



Search Engine Optimization

What is it and how do you do it?

Looking to improve the quality and quantity of traffic to a website? Then you're interested in search engine optimization. Search engine optimization is a techie term referring to steps used to ensure that a site appears earlier, or "higher", in the results when end users search the web using Google or other search engines.

Why does that matter? Simple human nature: The earlier a site appears, the more people will visit it.

Sounds simple, right? Not quite:

- Search engine optimization is a mysterious science, and there are rarely ever definitive or absolute practices.
- There are many out-of-date ideas and outright myths about what search engines value.
- No one other than the handful of programmers at the search engine companies *really* knows how the search algorithms that drive the whole process work.
- Search engine algorithms are changed, updated, optimized and refactored continuously, partly to improve performance and partly in response to cheaters.
- The different search engines employ different criteria and search algorithms so what works for one may not work for others.

So, if it's so complicated and mysterious, is this even worth the paper it's printed on? We think so! That's because, while there's no silver bullet to solve all of your search engine optimization issues, there is a large body of inferred knowledge out there about what works and what doesn't. This leads us to some best practices as well as worst practices. And, as you might expect, we'll be recommending that you follow the best practices!

Best Practices

Write good content for your visitors

Simple as it may sound, if you write content that is clear and useful for your visitors, search engines will spider your site more effectively – the automated process by which they include and update your site in their system – and point the right people to you. When you do write pages, think of what words people looking for your site might try to use to search for you and include those in your text.



What's more, if your content is seen as valuable to visitors, more webmasters will want to link to it. As you'll see in the last item here, that will help a great deal with where you land in search results.

Employ a clear, straightforward menu structure

Search engines have progressed to the point where good site architecture translates into good search engine results. Setup your site navigation so that its easy to follow from your end user's perspective. Make sure to use one url to link to each page. These basic steps will help search engines to spider your site effectively.

Use site meta descriptions and keywords

Meta descriptions and keywords are words or phrases that visitors to your site never see but are hidden in the underlying code of your site.

Why do they matter then? Meta keywords matter because they're used by many search engines to find your site. The meta description matters because it shows up in search results like Google to help identify your site.

How should you choose them? For the meta description, it's best to have a simple phrase or sentence that sums up your organization or site. Using your organization's motto or tagline is perfect.

As for keywords, here are a few guidelines:

1. Keep your list of keywords or keyword phrases down to 10 - 15 unique words or phrases
2. Do not repeat words or phrases
3. Put your most important word or phrases at the beginning of your list
4. Stick with words or phrases that are most relevant to your site
5. The goal is to think about the kind of people you want to visit your site and then come up with keywords they might use when searching. Although most of the keywords will be near to your organization's heart, some of the words and phrases you choose may be antithetical to the work you do--an organization that works for peace might include "war" as one of its keywords, a political campaign might use their candidate's opponent's name, etc.

Get partners and related organizations to link to your site



One of the most powerful ways to improve your placement in search engine results is by having other sites link to yours. Search engines, such as Google, assign what is called a Page Rank to sites based on what they deem their relative importance to be. The more sites that link to yours, the more your Page Rank improves.

Google is quick to say that their algorithms can distinguish natural links from unnatural links. Natural links are ones that would be placed by partners or related organizations on their sites. Unnatural ones are done through some of the techniques noted below under Worst Practices. Moral of the story: stick with encouraging sites with legitimate, user-centric reasons to be linking to yours and you'll see your Page Rank increase.

Use search engine friendly URLs

To ensure that all search engines can spider your site fully, it is best to use search engine friendly URLs. What makes a url search engine friendly? Not having a query string in it. A query string is anything that follows a "?" in a given url. For instance, <http://www.yoursite.org/index.php?category=books&subject=nonprofits> contains a query string after the "?".

Google's search engine plays nicely with urls with query strings. Some other search engines do not. If your site uses urls with query strings – and many content management systems do – see if you have the option to turn on search engine friendly urls. This will convert these dynamic, query-based urls to static, search engine friendly urls where the above link could end up looking something like this:
<http://www.yoursite.org/category/books/subject/nonprofits>.

Worst Practices

We know you're all good members of the internet community and won't be tempted to try any of this sneaky stuff but, to fully arm you with knowledge, we thought we'd throw out the things you *shouldn't* do. One thing to note: many fly-by-night services are out there that claim they can improve your search engine results for a fee. Many of them use these techniques which can very likely get your site in trouble with the search engines and actually harm your standing in search results. Take a peek at these to make sure you're on the straight and narrow.

Cloaking

Designing your website so that search engines see one thing and visitors see another is called cloaking. This can be done with sneaky redirects or with programming, and it's strictly verboten. Nobody likes to be tricked this way. If they're looking for a website on

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knitting, they'll be rather upset to end up on a website about, say, the wild ponies of Assateague Island.

Duplicate Content

Spam sites sometimes try to collect page views by duplicating the same content on multiple pages. Don't copy and paste large amounts of text from your own pages, and certainly don't violate copyright by copying content from elsewhere. Google has been known to ban sites that duplicate too much content.

Have a Robot Write Your Website

Just as it's a bad idea to duplicate content, it's a worse idea to get a machine to write your content for you. There are programs out there that duplicate the same content but make a few changes here and there. If Google catches you, and they're pretty good at catching this, you can kiss your page views goodbye.

Add Keywords that Don't Relate to Your Content

When you list keywords, do list keywords that directly relate to your site, and don't repeat the same keyword multiple times. Spamming keywords by listing every word in the dictionary is a great way to have your ranking lowered in Google and other search engines.

Link to Bad Neighborhoods

Google calls spamming sites bad neighborhoods, and linking to them is a great way to lower your PageRank.

Linking ordinarily would make you a good neighbor and a good citizen of the Internet. However, just because someone links to you does not obligate you to link back to them. Check out the website first, and make sure it is not a bad neighborhood.

How do you know it's a bad neighborhood? Check their PageRank and scan the website for any of the violations you see here.

Hide Text

Don't try to hide keywords by making the background color the same as the font color. This is called keyword stuffing or fontmatching. Google and other search engines are increasingly sophisticated at catching this, and they'll likely remove any offending websites from their search engine index.

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Likewise, watch how small you make the text. In a variation of keyword stuffing, some people try to put teeny tiny text at the bottom of a page. It doesn't work.

Title Stacking

Don't try to add extra <title> tags for more keywords. This cousin of keyword stuffing is called title stacking, and it won't win you any friends at Google.

One title per page, please, although you may separate that title with a dash to hit a few more keywords that do relate to your content, such as "Pie Crust Recipe - Homemade Pastry Dough."

Distribute Viruses, Trojans, or Other Badware

If your site is distributing a virus, trojan, or other badware, Google's going to remove you from their index for the public good. This should be a no-brainer.

Double check any software you agree to distribute to make sure it isn't harmful, and make sure your server is secure, so that hackers don't decide to hijack your website and distribute malicious software for you.

Doorway Pages

Doorway pages or Gateway pages are pages that are optimized for one key term but are really designed to be gateways to lead you to different content. For instance the "blueberry," "strawberry," and "orange" gateways might all be designed to get you to go to "fruit punch."

Doorway pages usually have very little in the way of original content and often cloak or redirect users to the intended website. Be aware of affiliate programs, because some of these may look like doorway pages to Google.

Automated Inquiries

Google doesn't appreciate robots writing your content, and they're even less appreciative of robots checking your ranking. Automated Google queries and automated link submission are both against Google's terms of service, and both of them can get your site banned. They tie up computing resources for everyone.