BIGTIME

Guide To SEO For
Professional
Services Firms

How to Push Your Firm's Website
to the Top of Google

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You know your firm's website needs more visitors, but you might not know where to start, or how to tell if you're doing a good job. It's OK: that's what Search Engine Optimization (SEO) was made to do.

SEO guarantees your website works as efficiently and as effectively as possible, to benefit your current clients, as well as your prospective clients. A website with good SEO is always helpful, authoritative, and easy to use.

What's more, SEO works for every industry. Whether you're a small firm or a medium-sized business, SEO can do the hard work of boosting your site's traffic, no matter the professional services you offer.

The best practices for SEO are well-defined and repeatable. When you invest time into learning SEO, and fitting it to your company, you can earn the sort of traffic that your firm needs to grow. What's more, SEO is a very affordable way to grow traffic.

SEO wants to make your content more relevant, your website easier to use, and your users more engaged with the professional services your firm offers. It's just that simple. Let's get started.

THE BASICS:
What is SEO? Why Should Your Firm Do SEO?

SEO is a well-defined set of best practices for improving the relevance, authority, and usability of your company's digital assets. But SEO isn't magic, even if it seems to work like magic, at first glance. We should take a moment to define what we talk about when we're talking about SEO.

We know that SEO is a proven method for boosting the quantity and the quality of your Web traffic. SEO is fueled by data, so its impact on your business is measurable and reproducible. If you're a small- to medium-sized firm that cares about data, SEO can be an alternative to Paid traffic, which tends to be expensive.

Some firms love SEO because it's data-driven, while others love SEO because it's a low-cost solution for attracting more visitors, especially compared to the cost of Paid traffic (like Google Ads). Regardless, if your firm has time to invest in SEO, you can draw

exactly the traffic you need.

Once you understand the basics of how SEO works, and once you know what people want when they search for your services, you'll be ready for more visitors.

Here's how it works. SEO starts when someone uses a search engine (such as Google, Bing, or DuckDuckGo) to look for information on a topic. The search engine then returns a list of websites, which we call a search engine results page (or SERP), with the most relevant results at the top of the list.

So how do you get your webpage to the top of the SERPs? You can't contact Google to argue that your site belongs at the top of their results. Nor can you pay Bing to remove one of your competitors from their SERPs. Instead, you have to understand what each search engine values, and make it happen on your website. In short, SEO just wants you to build a good website.

That's all there is to it. You'll need a webpage that offers your visitors the most helpful content, that seems trustworthy and authoritative, and that lives on an easy-to-navigate site. That's the challenge for anyone new to SEO. Here are the SEO best practices that could drive the site traffic your firm needs.

Tools You'll Need to Do Basic SEO

✓ Web Browser

This is for viewing the results of your SEO work. Google's Chrome is currently the most frequently used English-language browser, while Mozilla's Firefox is the probably the most secure.

✓ Content Management System (CMS)

This is for making your website and its content SEO friendly. Whether you use WordPress, Drupal, or another CMS, you need a tool that will let you add meta-data to webpages, and that lets you manage your files.

✓ Keywords Tracking and Research Tool

This is for measuring your SEO performance, over time, based on keywords that are important to your firm. There are several professional tools for tracking keywords, such as SEMrush, Moz Pro, Ahrefs, and Keyword Tool Pro, all of which are explored below. Most of these are paid tools.You want an app that lets you easily find the best keywords for your site, track how well you perform for those keywords, and shows your site's potential for traffic growth.

✓ Spreadsheets App

This is for making organized lists of keywords for tracking your website's SEO performance. Microsoft's Excel is a popular option, while Google's Sheets is based in the Cloud, allowing you to access SEO data from anywhere. Select any spreadsheets app that best fits how your firm already works.

FINDING THE RIGHT INFORMATION:
How Search Engines Help SEO

A search engine like Google or Bing helps its users to find the information they're seeking. This is how it works: search engines regularly visit websites, using technology called a Web crawler, to create a record of what's there. We call that crawling a website.

After it crawls your site, a search engine adds your website's info to its index, which is a collection of what's on the Internet. Search engines maintain an index of every site they crawl, including what the website is about, who made the site, when each page was first published, and how often the website changes.

When someone visits Google, and types in what they want to find (we call this a query), then Google looks through its index for the most relevant results for what the visitor searched.

Once Google finds the websites that best answer the visitor's query, it puts together a list of results, with the most relevant sites at the top.

That list of search results is the SERP. You can think of the SERP as the place where you measure your SEO efforts. Here's the trick: the SERPs change every minute of each day, depending on the query, and on how the visitor is connected to the Internet. Since the SERPs are always changing, based on what Google or Bing think is valuable to their searchers, SEO

seems like an endless competition for visitors.

> If you want control over your firm's SEO, you'll have to understand how your site's visitors know about your firm, and you have to take a close look at the queries they use to find your website in the search engines.

When someone types a query into a search engine, we call that a keyword, which is a word or a phrase that is highly relevant to a given website.

For example, if I'm looking for the time and billing software company called BigTime Software, I might search Google for bigtime, or bigtime software, or bigtime time and billing software. If BigTime Software has done a good job with SEO, then all of the results at the top of the SERPs would take me to their company's homepage, bigtime.net.

When the Internet was young, SEO was more straightforward: we would add a relevant keyword to a webpage, repeating it dozens of times in white text on a white background, and the website would perform well in the SERPs. However, by the 2000s, Google became so good at reading human language that it could tell good and helpful content from bad and unhelpful content.

You can't fool Google or Bing by repeating keywords, anymore. Rather, if you want more users to find your firm's website, then your site needs content that matches the keywords for which your users are searching.

> To get good SEO, you need to know the keywords that visitors use to find your website, along with the keywords they could potentially use to find you.

DEFINING WHO YOUR FIRM IS:
How to Find the Best Keywords for Your Firm

If you know your firm's brand, and if you know the services you offer, then you know what keywords you should use. Small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) have some advantages for creating a list of keywords for SEO.

For instance, your firm may already be known locally, so you could focus SEO on your local area (for example, civil engineers in Naperville, or best CPA in 60657). That's what we call Local SEO.

Another advantage to doing SEO for a small to medium-sized firm is that your prospective clients might already know your firm's name, and are likely already looking for the kinds of services you offer. That's what we call branded SEO, like when a visitor finds your firm by searching for Acme Architecture Firm, or for Jones and Smith IT Services. Branded keywords already belong to your firm's SEO program, so when you're making a keywords list, don't overlook your brand.

Keywords signal to Google and its crawlers exactly what every one of your webpages is about, and in turn, signals what your firm does. Once you start to find keywords that are relevant to your business, start making a list, and include with each keyword the webpage where

that keyword best fits. You'll want to include at least one keyword for each of your most important webpages.

At this point, after you've made a list of branded keywords, you should use a tool to see what other keywords could be valuable for your firm. When you look for non-branded keywords, you're searching for the kinds of queries that your potential visitors may use to find your firm, such as the pain points your visitors might encounter.

> Keywords signal to Google and its crawlers exactly what every one of your webpages is about, and in turn, signals what your firm does.

Here are some cost-free or low-cost tools for keywords research

✓ **Google**

Start here. This is the world's most-used search engine, and contains most of what the Internet knows about your firm, based on what its crawlers have discovered. Search for your firm on Google, and discover what your firm's presence looks like, to most Internet users. Next, search Google for your firm, but don't submit the query: instead, take a look at the results that Google autopopulates, and see if any of those keywords describe what searchers want from your firm.

✓ **Google Search Console**

This is a collection of your firm's Google data, including all queries for Web traffic and ads traffic, and your site's performance information. After you set up this free tool, you can use the Performance feature to see a list of all the keywords that visitors have used to find your firm's website, arranged by Clicks (how many people clicked through from Google) and Impressions (the total number of people who saw your firm's assets, regardless of whether they clicked through from Google, or not).

✓ **AnswerThePublic**

This is a keywords-research tool that responds to your query with dozens or even hundreds of keywords, organized visually and in text, so you can see all the different ways someone might find your firm. Think of AnswerThePublic like a big-picture view of all possible keywords for your site. AnswerThePublic offers a paid version, but is free to use, for several queries per day; the number of allowed queries will vary according to Internet traffic.

✓ **Semrush**

This is a paid software that offers, amongst several other tools that are vital for SEO, a professional keywords-research tool called the Keyword Magic Tool. Semrush can show you which keywords draw the most traffic (called Volume or Traffic Volume), as well as a graph that illustrates trends in the keyword's Volume, and a difficulty rating for each keyword—along with many other features for SEO. The best thing about Semrush is that it shows you the entire landscape of possible keywords for any small- or medium-sized business.

✓ Other Professional SEO Tools
(Moz Pro, Ahrefs, Keyword Tool Pro)

These are some other, excellent paid keyword-research tools, available at a broad range of prices. In addition to keyword research, these tools enable you to perform a lot of different SEO tasks, like tracking how well your website performs for certain keywords. Regardless of which of these services you choose, find one that fits the kind of work you need to do, at a price that fits your commitment—whether the tool is paid or free.

Once you understand the kinds of queries that visitors use to find your firm, then you know their search intent, as we say in SEO.

> Search intent is the key to driving traffic to your firm's website, since when you understand what searchers want, you can offer Web content that gives it to them. Keywords are like magnets that attract certain visitors to your site.

Here's the most important part:

When your list of keywords is finalized, you'll want to keep an eye on how well your website ranks in the SERPs for each of the keywords on your list. The free (but time-consuming) way to monitor your keywords is to Google each one, individually, and make a record of your position.

The quick (but not free) way is to use an SEO tool like SEMrush or Moz Pro, either of which can keep track of your keywords list, and show how your website ranks for every keyword that's important to your firm.

HOW TO GET THE BEST CONTENT FOR SEO:
Quality, Authority, and Relevance

For good SEO, content is king. While the keywords you track can tell you how well your website performs for certain words and ideas, based on how relevant your webpages are for a given query, you'll need good content if you want your firm's site to get more traffic.

Top Post
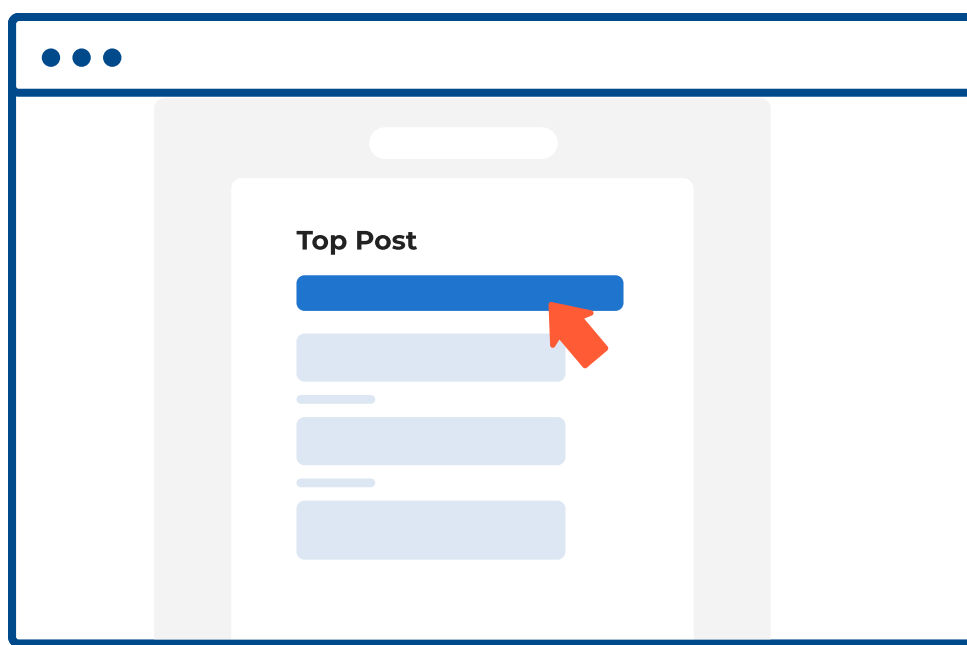
What counts as good content? It's easy. According to Google, good content is any written content that provides an informative answer to a user's query.

If you search Google or Bing for a keyword, such as your firm's name and its industry, then the SERP you see will always contain the most relevant and highest-quality results available to

Google or to Bing. Your site's ranking will change from week to week, from day to day, and even from minute to minute, based on where in the world you are when searching, and on which of a search engine's data centers you're connected to during your search. One thing stays the same: the site with the best-quality content always ranks the highest.

Your list of keywords will not just let you know how well you rank, over time, but your keywords will also give you ideas for content. Spend some time with the SEO stakeholders at your firm, going over the keywords that already bring traffic to your site, and see where you could improve:

? Do you already get a lot of traffic for a particular keyword?

Write and publish a blog about that subject, and show how much your firm knows about it, illustrating your authority for that subject matter.

? Do you want more traffic for a specific keyword?

Write or rewrite a page on your website that addresses that subject, and teach Google that your firm has lots of expertise on the topic, even if your website hasn't yet shown it.

? Do you need traffic, even though you're starting from scratch, without any traffic for particular keywords?

Focus on the keywords that your SEO tools say will create traffic, then write or rewrite some pages on your website, and publish a thought-leadership blog. Pay close attention to the incoming traffic your new content brings.

After you update your content, use an SEO tool to monitor the keywords related to your new writing, but keep in mind that it might take weeks or months for you to see any significant changes. SEO moves very, very slowly, so be patient.

Regardless of your firm's industry, or your targeted audience, there are some basic questions to ask yourself as you think of new content for better SEO. The search engines want to promote webpages that answer a searcher's query, so if you want more traffic, you have to create website content that helps Google's and Bing's users.

As you brainstorm content ideas that would work for your firm, and for your industry, spend some time answering these questions:

? What are your clients' top-five pain points?

In other words, what are the five things they complain about the most, and what does your firm do to solve their complaints? Write a piece of content (like a blog) for each of these pain points.

? As far as your clients are concerned, what are you an expert at doing, and how can you help your clients by using your expertise?

What are your co-workers experts at doing? Write a piece of content (like this guide), as an expert, that offers expert advice on a topic of interest to your clients.

? Why should your clients trust you?

What does your firm do, on an everyday basis, to gain and to increase your clients' trust? Write a piece of content (like a webpage about your firm) that seeks to gain the trust of your prospective clients, your new clients, and your existing clients.

> Content that is created from a real-world need, such as your clients' pain points, tends to attract and engage visitors better than content that focuses on making a sale or a deal. When you're coming up with content ideas, make sure that each content piece will fulfill a particular need that your clients have, or you could risk publishing content that doesn't attract any visitors.

Not sure how to start with writing SEO-friendly content? When it comes to content, Google promotes webpages that perform well in three areas, which it abbreviates as E-A-T. All of the websites toward the top of the SERP will, as far as Google's crawlers can tell, always exhibit:

✅ Expertise

Show that the author (and, by extension, your firm) is knowledgeable in particular areas of your industry. Write content that proves the writer is an expert, and include a biographical note, as well as the author's professional titles and associations.

✅ Authority

Show that the author's knowledge (and, by extension, your firm) matters to people in your industry, as a thought leader, and as an influencer. Choose a writer with a good reputation in your community, and ask them to create content that links to the author's other successful content, ideally on sites that are popular and reputable.

✅ Trustworthiness

Show that your content (and, by extension, your firm) lives in a space that deserves your visitors' trust. Include alongside the content your firm's contact information (digital and physical), detailed information about any service your firm offers, and easy-to-find links to pages that outline your privacy policy and T&C.

One way to get content that E-A-Ts is to make sure that everything you write is either adding expertise, authority, or trustworthiness. Remember, Google wants you to help its users to find the content that benefits them; no search engine has any interest in your firm's sales. That means your SEO-friendly content creator will have to take a very specific approach to writing copy.

Content is helpful to SEO when it focuses on certain keywords (so you can track your firm's success), when its content is created for the purpose of solving visitors' problems (so that someone will care about what your firm does), and when it shows your firm's expertise, authority, and trustworthiness (so that Google can reward your content). Using your keywords list, publish well-written content as frequently as you are able, and then use an SEO tool to monitor your firm's performance for those keywords in the SERPs.

HOW TO KEEP THE VISITORS YOU GET:
User Experience and Accessibility

After your firm's website starts drawing traffic for your new, keywords-targeted content, you'll need a reason to keep your users engaged. The rule of thumb, for engagement, is to make any necessary changes in order to keep users on your website.

Start thinking about how you want visitors to navigate your website, how you'll keep your users' attention, and how to give the best Web experience for users of all abilities.

User Experience (or UX) is how a person feels about using a system like a website, and User Experience Design (or UX Design) is the practice of designing something that produces positive, meaningful experiences for its users. When a website has good, thoughtful UX Design, its users are able to readily find the information they're seeking, likely because the site is easy to navigate, and rewarding to visit. On the other hand, when the design of a website makes it hard for visitors to find the right info, then it might benefit from a UX overhaul.

The best practices for UX come from the same accessibility standards used by government offices like the US Department of Health & Human Services, and by standards organizations like the World Wide Web Commission (W3C), each

of which makes their guidelines publically available.

> **Accessibility means your firm's site is intuitive to use, easy to navigate, and efficient for the visitor to load in a browser.**

Their standards assure that all Internet users, including and especially disabled individuals, are able to access information without being obstructed by bad website design.

Accessibility means your firm's site is intuitive to use, easy to navigate, and efficient for the visitor to load in a browser. Keep in mind that Google's crawler will read the text on your webpage, along with the text you can't see on the page, and all the text associated with the page's images.

Here are a couple of checklists to help you get started with getting a better UX:

Improving UX with SEO Metadata

✅ **Meta-title (10-70 characters)**

This is the site title that appears at the top of your browser. Your meta-title tells the search engines' crawlers exactly what each page contains. Usually, you'll enter this in your Content Management System (or CMS, like WordPress, Drupal, or Joomla!). Here, include a full title that describes what the page contains, followed by a mark of punctuation and the name of your firm.

> • **Format:** (Page Title) | (Company Name)
> • **Example:** Features: Resource Management | BigTime Software

✅ **Meta-description (50-160 characters)**

This is the page description that pops up in Google's SERPs. Your meta-description tells the search engines' crawlers what the purpose of each page is. Again, your CMS should have a field for you to input this text. In every meta-description, include an explanation of what each webpage does, and be sure to include any keywords for that page. You should know that Google may or may not choose to display your meta-description, and instead, could choose to use the first 150-300 characters of your page; it's mostly out of your control.

> • **Example:** BigTime is resource management software that lets you see deeper into your firm's project performance, staff productivity, and revenue projection.

✅ **Meta-keywords (1-10 words)**

These are the keywords that you've likely already found for each of your webpages. In your CMS, assign one keyword or more to each page, without reusing the same keyword on multiple webpages. Every page that's important to your firm should have at least one unique keyword that isn't used on other pages.

> • **Examples:** bigtime, big time, bigtime software, big time time tracking, project management software, bigtime project management software
> • Remember to include the keyword for a page in the meta-title, the meta-description, the URL, and the on-page content.

Improving UX with Page-Speed Improvements

✅ **Navigation**

Your site visitors should be able to easily find any information they need, in as few clicks, as possible. If a site has good navigation, then the users can find what they need in 3-4 clicks, using all available options for navigating, like the headers, the footers, and the sidebars. Nobody will use your website if it takes dozens of clicks to locate the right info; they'll simply go somewhere else.

> • **Target:** Starting at your homepage, try to navigate to any page on your site in fewer than 4 clicks, using only the on-page navigation options. You should reconsider the structure of your website if you can't get anywhere and everywhere on the site in fewer than 4 clicks.

✅ **Page Speed**

Users will wait 3 seconds for a website to load, and for each second past the 3-second mark, 10% of those users will leave a site. You can't increase your traffic, and grow your firm, if you can't keep people on your site. To improve your site's load time, you can use a lot of tools that will test your page and offer recommendations, such as Google's Page-Speed Insights tool.

> • **Target:** Test and optimize your page-load time until every webpage on your site loads in fewer than 3 to 5 seconds.

✅ **Image Compression**

Detailed images might be great to look at on your devices, but when your goal is a fast-loading website, using unnecessarily high-resolution images could seriously slow down your pages. You have to find a happy balance between image resolution and file size. To optimize your pages' load time, you can use a test like the GTmetrix page-speed report, which shows you which images are loading slowly, and lets you know the most efficient file format for each image, so you don't have to guess how your site should serve images. Then you simply compress the images, according to the GTmetrix report, and re-upload the newly optimized image files.

> • **Target:** Test and compress each of your images, then re-test the optimized version of the page, until your images no longer slow down your load-time. Again, remember that your goal is to load any page in fewer than 3 to 5 seconds.

✓ Coding

This is optional for basic SEO, but it could help your site, in the long run. The program code on a page (like HTML, CSS, or JavaScript) can sometimes slow down the load time, so if you have access to a Web developer or an IT worker, they might also be able to help you to optimize any code on your pages. Using the developer tools in a browser like Firefox or Chrome, your IT specialist can test the code on your pages, and may be able to optimize the code for you.

> • **Target:** Make sure that none of your code returns consistent errors, that none of your code creates problems for users, and that no code is unused or unnecessary. In short, your code shouldn't be so bad that it slows down your firm's site.

Invest as much time into optimizing your pages as you're comfortable doing. The best practices for SEO outlines that if you have good content that helps visitors, and if your website is optimized to provide the best UX possible, then Google and Bing will reward your site with SEO equity (known elsewhere by other metrics, like Domain Authority).

> **The more SEO equity you have, the higher the search engines will promote your pages in the SERPs, and the more traffic your firm's site will pull.**

Any page that follows those best practices will benefit, to a lesser degree or to a greater degree, depending on the quality of the content, the keywords tracked, and the field of competition. Remember, when you do SEO, you're competing with other firms' sites that also want to perform the best. Keep in mind that the first time you optimize a page is just the beginning of SEO. In the months that follow, you'll watch how your webpages perform against your competitors' pages, with lots of room for improving your website.

MEASURING YOUR SUCCESS:
What to Expect from SEO

Nothing will stay the same, for long. Once your site ranks well, you have to maintain it regularly, or risk falling behind the competition.

Working on SEO is a lot like hitting a moving target: your traffic changes day to day, Google's SEO preferences change in small ways many times per day, and your competitors are frequently improving their sites. When your rankings in the SERPs change from hour to hour, SEO can seem like a losing battle.

How can you ever really know if your firm is making real progress?

Start by tracking what's important, from day to day, from week to week, from month to month, and year after year. Understand that SEO moves very slowly, at a glacial pace, so it isn't rare to wait weeks to see results.

Here are some ideas for using SEO tools to track your success:

✔ Keyword-tracking tools

Using software like SEMrush or Moz, create a list of keywords to track, and make a spreadsheet in Excel or Sheets to record a weekly note of how your site's ranking changes for each keyword tracked. All you need to record, from week to week, is your ranking for every keyword. From there, you can analyze the rankings for week-over-week or month-over-month progress, over time.

✔ Analytics tools

In software like Google Analytics or Matomo, set up reports that record traffic metrics like Users, Unique Users, New Users, Sessions, and Pageviews, along with engagement metrics like Bounce Rate, Pages Per Session, Average Session Duration, and Time On Page. Traffic metrics tell you how many users came to your site, while engagement metrics tell you how interested users were in the site. When you publish new content, pay attention to how these two metrics change, for better or for worse.

To analyze your site's SEO performance, you have to take a close look at your traffic metrics, as well as your engagement metrics. Try to find connections between the two, particularly when you change your site's content, or when there are changes in the business of your firm. The driving principle of SEO is that when you change the quality of your site, you can expect a change in traffic, so keep a close eye on the relationship between content and traffic.

> **If you want to succeed at SEO, first understand your expectations, then make a plan to succeed. Think back to why your firm wanted to do SEO, in the first place, and talk about your goals:**
>
> - Does your firm need a large volume of traffic, even if they aren't likely to become clients?
> - Or do you need more visits from likely prospects, even though the volume of traffic will be small?
> - Are you instead committed to SEO that highlights a specific service or services that your firm offers?
> - What does your firm want from its SEO, and what can you do to make it happen?
> - What kind of a traffic boost do you need in your first month of SEO, and in the months that follow?

As a firm, commit to your SEO goals in writing, and keep track of your wins and losses from week to week. Discuss, as a firm, how you can publish content that your potential clients would want to read. Set a daily goal for Unique Users, a weekly goal for New Users, and a monthly goal for your homepage's Click Through Rate. SEO can tell you where your firm is headed, in the coming weeks or months, but only if you already know where your firm wants to be in the future.

Now that you understand the basics of SEO, and how search engines reward SEO equity to sites with good content, it's now your job to make SEO best-practices work for the benefit of your firm. SEO is a practice that could benefit any organization in any field, for drawing attention to any idea that people are interested in, and for any topic for which a person could create engaging written and visual content. If you have something that people are looking for, but you're having trouble drawing those visitors to your site, then SEO is the solution you'll need.

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BIGTIME

About BigTime

BigTime takes the guesswork out of utilization, capacity planning, and project profitability. Our award-winning PSA software provides project planning, budgeting, time- and expense-tracking, and invoicing, all backed by uber-cool reporting and analytics. We help accountants, architects, engineers, IT-services firms, and scientific and management consultants budget, track, and bill their most important asset: time.

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