

Search Engine Cloaking Uncovered

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Cloaking. Stealth. It even sounds hi tech and sexy. It smacks of espionage and James Bond. And if you listen to the practitioners of this high art of e-marketing, you're soon convinced it's search engine positioning taken to the Nth degree. You'll hear words like leading edge, sophisticated and proprietary, leading you to believe that the secrets of the search engines lie solely in the hands of these cloak and dagger magicians.

Hooey! Let's call a spade a spade guys. Cloaking and stealth scripts are simply the online version of a bait and switch or the shell game. Now you see it, now the search engine sees something else. And the simple fact is, the very premise behind cloaking just isn't very effective with today's smarter, more complex search engines. It's leading edge technology aimed at search engines the way they were 18 months ago.

What is Cloaking and Stealth?

A cloaking or stealth script is simply a server side program that monitors the ip addresses of visitors to your site. On the server sits a list of known IP addresses used by search engine spiders. When a spider comes, the cloaking script recognizes the IP and serves up something called a food page. This is a page optimized for a certain keyword phrase and that particular spider. The search engine spider gets spoon fed a page that should rank higher on the search engine.

In theory, this should offer a couple of huge advantages to the positioner. It allows them to present pages that are highly optimized for a particular engine without worrying about making the page attractive for human eyes. The other advantage is that no one would be able to steal that highly optimized coding, as they would never see that page. Sorry codejackers, this code is for the spider's eyes only.

One Slight Problem...

I've [recommended against](#) cloaking and stealth before. At that time, about a year ago, my reason was that several search engines came out and said they considered it spamming. In the past few months, representatives from the major search engines have been rather quiet about cloaking and stealth scripts. Does this mean it's okay now? No, it's because the search engines know something that apparently the cloakings have overlooked. The fact is, cloaking just isn't very effective anymore.

The whole concept behind cloaking is aimed solely at spider driven engines. As soon as a human is involved, cloaking is totally useless. That means this "leading edge technology" does nothing to help you get top rankings on Yahoo, Looksmart, Go, Lycos and Open Directory.

On the engines that are left, such as Google, AltaVista, Excite and Inktomi, the thing the cloakings have missed is that these engines now use a much more sophisticated ranking formula that includes several factors, including link and page popularity. Cloaking can only help you increase keyword density and frequency. It does nothing to help boost the other factors today's engines are looking for.

Sorry, This Shortcut's Closed

It all comes back to our personal mantra here at Search Engine Position. There's no short cuts to good rankings. The search engines want to see quality, content driven sites at the top of their index. Their whole purpose is to use their technology to sort out the same sites that a living, breathing human visitor would want to see. So, why try to fool the search engine? Why not just give it what it wants to see? A great site, with relevant content, well optimized, plenty of quality incoming and outgoing links, and built to be search engine friendly. Deliver on this and the search engines will deliver visitors by the bucket load!

Cloaking Secrets Revealed

"Okay," you're saying to yourself, as you wonder how you're going to drive traffic to your site tomorrow, "with all that said, it still seems that those guys that do cloaking have an inside edge with the search engines. I mean, when you read their sites, they have some big clients. It's new technology. There's got to be something to it."

I knew you were going to be tough to convince, so I came prepared. I did a little espionage work myself, a little spying on the spy-der masters! Here's what I found out.

I looked at the best-known cloakers in the business. Included in the list below are Greenflash, probably the first firm to offer cloaking, and Websiteresults, a SEO firm with some of the biggest dot coms in the world on their roster. Of course, I threw our own firm in, just to see how good, old-fashioned hard work faired against this "leading edge" technology.

I checked to see how well cloaking worked in positioning these firms own sites on the search engines. I searched under general industry terms like "search engine positioning", "search engine optimization", "website promotion" and "cloaking". After all, if these guys can't position themselves, what can they do for their clients? A reasonable assumption, right?

After I found out how all these firms ranked, I compiled the average visibility index for these keywords for each firm. The visibility index is a benchmark we use at Search Engine Position to measure search engine rankings across the board. If you want to find out more about the visibility index, you can by [visiting our site](#). For the purposes of this test, let's just say a score of 20% gives you a one in five chance of being found for your keywords on any of the major engines. And believe me, that's pretty good odds for competitive keywords.

So, how did the cloakers do? Here are the results, ranked in order of average visibility

| URL | Average Visibility |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Searchengineposition.com (our firm) | 26.03% |
| Fantomaster.com | 11.61% |
| Spider-food.net* | 11.09% |
| 101website.com | 1.03% |
| Trafficleader.com | 0.0% |
| Greenflash.com | 0.0% |
| Websiteresults.com | 0.0% |

Hmmm, it seems the cloakers might be covering up more than just their "highly effective optimized

pages"! It seems that there's a noticeable lack of results on the part of many of the cloaking experts.

Let's go one step further. Let's see how they stack up for the keyword "cloaking". After all, this is what they do. Again, I included our firm just for the fun of it, even though we've never worried about positioning for the word "cloaking". After all, we don't offer the service, so why optimize for it? The only thing about cloaking on our whole site is the article I wrote a year ago.

Again, the results, ranked for the visibility of the word "cloaking":

| URL | Visibility Index for "Cloaking" |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Fantomaster.com | 30.89% |
| Spider-food.net* | 24.82% |
| Searchengineposition.com (our firm) | 15.03% |
| 101website.com | 3.08% |
| Trafficleader.com | 0.0% |
| Greenflash.com | 0.0% |
| Websiteresults.com | 0.0% |

Surprised? So was I. One article, written for humans, not a search engine spider, not optimized in any way, and not hidden behind a sophisticated cloaking script, gave us the number three ranking in the world for the key word "cloaking".

Summing Up

One year ago, I wrote that using cloaking and stealth was not only unadvisable, it was also dangerous. Have I changed my mind? Absolutely. Now you can add the word ineffective to the list as well.

The original cloaking article:

[Cloaking, Stealth, and Spamming](#)

(June 2000)

* We were recently contacted by Spider-food.net and informed that no pages on that site are cloaked.

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