

Search Engine Optimization on a Shoestring: Best Practices in Low Cost Website
Optimization and Submission

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Abstract

A website which cannot be found is a website which cannot fulfill its online marketing strategy. Since most Internet users use search engines and directories to find resources, a key strategy for attracting customers to one's website involves achieving optimal positioning in the results delivered by keyword queries submitted to search engines. The quickest way to accomplish this is through the use of paid inclusion and advertising programs. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the ongoing process of preparing and editing a website or webpage so as to improve its chances of receiving a high rank and visibility in the results shown from search queries on relevant terms. By using proper SEO techniques, even a business with little or no cash available to budget for online promotion can prepare its website and web pages so as to maximize their potential for achieving high search rankings and therefore attain increased visibility to potential online customers.

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Best Practices in Low Cost Website Optimization and Submission

A few years ago, I viewed a television commercial depicting a fictional start-up company which had just posted its website on the Internet. In this commercial, the website instantly began receiving visits, and because of this, the company was immediately flooded with orders for its product. Unfortunately, while this technique of “Build It and They Will Come” may work in the movies (and commercials), it is not quite so viable in the real world for attracting customers to one’s website. An effective online marketing strategy requires more than simply having a website: it hinges on the prospective customer actually finding one’s website when that customer is searching for a provider of one’s services. It does no good to have a website that no-one can find, and having customers instantly and miraculously find one’s new site only occurs in commercials.

This may appear to be an obvious statement, but for a new business or for a business on a limited budget, accomplishing this “find-ability” involves a significant amount of careful effort. If one has the resources, paid options for promoting one’s site and achieving an optimal search engine positioning are plentiful: one can simply purchase sponsor ads and pay-per-click programs on all the major search engines and directories, and even tailor the ads to one’s specific situation and needs. For a business seeking to contain costs and still achieve visibility on the web and high page rankings in search engines, the best practices for website submission and optimization for the major search engines and directories include the correct use of keywords in metatags and page body text, writing effective page and site titles, developing a linking strategy, and avoiding practices that can get one’s site de-listed or banned by search engines, such as keyword spamming and using link farms.

Website Visibility and Search Engine Page Rankings

Most websites are destined for obscurity. Michael and Salter note that “the top 10 percent [of web pages and domains] receive around 90 percent of the overall traffic. The Web is a very tough place for small sites to get exposure, particularly those without a large budget for promotion.” (Michael & Salter, 2003, p.89).

In April of 1998, there were 2.2 million plus sites on the Internet. (Lemoine, 1999). At that time, simply having a website and submitting it to a search engine or two was sufficient to achieve at least a measure of noteworthiness and visibility. This is no longer true: a Google search on a single word or phrase can generate millions of hits. Typing the word “roses” into Google at 3:30pm on Thursday, August 18, 2005 gave 10,400,000 results. Obviously, if one is in the business of selling roses, one would prefer not to be hit number 10,398,900, as a prospective customer might at most only explore the links offered on the first few pages of results. While having a web presence is important, having a website alone is no longer sufficient: the new holy grail of internet marketing is a web presence with a high page ranking on the major search engines.

A search engine rank is the order in which the engine lists the results of a search. A high page ranking is one in which a webpage is listed within the first few pages of a search result on a major search engine when the search is conducted using keywords that are likely to be used by a consumer interested in services, information, or products offered on the site in question.

Achieving a high ranking is important, since the average person using a search engine is unlikely to explore every single one of the potentially millions of link results.

Various forms of paid services and advertising are available both to promote one's site and to improve site visibility and positioning in search engine results. They are offered in a wide variety of forms, including Google AdWords, Yahoo Sponsor Search and Enhanced Listings, MSN Sponsored Sites, and of course Pay Per Click advertising on numerous search engines. Each of these options will, for varying prices, provide expedited and, depending on budget, optimal positioning of one's advertisement and/or website listing in a prominent location on the search results page. The advantage to these options is that one's site will receive preferential treatment and positioning. The disadvantage for those businesses operating on a constrained budget is of course the expense involved, which can swiftly and easily spiral into the hundreds and thousands of dollars. Fortunately, alternatives do exist.

Spider or crawler based search engines use software robots to find web pages and build an index of pages with the words and phrases found on each page. The search engine then uses additional software to match a user's keyword query with a sorted list of web pages from its index that it deems most likely to contain the information the user is looking for. Directories are distinct from this in that directories are databases of sites which have been added by human editors. Hybrid services use a combination of spider indexing and directories to provide results. (Thurrow, 2003).

Best Practices and Techniques in Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the use of various techniques to improve a website's ranking with search engines and thereby increase one's chances of attracting potential visitors. Also referred to as Organic or Natural Search Engine Optimization, it remains a powerful strategy with which to significantly increase one's prospects of achieving a high page ranking while minimizing one's cash outlay.

Using best practices in creating an effective SEO campaign for a website is a project that includes several key components. First, before even submitting the website, one must put together a plan which ideally will incorporate an understanding that SEO is an ongoing process that requires a clear direction, focused research, solid documentation and results tracking, and consistent follow-up. More specifically, the steps in developing a SEO project begin with research: clearly defining one's objectives for the website, identifying the target audience, and determining how they might find you. One also needs to implement a documentation system: this can be as simple as a notebook or spreadsheet. This will be used to keep track of keywords, URL submissions, and other aspects of the project. This is followed by the actual optimization and submission of the site. Following this, one will need to analyze the results of one's work and use this information to develop appropriate revisions or updates to the site and strategy.

Just as a website must be well-designed in terms of usability, it must now also be designed with search engine requirements in mind. Effective optimization of a site requires that one take into consideration the distinct requirements for submission and indexing by engines and directories, as well as the specific requirements indicated for individual search engines and directories. Effective utilization of one's time and effort in optimizing a site means that one focuses first on the major search engines and directories, and in particular on those one's prospective customers are using. And they are using search engines. Consider the following:

“More than 95 percent of Internet users in the United States visit search engines to find information, products, or services on the Web. According to comScore Networks, a firm that tracks search engine usage, 35 percent of all keyword searches are performed through Google, 32 percent are performed through Yahoo, and 16 percent are performed through MSN. The remaining 17 percent are performed through Excite, AOL, and other sites.” (Schultz and Fristedt, 2005, p. 10)

As noted in *Association Management*, a number of factors are incorporated into the search engine’s determination of the rank of a given page. These include but are not limited to the sites text copy, underlying technology, structure, and the number and ranking of pages that link to the site. (Schultz and Fristedt, 2005). Meta tags are not used by all of the major search engines for determining site relevancy for search results, though some do use Meta tag descriptions when they show the results of a search. (Thurow, 2003). To further complicate matters, different search engines use different methods for ranking pages, and they regularly adjust and refine their methods for ranking sites.

Site Objectives, Keyword Identification, and Page Content

Defining the objectives of a site will aid in targeting directory submissions, developing link popularity campaigns and determining possible association links and resources. Once you have identified your target audience, you can then begin to identify specific keywords that they are likely to use when using a search engine to find what you have to offer. These are the keywords that will be incorporated into the page text and Meta tag content. As Kevin Gold succinctly put it: “Your objective is selecting relevant keywords that connect your customer’s preconceived expectation with your product or service.” (Gold, 2005).

As part of this identification process, perform searches using possible keywords and take a look at what type of websites receive high rankings with these keywords. A number of free keyword tracking and suggestion tools are available online: these tools provide information such as the number of times a search was performed using a given keyword or phrase in the previous day or month, as well as lists of alternate or similar keywords/phrases, ranked by frequency of search. These resources can be found both on the search engine sites as well as on independent websites.

In building the collection of keywords and phrases to use in optimizing one’s site, one will first need to select a top-level keyword: this is the most general term to describe one’s site. Next, create two lists: one for vertical keywords, one for lateral keywords. Vertical keywords include all forms variations of the top-level keyword, as both phrases and singular/plural terms. Lateral keywords are alternative keywords that a user might enter as search terms: they relate in some way to the top-level keyword for one’s site or product, but do not actually include it. (Daily SEO, 2005). For example, lateral keywords for the keyword “roses” might include “gardens”, “bouquet”, and “bare root”. Once the best keywords and phrases have been identified and selected, the actual optimization of the pages can begin.

In determining which pages to show in response to a given keyword query, search engines look for the presence and frequency of the keyword in various locations in the HTML tags and body text on the page. Different search engines place emphasis on different tags, so one should place the keywords in all the HTML tags possible. This specifically includes the Title tags, Meta tags, the alternative text for graphic images, and the body text.

The Title tag is essential, as it is what the search engine will show as the title of your site in a results listing, as well as being one of the primary factors considered in ranking a page. (Michael and Salter, 2005).

The description and keywords Meta tags are also significant for search engine indexing in that they can influence the description of the website shown in the results given by some search engines, as well as providing additional keywords for the search engines to use in indexing the page. These tags are not used by all search engines. The description tag in particular should contain a brief, carefully written description of the site that both contains the most important keywords and is written in such a way as to entice a person to choose one's site when it appears in a search result. The description tag contents are additionally significant when submitting one's site to be evaluated for inclusion in a directory.

Body text content should, to quote Newton (2002), "be brief, focused, and internally consistent". It should contain the selected keywords as part of the copy on the page while again avoiding the use of keyword spamming practices such as loading up the page with a multitude of keywords. (Goldsborough, 2005). Correct use could be: "Roses are a delightful addition to a flower garden. Bare root roses are on sale." Keyword spamming, which can get a site penalized, would include for example: "roses, roses, roses, roses, roses, roses, roses, roses, garden, garden, garden, flower, flower, flower." Also, regularly updating the content that contains the relevant keywords will increase page rankings, as search engines evaluate a page which is regularly updated as containing greater relevance than a site which is only updated sporadically, if at all. (Schultz and Fristedt, 2005).

In incorporating the keywords in one's page, certain SEO techniques are considered to be attempts to trick search engines into improving one's site ranking, and can get one's site penalized and even de-listed. This includes the keyword spamming mentioned above, both in the body text and in the Meta tags. It also includes such practices as placing keyword laden text on a page in such a manner as to be invisible or difficult to read by humans, such as using tiny black text on a black background.

The Impact of Architecture's on Ranking

Page and site architecture can adversely impact a website's ranking. Search engines tend to rank more highly pages that are in the first two directory levels in a site, and may ignore pages that are deeply nested in folders and sub-directories. A flattened site structure can provide a noticeable advantage if one wishes to position multiple pages in the site optimally for search engines.

Frames in particular can potentially render the pages in a site invisible to search engines. This is because the typical frameset code lacks index-able content beyond the Meta tags and Title tag text. If one is optimizing a framed website, this can be worked around by including <noframes> tags on the frameset page, and include both keyword rich content and links to key pages in the site within the <noframes> tags. (Thurow, 2005).

Dynamic sites present a different kind of problem for search engines. This is partially because the pages are dynamically delivered by a database program, and partially because many of these programs when creating URLs use the ? and other symbols: these same symbols act as signals to the crawler to stop indexing the site. When optimizing a dynamic site, one will need to utilize workarounds to address these problems. The database programs can

be configured to avoid the use of problematic symbols. One can directly submit specific dynamic URLs to the search engines. And finally, one can incorporate static pages into one's website that link to content within the database. (Michael and Salter, 2005).

Search engines are increasingly doing a better job of indexing rich media content such as music, movies, and Flash. Ensuring that any such content one offers will be indexed simply involves remembering that these types of files do not contain simple text and therefore must be prepared properly for indexing. This can be accomplished by completing all the metadata with well structured content and by making sure that the HTML page linking to the file can be crawled by search engines and has complete and accurate anchor text (including titles) on the individual link to the file. (K'necht, 2004).

Some sites incorporate a considerable amount of Flash either on the entrance page or in the page content. While this can make for a visually dazzling site, it is problematic for search indexing, as search engines treat Flash content as a graphic (which the search engine cannot see). This also means that the search engine cannot follow any links displayed in Flash. This is best addressed similarly to the way one handles a dynamic site: by using well written title and description Meta tags and by including important links and text content outside of the Flash portion of the page. (K'necht, 2004).

Considerations in Submission to Directories and Search Engines

Once one has optimized the most important pages on one's website, one is ready to begin submitting the key pages in the site to search engines and directories. One should begin by submitting one's site to directory listings, as directory links also improve the chances of a search engine's spiders finding one's site, even without one having submitted the site to the engine.

When submitting to directories, one should not restrict oneself to submitting solely to the big players such as Yahoo or the Open Directory. One should also find and submit to smaller directories and relevant special interest and business directories, as the popularity boost provided by having links to one's site from multiple directories can improve the ranking of one's pages in the search engines. (Thurow, 2003). Walsh (2005) comments that

"They are the legendary fairy lands of SEO: PageRank-passing, no-fee-charging, non-corrupt and actually well-run directories of relevant links. Yes, they really do exist. An SEO friend tells me he knows 200 good ones just off the top of his head. Plus, there are other kinds of directories: directories of affiliate programs, of websites using a certain content management system, of websites whose owners are members of this or that group, of websites accepting PayPal, etc. etc."

Clearly, time spent researching appropriate directories can be well spent. Preparing for submission to directories is critical, as one will often have only one chance to win approval from the human editor who is reviewing one's site for inclusion. With a directory, one will first need to determine which category and subcategory that would be most appropriate for one's site. (There may be several). In order to improve one's chances of getting one's site accepted, one should review and closely follow the submission guidelines provided by the directory site. One is also well advised to review the site descriptions already listed in that category, and tailor ones own description to fit the general writing style that the editor appears to prefer.

Free submission to the major search engines is relatively straightforward: all but a few provide submission forms and guidelines for properly submitting a page for indexing. One should always submit the home page of a site. An additional page which is helpful to submit is the sitemap, as this will give the spiders access to the URLs throughout the site. Once a site has been submitted, it can take up to several months for the pages to appear in search listings: for this reason, some may opt for paid-submission programs if they require expedited results.

A caveat when submitting one's site: be wary of link farms and free-for-all links pages: these types of sites are not the same as human built directories and can get one's site penalized by search engines, as well as being a source of enormous amounts of spam flooding one's email inbox.

Backward Links, Distributed Content, and Reciprocal Linking as Strategies

A backward link is a link to one's own site from a site which has content relevant to the content on one's own website. High quality backward links provide an increase in the popularity rating of one's site, which directly and positively impacts the ranking of the website. The main methods for acquiring backward links include reciprocal links and distributed content. Acquiring reciprocal links is easiest if one provides a links page or a portion of one's site on which one can place links to other websites. One then approaches other site owners with an offer to exchange reciprocal links: in this way both sites can benefit from increased traffic and increased popularity rankings. Link exchanges and web rings are two sources for identifying potential link partners. Piggybacking is an option for combining reciprocal links with keyword positioning. To do this, one uses keyword searches using both vertical and lateral keywords for one's own site, and identify as potential link partners those sites with related but not identical products. For example, a site offering rose bushes might find it beneficial to exchange links with sites selling garden tools and accessories.

Providing distributed content can be a very effective way to increase one's site ranking, become recognized as an authority in one's given area as well as to drive traffic to one's site. This process is straightforward, though it does involve some effort: write articles on topics relevant to the content in one's site, submit them and get them published to e-zine and article sites, and include a link to one's own site (this is usually done in the "about the author" section at the end of the article). Because these articles tend to remain archived on the articles sites and can also be exchanged and posted on additional e-zine sites, over time one can accumulate a significant quantity of high quality links to one's own site using this method. (Walsh, 2005).

Measuring Effectiveness

Tracking and measuring the effectiveness of one's SEO campaign in meeting one's defined goals is an ongoing part of the SEO process, and is used to evaluate and make refinements and revisions so as to further improve the site's search engine friendliness. The main information needed includes monthly traffic reports including the number of unique visitors, search engine ranking reports, click through reports, and sales data. Additionally, one will want to know which search phrases and engines the visitors have used to find one's site. A variety of tools exist to provide the relevant information: these may be included with website hosting packages, or they may be found as free or low cost stand-alone resources online. One can also use tools such as Meta tag checkers, keyword density analyzers, and page content analyzers. Using these reports and tools combined can provide effective measurements and resources to

evaluate and further improve the page's optimization. That being said, it bears mentioning again that the free and low budget approach to SEO is not a tool for bringing instant results: while paid inclusion strategies can bring positioning (and possibly traffic) within a few hours or days at most, free inclusion turnaround time is best measured in weeks and months. This is a long term business promotion strategy, not a quick-fix.

Conclusion

Regardless of which approaches a company uses, effective SEO requires knowledge of which search engines and directories to focus upon and what they look for in determining how to rank a site. Implementing best practices is ultimately an ongoing process: search engine technology and advertising practices are both continually evolving, and therefore site optimization requires a planned strategy involving clear goals, focused research, knowledge of one's customer, a basic understanding of search engines and directories and how they work, and an understanding of what tools and resources are available to assist in the optimization process. With this knowledge, one can write the content on each page in a manner that both meets the needs of the human site visitor and the ranking criteria used by the major search engines.

Additional optimization strategies such as building link popularity with distributed content and reciprocal linking will need to be evaluated with regards to their relevance and appropriateness for the specific business in question. All of this can be accomplished either for free or at minimal cost by the business owner or site administrator with a willingness to expend the necessary time and effort. Used in combination, these SEO best practices can work together to achieve the brass ring: a site with a high page ranking and visibility on all of the major search engines... a site that is not destined for obscurity but instead can be found on the Web.

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