

CHAPTER

1


WHITE HAT SEO: IT F@\$#ING WORKS


By Rand Fishkin


***Editor's Note:** This article was originally posted on [The Moz Blog](#) in April 2011 in response to an off-site post that dismissed the value of white hat SEO. Since then, Google has released many updates to its search algorithm. Most prominent among the updates are Penguin, which devalues spammy backlinks and over-optimized sites, and Panda (originally launched February 2011 as Panda/Farmer), which hits sites with thin content and link farms hard.*


I HATE WEB SPAM. I hate what it's done to the reputation of hardworking, honest, smart web marketers who help websites earn search traffic. I hate how it's poisoned the acronym SEO, a title I'm proud to wear. I hate that it makes legitimate marketing tactics less fruitful. And I hate, perhaps most of all, when it works.


Here's a search for "buy propecia," which is a drug I actually take to help prevent hair loss. (My wife doesn't think I'd look very good sans hair.)


Propecia without prescription. Cheap Propecia online - Propeccion... 
Buy Propecia online without prescription, get generic Propecia online. Free AirMail Shipping on big packs. Order cheapest Propecia online and you'll get ...
 propeccion.com/ - Cached - Similar

Buy Generic Propecia Online 
Buy best quality generic Finasteride with lowest prices guarantee at 4rx.com because **propecia** is safe and secure, **buy** Finasteride online.
 www.4rx.com › Skin & Hair Care - Cached - Similar

Buy Brand Propecia & Generic Propecia Online Without Prescription 
Buy Propecia Online. Easy order processing, no prescription required. Lowest price guaranteed. Customer service worldwide, discount system, round-the-clock ...
 www.unitedstatesdiscounts.com/ - Cached

Propecia 
 Merck's official site with information about treatment of male pattern hair loss .
 www.propecia.com/ - Cached - Similar

Buy Propecia 
Buy Propecia Online Without Prescription! Generic Propecia (Finasteride) 1mg & 5mg from a trusted online pharmacy! No Prescription Needed, Only \$0.33 Per ...
 buy-propecia.biz/ - Cached - Similar

buy propecia price - NMSU Library 
 In addition to general cataloguing sites, provides resources relating to rare book cataloguing, medieval manuscripts, and history of the book sites.
 lib.nmsu.edu/rarecat/ - Cached - Similar

Like most search results in the pharma sphere, it's polluted by pages that have artificially inflated their rankings. This is obvious to virtually everyone who's even minimally tech-savvy, and it has three terrible results:

1. Marketers and technologists who observe results like this equate SEO with spamming. If you've read a Hacker News (<http://news.ycombinator.com>) or StackOverflow (<http://stackoverflow.com>) thread on the topic, you've undoubtedly seen this perspective.
2. SEOs new to the profession see this and think that whatever these sites are doing is an effective way to earn rankings, and try repeating these tactics (often harming their sites or those of employers/clients in the process).
3. Consumers learn not to trust the search results, killing business value for everyone in the web world.

Spam removes economic and brand value from the search/social/web marketing ecosystem. If you create this kind of junk, at least be honest with yourself—you're directly harming your fellow marketers, online businesses, searchers, and future generations of web users.

In April of 2011, Kris Roadruck wrote a post called "White Hat SEO is a Joke" (www.krisroadruck.com/rants/whitehat-seo-is-a-joke). He was upfront about the fact that his post was intentionally provocative, not entirely truthful and more sensational than authentic. Despite these caveats, I think a response and some clarification about my thoughts on black hat in general are in order. I'm responding less because I think Kris believes it and more because of the surprisingly supportive response his post received in parts of the search community.

SOME POINTS ON KRIS' POST

Kris begins his article with a personal realization:

I started realizing there were only really 2 kinds of white-hats. The ones complaining about how they were doing everything by the book and getting their asses handed to them by “unethical tactics”, and the ones that were claiming success that didn’t belong to them ... because they ... happened to be in a niche that bloggers find interesting or entertaining.

It’s easy to preach great content when you have a great subject. But no one gives a shit about non-clog toilets or pulse oximeters or single phase diode bridge rectifiers. Sure you might be able to piece together 1 or 2 bits of link-bait but you can be sure that you aren’t going to get the anchor text that you want.

Kris’ premise seems compelling and even has elements of truth. Great content does work better in fields where there’s more interest from web-savvy site owners. On the whole, though, his proposition is a lie. That lie—that “great content” doesn’t work in boring niches—is one told out of laziness, jealousy and contempt. It’s told by spammers to other spammers because it glosses over the fact that white hat, legitimate marketing can work well in ANY field, for any site.

How about some examples, you ask? I am happy to provide them.

Editor’s Note: These examples refer to the status of the sites in 2011, when this post was originally written.

- Here’s Ready for Zero (www.readyforzero.com). It’s a Y-Combinator backed startup tackling the horrifically spammy and incredibly boring field of credit card debt relief. They don’t rank yet (as they’ve just launched), but if they invest in SEO, they will. They have the content they need to earn all the links they’ll need—a great team, great story, great investors and the right product. If I were an SEO consultant for a company seeking rankings for debt relief type searches, that’s exactly the “great content” I’d recommend.

ReadyForZero How It Works Log In

**Pay off debt faster.
Build wealth sooner.**

ReadyForZero's online tools have helped users pay down over \$35 million in debt.

SIGN UP FREE

"ReadyForZero acts as the angel on your shoulder"
CNNMoney

↓

Plan
Get a personalized plan ▼

Pay
Make payments online ▼

Track
See your progress ▼

Relax
Save time and money ▼

SIGN UP

- Here's one that does rank: Oyster Hotel Reviews (www.oyster.com). Today, Oyster is on the first page for nearly every hotel they've covered, and in position five for the massively competitive phrase "hotel reviews." (They're also the best listing in the SERPs.)
- Another that ranks well is Pods Moving Company (www.pods.com). It's not the most exciting site in the world, but it's a good idea with good marketing. It's on the first page for "moving company," another incredibly competitive result. And guess what? I couldn't find any black/gray hat links. No links from bloggers, either.
- Speaking of not exciting, but white hat and "great content," allow me to introduce you to Ron Hazelton's DIY Home Improvement (www.ronhazelton.com). Ron is a mini-celebrity thanks to a home repair-focused TV show. While his site isn't exactly drawing in the Linkerati, he markets it well and his stuff is good. As a result, Ron's site is #1 for searches like "toilet replacement."
- Slightly less boring, but more competitive and equally un-blogger friendly, is the world of business invoicing and bill paying. Yet, the gang at Freshbooks (www.freshbooks.com) is taking Page 1 rankings all over the place.
- Sound effects are another unlikely arena for building a big SEO success story. Despite avoiding every black hat tactic leveraged by the typical ringtone spammers, though, Seattle-based Hark.com has kicked serious butt here. They generate millions of visits from more than 750K keyword phrases each month, and they've built a serious brand in an industry rife with manipulation.
- Kris specifically called out bridge rectifiers as being an impossibly boring industry, yet AllAboutCircuits (www.allaboutcircuits.com) shows up on page one for virtually every diode-related search. There's nothing fancy there, either, just great content. Look at the page on rectifier circuits, (<http://mz.cm/Y1hNWg>). The illustrations are detailed, the content is awesome and they follow an almost-Wikipedia-like model to get contributors who often link back to them.

I try hard in my writing, my presentations and my other professional contributions to this industry to be warm, generous and understanding. But black hats telling the world that they turned their back on white hat because white hat SEO is impossible is a load of crap, and I'm not feeling very empathetic toward that viewpoint.

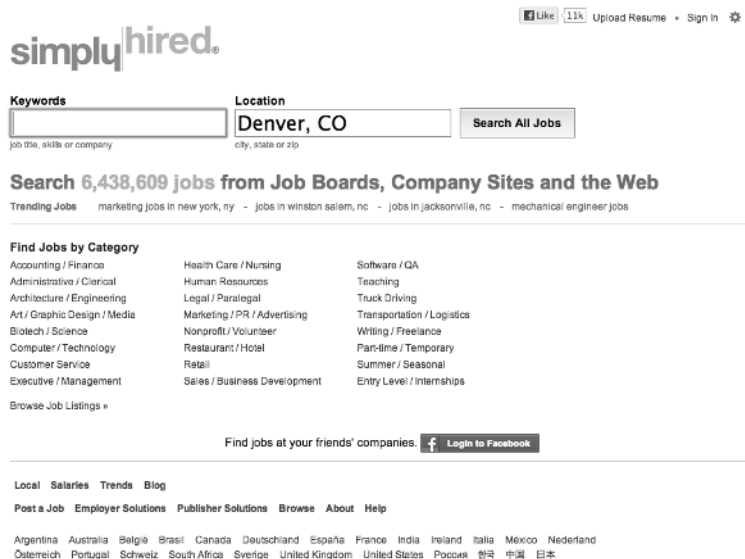
Yes, white hat SEO, particularly in boring industries for non-established sites, is a tremendous challenge. It requires immense creativity, huge quantities of elbow grease, and a lot of patience. Black hat SEO sometimes requires creativity. More often, though, it's finding the tactic Google and Bing haven't caught up to, and applying it over and over—until it burns down your site and you have to find another. Black hat is fundamentally interesting, and often amazingly entertaining, in the same way movies and TV shows featuring clever bank robbers are. But a statement like this has no legs to stand on:

The longer I practiced and studied greyhat, the more annoyed I got with the poor advice and absolute falsehoods I saw being doled out by so called SEO experts to newbies who had no way of knowing that the advice they were soaking up was going to keep them at the back of the search engine results pages (SERPs) for the foreseeable future. Whitehat isn't just a bit slower. It's wishful thinking. It's irresponsible.

Thankfully, it's easy to refute Kris' points with hard, substantive examples (something his post doesn't do at all).



Job searches are among the most challenging, competitive keyword phrases to rank well for in the SERPs. Back in 2008, when we still had a consulting practice, we worked with the crew at SimplyHired (www.simplyhired.com) to set up a long-term strategy for beating the odds. It involved creating a syndication strategy with smart linking and anchor text, embeddable widgets, and a search-friendly, crawlable site with a data-rich blog. It included a massive online brand-building campaign, too. After six months, SimplyHired's rankings and traffic had improved, but they certainly weren't #1 across the board for job searches. However, I'm incredibly proud of their progress since then. I stay in touch with their team and help out informally when/where I can do so. They're on Page 1 for "job search" and rank for hundreds of thousands of job title + geo combination searches. Thanks to SEO (and dozens of other successful marketing and sales programs), they're poised to become industry leaders in a massive market.



These strategies that worked for Simply Hired (and other former Moz clients like Yelp, Etsy and Zillow) aren't some dark secret, either. I wrote a lengthy blog post explaining the process in depth in a Moz post (www.moz.org/blog/ranking-for-keyword-cityname-in-multiple-geographies). I'm not alone, either. Blogs produced by SearchEngineLand, SEOBook, Distilled, and many others give tremendously valuable advice day after day.

I think Kris owes us some examples of “poor advice and absolute falsehoods” being “doled out by so called SEO experts.” I'll agree that there's some bad advice floating around the SEO world, and I'll even admit to giving some myself. Regardless, that's a bold statement for Kris to make without any evidence.

Unfortunately, this next statement can't be written off so easily:

If you are charging your clients for service and not being competitive then you are ripping off your clients. It's as simple as that. I know you white hats are squirming in your seats right now shaking your little fists and saying, “It's not sustainable. Our strategy is based around long term results!” No, it's not. Your strategy is based around wishful thinking and hoping that someday Google will do your job for you so you don't have to. Until Google starts enforcing the rules, there aren't any. And as long as that is true anyone who is not waiting around for them to be enforced is going to rank. Anyone who does wait around won't. You have an obligation to your clients to do everything in your power to rank their sites using the most effective methods currently available to you.

He's dead wrong on the false choice between either being black hat or “not using the most effective methods.” A tax advisor that recommends quasi-legal, high-risk shelters might be using “the most effective methods” to protect wealth, but that doesn't make his more responsible peers obligation-dodging sissies. Search marketers have an obligation, in my opinion, to know and understand the full spectrum of tactics from white hat to black hat. We also carry the same responsibility that any other professional with specialized knowledge does: to recommend the right strategy for the situation.

Unless your manager/company/client is wholly comfortable with the high-risk variable that comes with black hat SEO, you'd better stay clear. I'm also of the mind that there's almost nothing black hat can accomplish that white hat can't do better while building far more value in the long run. Unless it's “I want to rank in the top five for ‘buy viagra’ in the next 7 days,” you'd better explain that you're recommending black hat primarily because you're not smart, talented and creative enough to find a white hat strategy to do it.

Kris makes a fair point with regards to Google, though (and Bing as well). The engines are not doing enough to stop spam and manipulation from black hat tactics (see www.moz.org/blog/im-getting-more-worried-about-the-effectiveness-of-webspam).

And, for as long as they fail on this front, there will be those seduced by Kris' viewpoint (Kris himself used to be quite white hat). To be fair, they've done a good job on several fronts recently—pushing down low-quality content farms in the Panda/Farmer update, making original content rank better, and putting more high quality brands in the SERPs (even if they're not doing perfect SEO).

The biggest problems (IMO) that we are seeing today are manipulative, black hat links obtained through paid sources; automated link drops, reciprocal spam, link rings and article spinning. (Article spinning is probably my least favorite tactic on the rise.) There aren't a lot of truly new types of black hat link manipulation techniques, but the old ones are, tragically, working again in a lot of niches. I hope that's next on Google's and Bing's radar. If it is, a lot of black hats are going to have some painful times. Even if it's rough, I think that's the only way to solve the problems web spam creates. One of my favorite parts of being a white hat is cheering for the search quality teams rather than against them, and getting that little bump in traffic every time they improve the quality of their algorithms.

BLACK HAT ≠ SEO

The last point of Kris' I'll tackle revolves around the jobs an SEO performs:

If your main offering is quality content—YOU ARE NOT AN SEO, you are a writer. If you are billing your client SEO prices for writing services you are ripping them off. If you didn't go to college for or otherwise study writing and literature and you are offering writing services to your client rather than advising them to hire someone who actually specializes and is trained in writing, you are ripping them off.

With the exception of very large sites, most onsite optimization opportunities can be identified and charted in an audit in a matter of a few days. Implementation in most cases won't take very long either and doesn't even really need to be conducted by an SEO if the audit is written up properly. What does that leave: content strategy and off-site SEO. The content strategy is just that ... a STRATEGY, which can be handed off to a competent writer. If you are still charging your client after this point and you aren't competing with all the tools available and you aren't advising them of someone else who could or would, then you are doing your client a disservice.

These are ludicrous statements, but I think Kris realizes it and is simply using them to generate controversy. Anyone who honestly believes that the extent of an SEO's job is to develop content strategies, audit for on-page SEO, and build links has never done the job professionally.

I wrote a blog post back in 2007 highlighting why SEO is so hard (www.moz.org/blog/what-makes-seo-seem-so-damn-hard). In it, I talked about the massive number of things that affect SEO, and that number has only grown. Today, a responsible SEO needs to be thinking about these things, to name a few:

- The business' overall product, marketing and sales strategy, and how SEO fits into that
- Keyword research and targeting (a process that requires tools, patience, intuition, testing and experience)
- Funnel optimization (CRO has both direct and indirect SEO impact these days)
- Testing and optimizing content for users (time on site, bounce rate, engagement, etc. all matter directly and indirectly)
- Content strategy (which ties into overall business strategy at the highest levels)
- On-page optimization. (Black hats were actually some of the earliest to notice that Google had become much smarter about on-page analysis than just keyword usage and repetition, so I'm sure Kris knows how in-depth this process can be.)
- Making the site search-engine friendly. (This has become a complex project for many otherwise simple sites as there are now features like faceted navigation, AJAX crawling, JavaScript, Flash and many, many others to consider.)
- XML Sitemaps. We recently presented a 90-minute webinar (www.moz.org/webinars/getting-value-from-xml-sitemaps) on this topic that generated dozens of questions; it's not the fire-and-forget tactic that many think it is.
- Analytics. Visitor monitoring is just the start. There are webmaster tools, link monitoring, brand mentions and alerts, social media tracking and more to consider now.
- Vertical search listings (such as local/maps/places, video, images, news, blogs, and shopping). Optimizing for just one of these categories can be a full-time job.
- Usability and user experience issues (since these can significantly impact rankings)
- Reputation tracking and management
- Competitive research
- Social media marketing. No SEO can afford to ignore social today, and that's a massive strategic and tactical undertaking.
- Syndication, scraping, copyright, and duplicate content issues

If Kris thinks pounding links at a page until it ranks is the majority of his SEO responsibilities, I'm worried. (Note: I don't actually believe that's the case; I've met Kris and he's a very smart guy. Instead, I suspect significant hyperbole went into his writing.) If anyone out there tells you that this is how they're going to do SEO, you'd better make sure they're either a highly specialized contractor, or find another provider who can help you think holistically about all of these factors.

WHY WE CAN'T IGNORE BLACK HAT ENTIRELY

When I was in Munich keynoting SMX in 2011, I spent some time with a retiring black hat, Bob Rains. Bob, who's moving to the white hat world and joining TandlerDoerje in Germany, participated with me in a panel discussion on black hat social media tactics. In particular, Bob mentioned a tactic wherein he'd build Twitter and Facebook profiles for racehorses that would garner thousands of followers by making the profiles seem "more real than real," even pretending to be "official" Twitter accounts for the horses on occasion. On game day, he could then tweet/share a link to his gambling site. Users visited the site to place bets on the horses, netting Bob big affiliate payouts.

To do this manipulative work, though, Bob had to work incredibly hard to have real conversations on these social sites, upload photos from events, tweet interesting stats and experiences that could be verified. In other words ... he was building great content!

My recommendation was simple: just call the account a "fan page" and you'll be 100 percent white hat. You're building a great social profile; why not make it something that Twitter/Facebook won't shut down if they get word of it from the real owners? Why not go one extra step? Remove the "official" title and BE white hat! Yes, you might have a slightly harder time building up the profiles, but they'll last forever! And you'll be able to sleep at night!

I highlight this story because it perfectly illustrates how close black and white hat marketing often are. It also shows why I love talking to black hats and learning from them. There's almost always a way to take the knowledge and experiences from black hats—the best of whom, like Bob, are often massively creative—and apply it in white hat ways.

Three weeks prior to that event, first in London and next in New Orleans, Distilled hosted a one-day intensive seminar on link building. One of the talks at each event was called "Lessons from the Dark Side: What White Hats Can Learn from Black Hat SEO." Two presenters, Martin Macdonald (in London) and Kris Roadruck (in NOLA), gave talks about their experiences with web spam's effectiveness, limitations, and takeaways. I thought both presentations were excellent. They clearly indicated the danger of black hat SEO. Kris' deck started with almost a dozen slides about how and why not to do what he showed. They didn't pull any punches in showing the ups and downs of a spammer's life.

SEOs have a responsibility to understand and appreciate how and why black hat SEO operates. It's certainly not the first or most important step in an SEO education, but it's part of being a true professional. No one who does IT consulting would neglect to become educated about hacking and malicious attacks. No one who does public relations avoids studying the manipulative tactics practiced in their field. Even in industries like construction and contracting, it pays to understand how, why, and when shoddy work and cut corners happen. So, too, must professional, white hat SEOs know the range of tactics at play in our field.

In early 2011, I answered a related question on Quora (www.quora.com/SEO/What-techniques-do-websites-use-to-game-the-Google-search-engine):



Knowing more about each of the practices listed in that post can make you a better SEO. I'm not someone who pretends to have great expertise in this field. Every time, though, that I hear a black hat share a successful tactic that isn't illegal or just drive-by spam, I learn something, and am often able to come up with a way to leverage the same effect in a white hat way.

WHY WHITE HAT IS ALWAYS BETTER

There are very few things in the world that I perceive as wholly black and white. Spamming the search engines versus practicing authentic, organic marketing, however, is one of them.

It's my opinion that for real brands and real businesses, the choice of going 100 percent white hat will pay massive dividends every time. Here's why:

- 1. There's always a better way to spend that time and money.** Spam isn't free or easy, despite the image some black hats portray. When I hear about the actual costs and time commitments black hats invest, I'm blown away. For not much more time—and often less money—those same businesses and sites could invest in long-term, high value white hat tactics. Many just lack the creativity and willingness to do the hard work, while others are seduced by the promise of a quick win or simply ignorant of other options.
- 2. White hat builds exciting companies, spam doesn't.** With a very small number of exceptions, spam doesn't build exciting, scalable, long-term companies. It creates relatively small amounts of temporary wealth. If you're unwilling to trade short-term gains for long-term success, you're probably hurting the online ecosystem. None of us should endorse that behavior.
- 3. White hat rankings can be shared.** That means never having to sweat hiding dirty secrets, protecting your tactics or link sources, jumping through hoops to keep your footprint

anonymous, or refraining from showing off your site. The benefits of transparency improve your ability to do PR, branding, and networking. All of those, in turn, help SEO.

4. **Spam always comes with high risks.** Whether it's tomorrow, next month, or three years from now before you get knocked out of the search engines, it will happen. You can invest in multiple sites and tactics, shore up defenses, and build anonymity to hide your online profile. Honestly, though, if you applied that creativity and effort to white hat ... Just saying.
5. **You're renting rankings rather than buying them.** Devaluation of spam tactics means you have to stay one step ahead of the engines, and can never spend a week free from sweating what will and won't be found. White hat may take longer. If done right, though, it can put you in an unassailable position of strength for the long term.
6. **Reliability in the spam world sucks.** The people who sell spammy links or offer spam services are nearly always fly-by-night operations, moving from one business model to the next. Spammers are almost never long-term operators.
7. **Any victory is a hollow one.** I don't just mean in a touchy-feely way, I mean that no matter how many times you rank well with spam or how much you make, it's just money (and often far too little to sustain you, meaning you've got to go create more spam tomorrow). You're not building something real, long-lasting and sustainable—and you're rarely fulfilling any of the other requirements for job satisfaction or happiness.
8. **The money's not that good.** Ask yourself who the most prolific, talented, high profile spammers are in the world. I can name a good dozen or so and none of them are retired, only a few are millionaires, and not a one (to my knowledge) has made eight figures, with the exception of a few truly dark hat individuals who've earned their money from porn empires or illegal activities.
9. **There is legal danger.** I hesitate to bring this up because some folks in the search sphere have overemphasized this danger. However, the FTC, the British government and the EU all have regulations about disclosure of interests, and a lot of link buying and link spamming behavior violates these rules. We've yet to see serious enforcement. Personally, though, I have no tolerance for risk of this kind, and I suspect many others don't either.
10. **Spam never builds value in multiple channels.** What I love about the inbound/organic marketing philosophy is how it builds a site that attracts authentic traffic from hundreds of sources, often without any additional work. Spamming your way to a #1 ranking might send search traffic, but if the web shifts to Facebook/Twitter or if email marketing becomes the biggest tactic in your niche, or if a competitor wins purely on branding and branded search, you're up a creek. You've built nothing of real value—nothing to make people come back and share and like, +1, tweet, link, email, stumble, vote for, or shout to the heavens about. Spam builds a shell of a marketing strategy. One crack, and it's all over.

These graphics were in a slide presentation I made, but they're worth repeating here.

Take Time Invested in These:



Do This Stuff Instead; It Really Works



Who ranks #1 for “online dating?” It’s not a black hat, but a site that found a genius way to become a content and media hub, OkCupid. How about “buy shoes online,” one of the top converting terms in the apparel industry. It’s Zappos, a brand that’s put customer service, great

product and a unique business model into their SEO campaigns. Big props to Adam Audette, who made Zappos a shining star in the SEO ecommerce world. Or “real estate values,” an incredibly competitive term that’s only risen in popularity with the market crisis? It’s Zillow. Or “travel blog site,” where some brilliant viral marketing earned Travelpod the top position. Or “art prints,” where Benchmark-backed Art.com outranks even the exact match domain.

I could go on and on and on. The sites that people WANT to click on in the results are white hat. The ones that make searchers, technologists, marketers, and search quality engineers happy are sites that deserve to rank. When you build a brand that does that, and then optimize in a way that no web spam engineer would ever want to discount, you’ve earned yourself a truly competitive advantage in SEO. Black hat is, much of the time, a sad excuse for a lack of creativity, discipline, and willingness to invest in the long term.

Here’s hoping that the SEO industry continues to grow, flourish, and attract brilliant, creative minds. Over the past nine years of my career in this field, I’ve seen great progress, but not enough. I can promise that Moz and our partners are going to do everything in our power to bring greater legitimacy, value, and economic opportunity to the field of search and inbound marketing. It’s a fight I look forward to every day.

P.S. I put out a call on Twitter for great white hat sites ranking for competitive phrases, and received some terrific responses:

- Online budget app, Budget Simple (www.budgetsimple.com) has a well-designed site and top three rankings for “online budget” and “free online budget,” competing against the likes of Mint and Intuit.
- Mini Mave in Denmark (www.min-mave.dk) has legendary SEO Mikkel deMib as a partner and top rankings for competitive terms like “gravid” (Danish for “pregnant”). Last year, they recorded over a million keywords sending many millions of visits to the site.
- Science equipment supplier Edmunds (www.scientificsonline.com) has a great site with links that rock and a brand that’s trusted throughout the community. Their rankings for hyper-competitive searches like “science equipment” and “scientific supplies” along with a massive long-tail presence show the power of white hat in ecommerce niches.
- Online appliance retailer 8Appliances (www.8appliances.com.au) just started their online marketing, but they’ve already had success, earning more than 50,000 search visits monthly from top 10 rankings for queries like “miele kitchen appliances” (in Google Australia).
- Mexican-focused travel site Journey Mexico (www.journeymexico.com) has been having a lots of success in niche search results like “cultural travel mexico” and with its awesome blog.

White hat can be done, even in boring industries or for competitive queries. Anyone who says otherwise isn’t telling the truth.

