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## Firm puts best Web site first

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No retail company would invest in a new storefront and then strand it in an obscure location. But Jacques Habra, general manager of FirstClickSEO, said plenty of companies essentially do just that with their Web sites.

"If you're going to spend \$30,000 to \$50,000 building a Web site, that's a big investment. If it doesn't show up in searches, you might as well not even build it," Habra said. "It's a lot like choosing the right location in a retail site. If you're not in the top 10 search results for your target market, your chances of being seen are very low."

Habra's company specializes in search engine optimization – short for helping its clients' Web pages rank high in search engine results from companies such as Google, Yahoo! and MSN. Habra's company also partners with another firm to assist client with Web site design.

Scoring high at major search engines can make or break a company's online presence. Google, which handles about 48 percent of all Web searches in the United States, registers 91 million searches per day, according to Search Engine Watch, a search engine marketing trade publication.

"As a point of reference, it's safe to say a 25 percent return on investment can be expected within a couple of months of a good [search engine optimization] campaign, although some clients have experienced up to 400 percent solid, ongoing return on investment," Habra said.

About 42 percent of search users click the top-ranking link after searching, Habra said. The second-ranked link gets about 8 percent of searchers, and only 23 percent of searchers make it to the second page of results. Habra said that most searchers pick different search term if they don't see what they're looking for on the first page of results, making it crucial to land there.

But getting to the top of a search engine such as Google's heap is part science and part art. Companies can pay for top place-



From left are FirstClickSEO company members Jacques Habra, Terry Pfeifer, Christina Mahon and Mark Keller.

ment among advertisements that accompany search results, but a majority of searchers don't click the advertisements. Most tend to click the "organic," or non-paid, search results.

FirstClickSEO concentrates on organic results. Google uses complex algorithms to rank Web sites in search results, algorithms that take into account the volume of content on a Web site and the sites that link to it. While Google publishes general guidelines for Web masters, only the company itself knows the formula's specifics.

"We spend the first couple of meetings educating the customer," Habra said. Clients often believe a search engine optimization company can flip a switch to bring their Web site to the top of search engine results, Habra said. "We have to dispel that myth and tell them that this is a very sophisticated online marketing campaign."

Habra said more than 100 factors can play into turning up high among organic search engine results, but two count the most: the quality and volume of content on the Web site itself, and the number and quality of outside links to the site.

The quality of the sites that link to a client's site plays a key role, Pfeifer said.

"If you get linked by a reputable Web site

like the Wall Street Journal, it's going to carry more weight than some blog site," Pfeifer said.

Web sites that try to scam Google's system with quick fixes such as clusters of repetitive links or doorway sites seen only by the company's Web crawling robots can be removed from the search engine giant's index of sites – a death knell for businesses dependent on Web presence.

Many online-only search engine optimization companies use such "black hat" techniques, Habra said. He said FirstClickSEO spends time face-to-face with clients assuring them the company's techniques are Google-approved. The typical initial approach to an interested client includes a day of informational meetings and presentations concluded with a wine-and-dine on the town.

"It's still a people business," Pfeifer said. "It's still about relationships."

FirstClickSEO works for a fixed monthly fee or a "cost per action" option, meaning that the company only makes money when its client sells merchandise or generates sales leads. "So our incentive is not only to get ranking on the search, but also to make the customer interface such that it generates a transaction," Habra said.