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SEO helps firms shine on the Internet

New Mexico Business Weekly - by [Megan Kamerick](#) NMBW Staff

Bob LePage used to spend \$4,000 a month advertising in the Yellow Pages.

Now he spends about a quarter of that amount with the Albuquerque firm **SonicSEO** to keep his Web site optimized so it ranks high in results from online searches. LePage said his company, **Ex-El Foam**, is seeing far more business these days – about 80 percent of his leads are coming from the Internet.

He attributes much of the increase to search engine optimization, or SEO. Le-Page's company is a polyurethane foam applicator. Business was so good, he had work during the recent holidays, a time when he said much of his staff used to sit in the office "twiddling their thumbs."

Web development firms like SonicSEO are increasingly pitching SEO to small businesses to help their Web sites avoid being lost in a sea of online choices, and weather the recession.

"What's so important for businesses to recognize is, if you think of the way you search, that's how everyone searches. Most don't go beyond the first page of listings," SonicSEO President Arvind Raichur said.

Google ranks searched Web sites based on a combination of a site's relevance to a search topic and by the number of other, well-used Web sites that link to it. SonicSEO's clients include roofers, doctors, salons, pest control companies and landscapers. The average client spends between \$700 and \$900 a month, Raichur said, because added services include a continual refreshing, or re-optimizing, since a business won't necessarily stay at the top of search rankings forever.

Large companies shell out big bucks for SEO. But even small entrepreneurs need to pay attention to it, said Clare Zurawski, Albuquerque regional manager with **WESST**. Nonprofit WESST offers SEO classes at \$30 a pop, and related topics such as social media, as well as consulting services for about \$60 an hour.

"What we're finding is that there is a lot of intimidation," she said. "They really don't know what SEO is and they don't know how to evaluate a decision on whether to hire someone to optimize their new site or do it themselves."

Even with some Web development firms, SEO falls through the cracks, Zurawski said, because it requires a distinct set of skills and a lot of time. Web design is a creative task, while SEO tends to be more about strategic thinking and marketing. WESST tries to give companies two key strategies that will probably never change: using good key words on the site and using links to other Web sites.

The truth about online marketing is that you can throw money at it forever, said Bonny Moss, online team leader for **Xynergy Web Development Inc.** in Santa Fe.

"If you wanted to spend a million a year, you could," she said. "But for most business, especially small businesses, the last thing you want to do is set up a marketing program that won't pay off for them. So we sit down and figure out what aspect of online marketing will work."

Her firm charges \$1350 for a basic Web site optimization package, but clients can spend much more on additional services. Moss said her firm saw a dramatic increase in calls about online marketing a year ago, followed by a drop as the economy worsened. But now the phone is ringing off the hook again.

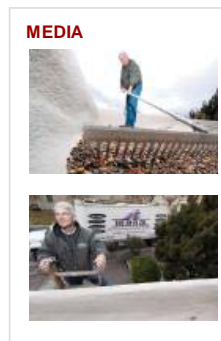
Some niches in Santa Fe are so intensely competitive that spending a lot of money on SEO isn't practical, she added. Any phrase that is tremendously popular will bring up a huge number of hits in a search, but it also means increased competition for a top spot.

"Search engines are always changing the parameters of how they search, because no matter how many times they adjust their parameters, companies figure out ways to manipulate it," said Kurt von Ahnen, owner of **Von Ahnen Design and PR** in Albuquerque.

Building a Web site and not optimizing it is the equivalent of buying 5,000 business cards and putting them in a closet, he added. Von Ahnen might charge budget-conscious clients around \$900 to build a site and do SEO initially, then leave it to the client to maintain. He also will take a commission on clients' sales in lieu of higher set-up fees.

Von Ahnen also makes sure all of his clients get on **Twitter** and **Facebook** and insert their Web sites' URL into posts on those sites, because the more linkbacks they create to the Web site, the higher it posts on search engines.

"That is how Web crawlers now validate sites," he said. "If it shows traffic going in and out of a site, that validates it."



That's why any SEO work should be part of a comprehensive online marketing strategy, SEO experts say.

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