

SEO Fundamentals: Key Tips & Best Practices for Search Engine Optimization

The process of *Search Engine Optimization* (SEO) has gained popularity in recent years as a means to reach target audiences through improved web site positioning in search engines. However, few have an understanding of the SEO methods employed in order to produce such results. The following tips are some basic best practices to consider in optimizing your site for improved search engine performance.

» Identifying Target Search Terms

The first step to any SEO campaign is to identify the search terms (also referred to as *key terms*, or *key words*) for which you want your site pages to be found in search engines – these are the words that a prospective visitor might type into a search engine to find relevant web sites. For example, if your organization's mission has to do with environmental protection, are your target visitors most likely to search for "acid rain", "save the forests", "toxic waste", "greenhouse effect", or all of the above? Do you want to reach visitors who are local, regional or national in scope? These are considerations that need careful attention as you begin the SEO process. After all, it's no use having a good search engine ranking for terms no one's looking for.

Your target terms should be at least two words in length and, of course, be relevant to the content of your site pages. Your own intuition and team brainstorming are good places to start with key term selection. However, there are tools designed to assist you in validating your choices and researching search term possibilities you may have never even considered. WordTracker and Overture offer two of the most popular such tools:

Google AdWords Keyword Tool (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>) allows you to search Google's database for the query volume (popularity) of various search terms; the tool also offers recommendations for related terms. This is a free tool.

WordTracker (www.wordtracker.com) is a commercial tool used for search term selection research. Although there is a fee for using the full version of WordTracker, they also offer limited trial where you can test out the system.

By strategically selecting terms that are popular enough to bring you visibility with target audiences, yet not so general/competitive that a prominent ranking will be difficult, you can ensure that your SEO efforts are built on a stable foundation from the start.

» We Have the Terms, Now What Do We Do With Them?

Once you have selected the search terms you want to target, the next step is to integrate the terms into your site pages to make them relevant.

Selecting Pages for Optimization

Initially, the pages that you select for optimization should be those that offer the most focused content relating to the terms you want to target – you may already have such pages on your site, or you may need to develop them from scratch. You can optimize as many pages as you like, but each page should focus on no more than one or two of your target terms.

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Inserting Target Terms Throughout Page Copy

The phrase “content is king” is often cited when it comes to web sites, and this holds true for search engines as well. While there are a number of variables search engines use to produce the results they deliver, the visible text content of your pages is a primary factor that search engines utilize to find, index and deliver your pages to prospective site visitors.

Once you have identified the terms you want to target, you’ll need to incorporate the terms into the copy of your site pages so that when an engine arrives at your page it can identify the page as being relevant for the search terms you are targeting and produce it among the results it displays. In other words, for a search engine to justify producing your page in search results for a given term, it needs to have evidence that your page is truly relevant for the term in question – having the term within the text content of your pages provides such evidence.

Make sure that your target search term appears at least once in your introductory paragraph and page header so that search engines—and visitors—can immediately recognize the term in the content above all your other page copy and give context to the content of your page.

Most importantly, try to integrate search terms into your page copy in a natural fashion so that the terms make sense in context and complement the overall message of the page content. Do not indiscriminately load your page copy with terms that do not make sense in context, as doing so will leave a negative impression on visitors once they arrive at your page, and could be considered Spam.

An excellent resource for SEO copywriting is offered by Jill Whalen of HighRankings.com. See: www.highrankings.com/seo-writing

Make Use of Head Tags

Search engines tend to weigh words placed within page head tags (h1, h2, h3, etc.) more heavily than they do general text. Whenever possible, include your target terms within the head tags, especially the h1 tag at the top of your page, to ensure that your pages get maximum search engine exposure. You can use a CSS stylesheet to format your head tags so they are consistent with your site design.

The Page Title Tag

The title tag in the HTML head of your site pages is a critical, yet often overlooked, location to insert your target terms. Search engines weigh the title of your pages quite heavily in determining relevance, so you’ll want to make sure that each page on your site that you want to show up in search engine results has a unique title incorporating the targeted term for that page.

About Meta Tags

Once thought to be the gateway to top search engine rankings, meta tags are no longer weighed very heavily by search engines, if at all. This is primarily due to the abuse of meta tags by unethical marketers. However, this does not mean that you should ignore meta tags altogether, just be aware that they are only a small part of the SEO puzzle.

The two tags you’ll want to pay attention to in optimizing your pages are the *description* meta tag and the *keywords* meta tag. Keep your description tag succinct and to the point (under 200 characters) – some search engines, such as msn, will utilize this tag to display a description of your page along with a link in their results, so it should provide a general overview of the page topic. With keyword tags, limit your key words to 25 terms or less (separated by commas) and make sure that you don’t repeat the same term more than 3-4 times, as doing so could be misinterpreted as an attempt to deceive the search engines and get you banned altogether.

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Keyword Density: How Much is Too Much?

Now that you have an overview of some of the ways to integrate your target search terms into site copy, you may be wondering how many times you actually need to repeat your key terms to get results. Opinions on this matter vary, but in general, you want to have your key terms appear anywhere between 2-10 times per every 100 words of text – this ratio is known as “keyword density”. The following link provides a neat little tool you can use to measure your keyword density on a given page for a given term: www.keyworddensity.com.

As a general rule, try to integrate your key terms as often as you can without breaking up the natural flow of your copy. Good copywriting is an essential component to SEO, and at the end of the day, your page content needs to appeal to people (as well as search engines).

» Linking Structure & Strategy: Let the Spiders Crawl

One of the primary ways that search engines find site pages is by following the links from your home page to other inside site pages (this process is also known as “spidering” or “crawling”). In order to allow search engines to effectively crawl your site and locate your inside pages, it is important to ensure that your menu structure does not present search engines with any barriers that interfere with their ability to follow internal links. Complicated JavaScript or other dynamic menu features can sometimes get in the way of effective crawling. As far as search engines are concerned, when it comes to finding links to your site pages, the simpler the better.

One tool that you can use to “see what the search engines see” is to use a *search engine spider simulator*, such as the one linked to below. If you cannot see all of the links to your site pages after performing a simulated crawl, then you will need to take a look at your code to assess what may be getting in the way of effective search engine crawling.

Search Engine Spider Simulator:
www.linkvendor.com/seo-tools/se-spider.html

A great way to build a search engine-friendly road map for search engine spiders to follow and index site pages is to create Site Map with simple text links to all of the pages on your site. A Site Map also has the added usability benefit of providing visitors with an overall snapshot of all site pages.

Link Popularity: The Importance of Inbound Links

Another way that search engines find your site pages is by following links to your site from other external sites (provided that those sites themselves are listed in a given engine). Having such links to your site not only provides search engines with additional opportunity to find your pages, but also provides increased visibility for your site by putting it in front of visitors on another site.

Many top search engines, such as Google, will factor in the number of sites linking to yours in determining its results for a particular search query. This is known as “link popularity”. One way to think about link popularity is that each external link to your site counts as a “vote” for your site. So, the more links you have pointing at you the better, right? Well, not necessarily. Because search engines also know how to count the link popularity of the sites linking to yours, a single link from a popular site will weigh more heavily than many links from obscure unpopular sites. When it comes to getting links, quality over quantity is the way to go.

All things being equal, of two sites with content of comparable relevance and structure, the site with higher link popularity will get more prominent placement in search engine results.

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Who's Linking At You?

If you want to research pages that currently link to your site, Google supports a neat little trick that lets you do just that. If you go to google.com and type in your URL preceded by "link:" (without the quotes – e.g. link:www.your-url.com) the results will give you a list of all pages listed within google that link to your site. You can also use this method to research sites that linking to organizations similar to yours – a site that links to organizations like yours, or even a direct competitor, may be a good lead to follow-up with in requesting a link of your own.

» SEO Barriers

Just as there are steps you can take to improve your site's search engine performance, there are also things that can hurt your chances at optimal rankings—below are some of the major culprits...

Avoid Frames

Sites utilizing frames typically separate the content of the page from the frameset, making it virtually impossible for search engines to find, let alone index and produce, the content of the framed pages in their results. If you have framed pages that you want to optimize for search engines, your best bet is to convert them to standard non-framed pages so that search engines can see what they have to offer for content display them properly.

Dynamic URLs

Dynamic URLs (e.g. containing "?" or "ID=") have traditionally been difficult for many search engines to crawl and index properly, although they are getting better at it. To play it safe, monitor your dynamically generated pages to assess whether or not the major search engines are finding them and, if necessary, create non-dynamic, search engine-friendly, versions of those pages on your site (e.g. yourorganization.com/about/default.asp).

Images vs. Text

Web developers will often utilize images to display text for page headings and navigation elements to enhance the design and/or control the layout of site pages, as opposed to utilizing HTML "true text" (in general, if you can highlight the text with your mouse, you will know it is true text). While there is nothing inherently wrong with this practice from a web development standpoint, it is important to know that search engines are not able to view text that is presented as images. Therefore, if words that you want search engines to find are embedded in site graphics, you should consider transitioning those images to actual text. Minimally, you'll want to use ALT text to indicate the words that are displayed in site graphics not only so that search engines can read them, but also as a usability enhancement for visitors who may not be able to view the images.

Multimedia

Flash animation and video may look cool to site visitors, but search engines cannot read or index the content embedded within multimedia objects. That is not to say that you shouldn't use multimedia where appropriate, but be aware that it is not search engine-friendly. Inserting Flash components as individual page elements (amongst HTML) to achieve the effects you seek is a much better option than building entire pages in Flash if you want search engines to find the pages.

JavaScript and other Scripting

Certain implementations of JavaScript or other scripts that embed content and/or links within the script can prevent search engines from detecting the content and crawling the links. A search engine spider simulator should allow you to determine whether or not the content is visible to search engines.

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» Measuring Success

So, how do you assess the fruits of your labor when it comes to SEO? One of the primary ways to gauge performance is to treat the SEO process as an experiment with measurable before-and-after results.

Before you begin optimizing your pages, note the rank of the pages you are optimizing for your target terms in given search engines. If you know the rank of a given page before you begin SEO, you can then use that rank as a baseline to compare against your post-SEO rankings once the search engines have re-indexed your pages. Similarly, you can also measure your pre-optimization and post-optimization site statistics to see if there is a noticeable improvement. Other key indicators you can track include conversion goals such as email inquiries, sales orders, incoming calls, newsletter subscriptions, membership applications or anything else that would be the logical result of increased public exposure.

» A Final Word...

It is important to remember that effective search engine optimization is not about “tricking” the search engines into ranking your site favorably. Rather, SEO is a research process designed to deliver relevant information to the people seeking that information. The better you are able to optimize your page content to suit the needs of your target visitors, the greater success you will have in not only attracting visitors to your site, but making sure that they are happy with what they find once they get there.

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