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## **Introduction**

Experienced website owners and professional internet marketers are well aware of the value of listing their own or their clients' websites in as many web directories as possible. They know that even listing their website in a directory with a small volume of traffic can be of great benefit given that many prominent search engines will examine the number of relevant inbound links to a website when determining its search engine rank.

Web directory listings are a popular means of traffic generation, whether that traffic comes straight from the directory or as a result of improved search rankings. The value of increased web traffic is readily obvious and so the demand for web directories is strong. Such a demand can be capitalized upon to generate excellent revenue for you, the web directory owner. All it takes is a little understanding of the right way to manage and promote your directory, and the rest goes to the bank.

I have written this Ebook as a reference source to help new and existing web directory owners maximize their success. As a successful operator of multiple web directories myself, the knowledge and principles contained herein are practical and proven, and I am confident they will help you generate good money from your web directory business, just as they have done for me.

- Louis Crisci

## **Know Your Customer**

### ***Two types of directory customers***

A common key to the success of any business is an understanding of its customer base. When it comes to web directories, there are two primary customer types. The first is the person looking to promote a single site. The second is the Internet Marketer who is looking to promote more than one site.

#### ***Single site promoter***

This person may be a small business owner or work in the marketing department of a larger company. Although they may in time bring you repeat business (either directly or via word of mouth), typically your most profitable repeat business clients will not be comprised of this customer type.

#### ***Internet Marketers***

Internet Marketers usually promote their own sites as well as sites owned by their clients. While I certainly suggest treating all of your customers in the best manner possible, repeat business from a loyal customer is the best way to manage a profitable directory business. Since Internet Marketers have the greatest potential to bring you repeat business, it is on this customer type that you should focus most of your energy.

Initially you may find it difficult to determine the origin of a listing submission, but with a little practice it becomes easier and easier to identify submissions made by Internet Marketers or those with good potential to bring repeat business. Repeat customers often have an email address that is either a Gmail account or from a site related to web promotion. In time you may also be able to spot professionally written titles and descriptions.

Improving your ability to spot potential repeat business will not only lead to increased revenue, it will also help you to evaluate your marketing efforts more effectively. Let's say that you spend \$200 on advertising and in return you receive an increase in business of \$100. At first glance this may appear to be a poor Return on Investment (ROI), but if you're aware that the increase came from a repeat customer type then you will know that your ROI may in fact prove positive over the long term.

### ***Fast listing reviews - a key to repeat customers***

One key to getting repeat business from your customers is to provide a fast service for submission review and listing. I would recommend having a policy of review within one business day. Surprise your customer and list their qualified site in less than an hour when possible. You might be surprised to learn how much of an impact fast listings can have on repeat business and remember, word travels fast amongst Internet Marketers!

## Directory Quality

### *Why promotion is as important as quality*

Whilst the quality of your directory is important and it makes good business sense to respect that there is always room for improvement, it is also important not to confuse directory quality with directory profitability. The core reason why directories make money is because they are effectively promoted. Of course, I'm not suggesting that you should sacrifice the quality of your work in order to make money, but rather that you prioritize the key tasks that contribute to the profit potential of your site.

If you can make money with a directory and you are not satisfied with aspects of the quality you are putting forth, then work both on promotion and quality improvement. If you own a high quality site that is struggling to earn revenue, the real problem will probably be related to your promotion efforts. There are many directories of equal or better quality than the sites I own that make little or nothing as a result of poor promotion.

### *Editorial policy and enforcement*

Although increased revenue is more to do with active promotion of a directory than with quality, a directory devoid of quality will rarely succeed over the longer term. Aim to ensure that any websites you include in your list are of a quality sufficient to provide real value to the users of your directory.

You will need to establish a process or set of submission guidelines that allow you to easily and quickly determine which websites you will allow in your directory whilst screening those that you won't. The guiding principle here is this: *be willing to refuse listings that compromise the perceived quality of your directory*. Always remember that a directory perceived as nothing more than a link list has a reduced likelihood of receiving paid listings.

Save yourself a lot of time and effort by publishing a list of your submission guidelines. Prior to submitting a listing for review your potential customers should be clearly informed, in detail, of your acceptance and rejection criteria.

### ***Submission Guidelines - Acceptance Criteria***

The acceptance criteria that you apply to your directory will vary according to the nature of your directory. For example, if your directory targets a niche such as Golf, obviously you would specify that only websites related to Golf will be accepted. There are, however, a number of general guidelines worth considering irrespective of the specific nature of your directory, and these relate primarily to those site elements that commonly deliver the perception of quality.

Look for sites:

- with an original URL (i.e. a web address, not an IP)
- that are fully operational (not under construction)

- with original content
- that are written in English
- with informative content devoid of keyword spam articles
- that are not primarily filled with advertising
- that are clean and professional in design

### ***Submission Guidelines - Rejection Criteria***

Whilst your rejection criteria will vary according to the nature of your website (in the same way that your acceptance criteria will vary), there are many more reasons why you should consider rejecting a site submission.

Unless your directory relates specifically to one or more of the following items, your submission guidelines should stipulate that you will not accept sites:

- containing or linking to adult materials such as sexual imagery, adult videos, sex-oriented products and so forth
- containing or linking to illegal materials including pirated software, child pornography, drugs, fraud and so forth
- that promote hatred and violence
- with obtrusive popup windows
- that redirect the visitor to a different site
- that are personal home pages and diary blogs
- designed purely for promoting affiliate programs or for obtaining commissions via spam advertising

## ***Directory categorization, navigation and organization***

In order for a directory to be useful, it must be well organized and easy to navigate. A listing that cannot be readily found offers no value to either the site owner or to users of the directory. Ease of navigation is achieved by constructing a tree of categories and subcategories that makes it a simple and intuitive process for a user to find what they are looking for.

### ***Top level categories***

You should begin by considering the top level categories into which your directory will be organized. These main categories will essentially serve as starting points for your visitor. You don't want to make your top level categories excessively specific or restrictive as their purpose is to act as the doorway through which you will guide the user to their specific goal. A user will search your top level categories with a view to locating something specific in their mind. It should be a simple split second decision for a visitor to identify which main category they wish to enter first.

For example, if a user is looking to find a cleaning service for their home, the top level category 'Home & Garden' would immediately strike them as a relevant area where a home cleaning service might be listed. Once they navigate to the 'Home & Garden' category, they would then easily find the 'Cleaning Services' subcategory.

It is also important to keep your main categories to broad divisions of your niche, so you can limit the number that need to appear on your start page. Too many top level categories will become confusing to your visitors.

### ***Subcategories***

You will need to decide how many levels deep you will allow your subcategory organization to go. You have two primary factors to consider when making this decision.

First, you must consider how many times a user is willing to click before growing frustrated and abandoning their search. You need your listings to be categorized into relevant groups, but not so far down into the levels of your site structure that nobody ever finds them.

Secondly, you must consider how the search engine spiders work their way through your site, and if they will be able to crawl through to your deeper subcategories. Again, the best organization in the world is wasted if your listings can never be found by the search engines. The rule of thumb is to have as few levels as possible whilst maintaining a logical navigation path. Ideally, the maximum number of levels you would want to have is your main level plus two levels of subcategories, three in total.

### ***Maximum listings per page***

It is important to limit the number of listings/links you have per page. Excessive links on a single page may make your directory appear to the

search engines as a link farm, as well as being difficult to browse through for a user. The number of listings per page will depend partially on how your listings are presented and with how much information you intend to offer, but I would recommend a maximum of fifty listings/links per page.

### ***Search engine friendly URLs***

It is beneficial to ensure that the URL's of your categories contain keywords that will make sense to a search engine crawler. Relevant keywords in your URL's will help boost the ranking of your individual pages in search engine returns relevant to those keywords.

### ***Site appearance***

It is highly important to make sure that your visitors can find their way around your site easily. In addition to a well thought out category structure you should aim to maintain a clean and uncluttered site layout. Use white or light colored background colors and avoid bright garish colors that are hard on the eyes. Choose no more than three colors to use as the 'palette' for your site. At the same time, you also want your directory to appear as professional as possible, so do try to achieve an attractive yet minimalist design style. With the presentation style of a directory, less is more.

Ensure your top level categories are clearly differentiated from your subcategories by using different font sizes, colors and so on. This will help your visitors to quickly scan the available options for a point to begin

browsing. Consider placing small icons/images next to your category titles to help the user isolate what they are looking for.

If you want to include advertising on your pages, do so sparingly, if at all. Excessive advertising placement will damage your credibility as an impartial referrer to quality websites. If you elect to place advertising on your page, ensure it in no way impedes the browsing experience of your visitors, and that it does not distract too much attention from any paid listings you may have.

### ***Directory Popularity***

When evaluating the benefits of listing their website in your directory, some people will want to know how popular your site is. Two of the most widely referred to measurements of a site's popularity are 'Google Pagerank' and 'Alexa Rank'.

### ***Google PageRank***

When measuring the overall importance of a website, Google allocates a number between 0 and 10. This number is what is referred to as 'Google Pagerank'. The higher your Pagerank, or PR, the more important your site is deemed to be. Also, the higher your Pagerank the more chance you have of appearing in Google search results. Google determines the pagerank of your site by examining how many other sites link to you and, in turn, how important those linking sites are. Customers may be more inclined to pay

for listing in your directory if it has a high Pagerank, as on top of the extra traffic this can bring, the importance of your links to their site may help contribute to their own Pagerank.

You must be very careful with the nurturing of your Pagerank however, as if Google decides your linking practices are skewing their calculation of rankings, it is possible they will penalize you and set your Pagerank back to zero. Keep in mind that Google and other search engines already have one eye on directories and will penalize them at the "drop of a hat". If you have a good PageRank, let it speak for its self. Don't tempt Google to take your PR away by openly selling it. You own your directory but Google has the right to list your site and give or take PageRank.

When it comes to advertising your Pagerank, here is my best suggestion: don't. If PageRank is important to your prospects, they will have a Google toolbar and will see it. Ever see a directory promoted as a "PR5" only to find that it has lost some or all of its PageRank? Don't let that be your site.

### ***Alexa Rank***

Alexa Ranking is a measurement of the amount of traffic your site gets, compared to all the other sites that Alexa has data on. The lower your Alexa rank, the more traffic you have. For example, prominent websites like Google, Facebook or Yahoo are usually ranked between 1 and 5.

Alexa gathers the data they use for ranking in two ways. The first is from internet users who have the Alexa toolbar installed into their browser. The second is through widgets placed onto websites by site owners. If such a widget is in place on a site, traffic data is gathered whether visitors use the Alexa toolbar or not. For this reason, you may wish to consider installing the Alexa toolbar and using it yourself, as well as encouraging visitors to install the toolbar as well, and/or placing an Alexa widget on your site.

You can also ask people you trust, such as family, friends or colleagues, to write reviews of your site on Alexa. Reviews of your website verify to Alex that your site receives active visitors, confirmation of which may lead Alexa to update your stats more frequently and improve your rank.

## **Directory Promotion**

### ***Cross promote using email templates***

It is not uncommon for directory owners to use their directory email templates to suggest a listing in another directory that they own. Few take full advantage of all of the opportunities that templates offer. Make sure that you are sending a contact email not only when a listing is confirmed, but also as soon as a submission is made and when a site is rejected. If you promote any web site promotion service in addition to your directories, take full advantage of this form of contact with your target audience.

Remember to use your email templates effectively and brand your site. Prospects may not pay for a listing the first couple of times they come across it. If it stands out from the crowd, or if they find themselves running into your site regularly, they may eventually pay for a listing. Brand awareness will help them recognize your site when they come across it again, and will help them to remember it when they don't.

### ***Promote Offers Related to User Submissions***

If you own a web directory, chances are you are marketing other online products or services. Monitor the flow of submissions and send a pre-written sales pitch when submission is related to your offer. Thank them for the submission then make your related offer.

### ***Collaborating with other directory owners***

A great suggestion I can offer is to consider sharing traffic with other directories. Contact other directory owners and offer to pay for, or swap, listing suggestions. Just because you are in direct competition with other directory owners does not mean that you should not collaborate with them.

As an example, I called a competitor and proposed that on both my payment confirmation page and confirmation email I would suggest the user also consider listing in his directory, and in return he would do the same for my directory. I explained that I would not get the referral from his

site until *after* his customer had already paid. The result of our collaboration was we each saw an increase in paid directory business.

If you are interested in having your directory suggested in other directory email templates, visit <http://www.adswise.com/promotion.html>.

### ***Owning More Than One Directory***

Putting all of your eggs in one basket, and focusing on making one directory the best it can be, is an effective strategy. Nonetheless, many directory owners prefer to own multiple sites. Multiple directories can also be effective because they offer you the opportunity to refer your customers which, in turn, leads to additional sales.

If you choose to operate multiple directories I highly suggest that you aim for each directory to be unique rather than a duplicate of your other directories. Implement new category structures, use a different layout, and even adopt a different pricing model. Price each directory fairly and in line with directories with similar qualities in the market place.

### ***Avoid inter-linking your web directories***

While inter-linking between your various web directories is an effective strategy for referring your customers to your other web properties, I would caution against it. By appearing to the search engines as one big network of sites, you greatly increase the chance that the whole lot will get banned

or penalized. If your goal is to increase backlinks to your sites, I would suggest looking for inbound links that originate outside your circle of sites.

Here is the strategy I use: My primary directory links out to each of my other directories. The other directories do not link back, or link to each other. You can direct the flow of visitors in many ways using links. Flowchart your links and be sure that no visitor can follow any circular path between sites and end up back where they started.

### ***Promote paid listings with a free directory***

Owning one free directory is an effective way to promote your paid directories. Free directories that are well promoted often receive more than 100 submissions per day. Each submission will be followed by a confirmation email that could suggest your paid directories.

### ***Email Special Offers***

Maintain a list of paying customers and send special offers on occasion. This not only promotes your offers but it also helps remind past customers of your directory. If you provided a fast review and listing process, they may remember that fact and be inclined to take advantage of your special offer. Customers may not want to be contacted too often so limit email list contact to once every two to three months.

## **Subscription Payment Options**

There are more potential revenue options for directory owners than just review fees alone. Offer a 'Featured Site' listing upgrade on a subscription basis so that you can begin to earn monthly or annually recurring fees. When you begin to see the subject line 'Subscription Payment Received' pop up in your email inbox you'll find that these are sweet words indeed.

## **Converting a site to a directory the right way**

It has become quite popular to take a site unrelated to web site promotion and convert it to a directory. This is done in order to capitalize on the original sites PageRank. Be aware that sites that do this are destined to lose PageRank, backlinks, and traffic. I do not suggest doing this or even submitting listings to such directories.

If you want to monetize a site by converting it to a directory, I suggest you find a way to keep the original text content and page URL's. If the content of the original site is anything other than web site promotion, I strongly encourage that you make it a niche directory. Niche directories are often shunned by directory owners due to the limited potential customer base. Yet despite this, niche directories can be some of the best quality places for related submissions and can benefit from visitors and rankings of the original site.

When converting a site into a niche directory, be sure to keep original text content and inside pages below the directory pages. Keep all of the original navigation links. If your preference is to remove the original navigation from featuring prominently on the site, move it to the footer instead. You can see an example of this in action on my website <http://www.alifeoutofdebt.com>. As of the time of this writing, I have maintained PR and actually increased traffic at the site since the conversion. *How odd would it look if a site with this URL was turned into a general directory?*

## **Why You Should Brand Your Directory**

Earlier I talked about the importance of using email templates to promote brand awareness. The awareness I was referring to was, of course, the brand of your directory. In the online world, brand awareness is often associated with an advertising salesman's reason why you should buy their ads even though you will have a negative ROI. Branding is not a sexy subject but it forms an important part of your long term directory marketing efforts. With thousands, if not tens of thousands of web directories out there, name and brand recognition can help you stand out, win customers, and most importantly, keep them.

Know that effective branding of your directory doesn't end with the creation of a highly recognizable logo. Find something unique about your directory and proclaim that fact in every advertisement, listing, and contact with the public that you can. If there is nothing unique about your

directory, add something unique and useful to it. Suggestions for unique content could be SEO tools, articles with unique information about web site promotion, or online coupons that can be redeemed for service at certain SEO firms. I have used branding to make <http://www.CannyLink.com> a PR3 directory that earns about \$2K/month. CannyLink is the "Hand-coded directory online since 1997".

## **Additional Suggestions**

### ***Advertise your directory on sites visited by web site promoters.***

This is your target audience. Many such sites offer 125x125 banner ads. Have a banner ad for your site ready. Animated GIF creation is available at <http://www.designmagix.com/bannerprices.php>.

### ***Solicitation and Announcements***

Use the "Solicitations & Announcements" section of the DigitalPoint forum when appropriate.

### ***Avoid using expired domains***

Do not start a directory using an expired domain that is not related to Web site promotion. A general directory with an address like HairTrimmers.com will scare off customers and make your business look foolish. If you do not follow this suggestion, please do not announce your directory on DigitalPoint.

### *Keep your pricing plans simple*

Keep pricing plans simple. <http://www.DirMania.org> has maintained a static \$10 review charge since I've owned the site. It also only offers one option. The amount of the charge is easy to remember and regular customers appreciate that the price does not increase even if PageRank has. If you offer additional options like a "Featured Site", keep it to just that one upgrade and a regular review price. Offering more than two choices creates confusion.

## **LEGAL DISCLAIMER**

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