



# IceGiant

SEO Consulting

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## A Dozen Ways to tell if an SEO is on the Level...

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If you've been in business online for any length of time, chances are that you've been approached by one of the ever-growing number of SEO Companies ready to waylay potential customers. But given this industry's reputation for unethical methods, how can you, as an online entrepreneur with little or no technical knowledge, tell the difference between an ethical and experienced Search Engine Optimizer and the many fly-by-night operators who take your hard-earned cash, and then proceed to employ *optimization* methods which are likely to do far more harm than good in the long-term?

## **Below you'll find twelve key-points which help you spot unethical or inexperienced SEO Companies:**

### **1. We have a Special Relationship with Google.**

*"And for a fee we'll get your site ranked at the top through the back door."*

Over the years I've actually lost count of the sheer number of SEOs out there who claim to have a special relationship or arrangement with Google, and thereby to be able to achieve better rankings for their clients' websites, simply because Google *gives them* preferential treatment. To me at least, this is the single biggest telltale of an unethical operator trying to pull the wool over a potential client's eyes, simply because the statement is a boldfaced lie.

#### **Let me make this one perfectly clear right now:**

*Google does not make special arrangements with anyone... ever... and most certainly not with some two-bit SEO Company which has to hit-up potential clients to get any business in the first place.*

In short, if anyone makes this kind of claim to you, just hang up the phone or delete their email, because they're full of it.

### **2. I have devised a Cunning Plan!**

*"But if I told you what it was, I'd have to kill you!"*

This is another one of my personal pet peeves, *Secret Service SEOs* who turn everything they do into some great cosmic mystery and baffle their clients with meaningless jargon in an attempt to leave them in awe of the Optimizer's almost god-like knowledge of Google, which they, as mere mortal website owners, could obviously never comprehend.

Face it, Google has always been perfectly open about what it looks for in a high-quality website. Back in November 2008 it even published its first SEO Starter Guide, clearly outlining the various basic ingredients needed by a website to achieve search-ranking success; so the methods behind successful search engine optimization can hardly be considered to be *Above Top Secret* information.

Any SEO who fails to be open about the methods he or she employs to achieve higher search engine rankings for clients' websites, or indeed does not specifically state that all the proposed work strictly conforms with Google's Webmaster Guidelines, should be treated with extreme caution, much like a villain in a James Bond movie.

### **3. Will that be Cash, Cheque or Credit Card?**

*"We are so busy; you need to pay us up-front to secure our services."*

You'd be surprised how many of the – *shall we say* – less savory Optimizers out there try this one, and some of the reasons given for demanding full payment in advance can get really creative.

The simple fact is, however, that although within the Search Engine Optimization industry it is quite common to take an advance payment of up to fifty percent, there is absolutely no reason whatsoever to ask for full payment before any work is actually completed. Therefore, should an SEO Company ask you to pay the entire cost up-front, even for the most imaginative of reasons, I would advise you to run in the other direction with all due haste.

#### 4. **Trust us. We'll get you to the Top of Google.**

*"Our SEO Services guarantee you a top search position."*

For starters, just what exactly is a top search position in Google these days? Searching the Google index for anything is rapidly becoming a highly individualized affair, with the search engine serving different users different results not only according to their geographical location on the planet\*, but also based on a user's own personal search history and preferences. So instead of simply returning the same results to everyone around the globe for any given search term, Google actually factors in a number of things when deciding which results to show for any given user query.

Consequently, effective SEO is no longer about simply getting a site to the top of the rankings for the desired keywords and phrases; it is now much more centered on identifying its target audience and reaching them effectively through Google's emerging *personalized search results*.

Think of this like a surgical strike on a single bunker with a guided missile, rather than an old-style carpet-bombing raid which wipes out an entire town to get an identical result. You still achieve exactly the same goal, but with less expense and without causing quite such widespread damage to civilians.

Therefore, any SEO who simply claims to be able to get your website to *The Top of Google*, without taking into account the search engine's ever-evolving sophistication, is simply trying to blow smoke in your face, just as any SEO who claims the ability to guarantee rankings for your site is not to be trusted.

*\*After all, if you live in the UK and need a plumber because your bathtub is leaking all over your downstairs neighbor's dinner table, you're not likely to be happy if all the top results returned for your search are from the USA.*

#### 5. **We can rebuild him! We have the SEO Technology!**

*"Our Special Bespoke SEO Tools give us an Edge over EVERYONE."*

Ah yes, the old '*We have a secret weapon*' ploy. I love this one. Back in the olden days, when dinosaurs ruled the Earth [*as late as 2004/5*], certain elements of the SEO Industry realized that if, in your web page's text, you included its desired keywords and phrases in **bold** and *italic*, and paid close attention to the exact percentage of times this word/phrase was repeated in every hundred words of text, Google would think that yours was the most relevant page of them all for this particular search-term, and allocate you a higher ranking.

As a direct result, for a little while at least, the text content of Google's top results for many search-terms began to look as though it had been written by a ten year old trying to make him or herself understood to complete idiots. It also led to the development of any number of SEO Tools, which weighed up a page's keyword density, the number of times a given keyword or phrase was included in **bold** or *italic*, its code-to-content ratio, the web designer's shoe-size and inside-leg measurement, and any number of other, completely pointless factors.

Well guess what? Google took one look at the developing situation and said: "*Damn! A lot of our top search results are beginning to look as though they were written by a ten year old trying to make him or herself understood to complete idiots! We'd better do something about that!*"

And they did...

These days Google doesn't really give a hoot about exact keyword densities, or indeed about how many times a keyword or phrase is included within a page's text in **bold** or *italic*. This is because, in the wake of the whole '*Ten Year-Old's Writing*' development back in 2004/5, Google has actually, for want of a better word, learned how to *read* what's been written. When indexing a web page, it will actually scan its content and assess its relevance to any given keyword by taking into consideration *all the interrelated words on that page*, rather than just logging keyword occurrences within a piece of text.

Consequently, the traditional formulaic approach to SEO is no longer a reliable and effective means of promoting a website, simply because Google is now able to ascertain that website's quality far more effectively at the content level, rather than having to rely on preset signals such as **bold** or *italic* text.

Today, effective Search Engine Optimization is much more about long-term experience and knowledge of Google's requirements, rather than set formulas as applied by a piece of SEO software, so if an Optimizer tells you they have special programs to handle your site's optimization needs, chances are they're using out-of-date techniques.

## 6. **You are the Weakest Link, Goodbye!**

*"Our Link-Building Services will point thousands of links to your site."*

Wow, thousands of links sure sounds like a lot, huh? And a few years ago, those same links would no doubt have benefited your website's standing in Google's search-rankings greatly. But things have changed, and what may have been an effective linking tactic a year ago, is now no longer worth a bean. And of course, Google usually gets accused of *moving the promotional goal posts* when it clamps down on things it considers to be breaking its quality guidelines.

Did I say *Google moved the goal posts*? This is of course completely untrue, since Google has not in fact changed its criteria of what constitutes a high-quality website even once since introducing its Webmaster Quality Guidelines in 2001. The only thing which has actually been changing during the intervening time is Google's ability to detect methods which it considers to be unethical and

manipulative of its ranking system, and eliminate these from its search results.

Be that as it may, the simple fact is that, contrary to what many SEOs would have their clients believe, the power of incoming links no longer stems from sheer numbers, as it did in the past, but from each link's *quality* and *relevance*, as *perceived by Google*.

Indeed, these days one *highly relevant* inbound link from a *quality* website will carry far more promotional weight than a hundred semi-relevant links from inconsequential sources.

So, any SEO Company which tries to sell you a 'Link-Building Package' for your website based on numbers alone, and without specifying where these links will actually come from, is not really offering you anything of particular promotional value for your online business.

## 7. **What you need are more Pictures of Frogs!**

*"Our 'Frog Picture' add-on will improve your site's success."*

Yes, I know, '*Add more Pictures of Frogs*' seems like quite a strange example to use where promotional website tweaks are concerned, but it's fairly ideal to make the point I'm trying to illustrate, simply because it is such a completely ridiculous thing to suggest. And that's the thing really...

By and large, most people tend to trust in the word of '*experts*' without question. After all, if your automatic lawn irrigation system fails, and your plumber tells you the *Orbital Flange Valve* needs replacing, you take him at his word, simply because all you know about automatic lawn irrigation systems is that water comes out of one end and keeps your grass green, which is why you've had to call an expert to repair the damn thing in the first place.

If, on the other hand, your plumber told you that your grass was obviously the wrong color for your sprinklers, and it was the lawn that actually needed to be replaced, you'd more than likely give him a strange look, thank him for his input and promptly call someone else.

The same does not seem to hold true for SEO advice. In fact, an alarming number of webmasters and online entrepreneurs seem to be willing to act on the advice of *SEO Experts*, no matter how strange their promotional methods happen to sound.

This, in turn, has led certain elements within the Search Engine Optimization industries to develop and sell services, programs, and '*marketing techniques*' which are of no actual value whatsoever, but are simply designed to put a few extra Dollars in the SEO's pocket. Nice, huh?

From your perspective, as a webmaster or site owner, the best way forward is to ask for a detailed breakdown, not only of the methods proposed by an SEO, but also of their *exact purpose* with regards to the promotional process. That way you'll at least be able to get a second opinion about the things an SEO has in

mind for your website. And, of course, should an Optimizer or sales person attempt to sell you a service or add-on which even sounds the least little bit bizarre, I would advise you to employ a healthy dose of skepticism in your dealings with him or her.

Most ethical SEOs tend to be quite straight-forward about the things they do, so if yours isn't you'd be a whole lot better off adding some *pictures of frogs* to your website than wasting your time listening to their advice.

## 8. **The SEO who came in from The Cold**

*"Hi. I think your website could really benefit from our SEO Services."*

By rights, I should really have put *Cold-Calling* SEOs at the top of this list, but I got a little carried away with pet peeves. However, this is quite a simple one really, when you stop to think about it for a minute.

*Any company which phones prospective clients out of the blue\* and offers SEO services, immediately makes alarm bells go off with me.*

For starters, there's the fact that any SEO Company which has to go fishing for business to all and sundry, is obviously not very well represented online, either in the search engine rankings or other industry specific places, like informational sites and support forums. Neither can they be very busy; otherwise there would be no need for them to pounce on unsuspecting website owners. Then there's the fact that, based on my own professional experiences, Cold-Calling SEO Companies don't tend to be too particular about how many clients they take on within any given market-sector.

To illustrate this point, let me tell you a little story. Back in June 2007 I ran into an ex-colleague of mine who had just started her own SEO Company. After exchanging small-talk for a while, she proudly proclaimed that her husband, who handled sales, had just signed thirty-six clients in the same market sector... Thirty-six websites would now have their search engine optimization handled by her company, and would all be competing for a coveted space on the first search results page for the same keywords.

*That sure is one mean salesman, eh? It really is a shame that there are only ten spots on the first page for any one Google search.*

Ah... yes... I see you've spotted the fundamental flaw with her cunning theory too. Well done. And that's the crux of the matter. What use are SEO services from a company which may well be promoting dozens of your direct competitors alongside you?

The list of reasons why taking Cold-Calling SEOs up on their offers really is a very bad idea goes on, but I believe I've given you more than enough to think about already.

*\*usually after finding them through a sponsored ad which they clicked, thus actually costing the prospective client money before even calling them*

9. **References? We don't need no stinkin' references!**

*"We have lots of satisfied clients, but we can't show you any of them..."*

...errr... because they value their privacy?

Just like the many excuses given for demanding full payment in advance, some SEOs can put forward really creative reasons why they can't show you any examples of their past work.

Call me a cynic, but I personally don't have a lot of faith in a supposed top-notch SEO Company which cannot show me a single case-study or put me in touch with a single satisfied client. And yet, many webmasters and site owners looking for SEO services don't even ask for references or examples of past promotional work in the first place.

As a rule, I would ask for at least three such examples, and then take the time to study the websites in question. After that, I would suggest calling the sites' owners to ask them what they thought of the SEO service they received, whether they are getting extra business as a result, and how closely the final price for the work undertaken resembled the company's initial quote.

An SEO is likely to charge thousands for the overhaul of a website and its continuing promotion. So before you hire them or sign any contracts, would it not be a good idea to make sure you're dealing with a reputable operator?

10. **Signing your Life Away**

*"By signing our contract you agree not to blame us for anything we do."*

Here are a couple of excerpts from genuine contracts I've come across during the course of the past few years:

*"[Company Name Omitted] shall not be responsible for websites or URLs excluded by Google for any reason."*

It could be argued that this is just a standard means of covering your back [*or some other part*], but why be so specific about Google? Why not specify one of the other search providers out there? Could it be that they know what they're doing is against Google's guidelines and will eventually land their client's site in hot water?

*"We measure the success of SEO process by asking if client website more user and search engine friendly. If we have managed to make client site more search engine friendly and more visible in eyes of search engines, then we charge full fee for our consultation despite the search engine results."*

Quite aside from the fact that a desire to achieve more concrete results by this SEO Company would be a nice thing to see, their grammar shows a certain lack of finesse. And if their contract looks like this, what does their work look like?

*“All fees are payable in advance and non-refundable under any circumstances.”*

This one was dropped in towards the end of a contract in extremely small print. It also comes right back to point number three.

Once again, you may be surprised by the number of people who will cheerfully sign an SEO Company’s service contract without ever reading it thoroughly. A few years back I conducted an experiment along these lines with a promotional CD I was distributing. Before the user was able to access this CD’s content, he or she had to click to agree with my terms of service. Clause 27 of my terms clearly specified that by clicking ‘I Agree’, the user was promising to wear his or her underwear outside their clothes for a period of six months. Strangely enough, although I got plenty of feedback from that CD, not a single user picked up on my rogue clause.

Judging by my own, professional experiences, the casual indifference most people show towards the terms and conditions in the many end-user license agreements they encounter on their computer screens more or less daily, has spilled over into the real world and produced a certain mindset when it comes to computer-related documents and contracts.

*After all, it’s so much easier to just click the ‘I Agree’ button, than to actually read the entire user-license document first, isn’t it?*

And while an SEO’s work contract may fall into a similar *mental category* as an end-user license agreement, for you as a client, it is a legally binding document which is potentially capable of nailing you and your business to the nearest wall, if you don’t take the time to read it and check to see where your underwear is supposed to wind up over the next few months.

***READ BEFORE YOU SIGN!***

## 11. **Talking the Good Fight**

*“Trust us. Promoting your website will be easy.”*

In the words of a highly accomplished designer/developer I know:

*“If it were easy, everyone would be doing it.”*

And yet, there seems to be a persistent element within the SEO industry which still talks about website promotion as though it were as easy and straight-forward as it was ten years ago, when achieving high search rankings was almost ridiculously simple compared to today.

Filling prospective clients’ ears with promises of online success and easy profits, they paint a rose-tinted picture of Internet commerce which in no way reflects the reality of the situation, and ends up costing the client large sums of money in return for very little actual gain.

**Think about it for a minute...** In 1999, the Internet consisted of roughly 4.7 million websites. Today [2009] this figure exceeds 200 million. Not only that, but

nowadays, the proportion of commercial websites compared to the total number out there is far higher than it was ten years ago, so the overall competition for those coveted top-ten spots in Google's search results is, to say the least, fierce.

Also, a decade ago search engine ranking algorithms were not yet as sophisticated as they are today, and the idea of being able to properly assess a site or page's quality and relevance to a given search-term at the content-level was a relatively new one. In fact, Google was not yet the search leviathan it is now, but a small, start-up search provider, less than a year old.

But we no longer live in the 90s. A decade has passed, the Internet has grown well beyond most people's wildest expectations, both in size and global influence, and the online commerce arena is a merciless battleground which makes the Circus Maximus in Rome look like the average playpen, a place where the difference between a first-page and a second page ranking for a highly competitive search-term can mean an income drop of thousands of dollars per day.

And here's an SEO who has just told you it'll be a piece of cake for him to get your website favorably ranked, and thus make you a load of money.

*"If it really is that easy, then why is this yahoo not running a string of commercial websites of his own, and growing rich from all those fast profits?"*

The simple fact is that the successful promotion of any commercial website is anything but easy. It requires experience, both about the product or service in question on the part of the website owner, and of Google and the sort of things Google looks for in a high-quality website on the part of the Optimizer. On top of this, it takes a strategic, long-term approach which must take into consideration the site's target audience, and how best to reach them and convince them to buy something. In short, it requires the right expertise.

It **does not** require some overconfident wise-guy, who tells you it's simple.

So then, beware of Search Engine Optimizers who may talk a good fight, and make things sound very easy, but fail to deliver when it actually comes down to the wire.

## 12. Long Tails can make Sad Tales

*"No, seriously, 'Left-Handed Surfboards in Kabul' really is a good keyword."*

It's called a long-tail keyword in the SEO industry: any search-term composed of three or more words, which is more specific to a market sector than shorter, generic terms. A good example of this would be the keyword **Surfing**, as a generic search term which conceivably relates to a number of water sports, and **Second Hand Surfboards**, as an industry-specific Long-Tail Keyword.

Although less commonly used by searchers, long-tail keywords have a reputation for being more productive than their generic cousins, simply because the use of a more specific search-term effectively pre-qualifies the visitor as being interested

in your product or service by the time he or she hits your website. He or she is then far more likely to actually place an order with you than someone who just finds your site on the off-chance through a generic term and browses off elsewhere after a cursory glance.

Therefore, the promotion of commonly used long-tail keywords within a website's specific market sector should form an integral part of its long-term SEO strategy, as these can prove a valuable source of paying customers.

**Ok... Sounds good so far, yes?**

But [*and this is a big BUT*], as well as highly productive long-tailed search terms, there are of course any number of different keyword permutations which no sensible human being ever searches for, either because they are too '*unnatural*' in their phrasing [**Left-Handed Surfboards in Kabul** for instance], or because they are actually too specific for most people to use [*Something like **Second-Hand Surfboards in Organs Road Bulli Australia***].

The point I'm so tediously creeping towards is the simple fact that it's of absolutely no use whatsoever to your business if your website achieves a top Google ranking for a term which nobody ever searches for. What you're really after is a decent Google ranking for your sector's pay-dirt keywords.

And yet it is exactly the sort of useless search-term illustrated above which quite a few SEOs use as a kind of '*Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free Card*'. When questioned about their optimization campaign's overall lack of success, they will cheerfully point out that the client's website actually ranks at number one for a handful of strange and esoteric keyword combinations, as though this actually *meant something*.

This comes right back to what I was talking about in Point 4, the part about figuring out who your target-audience is, and developing a strategy for reaching them, a strategy which will invariably prove futile if you don't even know what search-terms potential customers use when looking for whatever you're selling.

**\*\*\*IMPORTANT\*\*\***

What it ultimately boils down to is the fact that any SEO worth their salt should conduct an in-depth keyword study to determine the most potentially productive search-terms to target during the website's promotion. Based on this, they should then provide their client with a concise list of recommended keywords/phrases to be targeted, along with any available data about the average number of times each term is searched for per month.

What I am talking about here is **BASIC**, first-stage SEO campaign planning. It is an essential step which, if ignored or carried out improperly, is likely to spell *R-U-I-N* for your site's long-term search-ranking performance and profitability. Furthermore, any competent Optimizer will have access to the data I'm talking about here, so if an SEO does not or will not agree to provide you, *his client*, with this vital information, or, worse still, has no idea what you're talking about if you ask about keyword research, you might as well spend your money on changing the color of your lawn to match your sprinklers...

*So there you have it, a dozen ways to tell if an SEO is on the level or not. By looking out for the telltales and remembering what I said, you can stop yourself from being like Sven.*

### **Sven? Who the hell is Sven?**

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Sven's Surf Shack\*. Sven has recently decided that he would be able to service his clientele much better if he had a website, which is easy, since, as we all know, most web designers are cool dudes who spend a lot of time surfing and snow boarding. So, following an arrangement with one of his customers, [svenssurfshack.com](http://svenssurfshack.com) is launched a short time later.

However, after a few months it becomes obvious to poor Sven that his dreams of selling his range of custom-made surfboards online are not about to become a reality anytime soon. His site is simply not performing too well in the race for top search positions, mainly because it is a sad fact that most web designers are not too familiar with effective and ethical Search Engine Optimization methods and his site, although graphically spectacular, is *not seen* by Google as a top-quality resource about surfing.

To compensate for his overall lack of visitors and try to sell some merchandise, Sven starts a small AdWords campaign: paid advertising in Google's sponsored listings. Although this produces a few sales, which Sven is quite happy about, the advertising costs also eat into his profits, which somewhat dampens his spirits.

A few weeks later the phone rings. Thinking it's another potential customer, Sven picks up the receiver, to be confronted with the following:

*"Hi! I'm calling from Shady SEO, one of the world's top search engine optimization companies. I was looking around Google, and I noticed that you use AdWords. That can get pretty expensive, you know. But if your site was ranked in the organic listings, it wouldn't cost you a bean. We can optimize things and get you ranking organically. Interested?"*

Of course poor Sven's interested because he's realized how much of his profits he's spending on advertising, so he signs *Shady SEO's* contract, which states that they will guarantee twenty-five first page rankings for his site, but he has to pay for the entire job up-front.

*Shady SEO* get to work immediately, making arbitrary alterations to Sven's website and never even trying to explain what exactly it is they're doing. At this stage, Sven is still paying for online advertising, pending his website's roaring ranking success. A few months go by, and Sven notices that there seems to be no noticeable improvement in the number of customers he gets through his site. He finds this a little puzzling, since the guy from *Shady SEO* told him that his site's promotion would be easy, and that his profits would increase by many thousands of dollars per month.

*\*Don't bother looking for it online, it's fictitious. Any resemblance to tall, blonde Scandinavians who spend their time building surfboards is purely coincidental.*

When he phones Shady SEO to see what's happening, he's told that they have quite clearly fulfilled their obligations, and that his site is now ranked very highly with Google for a large number of search terms, including such gems as **One-Legged Surfboards** and **Surfboards for the Blind**.

At this stage it occurs to Sven that Shady SEO might not be all they pretended to be, so he asks for a refund, only to be told that Shady's service contract quite clearly states they will not give refunds under any circumstances. Reading the document thoroughly for the first time reveals a clause in the small-print towards the end which tells him that by signing the contract he waives his rights to a refund.

Now he really is *poor Sven*, because this little escapade has just cost him thousands, so he gives up and goes to have a beer to calm his nerves. While he's out, Google discovers that Shady SEO have made a serious fracture of its quality guidelines on his website, and excludes it from the search index altogether...

**Guess you should have watched out for all those telltales Sven.**

It may seem like a grossly exaggerated example, but the simple fact is that the warning signs are usually there to be spotted when you deal with an unethical SEO Company, if only you know how to look for them.

1. Don't believe anyone has a '*Special Relationship*' with Google
2. Don't fall for anyone who is secretive about their SEO methods
3. Don't pay the full cost of the optimization work up front
4. Don't believe anyone who tells you they can get you guaranteed rankings
5. Don't trust companies who claim to use '*Special SEO Software*'
6. Don't hire a company whose link-building schemes are based solely on numbers
7. Don't buy into seemingly bizarre SEO advice
8. Don't use a company which contacts you out of the blue
9. Don't forget to ask for references
10. Don't sign a contract without reading it thoroughly
11. Don't believe any SEO who tells you it'll be easy
12. Don't rely on anyone who does not give you their keyword research data

And that's pretty much it. For even more, solid SEO advice, visit [www.icegiant.eu](http://www.icegiant.eu).

You might also want to have a look at Google's Webmaster Guidelines here: <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35769>

#### **The Legal Blurb:**

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*Thank you for taking the time to read this guide. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.*