Regulation in the SEO industry – Impossible or essential?

We all get them, the offers of free SEO audits, of thousands of backlinks from "DA 40 and above" sites for just $10 and the "helpful" list of spurious SEO issues with your website.

Checking your junk folder every morning reveals another round of emails offering the SEO-moon-on-a-stick for a low, low price. As an SEO working for a search marketing agency I used to find receiving these emails misplaced but amusing.

Email received listing questionable SEO issues with the Avenue Digital website

I no longer laugh at these emails. These annoyances, although easily ignored through the press of the “delete” key, reveal something more sinister about the SEO industry – really anyone can offer SEO services. What the SEO-literate might discard as part of their daily email purge others will read, digest and panic over. Receiving an email claiming you could be losing hundreds of dollars a day through the poor optimization of your website is enough to make anyone outside of the industry sit-up and take notice. Small businesses appear to be particularly vulnerable, and it’s not just emails that they are subjected to. During my time working as an in-house

marketer, I became aware of just how often businesses are pestered over the phone by people claiming to work for Google, who, in reality, wanted to sell links or directory listings. I've also seen the regret of local businesses who have taken them up on their offer and then needed to turn to a legitimate SEO to fix their sites after they've accrued manual actions or dropped off the SERPs for their core, revenue-driving terms.

The problem, as I see it, is that "legitimate SEO" is a subjective term. Within our industry, there are no definitive criteria someone must meet before they can call themselves an SEO. Whereas in other professions there are minimum qualifications before one can practice, with search engine optimization the barrier to entry is a laptop and enough knowledge of the lingo to convince a layman of your expertise. How, then, are prospective clients supposed to determine if the practitioner they are looking to work with, or hire, actually has the ability to do a good job?

My agency, Avenue Digital, has been trying to combat this issue with education. Our guide on how to find the best SEO agency for your business is the culmination of years of talking to clients about their previous disappointments with agencies and our own experiences of taking over the websites of clients who have suffered at the hands of mavericks. Unfortunately, this is just one step in the right direction. Does there need to be more done to protect vulnerable businesses from the expensive mistake of hiring a poor performing SEO or agency? Does our industry need to be regulated?

This is something I've been mulling over for a while, so I threw the question out to SEO Twitter, and was surprised and impressed by the volume of responses.

It appears that many SEOs in the industry are in favor of doing something to bring a quality standard to our work. There were many suggestions; qualifications, ongoing professional

development, and governing bodies.

The issue

Unlike medicine which has a set of accepted premises and procedures that each aspiring doctor must train in and be tested on, SEO is highly disputed and one person's "best practice" is another's route to failure. In response to my question about regulation Dawn Anderson, MD of Move It Marketing raised a very good point that, "the industry is based largely on educated opinion. We cannot even agree on subdomains versus subfolders." How then are we to regulate an industry that can't even agree with what "right" is?

It's true that as SEOs our methods often differ, but is there a way we can ensure that all people offering it as a service are upholding a minimum standard of quality?

Governing body

An obvious way of regulating the industry would be through the formation of a body that oversees the conduct of registered members. Through membership the SEO would agree to be subject to the governance of the body, adhering to its rules. Members could be recorded on a list that would be available to companies to access in order to check if the agency or contractor they are considering is a member.

This would have its own limitations, however. As previously discussed, agreeing on rules under which the SEOs would operate would be tough. It would be simple to agree on client treatment and standards of reporting for instance, but as there's no universally agreed upon method of conducting search engine optimization. It would be hard to police the methods and results of these registered practitioners.

External auditing

For a governing body to be successful at monitoring the work of its members there would need to be a robust auditing process. Stephen Kenwright, SEO speaker and trainer suggested, “The most obvious way for a regulator to work in this industry is to turn Google’s webmaster guidelines into a checklist and audit an agency’s accounts like Ofsted in schools.”

Twitter message from Stephen Kenwright suggesting regulation through a Google-inspired checklist

This would ensure that members are adhering to the guidelines

that Google sets out for inclusion in its search engine and could help protect clients from suffering manual actions as a result of poor SEO practice.

External auditing checklists may need to be extended past Google's guidelines. In order to ensure SEOs' optimizing for other search engines are still monitored but not hampered in their efforts, the list would need to be more generic. There is also the question of how "grey hat" SEO would be treated under this system.

There might also be client privacy issues and the associated paperwork could be too time-consuming for sole-practitioners to bare. Fees would likely need to be charged which could be cost prohibitive for newer agencies or contractors.

Code of practice

Perhaps the answer isn't in a series of rigid rules, but a code of practice that the practitioner signs up to? As SEO Consultant Ric Rodriguez suggested, "regulating the industry is going to be really difficult. To start with, we'd need to establish a baseline code of practice, which given the subjectivity of the channel, is difficult in its own right". This is a fair point, how does a code of practice get universally accepted in an industry that does not have an agreed upon standard of "good practice"? As Ric suggests, "given SEO is unpredictable, it's hard to regulate mis-selling around results because no one can predict them", so perhaps the code should center around tempering the promises made to prospective clients, to prevent unrealistic expectations following impossible claims.

Education

Suggestions have been made that the onus shouldn't be on the SEO industry to regulate itself but on educating clients to

make more informed decisions. Rodriguez proposed, “what I think could work is an established body, that puts out information on “good advice”, offers a support function, that’s impartial […] it’s not regulation, but it may help filter out bad selling practices”

Through the formation of a trusted body that provides support and advice, businesses with little understanding of SEO good practice might feel more confident in what to look for in SEO support. They would have access to impartial experts who could provide advice on whether an agency seems trustworthy.

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Another argument is that the risk is so great that SEO consultants should make a point of formalizing their commitment to their clients’ successes in their contracts. This would give clients legal recourse if they felt their agency had not met their agreement, however they would only be as enforceable as local laws allowed and it would be natural for agencies or individuals engaging in shady practices to opt-out of including these clauses or make them so loose they wouldn’t really protect the client from much.

Certification

If the industry and self-regulation are too hard to achieve then perhaps the answer lies in increasing the knowledge and expertise of SEOs and recognizing this through qualifications. Many tool providers and agencies offer SEO training programs of varying subject matter and complexity, often accompanied by

a certificate. These go some way to reassuring clients that their prospective SEO partner knows a thing or two about the industry but they don ‘t necessarily guarantee that the knowledge gained through the course could be put into action effectively on their or others’ campaigns.

The other issue with training courses and certification is the qualifications are only good at certifying the knowledge gained at that moment in time. With the way digital marketing and SEO progress, it would be hard to prevent a certification from becoming outdated quickly.

Continuing professional development

Perhaps then, if the certification process isn’t sufficient due to the ever-changing nature of SEO, we need to look at continuing professional development. Institutes like the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) in the UK marries both the certification and ongoing development process well. Members of the Institute become “chartered” after displaying sufficient knowledge of marketing either through the CIM qualifications or work experience. Once they are chartered they need to undergo a certain number of hours to continue professional development each year in order to remain chartered. A similar system for the SEO industry would ensure that practitioners are kept current on developments through attendance at conferences, training courses, and meetups.

Conclusion

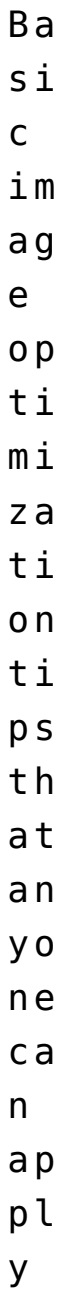
It’s important to ensure that clients and in-house teams are confident that the SEO they get support from knows what they are doing. How this is achieved is a more complex issue. As with SEO itself, there isn’t a cut and dry solution. One thing is clear however, for the quality of SEO provision to improve education is key – both for practitioners and the businesses who hire them.

Helen Pollitt is the Head of SEO Avenue Digital. She can be found on Twitter .
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