

## U.S. Health Care Web Sites Resist Natural Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Online Sales Leads



*"Search engines continue to be the primary tool people use to navigate the Web."*

*Jason Levin,  
Nielsen//NetRatings*

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## Executive Summary

Natural search engine optimization (SEO) and health care just don't mix too well – and they should.

SEO is already 10 years old, and yet the health care industry still doesn't do much to take advantage of the online marketing opportunity. Our new study, **"U.S. Health Care Web Sites Resist Natural Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Online Sales Leads,"** shows that health care sectors struggle with the basics, from page titles to META data.

Their response to natural SEO is somewhat surprising because the industry is known for innovation, best practices, quality assurance and more. They embrace many aspects of technology for product performance and operational efficiency. Natural SEO may just be overlooked among technological and management options.

Our assessment of 350 health care web sites reached the following conclusions:

- Nearly 72% don't use an effective title on their home pages.
- Nearly 35% don't use a keyword tag on home pages.
- 80% don't use an effective title on primary interior pages, such as the about or product summary pages.
- 78% don't use an effective META tag description on top-level interior pages
- Fortunately, only 14% use a splash introduction page

We were pleased to find that the vast majority of web sites have plenty of visible text (81%) – a good move because search engines like content. Getting the right terms in the page titles and META data before amplifying them in the page text may help a great deal.

It's still a matter of the right technique. We selected 10 web sites that appeared to be doing some natural SEO and studied their ranking performance. Collectively, 74% of their search terms didn't make the Top 30 of positions on Google, MSN and Yahoo!

If more web site owners start spending some time with the core components of natural SEO, they'll begin to see an increase in their rankings and traffic. Ongoing page adjustments and changes – handled by in-house specialists or by a consultant – will determine the level of their success.



## Introduction

Most U.S. health care web sites apparently don't comprehend natural search engine optimization (SEO) or embrace it as a marketing strategy, according to our new study, **"U.S. Health Care Web Sites Resist Natural Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Online Sales Leads."**

Unlike some local businesses with small geographic markets, these health care sites can sell in the United States and throughout the world in many cases. With that kind of reach, they should be well-positioned to take full advantage of SEO to improve sales. And, depending on the product and profit margins, it may not take too many new sales to more than recover the associated costs of SEO.

But they don't do enough. For example, 72% lack effective keywords in their home page title tag – a central driver to any SEO campaign.

For the study, Fathom SEO in July 2005 randomly selected 350 health care sites, identifying them from specialized online guides and directories. We assessed baseline SEO techniques for the industry offering such health care products and services as:

- Doctors
- Hospitals
- Pharmaceuticals
- Medical Equipment
- Chemicals
- Plastic Surgeons
- Orthopaedic Surgeons
- Medical Law
- Assisted Living

We looked at their page titles, META descriptions and META keyword sets as well as whether they use frames or splash pages. We concentrated on the home page, about page, product summary page and an additional interior page, such as a specific product description.

Although SEO has been around more than 10 years, you wouldn't know that by looking at rudimentary aspects of the web sites. From title tags to META descriptions, scores of health care sites don't even have the basics in place.

We found exceptions. Some health care industry sites made an effort to insert strategic keywords in their pages titles and META sets.

Unfortunately, they are not well written in many cases. For example, we produced ranking reports for 10 SITES that had at least nominal SEO techniques in place. Collectively, their rankings were poor among such search engines as Google, MSN, AOL and Yahoo!

Clearly, it doesn't mean all of the health care industry lacks visibility among the major



search engines. Some do well because they've developed SEO expertise in-house or hired a consultant. Pertinent search phrases in visible text can pay off. The health care industry also may be working with pay-per-click advertising, which is expected to help the search engine marketing industry grow to \$13.5 billion in 2007, according to Piper Jaffray analyst Safa Rashtchy.

Rather than continue to resist SEO, they should at least look at their search term choices and get the basics right. Enhanced page optimization – starting with the home page – can give them a much better shot of ranking well on Google and other significant search engines.

More details about SEO and search engine marketing are available in our white paper, "**Search Engine Marketing: Get in the Game.**" Order a free copy here:

<http://www.fathomseo.com/forms/WhitePaper.asp>

Health care industry website managers and marketing directors also can take a quick survey about whether they use SEO strategies. Please fill out the survey here:

<http://www.fathomseo.com/healthcare-seo-survey.asp>

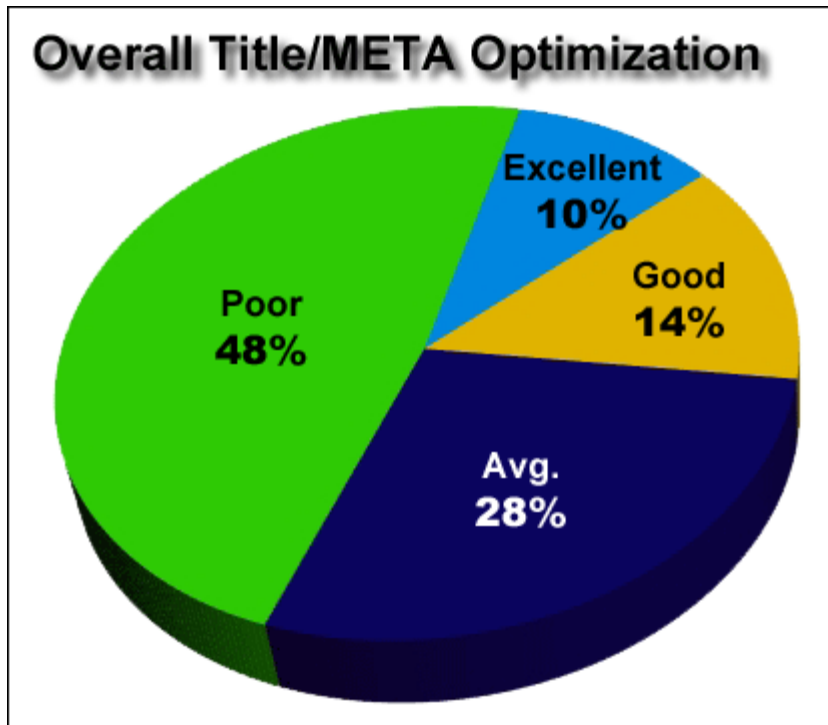


### Overall Assessment

We scored each company on 12 potential possibilities (title, META description and META keywords) – a set of 3 for each of the following pages: home, about, product/ service summary and another interior page (such as a specific product page). We gave the web site credit each time it appeared to include reasonable keywords in appropriate locations. Total scores ranged from 0 to a maximum of 12.

<b>Excellent</b>	10-12
<b>Good</b>	7-9
<b>Average</b>	4-6
<b>Poor</b>	0-3

A high score does not mean that a web site ranks well on search engines, only that it had attempted to use the basic techniques. Ideal keyword selection, page content, site architecture, link popularity and other factors influence rankings.





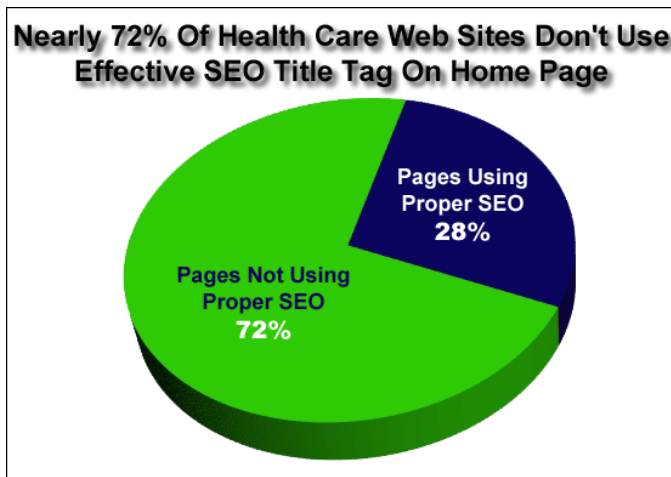
### Key Findings

#### Page Titles

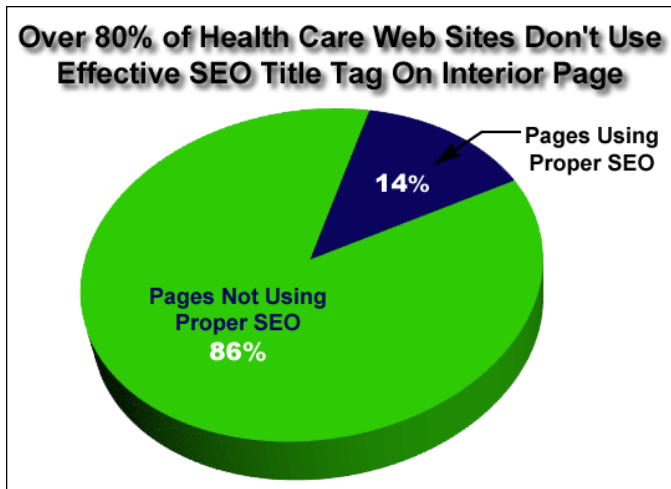
Even though title tags help produce rankings, the health care industry consistently overlooks their SEO value on the home page. A staggering number of web site owners don't bother placing keywords in the title of interior pages either.

Figure 1 - Page Title Optimization

1-1



1-2



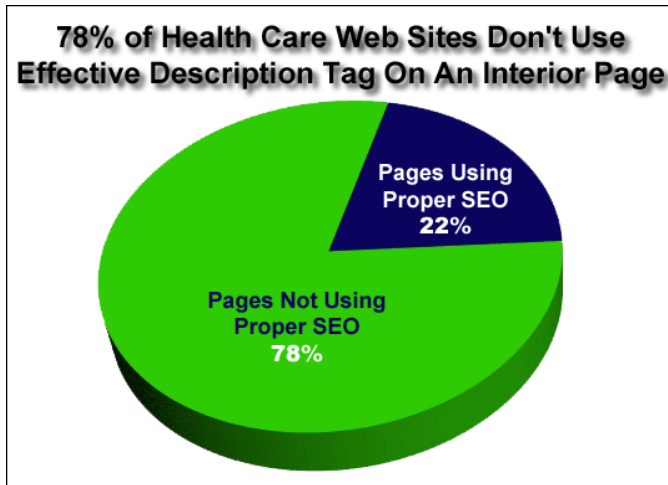


### META Description

The META description affects overall rankings, but web site owners either ignore it altogether or fail to include significant keywords within it.

Figure 2 – META Description Optimization

2-1



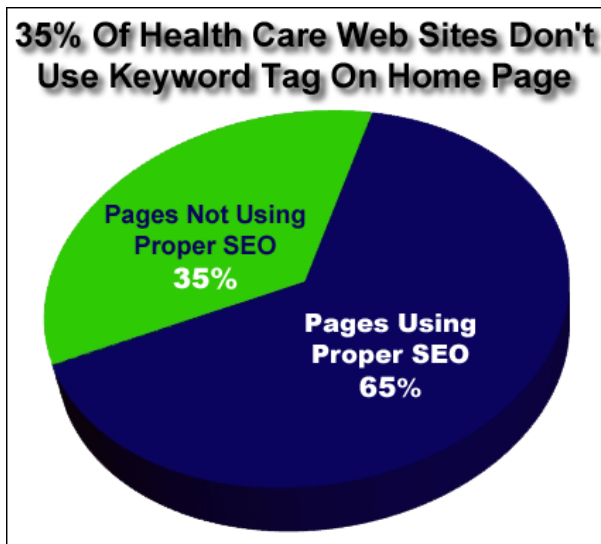


### META Keywords

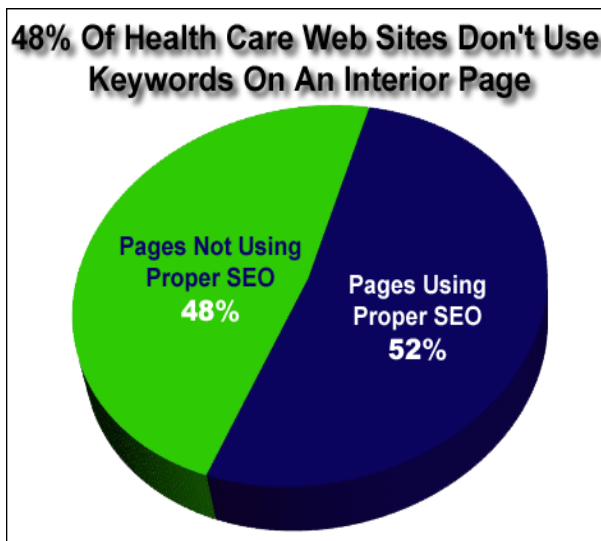
It's widely accepted that major search engines don't put considerable stock in the META keyword tag (too much abuse long ago). It can't hurt to include at least a few keywords as they can influence rankings in some cases now or in the future.

Figure 3 – META Keyword Optimization

3-1



3-2



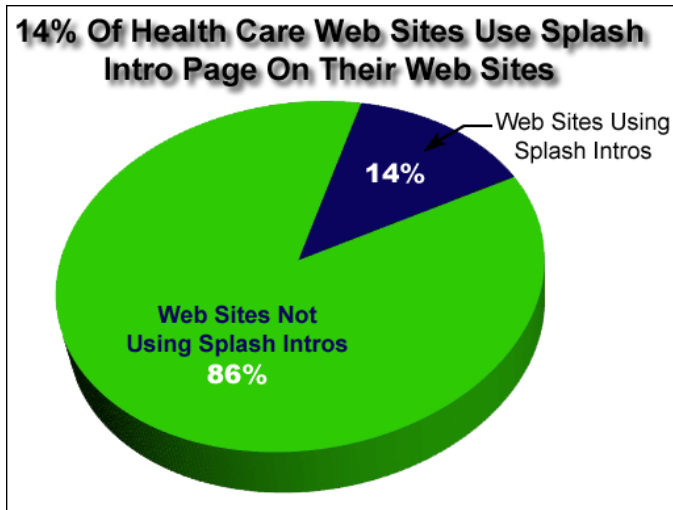


### Splash Pages

Splash introductions can impede search engines, or certainly rankings, because of the typical absence of text and re-directs in the source code.

Figure 4 – Splash Introduction on Web sites

4-0



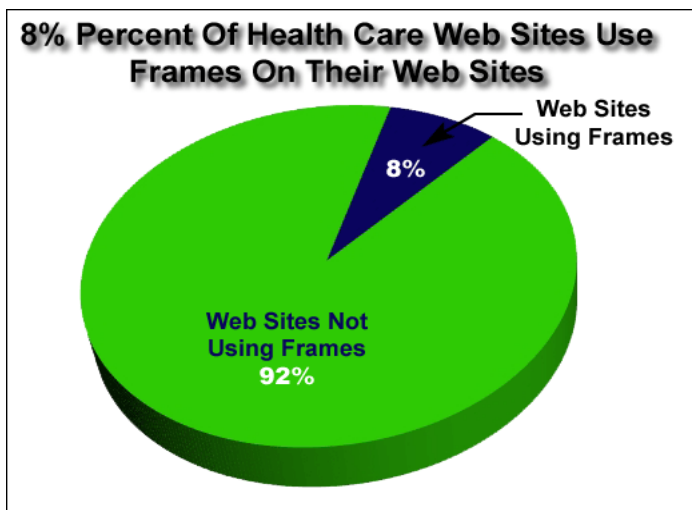


### Frames

Frames are in considerable debate. Yes, search engines can index a web site if it's in frames (i.e. navigation doesn't move). However, if created improperly, search engines may pick up the content page and visitors may not see the logo, phone number or navigation.

Figure 5 – Use of Frames

5-1



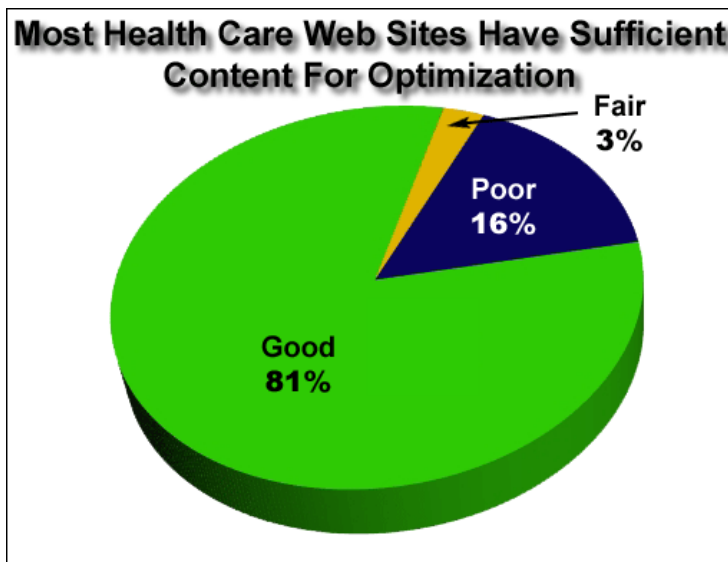


### Content Poised for Search Engine Optimization

The good news for the health care industry is that their content is in good shape from an optimization perspective (81% rated "good" in our assessment). We didn't judge the quality of the writing or the structure of the visible text (i.e. user-friendly). To please the search engines, it's important to have copy on each page – some suggest at least 250 words. Although we didn't see that many words on all pages, we were encouraged to see copy blocks that could be revised or expanded with appropriate search terms.

Figure 6 – Content for Optimization (i.e. Page Text)

6-1



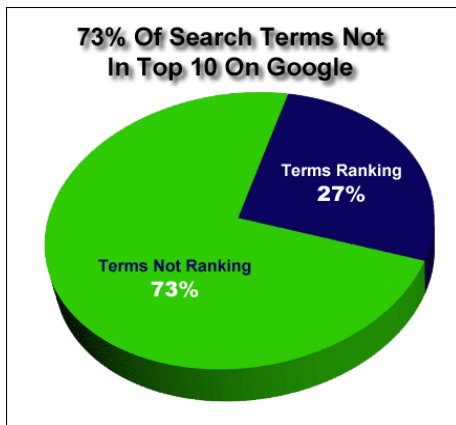


### Top Placement on Targeted Search Terms

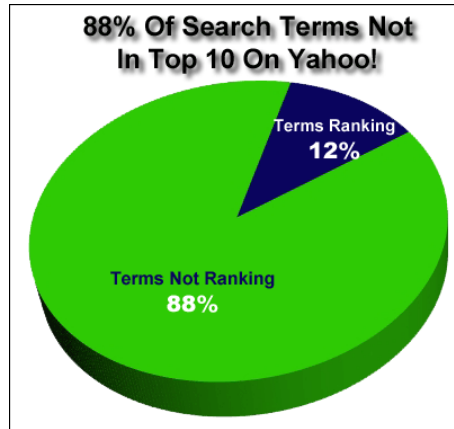
Fathom SEO examined the study data and selected 10 of the web sites that appeared to have the most optimization in place. Some of the apparent keywords and search terms were ranking, but most weren't – especially in the coveted Top 10 zone.

Figure 7 – Top 10 Placement for Targeted Search Terms

7-1



7-2



7-3



7-4

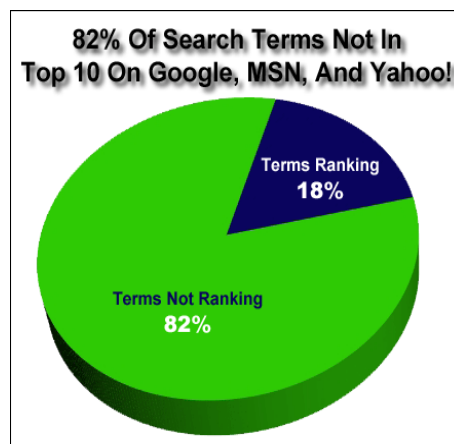
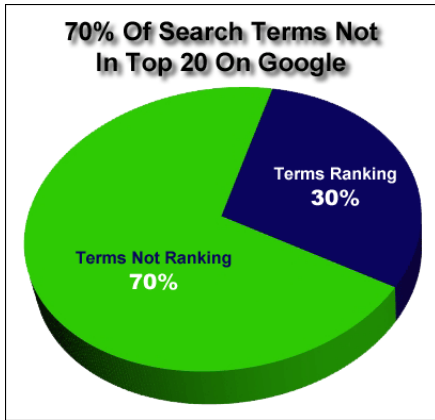


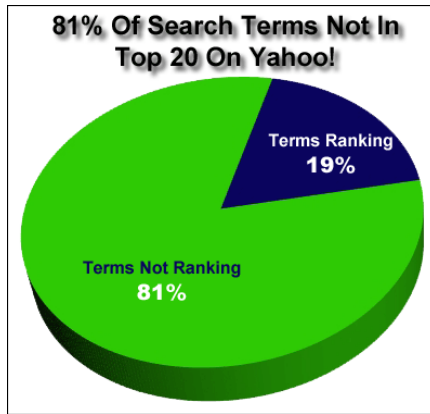


Figure 8 – Top 20 Placement on Targeted Search Terms

8-1



8-2



8-2



8-4

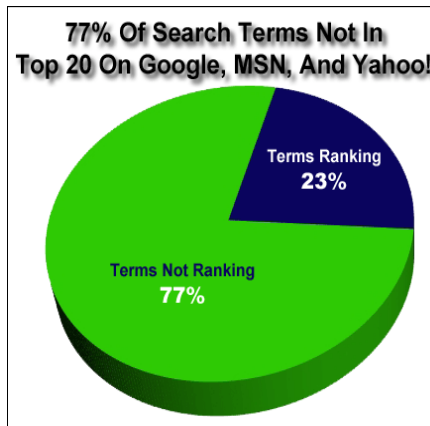
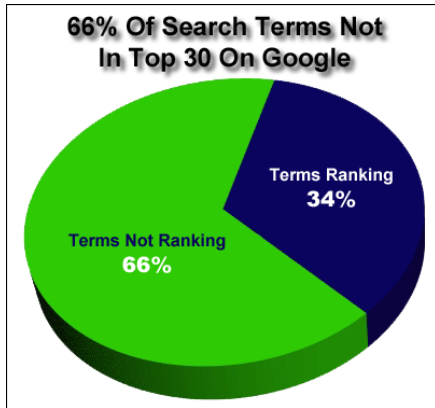


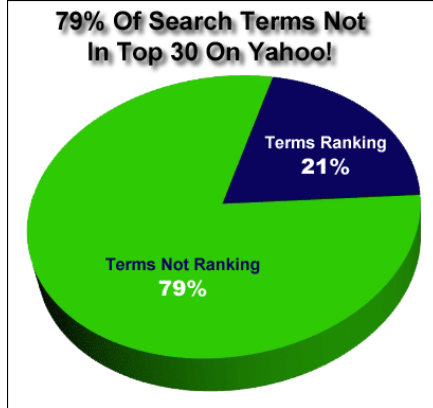


Figure 9 – Top 30 Placement on Targeted Search Terms

9-1



9-2



9-3



9-4





## Health Care Industry Picks the Wrong Keywords

Too often health care sites demonstrated that they don't know how to choose keywords. It's better to go after search phrases that adequately describe a business and its products and services.

Here are some of the actual keywords (enormously broad) that we lifted from the health care web site page titles and META data we studied.

- anesthesia
- consultant
- consulting
- examination
- exercise
- health
- healthcare
- home
- hospital
- hospitals
- incubator
- instrument
- laboratory
- leadership
- monitor
- nurse
- orthopedic
- paramedic
- pediatric
- physicians
- scrubs
- staffing
- stroke
- surgery
- team
- training
- uniforms
- walker
- wheelchair
- x-ray

## How do people search?

**OneStat**, an expert in web analytics, in 2004 tracked the seven most popular ways:

1. 2 word phrases 32.58%
2. 3 word phrases 25.61%
3. 1 word phrases 19.02%
4. 4 word phrases 12.83%
5. 5 word phrases 5.64%
6. 6 word phrases 2.32%
7. 7 word phrases 0.98%

But that's only part of the perspective you need. Think through all of the possible ways a potential visitor might express the nature of your product or service through a search engine request– both singular and plural. Add extra words to the core word or phrase – like "products," "services," "companies," etc.



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## Case Studies: Ineffective Optimization

We selected 10 of the web sites that scored the worst in terms of search engine optimization. Here's a closer look at what they may be doing wrong on their home pages (company names are removed).

### Case Study No. 1

```
<html>
<head>
<title>Company name.com</title>
<meta http-equiv="content-type" content="text/html; charset=iso-8859-1">
<link rel="stylesheet" href="/includes/style.css">
<SCRIPT LANGUAGE="JavaScript">
</head>
```

**Title lacks keywords, page doesn't include META data, nor does the entire site attempt to include any META data.**

---

### Case Study No. 2

```
<head> <title>Company name, Inc. keyword phrase</title> <meta name="Description"
content=" Company name, Inc. keyword phrase "/>
<meta name="Keywords" content="Home Page"/>
```

**META title is buried below over 12 pages of HTML code and only includes one search term with the company name, META description repeats the title, META keywords tag lacks keywords and only says "Home Page."**

---

### Case Study No. 3

```
<HTML><HEAD><TITLE>search term 1, search term 2, search term 3 – Company
name</TITLE>
<META http-equiv=www.companyname.com content="search term 1,search term 2,search
term 3,search term 4,search term 5,search term 6,search term 7,search term 8"
name=keywords>
<META http-equiv=www.companyname.com content="search term 1, search term 2 and
regulation, and search term 3 by company name. Company name servicing 4 different cities
listed." name=description></head>
```

**META title includes some search terms with a company name, META description and META keywords tag is incorrectly written with "name=description" and "name=keywords" at the end of the code rather than the beginning. Keywords are broad and irrelevant with commas in between but no spacing between commas.**



---

#### Case Study No. 4

```
<HTML>
<HEAD>
  <META NAME="Author" CONTENT="Webmaster Name">
  <META NAME="KEYWORDS" CONTENT="Includes 191 keywords and search terms
that are too broad.">
  <META NAME="DESCRIPTION" CONTENT="Features a 34-word description without
keywords.">
  <META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="ALL" >
  <META NAME="Revisit-After" CONTENT="30 days">
  <TITLE>Company name, Inc., search term for Physicians</TITLE>
</HEAD>
```

**META title only includes company name with no search terms and is incorrectly placed buried below a lengthy META data set, META description only describes the company's services and history with no search terms, META keywords tag is too long with 191 words and 1,666 characters. Search terms are too broad and irrelevant. META author tag should be below META data set. META robots tag is OK but shouldn't list a set timeframe of when the search engines should spider the site, the spiders should be allowed to visit your site naturally and randomly.**

---

#### Case Study No. 5

```
<head>
<title>Company name – Company name Home Page - Welcome to Company name</title>
<meta name="keywords" content="Welcome to Company name"/>
<meta name="description" content="Welcome to Company name"/>
<html>
<head>
```

**META title only includes company name with no search terms, META description and META keywords tag includes the company name with no search terms.**

---

#### Case Study No. 6

```
<html>
<head>
<META HTTP-EQUIV="Content-Type" CONTENT="text/html; charset=UTF-8">
<META NAME="KEYWORDS" CONTENT="N/A">
<META NAME="DESCRIPTION" CONTENT="N/A">
<title>Company name U.S. - Products</title>
<script language="JavaScript" type="text/JavaScript"
src="/includes/browserchk.js"></script>
```



</head>

**META title only includes a company name with no search terms, is placed incorrectly written below an empty META description and keyword set, displaying "N/A/."**

---

### Case Study No. 7

```
<html>
<head>
  <title>About Company name - United States</title>
  <meta name="keywords" content="">
  <meta name="description" content="">
  <META HTTP-EQUIV="Expires" CONTENT="0">
  <META HTTP-EQUIV="Pragma" CONTENT="no-cache">
```

**META title only includes company name with no search terms, META description and META keywords tag are in place but are empty.**

---

### Case Study No. 8

```
<html>
<head>
<title>Company name Products</title>
<meta name="title" content="Company name Products">
<meta name="keyword" content="Includes 18 keywords and search terms with no real focus">
<meta name="Description" content="Features a 28-word description without keywords.">
<meta name="Description" content="Product 1® Features a 25-word description about this particular product without keywords.">
<meta name="Description" content="Product 2® Features a 27-word description about this particular product without keywords.">
```

**Title tag only includes company name with no keywords, META keywords tag is poorly used, 17 META descriptions used on homepage highlighting a separate product in each tag (one META description is appropriate).**

---

### Case Study No. 9

```
<html>
<head>
<title>Company name</title>
<meta name="Keywords" content="xxxxxxxxxxxxxx">
```



**META title only includes company name with no search terms, META description tag missing, META keywords tag included characters and not a word (gives no real value).**

---

**Case Study No. 10**

```
<html>
<head>
<title>Company name</title>
</head>
```

**META title only includes company name, no META data set was used.**



## Return on Investment Insights

**A viable Search Engine Marketing (SEM) strategy should go hand in hand with other marketing efforts. Here are a few questions to ask:**

- How accurate are your print and online mailing lists?
- How experienced is your sales manager? Is he or she familiar with online marketing?
- How are your trade journal ads performing?
- When did you last issue a news release?
- Do people respond to your Yellow Pages ad? How do you know?
- Did you ever launch an affiliate marketing program?
- What innovative viral marketing concept did you try out?
- Did you have a contest or promotion?
- How successful was your last permission-based e-mail marketing program?
- What kind of response did you get to your last corporate newsletter?
- Do you pay for sponsored listings on specialized guides or directories?
- How did you measure the success of your last exhibit at a trade show?

Puzzling studies and reports suggest that businesses are missing out when it comes to ROI, including a whole host of metrics that should confirm or shape marketing strategies. The good news is that many companies recognize the disconnect between their needs (greater profitability from online marketing investments) and the methods and measurements that guide them.

For example, in a major 2004 survey of SEM agencies and advertisers, the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization found that senior executives view SEM as a "high business priority – at least among 50% of advertiser respondents. They even plan to increase SEM spending "41% on average" in 2005.

Their objectives include:

- Increasing/enhancing brand awareness of products/services (61%)
- Selling directly online (58%)
- Getting leads closed in-house (54%)
- Getting leads from dealers to distributors to close (21%)

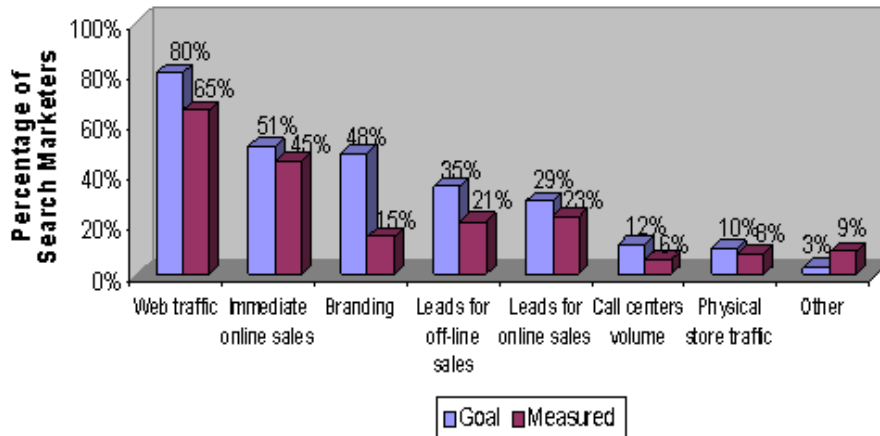
To pull it off, they plan to take money from a wide assortment of sources-- everything from paid listings in shopping services and e-mail marketing to print newspaper ads and TV ads.

The anticipation – and possible commitment – contrasts with past measurement performance.



## Many Search Marketers Fail to Measure Results

Source: Feb. 2004 Jupiter Research Executive Survey



### Aligning SEM with Corporate Marketing Strategies

You should start by knowing how your SEM goals relate to your corporate marketing strategy. Which of the following (or more) do you want to accomplish?

- Generate leads
- Sell online
- Build brands
- Grab more market share

### Conversions

You must track pages that allow visitors to take some kind of action, including:

- Requesting a quote
- Filling out a contact form
- Placing an order
- Registering for a newsletter
- Ordering a catalog

### Establishing Your Metrics

Determine which of the following will be the metrics that will mean the most to you:

- Online sales (broken down by category)
- Repeat visits
- Profits on sales
- Customer satisfaction
- Length of visits
- Cost per click (CPC)
- Click-through rate (CTR)
- Cost per conversion (CPC)





## Conclusion

The health care industry may have the best of SEO intentions that don't get addressed for any number of reasons, from management's vision and lack of expertise to budget and time constraints.

It's encouraging that they do have web sites and that they managed to write enough content that could be optimized and most avoid hindrances such as splash pages and frames.

They even have page titles and META data in place; it's simply a matter of using them effectively with strategic search terms. Other factors can come into play, including site architecture and link building, but making the most of foundational SEO elements can begin to boost awareness of their web sites.



## Methodology

Starting with industry guides and directories, we identified 350 U.S. health care sites. We examined each web site in the same manner based on distinct SEO standards and criteria.

- Home page title
- About page title
- Product overview tag
- Additional page title tag
- Home description
- About page description
- Product overview description
- Additional page description
- Home page META keywords
- About page META keywords
- Product overview META keywords
- Additional page META keywords

We weren't trying to look for the ideal title, description or META keyword set (that determination would require a custom consultation). We simply wanted to see whether they appeared to feature at least some keywords rather than simply say the company name or "home" in the title or marketing language devoid of keywords.

In addition, we noted whether each web site began with a dominant splash or Flash page, either of which could be a SEO barrier.

Similarly, we looked at the structure, categorizing web sites that used frames and those that didn't. Frames can be a problem as search engines may only display the content and not the navigation.

Finally, we made a judgment about the content for the four pages we examined. We determined whether each web site had sufficient content to handle a SEO program (limited visible text can limit rankings).



Fathom SEO

### About Fathom SEO

Fathom SEO, based in Cleveland, Ohio, is a market-leading firm dedicated to Search Engine Marketing with an emphasis on organic Search Engine Optimization. We also provide pay-per-click bid management, link building, web analytics, custom web development and permission-based e-mail marketing services.

The company offers "SERV" programs (Search Engine Ranking and Visibility)--a series of productized offerings using proprietary process, software and consulting services that dramatically increase traffic to clients' web sites by improving placement at the top of search engines for keywords and phrases targeted to their businesses.

Today we have over 60 clients, including **Eaton Corp., FedEx Custom Critical, The Cleveland Clinic, Little Tikes and Bissell**. Fathom SEO offers a seasoned and knowledgeable staff with diverse skills.

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