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Search engine optimisation (SEO) can be difficult to understand for those without an inside knowledge of the discipline. Here we have attempted to answer a short list of questions about SEO that are frequently asked by people who work outside of the SEO industry.

1. What is search engine optimisation?

Many people know little about what search engine optimisation actually means or entails. Essentially search engine optimisation is an umbrella term for a number of different processes that can help a web site rank higher in the results pages delivered by search engines.

2. What is the point?

It has been estimated that as much as 90% of all web traffic that passes through search engines clicks through to a result delivered on the first page. Other estimates are not quite so high but it is certainly true that a great deal of traffic ends up at a site that is featured on the first page - ranking in the very first position will earn your web site the highest number of visitors. As anyone with a working knowledge of marketing will know, visitors = potential customers = sales.

3. Is it possible to rank well for everything?

In a word, no (unless you are Wikipedia!). The results pages delivered by search engines are different for every search query and the processes that improve rankings are connected to specific queries. In other words, ranking well for one thing will not ensure you rank well for another.

4. How long does it take?

How long is a piece of string? The answer will depend on a number of factors, including the level of competition for the key terms (or search queries) you are fighting for. In some cases, results may be noticeable after little more than a month - but in others, it may take a sustained campaign spanning a year or even longer. Once a web site achieves a good ranking, regular maintenance work is often required to keep it in a prime position.

5. How much does it cost?

See above. Prices will vary greatly depending on the amount and quality of work required. For a locally focused web site in an uncompetitive industry, aiming to rank for a few long tail terms (but no head terms) - unconcerned with the ethical standpoint of their chosen SEO company - costs could be extremely low. On the other hand, for an international web site in a competitive industry, aiming to rank for lots of head terms in a short space of time and who insists on ethical, sustainable practice, costs could be extremely high.

Although this short article cannot provide a definitive FAQ (that document would be much, much longer), it should provide some quick answers to the most fundamental questions facing someone who has encountered the term "search engine optimisation" for the very first time. Further resources can be found at comprehensive web sites such as SEOmoz (where there is an excellent 'Beginner's Guide to SEO' for readers with more than a passing interest).

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