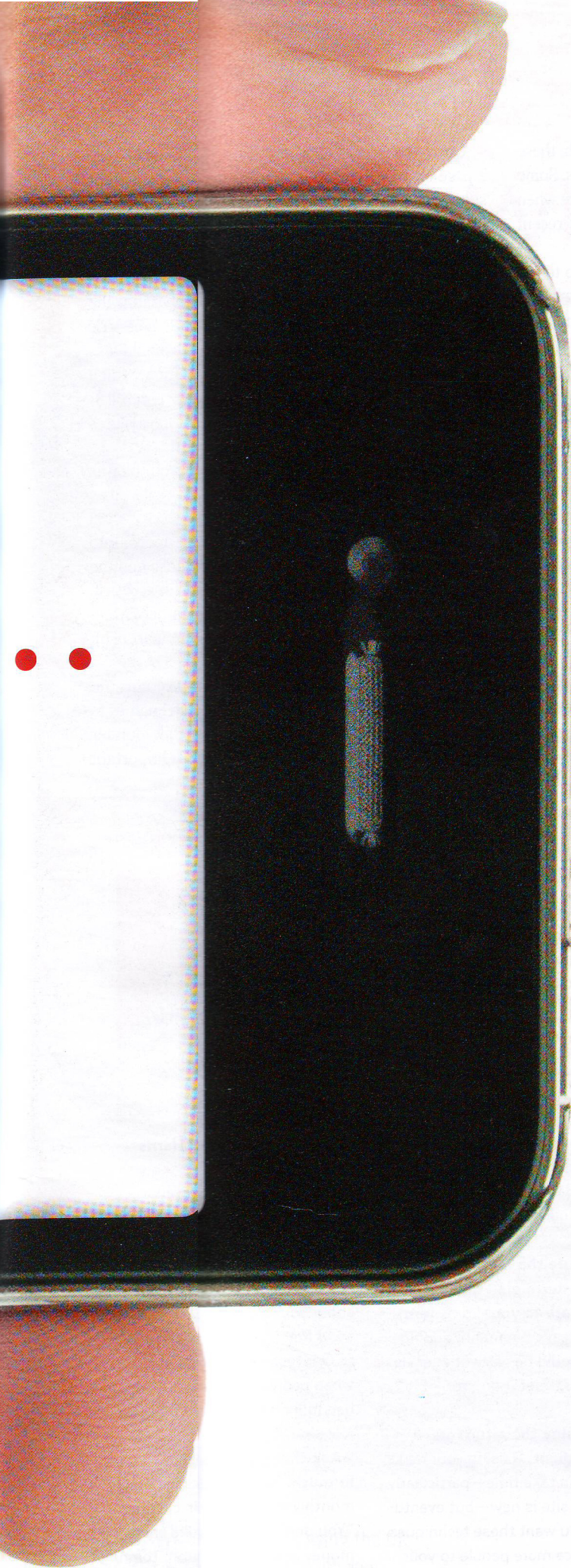


In Search Of.

Master the basics of search engine optimization (SEO) and your Web page will no longer be a site unseen

By Rob Bates



For Ron Adolf, something was missing every time he searched Google for a jeweler in Richmond, Va.: his store.

"I was seeing my competitors," he says. "But we weren't showing up."

Eventually his ad agency persuaded him to enlist a local company, Big Oak, to goose his site's rankings. It didn't take long before his rivals, as he puts it, "knocked off" from Google's top spot.

But even more important, his competition didn't just go down, he went up, and now AdolfJewelers.com has become a site for more eyes. Whereas it used to lure a paltry 30 visitors a day, now it draws about 200—a sixfold increase.

Adolf has become a believer in search engine optimization (SEO), the increasingly important, difficult-to-explain-to-your-grandmother field devoted to winning a search engine's attention. The rise of SEO is a testament to the ongoing power of search engines. Used by an estimated 90 percent of all Web users, Google and its cousins are now the Internet's primary information providers, question-answerers, and "bouncers," and where you appear in their listings makes a big difference in whether you are lost or found. According to SEOMoz.com, the top position in search results receives 42.25 percent of all clicks.


Setup an Appointment

JEWELRY **ja** ARTISANS

CUSTOM JEWELRY • DIAMONDS • FEATURED DESIGNERS • THE S

Obama Inauguration Jewelry

A custom designed pin and pendant, created to signify an extraordinary moment in our country's history. The between Lynda Sanford and Jamie Kresl.



The First Lady's Pendant

This handcrafted platinum pendant was created as a gift for First Lady Michelle Obama in celebration of President Barack Obama's historic inauguration.

The circle of diamonds represents our former first families. The black diamond represents the essence of our First Lady. Waves of rubies and diamonds represent the patriotism of the First Lady and her family.

The first piece in this series was presented on January 19, 2009.

The President's Pin

This handcrafted platinum presidential pin was created as a gift for President Barack Obama in celebration of his historic inauguration.

Forty-three white diamonds in a circle represent each of our former presidents, while a single black diamond is set apart from the others. The black diamond represents the essence of the Forty-Fourth President of The United States of America!

The first piece in this series was presented on January 19, 2009 – the day before his inauguration.

When Jamie Kresl, owner of Jewelry Artisans in Atlanta, realized his site wasn't showing up in searches for "custom design," which is the store's forte, he turned to an SEO firm for help.

And now, with the advent of the local search, these rankings hold growing importance for jewelers. Some 63 percent of consumers turn first to the Internet when hunting for a local product or service, says a recent survey from WebVisible and Nielsen.

"People looking for businesses no longer go to the Yellow Pages," explains Brian Saemann, digital marketing director for Charlotte, N.C.-based GoBeyond SEO. "They go to online search. So it really matters whether people can find you."

While SEO consultants abound (see sidebar, "Tips for Choosing an SEO Firm"), getting a jump start on the practice is relatively easy to do on your own. Here are some quick tips:

- **Figure out what you want to "rank" for.** Ask yourself: "What's the basis of my business? What do I want shoppers to find me for?" If you want to target customers looking for engagement rings, or watches, or charms, those are the keywords you should be focusing on.

For instance, Jamie Kresl, owner of Jewelry Artisans in Atlanta, hired an SEO firm when he realized he wasn't showing up in searches for "custom design" in his local area. "Our forte is custom design, so that kind of bugged me," he says.

Once you've picked your keyword(s), make sure a page on your website is devoted specifically to that subject—so, for example, if your specialty is pearls, have a page that shows pearls and nothing but pearls. And make sure that's reflected in the page's title. That means a page full of engagement rings should have the words *engagement-rings* (with a hyphen separating the words) in its title and address, rather than a generic description like "page two." The keyword should also be entered into the page's meta description, which supplies the words that pop up beneath search listings. (Most content management systems have places to input titles and meta descriptions.)

These keywords can also be fodder for your blog as well: "If you are targeting jewelry repair, write posts about jewelry repair," says Saemann.

- **Every page on your site must be accessible by a text link.** If a page is orphaned because nothing else leads to it, a search engine may not run across it. So every page should have a link from another page—and those links need to be text, rather than part of an image or video.

Site maps can help because they make sure no page is left behind, as well as assist search engines to "understand" how your site works. Big Oak founder Shell Harris recommends your site's most important

TIPS FOR CHOOSING AN SEO FIRM

Search engine optimization is constantly evolving, full of jargon, and not for the technically averse. That's why Jewelry Artisans' Jamie Kresl decided to hire an outside company. "I realized I was a business owner; I didn't have the time or creativity to get involved with SEO or blogging," he says.

If you do decide to hire an SEO agency, consultants recommend you factor in the following:

- **Hire a company that also handles other aspects of site maintenance, like writing articles or blogging.** "Find a firm that does everything, not just little bits and pieces," says Kresl. "I used to hire one person for this, another for that. There was no continuity."

- **Request local references, and see copies of their work.** "Ask how many links they have built," says Shell Harris of Big Oak. "Tell them you want backlink lists for their clients, because that's where the real impact is, and it's where some SEO companies cheap out." However, if a company makes grand promises, like guaran-

teeing 100 links a month, that can be a red flag that you are dealing with a black-hat company, says GoBeyond SEO's Brian Saemann. "[Often], those links are worthless."

- **Be sure the agency has a long-term plan they can articulate to you.** Long-term is key, says Saemann, adding you should be wary of agencies that just "set it and forget it."

- **Measure the return on investment.** Raising your rankings can take time—particularly if your site is new—but eventually, you want these techniques to entice more people to your site, and, ultimately, for those



Big Oak founder Shell Harris

hits to translate into revenue. So measure how things are working. This can be as simple as having salespeople ask customers where they heard about you, says JWAG's Matthew Perosi. Kresl realized his SEO investment was paying off when people began saying they had found the store on Google.

- **Ask the agency to stay in touch.** Saemann issues monthly reports to his clients. "You don't want to send them money and not hear from them again," he adds. —RB

Adolf Jewelers


BEAR. WE'VE MADE YOU HAPPY.

INTOWN • ONLINE • IN-STORE EVENTS • DIAMOND BUYING TIPS • DESIGNER JEWELRY • QUOTE • CONTACT • HOME

SHE'LL NEVER GUESS.

30% OFF HOLIDAY SALE

NOW THROUGH DEC 24



THE EVERYTHING ENGAGEMENT gallery

EASY GUIDE TO ENGAGEMENT RINGS

2004-2007 WINNER

BBB Torch Award for Marketplace Integrity

ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND. VOTE

Adolf Jewelers, Richmond, Virginia Jewelry Store • Diamond Engagement Rings • Diamond Cuts • Designer Jewelry • Contact Adolf Jewelers

Adolf Jewelers • 1537 N. Parham Road • Richmond, VA • 804.265.3571 • Adolf Jewelers Diamonds Are Certified Conflict-Free.

AdolfJewelers.com has benefitted from a concerted SEO improvement campaign. The store's main competitors have been "knocked off" from Google's top search results in the area, says owner Ron Adolf.



"If you're targeting jewelry repair, write posts about jewelry repair," says GoBeyond SEO's Brian Saemann.

links be recorded on the bottom of each page. "Think of your footer as a mini-site map," he says.

- **Label your pictures.** An image's alt text often draws in search engines. As with Web pages, image descriptions should contain keywords rather than something generic. For example, label pictures *engagement-rings.jpg*, rather than *32b.jpg*.

Also, better-quality images can boost your rankings, so try to keep your site art between 400 and 500 pixels. "If you have a wider image, that's what Google wants to show," Harris says.

- **Place your store's address on each page of your site, either on the header or the footer.** That can help with location-based searches, says Matthew Perosi of the Jewelers Website Advisory Group. And as with links, be sure to write this address in text. If it's part of your logo, search engines might not read it.

- **Claim your store on Google Places.** Supplying store information can make a "huge difference," says Harris. When someone uses Google to find a business, the search engine's first results detail entries from its local Google Places listings.

This info should include your store's address, hours, and phone number—and it must be formatted exactly the same as it is on your site, says Saemann. "If you spell out *First Avenue* on your site, don't list it as *1st Avenue* elsewhere," he warns. "You don't want the search engines to get confused."

In addition, Google Places entries are often accompanied by user reviews. Having a lot of write-ups, particularly positive ones, can enhance your position, Harris says.

Perosi also recommends Google's Merchant Center, which allows you to upload your database of products into Google for free.

- **Get others to link to you.** Search sites gauge a page's worthiness in part by measuring how many other sites link to it. "It's like a voting system," says Saemann. "When other sites link to you, it's telling Google: Hey, this site has value." It also counts for more if, say, a popular and respected site like *The New*

York Times directs readers to you, rather than, say, Frank's House of Counterfeit Pocketbooks.

You can build links in many ways. You can supply a listing to Yelp and YellowPages.com. When doing SEO for Adolf Jewelers, Harris' company added Adolf's site to Richmond business directories. Although there is a cost to joining the Better Business Bureau, the organization can also provide a valuable connection. And sometimes your shopping mall or center maintains a website and will add a link for free (though, again, make sure it's a text link, not an image or banner ad).

In addition, if you contribute to a local charity, make sure the organization points to you. A tip of the hat from a nonprofit can count for quite a bit, as Google is believed to consider .orgs more credible sources.

Harris also tries to place store-written articles on various sites, along with a link somewhere in the copy or author's bio. For Adolf Jewelers, he says, "we looked for blogs that have guest authors, particularly if they are about jewelry." He also recommends placing pieces on EzineArticles.com, a site built around supplied content from expert authors.

Jewelers should also consider writing for local newspapers or websites and participating in local forums, bulletin boards, and blogs—especially if they have a chance to display jewelry expertise. Sometimes, these forums allow users to include links in their profiles.

- **Link to yourself.** Your own links count, too. Pepper your blog posts and articles with connections to other pages on your site, particularly if those links include targeted keywords. Make sure those links give a clue as to what they are aiming at; it doesn't necessarily help your search ranking if the link just says *here* or *this page*.

- **Write substantive content.** A prime way to lure surfers and build traffic—and, by extension, links—is to avoid using your site simply as a selling tool. Rather, make it genuinely useful.

With so many people confused about jewelry buying, a blog is a great place to answer questions. "What questions do you get asked all the time? That's what people are searching for," Harris says.

- **Continually add to your site.** "The more frequently you update, the more frequently Google will come back to you," Perosi says. So churn out blog posts on a regular schedule, update your product selection, and generally keep things fresh.

- **Station your blog on your site.** If you do have a blog, attach it to your webpage. If, for example, it's a WordPress blog, the URL should be *joesjewelers.com/blog*, not *joesjewelers.wordpress.com*.

- **Track your SEO.** To attract more people, you first have to figure out what they are looking for. Google offers a free tool, Google Analytics, that tells you how many people have come across your site, where they came from, and how they discovered you. Find other helpful Google utilities at *google.com/webmasters/tools*.

- **Don't go to the dark side.** Search engines have made a real effort to punish purveyors of "black hat"

SEO, which involves shady practices like using comment spam, copies of other sites' content, and invisible text with irrelevant keywords to lure surfers. In February, *The New York Times* accused J.C. Penney of winning a top search position through the use of spam links, prompting Google to downgrade the company's results.

"The search engines have become intelligent enough to figure out the people who are gaming the system," notes Perosi.

While SEO can boost rankings, consultants say that you should try to attract search engines, not put one over on them. Even Google seems to know that the industry it spawned can help you only so much, and that the best practice remains: Remember your audience. "Design pages primarily for users," the search giant advises, "not for search engines." ■

SEO DEFINED

A helpful guide to search-engine speak

Meta description A (mostly) invisible summary of the content found on a given URL. It is also the text that appears beneath a link on a search engine result and is the default summary text that appears when someone posts a URL to Facebook.

Alt text (or alternate text) A description given to an image on a site. This text displays when images don't load and is a small search engine ranking factor. It was originally created so people with impaired vision could have a text reader describe an image to them.

Black-hat SEO A term used to describe unethical "gaming" of the search engines. Any practice that attempts to manipulate a search engine's impression of a site is considered to be black hat. Sites employing black-hat techniques typically will be punished. Eventually.

Backlinks Links that point back to your website from other sites. Since search engines interpret backlinks as votes for the usefulness or popularity of your site, good backlinks are valuable and can improve your search ranking.

Anchor text The clickable caption of any links on your website. Search engines assume keywords in the anchor text are relevant to the page being linked, so backlinks that use descriptive search terms are highly prized. —Chris Dornfeld and Andrew Hanelly