
DESTINATION

Search Engine Marketing

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POLE  POSITION
M A R K E T I N G
VELOCITIZE YOUR WEB PRESENCE

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DO YOU DESERVE TOP SEARCH RANKINGS?

In early 2007 I developed the concept of Destination Search Engine Marketing as a way to transform the concept of traditional rankings-based search engine optimization into a service that seeks to more fully meet a client's online marketing needs. While SEO itself is really not much more than the manipulation of a site to achieve better search engine exposure and rankings, *SEO as a service* should be much more.

Properly executed search engine optimization helps businesses succeed online. Search engine exposure is a component of that success, but not the measure of success itself. After all, running radio and TV ads isn't just about getting airplay; it's about running ads that will be effective at driving traffic and increasing business. Where SEO and other forms of offline advertising differ is that SEO cannot be created and executed apart from the core business. It is intertwined.

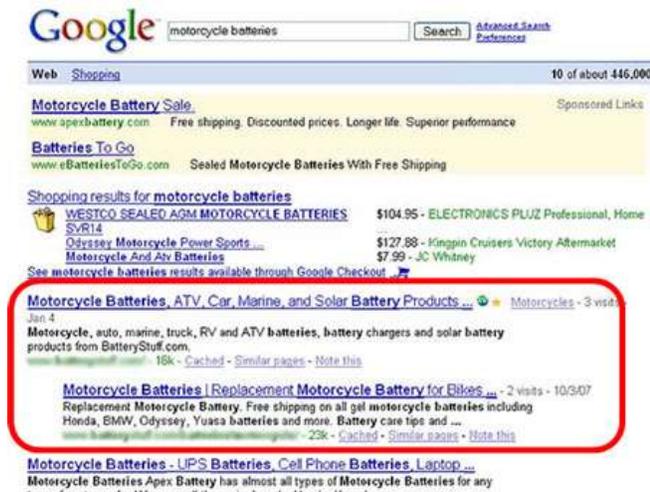
Unfortunately, SEO campaigns have traditionally been run as if they were simply radio or TV spots. They were either effective at driving traffic or not. What happened after the ad ran (or the rankings were achieved) was up to the business. While it is still true the business owner has to take responsibility for converting their traffic to sales, SEO focused solely on achieving top search engine rankings can actually conflict with the goals of the business. The result is the reduction of conversion rates and the loss of sales.

The old "rankings at all cost" mentality needs to be thrown out like last month's leftovers. It's a stale and moldy strategy that simply stinks up the web.

SEO strategies that seek to improve search engine placement without compromising the integrity of the website is what Destination Search Engine Marketing is all about. It's about the merging of both on-site optimization and total customer satisfaction so a site can achieve top search engine placement, by earning the right to be there.

It's not a fluke. It's not a mistake. It's not a manipulation of the algorithm. It's building a site that has been crafted in a way that actually deserves top placement in the search results.

HOW DO I EARN TOP SEARCH ENGINE PLACEMENT?



This is a key question for anybody looking to market their website online. Notice my choice of words here. I didn't ask about *getting* top search engine rankings; instead, I asked about *earning* them. That's a key distinction between standard SEO and Destination SEM. We're not trying to "get" anything that isn't deserved. Instead, we are trying to achieve a result by earning our way there.

The question becomes; how do you earn rankings? There are a lot of ways to answer that question. How you answer it depends on your industry, your business, and what it is about you that makes you different from your competitors.

First, let's back up. Let's assume you were asked by Google why *you* deserve to be #1. How would you answer? When I ask this question of potential clients here are a few answers I get:

- We have the lowest prices
- We've been in business since Noah
- We have better customer service
- No one does it better

The problem is; none of these are compelling reasons to justify achieving a #1 search engine ranking. They all have merit, but that doesn't translate into deserving better rankings than their competitors.

Lowest prices? Sorry, just about everybody makes that boast. Even if yours truly are the lowest today, there is no guarantee they'll be the lowest tomorrow. More to the point, prices are not an indicator of quality. You can have the lowest prices and still have a poor business model, poor quality products or services, poor customer service and just generally be a bad place to buy from. You'll have to do better than that.

Better customer service? This is another boast that not only can't be substantiated (except via word of mouth) but that almost anybody can claim, true or not. The problem I have using that as a distinguishing selling point is that customer service is kind of like insurance; it's great to have but most people don't want to use it. Customer service is generally only used once something has

gone wrong. I do believe in great customer service, and it can be an excellent selling point, but that alone is not enough to earn top rankings.

Business longevity? How long you've been in business does actually tell a bit about your company. If you've been around longer than most in your industry it says that you've got a pretty good business model and know enough about your customer base to weather the test of time. In fact, Google looks at longevity as a ranking factor. But longevity doesn't mean that you're better or more deserving than your competitors. It just means you're good enough. It can help get you noticed, but doesn't justify a #1 ranking.

No one does it better? This is the most compelling argument for deserving top search engine rankings. The problem is, how do you prove it? And how do you make a search engine understand it's true? Knowing, or believing you do it better than anyone else isn't enough. But make sure your customers know it and the search engines will be able to figure it out from the word of mouth you're generating online. But until your customers say enough about you, you won't convince the search engines to give you that top spot.

In order to earn top search engine rankings you have to think beyond the search engine itself. Simply put, the search engines want to reward sites that are praised by the online community. They don't want to give top rankings because you did the best job manipulating your website to match their algorithm, they want to award it to you because the online community believes you deserve it .

WHAT WOULD SUDDEN EXPOSURE GET YOU?

Define: Destination Search Engine Marketing

Let's take a minute to create a definition of what Destination Search Engine Marketing really is. To boil it down to the simplest terms:

*Creating a **desired destination point** for anyone looking for the product, service or information you provide.*

I bolded the words "desired destination point" because the concept is critical to the success of any online marketing campaign. It's not about tweaking your website in order to achieve top rankings; it's about tweaking a website for the purpose of becoming the go-to destination (Destination Website) for your industry.

When you focus on building up your website to meet the needs, wants and desires of your target audience, you're building a Destination Website. A website your audience will return to time and time again. By bringing SEO into the mix, you will achieve top search engine rankings not because you outsmarted the algorithm, but because you've created a site with significant value.

All too often SEO focuses on rankings alone. This creates a conflict between getting ranking "results" and allowing the website to do what it was created to do. (i.e. get customers, leads, sales, etc) When the sole measure of success is rankings the ability of the website to convert often gets ignored. Rankings can be achieved, but it's a half-victory at best if the site itself underperforms.

Destination SEM doesn't focus on rankings, it focuses on the site itself. Rankings are a means for exposure, not the end goal. The end goal is a website that becomes the one place in someone's mind that they can go to get [insert your topic, product or services here]. By focusing on the site rather than rankings, you earn the rankings without compromising the ability of the site to do its job as sufficiently as possible.

Destination SEM recognizes that when you put the visitor first, you'll achieve rankings not because you've beat the search engines at their game, but because your site has earned them. You're not sacrificing conversions for rankings, but neither are you sacrificing rankings for conversions. Build the site to be a Destination Website and the rankings will follow.

So how do you build a Destination Website? We'll get to the seven building blocks of creating a Destination Website later, for now, let's start with a question:

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF YOU SUDDENLY GOT MASS EXPOSURE?

The problem for most sites seeking to get top search engine rankings is they are looking for a shortcut. They want something they have not yet earned.

Let's go with that for a second. Let's say you get those top rankings, not by creating a site with any particular value, but because you were able to manipulate the search engine algorithms. With all this exposure, what are you going to get out of it?

-  Traffic
-  Sales
-  Repeat customers
-  Word of mouth

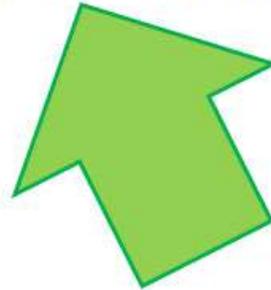
Obviously you'll get a slew of new traffic, and with increased traffic sales will undoubtedly follow. Whether you paid for SEO, are running PPC campaigns, or engaged in any other marketing campaigns, the money you've spent is fueling only short-term growth.

Studies have proven it costs more to get a customer than to keep a customer. If all you're getting with your newfound exposure is traffic and sales, you're missing out on a huge chunk of additional profits. Unless you capitalize on that by creating repeat customers who evangelize you to their friends, you're throwing money away.

On the other hand, if you build a Destination Website, you will get traffic and sales along with repeat customers that evangelize your company through word of mouth. Having an exceptional website is crucial to getting people to come back and talk about you. That talk drives new people back to your site (for free) which helps improve long-term business growth prospects.

By building a Destination Website you get additional exposure and sales that cost you nothing but the cost of building and maintaining a great website. So while you will still want to keep investing in SEO to bring in new traffic and sales, your Destination Website is able to convert that traffic and sales into additional long-term growth and revenues month after month, year after year.

- ✓ More traffic
- ✓ Increased sales
- ✓ Repeat customers
- ✓ Lots of word of mouth



DRIVING TRAFFIC DOESN'T CREATE CUSTOMERS

Most sites rely on advertising and marketing to increase traffic. Good advertising will drive traffic, but really does nothing more than put more eyeballs on the site today than yesterday. The site still has to do its job selling the product or service you offer.

Building a Destination Website does more than increase the number of eyeballs on the site, it helps rocket you beyond the competition in several key areas.

Drives new traffic:

With a Destination Website all your marketing components work together to drive traffic to the website. Whether it's SEO, PPC, magazine ads, radio, TV or whatever other avenues you choose, they all work together to drive traffic that has an expectation of what they will find on the website.

Improves conversions

With a Destination Website you focus more on the customer's wants, needs, and desires, not just on building traffic. This translates into satisfied visitors that are more easily persuaded to take the action you wish them to take.

Creates repeat customers

Not every customer is a loyal customer; some just like to hunt for the best deal. But many are more than happy to return time and time again to a place they are comfortable with. They might still shop around, but ultimately they'll return to familiar ground where they've had a good experience.

Builds loyalty

True Destination Websites go beyond getting repeat customer and actually build a loyal customer base. These are customers that wouldn't think of going anywhere else. You become the default destination to these key customers.

Makes your site sticky

It's one thing to have customers come back time and time again, but when your site is sticky, it becomes a magnet. Your audience finds it hard to pull away and return far more often than even they would expect. Your website isn't just a shopping experience for them, it's a place to learn and be engaged with the industry and the information you provide.

Creates word of mouth

When your website is truly exceptional, it helps create brand evangelists who go out of their way to tell others about you. This may be in the form of conversion, blogs, reviews, or online social networks. Good word of mouth can be an excellent source of new and continued business growth.

Improves ROI

Once you have your Destination Website doing most of the work for you, you'll find your return on investment improves significantly. That's not to say there is no more work left to do, simply that each effort you put into improving your Destination Website is multiplied for exponential rewards.

What would you rather have? An average website that may get decent search engine rankings and sales, or a Destination Website that creates a snowball effect of sales, repeat customers and word of mouth?

When you build a Destination Website, you're not just one *of* a million; you're one *in* a million.

STANDING OUT IN A SEA OF THOUSANDS

One of the things many businesses struggle with is how to make their site stand out. Many have dozens, hundreds, even thousands of online competitors. Some provide serious competition, some not-so serious, and some are not even on the radar but will soon become major players for "your" space.

Many businesses I talk to want to be #1 but simply cannot tell me why they deserve to be. They don't know what it is that truly sets them apart from their online competitors. What makes them stand out? Why would the search engines give them preference over the dozens, or even hundreds of other competitors looking to gain traction in the same space?

WHAT MAKES YOU STAND OUT?

Destination SEM isn't about getting that #1 position. With more and more space in the "blended" search results being given to video, images, blogs, etc., getting the #1 position isn't a priority. What is a priority is getting increased visibility for your important keywords. You don't have to be #1 to be successful, but you do have to stand out from the competition.



The simplest way to get noticed is to provide something that *cannot be found anywhere else*. That's not as far reaching as it sounds. It isn't even all that difficult. It just takes time and creativity. There really is no limit to what you can do that will set you apart, but here are four quick points to consider that will help you become a destination:

Offer something unique

It's not an issue that you do the same thing dozens of others do. You just need to do it differently. Even in a marketplace filled with the same products from site to site, you can find products or create a niche that currently isn't being tapped into. Here you have a chance to become an expert in a very specialized field where there are no other experts.

Be interesting

Blandness abounds on the web. That gives you an opportunity to create an identity for yourself that stands out from the rest. You can do this with your

website design, the content on your pages, or how you package your products or services. Don't be afraid to break the boundaries for your industry.

Be compelling

There are a number of places on the web to get information. But there are few places to find current, up to date, little-known nuggets of well written info. By providing these tidbits of data you prove to your audience that you keep current with the trends and tools pertinent to the service or products you sell. Package this information in a way that it easy to find and even easier to digest, and you'll build a very strong customer base.

Provide something valuable

Become the de facto expert and go-to site for your industry. Build a vast resource of information that goes beyond the products or services you specifically offer. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of competing products or services, add links to other resources, write helpful tutorials and upload how-to articles and videos. By providing value to your visitors you create a site that can be trusted. That helps build a long-term customer base.

VISITORS WANT TO LOVE YOU. HELP THEM!

When someone clicks into your site they are there because they want to be. For whatever reason they were led to believe you have whatever it is they are looking for. It's up to you to prove them right.

There are several key areas you can focus on with your website that will help you create something unique, special and wonderful for your visitors. Focus on these and you'll create a site that will give visitors a reason to believe in you!

Content

Make your content stand out. Create valuable information that can't be found elsewhere, and present it better than anyone else. Make it fun, enjoyable and educational.

Presentation

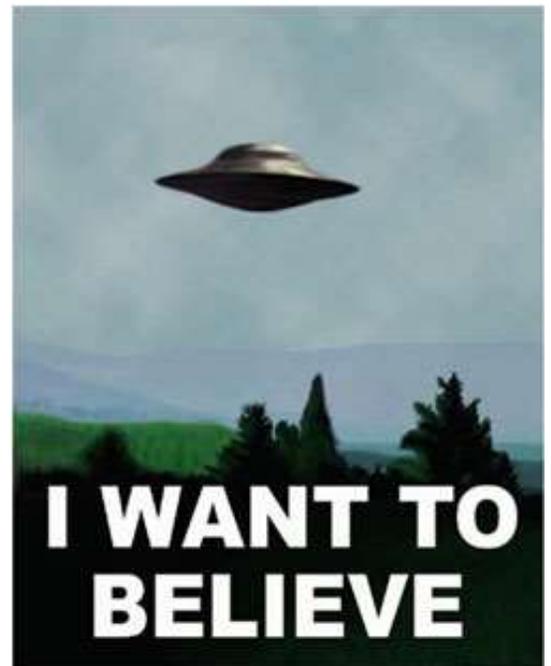
Don't just use words. Use words, graphics, images and anything else you can to help you get your point across in an engaging way.

Interaction

Interact with your audience. Don't create a one-way communication. Find ways to get them participating in the conversation. Use comments, feedback forms, email and general discussion to make them feel part of the conversation.

Resources

Provide additional resources. Link out to other sites, articles, and items of interest. Build your reputation for knowing where the other experts are.



On-site experience

Overall, you want your visitors to walk away having had a genuine experience on your site. The more involved, engaged and invested they are in your site, the better experience they'll have all together.

If you are just doing what hundreds of others are doing, offering nothing truly unique, then *you really don't deserve to be #1*. In fact, if you're no different than anybody else then you don't deserve any special recognition. If you want top exposure, if you want to stand out from all of your competitors, you have to make the effort to go beyond what everybody else is doing.

No amount of optimization can make you unique among your peers. That's something you have to do for yourself.

IT'S NOT JUST MARKETING AS USUAL

Too often businesses focus on only one or two areas of marketing looking for a quick boost in traffic or sales. These boosts are often effective, but generally short-lived.

In traditional SEO and SEM each marketing campaign serves a specific purpose. One drives traffic, another persuades visitors, another informs, another improves conversions, and so on. In marketing a Destination Website you use all the same strategies but instead of each strategy serving only a single purpose, they integrate with each other. Instead of working against each other—where the SEO drives traffic but sacrifices conversions to do so, or the content convinces visitors to buy but fails to be an attractive draw—each strategy works in unison with the others, bolstering the effectiveness of all.

A Destination Website must include:

- Strong on- and off-page SEO tactics that go beyond mere search engine rankings
- Excellent content that draws new visitors and persuades visitors to take action (conversions)
- Exceptional offline marketing efforts that merge seamlessly with online efforts
- Superb business management and customer satisfaction that goes well beyond closing the deal

Once all your marketing efforts work together you don't just get a boost in traffic or sales, you get a website that functions like a well-oiled machine. Each piece of the campaign does its job but also helps the other parts do theirs. Your website effectively becomes more than the sum of its parts.

SEVEN BUILDING BLOCKS OF A DESTINATION WEBSITE



BUILDING BLOCK #1: EXPERT INFORMATION

Think about something for a second: if you are not an expert in your field, what reason is there for someone who doesn't know you to make a purchase, engage your services or subscribe to what you offer? Most searchers hope to find sites they can be confident in. Sites where those running the show obviously know their industry inside and out. If searchers are not confident you'll be able to answer their questions intelligently, they'll move on to someone who can.

Some time ago my wife and I were shopping for a new television. Our first stops were Best Buy and Circuit City, where we knew the sales staff would generally be pretty knowledgeable about their product. We could have gone to Target, Wal-Mart or even Costco, but past experience at these stores told us that there are few truly knowledgeable sales staff available. Sure, they know enough to rattle off the specifications, but not enough to provide an expert opinion about what those specs mean in the real world. Before making such a significant purchase, we wanted to get the opinion of people we could trust knew what they were talking about.

At both Best Buy and Circuit City we found sales staff who could tell us about the minute differences between Plasma and LCD, why one model was better than another, what the negatives of each TV was, and so on. Getting this expert information was essential to our purchase decision.

Don't underestimate the value of good content

Doing business online doesn't give you the luxury of asking each potential customer if they need personal assistance. So you have to supplement that inability with content that does the job a personal sales person would do. Many website owners mistakenly assume text is something you put on your site only for the search engines. While text is important for search engines, it's also very important for website visitors.

Adding content to your pages allows you to speak to your visitors in a way that simple pictures and product specifications can't. Let's look at a few things content allows you to do more of.

More expert knowledge

You can't exactly sell yourself as an expert unless you have the content to back it up. Adding your expert insight and knowledge can propel a visitor through the buying process. As they learn more about what you offer and read your detailed analysis of the products or services, they become comfortable knowing you really know your stuff.

Anybody can spout product specifications. These usually come with the manufacturer's product description many site owners regurgitate without any additional thought. While there is nothing wrong with adding manufacturer specifications to your product pages you also need to go out of your way to discuss the ins and outs of those specifications, what they mean, pros and cons, and anything else that provides the shopper with information they need to make the purchase.

If your visitors feel they can trust the information you're providing—that it's not just sales jargon spewed back on the screen in a different voice—you'll be able to make a connection with them other sites won't. They'll trust you to make honest assessments of the products you sell and know you're not just pushing something on them to make a quick buck. This expert knowledge satisfies their questions and allows them to feel safe purchasing from you.

More opportunities to persuade

Trust is an important component to persuading visitors to do business with you, but you also have to be able to speak to their needs. You have to convince them you're not only the place they can get what they need, but the place they want to engage with on a repeat basis.

It doesn't necessarily take a lot of content to persuade visitors, but it does take some decently written prose. Again, you can't just throw up specifications. You need to make the visitor feel as if the product is essential to their enjoyment/way of life/job, etc. Good content will explain how the product is used to make life easier and/or more enjoyable. It'll use language that emphasizes the benefits and speaks to the readers' particular needs.

Persuasive text is important throughout the website, from the home page through the upper-level categories and right down to the product level. It's not that each person is going to read every word of content; it's that it is available for those that do. You also want to be able to provide the main selling points to any visitor that might come into the site through any particular page. Remember, not everybody enters through the home page!

More pertinent info to make the sale

Everybody needs to know the details before they purchase. What are they getting, how much does it cost, what are the features and how do those translate into benefits for me?

The more information you can provide about your product or service the more questions you're apt to answer before they are even asked. The more questions you answer the more likely you are to satisfy all your visitor's informational needs.

Don't have the expectation every word will be read, it won't. The availability of the information is what's important. Visitors want to see you've got all the facts they need to make an informed decision, even if they don't actually read all the facts. Many won't, but they'll be satisfied knowing it's there.

No content for sake of content

It's important that all your content has a purpose. Is it there to inform? To sell? To answer questions? The last thing you want is to add content for the sake of putting more words on the page, even if those words are "keywords". Content for the sake of content is generally pointless.

So how much content should you have?

To answer, you have to know your audience. Then you give them as much content as they need.

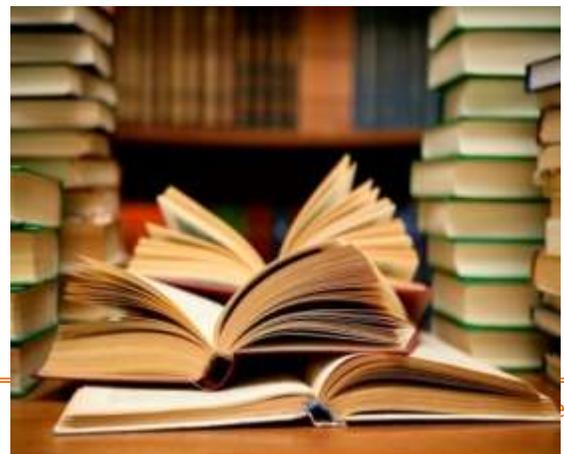
By knowing what type of information your visitors are looking for you can provide that information on your website. Provide no more and no less than is necessary. Remember you have different types of visitors looking for different kinds of information. Knowing the types of information expected by each segment of your audience will be important in meeting all your visitor's informational needs.

When it comes to creating optimized text for search engine rankings, the same rules apply. Yes, it's important to work in your keywords, but only inasmuch as providing what your audience is looking for. Don't go out of your way to create an over-abundance of unnecessary optimized content that is only there to get search engine rankings. Focus your content on the visitors and meeting their needs while incorporating the keywords they use to find you.

By focusing on providing expert information, you're letting your visitors know you are knowledgeable about what you are doing. At the same time, you're providing them the tools and information they need to make an informed purchase decision. This information helps establish your site as a Destination Website, worthy of being returned to time and time again.

Seven Types of Expert Information

There are a number of different types of expert information that can be developed for your website as a means of providing your visitors with additional, quality content. Depending on your site, some types of expert information are more applicable than others. Not all will be a good fit for you. You must evaluate your site to determine what kind of expert



information will best serve your audience's needs and expectations.

Sales and marketing copy

When most people think of adding content to their website, they think mostly of adding sales and marketing copy. This is the information used to describe what you offer the visitor and, hopefully, convince them to move toward conversion.

The content of most sales-oriented websites revolves around this kind of expert information. Page after page is dedicated to providing descriptions, specifications, features, and benefits. When reading this content you want the visitor to be able to taste the food, feel the comfort, experience the thrill, and see the results. And it all must be done in as few words as necessary.

When your words are able to make the visitor see, feel and understand how you can meet their needs, then you're better able to make the case that you are the expert they should ultimately rely on. The job of the sales and marketing copy is to not only sell the product or service, but to sell you as the best one to deliver it.

Non-marketing information

While the sales and marketing copy is an important part of most business websites, it's not the only kind of expert information that can help establish you as the authority on your topic. There are several other kinds of non-marketing information that can be added to a site that does just as good a job at selling and meeting your potential customer's needs.

Product comparisons

When most people think of product comparisons they think of the charts that show two or more products at the top, a list of features or benefits down the side, and a few check boxes that show how one product (the one trying to be sold) is superior to the other (the competitor's product.) This type of product comparison would fall more squarely into the sales and marketing copy. That makes for good sales information, but the reader expects this type of information to be biased.

There is another way to provide product comparisons that's not part of the sales hype that you typically see. Simply give a straightforward, honest assessment of how two of your own products or services compare with each other. You can use the side-by-side format typically used or find another format that fits your purposes. This type of comparison also lends itself well to video, which is a great way to gain additional exposure in the "blended" search results.

Regardless of what format you use, be sure that the comparison of the products is honest, unbiased and clearly states the flaws of the product you wish to sell. One way to do this is to run both products through a number of tests and document the results. Make sure the tests are fair and as closely resemble real-life situations as possible.

Product reviews

Product reviews are similar to product comparisons, except you're not obligated to compare your product against a competitor's. But a review of your own

product, using the same methods of those mentioned above can be incredibly valuable to the site visitor.

While the site visitor will undoubtedly expect the review to be positive, you can lend yourself credibility by pointing out some of the flaws of the product. If possible, take the flaws and spin them into a positive. By doing that you're not only showing credibility in your truthfulness, but you're also minimizing the negative points at the same time. The visitor knows what they will be getting, warts and all.

If you have too many products to review, find a way to generate customer product reviews. These are becoming more and more important in helping shoppers make sales decisions. They'll expect you to sing glowing praise about your own products, but what do other buyers have to say? Give them a voice and let them help sell your products. Just be careful, if word spreads that you delete negative product reviews you'll get an unwanted reputation for dishonesty.

Tips and tutorials

There is a significant searcher base that isn't necessarily looking to buy anything, they are looking for information. Providing tips and tutorials in various formats (text, video, diagrams, etc) can help you create a site that is not only visited for the things you sell, but also for the quality of information you provide.

This may seem counter-intuitive for a site whose main purpose is to make money. After all, why try and bring in an audience that isn't going to buy? An understandable concern, but that philosophy is short sighted. Certainly, we want our conversion rates to go up, not down, but the addition of tips and tutorials is an investment into future customers.

This kind of information builds loyalty, leads to repeat visits, and promotes branding. If a visitor is known to frequent your site for information, then it's not too big of a leap to realize that you'll be the first place they go to when it is time to become a customer. They are familiar with your site. They value your information. Most importantly, they trust you, which is what keeps them coming back to begin with.

Helpful opinions

Another great form of useful content is industry opinions. People spend hours a day doing nothing more than reading opinions on the web from people they don't know. If the opinions are reasonable, well-considered and backed up with facts, an opinion maker can become an opinion leader. You can use your own opinions to bring people back time and time again, as well as to engage them in conversation. By building that relationship, you're building trust and respect which bleeds over to the products or services you sell.

Company and exec background info

Typically company and executive information is found on the "About Us" page. Unfortunately, most About Us pages lack the type of quality information that helps establish the type of trust a potential customer seeks. Many visitors look to the about us page to get a sense of security. They want to know more about the company they are considering dealing with. Yours should establish how long you've been around, your credentials, and other such signs of trust.

Don't make the mistake of letting the PR department be the only ones working on these pages. Avoid being "corporate". Let the personality of the company come through in the information you provide and show the true faces behind the company. Visitors are not looking for a list of education credentials; they want to know they are dealing with real people who won't hide behind a corporate veil when customers need a solution.

"Ask the expert" section

Providing a place where visitors can ask questions and get expert answers is a great way to provide information and create user generated content. Create a forum for your visitors where they can ask questions that get answered on the website. This allows you to establish yourself as an industry expert and build relationships with your potential customers. Don't be afraid to answer difficult or critical questions and don't ever be defensive. Doing so will only hurt your credibility.

These are only a few ways to generate content for your website that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional sales and marketing copy. Use this information to establish trust. Many visitors will gladly pay more for a product from a site they trust because they lack faith in the site delivering a better deal. Even if the competition is bigger and better known, the information you provide can help you establish that trust relationship with current and future customers.

There really is no shortage of what you can do or how you can do it. As noted above, you can invest time in building a library of videos, articles, and image tutorials that will bring your visitors back for more. This will let you build a solid, long-term customer base that feels no need to go elsewhere.

BUILDING BLOCK #2: USABILITY

Running SEO campaigns that don't address usability concerns is like running radio and TV promos to drive people to a store that hasn't been finished. The traffic being driven to your site may not be a total loss, but you certainly aren't getting the full value out of each visit. Many visitors won't find what they are looking for. Others will be frustrated trying to contact you or make a purchase. Some may turn around the moment they walk in the door. Usability addresses those issues to ensure the majority of your customers have a good experience on your website.

Poor usability = poor user experience

When you don't consider usability as an important part of your website's marketing effort you are doing little more than relying on your own personal preferences to get the job done. Unfortunately, (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it) not everybody prefers the same things you do. Have you ever seen a movie that you totally hated even though it was wildly popular? (One comes to mind for me, but I dare not say for fear of being tarred and feathered! *coughshrekcough*) That's personal preferences issues at work.



Most websites are built almost entirely on personal preference; sometimes the site owner's, sometimes the web developer's. Sometimes, it's a nearly unidentifiable result of comprises by the many heads involved. That's not to say personal preferences don't have merit, but there are many aspects of usability that must be carefully weighed, tested and measured during implementation. Several things can cause poor user experience once someone lands on your site:

Poor navigation

Navigation is one of those crucial things you really do have to get right. In fact, when it comes to usability, almost everything revolves around the ability of the visitor to navigate from page to page. Getting the visitor from Point A to the conversion is the ultimate goal of any website. Navigation consists not only of the top, left, right, and footer navigation areas, but also the links in the body of the text. For now let's consider only a site's primary navigation.

How easy is it to follow the navigation on your site? I've seen some sites that have their navigation links alphabetized. The "Home" link would fall in the "H" Section and the "Contact Us" link fell between "Books" and "Digital Downloads." There is nothing wrong with an alphabetical navigation for some items or categories, but not for everything. This is a clear example of navigation gone wrong. The Home link should be one of the first navigational items, as should the Contact Us link. These navigation links shouldn't be mixed with the rest of the category links.

I won't go into how to build user-friendly navigation, but let's just say that if you don't consider how your customers might find stuff, then you may not be giving them the best navigation options possible.

Confusing site layout

If you're dealing with a large website it's important to make sure the visitor has a sense of where they are in the site at any given time. When you go to the mall, they place a map at each entrance with a big "you are here" label. This allows you to find your way to any store based on your current location.

Now imagine if you found one of those mall maps with all the stores nicely laid out but there was no icon telling you where you were . You'd feel lost. In addition to the actual site layout, you need to make sure you make the shopping process clear and easy to follow. When it comes to things like your shopping cart check out process, there is very little room for error before you start losing customers.

Lost calls to action

One of the most important things you can do on a website is to tell your visitor what you want them to do. Do you want them to call now? Add to cart? Sign up? Order now? These are all important calls to action. For some reason we often think people will figure it out on their own. Some will, but most won't. Without a call to tell them what you expect them to do, many simply won't move forward in the process. You'd be amazed at how adding a simple text or image link that says "click here to..." can make a huge difference in your conversion rates.

There are two kinds of calls to action you can use: visual and textual. Both are important. We often see the visual calls to action in the navigation. These are the

"contact us" or "order now" buttons and links. These calls are necessary to provide a single, permanent, easy-to-find link for your visitors. But what is often missed are the visual calls to action in the body content. These can be created by adding a button image of some kind within the body content area. Not only do these help break up the text, they also grab the attention of the reader as they scan the page.

Textual calls to action are just as important as visual calls. Instead of always using a graphical image to convey the call, you need to occasionally have calls to action linked in your body copy. Some visitors get image blindness and start skimming or reading the content. These hyperlinked calls to action jump out and helps propel your visitors forward.

Little internal linking

This last point brings us to one more usability issue that affects the user's experience; using your text to link to other areas of the website. All too often we try to let the main navigation do the job of getting the visitor from one page to the next. This is very short sighted.

Just like textual calls to action are important, so are textual links to other relevant portions of your site. If your content references something discussed on another page, why not add a link to it right there? If you look at sites like wikipedia.org, you'll see they are powered by such links. You can get stuck on that site for hours as you keep clicking any link that interests you. Your website can funnel traffic in much the same way. Though the ultimate goal is often the conversion, not just information sharing.

You want to provide a clear path to the "goal," but you also want to be sure that the user can easily get to any information they need to help them make that conversion decision. Don't rely on them to know what they need and then go hunting through the navigation to see if you offer it. Link to it in your body copy and let them navigate through the site as needed.

Poor user experience = visitor loss

The main thing you need to understand about the importance of meeting the usability needs of your visitors is every usability issue that remains on your site, you'll lose another chunk of visitors. Your website isn't a movie where people will stay until the end regardless of how bad it might be. You're not going to convince them it's "going to get better," or "hopefully the end will pay off."



When a visitor has a bad experience on a website, they leave. When they can't find what they want, they leave. When they get confused or frustrated, they leave. Your job is to create a path of least resistance. To build a site that helps them glide effortlessly from page to page on toward the conversion goal.

When your site is a hassle it creates frustration. That's when you start losing real customers. Many people go out of their way to avoid things they don't like. A website is no different. If you leave a bad taste in their mouth, you've likely lost that visitor forever. You rarely get a second chance to prove your value.

Poor usability experiences are often sub-conscious. Sometimes visitors don't even realize they had a bad experience. They just know they were not able to find whatever it was they thought they should have found.

You have two primary goals in building a more usable website. The first is to find areas where visitors are not finding what they need or are abandoning your site. The second is to understand why this is happening and to correct the problem. In order to become a Destination Website, you have to have a site users enjoy returning to time and time again.

BUILDING BLOCK #3: WEBSITE DESIGN

Just because you have a well-designed site doesn't mean it is usable. The web is littered with great looking sites that have a whole mess of usability problems. Along the same lines, just because a website employs effective usability strategies doesn't necessarily mean it's pleasing on the eyes.

We've all seen those direct mail-like landing pages, the ones that scroll on forever telling you just how great the product is you need to buy. Usually they have a big red heading, some pictures, testimonials and a lot of words highlighted to draw your eye to them. As ugly goes, these pages pretty much invented the thing. But they are extremely effective. And a lot of that is in their extreme simplicity.

These pages are meant to do one thing and one thing only: Get a conversion. They are designed simply to sell. On the other hand, a Destination Website is meant to engage the visitor. Yes, they can also sell products or services, but go about it in an entirely different way.

The design of a website is an important aspect of building a destination that people want to return to time and time again. But don't go out and spend all kinds of money for the most current, up-to-date website design with all the whistles and bells. Stop for a second to truly consider what kind of website design you really need.

Evaluate your design

There are many levels of great website design. What works for one industry will not work for another. What looks good here, won't look good there. It's not about having the most advanced website that has all its pretty in place, but rather having the website design that meets, and hopefully exceeds, industry standards.



You need to first do your research. Check out all the sites in your industry. Not just your top competitors, but those further down the food chain. See what kind of functionality they have, what colors they use, read their content and investigate their special offerings (whitepapers, newsletters, etc.)

No, you're not going to emulate any site exactly, but this will give you an idea of where your industry is in terms of website design and functionality. Take that information and then move forward to ensure that your site is, at the very least, as good as the industry average.

That's not much of a benchmark, but it's a starting point. If you find that your site design is below average then you need to do something about it. If your site is at or just above average, there is no reason to settle for that, but it's not critically important you do something about it right this moment.

Of course, everybody thinks their website is above average. Get a second opinion. Get a third opinion. Have unbiased individuals give you an honest assessment of your site compared to your competitors. That's the only way to truly know if your site is at, above, or below the competitor's average.

Of course, we're just talking the bare minimum here. But building a Destination Website isn't about having the minimum, or being average. It's about being exceptional. And to be truly exceptional, your site design should be as good as, or better than, the best in your industry.

Find out what it is about the best site that makes it the best. Is it the colors, the layout, the navigation, the architecture, the content, or the added tools and benefits? Once you know what makes another site's design exceptional (and it may be more than one thing), you then need to find out where that site's weaknesses are.

If you just try to emulate another site's strengths you'll likely emulate their weaknesses as well. So you need to find out what those are so you can, at the very least, match their design strengths, but go a step further and excel in areas where they are weak. This will not only help you build a better site, but will help you build a better Destination Website.

Look for ways to improve

Of course, with websites getting re-designed on a continual basis, it doesn't make sense to employ a major re-design every time someone else does. Instead, there are two things you can do.

First, always be looking for ways to improve. Just because your designers have wrapped up the big project doesn't mean that there are areas of your site design that couldn't be made better. Most of the time you won't know until after the site has been functional for a while anyway. But find the areas you can improve upon visually and functionally and budget those into your marketing costs.

Second, it's OK to not always be the absolute best. Sooner or later someone is going to design a better site than you. Just keep improving upon yours and wait to implement a major re-design until it's absolutely necessary, or, until you find yourself getting closer to "average" than "exceptional". I think every site should

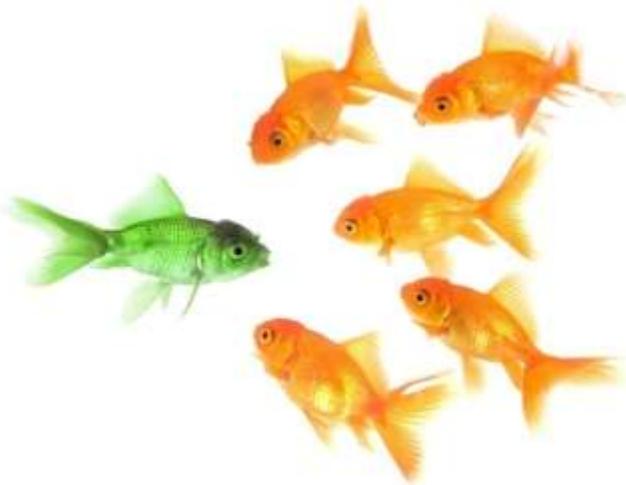
go through a significant overhaul every few years anyway. Just keep an eye on your industry and always be improving.

One thing to keep in mind is when your website is poorly designed, (or even appears to be poorly designed compared to others in your industry) you lack credibility. Given the option between you and someone else, most people are going to gravitate to the better looking website as it gives the appearance of being more professional, and therefore, more trustworthy.

The one thing you don't want to have is a site that is so poorly developed it looks like a hobby site, unless of course, that's all it really is. Just like an effective brick and mortar business has to consider its location and the appearance of their store, you must do the same with your site design. You're not some kid selling lemonade on the side of the road, so don't act like it.

BUILDING BLOCK #4: UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION

In its early years, the Internet was the great leveler of businesses. Anybody could jump online, start a business and hope to make a little money. Today it's not as easy as it was, but unfortunately people still have that same mindset. It doesn't take a lot of money to start a successful business online, but it does still take a plan. That's where many online businesses go wrong.



I talk to many website owners who are unable to put to words what distinguishes them from their competitors. They don't know what makes them unique or have a reason why someone should buy from them rather than somebody else. This is a shame.

Running a business online is really no different than running one anywhere else. Just because it's easier to "build your store" doesn't

mean you'll be successful. You still need to create a solid business plan and develop a Unique Value Proposition (UVP) if you really want to succeed online. This is where building a business online may actually be more difficult than offline.

When building a business off-line, location is everything. In fact, you see many businesses that really are no different from each other; they're just in different parts of town. Due to each business' location, they can each survive and even be successful. But generally, that's only until another similar business sets itself up in close proximity that has established its own UVP.

You soon find that because this new business has given themselves a unique advantage over the other, they begin to draw business away from the original. The same thing happens online, but it's magnified.

Where offline businesses can succeed simply by filling a need in a unique location, even in a town with dozens or hundreds of other similar businesses, online there are no geographical limitations. Your business is not just competing with businesses in your area. Quite possibly you're competing with businesses all over the world. If you're not unique or remarkable in any way, if nothing sets you apart, then you're just another one of a million other businesses doing the same thing.

No business being in business

On- or offline, if you don't have a UVP then you really don't have any business being in business. Your business may be valid, it may be genuine, it may be profitable, it may meet a need, but if there are others out there doing the same thing, you need to find something that sets you apart. You need to give people a reason to buy from you rather than from "them."

A UVP answers the question, "why you?" Every shopper asks this question, whether consciously or unconsciously, before making a purchase. If they have shopped with you before that question has already been answered once. Don't assume, however, the next sale is an automatic lock. If they find another store that can provide a better answer it's still possible to lose your customers to the competitor. When attracting new customers, the "why you?" question has to be satisfied before they'll continue through the purchase process.

That question can be answered in many ways. One of the easiest ways to answer it is to give your visitors something unique to focus on. Make sure they know what it is about you that makes you different from the next guy.

Before we go any further, let's take note of what unique *doesn't* mean. Two things come to mind off the top of my head: low prices and customer service. Sorry, there just isn't anything unique about these things unless you can definitively show that you do have the absolute lowest prices and/or the best customer service. Most likely, you can't. That's why these points don't constitute a UVP: almost anybody can claim them for themselves... though most do.

I talked to one business owner that believed that he truly had the best customer service in his industry. He hadn't really sold anything yet as he was just getting off the ground, but that's what he wanted to build his business on. That's certainly a great goal, but there are problems with this approach as a UVP. When dealing with transactions online, customer service is almost synonymous with problems that need to be fixed, not necessarily problem avoidance.

In a brick and mortar store, an associate can walk up to a person and help them find what they are looking for. Online, you have to wait to be contacted before you can help someone. And getting contacted usually only occurs when something has gone wrong. Of course there is nothing wrong with fixing people's problems and helping them find solutions, but you don't necessarily want to build a business model on that unless you expect there to be a lot of problems.

Online, good customer service is necessary, but it's not unique. It certainly can help you stand out if and when problems arise, but you want something that will help you stand out long before things get to that point.

What makes you remarkable?

Ask yourself, what is it that makes you truly remarkable? What are you doing that you can claim all for yourself? The possibilities here are virtually limitless. Find something you can claim as your own. It can be as simple as looking at your competitors to find an area where they are either weak or absent and creating a better offer or service than them.

Below are a few examples of some generic UVPs. You can use these to help get your creative juices flowing. As far as Unique Value Propositions go, these are not all that unique, but they can help you start moving in the right direction.

Unlimited customer support

This is one that's good for industries where customer support is expected or needed, such as computer software or hardware. Buying from you means I know I can call anytime, for the life of the product, to get assistance. This provides great comfort knowing that I'll be able to resolve problems without incurring any additional fees.

Similar UVPs: free upgrades, 24/7 customer support, free technical support, free installation assistance, free tutorial DVDs with purchase, etc.

Hassle-free returns

There are some products that are more prone to returns than others. Making a point to let people know they can return a product simply and easily for a full refund or store credit can be a great unique selling point.

Similar UVPs: Free-exchanges up to a year, trade the old for discount on the new, etc.

Offer proprietary products

Offering products that are proprietary is a great way to be unique among your competition. This is especially useful if you can keep your products from being duplicated or knocked off, or if your products are demonstratively superior to the competition.

Similar UVPs: Products personally tested for durability, hand selected from the manufacturer, unique designs not offered to other re-sellers, etc.

Free shipping

Many companies offer free shipping so make sure you are truly unique in this... and that another competitor can't jump in and offer this too. To make this work, not only do you have to ship for free, but your prices must still be as low as the next guys.

Similar UVPs: free re-download of digital products, receive a free hardcopy with your digital version, free overnight shipping, free shipping with x amount purchase, etc.

Every industry has its own possibilities so it will be up to you to find something in your industry that's not already being done, or a need that's going unmet. The best UVPs are either the ones your competitors are unwilling to duplicate, or the ones that feature a niche you can be the first to dominate. There will be others

that come to steal your thunder, but you'll have the advantage of having been first.

If you already have an established business but you haven't given much thought to your UVP, now is the time. You simply need to find a unique way of doing what you are already doing. It can be easy for established businesses to find a UVP because you already have a customer base. Now you just need to do something that will surprise them and get them talking. Establishing a UVP can be a great way to get some fresh word of mouth going about your business.

But whether you're just starting or have been in business for years, building and growing your business online takes a little something special. Find out what it is you can do to be special. Find a way to stand out from your competitors. Look for gaps that can be filled or ways to do what you do differently. Unless you're doing something wrong, standing head and shoulders above the competition is never a bad thing.

BUILDING BLOCK #5: TIME AND PRESENCE

If there is one thing most online businesses need to understand, it's this: you can't become an authority overnight. This is especially crucial to understand when you realize it takes a certain element of "authority" to compete against other websites in the search results.

The whole point of Destination Search Engine Marketing is to achieve rankings because you have earned the right to be there, rather than because you outsmarted the search engine algorithm. In non-competitive areas, achieving top rankings often doesn't take much effort. But when you're targeting keywords in more competitive fields, you're going up against other websites that have already established themselves in that space. Many of those competitors are already the authority for those keywords.



That's not to say that these sites can't be uprooted from their firmly established top positions, but to do so you're going to have to prove your site has even higher value to your target audience. And to do *that* you'll have to do more than just show up on the playing field.

Building an authority takes time

In almost every topic imaginable, it takes years to gain respect as a true authority. Authors who write topical books that vault to the top of the bestsellers lists often have years of experience that creates the foundation for their knowledge. Most businesses that become known as "the place to go" for certain things have gotten to that point because they have spent years demonstrating to customers what they can achieve.

You can't simply set-up a website and expect it to outperform other sites that have been established for a long time. If anything, it's much more difficult to do with websites than with brick and mortar stores. Online, it's not just what people are saying about you now; it's about what they've said about you in the past.

Yesterday's authority can still outperform today's authority simply because time works in their favor.

Let's say Store A was a very popular store for several years. It was the talk of the town. Newspapers wrote reviews and news stories about it. Friends told their friends who told their friends. But over time Store A stopped being innovative. They still do what they do well enough, but not exceptionally well. Positive newspapers reviews slowed to a trickle and friends stopped telling other people about the store. .

You see an opportunity here so you open up Store B. You offer something similar as Store A but add the excitement and innovation back into the game. Now people start talking about your store. News sites start writing reviews and people start telling their friends who tell their friends.

Over a few months' time, you firmly establish yourself in the field. Everybody who's visited your store knows you're better than Store A in all aspects. By all accounts, you would be the store that deserves the better search engine rankings. The problem is Store A was the go-to destination for many years before you even came along. All the news stories, reviews and word of mouth they achieved over those years are still working hard for them when it comes to the search engine algorithms.

Why is that? Because online, news stories, reviews, word of mouth mentions and the like are all permanent. These are done in the form of links, and as long as those new stories, reviews and word of mouth mentions remain online with active links, they continue to be votes for Site A. In fact, even current mentions of how Store A isn't as great as it once was can also be seen as favorable to the algorithms.

So how do you surpass this former authority in the search results? You have to continue to get reviews, news stories, and word of mouth mentions. You have to build upon your relevance and hope the relevance of the other site diminishes. You have to focus on building your site up and let all the goodwill from your visitors accumulate into more and more links. That takes time.

Building an authority takes presence

Time alone is not enough to earn search engine rankings. You have to be sure you are building up your presence as an authority. Sure, you can *be* an authority, you can have great content and provide a fantastic user experience, but unless you're able to establish your presence among your target audience, none of that will make any difference.

In our example above we noted that both Site A and Site B were able to achieve favorable reviews, news stories and excellent word of mouth. Those things were helping those sites establish their presence as an authority. They were crucial.

Let's look at the above story a different way. Let's say Store A is still considered the go-to authority. People still love Store A and over years it's accumulated many favorable reviews, news stories, word of mouth, etc.

Along you come with Store B. You found a weakness in Store A and fill that gap. You feel you are superior to Store A and you believe others will too. The problem is people are not that interested in switching stores. Store A is comfortable. They know where it is, they understand how it works and they know how to move around and find what they want from it.

You've been able to improve upon all the things people don't like about Store A, but you have to find a way to let people know about it. You invite people to come to your store in hopes of getting some positive reviews, news stories and word of mouth. After a few months you've been able to get some of those things happening, but nowhere near the amount of reviews, positive mentions and word of mouth that Store A continues to get.

This is because you have yet to truly establish yourself as a contender in the field. The visitors who do find you may prefer you to the competition, but so far your traffic is limited. You don't have enough presence yet to draw the people that will write the big news stories, publish the reviews that get in front of more eyeballs, and spread the word to the bigger crowds.

Time and presence go hand in hand. Presence is often a slow build, unless you already have an established name behind you. Why do you think companies try to get celebrity endorsements? The celebrity endorsement helps them build a presence that they wouldn't otherwise have. They've circumvented time by buying the presence.

How to become an authority

There are two ways to become an authority. One way is to buy it. You can't buy time, but you can buy presence. Online this is done by purchasing links, blog reviews, etc. If you're making an outright purchase then you really don't have to establish yourself as an authority, you're paying other people to do it for you.

The other way to become an authority is to earn it. Earning it takes time of course, but over time you can do the following:

Establish credibility

The more customers you serve and the better job you do of meeting their needs, the more credible you'll be. You have to prove yourself as a legitimate business that truly understands the needs and wants of your target audience.

Customer service

It's not enough to provide a product or service to your customers. You actually have to meet their wants and needs. You have to go out of your way to ensure customer satisfaction.

Build relationships

As you serve your customers, build a relationship with them. You can do this by keeping the doors of communication open; start a blog, include product reviews, create a support line, etc. Listen to their needs and work hard to fill any unmet areas.

Nurture business ties

You can go a long way doing nothing more than serving your audience, but you'll

go a lot further if you nurture your relationships with others in the industry. They don't have to be direct competitors; they could be distributors or suppliers. Either way, build up those ties as they can be beneficial to you.

Get testimonials

Testimonials and product reviews are a great way to build up your presence and authority. Look for opportunities to get testimonials that can be published on your website and encourage your satisfied customers to write reviews at the appropriate places.

There is also a third way to build authority, and that is a combination of the first two. Attempting to purchase authority outright is counter-intuitive to Destination SEM and does nothing to build a Destination Website visitors will flock to. On the other hand, if you are establishing yourself as an authority in the truest sense, purchasing a little exposure never hurts.

I'm not suggesting you go out and buy a bunch of crappy links. Quite the opposite. Just as some companies use celebrity endorsements, you can look for ways to get the word out about your Destination Website. Hire a firm to do some social media marketing, create some link worthy material, optimize your site for targeted keyword phrases, start making industry contacts and establishing links, and so on.

The goal here isn't to circumvent the process of becoming an authority. It's about becoming an authority and finding ways to reduce the amount of time it takes for others and the search engines to recognize your authority. You don't have to be in business for years to deserve top rankings, but time is an effective momentum builder.

BUILDING BLOCK #6: VOICE

One of the easiest ways to set yourself apart from your competitors is by creating a distinct voice through your written content. Whether you realize it or not, every website has a voice. For most businesses, the tone of their site is a reflection of whoever wrote their content. Generally that means the tone is created by the site owner, an in-house writer, an SEO, a sub-contracted copywriter, or a combination of them all.

Unfortunately, this type of collaboration makes most content virtually indistinguishable from one website to another. Instead of creating a unique voice that is distinct to the site, they create a voice too diluted to be heard.

That's not to say the copy is bad. On the contrary, the copy can be quite effective at educating and engaging the visitor and driving them to the conversion point. Voiceless copy isn't necessarily bland copy.

Give your website personality

Creating a distinct voice for your website is really about giving your website a personality. You can have great copy that lacks a clear voice, but creating a voice that can be heard clearly and distinctly through each written word on the page, increases the level of engagement with each visitor.

Your website is no longer just another site that sells something. By giving it a voice you create a unique personality each visitor is able to identify with. This personality is then able to do more than just sell your product or service; it becomes one of the main draws that brings visitors back time and again. The visitor no longer feels like a guest, but instead has become a friend.

This friendship isn't developed with the people running the website, or the person writing the content or even with the customer service representatives (though that's certainly desirable). The friendship is developed solely with the voice speaking through the website. If developed with care, the visitor treats the voice as if it were a living, breathing person. It becomes someone they enjoy being with. Depending on the site and the circumstances it also becomes someone they can laugh with, cry with, share with, relax with, joke with, be serious with, learn with and do business with.

Of course all this can only be achieved by creating a voice that truly resonates with your audience. Understanding who your audience is and what type of voice will speak best to them is key to developing an effective voice. You need to engage your readers so they will want to engage with you.

Developing your voice

Before you start developing your web content you need to determine what kind of voice you want your site to have and how you'll ultimately deploy it. A voice can be anything:

- Humorous
- Serious
- Whimsical
- Snarky
- Flowery
- Thoughtful
- Brutally honest
- Down to earth

Chances are good your mind started speaking to you in each voice as you read the bullet points above. If not, read through them again and let your mind convert the words into examples in your mind.



Just by reading the words you can really see how these voices can come through with well-written content. You just need to decide what voice will fit best with your company and your audience. You may think your industry is limited to just one voice, but it all depends on how well you sell it. Let's create some quick examples to show you almost any voice can work on your site:

Humorous: *Our car batteries are durable, long-lasting and deliver enough power to start any vehicle in the harshest winter environment. Your escape from the in-laws is guaranteed every season of the year.*

Serious: *Our car batteries are durable, long-lasting and deliver enough power to start any vehicle in the harshest winter environment. You're guaranteed to get power to your vehicle when you need it most.*

Whimsical: *You want a durable, long-lasting battery? Yeah, we got that. There is no natural force in the world that'll keep our batteries from doing their job. When you need power, we deliver.*

Snarky: *When headed to the in-law's you want to be equipped with one of the most powerful car batteries money can buy. Come hell or high water, you're getting out of there alive!*

Flowery: *Our car batteries are designed to withstand whatever forces of nature that heaven above (or you know who below) can throw at it. When you turn that key, your vehicle will roar to life without so much as a cough or sputter.*

Thoughtful: *Let's face it; batteries only fail at the worst possible time, in the worst possible location. We've built reliability into all of our car batteries so they deliver the power you need when you need it to get you to where you would rather be.*

Brutally honest: *Your boss is a jerk, your wife can be a nag and your friends act like idiots. Everybody needs an escape. Where you escape to is up to you, but how is up to us. Our car batteries are durable, long-lasting, and deliver enough power to start any vehicle any time anywhere. We're ready to go when you are.*

Down to earth: *We know you can find cheaper car batteries with those other guys. We're not competing on price, we're competing on quality. Our batteries are durable, long-lasting and deliver enough power to start any vehicle in the harshest winter environment. Can you really put a price on that kind of reliability?*

The one thing you never want in a voice is to be corporate. A corporate voice has zero personality and engages no one but the corporate execs who approved the text. Of course in the world of corporate businesses, sometimes you just can't get away from it. But that doesn't mean you can't incorporate one of the voices above into your copy. It's all a matter of how you do it.

If your text has to follow the mundane corporate line, then try to insert a standalone voice. Create an alter ego or use special text boxes that stand out from the corporate drivel on the page. Use these to write short bursts of content in the voice you feel works best. Corporate gets their way with the main content, but the site itself gets a little character. Even a few sentences per page can make a significant difference.

Whatever voice you choose, you need to be consistent throughout the site. This can be a difficult chore as many people often have their hands in the content. Establish your guidelines up front. If your voice is spelled out and clearly part of the text specifications, it becomes easier for the voice to be consistent as pages are added and edited over the years.

BUILDING BLOCK #7: TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

The first six building blocks in creating a Destination Website; expert information, usability, website design, unique value proposition, time and presence, and voice are all things that we mostly have direct control over. The exception is time. We don't control time but we do control how we build up our presence over time.

Trust and credibility are also partly in our control but they are also two of the most difficult things to achieve. We determine whether we move forward in a trustworthy way and whether or not to act in a credible manner. No matter how hard we try though, we cannot wish those two things into existence. We cannot force someone else to trust us. We cannot tell someone to find us credible and expect them to do so, based solely on our word.

We can go about doing all we can to build both trust and credibility, but in the end, whether we are trusted or not will depend not with our own efforts, but other people's perceptions. If you spend months and years showing you can be trusted and proving that you're credible, but if no one believes it, you aren't. These are not physical things that can be touched. They simply must be understood to be true.

How to build trust and credibility



So while we can't make a few tweaks here or there and suddenly expect to be deemed credible, there are things we can do to help build the perception of trust in the minds of our visitors.

Answer phone calls and return emails:
I'm amazed at how often I run across businesses that don't do this. You would

think this is one of the basic no-brainers of doing business. Heck, if you can't return a call or reply to an email, what signals are you sending to the potential customer? First question: are you a legitimate business? Second question: if I have a problem, who is going to be there to help me out?

It's bad enough potential customers call and get voice mail during business hours. It is worse when those calls are not returned. Rule of thumb: you have about 24 hours to respond to messages and emails before your credibility is questioned. If you really want the customer, you should respond much faster. Twenty-four hours is a long time on the web and if you wait too long, you just might lose them to a competitor.

Keep information secure: Security is important when it comes to conveying trust. Whether you are selling products or just capturing leads, visitors need to

know their information is going to be kept secure and it won't be used for nefarious purposes. Using trust symbols such as Thawte, Better Business Bureau, and HackerSafe can all provide additional feelings of trust. Linking to privacy and security policies from your forms can help as well.

Open communication: Keeping communication open between you and your customers is essential. This is more than just returning calls, it is active participation, both in meeting customers' needs and in anticipating them. It means finding where your audience is and engaging with them in forums, chat rooms, blogs and the like. Keeping communication open gives you opportunity to be honest with your shortfalls, own up to your mistakes, and to present yourself as you truly are: a real person who cares genuinely about the needs of your audience.

Put the customer first: We've all heard it said that "the customer is always right." I don't necessarily believe this is true in all situations, but to survive in a customer oriented business, we have to put the customer first. This means going out of your way to ensure the customer is satisfied with their purchase. If not, you need to find out why they are dissatisfied and provide a solution to satisfy them.

Exceed expectations: One of the best ways to build trust and credibility is to simply exceed the expectations of your audience. This can be both easy and difficult. It's easy to find little ways to go the extra mile and to provide a little extra service or extra benefit. It can be difficult however, if you over-sell yourself. If you do that you make it difficult to meet expectations. Look for opportunities to do something your customers or prospects don't expect; ways to prove to them that they are special to you.

Of course, all this isn't just about building perceptions, but proving those perceptions to be true. Creating a perception of trust and then failing to deliver is far worse than never having built the aura of trust to begin with. If you fool visitors into thinking you're credible, they'll soon find out you're not. Trust is harder to rebuild than to build in the first place.

Putting them all together

When building a Destination Website, there's no use putting the first six building blocks in place, if you don't follow through with the seventh. Without trust and credibility, the first six are meaningless. Usability, voice, design, expert information, etc., all just become part of the ruse. If you are truly building up trust that can be trusted and credibility that is credible, the first six building blocks all contribute to that goal. They all play a role at helping to establish and prove your trustworthiness.

Very successful businesses, both on-and offline, have been built on this last building block alone. In fact, only this last one is required for success, though all seven are required to build a Destination Website. Like any good foundation, all seven building blocks provide support for the other six, with trust and credibility being the most crucial piece of the pie.

WHY DESTINATION SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING IS SO ESSENTIAL

When planning a Destination Search Engine Marketing campaign, it's important to both ask and answer the question "why?" Why go through the hassle of building a Destination Website? There are thousands of successful online businesses that don't take the time to build anything that could be considered a "Destination." If they can be successful without doing all that work, why should you go through the extra effort? Consider this:



When I was younger we had this saying about Denny's Restaurants. "Nobody plans on going to Denny's, they just end up there." That's was because Denny's was the only restaurant in town that was open 24 hours (quick the snickering, I grew up in a podunk Oregon town!). If you were out past 10PM there simply were no other options.

Many websites are like that. People don't plan on going, they just end up there. That's not to suggest these sites don't deserve top rankings. Many of them have earned their place by being the best of the sites that are available. But they haven't gone so far as to become a destination point for their industry.

That's where you and Destination SEM come in. These other sites have the top rankings you want. How do you displace them? In some cases it's more difficult than others. Sites that have been firmly entrenched in the "we just end up here" space can still be hard to bump aside. But that's the reason you build a Destination Website. You build a place your audience wants to go visit. And once you become that destination, you start earning those top positions.

OVERCOMING THE COMPETITION

Every year it gets more difficult to compete online. Thousands upon thousands of new websites are introduced daily, some of which will be competing against you. Even if you're firmly established in your #1 position, you can't expect to hold your spot forever if you're just another Denny's.

You may have done fine so far. You may have even dominated your market for a number of years. But if you're still not the go-to destination for your industry, those positions are soon going to be challenged by newcomers. . All it takes is for the next guy to come along with a better website that does a better job of meeting the needs of your audience and you're in trouble. It only takes one website delivering a better user experience to put your current position as market leader at risk.

In other words, if you aren't building a Destination Website, your top positions are hanging by a thread.

If you're not improving, you're falling behind. This is because other companies are looking for an edge in the market place, looking for a weakness they can exploit. They are looking for the needs you are failing to meet, looking for a way to capture a piece of your target audience. They know they can only capture that audience by being better and/or unique.

When you build a Destination Website, you're not waiting for your competition to get a foot hold. Even if you're site is the best today, you need to make sure there is no room for someone to outperform.

As the web becomes more competitive, search engines become smarter. They are looking for sites that truly provide the competitive advantage. They don't want to rank sites that are simply better at adding keywords. They want to rank sites that deliver what the searcher is actually looking for. The sites at the top of the results will have found a way to establish themselves as the go-to destination.

Destination SEM is about building a website that is unique among its peers. It's about doing what you do so well that people can't help but sit up and take notice. It's about achieving top search engine rankings because your site offers something the 10,000 or 1,000,000 other keyword competitors can't.

You may not be able to compete with every site on every level, but you can compete when it comes to delivering visitor satisfaction. Build your Destination Website and the rankings will follow. It's not about just achieving top search engine placement, it's about deserving it.

ABOUT STONEY DEGEYTER

Author of [The Best Damn Web Marketing Checklist, Period!](#), Stoney deGeyter is also the CEO of Pole Position Marketing, a results-driven web presence optimization and digital marketing agency established in 1998. In addition to business training events, Stoney has spoken at nationwide conferences, such as PubCon, Search Marketing Expo (SMX), WordCamp, and Affiliate Summit.

Stoney's articles about how to navigate the digital marketing landscape are featured on Pole Position Marketing's E-Marketing Performance blog and have been published on [Search Engine Land](#), [Marketing Land](#), and [Search Engine Journal](#).

ABOUT POLE POSITION MARKETING

[Pole Position Marketing](#) is a leading digital marketing firm that specializes in organic and local SEO, pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, content marketing, social media consulting, web analytics, website development, and more. Our agency was established in 1998 and serves B2B and B2C companies throughout the United States and in diverse industries, including retail, travel, health care, manufacturing, and higher education.

As an enterprise-level SEO company that serves small, medium and large businesses alike, we provide reliable, affordable website marketing services designed to engage customers, drive brand awareness, and win conversions. Our firm's team of experienced SEO and web marketing professionals is dedicated to helping businesses grow through efficient, economical and ethical web presence optimization strategies.

[Contact us](#) today to request a free 30-Minute consultation