn up for searches involving your name or address which isn't all that useful.

Most directories will require you to submit your details to them. In all cases registering an account, submitting your details and verifying your entry is the only way to take full advantage of the directory facilities (i.e. to be properly categorised for search results, get reviews, a full profile, etc). Verification varies - Google will require you to fill in a postcard, Thomson will call you, while Yell and others will just look over your entry themselves. For some specialist directories you may have to pay for inclusion or be a member of a professional body, and of course you can always pay to be advertised or priority-listed.

If the directory has very simple profiles for non-paying clients (name, contact details, categorisation), it's quite likely that the results will show this information directly, including a link to any webspace you tell them you have. If it gives better profiles to non-paying customers, the listing is well worth while as you get a chance to say something about what you do. The best profiles allow you to have a detailed section about what you do and this is actually another form of webspace which can be optimised for search engines with good copy.

The advantage of being in such directories is the same online as it is in the physical world - some people walk the streets to find what they are looking for, others pick up a phone book. You can have premises on the street but if you aren't in the phone directory you are invisible to the person using the phone book.

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If we go back to our analogy of personal assistants, the search engine and the web search directory will bring you back results from all over the web, including what is in contact directories, but a contact directory will only return results from the contact details it's been given.

People do use contact directories to search for businesses and organisations, in particular when they are interested in a certain area. They may already know of the directory or have discovered it in a previous general web search and decided using it was better than using a general search engine. Part of the reason for this is trust - they know these entries are likely to have been verified especially in well-known or profession-specific directories. Another reason is that such directories have strict categorisation and make searching less general - searching for a shoe-maker will only return a list of shoe-makers, not web addresses of people who are knowledgeable about them or talk about them a lot. This is especially true of a shoe-maker directory. With these listings, the searcher gets the contact details and this is another strong reason to use such a directory because statistics show that people who use contact directories are not idly searching - they really do want to get in touch with that shoe-maker.

One area having directories entries can also help with is building a good reputation, which can only be genuinely attained by having a good service or product which has satisfied people. Obviously 'word-of-mouth' or personal recommendations is one way this can happen and getting reviews is another but there has to be somewhere that people can leave the reviews and others can read them. Many contact directories do allow you to get reviews once you are registered with them without you having to pay for this - great whether you do have your own webspace or not.

Being in a contact directory increases your visibility all round then because people making either a general web search or a directory-only search have a chance of finding you for a relevant search term because of your listing. If you do have a web address in your directory profile(s) you also help build legitimate links to your web outlet. It should go without saying that you should only try to get yourself listed in general directories and suitable specific directories. There's no good in a shoe-maker trying to be listed in a directory for lawyers - a profile should always be accurate and truthful.

### The results?

One important aspect to think about regarding general web searches is how many competitors you have with the same or similar name - at all, in your category (keywords describing what you do) and in your area. It's good to try and come high in search engine results for your operating name. If a lot of organisations have the same name worldwide, try and do well for combinations of name + category or name + area, or even all three together. These are very common ways of searching since people you meet often remember your operating name even if they lose your card, and people who have heard of you get a word-of-mouth recommendation they want to follow up.

If you can come high up in general search engine results for a search as open as category + area then luck has as much to do with it as anything else. Consider my position - I do web design in Edinburgh (actually I do a lot more including programming but this is one category people could use to find me). So does everyone else and their dog - all it takes to get someone started is the idea that it's a nice, easy little side-line, one little course in design (many don't bother), getting hold of a program which writes code for you and a computer at home. Everybody wants to be a ~~director~~ designer :P

I recently put myself in Thomson's online directory and the man who verified my account was much happier hearing that mine was an incorporated company as you have to be over eighteen to run one and they often get school kids operating from their bedrooms wanting to be listed in the directory as a business. They can be found on the web as they have set up websites, but not usually in directories which verify their business listings.

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Lots of serious companies pay for their listings to get ahead of this kind of competition because it is not a side-line for them - enough of them to fill a page of search results. If you do something that a lot of people do - hobbyists or part-timers as well as full-time experienced professionals, then you have to accept that some generic categories, especially in search engines, are going to be oversubscribed even in your area and very hard to get to the top of without paying. Bed & breakfast and any arts and crafts categories are also good examples of popular categories with lots of web addresses.

When it comes to choosing which search result listing to investigate, search engine users tend to favour results with good ranking (usually no further down than second page unless they are not going to refine their search terms and try again). They also prefer those which give most relevant further detail just under the link given. Detail given is often more important than ranking for contact directory users who tend to favour the listing which is verified and shows more detail - either a website or a filled in profile which says something about the company. Reviews are also good for attracting attention so long as they are from genuine and genuinely satisfied customers. Directory users are more likely to go further down the list before giving up or refining their search.

You can have a great search directory profile but if the search engine or directory favours one area on a map or lists results alphabetically there isn't a lot you can do to shift your rank position other than changing your company name or premises. However, having a good directory profile in a few popular and well-used directories still helps as people do flick down a list to find the best results and the information in your profiles will help you come up in more specific searches.

This helps a fair bit with the 'over-subscribed category in my area' effect when search engines 'decide' (as they do sometimes) that a searcher would be better off looking in a directory because that is where the most relevant content to their query is. Obviously it can only give you a leg up if the searcher is using a directory you are in, especially profession-specific, as the vast majority of people don't bother to put themselves in them and rely only on what unverified listing they might get by chance.

So, as with any kind of promotion, there are no absolute guarantees on the level of success you will have unless you have a niche market - the attention you get can depend on what you are promoting and how many competitors you have as much as anything else. You can also mess things up a bit by not understanding some of the finer rules about optimisation, linking or building a reputation.

Usually though, doing or getting these things done to promote yourself is better than not by far even with a few mistakes or stiff competition, in particular if you do have web outlets to promote. Using online promotion methods to improve or even get a search rank and give your visibility a boost can only do you favours (assuming your directory profiles and web outlet(s) are in good order) and my personal experience is that these forms of promotion do work. Everything you get back from them is a bonus if you paid little or nothing to get them done.