



CONFLUENCE
DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY+EXECUTION

Black SEO Hat vs. White SEO Hat

AN EXECUTIVE BRIEF

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Executive Summary

You can determine whether the search engine optimization vendor company that you are considering hiring is using white hat or black hat techniques by the answers they give to five questions.

Introduction

You may be surprised to learn that search engine optimization (SEO), the process of increasing traffic and conversions for a website through improved organic search results, wears hats. Like the old 'B' cowboy movies of your great-grandfather's era, the techniques and those who apply them are called either white hat, if a good guy, or black hat, if a bad guy. If you are hiring a company to optimize your site, you need to be able to identify the approaches, methods, and expectations of these two styles of SEO.

White hat. The good guys of SEO abide by the Google Webmaster Guidelines in both fact and spirit. They focus on creating a site that will bring value to your potential customers naturally through quality, authoritative content and keyword research. They deal with high-value web properties and take care not to risk the search engine rankings. Value in the site is developed slowly through:

- A/B testing
- Web analytics observations
- Content optimization and creation

Black hat. The bad guys of SEO disregard the Google Webmaster Guidelines. They use techniques that artificially increase organic search results rankings in a short amount of time for the target keywords. These techniques involve deceptive practices that, once discovered, may incur a penalty or even get the site removed from the search engine index. The website properties that they work with, therefore, are generally low-value, disposable sites. Their focus is on making as much money as possible before they get caught. Their techniques may include deceptive tactics such as:

- Creating "doorway" pages that show a different web page to search engines and to readers
- Purchasing links from low-quality, unrelated sites
- Hiding text or links by coloring them the same as the background color

It's small wonder that black hat SEO services have a market. Getting listed on the first page of search results has a huge impact on online sales of a company's products and services. This was highlighted by a February 2010 [report from iCrossing](#) that shows that 95.8% of traffic to websites comes from Google's first page of search results for non-branded searches. But getting on the first page is not enough. [AOL leaked search data](#) in 2006 shows that 42% of the page one traffic goes to the number one position, 12% goes to the number 2 position, 8% goes to the number 3 position, and so on decreasing down the page. This may make a short term risky approach appealing to some companies. However, by applying white hat techniques, your website will be assured of earning and keeping that position legitimately for the long term even though it may take longer.



Google Guidelines

Google has published a page of recommendations that it calls its [Webmaster Guidelines](#). This web page provides recommendations for your website design and content creation, technical advice, and quality guidelines. The Quality section of the guidelines is focused primarily on what techniques to avoid, making this a list of black hat offenses. But as technologies evolve and search algorithms change, black hat SEO gets more and more clever.

When Google Guidelines are Not Followed

In February 2006, Google removed the [BMW Germany](#) website from its index for 30 days for its use of deceptive practices. In the recent case of [JCPenney](#), Google penalized the company's black hat tactics by dropping their rankings from as high as the #1 position to as low as #78. Hundreds of small, no-name websites a year are undoubtedly penalized for black hat tactics that we would never hear about except in some distant forum. With over 1 trillion web pages in its index, Google cannot track them all. Appeals for re-inclusion can sometimes take years. Hiring black hat SEOs is a risky business for a website. So how do you know whether the SEO vendor company that you're considering is white hat or black hat?

5 Questions to Ask Prospective SEO Vendors

Unless you get a reference directly from a knowledgeable and trusted friend or associate, you may not know what to look for when you decide to hire an SEO company. Fortunately, the majority of SEO companies are honest professionals who take pride in their white hat tactics. But, be wary of SEO companies that:

1. **Promise you a #1 ranking.** If your prospective SEO company sounds too good to be true, it probably is. With the constant juggling for position on the search engine results pages and changes in algorithms, such guarantees of a #1 position in organic search rankings cannot be realistic.
2. **Claim they have a special relationship with Google.** Google does not maintain special relationships with any SEO companies, no matter how much they spend in their Adwords campaigns.
3. **Won't explain in detail how they intend to accomplish your goals.** If they won't explain their process, there is probably a good reason why.
4. **Has complaints filed against it.** Research this company like you'd research any other vendor or consultant. Look in the [Better Business Bureau](#) to see if there are any complaints filed against them.
5. **Are focused entirely on improving rankings in the search results and not on the customer.** Search engines don't buy your product or services. People do. The end goal of optimization is more qualified traffic and more conversions, not a higher ranking – although that often happens, too.



Corrective Actions

If Google does penalize your site for something that you may or may not know about, in most cases, you can correct the mistake and petition for re-inclusion. In other cases, you may need to scrap your website and start over with a new domain name and website. In either case, you've lost time, reputation, and online sales. And all you've gained is more grey hairs.

Conclusion

Finding a white hat SEO company that you can trust with your reputation and online sales vehicle is worth a little investigation. A white hat company will offer you no guarantees of a #1 position, will discuss their methods with you, has a great reputation, and will commit to partner with you to create a more discoverable website and a more successful business in the long run.

About the Author

Margery Spears is a practicing Search Engine Optimization expert at [Confluence Digital, LLC](#). Margery has been doing organic search engine optimization full-time since 2007. Born in Pennsylvania, she has lived in many parts of the US before settling down in Seattle. She is the proud friend of two cats and a dog, and can be found on weekends on one of the many bike paths in Seattle under many layers of rain gear. Follow her on Twitter [@MargeryS](#).

About Confluence Digital

Confluence Digital, LLC is a Seattle-based digital marketing consultancy providing search engine optimization (SEO), paid search (PPC), web analytics and other search engine marketing, online advertising and strategy solutions to B2B and B2C clients.

