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Internet use has soared over the past few years and as a result, the web as an arena for business has become increasingly competitive. In the early days of internet search, simply having a website with some degree of keyword optimisation was enough to give a business a decent shot at a good position in the search engine results pages (SERPs). Sadly for many webmasters, this is rarely the case today.

Search engine optimisation has evolved from the crudest techniques, such as keyword stuffing, into a complex discipline that incorporates many different approaches to the same problem. As search engine algorithms become more sophisticated, search engine optimisation has to keep pace. These days, search engine optimisation covers everything from search-engine-friendly web development to 'black hat' link building techniques. Look online for long enough and you will come across agencies that make tempting offers of overnight ranking gains at unbelievable prices. These offers sound too good to be true because they often are.

While it is possible to make considerable ranking gains in a very short space of time using certain methods, these methods often contravene the webmaster guidelines laid out by search engine operators. Increasing the number of inbound links to a website usually results in elevated SERP ranking positions, so there is much to be gained by furiously building links. So-called 'black hat' link building businesses, who seek to manipulate search engines by manufacturing enormous quantities of low-quality links, can often raise a website quickly within the search engine results. These rapid ranking gains come at a price, however - as well as inbound link quantity, search engines are interested in inbound link quality, and perhaps even the ratio of high:low quality inbound links to a given website. Even if a website immediately soars within the SERP rankings after a promotional black hat link building campaign, search algorithms are changing all the time and it only takes one change for an unstable website to drop like a stone.

Why 'white hat' SEO? Because white hat SEO is sustainable, ethical, and approved by search engines. Black hat SEO seeks to exploit and take advantage of weaknesses and flaws in search engine algorithms. White hat SEO seeks to 'play by the rules', ensuring a website is optimised within search engine guidelines and delivers an irresistible user experience. Websites that engage in unsanctioned, black hat SEO will always be vulnerable to algorithm changes and search engine penalties, while those that insist upon white hat promotion and high-quality content will always gain from the devaluation of other sites.

Search engine optimisation should be accounted for within the digital marketing budget of any serious enterprise. With more websites springing up every day, the online space is only going to get more competitive and businesses that want the greatest chance of maximising their revenues should devote some resources to obtaining value, relevance and visibility within search engine results pages. Despite the obvious temptations to employ a 'black hat' agency, businesses that want to ensure the continued effectiveness of their link building spend should stick to 'white hat' professionals.

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