

The Keyword for Many Search Engines is *Money*

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The last twelve months have seen a significant shift in the way search engines generate revenue and prioritize the inclusion of web sites in their databases. Historically, registering with the major search engines was free for web site owners; an owner could, at no cost, go to the search engine, submit their site, and wait for the engine to visit, catalog and list their web site. While the basic process remains the same, there is a new component in the mix now – money.

“Before October of last year, virtually no major search engine offered paid placement listings. Now, with the new Yahoo program, Excite remains the only major service not to have them. The growth underscores the popularity of paid listings as a new revenue stream for search engines.” THE SEARCH ENGINE REPORT, February 6, 2001 - Number 51 - Part 1 of 2, By Danny Sullivan

Most search engines and directories still offer some free submission option. However, it may not be the most desirable approach any longer. Often, the free submission choice leaves the web site owner with little assurance that the site will be included among the listings in a timely manner. Worse, the free choice may involve accepting a potentially less desirable placement in the directory. For example, Yahoo now requires a \$199.00 fee for businesses that would like to include their site in the *commercial* (as opposed to the *regional*) portion of the Yahoo directory. For a company that operates across regions, or would like to, a regional listing will not provide the exposure and traffic needed.

There is an important difference that should be made clear. There are different types of paid inclusion; the main two types include 1) a paid placement listing and 2) an express submit option. A paid listing or placement generally guarantees that you will be listed on a certain place within the page, featured separately at the top or within the first three search results. An express submit option, on the other hand, is one-time fee that only guarantees that your site will be reviewed and considered for listing within a certain time period, generally seven business days.

In order to better understand your paid search engine options, three of the services, LookSmart, Yahoo, and Goto, are discussed below in more detail. While there are many options available from the various search engines, a discussion of these three engines and their services provides an overview of the types of programs being offered generally.

LookSmart, www.looksmart.com, powers the search directories of leading portals on the Web and more than 370 ISPs, including MSN, Excite, Altavista, iWon, and CNN.com. Through these cooperative agreements, the LookSmart Network reaches 64 million people. That's four out of five US Internet users. What this means for you, the web site owner, is that your chances of placing well on the search engines that are powered by LookSmart are greatly increased by using (that is *paying*) for their service. The only free option they offer is for non-profit organizations. For any commercial venture, you will have to pay to be included. Their paid services start at \$99.00 for the Basic Submit option.

Some of the recent changes at Yahoo, www.yahoo.com, were discussed above. Basically, they have two paid services: 1) Express Submit service and 2) Sponsorships of keywords. The Express Submit service (\$199.00) began as an elective service that ensured that your site would be reviewed within seven days. Express Submit is now required if you want your site included in the commercial section of their directory. The free submission option still exists in the non-commercial sections of the directory. The second and most recent paid option is the Sponsored Sites program. It is a fee-based service that allows commercial sites already listed in the Yahoo! directory to receive enhanced placement in certain commercial categories of the directory. Pricing and availability varies by category with categories priced in the \$25-\$300 per month range.

Finally, Goto.com offers still a different type of option. It allows advertisers to bid on certain keywords on a per click basis. The cost per click can be as little as \$0.05 depending on the popularity and

competitiveness of the keyword. After meeting the monthly minimum, the site owner does not pay unless users click through to his/her site. The Goto.com site offers a very useful tool for you to check the current bid prices on the keywords of your choice. There is a minimum monthly charge of \$20.00, which is applied entirely to click-throughs. This can be an affordable way to drive targeted traffic site to your site; and, unlike other services, you only pay for those people that actually visit your site.

Some critics charge that this shift towards paid inclusion in the search engines is not desirable. They argue that it diminishes the level playing field that small businesses have enjoyed on the Web since its inception. Large corporations with fat marketing budgets can buy their way to the top of the search engines, leaving the little guys to fight for the scraps. However, I look at this trend in a different way. I believe that it helps to eliminate some of the uncertainty that has always been a part of search engine positioning. It provides site owners with affordable means to ensure that their site will be listed when and where they want. It offers a level of control that has been before now unavailable. When chosen and used carefully, these methods can boost a site's targeted traffic and pay for themselves many times over. Compared to other advertising options, both in traditional media and on the Internet, the costs of paid inclusion services are nominal. They offer an efficient outlet for the allocation of marketing dollars, especially given their worldwide exposure. As you develop your site's marketing plan and budget, keep these options in mind as reasonably priced ways to increase the visibility of your Internet property.