If the much-publicized dot.com crash of 2000/2001 is making you think that the Internet is less important to your business than it used to be, you’re wrong.

Builders, specifiers, homeowners and do-it-yourselfers aren’t abandoning the Web. Far from it. They’re actually relying on the Internet more than ever as a means for locating...
Achieving Higher Search Engine Rankings Is a Cost-Effective Way to Increase Web Traffic

information about residential and commercial construction and remodeling products and services.

Whether you're a manufacturer or a building professional, the Internet offers a potent marketing tool for publicizing your business, communicating with customers and growing sales. Face it, the Web isn't going away. And, if you're not taking advantage of it, you can bet your competitors are.

Without a doubt, the most important step you can take to successfully market your business on the Internet is to create a high-quality site. Three primary factors define a high-quality Web site: content, content and content.

While site appearance and layout are nice, visitors aren't coming to your site to be "wowed" by graphic design. They're coming to your site to get information about your business, your products and your services.

So, give them what they want. Manufacturers should offer all the information a specifier or homeowner needs to select, use and purchase products. All of it. The same holds true for contractors, dealers, builders, architectural firms and other business businesses. Provide specifics about your services, your industry experience, the types of projects you specialize in, and so on. And, keep the information completely updated. Yes, it will take time, effort and commitment, but that's what's needed for successful Internet marketing.

Creating Awareness

With your site content fully developed and updated, the next trick is to create awareness for your site and build targeted traffic. There are any number of ways to accomplish this, but one of the most effective is to achieve highest-possible rankings on the Web's top search engines.

Each day, millions of Web users visit Yahoo, iWon, GoTo, LookSmart, Lycos, AltaVista and other major search engines and portals to locate sites and online information. You know how it works. Users go to a search engine and type in a keyword or keyword phrase, hit "Enter" or "Go," and check out the list of resulting Web pages. Depending on the keyword or keyword phrase used, the listings of results can usually range from massive numbers of Web pages to ridiculously massive numbers of Web pages.

For instance, a search on Lycos using the keyword phrase "acoustical ceiling contractor" returned 3,414 listings (in January 2001)—a massive amount of information. A Lycos search for the pop singer, "Britney Spears," returned 470,000 Web pages—a ridiculously massive amount of information. And a search for "travel" returned more than 24 million Web pages—a even more ridiculously massive amount of information.

Obviously, no one is going to spend hours plowing through all 3,414 listings for acoustical ceiling contractors. Web users generally check out the first one or two pages of results, click on one or more sites that seem appealing, and ignore the rest.

So, the goal of the "search engine game" is to get your site listed within the first 30 or 40 listings on as many of the major search engines as possible for as many relevant keyword phrases as possible.
sible. If you can accomplish this, you’ll be amazed at how much traffic search engines can deliver to your site. That’s the good news. The bad news is that it’s not easy to get those high search engine results.

How Search Engines Work

To successfully enhance search engine rankings for your site, you must have a baseline understanding about how search engines work and how they analyze and rank sites. First, you need to understand the distinction between a search engine and directory. A search engine (Lycos, Excite, AltaVista, etc.) uses automated “robots” that cruise the Web and index sites mechanically. A directory (Yahoo, LookSmart, etc.) is a human-reviewed listing of sites categorized by topics or subject matter.

Submitting a site to a directory is fairly straightforward. Yahoo, LookSmart and others offer detailed instructions on how to submit a site for consideration in their directories. Follow the rules carefully. For instance, Yahoo asks for a 25-word maximum description of your site. Keep your description to 25 words or less—don’t use 26 words. Yahoo editors are notoriously picky and will discard your submission for even minor rules infractions.

Yahoo and LookSmart are the two most important directories. Be sure your site is registered with both. Also, when registering be sure to use the “Business Express” option on Yahoo and the “Express Submit” option on LookSmart. Both these express submission services cost $199. Pay the fee—it’s worth it. If you don’t pay the fee, you may wait weeks or months for your listing to finally appear, if it appears at all.

A third, lesser-known but still important directory is the Open Directory Project (www.dmoz.com). Listings on this site are free. Open Directory is important not so much for the site itself, but for the network of search engines and portals that use its directory listings. Open Directory listings appear on Lycos, AOL Search, AltaVista and HotBot, among others.

As mentioned previously, automated search engines differ from directories in that they send out “robots” that automatically crawl the Web, indexing and cataloging pages as they go. But don’t expect these robots to automatically find your site without any effort on your part. Given the huge number of pages now on the Web, waiting for search engine robots to find your site may take weeks, months or years. Instead, take the time to
register your site with key search engines. While there are hundreds of search engines in existence, concentrate your efforts on the major players. According to Danny Sullivan, a leading expert on search engines and publisher of Search Engine Watch (www.searchenginewatch.com), below are the major search engines.

### Major Search Engines

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<th>Search Engine</th>
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<td>AOL Search</td>
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<td>AltaVista</td>
<td>Inktomi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask Jeeves</td>
<td>Lycos</td>
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<td>Direct Hit</td>
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### Submitting Your Site

Before submitting your site to any of the top search engines or directories, you need to prepare your Web pages by following a few basic guidelines. While there are no guarantees that your site will be listed among the top 30 or 40 results for any search engine, following these guidelines will give you a better chance for success.

Some of these guidelines should be followed as you are creating or updating your site. Others can be accomplished immediately prior to search engine registration.

First, think about what keywords search engine users may use to try to find your site. There are no right or wrong answers. Just use common sense. If you’re an acoustical ceiling contractor based in Dallas, you’re probably only interested in reaching customers based in the Dallas area. So, include “Dallas” as part of your selected keyword phrases (for example, “Dallas ceiling contractor,” “Dallas commercial ceilings,” “Dallas commercial construction,” etc.).

The keywords and keyword phrases you select are important because, as the robots review Web pages, they “read” the copy
on each page and note the relative usage of words and phrases. If the words “Dallas,” “ceiling” and “contractor” appear on your pages or on your page titles or metatags (more on this later), the robots will be able to identify your site as having something to do with being a Dallas ceiling contractor and will list your site accordingly. This gives your site a better chance of appearing on top results when a Dallas building owner goes to Lycos (or another major search engine) and searches for “Dallas ceiling contractors” or a similar phrase.

Select as many keywords and keyword phrases as you like, but concentrate on what seem to be the most important and most likely to be used. Try to incorporate those primary keywords into the copy on your home page and primary subpages. If possible, use them in your page headlines and in text links. But, there’s no need to overdo it. Work your keywords and keyword phrases into the flow of your copy. If you can include “Dallas ceiling contractor” a couple of times on your home page, you’re doing great.

Alternatively, you may want to consider creating a separate page within your site that’s focused on one particular keyword or keyword phrase. For instance, for our Dallas ceiling contractor business, you could create a page that provides information on company history, emphasizing your Dallas roots. This topic will enable you to easily include additional mentions of your “Dallas ceiling contractor” key phrase, thus giving the search engine robots stronger hints about the nature of your business.

You’ll also want to include your keywords in your page title. Page titles are extremely important as most search engines give them high emphasis in categorizing sites. Titles are also often used as the description of your site on search engines listings. The more descriptive your page title, the more likely it is that users will understand what your site offers and click through to it.

For example, let’s say our Dallas-based ceiling contractor business is called “Triple A Ceilings.” As is the case on many Web sites, you could use the name of your business (Triple A Ceilings) as your page title. While this may seem logical, it’s actually giving very little pertinent information about your business,
your products and your services. A better page title would be this: “Triple A Ceilings for Dallas commercial and acoustical ceiling installations.”

The latter page title provides key information about your business to the search engine robots and, when it is listed as part of your results page, it will give specific information to potential customers who are using search engines.

Finally, include your keywords into the metatags on your home page and other major subpages. Metatags are special programming elements inserted into your Web pages. They are not visible to site visitors, but can be read by search engine robots. Some, but not all search engines, read metatag information when indexing your site.

The two most important types of metatags are “description” and “keywords.” Some search engines will use your “meta description” as the summary for your Web page. This gives you a degree of control over how those search engines present your site to the public. (Other search engines use either your page title or pick up the first sentence or two of copy on your site as the site summary)

“Meta keywords” offer an opportunity to further reinforce your important keywords to search engine robots. Again, some, but not all, search engines utilize meta keywords. While meta keywords are not some magic formula that will send your search engine rankings skyrocketing, they do add value and should be utilized.

If you’re involved in the development or management of your site, you may know how to insert page titles and metatags into your Web pages. If not, talk to your site developer or Webmaster and have him or her insert your keywords into the pages. The process is quick and simple. It can be accomplished in a matter of minutes.

Once you have your content, page titles and metatag information ready to go, submit your site to all the major search engines. Don’t wait for them to find your site . . . as that may never happen. Submitting your site to search engines is usually quite simple. Locate the “Add URL” or “Add a Site” link on the search engine home page and fill in the form information as required. In most cases, you simply need to type in the Web site address.
Depending on the specific search engine, your site will be cataloged within a matter of days or weeks. Soon thereafter, pages from your site will begin appearing in search engine results.

**Search Engine Consultants**

Search engine positioning has become so important that it has spawned an entire consulting industry. Search engine consultants are available to provide specific advice about keyword usage, metatags, page design and layout and other pertinent issues.

Search engine consultants also offer what are called “doorway page” strategies. These are Web pages that are specially designed to rank as high as possible on specific search engines for specific keyword phrases. Triple A Ceilings, for example, might hire a consultant to create a doorway page that is focused solely on achieving highest-possible search engine rankings for the key phrase “Dallas ceiling contractor.” Creating effective doorway pages requires in-depth knowledge of how search engines operate. Since search engine indexing parameters are continually changing, it’s a full-time job just to stay up-to-date on what’s working well and what isn’t.

When the right keywords are selected and the strategy is executed correctly, doorway pages can provide excellent results. Creating doorway pages can cost between several hundred and several thousand dollars or more, depending on how many doorway pages you create. Compared to the costs of banner advertising and other site promotional campaigns, it can be a real bargain.

But remember, no matter what search engine strategies you employ, driving traffic to your site is only half the battle. The ultimate success of your Web site goes back to those three critical factors: content, content and content.

**About the Author**

Marty Duffy is a founding partner of Building Channels (www.buildingchannels.com), a business providing news, Internet marketing and public relations services for building, AEC and DIY businesses.