

# White Hat vs. Black Hat Search Engine Optimization

Part 1 of 2: An Introduction to White Hat SEO

# Part 1:

## An Introduction To White Hat SEO

The purpose of this paper is to present a more complete conceptual model of what the term 'White Hat' means in relationship to SEO online Marketing. To start, we will address the implied relationship this term possesses and the inherent dynamism of that relationship. The cartoon *Spy vs. Spy* from *Mad Magazine*, the irreverent publication of youthful rebellion, is a great example that illustrates the problems inherent in simple "black and white" definitions. In the cartoon we are introduced to two characters, both are spies bent on the other's destruction, and both are monochromatic, one white one black. They battle each other relentlessly, the black spy consistently outsmarting and killing the white spy because he is willing to go beyond the rules, to exploit the white spy's naiveté. It is in the battle, which has no reason and no end, that we are led to realize there are no 'good guys' and no 'bad guys' just the struggle for dominance, and the one confined by less rules, is bound to win. They require each other to exist and so as much as they are separate they are also one.

In many ways this cartoon is at the heart of both the way we define White Hat and Black Hat SEO Marketing techniques. White Hats are bound by the rules because of ethics and Black Hats are renegades, bound by nothing except for profit. As we will see in our investigation of the both the prevailing definitional norms associated with White Hats and the rationales behind the actual practices, we couldn't be further from "black and white". Because in a world as competitive as Internet marketing there is no room for static definitions and all the advantage needed is found between the lines. But before following this more ambiguous line of reasoning, let's venture down a more established path.

Unlike the White Spy in *Spy vs. Spy*, this article will put forth an argument that suggests modified and creative White Hat methods are superior to strictly Black Hat Methods. We are also going to demonstrate that the most important part of being successful as an Internet Marketer is to stop abiding by a rigid set of definitions about how to make your fortune and embrace a larger sense of creativity.

## Some Foundational Truths Re: White Hat

There are some basic concepts that help to define practitioners of White Hat Marketing Search Engine Optimization (SEO). One of the primary notions is that White Hats are using techniques defined and approved by search engines themselves. This makes their web-design concerns sync-step with the intended user experience, which is what Google's ever-changing algorithm is designed to discern and promote. Transparency is a ubiquitous catch phrase articulating a design goal. The point is to create a site that is apparent to both the user and the search engines, nothing was built 'behind' the scenes to either fool the user or the search engines. This is an important and distinguishing characteristic of White Hats.

The White Hatter is conspicuously concerned with exercising an ethical and moral code that's underlying principle is defined by rankings being a true reflection of the site's usefulness to the user. The more useful your site becomes, with unique high-quality content, proper html tags specifying page topics, keyword rich URLs and reliable links with other 'good' sites are the sure-fire ways to rise in the rankings. These are all topics we will cover more rigorously, and there is certainly depth to these practices, but in essence, they are self-explanatory.

## Techniques That Work Like A Charm

To understand a thing one must delve into the mechanics of how it works and how it is put together. White Hat SEO is very much determined by this particular understanding, measuring its success by how thoroughly it can integrate all the rules of the game into the business development stages of an opening Search Engine salvo. By discussing the techniques a web business has available to it, we can perhaps start to understand the 'more than meets the eye' nature of White Hat SEO development and all that it can accomplish.

### Domain Naming

How businesses name their sites can be a tricky endeavor, and while most of us are busy buying up the clever names we have named our site, a good web site business owner will be more concerned about buying URL names that are related to the actual product they are selling. As opposed to traditional business branding that reminds us of concepts or emotions marketers wish us to associate with their product, the Internet market place is built on a "literal reality". Consumers buy when they find exactly what they are looking for. Keeping a product closely associated with the words that buyers are looking for is the best way to make sure people find you when they find what they are looking for.

Hyphenating is a good way to make sure that you can have both a business name and the product description right in the URL. [www.bill.com](http://www.bill.com) is not as powerful as [www.bill-fish.com](http://www.bill-fish.com). Another way to compliment this idea is to buy multiple URLs with a number of different keyword combinations and then have them all point back to your main site. This way you can keep your brand name as well as optimizing your keywords.

### Content Manipulation

The refrain "Content is King" rings like church bells calling White Hat experts to supplicate at the altar of SEO. The reason for this is because it doesn't actually mean very much by itself, since it is how content is constructed in relationship to the direction of the prevailing winds that search engine algorithms are blowing in. Right now content is defined by a few basic components that add value to its presence on a website.

Since human adjudication of all websites on a search engine is obviously a logistical impossibility, evaluating something like content, which requires a degree of comprehension to gauge its use to the public, needs a defined set of automated points of reference to give it a Quality Score.

These rules govern the Google spiders.

Keyword density is one of the terms that help the spiders decide how compliant content is with the standards that Google and the other search engines are looking for. Density helps to determine how natural the content will read. During the formative years of search engine technologies a classic cheat for website owners would be to stuff some of their pages with tons of keywords. This was obviously not particularly useful for anyone except the people trying to cheat the system, and so simple volume ceased being the criteria for value and density, or the ratio of keywords to total words comprises a reasonable threshold of that will appear natural to the user when reading.

This threshold for visible content is thought to be set around 3-5%, but this can be higher when counting the times that your keywords appear in your site's meta tags, alt tags, descriptions tag and comment tag. Some SEO experts suggest that this number, which can be as high as 20-30% is more useful as spiders aggregate the site's entire content.

## Link Building

According to many SEO analysts, links between sites are as important or more important than any other method in helping the Search Engines determine value and trustworthiness of a site. Links act as a value aggregators, compounding the other sets of value indicators that users provide by visiting sites and staying (Click Through Rates), visiting their forums, bookmarking their pages, as well as the amount of original, updated and valuable content a site has available. Linking to a site has the kind of self regulating quality to it that search engines depend on, and as a result they allow a little of the pixie dust from successful sites to rub off on sites that are able to solicit a link.

As long as HTTP is the only protocol that the internet uses or until some more intelligent interface or Semantic Web, which would enable computers to do more talking and organizing on their own, links are the best way to guide SERPs (Search Engine Rankings Page). This is not to say that Google has not made their analysis of links more sophisticated, reducing the value on volume and focusing on quality, relevant over non-relevant and industry links outweighing generic links.

## Long Term vs. Short Term

Using all of the SEO practices that have been discussed is designed to ensure one thing: the success and longevity of a well run site, defined and designed with the search engine's principles for user experience and ease of ranking. As with any system that is designed to help interpret information and translate it into something that can be quantified and actionable, there is going to be the temptation to circumvent the process and skip to the front of the line. As with any type of cheating there are consequences to this behavior, this is how long term success can be short circuited by short-term gains.

Though White Hat SEO can take time, as the processing of improvements to a site can take time, and as with any level playing field, all the competitors have the same advantages and disadvantages. Focusing on Page Rank Development is like ensuring compound interest. Small amounts of principal that sit, slowly gathering mass, gaining inertia, will eventually perform the miracle of exponential growth. The small inputs all work together to build a positive feedback loop, much like a network economy, becoming more than the sum of its parts. Good content on a stand-alone page is only worth a very small amount, but surround it with all the other tags, and links and that same content becomes worth so much more. Like a single, useless fax machine, a site is not the product of only what comprises it, but what surrounds it. Many fax machines raise the value of each one as a tool, thus the network of information is what SEO attempts to position a website inside of. This is the change that our perspective needs. White Hat SEO is about connections, not exploitation, and in the long run that's where the value lies.

## Identifying Your Competition

Perhaps the most advantageous aspect of deciding to pursue White Hat marketing tactics is that they necessarily force a more thorough analysis of the business landscape. As opposed to a false sense of undifferentiated penetration capabilities, playing by the rules creates an opportunity to evaluate the core modalities of multiple entry points. The job of a good affiliate marketer is to shine a bright light into the corners of the Internet, looking for openings and capitalizing once they are found.

A key method that's important when turning a discriminating eye towards a project is to ask the questions: Is the top natural ranking site in the area of interest maximizing all traditional and non-traditional SEO techniques? To determine this look at how much content is listed on the site, and use Google to search and see if it is unique, as well make sure to keep an eye out for underutilized keywords and their subsequent density. Check for all the other points of SEO that we have discussed earlier.

If you see sufficient room for improvement then the market has potential for exploitation. If the site has been optimized then you will not waste any more time trying to make your square peg fit into a round hole. This is what makes White Hat techniques work so well, because they lead to in depth and proper evaluation of market conditions, giving an informational advantage as opposed a strictly technical advantage.

## Being A White Hat Analyst

The thing about knowledge is that its value lies in its predictive power, in its ability to clarify and focus action in the face to variable and mutating demands. Knowledge allows for reaction and pro-action. While circumventing the system with Black Hat tricks may allow for cue jumping, it doesn't inform you where the queue is or even what your waiting for. White Hat analysts have the skills to interpret the data and understand its cause and effect.

There are a set of rules that define the characteristics of White Hat analysts:

### **Data**

By understanding the limitations to traditional site side data, more complete understanding can be reached. Incorporating tertiary data flows, like qualitative marketplace analysis or natural yearly cycles, helps inform the analyst of the true story that the information is telling. Because of the proliferation of analytic tools, analysts must be ready to incorporate such tools into their analysis. Things such as competitive analysis and brand perception rarely show up in the straight numbers but the savvy White Hatter will be able to introduce their implications into conclusions.

### **Business Results**

Never get bogged down in the infinite whirlpool of accuracy. With a taste for skepticism will come an appetite for the broad strokes of business performance inquiry. Setting benchmarks will allow for other exogenous tools to be finessed for more subtle reading of the data. As opposed to relying completely on the straight data for immutable conclusions such attenuated thinking can be clear in its cause and effect possibilities without ever straying into the certainty that can sink businesses.

### **Cause and effect analysis**

Being willing to take in information from all sides and mediums makes the job of constructing solutions to business problems much more fluid. The White Hat analyst waits and watches and is ready to lend a hand to guide the steering wheel once the course has been set. Outcomes are the only thing that matters, as they trump logic and precipitate action.

## **Conclusion**

Much like the Black Spy in the cartoons, the reason that the Black Hat keeps appearing to win is because he is more creative than the White Hat. He looks at the world of online marketing without constraints and doesn't let the rules of engagement circumvent his desire to achieve their business goals. They are goal oriented and look for the straightest line between here and the money. They realize that there is a cop somewhere on the highway, but they are fairly certain that they can collect enough money along the way to mitigate the effects of any search engine handcuffs being placed around nefarious hands. Sticking with this analogy, the problem is that only the fastest and most sophisticated cars, drivers and radar technology can escape the cops for very long, and even then, a slip up can take all that gleaming machinery away.

White Hats may not win the fast/quick money contest, but they are going to get where they are driving because whatever speed they travel they aren't going to get pulled over. In fact they may even get helped along their journey.

The balance that exists is one of results vs. process. Process focuses on getting the pieces of the puzzle in the right order and assumes that the picture forming will be the same on the box, thus predictable. The result, focuses its energy on making the picture appear to have been solved by putting the pieces together, but would be most likely to scan the photograph, print it on cardboard and cut it into jigsaw pieces.

The way that search engines are set up is to make the process king, because they have decided that the process will marry what are necessarily divergent goals. Since people populate and use search engines, and business people are aware of this apparent fact, their goal is to use the search engines to funnel the people to their business. Obviously search engines have a vested interest in people getting places that they want to go and not to places designed just to sell them. So search engines reward businesses that are best at melding the two goals, and send people there.

Black Hats spend their time convincing sophisticated algorithms that they are the best at melding consumer needs and business needs, when they are actually only good at selling. Doing this is actually quite complicated and comes with a fair amount of risk.

White Hats follow the process and hope that they are given the keys to kingdom. This takes a while, and is filled with other people doing the same thing, but if you get there success awaits.

Instead of being a Black Hat or a White Hat, we encourage you to do the following: Forget being either. Be the smartest hat in the room, and you're likely to win whatever contest you're in. But lest ye forget, its best to know how to pour the foundation before you try to hammer the shingles. The true success of an affiliate marketer is the ability to integrate basic Google friendly techniques, while remaining deft and fluid enough to use the knowledge gained from both types of SEO. Err on the side of White, but boldly manage the risk of a capricious marketplace by pushing forward with Black.