

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SEO Support: In-House, External, or Both?

The Business of SEO

SEO has its roots in the web development and technology communities. Early search engine optimizers were web developers, small-business owners, and forward-thinking consultants looking to make their websites visible in the search engines and focused on tweaking HTML to make their sites more search engine–friendly.

As search has matured over the years and taken its place at the marketers' table as a legitimate sales and brand development channel, SEO pros have increasingly been asked to focus on the business side of the practice—to evolve beyond the code and Microsoft Excel jockeys of the early days of the practice (though let's be clear: Excel still serves some very valuable functions in SEO work!).

The benefits of focusing on SEO as a business are:

- It legitimizes the practice of SEO. Talking about `canonical` tags is great for chatting at an SEO conference, but talking about organic search share will go over better in the C-suite. In many companies, winning the C-suite battle to obtain budget and functional support is the only way to really succeed long-term in SEO.
- It bridges the gap between the practice of SEO and the impact on the business. Focusing on the business aspects of SEO will enable you to be clear about the ROI you are getting from organic search. Translating SEO-centric metrics such as rankings and traffic to revenue and dollars earned enables you to tie a tangible business impact to your efforts.

Understand Your Market Opportunity

Most SEO consultants probably cannot say with certainty what ranking in the top search positions for their keywords is (or would be) worth to them in terms of traffic and revenue. However, you should never set out to develop a new product or launch a new service without first understanding the business case/market opportunity, and organic search should be no different. Understanding the market opportunity prior to editing even the first `<h1>` tag is important, because it will help you to:

- **Understand what SEO is potentially worth to your organization.** It will give you an idea of what organic search visibility is worth to your business and answer questions like “How much organic traffic could we potentially procure from higher organic positioning?” Answers to these questions will guide the SEO process, including budget and infrastructure investments, and will help you make the SEO business case to the rest of the organization.
- **Track progress as you go.** Building a market opportunity benchmark prior to embarking on SEO will enable you to measure progress as you go and demonstrate the ROI of SEO in real, quantifiable metrics that will resonate with the company stakeholders.

A market opportunity assessment in organic search shows the current visitors captured for your keywords, versus the potential opportunity were you to rank in a top position. There are various tools available on the Internet that can help simplify the process.

To conduct a market opportunity assessment:

1. **Isolate your top group of nonbranded keywords.** Determine your target keywords based on their perceived conversion potential. The number of keywords may vary based on factors such as your SEO maturity or vertical market space, and can range from around 50 for those just starting out up to several thousand keywords for those further along in organic search.
2. **Gather search volumes and rankings for your keywords.** Find out what your current search volumes and rankings are for your targeted keywords.
3. **Use a click-through rate (CTR) curve to identify the potential for new visitors.** A CTR curve shows the expected percentage of clicks based on the search position of the keyword. Plugging your current search volume and rank into a CTR curve can give you a general idea of the number of new visitors you can expect to get by moving up in the search rankings.
4. **Scale that across your total traffic.** The first three steps of the analysis give you a sense of the traffic gain you can get for your top keywords, but it is likely that you have many other keywords driving traffic to your site. If you have an oppor-

tunity to double the traffic on your top keywords, you likely also have the opportunity to double your overall nonbranded organic search traffic volume.

5. **Check the CPC values for your keywords.** Using a tool like **SEMrush** or **Searchmetrics**, or **the Google Keyword Planner** from within your own Google AdWords account, run some numbers on the current market value of your keyword targets.

Get Buy-In Across the Organization

Now that you've done an opportunity assessment and know what you will be working toward in organic search, it's time to internally publicize the opportunity and obtain buy-in across the organization. For SEO efforts to be successful in any organization, active participation from many parts of the business—from C-level executives approving budget, to the engineering department implementing web and infrastructure changes, to content writers using SEO best practices—is an absolute necessity. Organizational buy-in is as critical to successful SEO as information architecture and <h1> tags.

To obtain organizational buy-in:

1. **Get people excited about SEO—then scare the heck out of them.** Show people the opportunity in organic search that has come out of your opportunity assessment. Make them aware of what the business is missing out on by not performing well in organic search. Then, make them aware of where your company stands relative to the competition, and identify competitors who are currently cashing in on the opportunities you are missing out on.
2. **Keep the SEO opportunity foremost in people's minds.** Make posters outlining the market opportunity and hang them on the walls. Speak about it often, and generally socialize it in the organization. The more you can keep the opportunity front and center in people's minds and keep them excited about it, the better.
3. **Create a service-level agreement (SLA) with stakeholders.** To formalize the working relationship with organizational departments and increase their buy-in to SEO, sign an SLA with them that defines how quickly they will respond to requests and the metrics that will be used to measure success.

Lay the Groundwork

Once you've obtained buy-in from the organization, it's time to position yourself to succeed. We've heard of many instances of chief marketing officers (CMOs) who have dipped a toe in the water with SEO but labeled it "black magic" or ineffective because the company's website failed to skyrocket to the top of the search rankings for the

high-volume, highly competitive keywords they've targeted in 90 days or less. To avoid problems like this and to lay the groundwork for SEO success in your organization, it is important to do two things:

- **Set the appropriate expectations.** SEO is a long-term strategy where you are likely to see incremental improvements that may start slowly at first. Focus expectations on gains in nonbranded search traffic and conversions from that traffic, not on rankings. Many marketers' only exposure to search marketing is the world of pay per click, so it is important to educate them about SEO with its unique characteristics and differentiators.
- **Show early wins.** You may be tempted to go after high-volume, highly visible keywords right out of the gate, but ranking for competitive keywords can—and does—take time. It is better to initially target less competitive keywords that can result in quick wins (what we call “low-hanging fruit”), while simultaneously developing a long-term strategy for more competitive keywords. This will help keep people engaged and believing in the opportunity in organic search.

To help set reasonable expectations and report on your organic search progress in the most effective way possible:

- **Make a distinction between milestones and success metrics.** The fruits of your labor can take some time to materialize in organic search results. To maintain organizational buy-in and gauge your progress before traditional success metrics such as conversions kick in, report on key milestones such as number of indexed backlinks, changes made to the website, and recommendations made.
- **Report on SEO metrics as business metrics.** Report on SEO like you would any sales effort, by continuously reporting on your search pipeline and the competitive landscape. Create a mission around SEO: you might strike a gong when certain milestones are hit, or install TVs where you can show regularly updated traffic and conversion stats.
- **Be a businessperson.** Understanding when to use technical SEO tactics is important, but speaking the language of business the C-suite understands is critical to the ongoing success of SEO in most organizations. Expand your horizons beyond Excel and analytics and learn to speak the language of dollars and cents—this is what executives will notice and understand.

Motivate Resources That Don't Share Your Goals to Help You

As we've mentioned, succeeding in SEO requires support and buy-in across your organization. Many SEO efforts are dependent on non-SEO team members in the company to get things done, often relying on resources across numerous departments who may

not be trained on, or oriented toward, thinking about SEO. Finding ways to work with others to get things done is key to SEO success.

To most effectively work with resources organization-wide on SEO tasks:

- **Show how it will benefit them.** Trying to get content creators to use targeted keywords in content can be a losing proposition. If you demonstrate conclusively, however, how it will benefit them—that they will reach a wider audience with their content—they are much more likely to buy in, implement changes to their content development process, and commit to the effort over time.
- **Recognize contributions to organic search visibility.** Recognize when team members do something that contributes to organic search success, such as optimizing a press release or tweaking an XML sitemap. At one Fortune 100 company, the director of SEO handed out an award every quarter to the individual who had contributed most significantly to organic search visibility.
- **Become an SEO evangelist.** Evangelism is just one more on the long list of job requirements for the SEO pro. One of the more important tasks is walking the halls, spreading the gospel of SEO. Buy the IT person breakfast, the PR director lunch, and the content writer dinner. Get people excited about organic search and then be sure to keep them that way!

Progress Through the Stages of SEO Maturity

Now that you have organizational buy-in and appropriate resources to execute, how do you go about scaling your keywords and continuing to drive organic search traffic to your website?

Our observations over the years have shown that organizations often move through five distinct stages when it comes to SEO. Each stage is characterized by investments in budget, strategy, and metrics appropriate to the stage's maturity level. Organizations should continuously be striving to move into the next maturity stage until they are at the "Compete" level and are actively vying to outperform the top firms in the search rankings. The stages are:

1. **Foundational.** In the first stage of SEO maturity, the organization dips its toe in the water and focuses on low-hanging fruit, optimizing for a small set of initial keywords. In the Foundational phase, the majority of the budget is spent on personnel, with a portion allocated to engineering/production. Efforts begin to move their top target keywords on deeper pages of the SERPs (page 7 and below) into striking-distance (page 4 or below), so they are primed to move into top-visibility positions in later phases. One employee and/or independent consultant is often assigned to SEO part-time.

2. **Investment.** In this stage, organizations begin to expand their coverage, moving into more competitive keywords with higher search volumes. Average ranks begin to improve as keywords optimized in the previous stage begin to move into page 2, 3, or 4 of the search rankings. Organizations now begin to invest in some link-building activities and content creation and start to expand their investment in SEO technology. One or two employees are assigned full-time to SEO.
3. **Measurement.** In this stage, to maintain investment in SEO, it becomes critical for organizations to begin showing ROI and tying SEO metrics such as rankings and traffic to business metrics such as conversions and revenue. In the “Measure” stage, rankings continue to increase as the organization becomes increasingly SEO-savvy, beginning to invest in continuing education. Several full-time employees are assigned to SEO, along with specialized outside agencies and/or consultants.
4. **Scaling.** In this stage the organization organizes and prioritizes, beginning to look at organic search from a holistic perspective. An organic search pipeline develops as SEO starts to be treated as a sales campaign organizationally. Many more keywords move into top-visibility positions as investments in link building and content creation are increased. Several employees remain assigned full-time to SEO along with outside agencies and consulting specialists.

Building an SEO team

At this point in the SEO maturity cycle, you are ready to catapult yourself into organic search success by moving from relying on internal “generalist” SEO professionals with outside consultant specialists to building internal teams of specialized professionals. From content writers who write search engine–friendly content, to link developers who focus on leveraging that content to acquire strategically important links, to keyword jockeys adept at discovering hidden opportunities through spreadsheet analysis, to the project manager who pulls it all together, your organization is now ready to become a lean, mean SEO machine and drive to compete with the best the SERPs have to offer. This is the final stage:

5. **Compete.** In this stage the organization makes additional gains in organic search visibility such that it begins to look at its share of search relative to the competition. Budgets stabilize, while mature SEO technology is in use company-wide. In the “Compete” phase you are building internal teams of SEO professionals.

NOTE

A special thanks to **Seth Besmertnik** for his contribution to this portion of the chapter.

Using In-House SEO Talent Versus Outsourced Support: Dynamics and Challenges

Once your organization has embraced the need for SEO, you must decide whether to hire someone in-house or work with an outside consultant or agency. The same decision must be made when the time comes to expand an existing SEO team. Here are the factors you should consider:

- Is there enough work to justify a full-time, part-time, or contract employee?
- Is in-house knowledge on SEO strategically necessary for the business?
- Are people with the right SEO skill set for your website available for hire within your target salary range? (What each company needs will vary.)
- Do you want to access and leverage experienced talent from an external agency to supplement an internal team?
- Is your organization so complex that it would benefit from the presence of an in-house SEO pro?

The Value of In-House SEO

One of the significant advantages of in-house SEO is the ability to access search expertise whenever you need it. Some additional advantages are:

- A greater likelihood that SEO best practices will be integrated into the company culture.
- Greater accountability.
- Faster ramp-up time (familiarity with the core business).
- Faster implementation time (greater leverage in the development process).
- The ability to ensure that SEO requirements remain in scope (and raise the flag when they are descope).
- The SEO expert can be tapped anytime and her work reprioritized immediately for quick deliverable turnarounds.
- The ability to provide cross-departmental communications around complex SEO issues, and support project management of ongoing SEO implementation.

The Value of Outsourced SEO Support

Although it may seem that in-house SEO is the ideal solution, there are also plenty of reasons to use an outsourced team instead of, or in conjunction with, an in-house team. Here is a summary of some of the best reasons to leverage outsourced talent:

- Finding expert-level (15+ years of experience) SEO talent to hire is difficult, so it may be smarter to contract with such talent.
- It allows you to focus on your core business and outsource your noncore activities.
- Experts generally have a broader reach in the marketplace via industry contacts, and as a result of working with many clients.
- SEO is multidisciplinary, so using external people makes it easier to pull in components when needed.
- Outsourced teams don't have the myopic focus that sometimes occurs in long-time in-house personnel.
- Outsourcing brings a fresh perspective and new ideas, and outsourced talent can often identify what in-house staff may have missed.

Many SEO consulting firms, such as those of the authors, are willing to take on contracts that include training in-house personnel. This approach can give you the best of both worlds: the ability to immediately inject a high level of expertise into your organization (albeit on a temporary basis), and a long-term plan to bring the capability in-house, or at least build up the expertise with ongoing or occasional augmentation via outside consulting.

The Case for Working with an Outside Expert

You might want to work with an outside expert if any of the following scenarios apply to you:

- You don't have any inside SEO resources, are not in a position to hire them, and need someone to work directly with your development and marketing teams to get your SEO campaign going.
- You don't have any inside SEO resources, and while you want to build a team, you need to jumpstart the process in the meantime. You may also want to use your outsourced SEO practitioner to help train your team.
- You have an inside team but it is missing a key piece of expertise, or you just want to sanity-check the conclusions your team is drawing or see whether they are missing anything. In addition, because SEO at its best involves lots of brainstorming, an injection of fresh ideas can be just what the doctor ordered.
- You have an inside team, but they are busy working on other projects.

Regardless of the scenario, an outsourced SEO professional can bring two assets to the table that will be difficult for your internal team to provide:

The power of external authority

If you hire an industry-acknowledged expert, that person can often speak with a voice of authority that is not readily available to the inside team. This is not necessarily because the inside team are less senior; it's just because they are, well, inside. The view of an unbiased third party with industry credentials can be invaluable.

From management's point of view, the opinion of a recognized authority can increase their comfort that the right path is being pursued. It is very common for in-house SEO professionals to engage an outside expert to help their cause. Engagements range from a presentation or training to site audits and quick consulting calls with web development and engineering teams.

The value of experience on multiple sites/campaigns

Outside experts will have the benefit of having worked on hundreds, if not thousands, of different sites and SEO strategies. Each site's SEO strategy is like a lab experiment in which the SEO expert can benefit from many different types of tests to learn what works well. In addition, if your outside expert is active in the SEO community, he may also benefit from discussing different experiences with other SEO experts.

How to Best Leverage Outside Help

As we've just discussed, there are several scenarios in which you might bring in an outside SEO expert. In all of these scenarios, you will benefit most by working with someone who is good with people, can effectively and diplomatically negotiate, and can teach. Bringing in someone you can trust is also a must.

To leverage these skills, you need to put your SEO expert in a situation where he can succeed. A good candidate will tell you what will be needed from you to be successful. Take this input seriously. If you can't provide the things you are being asked for, your ability to succeed will be limited. It is vital that management paves the way for successful SEO plan implementation. Although many managers may believe they are giving SEO projects what they need, this is not always the case, and as a result, SEO suffers. The key is for management to understand how to give the right type of SEO support.

For example, the SEO expert may need time from your development team to implement the suggestions he makes. If the development time is not available, his suggestions will be useless to you. Prearrange time with developers to talk to the SEO consultant, and work with project management to schedule time to work on the recommendations.

On the content side of things, the SEO expert may define a content plan to support ongoing content development and marketing efforts. Before you commit to a new

hire, make sure you have a rough idea of the scope of the content development and marketing efforts the expert thinks might be needed to support this.

How to Implement Your Expert's Recommendations

Take your expert's input seriously, because he's telling you what he thinks he needs to be successful. If he doesn't get that support and ends up thinking he can't win, what are the chances he will succeed? The thing to remember about SEO is that implementation is crucial; you cannot implement a partial strategy and expect to see results. Unfortunately, most companies implement only a fraction of what is needed and wonder why their traffic isn't increasing, which is truly a shame—and why buy-in is so crucial. Remember, SEO is *extremely competitive*. There's a reason Google makes so much money with AdWords: because not everyone, and not every business, has what it takes to make high volumes of organic traffic happen. To be competitive in SEO isn't the same as finishing a 5K race; it's more like running a marathon and finishing in the top 0.001%. Do you think any of the top marathoners implement only 50% of their training, diet, and sleep regimens? Not a chance.

Ultimately, the cost of hiring an outside SEO expert goes beyond the direct cost for the expert's services. The SEO expert will need a certain amount of support to have a chance for success. Before you decide to hire an SEO professional, ensure that you have the internal support (and are willing to provide it) to make the recommended changes. You don't want to be one of those companies that pays for SEO advice that sits on the shelf and collects dust—we have seen this more times than we care to count!

You also need to have a plan to manage your outsourced SEO help, as high-quality SEO firms will also be placing demands on your organization. Quality SEO cannot happen in a vacuum. This includes content marketing, which requires high-quality content that represents your brand.

The types of internal resources you need to be able to provide include:

- Engineering and web development resources to implement the SEO firm's recommended changes to the website, on both a near-term and long-term basis
- Marketing resources to review plans and any content created to support those campaigns
- Content development resources to create any required content, whether it be adding copy to the website or creating content to support content acquisition strategies and link earning
- One or more project managers to oversee the entire process

How to Integrate SEO Knowledge in the Organization

Although it makes sense to involve an experienced SEO professional (employee or consultant) in your optimization efforts, it is important to remember that for SEO to be successful in the long term, you need to integrate SEO expertise into every aspect of your online business.

A basic level of SEO knowledge within the software and website development departments can speed up the production process, as a well-educated development team already knows a lot about how SEO affects what they do every day and can modify their efforts accordingly, on an ongoing basis. They will also be more likely to make the right decisions when the person in charge of SEO is not immediately available. Ultimately, this can save a large organization hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, of dollars—because it won't be necessary to do a large amount of extra work to make the site search engine-friendly.

SEO is no longer merely about <title> tags and meta descriptions. Although this wasn't the case a few years ago, user engagement signals and website usability play increasingly large roles in search engine visibility today. It is vital that website designers think about the experience of the user who comes to the site from a search engine results page. Likewise, social media strategies need to incorporate keyword themes and links that search engines are looking for as signals in their ranking formulas, as well as the overall element of social engagement that leads to natural link development and increased brand awareness.

Collaboration with Internal Teams

If you are in a larger organization, you must persuade your various teams/departments to have a stake in your site's SEO success because you will rely on them to implement many of the optimization efforts. For example, the engineering department can be your biggest ally, or a thorn in your side. They need to weave SEO into every facet of what they do, and that happens only when they want to work with SEO.

If conflicting priorities and insufficient internal resources stymie you with regard to any specific department, you must work hard to resolve the issues—or resign yourself to having to find alternative solutions. In some cases you can still accomplish what you need to with your site, but it will require a bit of out-of-the-box thinking and some technology.

Making sure your web development team has some basic SEO knowledge can dramatically reduce the work required of the SEO expert, so that when he does review your website for search engine friendliness and to create an SEO strategy, instead of spending time talking to you about Flash, JavaScript, header tags, and alt text, he can focus on more advanced solutions and strategies. The goal is for the organization as a whole

to address 80% of the SEO workload, and the in-house SEO guru or outside consultant to address the more complex 20% of the SEO workload.

Similarly, basic SEO knowledge is an incredibly powerful tool in both online and off-line marketing. Many companies have failed to integrate their offline marketing efforts (such as television or radio commercials promoting a new product) with their online efforts, and SEO planning in this area can often make (or break) a product or website launch.

SEO knowledge at the management level is essential for similar reasons. Decisions made by management, which can affect the entire business, can often have disastrous effects on SEO efforts if they are done in a vacuum—one common example of this is contractual agreements with partners for content syndication. It is a common problem that even after the development teams, designers, and copywriters are trained on SEO, managers end up becoming the obstacle because they haven't been briefed on, or haven't entirely bought into, the aspects of SEO that executives need to know about.

When all of the members of an organization have and act on basic SEO knowledge, the likelihood of success is exponentially greater. The SEO specialist or team can focus most of their energy on new initiatives and continuing to develop the process, while the rest of your team makes good business decisions and taps them for on-demand answers to questions.

NOTE

A special thanks to **Jessica Bowman** for her contributions to this portion of the chapter.

The Impact of Site Complexity on SEO Workload

The amount of time that is needed to perform effective SEO depends on the size and complexity of the website, as well as the competitiveness of the market space the organization is pursuing. An organization's size and vertical scope also have an effect on the overall complexity of the SEO process. Here are some of the ways that SEO considerations can affect the complexity of a site:

Keyword research

More pages mean more keyword research. Solid keyword research is needed to help drive the site architecture and content plans.

<title> tags

<title> tags (your page titles) are still an important ranking factor, and an important piece of the search results page itself. This means that you need to take the time to write the best possible copy for generating the highest click-through rates.

For very large sites, you may have to design an algorithmic method to choose these for you.

Page content

The content must be unique and substantial enough for a search engine to understand what the page is about. Google's Matt Cutts has mentioned that two to three sentences of unique content can suffice to achieve ranking.¹ If you sell products and receive content from manufacturers, you need to invest the resources to write unique product descriptions; otherwise, you risk being omitted from the search engine's indexes or ranking lower because your content is a duplication of other sites' content.

Meta descriptions

Meta descriptions are important because search engines often use an excerpt from your meta description in the SERPs, and the description they provide for a page can influence its click-through rate. While you cannot directly control the description used in the SERPs, you can influence it. For example, by including the keywords that you are targeting with a page within its meta description text, you can make the relevance of your page clearer to the searcher. The larger the site is, the more writing you will have to do, because search engines value unique meta descriptions for each page on the site. For very large sites, you may have to design an algorithmic method to choose these for you.

Link development efforts

As sites scale, the complexity and need for links grow. You need to research the competitiveness of your targeted keywords, and make plans for link development so that execution neither grossly exceeds nor falls short of the necessary effort. The more websites/domains your company owns, the more link development is required. Likewise, the less authoritative your website is, the more link development work is required.

Web-based partnerships

Websites of all sizes engage in partnerships and relationships with other entities (charities, businesses, consultants, clients, distributors, agents, etc.). SEO professionals know that all of these partnerships represent opportunities for acquiring links and link relationships, and that when they are properly leveraged they can result in massive value-adds for the organization. For larger organizations, these partnerships can be more complicated in nature. The more complex the organization is, the longer it will take to leverage these opportunities for SEO.

¹ Matt Cutts and Eric Talk About What Makes a Quality Site," Stone Temple Consulting, July 9, 2012, <http://www.stonetemple.com/matt-cutts-and-eric-talk-about-what-makes-a-quality-site/>

PR team/agency

Your PR team is your friend when it comes to link development and content distribution, so be sure to integrate your SEO efforts with your PR efforts. Truly advanced organizations task a link metric to the PR firm they use so that the teams are asking for links with every story they pitch. You should too.

Development platforms and content management systems

The development platforms and content management systems used on larger sites can often create a number of limitations regarding SEO implementation, and frequently require extensive, costly, and time-consuming workarounds before optimization efforts can be implemented. If you have a non-search-friendly CMS (most are not search engine-friendly), you will have to do more customization work. It is recommended that you work with an expert to understand what is needed so that you develop it right the first time (because you may need to recode things every time you upgrade the CMS).

Solutions for Small Organizations

Some organizations are not equipped—either structurally or financially—to have an entire SEO team to handle the SEO workload we have been discussing. In fact, only one person may be knowledgeable about SEO, and that person may be only a part-time employee. Or there may not be anyone within the organization with the time or skills necessary to optimize the site, so outsourcing may be required. This section will give you direction on how to handle SEO in a small organization.

Developing the In-House SEO Specialist

Building SEO knowledge in-house can be challenging in a small organization where most of the employees are already performing multiple tasks. It is often good to have an SEO consultant on call to answer questions and validate solutions.

If you need to assign SEO to existing talent because you don't have the budget to hire an agency, consultant, or contractor, you should consider engaging an SEO professional to evaluate the aptitude of the person(s) you have in mind for the role. The cost of this assessment from an independent consultant can run anywhere from several hundred to a few thousand dollars, depending on a variety of factors. Countless companies have underestimated the specialized skills and investment required for successful SEO. It's a role unlike any your organization has seen before—this person needs the technical skills, marketing panache, and political savvy to work her way into your website development processes, and the innovative, outside-the-box thinking that will generate creative solutions to search engine crawler needs. Choosing the wrong person can be a costly mistake in terms of time wasted and missed opportunities.

As with larger organizations, it is important to develop a basic level of SEO knowledge throughout the organization. SEO still touches on management, marketing, and development, and it is important that all of these departments have a basic understanding of the issues.

We will outline some of the ways to effectively and rapidly learn about SEO and build up in-house knowledge next.

Making the Most of Limited Resources or Budgets

Learning SEO and doing it on your own can be a challenging task, for two major reasons:

- The demanding, ever-changing landscape of search algorithm behavior is often unpredictable and nonintuitive.
- There are literally thousands of details and tactics to learn, some of which may have little impact on their own but, when used in various combinations with other components, can have a powerful influence on rankings. Herein lies the “art” aspect of mastering SEO.

Fortunately, many SEO training tools and materials are available via paid subscription at [Moz](#), [SEO Book](#), [Instant E-Training](#), [Market Motive](#), [ClickZ Academy](#), and others. If you don’t have the budget for a subscription, you can try public blogs and resources such as [Moz.com](#) and [SearchEngineLand.com](#). Also consider the many resources for learning that we discussed in [Chapter 11](#).

You can do numerous things at a fairly low cost to improve your site’s overall optimization, including the following:

Use the free search engine tools

Use the free tools provided by the three major search engines. Create accounts in Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools and verify yourself as a site owner on both. This will provide you with access to diagnostic tools, such as *robots.txt* validators, as well as reports on backlinks, spidering activity, server errors, top search queries, anchor text, and more.

Find the best keywords to target

Use the [Google Keyword Planner](#) to find keywords with high search volumes. Then use [the Moz Keyword Difficulty and SERP Analysis Tool](#) to get an estimate of how hard it would be to rank for the terms you have identified.

Check out your competitors

Assess your site and those of your competitors for SEO success factors such as keyword-rich URLs, `<title>` tags and `<h1>` tags, keyword prominence, and so on. To survey your and your competitors’ `<title>` tags across a large number of pages,

use the search engines' *site:* operators and set (in the preferences) the number of results returned per page to 100.

Optimize your <title> tags

You want each <title> tag across your site to be unique and focused on a relevant keyword theme. Make each <title> tag count, because of all the elements on the page, it's what the search engines give the most weight; it also heavily influences the searcher's click decision from among the search results.

Optimize other critical elements

Analyze the text, HTML, inbound links, internal links, anchor text, and so on to determine your ideal configuration for success. Include a dose of your own critical thinking.

Measure, test, measure, and refine

Test your assumptions and the assertions of others—particularly SEO bloggers (not every piece of advice you find will be accurate or applicable). Measure key performance indicators (KPIs) and treat SEO like a series of experiments. Make iterative improvements to your URLs, title tags, <h1> tags, internal linking structure, anchor text, page copy, link acquisition efforts, and so on.

What sorts of KPIs should you measure and aim to improve? At a minimum, consider checking rankings, traffic, and conversion metrics. However, you can also check other metrics, such as the number of different search terms used to find your site (for this, use Google Search Console, SearchMetrics, or SEMrush), the number of different landing pages where search visitors arrive, the growth of inbound links and the addition of any notable inbound links, and so forth.

NOTE

We recommend these books to help you understand using analytics: *Web Analytics 2.0: The Art of Online Accountability and Science of Customer Centricity* by Avinash Kaushik (Sybex) and *Advanced Web Metrics with Google Analytics* by Brian Clifton (Sybex).

Test different ideas

Get one *great* idea for a tool, service, resource, or page, and bounce it off some folks in social media, participants in SEO forums, or privately through email to an SEO expert whom you trust. Hire a developer who can help you build it; consider leveraging your online relationships via LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter to mine recommended developer talent.

Many in-house SEOs have had success finding copywriters via sites like Craigslist or Textbroker to write articles for nominal fees ranging from \$10 to \$50 per article (few companies and in-house resources can compete with these rates), though

remember the old adage that you get what you pay for, and this applies online as well. Again, consider leveraging your online contacts to find highly regarded talent within your budget.

Leverage low-cost tools

Consider using one of the following tools:

WordPress or Drupal

These tools are popular with dynamic and static website/application developers, respectively. Most of the time they are used to build web pages, but they also offer a range of reporting tools.

Xenu's Link Sleuth

This is a simple link-based crawler. Web developers use Xenu to check for broken links on a regular basis, but for SEO purposes the best value comes in the form of simple internal link analysis. By ordering the Xenu Sitemap based on “links in” and “page level,” you can easily detect possible internal linking abnormalities that may interrupt PageRank flow or decrease anchor text value; and of course, you can save all this information as a report. Xenu gathers loads of information, and it is a very useful tool, even for in-depth SEO purposes.

Screaming Frog SEO Spider

This is a small desktop program you can install on your PC or Mac that spiders websites' links, images, CSS, scripts, and apps from an SEO perspective. It fetches key on-site page elements for SEO, presents them in tabs by type, and allows you to filter for common SEO issues (or slice and dice the data how you see fit by exporting it into Excel). You can view, analyze, and filter the crawl data as it's gathered and updated continuously in the program's user interface.

Microsoft Word

Although it may seem to be an unconventional tool for a web developer/SEO practitioner, Microsoft Word is undeniably one of the best copywriting and publishing tools, and practically all users are familiar with it. It has several built-in features that help you to produce high-quality content, analyze existing content, fix and locate essential grammar errata, and above all, easily automate and synchronize all features and changes with other users and publishing tools. For more tech-savvy folks, there is always the scripting option for fine-tuning.

As with most SEO tools, the beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If you use the preceding tools properly, they can be very helpful, but if you lack experience or try to use them for the wrong kind of task, they can cause pain and misery.

Making proper on-page optimization decisions usually takes days. Even for a relatively small site, it is possible to cut that down to fewer than two hours by using the tools and methods we just described. Of course, there is a difference in the quality of work and the documentation you'll get with these tools compared to what you'd get with more conventionally priced SEO services, but they do have their place.

SEO webinars

There are numerous free SEO webinars available that will expand your knowledge. Great sources include [Instant E-Training](#), [Moz](#), [Digital Marketing Depot](#), and [SEMPO](#).

Limited cash options

If you're on a tight budget, create a blog with great content and promote it via social media (Twitter, Facebook, and Google+). Execute the SEO action items identified in this book, and leverage the free tools and guides we've mentioned. Attend free webinars. Do what you can for SEO. Then, invest in an hour or two with a consultant to do an ad hoc site review. You can also check with SEO firms to see which ones are offering special introductory packages, as some firms offer special pricing just to get started with a client.

These are just examples of things you can do, and countless other options are also available. Whatever you do, don't short-circuit the process of developing in-house expertise, even if you hire outside help. That in-house knowledge will be invaluable over time, and if you have hired a quality outsourcing partner, she will be delighted because it will make her job easier. She may even help train you or your team.

Solutions for Large Organizations

The challenges of performing SEO for a large organization are a bit different from those for a small organization. This is true regardless of whether you are working from an in-house position or are an outsourced SEO consultant. Some of the challenges can stem from the size of the site, which can range from 10,000 to tens of millions of pages, potentially spread across multiple domains, countries, and languages.

Large organizations are usually complex entities, and many of these organizations may make decisions by committee, or review all decisions with a committee before finalizing them.

Many important projects (SEO or otherwise) can be delayed or even canceled in a large organization due to a lack of understanding by a single key player. In the world of SEO, efforts are often delayed by someone in IT/development, marketing, sales, or management—and it can be challenging to get a meeting with the people you need to persuade, let alone accomplish the task of persuading them.

Patience and persistence are essential, and adhering to the following large-organization SEO guidelines is recommended:

- Get buy-in, if you can, from the head of IT, the head of marketing, the head of sales, and senior management. Those people will likely control your fate. If you can get two or three department heads and senior managers on board, you should be in good shape.
- Always make sure you talk about opportunity cost. Make sure all people involved understand that they're potentially leaving X visitors on the table every day, and that at the current conversion rate that means N potential leads and Y potential dollars. Include the opportunity gap—where the clients are versus where they could be—in every report.
- Insist on a sound web analytics plan. Successful SEO projects depend highly on quality analytics information. If your company currently cannot implement a quality analytics solution, yet you have support for implementing SEO, look at other KPIs, such as rankings combined with search volume and estimated clicks per position in the search results. You can also rely on the data from Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools, which will provide some quality information.
- Provide detailed reports even when you're not asked to. As the disciplined people around you are likely to be unfamiliar with the basics of SEO, SEO practitioners need to overcommunicate.
- Educate, educate, educate. Always explain why you are making a given recommendation. Just make sure you are speaking in the language of the recipient (i.e., talk technically to the developer and in business terms to the marketer). This is where many SEO efforts fizzle out. When you conduct training properly, you can create an almost overwhelming amount of buy-in and interest in SEO. Companies often go wrong when they think one training session is enough. Unfortunately, interest will wane, and if you don't offer continuing education you can be back to square one in 6 to 12 months.
- Be confident. Cover your bases before each meeting. It's important to speak confidently on what you know, but it's also important not to speak about what you do not know. There is nothing wrong with saying, "That's a good question. I don't have an answer for you right now. Let me do some research and get back to you." Most development teams will respect that answer—if you can do your research and get back to them quickly. Be mindful of the Ugly Baby Conundrum: the website is the baby of the programmers, designers, and business sponsors; when you point out a site's SEO needs and flaws, it's like you're saying, "Your baby is ugly." When you look at a site for SEO, you will probably find many issues. Be sure to

mention what has been done well in terms of SEO, and be unbiased when presenting the issues you've found.

- Don't make technical presentations to the executive team—they want metrics and action plans showing progress (or lack of progress). Although they might understand what you're saying, their brains are tied up with 99 other things. Just get to the point: what's gone well, what hasn't, and what you need from the team to fix it.

Contracting for Specialist Knowledge and Experience

Even if you have a solid in-house SEO team, sometimes it makes sense to get help from the outside. Why would you want to bring in external expertise when you have a strong team already?

The answer lies in the complexity of SEO itself. SEO has dozens of subdisciplines, including video optimization, local search, image optimization, competition for search traffic in other countries, link development, usability, and strategies for social media properties. If you need help in one or more of these areas, don't hesitate to seek assistance from outside your organization. It's also possible that your SEO team has mid-level, but not expert-level, knowledge of SEO—and contracting out for expert-level guidance of your team is often a wise investment.

Another reason to bring in an SEO consultant is to conduct an audit of your site. This should help identify the things you've missed, confirm the things you've done right, and highlight new opportunities. Here are the ideal times to engage a consultant to perform an SEO audit:

- When you need to understand the amount of work that will be involved in optimizing your site
- When you have done what you know about SEO and need advice on what to do next (or as part of an annual training, to help develop better expertise in-house)
- When others in your organization need justification of your SEO recommendations
- Before a site redesign (or at any time you make major changes to a site), so that you can learn what needs to change and what you can do to make the next website more search engine-friendly

Applying SEO Recommendations Intelligently

One of the biggest challenges in SEO is the gap between strategy and implementation. The SEO artist knows how to explain his recommendations in simple terms and in the

language of his audience. However, simple expression of a concept does not always mean seamless implementation.

When you look at a site from an SEO perspective, you must always keep the bigger picture in mind: to do what is best for the business by balancing both short- and long-term goals while managing available resources effectively. Changes that minimize implementation cost and hassle but have a big impact have the best ROI. Before you recommend throwing out that old CMS and reinvesting millions of dollars in a brand-new website, ensure that the ROI to the organization will justify the expense, and back it up with data.

This does not mean you should never recommend drastic changes, but rather that you should do so at the right time and place, and break out the implementation of the overall SEO strategy into prioritized SEO “projects.” Be mindful of the potential benefit for each SEO recommendation. Sometimes this is difficult to quantify, and you may need to build a table similar to **Table 14-1**.

Table 14-1. *Rating potential SEO projects*

Project	Value	Effort
SEO Project 1	High	High
SEO Project 2	Low	Medium
SEO Project 3	Medium	Low
SEO Project 4	High	Low

This type of analysis is incredibly valuable in keeping an organization moving forward with an SEO program and increasing search traffic at the most rapid rate possible. Of course, sometimes the executives in your company may want to see dollar numbers instead of High, Medium, and Low ratings for the Value, so you may need to be prepared to give an estimated range of dollar impact. Just make sure to be clear that you are providing a very rough estimate, as this is usually difficult to predict precisely.

Hiring SEO Talent

If you have decided that you want to add to your in-house SEO team (or start one), you need to think seriously about the type of person you want to hire. Do you want someone with prior experience, or do you want the person to learn from other team members along the way? Do you know which facets of SEO are crucial to the success of your specific website and organization, and how to hire for these skill sets?

Hiring top people can be prohibitively expensive, because there are a lot of income opportunities for them to pursue. It is hard to match the earning potential of a top SEO pro because, at the very least, he can usually make more from building sites and

operating them in an affiliate or lead-generation model. That does not mean you cannot hire real talent; it just means you will pay a premium. An alternative would be to hire someone less seasoned and experienced, and pair her up with a consultant or agency to oversee the work.

Selecting the Right SEO Person

Although experience costs more, under normal circumstances it will bring faster results. On the other hand, a less experienced person is a lot like a rookie in baseball: if you hire a future star, you can potentially accomplish a great deal at a much lower cost.

When sifting through résumés, examine candidates' specific skill sets. If you are looking for someone to develop social media campaigns, you should probably be a bit more focused on that than on whether the candidate is an expert at keyword research. No matter what his skill level is, he should “get” the Internet. Does he blog? Tweet? Have a professional and well-connected LinkedIn profile? If he doesn't, and there isn't a specific personal or professional reason why (privacy, confidentiality, etc.), he's possibly under-experienced for the position you are looking to fill.

Also, when evaluating a person's skills, don't forget to assess her political finesse. What makes a successful SEO practitioner at an agency or in a freelance position is different from what makes a successful candidate in-house. Often, companies focus strictly on results and types of projects; however, if your company is plagued with red tape and political minefields, you need someone who can remain diplomatic, sell SEO to the entire organization, and integrate it into the organization in the right places so that it is implemented successfully. There is an 80/20 rule for in-house SEO: 80% of the time you spend selling and 20% of the time you spend doing SEO.

Pitching the Person

As we've noted, finding good SEO talent can be challenging, as top SEO experts are in high demand and are likely to have more than one job option to pursue; for these SEO pros, a high six-figure salary is the norm.

Many companies overlook this. The “jobs offered” sections of forums are often full of offers, but few employers have made any real effort to market their openings. It really is a basic marketing problem that many of those vacancies show. Many don't even put a location in the title. Far worse is that almost all of the posts are company-centric: all about what the company wants from applicants, and no thought for what the prospective applicant will want from an employer. SEO is not like other job functions. A good SEO guru is in high demand; you have to make her think, “I want to work there!”

Fail to pitch the prospect, and you will get to choose from a diminishing pool of folks who can't make it alone, aren't able or willing to make a good living from affiliate pro-

grams, and don't prefer to be with a more forward-thinking and proactive company that looks to develop its staff, rather than merely recruit them. Many SEO pros are looking for companies that have more support and resources; they are frequently stuck as isolated one-person departments, with few tools and "toys" to help them advance.

Sample Job Opening: An Oldie but Goodie

The following job opening appeared in the [job postings at Search Engine Watch](#) nearly a decade ago:

I'm totally serious about this unique opportunity for a person of the right calibre to come and work with Propellernet UK, a Brighton-based Search Engine Marketing company, as a trainee Consultant.

This is not your average trainee position, and a high level of skills are already expected. We do not have the time to spend years on this training, and we are looking to take on an experienced SEO, who already understands the special aspects of Marketing as it applies to the web. Then I will personally train and coach you to take that further still.

The ideal candidate will have a background in sales or marketing, as well as a broad understanding of SEO.

(Clue: If you don't know who I am, your knowledge of SEO is not going to be broad enough.)

You must be a great communicator, as an essential part of this role is to bridge the communication gap that often exists between the Marketing and Technical Departments of Client Companies.

You need to be able to talk to Marketing Directors on their level, and then turn around and talk with Heads of IT Departments on their level without a pause.

You need to have equal passions for both Teaching and for Learning, as you will be expected to do both things each week as a matter of course.

You need high initiative, and the ability to think on your feet. You need to be proactive yet still have fast reactions too.

You must be in possession of a full, clean, UK Driving License, as considerable travel may be involved in the consulting work.

What you get in return:

A salary based upon ability and experience that will be reviewed regularly as your skills are proven. The salary will also include performance-related elements, and on-target earnings could easily surpass £70,000 as soon as your skills are up to the demand.

You get to work right on the cutting edge of SEO consultancy, where the work is never dull nor repetitive and we seek unique solutions for every client.

You get to be trained to be a world-class SEO and Web Marketing Consultant, able to stand alongside the very best that our industry has to offer.

I am looking to train an equal, not a junior, so you'll be learning everything that I can impart to you just as quickly as you can absorb it.

This is a completely sincere offer. Your time will not be wasted—I don't expect mine to be either.

CVs should be sent to Propellernet Ltd.—you can find the address for yourself if you're a qualified candidate.

Sincerely,

Ammon Johns (aka Black_Knight)

Marketing Director, Propellernet Ltd.

Clearly, this type of job posting is not what every company would want to put out there, but that is part of what makes it effective. There is a certain amount of attitude to it, and that speaks volumes to a potential applicant: either this is what you are looking for, or it isn't.

The job requirements also spell out many of the personal and professional attributes an applicant would need to have to get the job. The compensation is well detailed too, so the applicant knows what is in it for him. Good SEO professionals are well compensated and hard to attract. They know the value of their time and will not waste it on jobs they do not feel will give them valuable experience and just compensation.

In addition, the posting makes it clear that Ammon Johns was looking for someone who could be a true peer. This and many other points in the job outline make it evident that he is looking for a senior person. One thing that might make this type of listing a bit more effective would be the addition of some examples of search problems that a qualified applicant should be able to solve prior to applying (the “find the address for yourself” requirement at the bottom is not a challenging problem).

Making the Offer

Move quickly! Once you know the candidate is the right fit, make an offer. Good SEO professionals are always in demand, and waiting two or three weeks to make an offer could cost you the superstar hire. It is not uncommon for top-notch pros to land a new job in 3 to 4 weeks, nor is it uncommon for a company to search for a candidate for 6 to 12 months. In the SEO recruiting space, if you snooze, you lose. Prioritize time for the interviews, and act fast. If the process just seems too daunting, consider paying for a few hours of a top SEO pro's time to help you in the hiring process.

Selecting an SEO Firm/Consultant

Once you have decided to hire an outside firm, you need to go through some sort of selection process. This can be daunting if you are not already familiar with the space and if you don't already have some understanding of SEO yourself. There are many solid and reputable companies out there, but unfortunately there are a large number of bad ones as well.

In addition, there are many different types of projects you may want them to work on. For example, if you have a local SEO-focused project in mind, you will need to find a team with the right type of experience. Similarly, you may have specific contract requirements that will impact which firm is right for you. Consider looking at resources such as [the Moz vendor directory](#).

Getting the Process Started

Just as a bad hire can be a very expensive proposition, so can engaging the wrong consultant or firm, either through a haphazard selection process, or no selection process at all. Here is an outline of the steps you should take for a more methodical, disciplined search for outsourced SEO expertise:

1. Start with your goals. Connect with your team and make sure you have a good idea of what you want to accomplish by working with an SEO expert. Sometimes it's as simple as an audit to make sure you're following best practices; other times it's training for your marketers and content builders to get them up to speed on how to actively promote the site. If you have a solid list of things you want completed at the end of an engagement, you'll be better able to find the consultant or firm that best suits your needs—and you'll be better able to judge the eventual results.

If you don't really know what you want, that's OK, but it does make the SEO practitioner's task a little less structured, and it means you need an exceptional level of trust in that person. Sometimes an SEO expert can help you define your goals—to get the best of both worlds, you can ask her what she thinks your goals should be and combine those with your own list. It is still fairly common to hear companies tell us, "We don't know what we need to do for SEO, but we need to do something; can you tell us?"

2. Connect with your social network. The people who can best assist you in finding a good match are often those who know you well. Talk to friends, fellow business owners, SEO bloggers, and people you know and trust.

When you communicate with your network, make sure you share a little bit about your site, your business, and your goals with regard to SEO (to the extent that you know them). The more information you can share, the better folks are able to assist. At a minimum, if you have geographic considerations or want the culture of a large, multi-offering agency versus that of a smaller, SEO-focused consultant/consultancy, this is good to include in the request.

3. Get advice from SEO-savvy people you trust. Familiarize yourself with the Twitter handles and Facebook pages for the people you trust, and engage. Tap your Google+ circles and LinkedIn connections to request advice and guidance. As a rule, SEO experts are incredibly friendly about referring business to good companies

and good people, and if your network has already given you a few names, running these by the professionals can get you valuable insight on potential winners versus lemons. Even the authors of this book are willing to provide recommendations, so feel free to reach out to us.

4. Make sure the person is available. This is a fairly obvious step, but many people do not put this at the beginning of the communication process. Ask the person whether he is available at the start, and then continue the conversation if applicable (there is no need to waste energy on folks who can't help, though you should always ask for a referral). Your time (and theirs) is precious, so don't waste it.
5. Define what type of expertise you need. If you have an enterprise-level, highly complex website with legacy systems and a complex development life cycle, you need an SEO consultant who knows how to work within these constraints. If local SEO is your priority, you need someone well versed in local SEO. Few companies do extremely well in all facets of SEO, so you must identify which aspect of SEO you need most and find a company that excels in that area.

Preparing a Request for Proposal

A well-written request for proposal (RFP) can significantly improve the overall process. If your RFP is not written well, it hinders the SEO firm's ability to understand and define your needs and to scope and price your project. This in turn leads to a disconnect in expectations for both parties. A lousy RFP can discourage a busy SEO firm from even responding—which is a very unfortunate outcome, as it takes the best firms out of the running. That being said, there are some SEO companies and consultants who do not participate in the formal RFP process, and with good reason: some businesses use the bait of an RFP to gain valuable SEO strategy tips, and even specific tactics, for free and at the expense of the SEO vendor. So while it can seem like a good idea to ask for a lot of great information in the RFP, this can place an undue burden on the RFP respondents and may result in some of the best agencies and consultants not responding, simply because they have other opportunities they can pursue without having to participate in a lengthy RFP process.

Many companies intuitively “know” what they want but find it difficult to ask for it in a way that is clear, succinct, informative, and constructive. If written properly, an RFP can facilitate the sales process and ensure that everyone involved on both sides understands the purpose, requirements, scope, and structure of the intended engagement. Following a few key steps in the beginning of the RFP process will enable you to rest easy, knowing that you are more likely to get what your company wants and needs.

Step 1: Nominate a “point person” for the engagement

One of the most challenging concepts for any large company with multiple working parts is to determine the end goal of the engagement. Often, marketing departments may voice different wants and needs than IT departments; even when they are asking for the same thing semantically, they may not be using the right language to communicate what they are looking for.

Every successful project needs a project manager who is invested in the project’s success and can pull together the disparate groups that have a stake in the outcome or a role to play. Without that person at the helm, the project will struggle. By nominating that person as the SEO firm’s “point person” even before you send out your RFP, you will ensure a steady flow of information throughout the process so that internal and external expectations are met.

Step 2: Define “needs” and “wants” using a decision matrix

RFP recipients will understand that you aren’t the SEO expert, and therefore you aren’t going to be able to adequately define the scope of your desired SEO engagement. As the saying goes, “You don’t know what you don’t know.” Just try to be reasonable when formulating your needs and wants, and recognize that the RFP recipient may have a better idea of what you need than you do.

In addition to disclosing to the SEO firm the basics, such as your objectives, your site’s conversion types (e.g., online purchases, newsletter subscriptions, white paper downloads, etc.), target audience, constraints, and so forth, in all fairness you will also need to clearly spell out the criteria by which you will evaluate the SEO firm’s suitability. This means you will need to define these criteria in advance.

SEO firms know the selection process is usually governed by gut feel, so any RFP recipient who does not have a preexisting relationship with you is automatically inclined not to respond because he knows the deck is likely stacked against him. This is further exacerbated when you send the RFP to multiple SEO firms. You can allay this concern by candidly sharing with the firms your biases and the clearly defined criteria by which you will be evaluating them.

You should map this out in a *decision matrix*, which is simply a chart listing the attributes you are looking for in the SEO firm, a weighting factor for each attribute, a score from 0 to 10 for each, and the weighted score (e.g., the score multiplied by the weighting factor). The weighted scores are added to arrive at a total score. A highly simplified example of a decision matrix is shown in [Figure 14-1](#).

Candidate SEO Firm Scoring Matrix							
	Trustworthy	Trust Weight	Experience	Experience Weight	Availability	Availability Weight	Total
SEO Firm 1	8	0.4	6	0.3	9	0.3	7.7
SEO Firm 2	4	0.4	8	0.3	10	0.3	7
SEO Firm 3	7	0.4	7	0.3	8	0.3	7.3

Figure 14-1. *Decision matrix for evaluating competing SEO firms*

Judging criteria that are both quantitative and qualitative brings objectivity into a subjective process, which will aid you in managing expectations internally. And by sharing your list of criteria and the weighting factors with the RFP recipients, you increase the likelihood—as well as caliber—of responses.

We recommend that you place a high premium on trust in hiring an SEO firm. Unfortunately, there are lots of firms that claim a high level of expertise that either don't really have it or don't put in the effort to drive results (this is much the same in many consulting disciplines). This is one factor on which we recommend you place a lot of weight.

Step 3: Define your success metrics

Now that you've identified what you are looking for in an SEO firm, it's important to let the firms know how you will measure the success of the engagement. Some firms can report on SEO health metrics well beyond just rankings (e.g., page yield, keyword yield), thus facilitating troubleshooting and reviews of program performance. Others will rely heavily on your own analytics package to track the program's success.

For example, you might pose this question internally: "What are your KPIs?" SEO firms often use KPIs to prove the value of the services they provide. If you aren't sure which KPIs your company would like to use, think about baking that request into the RFP, stating something such as, "Do you offer monthly program performance reviews indicating the program's growth? If so, please elaborate on the deliverables of such reviews."

You can assist this process by defining your business metrics clearly, whether they be sales, leads, views or shares of a piece of content, or something else. Make sure the SEO firm is under a nondisclosure agreement (NDA), and provide them with a baseline of traffic and conversion metrics and ask them to show what strategies they are going to use to grow your business from that baseline. Don't get distracted by artificial metrics such as rankings or number of links. While these may be of some interest, keep your eye on your bottom line and make sure that your prospective SEO firm knows that they will need to do that too.

Step 4: Prepare to disclose all known influencing factors

An SEO firm can easily examine your existing website, evaluating the on-page factors (<title> tags, navigation, HTML) to gauge project scope. But other factors will influence your organic exposure during the engagement, some of which won't be immediately obvious or known to the RFP recipient without prior disclosure. Important disclosures include:

- Has your site received a manual action notification from Google?
- Has your site seen traffic drops resulting from the Panda, Penguin, Mobile, or other updates?
- Does your company have other domain names, subdomains, or microsites?
- Is a massive redesign of your website in the works, or are you about to migrate to a new CMS?
- Do you employ a third party for your site's internal search, and if so, who is it?
- Have you ever engaged in text link purchasing, article/blog spam, or link networks?

By disclosing as much information as possible, you spare the SEO firm the time and expense of discovering these things on their own and increase your chances of getting a good ROI in them.

Step 5: Provide an estimated timeline and budget for project completion

One of the biggest deterrents in any RFP is confusion over when a project should be completed and how much it might cost. A company hiring an SEO firm may not know how much time it takes to complete an SEO audit, but it may have pressing internal matters that require the project be done by a specific deadline.

Retail sites may want to schedule new launches around a particular theme or season; for example, if you want your site launched in time for back-to-school, be sure to write that in your proposal. Not only will an expected deadline save your company time in looking for an appropriate firm, but it also serves as a professional courtesy to the SEO firms you are querying.

Budgets often coincide with a project deadline, depending on how your company conducts its business. Consider assessing a budget based on a range of services; that is, instead of saying the project absolutely has to cost \$X, say you are willing to spend within a range of \$X to \$Y. Budgets may or may not be included as part of the RFP, and there are benefits (and drawbacks) to both approaches. Even if you do not provide an SEO firm with your budget in the RFP, we recommend determining a budget

beforehand because knowing how much money you are willing to spend will help you determine a target ROI.

Be aware that high-quality work at high speed is clearly going to cost more. Consulting with people you trust that have used SEO firms can help you get a sense of what the costs are likely to be. Once you have an idea of the market costs for a project of your complexity, you can then decide to spend more (to try to get faster results) or less (to manage budgeting concerns).

A sample RFP document outline. Now that you've gathered the preceding information for your RFP, you're ready to sit down and write it. You can structure an RFP in several ways. Here is a brief outline:

Section 1: Summary and overview

This section is where you will introduce the challenge you are having and provide the SEO firm with an overview of the rest of the RFP. We also recommend outlining how you would like SEO firms to respond to your RFP. Think of this section as an executive summary, where you will provide the highlights of the RFP without the technical details.

Section 2: Technical summary

Often, SEO firms need the gritty details to determine how they can best help you. The technical summary is where you will provide key pieces of information relevant to your project, such as technical requirements, a description of technical issues with the project, your site's current platform, and so on. The technical summary might originate from your IT department, as this section is often for an SEO firm's programmers and delivery team.

Section 3: Administration and management

By describing who will be involved in the project on your end and what the timeline is for completion, you are defining the framework of the project.

Section 4: Project expectations and delivery

If you've done your homework, this should be the easiest section to write. From outlining your evaluation criteria to specifying what monthly deliverables or training you would like to receive to assessing your KPIs, this section helps an SEO firm determine its cost to complete your project, as well as its suitability.

When you write an RFP, keep in mind that the reason you're doing so is to hire an expert SEO firm that will propose its recommended actions for your company's website(s) to achieve the greatest chance for success. Sometimes an SEO firm's feedback highlights other potential issues that you may not have considered, which may change the scope of your project entirely—and this is often the case!

Communicating with Candidate SEO Firms

You should also plan to talk to candidate SEO firms. This is your opportunity to dig a little bit deeper and move beyond the RFP. If you are a smaller company and have bypassed doing an RFP, you will still need to be in direct contact with your prospective SEO firm. Here are some things for you to consider during this stage of the process:

Ask for a list of past success stories (not just clients)

Let the company tell you where it has helped someone be successful. You can ask for a client list, but be aware that a failed client engagement does not necessarily mean the SEO firm failed. In addition, many SEO service contracts prohibit the SEO firm from disclosing their clients. Many times clients don't implement the SEO practitioner's recommendations, or they try to, but do it badly.

You can use this to your benefit. Ask the firm for a case study of a client failure, and then ask them why they think it failed. This can provide some great insight into what they require from their clients, because the failure they disclose to you will inevitably be due to the client not providing them with what they needed.

Talk on the phone or (if possible) meet in person

Email is a great initial communication medium, but a phone call or in-person meeting gives you a real sense of the team you'll work with. Make sure you're not talking to a salesperson (if you go with a big company), but rather to the person who will be interacting with you throughout the contract execution process. There's nothing worse than getting sold by a charismatic, knowledgeable SEO leader and then being passed on to a junior team for management.

In the phone call/meeting, be sure to establish rapport. If you don't feel comfortable on a personal level, don't dismiss it—brilliant SEOs are great, but if you can't work well together, the project is unlikely to succeed. Everyone works better with people they like and get along with. There's also the incentive of not letting down someone you've developed a working relationship with, which extends subconsciously and consciously into every part of the work you do together.

Present a few initial issues over email

Some SEO consultants won't engage in any work before a contract is signed, but you should at least get them to talk about how a problem can be approached, whether it's an issue, and what strategies they might recommend to fix it (even from a broad perspective). If you are an SEO practitioner, put a few examples of issues you've already identified on the table. Seeing how the consultant responds builds trust in her knowledge, and gives you insight into how she solves problems and what your work relationship and the advice you receive will be like down the road.

Ask for references

Asking for references is a good idea, but make sure you qualify the reference as part of the process. You want to protect yourself from people who might get some friend of theirs, instead of a real client, to act as a reference. It is helpful if the reference the candidate provides works within a well-known business. Make sure the relationship between the SEO firm and the reference provider is clear.

Once you get the reference on the phone, you should try to learn what the SEO consultant was asked to do, and what he did. Get specific details on this. If you want someone to provide link development strategy for you but he did not do link development for the other client, the value of that reference is decreased. Then see whether the reference will give you some input on the benefits they received from the work of the SEO consultant (e.g., increases in traffic, conversions, or other metrics of value). Then verify what the reference says about the SEO firm by checking their site metrics with [Compete](#) or [Quantcast](#).

Also, think about doing your own research. Find out what site the consultant worked on for the reference. Then use the [Wayback Machine](#) to see prior versions of the site if they're available.

Contact other past clients

Look at the SEO firm's site and see if it provides client lists. Call ex-clients the candidate firm didn't give as references. In addition, ask about good and bad experiences with the company in forums that cover SEO.

Making the Decision

Regardless of whether you have done an RFP or used a more informal process, make sure you understand the process you will use to make a decision. Here are some tips:

Get a written response from two or three vendors

Don't get an RFP response or quote from just one vendor, even if you're sure you're going to use them. Multiple quotes aren't just a best practice, they're a good way to learn about pricing and scope discrepancies. The quote from the vendor you don't like might include some pieces that your preferred vendor overlooked. Pricing is harder because it fluctuates so wildly in the search marketing world.

However, don't choose an SEO expert on price alone (or even make price the biggest part of your decision), unless your budget is a real problem. SEO is usually an incredibly high-ROI activity. Companies that spend larger amounts on SEO services tend to make it back in a matter of weeks or months from traffic and conversion increases (remember that more targeted traffic means higher conversion rates too).

Thus, going with an SEO expert who costs a lot less might seem like a good idea, but if you don't work as well together and you think she might not do as good a job, you're hurting yourself in the long term. Of course, don't get fleeced by an exorbitantly overpriced firm (watch out; some of the biggest SEO companies have some of the most ruthless pricing models because they know that Fortune 1,000 companies will work only with consultants who've done work for other Fortune 1,000 companies), but be aware that the prospect of saving a few thousand dollars is not the best reason to choose a different provider.

Have smart, sensible people review the contract

Lawyers are great, but sometimes legal folks get overly concerned with liability and risk management details and overlook big-picture business items. Make sure your savvy business/ROI-focused personnel get a good look too. If there are legal issues that cause a rift, it can even be wise to get your C-level executives involved. Sometimes the folks from legal won't budge on an issue that's going to be a deal breaker, but if the CEO says do it anyway, you can get around the more problematic demands. Also be aware that different things are important to different firms. For example, some SEO companies will walk away from a deal if the client insists on a no-publicity clause, if you insist on them assuming millions of dollars in liability for a small engagement, or if it's got a "work for hire" clause, which the company has if they want to share but not lose ownership.

Go with your gut

When you finally make your choice, go with the team you feel will bring results. Making a matrix of price versus service versus reputation versus estimated productivity is fine if you're into that, but consider going with your initial gut feeling. If you don't feel like there is a "right" company, go back to the table, get more information, and even try to get another bid or two. When you do find the best choice, things just "feel" right. How do you know?

- The way they talk about search engines makes sense and the advice they've given lines up with the best practices you've seen expressed on SEO sites you trust.
- They are familiar with recent trends at the engines and the links they send or news they cite is timely, relevant, and logical.
- They use the engines like pros, rapidly combing through site queries, link information, and analytics data to unveil the underlying factors that are hurting your rankings or helping the competition to succeed.
- Their interactions with your team "fit." The team members like the consultants and are eager to implement their advice.

Choose someone you are comfortable dropping your guard around. This is your expert and ideally your confidant, someone you can reach out to and talk to about challenges and knowledge gaps in a way that you cannot with in-house colleagues.

Remember, an SEO business relationship is a relationship, and if the two parties involved simply speak different languages (professionally and/or culturally) within their organizations, no amount of SEO expertise—and no amount of SEO budget—will make the relationship work. It is much smarter to work with people you like than to pay begrudgingly for a working relationship that simply doesn't work. Cultural fit is essential, so be sure you can identify your own business culture and then look for a compatible, resonant culture within the SEO company/consultancy you hire.

Mixing In-House SEO with Outside SEO Help

When you are combining the resources of an external team with those of your in-house SEO team, you need to determine who does what, who decides what is to be done, and so on. It is best to have this all clearly defined up front, or else there will be conflicts and confusion, which will slow down the process of increasing your organic search traffic. Be sure to talk to the website program or project manager, not only upper management. In the end, it will be up to the program or project manager(s) to fit the changes into the schedule. Get their buy-in from the beginning. You may want to even involve them in the vendor selection process, because they will have to work with the vendor as well.

If we look first at the process of defining who does what, there are a few considerations, such as the following:

- What areas of expertise does your in-house team have? How does the outsourced resource complement or reinforce that?
- Is the outsourced resource bringing a unique new area of expertise to your organization, or is it a supplemental resource to an existing area of expertise?
- Is the outsourced resource going to be working on an area where you consider it essential to build expertise in-house?
- Can you leverage the outsourced resource with your internal resources? Perhaps you can use this to keep the outside help working on higher-value tasks that provide you a bigger return on your consulting dollar.

All of these considerations factor into the overall division of labor between your outsourced team and your internal team.

You also need to be clear about who is making the decisions and who is communicating those decisions to the outside SEO consultant. He will need guidance and direction

on what you are looking to accomplish. Although you hopefully defined this in detail up front, it is likely to change over time, so updating that guidance on a regular basis is important. And as the outside consultant may not sit in your offices all day long, more effort may be required to communicate changes in plans to him than to your internal team.

In addition, the outsourced SEO consultant will have questions and will make recommendations, and he needs to know who to pass these on to and who will give him any related updates and let him know about decisions that are made. A clear communication channel is critical to success.

Building a Culture of SEO into Your Organization

While SEO is at its core a marketing channel, it is unlike any other marketing channel or company function you have seen, because it spans so many disciplines.

SEO involves a deep understanding of and integration with nearly all web-related disciplines, from website development and user experience (UX) design to site analytics and tracking. Engaging in SEO efforts is ultimately a process of mobilizing all aspects of your organization to come together to determine target audiences, develop messaging, identify content resources and develop robust content development strategies, build out a user-focused yet search-friendly technology platform, and leverage the business model for external engagement and link acquisition.

SEO is also a bit of a strange beast because much of it is nonintuitive—although some of it, for many SEO pros, is very intuitive and based on “gut feel” and two decades’ worth of experience. As an SEO practitioner, you can often explain things to people in great detail, and they will look at you like you have three heads and say, “Huh?”

Building an SEO culture requires that you get the organization as a whole to accept a handful of important facts:

- Organic search engine traffic is essential to the growth and success of the organization.
- Search engines impose some specific constraints on how you can structure your website.
- Search engine success requires specialized marketing programs.
- You can gain a strategic advantage over your competition by embracing these limitations and requirements.

These concepts are pretty high-level and very simple by design. If you can get all parts of the organization to buy into them, though, it will have a very powerful impact on your chances for success. Once everyone agrees that SEO is needed, you will have taken the first step in building an enduring SEO culture into your organization.

The value of this is that you will have made all team members aware, at least at a basic level, of how SEO affects them. Before the senior manager makes a sweeping policy decision about something, she may pause to consider the SEO impact and get the advice she needs on the topic. Before the developer implements something a particular way, he will likely make sure he is doing the right thing from an SEO point of view. In this environment, your in-house SEO practitioner is invited to the right meetings, pulled into impromptu discussions, and called for quick answers as people are executing project tasks.

To build an SEO culture at your organization, you need to institutionalize SEO by integrating it into everyday business activities and making it part of everyone's job description. Successful SEO will not be the result of a solo effort by your in-house SEO practitioner(s); it will come from collaboration with everyone who influences and touches the website.

Conclusion

As we have outlined throughout this chapter, SEO touches engineering, web development, marketing, public relations, UX, design, copywriting and editorial, content strategy, social media, sales, and management. Getting every one of those groups to understand the basics of SEO is essential to long-term success. SEO is not the be-all and end-all, but it is a significant component of all these disciplines.

SEO culture is focused on growing relevant, converting traffic to the website and the business overall, and building a brand that resonates with users. Educating your organization in these simple concepts will ensure that everyone is working toward the same objective and will bring increased efficiency to your overall operations, which will ultimately help you achieve SEO success.