

An Interview with Benj Arriola, 2007 SEO World Champion

Hello, this is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the largest book ever written on the subject of Social Media. Today we are here with Benj Arriola who has won a #1 spot in two international SEO contests. One was the prestigious, and highly budgeted, 2007 SEO World Championship, organized by the Swedish SEO Corporation, *GetUpDated*.

Benj has bested the top SEO all around the world and the over all champion, winning a brand new European car, a Citroen C2. Benj is currently considered one of the top SEO professionals in the world, and today we are going to be speaking with Benj about SEO; Search Engine Optimization.

So, let's get started!

LS: So, Benj, can you please tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what your backgrounds is, and mention a little bit about that award that you took?



BA: Okay. To start off, yes, I am Benj Arriola, as you've mentioned, an SEO Engineer, or SEOlogist. The titles, you can get them all mixed up, but [01:18.0] SEO.

I started out a career as a chemist and my...I started to move into SEO when I started doing IT jobs on the side, simply because it was my interest, and started running a business in web design and web development; and that moved into SEO as the years went along.

As for the contest, I was really fascinated by SEO and I'm pretty much a competitive person. I like to challenge myself and see how far my skills will reach in comparison with the rest of the people in the world. So that was my main interest. It was not really to win; it was really to test out the skills that I have. And I believe, in any SEO contest, it's a learning process where you learn new things. So when I tried it out, and I've done several contests also in the past, and I was fortunate enough to win the contest and won a brand new car in 2007.

LS: That's pretty incredible! I mean, SEO is probably the most important three letters that has ever affected the internet; and to be able to take a World Championship and actually win a new car, I mean really, that says a heck of a lot because it's a multi-billion dollar industry.

BA: I guess...you've said it all!

LS: Well, you and I know what an SEO is and what a Search Engine Optimization is, but most of the people are going to be reading this *Social Media Bible* probably aren't going to have a real handle on, first of all, what is Search Engine Optimization, and secondly, why is it so important. Can you just kind of tell us, tell the beginner, some tips about it; what it is, and why it is important to them?



BA: Okay! So what it is; Search Engine Optimization, from the word itself; this is...often might be a website, to perform well, a search engine, as we all know in the internet today existing in many of the websites, Google is almost like a verb today. People will say, “You googled it.”

People get to websites today through these search engines. They search for what they’re looking for. It could be a product, it could be a service; and in Search Engine Optimization this is making sure that websites perform well and search engines giving these websites top rankings.

When you say, “top rankings” these are like the first position in the search engine results; trying to be there in the top #1 spot, or at least to be in the first three pages. Because, as research shows, most people don’t go beyond the first page.

LS: True. So, Search Engine Optimization really is about tweaking your web pages; not just your home page, by the way, but your other web pages, to make them “search engine compatible” so that when somebody’s looking for a particular key word that represents your product or service, that your website is done in such a way that you will show up, at least, on the first page or the first three pages. Because after that, you pretty much don’t have a chance.

BA: Yes! Comparing that to the traditional media you know, compare it to a T.V., print and radio. With Search Engine Optimization, at least you know your target market is really searching for you. Unlike T.V. ad spots where you are relying on everything on demographic data, hoping that the watching audience is your target market, even if they’re not really looking for your product or service.

LS: So the trick is that as soon as they get on the internet and type in a few key words that represent what you “do” or “sell”, that you really want to direct them over to your website so you can start developing that relationship.

BA: True.

LS: Got it! And what are some of the pitfalls? Because I know that, oh the last couple of years I’ve taught SEO and SEM in over 100 cities a year and inevitably I always hear some of the horror stories about companies that are supposedly selling Search Engine Optimization and, in a lot of cases, they really aren’t; as well as Search Engine Registering. What are some of the pitfalls that your people look out for?

BA: Okay, pitfalls. First is there are really some credible Search Engine Optimization companies out there, and there are also some that are...ahh...they think they know what they are doing, but they don’t “really” know what they are doing; or some purposely do not know what they are doing, but they are still selling the service. Okay?

So, pitfalls. First is guaranteed rankings; any company that guarantees rankings or ranking. That is already a “red flag”. You cannot really guarantee an “organic” spot; what you could guarantee, probably, is a sponsored result, or using Pay For Click advertising. But that is also not guaranteed; depending on the budget a client is willing to spend.

Now a person that...or an SEO firm...that explains more methodology and shows ranking results over time, doing reporting, showing trending results, and has a plan that will show you how to get to a higher ranking...now that sounds more like a...more credible company. Someone that says that they could provide improved ranking sounds better than guaranteeing a certain spot, like a #1 position. Over time it is achievable, but guaranteeing is not something that you can really promise.

LS: That's a really good point, because you do hear a lot of companies, especially marketing companies, who were traditional marketing companies a few years ago and when SEO became fashionable, they sold that service to their clients, when in fact, they do not have a clue. And "guaranteed". I think that's a really good point that you brought up, because if you do SEO, there is no guarantee, but you will see really good results. The only guarantee is that if you don't do it, you won't show up at all.

BA: Yes, that's true. I guess another thing that consumers...all other companies that will avail SEO services, should look out for is companies that are "too much" focused on ranking. There are so many companies that are focused on ranking today. And SEO today is slowly moving into the direction of looking into conversions, where a conversion is either a sale or a lead or having someone...having a visitor download the software...the trial software, an eBook, a White Paper. That is what you want. You want someone to use your site, because sometimes you can concentrate so much on ranking that even though you get the #1 spot for your targeted key word, if they visit your site and they are not pleased, they hit the back button, they go to the #2 one and they are pleased, you lost your market right there.

LS: That's another really good point and I'm so happy that you brought that up because SEO is about getting ranked, getting in the listing, and getting people to "click" on that to get them over to your website. But if your homepage isn't palatable, isn't exciting, doesn't have a "What's in it for you", a take-away for the clients, it doesn't do any good to do SEO because the customers will simply leave your site and go someplace else.

BA: Very true.

LS: So, what you're saying is it is kind of a "full program", not just the technology of SEO.

BA: Very true! I believe that SEO works hand and hand with everything else in the whole internet marketing business. It works well...it should...it should...SEO teams and your web-development team should have no conflicts at all. I believe "usability" and SEO also go well hand and hand. And I believe every other form of internet marketing should work well with SEO, from e-mail marketing to Social Media marketing. All this should merge together in one big pen.

LS: So that's one of the exciting things about Social Media. A lot of people really don't consider e-mail to be part of Social Media, but it is. It's a tool for communication and it's really about, if I'm hearing you correctly that bring all the tools that bear...both Social Media tools as well as SEO tools, as well as common sense...that it really is an integrated program.

BA: Yes, I agree. That's exactly it!

LS: Can you mention a little bit about...well, here's one of the things that you did, kind of, mention. You have to make the website and the content palatable for the user, and you also have to make it "design-specific" efficiently for the "spider" or the "robot" or the search engines.

What's this thing that you hear about, "key word" density and making sure that your content actually matches your key words, and some of the tricks that people are using that they shouldn't. I mean is there some specifics that you can share with us?

BA: Okay. Since you mention that there're tricks that some people shouldn't be doing; so more on the SEO part, I guess...I've been seeing more and more SEO's concentrating too much on getting links. "Links" is a good thing; actually, because it's like a vote of authority, it's like a vote of credibility to the search engines. Hence, if more sites are linking to you that means you must be important. Thus, you should get ranked higher. But there are more and more SEO people out there that are just doing the link, or the link alone; and not using some good content behind it.

Some people are concentrated too much on artificial link building that they abuse it so much and the search engines are really detecting that right now. They are no longer giving too much benefit to links that have no value. So....

LS: That gets back to the term "external reputable links", emphasis on the word "reputable."

BA: Yes, reputable is one good word to use there. Authoritative, as well.

LS: So your content on your site should, pretty much, align or somewhat complement the content on their external link or the search engines are going to recognize it and know that you're just trying to trick them?

BA: Ahh, they should really have relevant content. They should be related and if you're just linking from so many places that are not related, the search engines should really detect that, and they know that you are tricking them already.

LS: And what about some of the other things. Like having multiple URL's and portals and cloaking and....

BA: Yeah...multiple URL's...that's one thing that we also want to minimize because this has been a technique used in the past, making hooks [13:03.1], making [13:03.6] pages, making all these other pages which their objective is to fill up the whole page, the whole page #1, or the first few pages of search results, all going to your site.

Now, if all of these are all similar content, then this is where the search engines started applying the duplicate content filters. So, what we want to do is we want to minimize all these URL's, all which are all your sites, and it would be nice to just focus on one site, sending them the product or service you are offering...and just concentrating on one site alone...and a single URL, a single domain.

LS: So this also applies to redirects and for listeners who do not understand "redirect" this is when you have a multiple web site address and somebody types it in, you don't even know this, it just automatically takes you to the main website. But it has another portal. Do search engines get upset about that?

BA: Well, redirects could be used in two ways. The good way to use it is to consolidate all of your old pages or your old domains and your [14:17.3] websites and make them all consolidate to a single domain. That is the good thing to do.

Now, the abusive way of using redirects is buying old websites and using all these other pages, all these other websites. Some could be related, some could be not, and just making them all redirect to you single site. Whenever a page redirects, all the link-connectivity that a site has when it's redirected to your site, you bring along that link connectivity. It looks like you're links are increasing. So it could be abuse in a way. Although, in general, it's still is a good ethical SEO technique to consolidate all of your web pages that are all duplicates.

LS: Great. Great. So basically, if it's legitimate the search engines will probably recognize it. But if you're just high jacking traffic, then they'll probably pick up on that as well.

BA: Yes, I agree. Although I could say, you know, it's not 100% easy to detect. But, you know, there's always someone out there that could find it and once another SEO person can find it, that's one of your worse enemies because Google has their own spam report, [15:40.6] and also Yahoo and MSN has there own spam report form; but you have to fill it out to [15:46.9] website.

LS: And speaking of that wasn't there an issue a couple of years ago with BMW having multiple portals and redirects?

BA: Yes, I believe the main issue with BMW, that was the German site that was the dot ee...it was "poor man's cloaking". The poor mans cloaking was just a simple JavaScript with a no-script tag, wherein it was stuffed with many keywords. Amazingly, it still works because a lot of SEO people will say "key word" stuffing does not work anymore, where you just stuff you page with tons of keywords and though they don't appear in the page, it helps in your ranking.

But in the case of BMW, it was helping them probably because, also, with the authority of their domain, key word stuffing in a simple, no-script, JavaScript cloak content, it was ranking them high. And when Google found out about it, they kicked them out of the search engine results. Although they modified their page, I believe, within two days only. And they appealed to be included again, and they got back.

LS: Can you imagine that! If you try to trick search engines, and that's the cool thing that I respect about Yahoo and MSN and especially Google, is that if you try to trick them and they catch it, they will notify you and say, "Stop it!", and you do actually have a chance to make good. But I believe in BMW's case they kind of got a little arrogant about it and didn't respond quickly enough. And the penalty, from what I understand...correct me if I'm wrong...is that Google or the other search engines will actually remove your company's websites for up to five years.

BA: Yeah, they will.

LS: Can you imagine being the head of IT having to tell your direct report that you caused your company to be permanently eliminated from all search engines for five years?

BA: Ahh haa.

LS: That's pretty scary!

BA: Yeah, it is, ahh ha. It is a big problem.

LS: And you mention “cloaking” and “keyword stuffing”. For our listeners, can you just kind of just explain a little bit about what those two terms are?

BA: Okay. “Cloaking” is basically showing a different content to the people that visit your site, and also different content that is seen by the search engine. It could be done in several methods. It could be from JavaScript, CSS hiding, to more deeper methods like “user agent detection” which is like browser detection; or IP address detection, which is detecting the IP address of the person visiting you site.

And for “key word stuffing”, that is used in combination with cloaking where the key words are stuffed within the page so that it helps the ranking of the page. But when caught, then you get your corresponding penalties; and instead of improving your site you’re actually decreasing your ranking.

LS: You’re driven to the bottom of the list.

BA: Yeah.

LS: And one of the common things that I heard in the early days, which luckily nobody is really doing any more, and it gets back to this key word density if I’m not mistaken... where you tell the search engines in your code what are the important words and then you’re those words to communicate with your customer and the search engine kind of compares it to. And one of the earlier cloaking which I thought was kind of clever, is taking all of the key words (whether they’re appropriate or not) and just putting them at the bottom of the page and making them the same color as the background, so you couldn’t see them.

BA: Oh, yeah. That was one of the early methods that people were doing, like “White Text” and “Wrap Around”, like white text on background, and it did work for a while, but you know, that’s old school cloaking. I could say that cloaking still exists up to today but it’s more of the advanced methods on the dark side where most of the time it’s [19:59.3] detection and user-agent detection.

LS: And your advice is, “Don’t do it!”

BA: Of course!

LS: Okay. So Benj, tell me; I mean everybody’s going to want to know the answer to this question. How did you win the contest? What are some of the specific strategies and techniques and tactics that you actually used? How could you advise them...I mean, what did you do? Give us the secret!

BA: Okay. So, basically that contest was...the keywords were about global warming. So what I wanted to make is, really, a good-content site because a website with really good content could be viral...and add that twist of controversy, add something that would push people to really...when someone reads it they should have a feeling that they really want to pass it onto someone they know. It could be in any medium; by word-of-mouth, by phone, by email, by IM, in forums, in blogs...and that’s the viral...that’s the whole viral content.

Now, if your site isn’t virally working already, imagine just putting in Social Media within it, from social bookmarking to social networking, each person is connected to another person. It makes the spread even go faster. And when that spreads, that’s the ultimate link-maker right there.

Someone is just going to link to you, and they're just going to link and link and link to you. Although driving content requires some talent to make it viral. And then it does not always have to be content; it could be images, it could be videos. And in my case in the contest, since it was related to global warming, I came up with controversial topics about global warming. Wherein...was saying that global warming was not due to man-made carbon dioxide. Just by the title alone, people might react and say, "It is!"

So making that twist is what made it go around the scientific community as well as the political bloggers.....

LS: Cleaver!

BA:and it just helped overall in the contest.

LS: So, again, content is really the most important thing and sometimes just going "middle-of-the-road", kind of "vanilla-main-stream" is not necessarily the best way to go.

You created a viral affect by just being controversial.

BA: Yes, I agree. That's it!

LS: Ahh. So, really, it kind of gets back to the "What's in it for me?", or your clients or for whoever's actually looking at the page? If it's entertaining, if it has a good take away, then they'll simple pass it on to their trusted network.

BA: I agree. I think that's how you could say in all in one sentence!

LS: So the cool thing is...what I'm hearing is...is that, really it's not so much about the technology and the cloaking and the key-word stuffing; really it gets back to just putting the effort into creating good content.

BA: I totally agree! And this is also something that the novice SEO people should figure out. There are so many beginner SEO's that are concentrated so much in the, "What's the best way to I/O Pad? What's the best way to...where do I get most links, where could I link to and who could link to me?"

And sometimes it's just common sense in making something really, really good and then doing all the basics; where is all the on-page and off-page optimization.

LS: That's one of the things that I appreciate about this industry, and especially about the search engines, is that it's about integrity. If the search engines return the best possible relevant search results, then that makes them a better search engine. I think it's Google's algorithm, for example, that kind of pulled out ahead of Yahoo...even though Yahoo had most of the market...because the search engine results were just that much more relevant to the searcher.

BA: I totally agree! And speaking about that; whenever Google has the algorithmic change, they're doing it to improve...to come up with more relevant results. And they're also doing it so that people who are doing shady SEO techniques start getting pushed down.

And it's kind of funny when Google tries to improve its algorithm; there are some SEO people that complain! Where in a way, they should be happy and challenged because all you have to do is come up with good content. That's going to be the future.

And how I picture the future of SEO's...it's really the creative people that are going to make it smart. People that can come up with really cool viral stuff...is the future of SEO. And it is no longer the technical linking and linking and changing things in the codes.

LS: And that's a great observation, because so many of us are kind of "hamstrung" or don't have the ability to make changes to our web pages because the IT people kind of hold it hostage, if you would. I mean, my background is IT, so I'm not saying anything against IT, but it became so technical that the marketing and public-relations people, the sales people, really lost control over the last decade, of the webpage.

So, if I hear you correctly, it kind of sounds like there's kind of a shift here where it's less technical and actually just more creative.

BA: I totally agree, although the technical things should be already there by default. It's like everyone's going to learn it sooner or later and everyone knows it, and it's going to be a standard where everyone's doing it correctly.

And with usability on the rise, that's even pushing it even more...where all the standards will be in place and done correctly. And when everyone is doing that, who has the upper hand in ranking if everyone is doing the correct thing in coding?

LS: I like it!

BA: And that's where the creativity will come into play.

LS: And that's where my excitement is; that's where I took a personal interest in and actually taught it across the country...SEO and SEM...and the reason was it's really...it's about integrity. The more integrity you have, the more integrity is built into the search engine algorithms, the higher possibility you will get a higher ranking.

BA: I agree!

LS: Cool! Now can you think of any specific...I mean, talk about business successes. I mean the fact that you actually won a world championship and they gave you a car! That's a pretty good example. Can you think of any other practical examples where SEO, Search Engine Optimization, actually kind of pays off. I mean, can you think of an example?

BA: Well, when we say "example" are we talking about our own clients?

LS: Yeah, any clients? Something that you've read about or...

BA: Yeah. I work with two hats here. The first is, I am a SEO engineer for "*BusinessOnLine*" where they work with top-brand clients. Although I use to own my own small SEO business, some people might think that there is a conflict of interest there. But the companies I work for are not interested in the small "Mom and Pop"

companies, while in my own SEO business is where I work with the smaller clients. And with successes, I have several active clients that have different kinds of problems and they're all across the board in different industries.

You have the car manufacturers to apartments and hotels to universities; and I can't think of what I can tell...
(Laughter)

LS: Okay, but what you are saying is that SEO really applies to every single industry and everybody can benefit by playing the game fairly.

BA: Very true. Umm hum.

LS: Excellent. Now is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners about Search Engine Optimization that you think might be helpful for them to kind of get started and motivated?

BA: Okay. To get started and motivated, I guess the first thing is people look for schools and sometimes there is no good school. There are some that are some certification programs. They can be very expensive and very cheap. I'm not saying that they're not good. Actually, they could be a good starting point; but I guess most of the best information is from the community itself.

Just sharing and sharing with more SEO professionals and the more you share the more you learn. If you're trying to get information just from other people and you are not sharing that much, sometime you also will not get that much information, as well.

So, be a part of the community and share. Don't be intimidated. Try to look at the big picture. Sometimes some SEO people just look at one technique and they are stuck with it. It is nice to try to get the overall picture of everything and see how everything falls into place.

That's all I can say!

LS: Okay, that's good advice. And, I mean, the advice that you gave earlier, too, about how to pick the right search engine company, the type of questions and the type of philosophy they have; that's been really helpful as well.

And, lastly, where can listeners find out more about Search Engine Optimization, or specifically, more information about you and the type of work you do, and maybe even how you won that World Championship?

BA: Okay. So more information about Search Engine Optimization...they are basically online. There's a lot of blogs and forums talking about Search Engine Optimization. I guess one of the top ones is www.searchengineland.com, and these bloggers here are from [30:28.0] SEO companies, so they are not biased to a single company, they are not trying to self-promote; although in a way they are...(laughter)

LS: Yeah, of course.

BA: ...uhh...and more information about me, if you are interested, but mostly I would recommend going to www.businessol.com. If you believe you are not much of a big business that BusinessOnLine would pay

attention to, you could always contact me personally in my own small business; and basically just search for Benj Arriola, or I could just give my email on the air. Spy filters are pretty good today, so that would be benj@benjarriola.com.

LS: So what you're telling me is that if I type in your name you might actually show up in the search engines?

BA: I should, yes.

LS: (Laughter) that's our goal, for sure.

BS: Yeah, ahh ha.

LS: Benj, really, honestly, thank you. I would like to thank Benj Arriola, World Champion Search Engine Optimization guru, for being here today with us and sharing his incredible insights.

And, again, that you Benj. Very enlightening! I appreciate it.

This has been Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out our other valuable Social Media tactics, tools and strategies that can be found in *The Social Media Bible* book, as well as our website at www.thesocialmediabible.com.

And for more information on me, Lon Safko, or to learn how I can speak at your company or your next event, please by all means, visit my website at www.lonsafko.com. And, yes, if you type in "Lon Safko" the search engines will take you to my website. (Laughter)

Again, thank you, Benj, for being with us here today.

BA: Thank you very much, too. It was a pleasure...and...thanks!

LS: Take care now, Benj.

BA: Okay.

LS: Bye.

BA: Bye-bye.