

## How to Spot and Avoid the Predators of SEM Malpractice

### OVERVIEW

The proliferation of any new marketing practice always brings with it an onslaught of schemes, scams, and swindles. Search engine marketing (SEM) is no exception. Those looking to start online marketing campaigns, who have not studied the marketplace carefully, are often at risk. Close to 95% of online marketing contractors fall into three categories: Pirates, Fluffy Ad Agencies, and Technogeeks. To productively use SEM, you must learn how to harness the ecosystem, rather than allow it to harness you.

Through years of portfolio diversification, pirates have now found looting and plundering to be more profitable online than in the open seas. Companies lacking SEM experience are often taken advantage of by these “pirates” through unethical and fraudulent online marketing schemes.

Although the number of pirates is dwindling, the number of fluffy branding/advertising agency types and graphic designers are not. It is far too easy to entrust your site’s well-being to a beginner who does not fully understand site design and production. This sentiment carries over to branding or advertising agencies which quickly drain your bank account.

Finally, it is generally inadvisable to expect success from someone who has the word “geek” in their job title. Technogeeks take pride in being told what to do without deciding if a given task is logical or cost-effective. Most are adept in current online marketing programs, but ineptly rely on untested keywords that are simply given to them.

### THE SIGNS

With friends like these who needs competition? Fortunately, there are several tell-tale signs you are being taken advantage of by any of these predators:

**Starting with SEO instead of PPC** is a red-flag of common industry malpractice. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is proven to work, but it works over time. Pay-Per-Click advertising (PPC) is a more efficient way to start an online campaign because it quickly delivers visible results while promoting a new website. This in turn tests, and proves, the right keywords to use in a future SEO campaign.



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**Relying only on clicks** means your campaign is being seen, but it does not mean your campaign is working. In addition to depending solely on clicks, there are also agencies that insist success is contingent on a website's "reach" and "visibility" metrics. Garnering said attention is great, but when you are paying for this attention, it is important to generate revenue that can maintain the attention. This is only accomplished by clicks converting to leads and sales. If you are being told that either clicks, reach or visibility equals the secret to your success, you are essentially being told the secret of how your online marketer plans to take advantage of you.

**Only utilizing PPC for a limited amount of time** could kill a flourishing ROI. Some online marketers suggest that eliminating PPC after a certain period of time (usually 3 months) and focusing on SEO alone is the proper cycle of online advertising. But what if your PPC is working? Although this is not a direct form of malpractice, it is an extremely careless approach to maintaining earnings.

**Focusing on a few top keywords** effectively throws away a targeted audience that uses more detailed keywords to find your product or service. And by constantly vying for top ranked keywords, you can quickly exhaust a budget's advertising dollars. For example, if a person is searching for "plumbing," they will find a random site in an infinite index, but if they are looking for "24 hr plumbing Paris TX" they will find an exact site in a manageable index.

**Employing no-traffic keywords** can earn a top search engine ranking position, but at the cost of no viable visitors. Unlike focusing on only top keywords, no-traffic keywords can save on advertising dollars spent, but that is because no one is using them. No-traffic keywords can and usually will, earn a top ranking in search engines, but if no one is looking, nothing is happening.

**Overloading a site with keywords** carries limited value with the major search engines today, and may even trigger an "over optimization" penalty. A site's content should be coherent to the user- jargon and an abundance of keywords portrays a lack of professionalism. Remember, site content is written for a person, not a robot.



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**Insufficient tracking** will not be able to follow which ads are generating sales, in addition to not knowing specifically which ads are good or bad. Tracking the result-generating ads in a PPC campaign is how a site is effectively managed for both efficiency and ROI.

**Guarantee of results** offered by marketers may seem like a great selling point, but in reality is a fraudulent promise that often guarantees nothing more than disappointment. Guarantees are merely an intriguing ploy used by sub-par contractors who do not grasp the vacillating realities of SEO or PPC marketing.

**Automated Link Submission Services** should be avoided because most often they employ link spam techniques. Some of these methods include link farms, which are a group of web pages that hyperlink to every other page in the group, or Google bombing, which is the creation of a website specifically designed to affect the ranking of another site. Trusted directories employ technologies to block automatic submissions, and may ban the sites of those who utilize them.

**Unintelligent SEO practices** will deliver an overwhelming invoice and a mediocre ROI. Prior to Google's existence, search engines ranked pages almost exclusively by on-page content. This all changed once Google stepped into the market. The precise formulas Google uses to rank pages are unknown and are ever-changing. However, the one fact that has been proven since Google's inception is that a website can earn a higher ranking by having many other websites linking to it. This does not mean though, that on-page content does not matter, it just matters less. Roughly 80% of SEO ranking is accumulated through site linking, leaving the remaining 20% to on-page content. However, a great portion of SEO marketing firms focus on creating an excess of on-page keyword content, which makes a site less effective and charges the client for banality. This figure becomes even more staggering when the 20% is divided into the criterion that actually makes the on-page content. An estimated 40% of on-page content is derived from the page's Title and Meta tags; another 30% comes from the combination of keywords per paragraph, and the header (H1 & H2) title, leaving the remaining 30% to actual keyword density. This figure, multiplied by the 20% it is a part of, equals 6% of actual SEO work. When an SEM firm only offers SEO content copywriting, they are spending 100% of their time doing things that are only 6% effective.



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## HELP YOURSELF (GUIDELINES PREVENTING MALPRACTICE)

Taking all of the above in to consideration, we can diagnose the most common theme among victims of SEM malpractice. It seems to be their inability to tie their business objectives to specific SEM elements. You don't have to understand the intricacies of each aspect of SEM, but be familiar enough with the basics to know when you're being led down a futile and costly path. Bottom line- it is imperative that their efforts are translating into ROI for you.

**Understand your business goals.** If a task or service is not offered and must be engaged to achieve desired results, there is a provider who can serve you better. SEO must be tied to the specific goals of the site. If a website's purpose is to generate leads, those leads must be able to be correlated to the specific key phrase and search engine. Likewise, if a website's purpose is to generate sales directly, the sales must be able to be tied back to the organic listing.

**Track and measure obsessively** which ads are helping you and which are hindering business. Tracking is a way of measuring which ads in a campaign are generating results as opposed to independently generated results. Measurements of traffic (visitors) and conversion rates (leads, sales, etc.) are tools that offer tangible figures of a site's performance.

**Link Building** will improve a site's ranking and importance in search engines. One of the most efficient ways to receive links is by using directories that are lists of websites and links. Some of these directories are free and some are paid for, while some (called Reciprocal Links) offer free links in exchange for a link back to the directory. Although reciprocal links are not a form of malpractice, it should be noted that search engines have greatly devalued such links.

**Cast a wide net of keywords and phrases** so both casual and targeted visitors will hit your link. It is clear that search engines look at the content of a linking page when determining the qualitative value for a particular topic. Therefore, linking from pages that match one's keywords and phrases is highly desired. Generally, a healthy number of keywords and phrases to submit is in the high hundreds or low thousands.



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# APOGEE RESULTS MARKETING

**Invest and Test.** With the above mentioned methods of online marketing, there will certainly be one, if not a combination of several, that can accomplish your online marketing needs. There are many tools and resources in online marketing, but to consistently get the job done right, invest in what works.

**Reference** who you hire for any SEM. Ask about links, ask about content, ask about tracking, ask about anything that has been mentioned within this paper. Remember, only 5% of the SEM industry that is worth trusting.

## CONCLUSION

Oddly enough, malpractice is a prevalent occurrence in the SEM industry, not because of malicious intent, but because of carelessness. Many SEM vendors sincerely believe that their practices are both ethical, and moreover—the real deal. Before hiring any SEM vendor, a proper evaluation of their past client service history must be made to distinguish the difference between those who legitimately made improvements and those who simply made up improvements.

### ABOUT APOGEE RESULTS:

Apogee Results is a leading online marketing agency that develops and manages customized search engine optimization, paid search, and website effectiveness consulting programs for B2B and B2C clients. Apogee Results uses proven techniques, powerful web analytics tools, and a deep expertise in statistical evaluation to generate solid, measurable results at every stage of the search marketing process.

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