SEO vs. Search Engines: a False Opposition?

by Robert Stevens

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Much has already been made of the troubled relationship between search engine (SE) operators and search engine optimisation (SEO) companies. Many people see the two groups as opposing forces, embroiled in a battle for control over search results; however, closer examination reveals these groups have some common ground. In many ways they even work to complement one another.

The goal of a search engine is to connect search engine users with the content they seek. With so many millions of web pages online, this is an extremely demanding task and one that can only be accomplished using a huge network of powerful servers.

The goal of a search engine optimisation company is to ensure that a web site is optimised for the greatest level of visibility and understanding by search engine crawlers. With hundreds of thousands of pages vying for a prime position in the search results for competitive key terms, this too is a monumental undertaking.

Search engine optimisation companies clearly rely on search engines. They also rely on an understanding of the algorithms (or rules) used by engines to determine relevance and value. Without this understanding, SEO would be a hopeless enterprise and web sites would be left to guess how best to promote themselves.

Less immediately apparent is the fact that search engines also rely on SEO. Without SEO, very few web sites would be designed in the best way for search engine crawlers to understand them. This could lead to a monopoly on relevance which would make the service less appealing to internet search users.

One of the reasons the current search system has proved successful is that SEOs help to maintain the structure of the web that is necessary for search engines to thrive. By ensuring that web sites feature the right HTML tags in the right places, are well connected, have a high degree of usability and contain a wealth of relevant content, SEOs help search engines to find content for their users. Without some degree of on-page optimisation it would be difficult for a search engine to find even the most relevant page to a user's search query.

It is clear that both SEs and SEOs are invested in the success of search engine crawlers. SEs rely on these crawlers to deliver results and so do SEOs. While some tactics employed by unscrupulous SEO agencies are considered manipulative and underhanded, many SEO techniques equate to the strategic use of legitimate online communities to make life easier for crawlers and web users alike.

One example of SEO would be a link exchange request from a web site that publishes technology reviews to another web site in the same field. Both are respected online publications that already share common readers and both stand to gain from increasing the flow of traffic between them. If successful, this link request would also improve the value of both web sites perceived by the search engine crawlers. It is difficult to see how this exchange could have a negative impact on the web search experience of an internet user.

Despite evidence to the contrary, some individuals and organisations believe an internet free from search engine optimisation would be better for its users. Others strongly suspect that an internet free from SEO would be chaos.

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Robert Stevens - About Author:
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