

Seeing Red – Search Engine RedZee™ Reviewed

By Ross Dunn, CEO and Founder, [StepForth Placement](#) Inc.

What is RedZee™?

[RedZee™](#) is a Meta Search Engine that opened its doors officially in July 2005. Now open just over a year it was recently brought to my attention that this search engine with a darn cute mascot (I love zebras, especially ones that grin!) along with some decent design concepts also have some significant caveats that I believe my valued readers and clientele should be made well aware of.

First, A Thank You

Before I jump into this article I wish to sincerely thank Win Singleton of Summit Web Design. It was his dedication to his clients that brought this article to life. One of his valued clients was particularly unhappy with their choice to try RedZee's™ services and it was Win's extensive research to support his client's rights provided me with the substance of this article.

My First Impression of RedZee™

To begin I would like to state that my first impression of RedZee™ was positive. For example, the layout of the search engine results pages (SERPs) is quite pleasing to the eye. Each page begins with a framed section called the RedZee™pedia; a clever definition and encyclopedic breakdown of the phrase and separate words searched. Immediately following this informative listing is the familiar left-side organic results and right side sponsored results. The left side shows screenshots of each organically ranked site and provides quick access to a "Quick Look" windowed preview of the site. In addition, and I really like this, the Meta search engine provides a quick access link to online archives of the associated site. These archives provide insight into the past of what might be a prospective vendor; and the more information we have when making vendor decisions the better! Lastly but not least I was impressed with RedZee's™ commitment to kid-friendly searching. I can't say that I conducted a serious review of the success of this kid-friendly policy but it seemed to work great by totally ignoring adult oriented keyword searches – a novel idea.

What has put a significant damper on my perception of this search engine is their [TOP3 pay-per-click program](#). To more accurately explain I am going to use the following live sample as I want this to be a very systematic and clear illustration of what has me concerned.

The Sample: A Current PPC Program for "Fairfax County Real Estate"

A [client](#) of Summit Web and StepForth's agreed to commence with RedZee's™ TOP3 program; unfortunately without either company's prior counsel. The client chose to agree to a fixed price of a \$0.10 per-click promotion whereby their website would be guaranteed to appear randomly within the top 3 results on RedZee™.com for the client's chosen phrase(s). One of the phrases chosen by the client was "Fairfax County real estate".

Step 1: I checked RedZee™ under "Fairfax County real estate" and indeed the client's website is appearing in the top 3. Sounds ok so far, right? Not quite. To my surprise despite listing these paid results within the organic listings RedZee™ was not [clearly identifying them as paid](#); i.e. there was no "sponsored link" in grey or anywhere around the paid top 3 rankings. This is a practice that I had thought was long gone in the world of reputable pay-per-click services.

Step 2: At the instruction of Win at Summit Web, I was told I needed to take a screenshot of Google's results for "Fairfax County real estate" for future comparison. Intrigued, I followed his instructions and then upon his next direction I proceeded to install the RedZee™ toolbar on my machine. After installation I again navigated to Google.com and tried the same search. Much to my alarm, within a shade of a second, Google's organic results were altered to include RedZee's™ paid TOP3 rankings at the very top. Again, not only were these results pushing down legitimate organic rankings from Google but RedZee's™ results were again not clearly distinguishing themselves as paid or anything other than Google's actual results.

View [Original Google Screenshot](#) (unaltered by RedZee)

View [Google Results Screenshot](#) (altered by RedZee)

How does this manipulation happen? The RedZee™ toolbar includes adware that once installed quietly supplements Google's results on your machine when any search phrase is typed in that RedZee™ is currently receiving bids for.

Step 3: I proceeded to test other search engines using the RedZee™ toolbar and discovered that the same manipulation occurs within Yahoo and MSN results.

View [MSN Results Screenshot](#) :: View [Yahoo! Results Screenshot](#)

Step 4: Still a bit shocked at the gall of this promotion tactic Win and I spoke about his client's results within this TOP3 campaign; perhaps it was actually benefiting the client? According to him the ROI has been dismal to say the least. In fact he stated that although there has been a great deal of traffic sent to his client's site the visitors didn't go farther than the home page. We both found this alarming considering this is a real estate website where the listings are located past the home page. In addition the client's visitor depth results on Google campaigns have been drastically more productive with (in most cases) less traffic.

More Research Needed

The title of this section says it all; I needed to know if this was a story that had gotten 'out there' or if others were facing the same issues. With Win's help and my own research I discovered that RedZee's™ TOP3 promotion technique, although somewhat known, appears to be flying under the public awareness radar. To Rand Fishkin's credit we were able to find a discussion post from 2005 on his informative SEOmoz Blog called "[Investigating the RedZee™ Search Engine.](#)" We also found a large thread that delves into the details of RedZee's™ tactics on a [Digitalpoint forum thread](#).

The next step was to see if RedZee™ had a parent or subsidiary company that may have been making similar headlines. This research paid off. In their privacy statement a "business partner" called "Link Positions" which is a subsidiary of Internet Shopping Enterprises (RedZee™'s parent company). Researching Link Positions revealed additional information that was more along the lines of what I was searching for. In this [2005 Search Engine Watch forum post](#) Link Position's suspicious sales pitch is discussed along with the exact adware tactic that RedZee™ is using.

Finally, Win pointed out an even more interesting BlogSpot posting called "Advertising Scam 'Search Engine Data Merging'". This [post by Professional Web Services Inc.](#) was exceedingly revealing as the writer describes exactly how this 'scam' as he calls it is sold and profited from. I highly recommend that everyone who is not aware of these techniques read this article because it truly shows the intricacy and premeditation involved with promoting this strategy.

Ross Dunn's Final Word

I am recommending that all of my clientele and readers think long and hard before they proceed with a RedZee™ TOP3 promotion service. I definitely do not consider it a worthwhile investment at this time.

Why Am I Against the TOP3 Service

First, I find it ethically corrupt that any search engine would misrepresent what are supposed to be organic search results with paid results. Secondly, in my opinion the alteration of search engine results on a competing search engine is beyond reprehensible. Not only does this "data merging" misrepresent the confidence of supposedly sacred organic results on search engines like Google but it appears to be done without the foreknowledge of the installer of the toolbar. To be certain of this I reviewed the privacy policy and terms of use policy on RedZee™ and with my untrained eye I discovered nothing that would lead me to believe that the person installing the toolbar has any idea that 3rd party search engines results would be modified. The only loophole that did appear in my review of their policies was found within a portion of [RedZee's™ privacy policy](#) shown below (last paragraph in section called 'Search Engine'):

Certain search results may be "sponsored" results, which consist of websites who have paid for placement in the search results. These listings are provided by our business partner, Link Positions, which is a subsidiary of ISE. These premium results may contain tracking URLs provided by Link Positions to identify clicks from the search results page. Again, information gathered by these means will not personally identify you. **Any information collected by Link Positions will be subject to Link Positions's privacy policy, and Link Positions and ISE may share information that either company gathers in connection with the use of ISE's search engine.** (Author's bolding.)

What I noted in the above copy was that there was no link to Link Position's privacy policy anywhere within RedZee's™ policy. I am no lawyer but not providing access to Link Position's privacy policy may effectively make this agreement fair game for manipulating results (among other things). In addition I performed some quick research and had no luck finding Link Position's website, never mind their privacy policy.

All-in-all I definitely feel a bit sheepish because I have to admit that I had no idea result hi-jacking was taking place on such a wide scale. I guess this is partly because as a search engine optimization and placement company these salesmen know better than to call... at least I would like to think that. In addition, I am frankly curious if anyone knows of other lower-tier search engines that use similar techniques. Please let me know if you do because I would like to bring them to the attention of my clientele and other readers: email ross@stepforth.com

Care to Reply RedZee™?

I invite RedZee™ to respond to this article on the record. I am hopeful that a search engine with such a promising overall appearance will either choose to abandon the use of such technology or at least make it better known to their users that they are agreeing to the manipulation of other search engines' results by installing the toolbar. In addition I would love to hear how they argue the ethics of such tactics. Unfortunately I have heard through several discussions that the arguments posed to other inquiring minds have so far have been less than impressive.