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"We have been on the internet since 1996 and had always taken a very conservative approach on our site. For nearly a year though, we were bombarded by emails from third party linking programs, which stressed the importance of linking for relevancy.

Finally, we broke down and joined one of these programs. Unfortunately, the program used hidden links, and Google removed us from the index within a week. I guess it's true that anyone can get fooled into buying snake oil."

- Frank, owner of a limousine services company

Search Engine Optimizers

SEO is an abbreviation for "search engine optimizer." Many SEOs provide useful services for website owners, from writing copy to giving advice on site architecture and helping to find relevant directories to which a site can be submitted. However, there are a few unethical SEOs who have given the industry a black eye through their overly aggressive marketing efforts and their attempts to unfairly manipulate search engine results.

While Google does not have relationships with any SEOs and does not offer recommendations, we do have a few tips that may help you distinguish between an SEO that will improve your site and one that will only improve your chances of being dropped from search engine results altogether.

- **Be wary of SEO firms that send you email out of the blue.**

Amazingly, we get these spam emails too:

*"Dear google.com,
I visited your website and noticed that you are not listed in most of the major search engines and directories..."*

Reserve the same skepticism for unsolicited email about search engines as you do for "burn fat at night" diet pills or requests to help transfer funds from deposed dictators.

- **No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google.**

Beware of SEO's that claim to guarantee rankings, or that claim a "special relationship" with Google, or that claim to have a "priority submit" to Google. There is no priority submit for Google. In fact, the only way to submit a site to Google directly is by using the page at <http://www.google.com/addurl.html>. You can do this yourself at no cost whatsoever.

- **Be careful if a company is secretive or won't clearly explain what they intend to do.**

Ask for explanations if something is unclear. If an SEO creates deceptive or misleading content on your behalf, such as doorway pages or "throwaway" domains, your site could be removed entirely from Google's index. Ultimately, you are responsible for the actions of any companies you hire, so it's best to be sure you know exactly how they intend to "help" you.

- **You should never have to link to an SEO.**

Avoid SEOs that talk about the power of "free-for-all" links, link popularity schemes, or submitting your site to thousands of search engines. These are typically useless exercises that do not affect your ranking in the results of the major search engines. At least, not in a way you would likely consider to be positive.

- **Some SEOs may try to sell you the ability to type keywords directly**

into the browser address bar.

Most such proposals require users to install extra software, and very few users do so. Evaluate such proposals with extreme care and be skeptical about the self-reported number of users who have downloaded the required applications.

- **Choose wisely.**

While you consider whether to go with an SEO, you may want to do some research on the industry. Google is one way to do that of course. You might also seek out a few of the cautionary tales that have appeared in the press, including this article on one particularly aggressive SEO:

http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/07/01/spyware_inc/index.html

While Google does not comment on specific companies, we have encountered firms calling themselves SEOs who follow practices that are clearly beyond the pale of accepted business behavior. Be careful.

- **Be sure to understand where the money goes.**

While Google never sells better ranking in our search results themselves, several other search engines combine pay-per-click or pay-for-inclusion results with their regular web search results. Some SEO's will promise to rank you highly in search engines, but place you in the advertising section of the engine rather than in search results. A few SEO's will even change their bid prices in real time to create the illusion that they "control" other search engines and can place themselves in the slot of their choice. This scam does not work with Google because our advertising is clearly labeled and separated from our search results, but be sure to ask any SEO you're considering which fees go toward permanent inclusion and which apply toward temporary advertising.

- **Talk to many SEOs, and ask other SEOs if they would recommend the firm you're considering.**

References are a good start, but they don't tell the whole story. You should ask how long a company has been in business and how many full time staffers it employs. If you feel pressured or uneasy, go with your gut feeling and play it safe: hold off until you find a firm that you can trust. Ask your SEO firm if it reports every spam abuse that it finds to Google using our spam complaint form at

<http://www.google.com/contact/spamreport.html>. Ethical SEO firms report deceptive sites that violate Google's spam guidelines.

- **Make sure you're protected legally.**

For your own safety, you should insist on a full and unconditional money-back guarantee. Don't be afraid to request a refund if you are unsatisfied for any reason, or if your SEO's actions causes your domain to be removed from a search engine's index. Make sure you have a contract in writing that includes pricing. The contract should also require the SEO to stay within the guidelines recommended by each search engine for site inclusion.

What are the most common abuses a website owner is likely to encounter?

One common scam is the creation of "shadow" domains that funnel users to a site by using deceptive redirects. These shadow domains often will be owned by

the SEO who claims to be working on a client's behalf. However, if the relationship sours, the SEO may point the domain to a different site, or even to a competitor's domain. If that happens, the client has paid to develop a competing site owned entirely by the SEO.

Another illicit practice is to place "doorway" pages loaded with keywords on the client's site somewhere. The SEO promises this will make the page more relevant for more queries. This is inherently false since individual pages are rarely relevant for a wide range of keywords. More insidious however, is that these doorway pages often contain hidden links to the SEO's other clients as well. Such doorway pages drain away the link popularity of a site and route it to the SEO and its other clients, which may include sites with unsavory or illegal content.

What are some other things to look out for?

There are a few warning signs you may be dealing with a rogue SEO. It's far from a comprehensive list, so if you have any doubts, you should trust your instincts. By all means, feel free to walk away if the SEO:

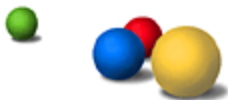
- owns shadow domains
- puts links to their other clients on doorway pages
- offers to sell keywords in the address bar
- doesn't distinguish between actual search results and ads that appear in search results
- guarantees ranking, but only on obscure, long keyword phrases you would get anyway
- operates with multiple aliases or falsified WHOIS info
- gets traffic from "fake" search engines, spyware, or scumware
- has had domains removed from Google's index or is not itself listed in Google

If you feel you were deceived by an SEO in some way, you may want to report it.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) handles complaints about deceptive or unfair business practices. To file a complaint, visit: <http://www.ftc.gov/> and click on "File a Complaint Online", call 1-877-FTC-HELP, or write to:

Federal Trade Commission
CRC-240
Washington, D.C. 20580

If your complaint is against a company in another country, please file it at <http://www.econsumer.gov/>.



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