Choose a Topic

If you are starting from scratch and do not have a previously developed Web site to begin working on, choosing a topic for your Web site is the first step in starting a successful search-engine-optimization plan. The topic you choose can have a dramatic effect on both the quality of the results your search-engine optimization achieves as well as the speed at which you can achieve them.

Increasing your Web site rankings for competitive topics is much more difficult than increasing rankings for less competitive topics. Examples of highly competitive topics include mortgages, debt relief, and prescription medications. Web sites concentrating on these topics can be extremely lucrative to Web site owners if they manage to generate visitors. Even one visitor to a mortgage application Web site can produce a large profit if that visitor applies and is approved for a mortgage.

If you are starting a brand-new Web site with dreams of becoming profitable quickly, you may not want to start by focusing on these highly competitive terms. Web sites ranking highly for terms like "mortgages" have likely been around for many years, contain a tremendous amount of content, and possess thousands of relevant inbound links. The importance of factors such as Web site age, quality and quantity of content, and quality and quantity of inbound links are discussed in later chapters.

Unless your Web site already possesses those factors, you should choose a topic that is less competitive. Optimizing for less competitive topics can provide quicker and more impressive ranking results. If you are developing a Web site about mortgages, consider focusing on a specific topic within the overall topic of "mortgages," such as "Pennsylvania mortgages" or the even more specific "Wilkes-Barre mortgages." Although there is less traffic for these more specific terms, there is also less competition and a higher likelihood of early success.
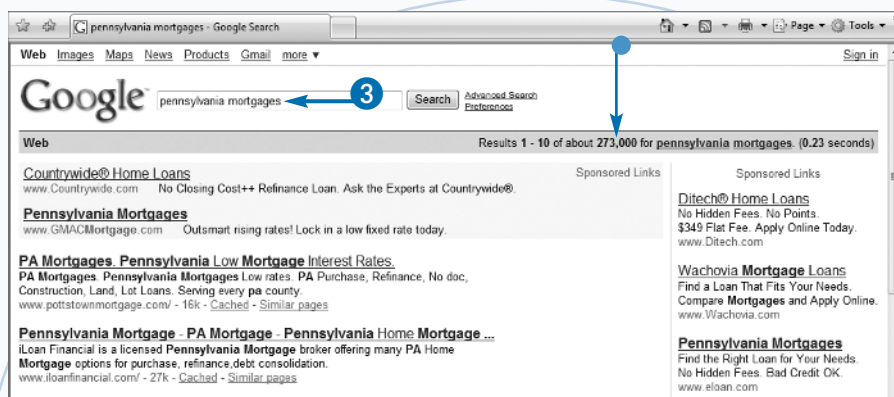
Choose a Topic

1 Navigate to Google.com.

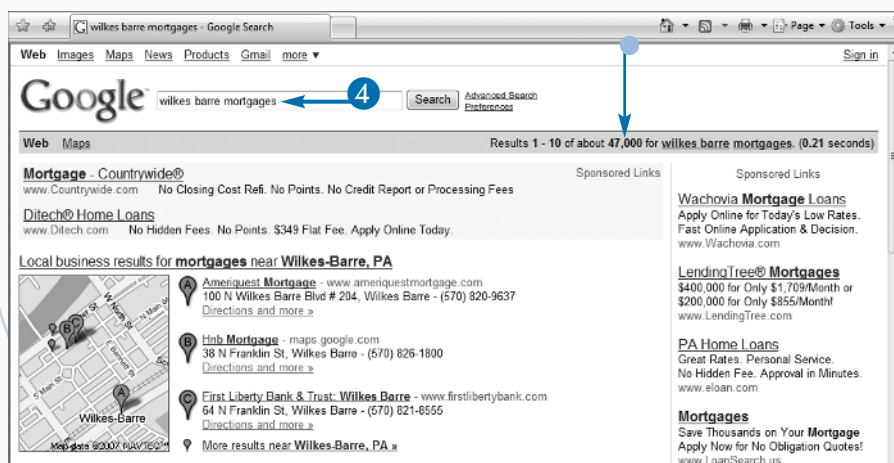2 Search for a popular topic, such as "mortgages."
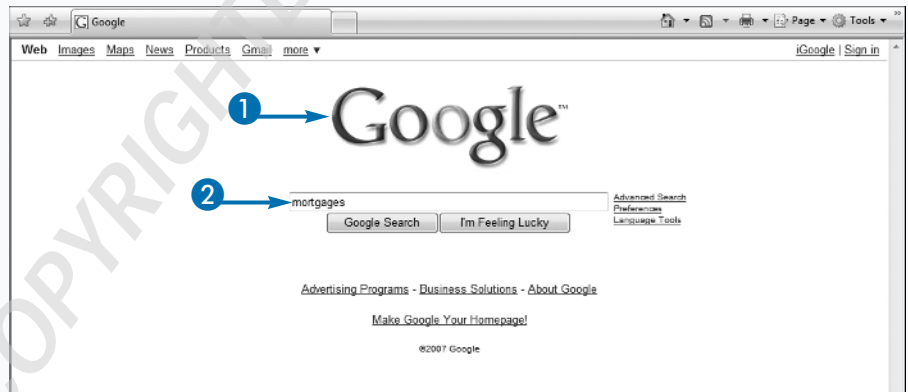
● Notice 8,970,000 results.
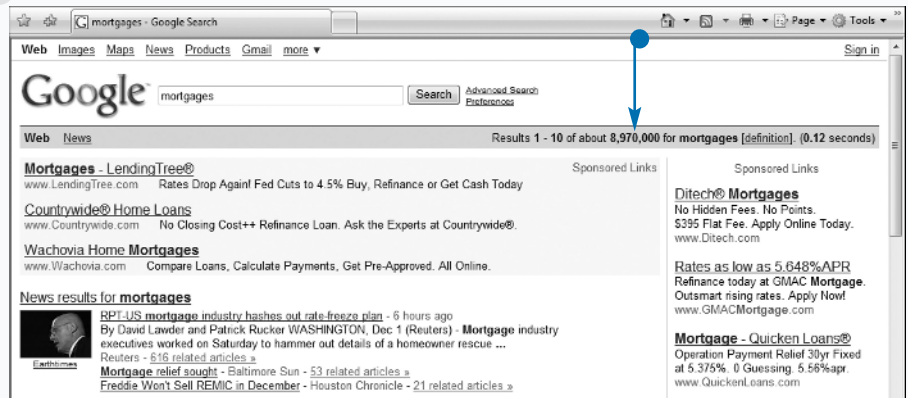
3 Search for "pennsylvania mortgages."

- Notice 273,000 results.

4 Search for "wilkes barre mortgages."

- Notice 47,000 results.

  Fewer results implies less competition within a particular niche.

Extra

Most general terms are very competitive and extremely difficult to rank for. Keywords and phrases span from very general to very specific. An example of this progression would be pets, dogs, large dogs, Great Danes, brown Great Dane puppies.

The term "pets" is very general, and although the traffic for such a term is enormous, that traffic may not translate into a large number of sales. If you are creating a Web site or marketing a Web site about breeding Great Danes, the Web site is more likely to succeed if specific terms are targeted.

Google provides free access to its Keyword Tool at https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal. Type any keyword or phrase into this tool, and it generates a list of related terms, displays the amount of advertiser competition, and displays how much volume those searches received that month across the search engine. This tool is extremely useful if you are building out a pay-per-click advertising campaign, which is discussed in more detail in Chapters 11 and 12.

Find Your Target Audience

To get the most from your search-engine-optimization efforts, you should design and optimize your Web site for your target audience. Your target audience is the group of people that you are trying to reach through your online marketing efforts. Target audiences are often defined by demographics such as age groups, nationalities, or specific interests. Understanding who your target audience is and what they are searching for can greatly increase the effectiveness of a search-engine-optimization campaign.

Make sure you are speaking your target audience's language when optimizing your Web site. If your business is an online marketing company, your main focus is to generate more traffic to your customers' Web sites. If you focus all your efforts on gathering visitors searching for the term "online marketing company," you are missing traffic from people searching for "online media buying," "pay-per-click advertising," and "search-engine optimization." Make sure you speak the same language on your Web site

that your target audience uses. More advanced keyword research and analysis is discussed in Chapter 2.

Research and analysis uncovers the key terms and phrases that Web users are searching for. This may be as simple as figuring out what terminology people are using when searching. Are people searching for "seo" or "search engine optimization"? You can use a tool like Google Trends to discover trends in the popularity of different search queries.

Knowing your target audience also provides you the opportunity to identify other online marketing opportunities. If your target audience is primarily the teenage demographic, marketing on platforms such as MySpace could be lucrative. If your target audience is mostly young college graduates, marketing on a social network like Facebook may provide benefit. The benefits of having a full understanding of your target audience cannot be overlooked. Rather than waste time trying to figure out what that audience is later, try to define your audience early in the search-engine-optimization process.
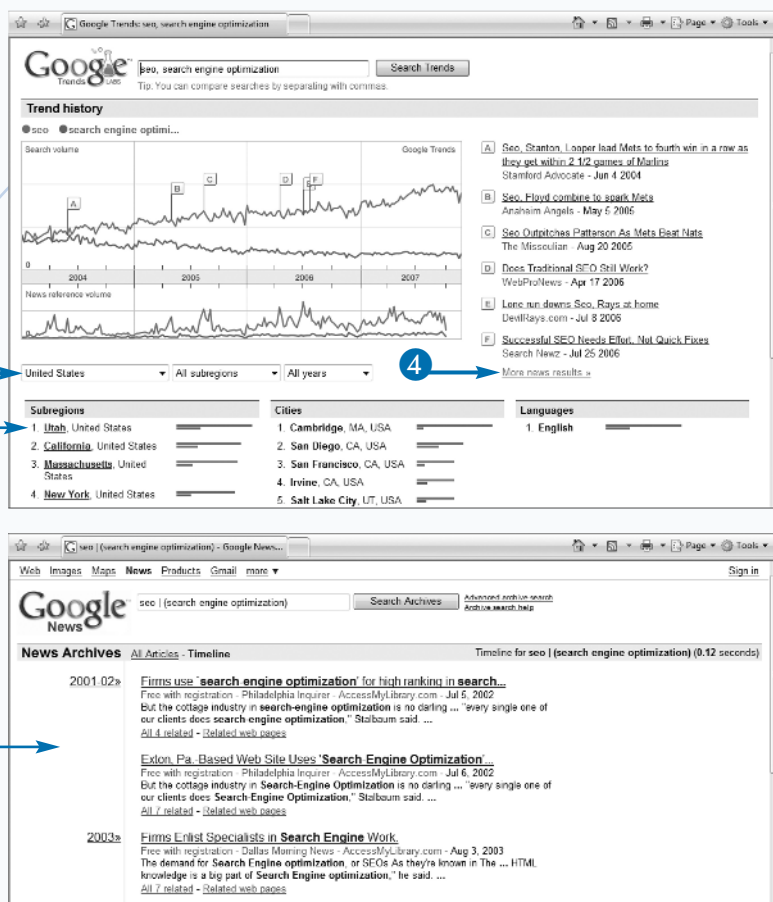
Find Your Target Audience

① Navigate to www.Google.com/trends.

② Type **seo, search engine optimization**.

● Notice the traffic trend from 2004 through 2007. The term "seo" is increasing in popularity.

● Results are separated by regions of the world, cities, and languages.
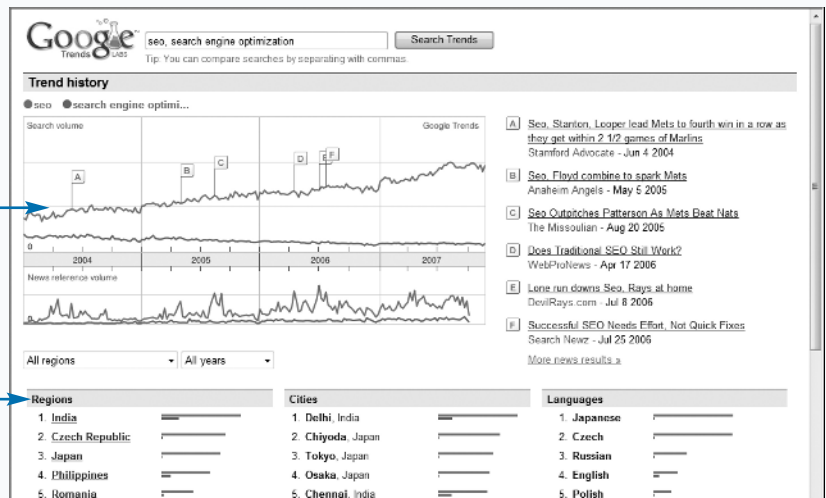
3 Change All Regions to United States.

- Results are limited to traffic from the United States.

4 Click More News Results.

- News articles from past years are available for reading.

Extra

Optimizing for your target audience involves customizing your Web site design as much as your Web site content. If your target audience is the teenage demographic, and your Web site is designed to resemble a legal document, it may not matter how relevant your content actually is. If your Web site users are turned off by the Web site design, they may not stick around long enough to read the content anyway.

When you design your Web site, be sure to design it around the tastes of your target audience. An art school's Web site design should be different from the design of a site about the world's most demanding law schools. The target audiences for these two markets are very different despite the overall theme being the same.

Make a point to study your successful competition before you move forward with Web site design and content development. Try to stay original, but do not feel the need to reinvent the wheel. Much of the research has already been done for you. Your mission is to improve upon what products or services are already available while keeping your target audience in mind.

Set a Budget

If you decide to do your own search-engine optimization, more than just your time is required. Set aside a budget for your search-engine optimization as if it is any other form of marketing. There are certain tasks involved in a comprehensive search-engine-optimization plan that require a financial investment. You may not need to hire a company to do your search-engine optimization, but you should give yourself the best opportunity to increase your rankings, increase your traffic, and beat your competitors. To give yourself that opportunity, a budget is required.

Web Design and Development Costs

There are numerous costs involved in just getting a Web site running. Free Web hosting should be avoided; a domain name is required; and unless you are adept at Web site design, having a professional Web site developed can cost a significant amount of money. These are necessary costs that cannot be avoided. Generally, Web hosting can cost anywhere from $5 per month to hundreds of dollars per month depending on the type of hosting required. Selecting a Web host and a domain name is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

A domain name can be purchased for less than $10 depending on where you look, but professional Web site design can cost hundreds, thousands, or more depending on the complexity of design required. High cost does not necessary translate into great results, and there are instances where a redesign of a Web site can positively or negatively impact your search-engine rankings. Web site design can not only affect search-engine rankings, but it also can directly affect your site's *conversion rates*. The conversion rate of your site is the percentage of visitors that are converted into a sale. A difference in only a fraction of a percentage point can have an enormous impact on whether a search-engine-optimization campaign is profitable or a drain on financial resources.

Keyword Research Costs

Other costs may arise. Quality keyword research and analysis tools can be a necessity depending on the size of the project, and these tools normally cost between $50 and $100 per month. These tools are reviewed in detail in the next chapter. A quality keyword research and analysis tool is often one of the first investments that any search-engine-optimization specialist makes.

Link-building Costs

Also, be sure to have a budget for link building. If you choose to pay for links, the cost can be a few dollars per link to upwards of a few hundred dollars per link depending on the quality of that link. As discussed in Chapter 3, both the number and quality of inbound links to your Web site are possibly the most influential factors on your search-engine rankings.

Content Development Costs

Your content creation is also a consideration. You may decide to outsource content creation to skilled copywriters who write content at an hourly rate. These rates vary depending on the skill and experience of the writer. You should expect to pay between $15 and $75 per hour for content writing. As discussed in Chapter 3, a Web site's content is a very influential factor in search-engine rankings. To compete with other Web sites in competitive markets, your site has to contain a substantial amount of unique, relevant content. If you want your visitors to trust your Web site as an authority source in your field, make sure your content is well written and factually correct.

Set
Goals

Setting realistic goals for your search-engine-optimization project ensures that you stay on task and keep focused despite the many mountains and valleys you are sure to encounter. Search-engine optimization is not an exact science, and even if you follow best practices, there are no guarantees. Many search-engine-optimization companies guarantee front-page rankings or even place time frames on when success is likely to be realized, but ultimately, the search engines decide your fate. Set realistic goals for the project, and you are less likely to be disappointed and distracted throughout the process.

Progress Steadily

Search-engine optimization is much like exercise and diet. You may not notice immediate results from a single workout or cutting out a single fatty meal, but over the course of weeks, months, and years, the effects accumulate. Similarly, with search-engine optimization, you can rest assured knowing that your efforts build over time to produce results. Also, much like exercise and diet, working slowly and steadily over time is much more likely to produce results than trying to cram all the work into a few weeks or months. Spread out your search-engine-optimization work over time or risk a penalty from the search engines for trying to manipulate their ranking algorithms.

Spammers historically manipulated the search engines by programming content generators capable of building Web sites with thousands of pages of text in minutes or less. At one time, these Web sites almost immediately gained high rankings in the search engines due to their large quantity of "unique" content. Upon closer inspection though, this content was very evidently machine-generated garbage.

The same holds true in your efforts to build inbound links back to your Web site. Spammers have historically manipulated the search engines by programming link generators capable of building thousands of links back to their Web sites in a very short period of time. Most of the time, these programs target online guest books and message boards, and automatically generate entries on the guest books or posts on the message boards that include a link back to a selected Web site. In a time where quantity of links was considered much more important and easier to measure than quality of links, this practice, especially in combination with an automatic Web site generator, fed the search engines with the ingredients considered important for a high-ranking Web site.

Focus on Natural Growth

The search engines want to see a slow, steady, and natural growth of your Web site. They realize that a single person or even a group of people are unlikely to have the ability to generate hundreds of pages of content as soon as a Web site goes live. This type of growth is the fingerprint that a machine-generated Web site leaves behind. The engineers behind the search-engine ranking algorithms work hard to ensure that machine-generated content and links are penalized appropriately.

As you learn different search-engine-optimization techniques in this book, think about how they fit into your overall goals. Are you trying to build more traffic to your Web site overall? Are you trying to increase sales of a certain product? Are you trying to establish your brand? Your specific goals determine how you should approach the project. Plan out what strategies you are going to implement, how you are going to implement them, and when you plan to have the projects completed.

Put a Team Together

Not everyone is going to be an expert at every aspect of search-engine optimization. To take full advantage of what search-engine optimization has to offer your Web site, many skills are required. These skills include but are not limited to HTML writing, knowledge of CSS, data analysis, graphical design, server administration, copywriting, link building, blogging, and so on. Do not hesitate to put together a team of people skilled in these different areas to assist in the project. You do not need to hire a team of people to work at your side; you can outsource some of the work to others through popular outsourcing Web sites such as Elance.

You are sure to find that you excel at some search-engine-optimization tasks and lack the knowledge or motivation to excel in others. You may be an excellent Web designer and copywriter, but terrible at server administration and link building. In this case, you may want to consider an outsourced employee to help you take advantage of the advanced server-side search-engine-optimization techniques and someone else to assist in link building; or, you may want to pass on the Web designing and copywriting and focus solely on link building. Either way, there are many alternatives out there to doing all the work yourself. How you decide to take advantage of these alternatives depends on your level of experience and ultimately your budget.

As you read through the rest of this book, you are going to encounter many techniques that you feel uncomfortable performing due to lack of knowledge or just a lack of time. Just about everything can be outsourced, so do not hesitate to explore that option if necessary.

Put a Team Together

1. Navigate to www.Elance.com.

2. Enter a description of the service that you want.

3. Click Search.
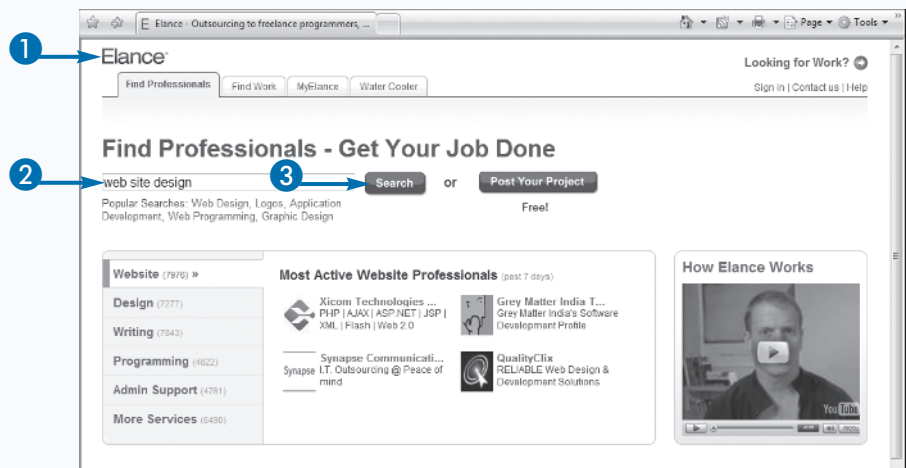
- You see a list of service providers, their feedback, and the total amount of money they have earned on the Elance platform.

  You can click a provider from the list to see their portfolio, feedback, and contact information.

4. Click Post Your Project and sign in with your Elance account.
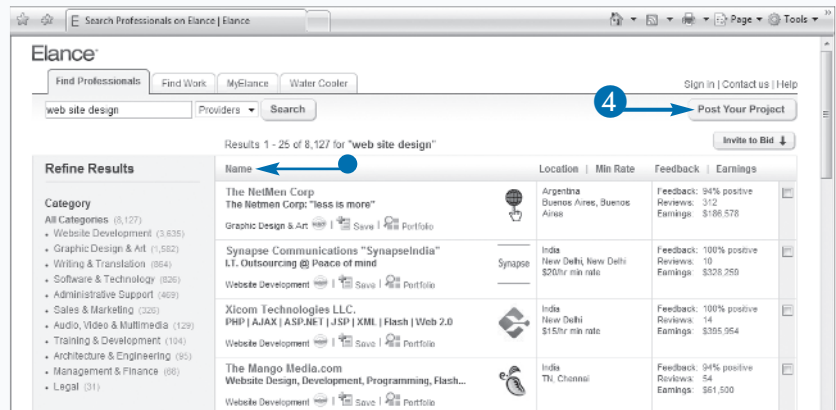
5 Enter pertinent details about your project.

6 Click Continue to post your project.

Elance providers can now view your project and choose to bid.

Extra

Although Elance.com is the most popular online source for finding freelance workers to perform jobs, there is another fast-growing alternative that may be worth trying.

oDesk, located at www.odesk.com, has over 31,000 certified professionals waiting to bid on your projects. oDesk has an advanced and very friendly user interface. It has a unique online platform that enables you to supervise your workers and track their time worked and tasks performed. You can view and verify their time logs to create detailed bills that can be paid by credit card. Unlike Elance, you can pay by the hour, which eliminates the problem of paying a fixed fee based on a project description.

oDesk is known for its high quality of providers and its efforts to return trust to the online contracting industry. The programmers are hooked up to Web cameras, and random screenshots of their desktops are taken to make sure they are working. A reputation system is in place that lists diplomas and certifications, and based on a programmer's reputation, oDesk can suggest a price for that programmer.

These factors combined make oDesk a worthy competitor to Elance. oDesk comes highly recommended throughout the Web community as a platform to use when looking to outsource your work.

Keep Up with Industry News

The Web is full of informative blogs and forums where industry experts freely share their knowledge and experiences in search-engine marketing. Keep up with the pulse of the Internet marketing industry by reading these blogs and forums on a daily basis. Search-engine optimization is not an exact science. The ranking algorithms are constantly changing, and though the optimization techniques generally remain the same, new tips and tricks are constantly discovered by these industry gurus.

This book provides you with a framework upon which true industry expertise can be built. Much like other industries, continuing education is a must if you plan to excel at search-engine optimization. Take advantage of every free resource that is made available to you. Unlike many other industries, search-engine marketing experts are generally not afraid to share some of their best secrets.

There are literally hundreds and possibly thousands of constantly updated resources pertaining to search-engine optimization. Respected industry blogs like Search Engine Land (www.searchengineland.com), SEOmoz (www.seomoz.org), pepperjamBlog (www.pepperjam.com/blog), and others are updated frequently, sometimes numerous times per day. Although it is impossible to keep up-to-date with every resource, it can be just as difficult to keep up with only a few blogs due to the rapid frequency of updates. To alleviate this problem, customize a free newsreader like Google's personal home pages to display the most recent entries of your favorite blogs. Each of these industry blogs uses RSS to syndicate content throughout the Internet. Google's customizable home page reads these RSS feeds and updates your personal home page with the headlines of the most recent posts of each blog whose RSS feed you subscribe to.

Keep Up with Industry News

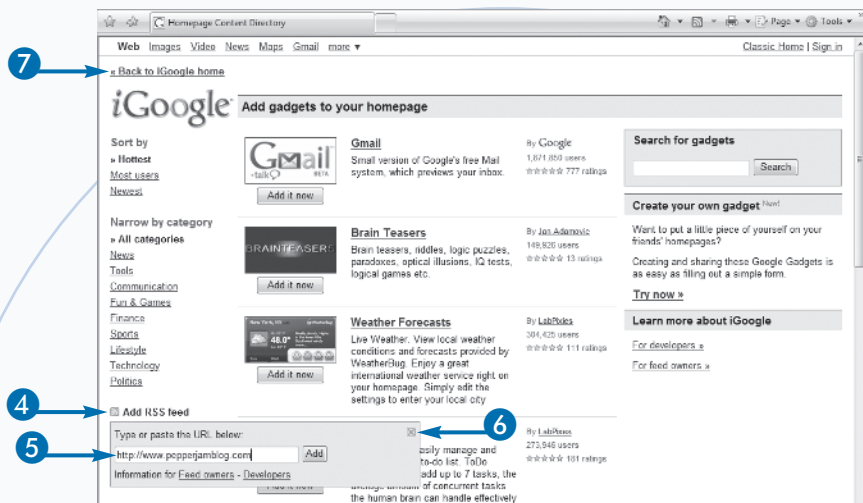**①** Navigate to www.google.com.

② Click iGoogle.

Note: *If you do not already have an iGoogle page, click Get Started and create your iGoogle page following the instructions.*
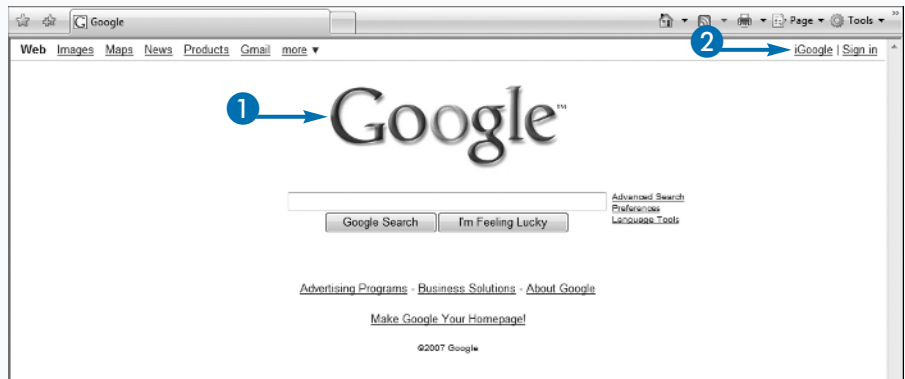
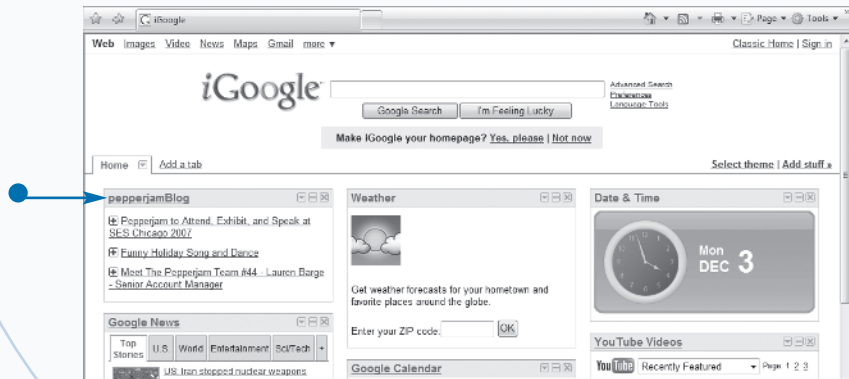
③ Click Add Stuff.

4 Click Add RSS Feed.

5 Enter the site address.

6 Click to close the window.

7 Click Back to iGoogle Home.

● The latest headlines from the site you chose in Step 5 are added to your personalized home page.

Extra

Some very influential people in the search-engine marketing industry maintain blogs where they share a tremendous amount of information about their trade. The following blogs are highly recommended:

● www.wolf-howl.com — Wolf-howl.com is owned by Michael Gray (aka Graywolf), the president of Atlas Web Service (www.atlaswebservice.com), a New York–based Internet consulting firm. He has been involved with online marketing since 1998 and speaks at many of the industry's top conferences, and his blog, albeit controversial at times, is frequently updated with behind-the-scenes search-engine information.

● www.davidnaylor.co.uk — David Naylor is one of the most influential SEO experts in the country. He started working in the industry over ten years ago and has consulted with countless corporations and companies over the years. He is the owner of Bronco Internet (www.bronco.co.uk), a highly successful Web development firm.

● www.jimboykin.com — Jim Boykin is a renowned expert on link building. His blog is one of the most impressive resources available for all issues related to building high-quality links back to your Web site. He often posts extremely informative and educational entries, and his archives are an invaluable resource.

● www.stuntdubl.com — Stuntdubl.com is the brainchild of Todd Malicoat, a well-known Internet marketing consultant and Internet entrepreneur. His Top Posts section, located at www.stuntdubl.com/best, should be near the top of your bookmarks. Information about optimal Web design, link building, search-engine-optimization theory, and much more is available in large quantities at his blog.