

Search Engine Optimization Analysis

www.pathfinderstravel.net

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Recommended Keyphrases	4
Keyphrases Targeting Local Michigan Customers	5
Keyphrases Targeting Online Customers.....	6
On-Site SEO Issues & Recommendations	7
Site URLs.....	7
Domain Name	7
Subpage URLs.....	7
Structural Markup.....	8
<title></title> Tags.....	8
Description <meta /> Tag	8
<body></body> Content.....	9
Content that targets different site visitors	10
Additional content to attract visitors	11
Off-Site SEO Issues & Recommendations	13
Current Inbound Links.....	13
Increasing Inbound Links	14

Executive Summary

A search engine optimization analysis was conducted of the pathfinderstravel.net website to determine what changes could be implemented to improve the site's ranking in search results entered by two target customer groups:

- Residents of the local areas surrounding Pathfinders Travel's three western Michigan locations.
- Online internet users from any geographic location who would use Pathfinders Travels' services remotely.

The analysis looked at the site's structural markup and content as well as which other sites were linking to it in order to determine how the site could be optimized so that search engine spiders could effectively index the site and how to create inbound links from other highly-ranked sites.

The major recommendations for optimizing pathfinderstravel.net include:

- **Use additional URLs which are significantly different than other companies' URLs and which provide more information about Pathfinders Travel's services and its location.** These URLs can be permanently redirected toward the existing URL.
- **Use effective <title></title> and <meta description /> tags to describe the page's content and use keyphrases.** These items are given high priority by search engines and are often used as descriptions in search engine results.
- **Use efficient html code that uses CSS styling, proper use of heading tags, and alt tags.** The site currently uses table-based layouts, which are harder to index, as well as graphic text and JavaScript-generated text, which cannot be indexed.
- **Find other sites to be linked from, such as business and local directories, blogs, websites of related businesses, and sponsored non-profits.**
- **Add tools and features to the site that non-customer visitors would use and would link to.** Possible features to include are a honeymoon registry, a currency calculator, and photos of customers' trips.

While these are among the most important recommendations, the report discusses several other possible actions that could be taken to improve the site's search engine rankings.

Recommended Keyphrases

To optimize the page rank of pathfinderstravel.net, specific keyphrases that users may search for should be used within the text that would be indexed by the search engine spider. These keyphrases should accurately describe the content of the site, reflect the language that internet users would enter in a web search, and, when possible, use phrases that are unique to Pathfinders Travel so that searches for these keyphrases would not locate competitor sites as well.

Each of these keyphrases was entered in each of the three major search engines (Google, Yahoo, and Bing) to determine if they would create the desired results. These categories are divided into two groups since separate keyphrases would attract local and online customers.

Keyphrases Targeting Local Michigan Customers

Suggested Keyphrase	Current Search Rankings			Explanation
	Google	Yahoo	Bing	
West Michigan travel agency	66	8	22	Describes general geographic area of agency and specific cities
travel agency serving west Michigan	105	-	-	Because west Michigan is a popular destination for people to travel to, searches for “West Michigan travel” retrieve mostly results about travel to Michigan. The phrases “serving West Michigan” and “located in western Michigan” indicate that the agency focuses on Michigan residents who wish to travel elsewhere. These keyphrases also use the different variations of the word “agent” and “agency”.
travel agent located in western Michigan	8	-	-	
Big Rapids travel agent	1	-	-	It appears that Pathfinders Travel is the only agency in Big Rapids, so this keyphrase should retrieve it first.
Zeeland Michigan travel agency	3	-	-	The actual site did not appear in Yahoo or Bing search engine results, but directory listings did appear.
Mecosta County travel agent	-	-	-	This county includes the Big Rapids location, although this keyphrase did not locate either Pathfinders Travel or any of its competitors.
Ottawa County travel agent	-	-	-	This county includes the Holland and Zeeland locations, although this keyphrase did not locate either Pathfinders Travel or any of its competitors.
Business travel agency west Michigan	--	-	93	Although this keyphrase did not find Pathfinders Travel, it found few of its local competitors.

Keyphrases Targeting Online Customers

Because of the large number of online travel companies, Pathfinders Travel did not rank within the top 150 results of any non-geographic searches. However, these keyphrases were chosen because they highlight that Pathfinders Travel offers personalized, customized service provided by experienced specialists, as opposed to an online reservations system.

Suggested Keyphrase	Current Search Rankings			Explanation
	Google	Yahoo	Bing	
Personalized vacation planning services	- ---	-	- ---	This retrieved lots of travel agencies and adventure travel-related businesses from all over the world, but no local competitors and accurately describes Pathfinders Travel’s key selling point.
Personalized adventure travel planning	- ---	-	- ---	This retrieved some possible competitors but also emphasizes one of Pathfinders Travel’s key selling points.
Online cruise database	- ---	- ---	- ---	There are a number of other online cruise databases, but many of them are specific to one cruise lines or location.
International travel specialist	- ---	- ---	- -	The word “specialist” conveys that Pathfinders Travel staff provide a higher level of service than is often conveyed with the word “agent”.
Full-service Honeymoon planning	- ---	- ---	- ---	In addition to describing one of their key services, this keyphrase retrieved many wedding planning sites as well as other travel agencies, so the number of possible competitors was reduced.
Complete online vacation planning	- ---	- ---	- -	This resulted in mostly online-only travel sites (like Travelocity) or destination sites, not direct competitors of Pathfinders Travel.

On-Site SEO Issues & Recommendations

Site URLs

Domain Name

A site's domain name is one of the primary factors in how a site's content is indexed, and should therefore be as descriptive and unique as possible. The URL <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/> reflects the name of the site's owner, Pathfinders Travel Inc., although there are two issues with this URL that could negatively affect search engine rankings.

- The URL is very similar to URLs used by other companies:
 - <http://www.pathfinderstravel.com/>, an ethnic travel magazine, is the first result listed when "Pathfinders Travel" is entered in any of the three major search engines. Since only the suffix differs from <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/>, internet users could easily mistype the URL or incorrectly code inbound links, particularly since the .com suffix is more commonly used than .net.
 - Other similar URLs--<http://pathfindertrvl.com/> and <http://www.pathfinder-travel.net/>-are used by a travel agency in Kansas. As a result, a potential customer may visit that agency's site instead of <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/>.
- The URL does not help identify its geographic location or specify which type of travel services it provides.

Recommendation: In addition to continuing to use the [pathfinderstravel.net](http://www.pathfinderstravel.net) site, use additional URLs from which users are redirected (via a permanent redirect) to the original URL. Examples of possible additional URLs are:

- pathfinderfullservicetravel.com
- pathfinderstravelmichigan.com
- pathfinderstravelmi.com
- pathfinderstravelagency.com westmichigantravelagent.com

As of the publication of this report in early October 2009, these domain names are all available.

Subpage URLs

Each of the site's subpages has a numeric URL which, in addition to being difficult to remember, cannot be indexed effectively by search engine spiders. For example:

- The Locations page URL is currently <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/default.asp?sid=8389&pid=13699>.

- The URL of the Celebrity Cruises page of the Cruises section is currently <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/cruises/SearchResults.asp?v1=1&searchid=28184&sid=8390>

Recommendation: Rewrite the subpage URLs (such as via Apache mod_rewrite) to be more descriptive so that users and search engines can detect more meaningful URLs. For example, with rewritten URLs:

- The locations page would be <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/locations>
- The Celebrity Cruise page would be <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/cruises/celebrity>

Structural Markup

<title></title> Tags

Currently, nearly all of the page's <title></title> tags are identical to the name of the one- or two-word navigation link assigned to them. For example, the home page <title></title> is "PATHFINDERS TRAVEL – Home", and the current <title></title> of the Locations page is "PATHFINDERS TRAVEL – Locations".

However, <title></title> tags should provide detail on the site's content since they are looked at closely by spiders and are sometimes used as the description in search engine results.

Recommendation: Create a <title></title> tag for each page that is unique and effectively describes the page's content. Titles should also include keyphrases when appropriate.

Examples of effective titles are:

- Personalized Vacation Planning Services - "Pathfinders Travel" for the home page <title></title>
- "Locations in Holland, Big Rapids, and Zeeland, Michigan" could be used for the locations page.

Description <meta /> Tag

<Meta /> tags are often used as the description on the search engine results page. While many pages on pathfinders.net do have description <meta /> tags that describe the page, these are missing from several pages.

Recommendation: Add a unique <meta /> tag to each page that accurately describes the page's content and uses keyphrases if possible. Examples of effective keyphrases are:

- The home page's current description <meta /> tag, "Specializing in selling Celebrity and Azamara Cruises to Europe Mediterranean Cruise Specials", could be reworded to "Pathfinders Travel is a full-service travel agency serving West Michigan as well as providing complete online vacation planning, including cruises, adventure travel ,

honeymoons, and corporate travel.” The home page’s description <meta />tag should be between 150 to 200 words.

- The Cruises page’s current <meta /> tag, “Pathfinders Travel offers cruise specials with their cruise search engine” could be reworded to: “Pathfinders Travel can help find your next cruise and book shore trips. Use our online cruise database to find cruises with Azamara, Celebrity, Disney, Holland America, Princess, Royal Caribbean and other cruise lines.” Each subpage’s description <meta /> tag should be between 200 – 250 characters.

<body></body> Content

To allow search engine spiders to index a page effectively, the body content should include standards-compliant html code and text created using HTML rather than JavaScript or graphics. However, the site is currently coded using tables instead of more-efficient CSS styling, and does not properly use headers and image alt text.

The first 2 - 3 sentences inside the <body></body> tag will be given the highest priority by search engine spiders and may also appear in the search engine results. As a result, every page should begin with text that includes keyphrases and reflects the page’s content.

Recommendation: Use primarily HTML code instead of graphics and JavaScript.

Search engine spiders do not index graphic text or script generated with JavaScript. As a result, as much content as possible should be coded using html. Graphics should include alt text so that spiders can read the information contained in the graphic.

The site currently uses a large amount of JavaScript-generated code and graphical text. For example:

- The only HTML currently used in the body of the home page (which is therefore the only body text that can be indexed) is:
 - the navigation links
 - the text “Pathfinders Travel has been voted West Michigan's #1 Travel Agency two years in a row!”
 - descriptions of each featured cruise
 - footer content
- The “Adventures By Disney” page of the Adventure Travel section is one large graphic.

Many pages of the site (such as the Cruise section) have content dynamically generated with JavaScript. Since JavaScript may be necessary to keep this content current, these sections should also include html code that explains what information is being generated. For example, the only html text used in the main content of the Azamara Cruises page is “Search Results.”

This could be recoded to use an <h2> with the text “Azamara Cruises” and the <h3> Search Results</h3>.

Additionally, current product information could appropriately be used in a table with html-coded <th>, <caption>, and <summary> tags so that spiders can index the types of content included in the table (the actual data in the td cells can still be generated via JavaScript).

Recommendation: Use headings to indicate text that should be given priority.

No headings are currently being used although it is strongly recommended that they be added since these have the second highest weighting after titles. Each page should have one <h1></h1> tag and have as many lower-level heading tags as needed (without skipping levels).

The home page could be recoded to incorporate the following headings:

- <h1>Pathfinders Travel, Inc.</h1>: This graphic logo could be used along with the h1 heading via image replacement, in which the graphic lies on top of the heading so a visitor viewing graphics would not see the h2 text. However, search engines would detect the heading. Currently, “Pathfinders Travel” is only an image at the top of each page.
- <h2>Welcome to Pathfinders Travel: a full-service travel agency serving both online customers and the local western Michigan community.</h2>
- <h2>Featured Vacation Packages</h2>
- <h3>Celebrity Caribbean Cruises</h3>
- <h3> Royal Caribbean Cruises</h3>

Content that targets different site visitors

Recommendations:

- **Include text on the home page that introduces first-time visitors to Pathfinders Travel, such as:**

Our specialties include both domestic and international travel, personalized vacation planning services, adventure travel, honeymoon planning, corporate travel, and travel insurance.

This page could also feature content that would be of interest to returning visitors, such as current discounts and packages.
- **Use overview pages with multiple subpages instead of long pages.**

Several pages include a large amount of information, causing important information to appear later in the code. This could prevent this information to be indexed by spiders (some of which only index the first 200 words of text).

For sections with a large amount of content, an overview page should be used with links to subpages. For example, the Adventure Travel page could feature text describing Pathfinders' adventure travel services (including keyphrases), plus links to subpages for Natural Habitat Adventures and Adventures By Disney.

- **Emphasize calls to actions.**

If a specific action can be performed on a page, it should prominently highlighted. For example, on the page featuring the cruise search, the words "Search for your next cruise!" should be the most prominent text on the page.

- **Include office locations on each page.**

Since Pathfinders wishes to increase its customer base within the local community, the site should include all three locations in the footer of page instead of just the main Holland office. This will help spiders associate each location which each service the agency provides.

- **Provide descriptive link text.**

Links are also given priority by search engine spiders, so words used to link pages within the site should be carefully worded to effectively describe the destination page.

Many links are only graphics without any accompanying html code. For links that benefit from being graphical (such as the Travel Insurance link on the home page, which is a graphic of the "Travel Guard" logo), add alt text and an additional html link (such as a short description which can be indexed). Other links can be coded with html, such as the "More Details" and Contact Us" links included with each product description.

Additionally, all links should include text specific for their destination instead of text. For example, if the product's name is "7-day Eastern Caribbean Cruise", its link text should read 'More details about the 7-day Eastern Caribbean Cruise" instead of "more details".

- **Use breadcrumbs on each page.**

In addition to providing visitors with an easy way to navigate throughout the site, breadcrumbs are another opportunity to use keywords.

Additional content to attract visitors

Some types of content may attract visitors that are not actively looking for the services of a travel agent. Examples include FAQs (such as Frequently Asked Questions about preparing for

your cruise) or vacation spot reviews. These visits could result in additional business for Pathfinders Travel.

Recommendation: Use summaries and pull quotes on each page to emphasize keyphrases.

Keywords and phrases can be appropriately repeated within a page if the page begins with a summary of its content. A summary could also be a way to include keywords on JavaScript-generated pages. For example, the Azamara Cruise page could include a paragraph such as:

Azamara offers luxurious cruises throughout the Caribbean, Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Destinations include Athens, Rome, Sorrento, Miami, and Alexandria. Many Azamara cruises are part of the Vacation Vignette program and feature the services of a concierge host, a bon voyage reception, and exclusive shore events. Contact a Pathfinders international travel specialist for more information.

Customer testimonials can also be included in block quotes. In addition to telling users about previous customers, these quotes may include words that prospective customers are likely to search the internet with.

Off-Site SEO Issues & Recommendations

Search engines often rank pages partly based on how many other pages link to them and on the quality of those links (one link from a higher-ranked page may be much more valuable than multiple links from lower-ranked pages). As a result, optimizing a site requires finding opportunities to get higher-ranked pages to link to the site.

Current Inbound Links

Yahoo's Site Explorer tool (<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/>), which shows the number of inbound links to a page, reports that the URL <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/> is linked to from the following sites:

- Business Directories:
 - Yahoo Directories including Yahoo! Canada, Yahoo! Australia and New Zealand, Yahoo! Singapore, and Yahoo! UK and Ireland
 - Business directories including yellowpages.com, humanresourcemall.com, ottawacountybusinesslist.com, and guideall.com
 - New Bride (<http://newbride.net/resources/Honeymoon.shtml>), a directory of local wedding planning resources
- City directories:
 - Feel the Zeel (<http://www.feelthezeel.com/>), a site listing information about and businesses in the city of Zeeland
 - Holland, Michigan Search (<http://holland.org/search>), a travel information site for the Holland, Michigan area
- Nonprofits who have been sponsored by Pathfinders Travel
 - Kids Healing Kids (<http://www.kidshealingkids.com/sponsors.html>)
 - Holland Area Arts Council (<http://hollandarts.org/fundraiser.php>)
- Other travel-related companies:
 - Quick Shuttle Travel Agent Links (http://us.lrd.yahoo.com/_ylt=A0oG7zZRwcxK8iQBCLvbl8kF/SIG=11oqrcrs6/EXP=1255019217/**http%3a//www.quickcoach.com/agents.htm), a bus service serving Seattle and Vancouver whose site includes a list of travel agents throughout the US and Canada.
 - <http://eurotrailtours.com/links/links.html>

Increasing Inbound Links

Recommendations:

- **Specify a Canonical URL.**

The Pathfinders homepage can be accessed with the following URLs: <http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/>, <http://pathfinderstravel.net/>, <http://pathfinderstravel.net/default.asp?sid=8389&pid=10576>, and <http://pathfinderstravel.vacationport.net/>. Although each of these URLs links to the home page, it is possible that Google could be assigning a page rank to each separately, which lowers the page rank overall for the site.

To make sure that Google knows which URL to assign a page rank to, use the <link rel="canonical" href="" /> tag. For example, add <link rel="canonical" href="<http://www.pathfinderstravel.net/>" /> to the <head></head> of the home page.

- **Submit the URL to Web Directories.**

Although the Pathfinders Travel URL already appears in a number of business and local directories, there are numerous others that it can be submitted to. Some of these can be submitted free of charge and others will require a fee. Possible directories to submit to are:

- The Open Directory Project (dmoz.org)
- Geographic-based business directories such as The Michigan Business Directory (<http://www.michiganbusiness.us/>) and Discover Our Town: The Ultimate US Travel, Tourism & Relocation Guide (<http://www.discoverourtown.com/MI/Holland/>)
- Travel resource directories such as Travel Directory (<http://www.travel-directory.org/>)
- Travel agent search tools such as <http://www.travelsense.org/agents/> (can search by destination and specialty and by location)

- **Find blogs to be linked from.**

Try to be linked to from blogs, especially blogs on a niche topic such as:

- http://www.mlive.com/travel/index.ssf/traveling_coach/index.html a blog targeted toward Michigan residents who are going to travel
- <http://www.shipcriticblog.com/> - a sponsored blog about cruises

Start with any bloggers with whom there is already an existing relationship.

Another option would be for Pathfinders Travel to start its own blog that could be of use to travelers in general, not just customers. Topics could include destinations, travel trends, and advice on specific travel situations.

- **Use related business and organization websites.**

Find businesses and groups whose services complement the travel industry. These include:

- Wedding-related businesses: Pathfinders could emphasize its honeymoon and guest travel services. Local wedding-related organizations include:
 - <http://www.michiganweddingsolutions.com/index.htm>
 - <http://www.westmichiganweddingassociation.org/vendors.php?c=Bridal-Coordinator-Consultant-Wedding-Planner>
<http://www.westmichiganweddingplanner.com/TravelHoneymoon/tabid/221/Default.aspx>
- Enthusiasts of sports and hobbies that may involve travel, especially to locations that Pathfinders Travel specializes in: For example the Sea Hunt Dive Club of West Michigan (<http://www.seahuntclub.org/>) is a social club of divers which whose members may frequently travel to popular diving spots like the Caribbean. These types of sites often have links to resources.

- **Host meetings of local groups at a business location.** The link will often be included in event announcements and in blogs and tweets about the event.

- **Continue to sponsor local non-profits**, since it has already effectively created inbound links.

- **Create reciprocal links partnerships.**

Partner with non-competitor businesses that are related and agree to link to each other's web sites. For example, Pathfinders Travel could have a include travel resources page that includes links to:

- Luggage and travel gear stores
- Hotels, airlines, and tourist sites
- Wedding and event planners

The Cruises page currently includes a graphic link to Shoretrips although the Shoretrips site appears not have a link back to Pathfinders Travel. This could be a possible reciprocal link.

- **Write articles to be published in local and industry sites.**

Staff could write articles for online travel sites and magazines, with links to [pathfinderstravel.net](http://www.pathfinderstravel.net) in a short bio at the end of the article. Similar to the blog, these could be on topics of interest to non-customers.

- **Add free tools to the site.**

Add features that travelers frequently use so that others may link to them. . Many of these items are linked to from the Travel Resources page, although the site itself could easily include these:

- Currency calculator
- Time zone calculator
- Weather information
- A “Travel Tip of the Day”
- Checklists of what to bring and what to do to prepare for specific destination(s) that can be maintained online, downloaded, or printed
- A honeymoon registry for couples who make honeymoon reservations. This would bring traffic in from friends and family of the couples.
- Pages for customers to share their photos and post updates of trips reserved through Pathfinders Travel with family and friends, expanding on the current “Client Photo of the Month”. Although this feature would provide optional password-protection, it would bring traffic to the site.