

**SEO (Search Engine Optimization): A Case Study**  
**The Beach Trail Cottages,**  
[www.beachtrailcottages.com](http://www.beachtrailcottages.com)

*1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Q 2003 Internet Marketing Newsletter*  
by Alli Denning



Before undergoing an SEO (Search Engine Optimization) program, The Beach Trail Cottages (BTC) web site had never generated a confirmed lead, much less a reservation, for its owners. One of the owners, a graphic designer by trade, designed and developed the site. While both attractive and informative, it was not delivering the desired results. Their Internet leads came from paid advertising listings placed on other vacation rental sites where their listing sat along side their competitors. That was then.

Now the site generates a steady stream of highly targeted leads for the Florida beach cottage rental properties. The owners estimate that *75% of their reservations* now come from their web site. This case study examines the SEO tactics used on this under-performing site and the subsequent results.

A quick definition of search engine optimization may be helpful as we plunge into the case and its results. This definition comes from the [denning e-solutions online glossary](#) of Internet marketing terms:

**Search Engine Optimization (SEO):** One name given to the process of trying to maximize a site's exposure in the various search engines and directories, targeting specific keywords and phrases. This process is also called web positioning. The process largely involves making changes to the site (page titles, keyword-rich content development, META data) itself to make it more attractive to the search engines.

### ***What We Did***

We began the program in July 2002. The short-term strategy was to implement search engine optimization tactics that focused on improving the site's attractiveness to the major search engines and then re-submit the site for inclusion. It takes approximately three months to begin to see results in the search engines so we decided to hold off on exploring any paid listing campaigns (e.g. Google AdWords, Overture, Yahoo listing) until after that period of time to determine if those supplemental marketing tactics were going to be necessary to reach the owners' goals.

In order to establish a baseline with which to gauge our success, we ran an analysis (using WebPosition analysis software) showing where the site was placing for our selected keyword phrases within the major search engines. Not surprisingly, there were no top 30 results at all in any of the search engines\* before we started.

Once the baseline was established, we got to work. Our program included:

1. Research – Before making changes to the site to target specific keyword phrases, it is critical to know *which* phrases deserve the attention. By researching the way in which people search for products or services like those of the subject site, we are able to maximize our search engine optimization efforts. In the case of The Beach Trail Cottages, it was important to develop three different target areas: 1) those searchers looking for rental properties in the specific geographic area surrounding BTC, 2) those searchers looking for beach rentals generally and not interested solely in one area, and 3) those people searching for pet-friendly vacation rentals (this is a feature of BTC that sets it apart from many other rental options and needed to be used to the fullest). Knowing the client's target audience and how it is that they search for

services/products like theirs ensures that the SEO work we do is most effective.



2. Site Changes – Once armed with specific information about the search behaviors of the client’s potential customers, we set to work on the site itself.
  - a. Text Links and Contact Information – Because search engines use automated spiders (software programs that crawl the web gathering information for their databases), it is important to provide good old-fashioned text hyperlinks to the major sections of the site. Navigation links that are a part of the site design (that is, associated with images) cannot be followed by the search engine spiders. Therefore, it is a good idea to make sure that all important links are also available as text links, even if they are a repeat of those presented elsewhere on the page. For BTC, we simply added links to the site’s sub-pages along the bottom of every page. In addition, we added the address and phone number for the properties on every page. For some search engines, the presence of such contact information provides a measure of legitimacy. The contact data has the added bonus of giving the user easy access to important information and boosts your keywords (in the case of BTC, the address includes both the town and the abbreviation for Florida so those keywords are given an extra boost).
  - b. Page Titles and Page Names – Of the various tags found in the <HEAD> section of the site’s code, the <TITLE> tag is *by far the most important*. The title tag of a given page is what you see across the top left of your browser window.

The page name is the file name of the html file. So, if you want to place well for “pet friendly rentals” as was the case for the owners of BTC, you would want to have the page that describes your pet policy to be named: pet-friendly-rentals.htm. Notice also that on their home page ([www.beachtrailcottages.com](http://www.beachtrailcottages.com)), we created a link to this new page with the link also containing our targeted phrase.

- c. META data – This term refers to the description and keyword information that is included in the <HEAD> tag of the site’s code. While less important today than in the past, having the right, targeted keywords in these tags is still an important component of SEO efforts.
    - d. Expanded, Keyword-Rich Content – After the title tag, this is the most important aspect of site improvement. Search engines love text, and more specifically, they love sites that have lots of text that is directly related to the site’s subject. Keywords found in the text, and particularly in prominent areas of text, will help boost a site’s rankings more than many other tactics. This SEO strategy, that is building keyword-rich content, has the added bonus of providing your users with more of the information that led them to look for a site like yours to begin with. So, by adding more and better content to your site, you increase your traffic AND increase the satisfaction level of those that visit your site.
3. Re-Submission – After making the changes detailed above, we re-submitted the site to the most important of the search engines. That process is then repeated monthly.
4. Tracking Results – Along with the monthly re-submissions, we tracked our progress in two ways. First, we monitored the site’s traffic by analyzing the log files. Second, we ran follow up analyses in WebPosition to monitor our changes in rankings across the major search engines. By tracking our results, we can revise and redirect our efforts as needed depending on our results.

## **Results**

The owners estimate that 75% of their reservations now come from inquiries made from their web site. With some attention to the site itself and careful re-submissions to the search engines, the owners of

The Beach Trail Cottages now have a site that works for them. They had this to say about the search engine booster program:



Thank you for the analysis and reconstruction of our web site. As you had indicated would happen, we have noticed a definite increase of hits to our site directly from search engine activity. We have booked a number of these already. Before you took over the site, we had to rely strictly on piggy-back advertising on other vacation rental sites that were filled wall to wall with competitors advertisements . . . Thanks.

**- Tom and Jan Bowers, Owners of Beach Trail Cottages  
Indian Rocks Beach, Florida**

*Traffic Stats Information*

While the number of reservations is the most important gauge of success, we can examine several other measures as well to quantify the results of our SEO program. As of February of 2003 (six months after the search engine booster program), the site had an average of 100 unique visitors per day (almost 40,000 a year) up from virtually none before we started the program in July of 2002. We know from the site statistics that the traffic being sent to the site from the search engines is very targeted by examining the keyword phrases used by the visitors (many of those specifically targeted in our efforts).

*WebPosition Rankings Results*

We targeted and track 15 keyword phrases on a monthly basis. Those phrases include:

indian rocks beach	gulf coast vacation rentals	pet friendly vacation rentals
indian rocks beach florida	florida gulf coast rentals	pet friendly florida vacation rentals
indian rocks beach rental	florida beach house rentals	pet friendly beach rentals
indian rocks beach vacation rental	florida beach cottage rentals	tampa bay vacation rentals
florida gulf coast vacation rentals	florida vacation rentals	clearwater beach rentals

For those keyword phrases, after six months with the program, the site enjoys the following rankings:

1 <sup>st</sup> place : 8	Top 5: 17	Top 10: 19	Top 20: 45	Top 30: 78
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As the rankings improve, the traffic increases, and the number of inquiries and reservations increase. By doing the research, making minor adjustments to the site itself to better accommodate the search engines, and diligently tracking our success, we were able to turn an under-performing site into a source of steady leads for the site owners.

We would like to thank The Beach Trail Cottages for their willingness to allow us to profile their case in this newsletter. If you are planning a trip to Florida this summer, be sure to check out their web site: [www.beachtrailcottages.com](http://www.beachtrailcottages.com)!

\* search engines used for analysis and tracking success: Altavista, HotBot, AlltheWeb, AOL Web Sites, Google, I Won, LookSmart, MSN, Netscape, Open Directory Project, Overture, and Yahoo!