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Common Legal Problems Associated with SEO by Trevor Southwold

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Like other online activities, search engine optimisation (SEO) has proved to be a difficult area for legislators. The boundaries between legal and illegal SEO activities are hard to define. To make matters worse, when breaches of the law occur, they are difficult to punish. Nevertheless, any SEO agency or business that is hoping to employ one should gain a basic grounding in the legal issues that surround search engine optimisation.

SEO itself is not against the law, nor is it against the 'spirit' of the search engines. True, honest search engine optimisation benefits everyone: it provides the search user with a better experience, the search engine with an easier job and the webmaster with greater traffic and visibility.

That being said, there are many unethical practices employed by unscrupulous agencies to boost the search engine results page (SERP) rankings of their clients. These range from the morally questionable to the definitively illegal. Knowing the difference between the two will help protect your business from landing in legal hot water.

Techniques to watch out for include hacking in all guises, parasite hosting, content scraping, email spam, false testimonials and software theft. There are many fine lines in internet marketing and although these techniques are not always against the law, an agency that uses any should be considered too great a liability for a reputable business to employ.

Content scraping is one technique that can easily cause its users to fall foul of the law. Scraping refers to the practice of plagiarising pieces of original content that have been published elsewhere on the internet for the purposes of driving online traffic in the desired direction. Generally, content that is selected for scraping is already well ranked in SERPs. The legal risk here is that of copyright infringement: a website that publishes plagiarised material can be seen to infringe upon the copyright of the original content author.

Hacking in various forms is also illegal. Although the law covering hacking offenses is notoriously complex and will vary between countries, any reputable business should steer clear of agencies that employ hacking in their SEO strategies. One example of how hacking can be used to boost search engine optimisation is by using computer code to generate a web page on an existing web site without the webmaster's permission (or knowledge). By doing this on web sites with a good level of domain authority and placing links on the created page, hackers are able to pass relevance and value to the link destination. It should go without saying that hacking could land your business in extremely serious trouble.

Ultimately, the best option for a business that is hoping to employ an SEO agency is to go with a well recognised, industry-leading company with a number of existing high-profile clients. It is also worth writing into the terms of your contract that illegal techniques will render your agreement null and void. Although they cannot guarantee your agency will respect the law, taking these important measures can provide you with some peace of mind.

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