

Increasing Website Visibility with Search Engine Optimization

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Website visibility is one of the most important factors in e-commerce. You can have the most spectacular site on the Internet, but it is a death knell if nobody knows it is there. Customers must be able to find your products in the sea of websites on the web. Because of the lack of understanding this basic fact, “dead sites” plague otherwise competent web developers.

There are many ways to direct attention to a website including pay-per-click (PPC) advertising such as Google AdWords, traditional advertising or word-of-mouth. There is, however, no more powerful or cost effective way to bring potential customers to your website than organic search results on the major search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Organic search results are the non-paid results generated by search engines directly below sponsored or paid results.

To be included in those results couldn't get much simpler, you merely need to let the search engines know that you exist. Most search engines have a URL submission page such as the one on Google at <http://www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl>. This will add your website (or individual page) to the list of URLs to be crawled by the search engine's spiders or bots. Be patient, the first crawl of a new website can take up to a month or two.

Once your site has been included in the search engine index it will begin showing up in the search results for that search engine. How high up on the search results it appears is dependant on the quality of the site content and how search engine friendly your website is. By adjusting certain aspects of your website you can assure optimal placement of your pages in the search index. This process is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

SEO is more of an art than a science since the algorithms used by the search engines are closely guarded secrets. There are many schools of thought on the best way to implement SEO to increase the visibility of your site; this paper will outline the major points that have been found to work in practical application in a production environment for the author.

- Website Architecture
- Meta Tags
- Site Navigation
- External Linking
- URL Submission

If the SEO task seems too daunting, there are SEO professionals who can help you with the tasks. But be sure that their tactics work on their own websites. After all, you wouldn't want to use a SEO firm who couldn't place themselves higher than page 30 on a search for “Search Engine Optimization”.

Website Architecture

When developing a website it is important to keep search engines in mind. Most search engines have guidelines on their sites for designers such as the Webmaster Guidelines on Google at <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35769>, filled with a wealth of great design advice as well as things to avoid. You can't get better advice than that given directly by the people who actually built the search engine indexes that you wish to be included in.

Use descriptive filenames for your pages that include keywords indicating the content of your pages whenever possible. For example toy-trucks.html would be preferable to category-5.html, as the search engines can more readily determine the content of the page.

Be sure that you make your pages standards compliant; most search engines give some weight to pages that are constructed correctly. The less errors in the pages, the more likely you are to have a successful crawl. Not only does this help with search engine rankings, but it also aids in the cross platform integrity of your page design which ensures a consistent look and feel on all Internet browsers.

There are many online utilities available to test the code in your pages for standards compliancy such as the markup validation tool at <http://validator.w3.org/> or the CSS validation tool at <http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator>.

Be sure to use terms (keywords) in your page content that reflect the true content of your page. Use the most important keyword two or three times in the page. Be sure the use of the term flows smoothly like natural speech. Do not go overboard by placing the keyword in the page dozens of times, this give you no advantage as this constitutes keyword stuffing or search index spamming and can potentially get your site banned from the search index. There are exceptions to this such as product lists which include the keyword in each item name; search engines are sophisticated enough to determine the difference.

Use header tags such as <h2> or bold tags to identify the subject of the page prior to the main text content; search engines key into these and identify them as important text to determine your content. Be sure to use your most important keyword for your page in these headers.

Try to go as in depth as possible for all of your pages. The more content you have published on any given subject, the more authoritative your site looks to the search engines for that subject; but be sure that the content you use is of genuine use to your users such as in depth product or service descriptions, otherwise it could be considered search index spamming. Try to use important keywords in this content.

Keep your most important content as close to the top of your pages as possible. The further down a page your keywords are seen the less precedence the search engine spiders and bots give them.

Be sure to have a sitemap page on your website as search engines view them as a 7 course meal and will spider all the links from that page.

Meta Tags

It is important to give information directly about your pages to visiting spiders and bots about your pages and content. Providing meta-tags in the <head> portion of your pages does this. The most critical meta-tags are *title*, *keywords*, *description* and *robots*.

The *title* tag should be approximately 15 words and clearly indicate the content of the page. Be sure to include one or two keywords from the body content of the page in the title. This way the search engines can draw a correlation between the title and content. Most search engines will also use the *title* meta-tag as the link text in the search results. If the title meta-tag does not exist, the search engines will use some random text from your page or just your URL as the title, which in most cases is not the best title for your page.

The *keywords* tag should consist of up to 25 words or groups of words separated by commas that indicate the subject of your page; use both singular and plural when applicable. Do not duplicate the same keyword over and over, this is called search engine spamming, it will not help and can get you banned from a search engine index. Because of such tactics, search engines are putting less and less value on the *keywords* tag and in some cases they ignore them altogether. But it is a good practice to include this tag anyway for the search engines that still utilize it.

The keywords “toy duck, toy ducks, rubber duck, rubber ducks, toy, toys” would be more effective for a page containing content about rubber ducks than “rubber ducks, rubber ducks, rubber ducks, rubber ducks” or “lots of rubber ducks, rubber ducks for your tub, rubber toys”. Be sure that the keywords you select appear in the content of the page as it helps the search engines draw a correlation between them and your page content.

The *description* tag should have approximately a 25-word description of your page in plain English. Be sure to include the main keyword in this description, this way the search engines can once again draw a correlation between the title and content. Search engines will display this page description in search results if it exists, otherwise they will use some random text from your as the description, which in most cases is not best describe your page.

And finally, the *robots* tag gives directives to the visiting spiders and bots, telling them what to do with the content of the page. This way you can choose which pages are added to the search indexes.

To have spiders and bots index the content of a page and follow all links use the following... <meta name="robots" content="index, follow">

To prevent spiders and bots from indexing the content of a page and following all links use the following... <meta name="robots" content="noindex, nofollow">

These directives can be used in combination to allow spiders and bots to index your page content but prevent spiders from following links on the page with the following... <meta name="robots" content="index, nofollow">

Site Navigation

Site Navigation is a sticky subject as it generally causes a rift to develop between webmasters and the site designers. The designers will want navigation schemes that involve graphical buttons and JavaScript or Flash menus. Unfortunately those types of navigation schemes can have a negative impact on the search index ranking of your pages.

Search engines cannot “see” the text on your graphical buttons. It is good practice to make use of text links for all of your important navigational links. Try to keep the links specific and use keywords when possible. If you must use a graphical link, be sure to include a good description of the purpose of the image in both the alt and title arguments for that image and provide that same link somewhere on the page as a text link. For example if you use a graphic for a navigational link to your products page you would want to use a link similar to the one below...

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<a href="products.html"></a>
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Then be sure to include a text link to the same location on the page, usually at the bottom of the page.

JavaScript menus and Flash menus, while providing a slick look and feel, cannot be seen by most search engines spiders or bots and will be ignored. Any links, keywords or content inside the script will be rendered useless in your attempts to get indexed on most search engines. As mentioned before, try to use text links whenever possible.

To get a good idea about how a search engine spider sees your pages, use the Lynx Viewer here <http://www.rankquest.com/tools/Lynx-View.php>. By studying the results, you can get a better feel for what the spiders and bots are seeing and determine how to better optimize the page to make the best use of your keywords.

A good compromise between the site designers and webmasters is to use CSS menus inside a <div> as an alternative to JavaScript or Flash menus. These can be seen by visiting search engines while still giving much of the functionality the site designers want.

External Linking

Incoming links from other websites are becoming more and more important to the value that search engines assign to your pages in the search index; they are viewed as “votes” for your site. There are three types of incoming links; reciprocal, non-reciprocal and link farms. Be aware that page rank of the sites linking to you directly corresponds with the perceived value of your site content for Google especially; you can get more information about page ranks and their value at <http://www.google.com/technology/>

When an external website links to your site and you provide a link back to them, this is called reciprocal linking. If the websites contain relevant content or complimentary topics, more weight is given to them than sites with no correlation between them. Also, the higher the perceived page rank of the site linking to you the better your content will appear to the search engines.

When an external website links to your site and you do not provide a link back to them, this is called non-reciprocal linking. This is the most valuable type of link; it indicates to the search engines that the site linking to you saw your site as such a valuable resource or authority on a specific topic that they didn't require a link back to them. Once again, the higher the perceived page rank of the site linking to you the better your content will appear to the search engines.

The third type incoming links are link farms. You want to stay as far away from these types of links as possible. A link farm is a website whose sole purpose is to artificially raise page ranks of the participating sites by providing links to them while offering no real use or content of its own to visitors. They usually consist of thousands of links to various sites that have no relevant content to your site, and they all link back to the link farm to artificially guide spiders and bots to the other sites.

Search engines frown upon the use of link farms and in some cases will penalize your search index ranking and sometimes your page rank will suffer for participating in this practice.

A good rule of thumb is to stay in “good neighborhoods” with reciprocal and non-reciprocal links to sites with good page ranks and stay away from “bad neighborhoods” like link farms and sites with bad page ranks.

Outgoing links are important as well, although search engines do not give them as much weight as incoming links. It is perceived that you are providing a service to your users by providing links to relevant content on other sites. If you do provide non-reciprocal outgoing links, be sure that any site you are linking to has a Google page rank of 4 or above as this will indicate to search engines that you are linking to worthwhile content.

URL Submission

Submit any new pages or pages with recent edits to the major search engines as soon as you publish them online. It is quicker than waiting for the search engines to discover them themselves. By adopting this policy, you can shave weeks off of the search indexing process.

Keep in mind that you want to be in the first 30 search results for any of your important keywords, as most people will not go beyond the third page to find a website about a specific topic before refining their search. Be pro-active and monitor your search result placements monthly. If your placement for any of your important keyword drops below the top 30 then it is paramount that you adjust the content on those pages of your site to attempt to rectify the situation and increase your result rank. Once you have adjusted your pages, re-submit them to all of the major search engines. Be patient, it can sometimes take weeks for your pages to be re-indexed.

Over 90% of all searches to you site will be from Google or Yahoo!

The URL submission page for Google is located here...

<http://www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl>

The URL submission page for Yahoo! is located here...

<http://search.yahoo.com/info/submit.html>

MSN Live is a late comer to the search arena and their search indexing algorithms are not as sophisticated as Google and Yahoo!'s. You will get only sporadic success with MSN Live until their technology matures.

The URL submission page for MSN Live is located here...

<http://search.msn.com/docs/submit.aspx>