

With some serious SEO work, you can build Web traffic that produces bookings, not just browsers.

More than luck

With an estimated four out of five consumers doing online research before making a purchase, investing time in optimizing your website may be one of the best marketing moves to get new customers. For our studio, it's allowed us an opportunity to follow our dreams. It's hard work, not luck, that makes a website one of a photographer's best marketing tools.

For a startup studio on a tight budget, overspending on advertising could mean disaster. Every dollar spent on advertising leaves one dollar less to spend on equipment and studio improvements. We discovered that we could save money on advertising and still effectively spread the word by investing time in Internet search engine optimization (SEO).

My wife, Larissa, has been passionate about photography since high school, and started working at a studio in college. I majored in computer science and worked as a programmer for a communications company. It wasn't long before Larissa was shooting weddings on her own, and I went along to do candids. She drew up plans for a website

to promote her business, and I launched larissaphotography.com.

Getting just a couple of customers a week, Larissa dropped a heavy hint; people couldn't find the website when they searched for the studio name on Google. Getting Google to find the studio name was a lot easier than I thought it would be, but that was only the beginning. I wanted our site to come up whenever someone looked for photographers in our area. After hundreds of hours of research and experimentation, I've got us coming up in the No. 1 slot in our city.

According to Google Analytics, our website now gets some 150 visitors per day. We were booking so many appointments that I quit my job to help out full time in the studio.

The basics of SEO are pretty simple. First, let the major search engines know your site's out there. It takes just a few minutes to submit the address to Google (google.com/addurl), Yahoo (siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/submit), and Bing (bing.com/docs/submit.aspx). It's also wise to register your site in the Open



The listings by the map are the local search results for "Belleville IL photographer." Below that are the organic search results. Be sure your studio is listed with search engines' local service.

Directory Project (dmoz.org) because being listed there earns your site more legitimacy with the search engines. All of these registrations are free.

Now choose keywords (search terms) that customers are likely to search by. Resist getting into a bigger-is-better mindset. For example, our site comes up on the first page of a search on "photographers in IL," but does that get us anywhere? The majority of searchers in all of Illinois are outside my target, so people who find our site from that phrase are unlikely to call. On the other hand, we have five to 10 potential customers who find our site each day by searching "Belleville IL photographer," and we have a much higher success rate for booking sessions with these searchers. Using your keyword phrase in the

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decidio.com—I get a visitor every other day from this site. I get better placement on the site because I link back to their website.

insiderpages.com—I get a visitor every other day from this site, too. Reviews from this site get pulled in to local search results.

highschoolseniorphotographers.com/—This site gets the same amount of traffic as decidio, but brings high school seniors instead of brides. I link back to their site for better placement.

wedj.com—I don't get a lot of traffic from this site, but linking to their site gets quite a few links back to our site.

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page title, image alt tag, page text and link text, will help your site show up higher among the search results for that phrase.

Listing your studio in a search engine’s local service is one of the quickest ways to start showing up in search results. Showing up in regular “organic” listings could take six months or more, but if the field of competition isn’t too crowded, there’s a good chance of having your site come up in local searches within 24 hours.

Businesses can be added for free to local listings for Google (google.com/local/add),

Yahoo (listings.local.yahoo.com/csubmit/index.php), and Bing (ssl.bing.com/listings/ListingCenter.aspx). It’s best to enter as many business categories as possible, even if it means using custom categories like wedding photography or commercial photography. The key is to guess what a user might enter as a search query.

Blogging plays a crucial role in a website’s ranking, too. If a blog is part of your main website, every new post creates a page on the site, and search engines will see the site as an authoritative source. Having a blog on

the main site also keeps the site’s contents fresh, which search engines might use as a ranking factor. Blogging can also be used effectively through sites like blogger.com, which is what we use. To promote the main website from the blog, each post should contain a link to the studio’s website. Each new post on the blog is then a popularity “vote” for the main website. To make each vote worth more, register the blog at blogcatalog.com and other quality blog directory sites and aggregators like blogville.us, blogged.com, networkedblogs.com and feedmap.net.

There’s always room for growth in SEO. I’ve hit just the basics as a starting point. For more info on Search Engine Optimization, visit seomoz.org. ■

Larissa Photography is in Belleville, Ill. (larissaphotography.com).