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7 Simple Techniques Ready Site for Search

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Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is probably the least understood aspect of Web design and marketing. It's a world of secret sauce, voodoo and complicated algorithms. There are few facts, no guarantees and lots of wishing on a star when it comes to SEO, and it doesn't have to be that way.

Sure, you could pay an SEO consultant to optimize your site for you. You could pay someone to recommend keywords and submit your site to popular search engines. You could do all of these things and more and still, there will be no guarantee that it will help your rankings. More importantly, there is no guarantee it will drive the visitors you want and need to make your site successful. Rankings are important, but it's relevant visits—those that turn visitors into customers—that really matter.

While a vast industry of consulting, technology and services have grown around the promise of a SEO silver bullet, the saying, "There is no silver bullet," is ultimately true.

While SEO has its complications, it is simpler than it has been made to be. Simple ways you can optimize your site for search exist that are little more than well-applied common sense, a plan and some know-how.

When it comes to SEO, and driving relevant visits, you'll get the most bang for your buck by getting your content in order, having your site built the right way and taking the time to manage it and keep it fresh.

Content is, and always will be, king

The most important thing you can do to assure your site is optimized for search is to provide great, relevant content. Put (very) simply, the best kind of Web content is relevant to your customers' (and potential customers') needs, and written with the Web in mind.

Search engines are all about indexing content. Without content, no amount of SEO trickery is going to help you in the long run, nor should it. By helping engines help people who are looking for

information, you're not only providing a service and making the Web an easier place to be, you'll be helping increase your ranking and relevancy with search engines.

When you've got good, current and relevant content people want to read—you've got something others may also want to link to.

Inbound links matter most

When it comes to SEO, the most important factor as it relates to ranking in a search engine, is how many inbound links you have and the quality of those inbound links—other highly ranked sites linking to your site are worth more than lower ranked sites. If you can provide content people want to link to, you'll move up in the rankings.

Again, it comes back to content, but it's more than that. You should be actively soliciting links to your content. I don't mean the (usually less than useful) typical link exchange techniques. I mean getting the word out that you've published something worth noting and keeping interest in your content high by keeping it always fresh and up-to-date.

Content can be hard to get right, but when you do, and when you've got people interested and linking to you, you're relevant visits, the visits that actually matter, will go way up.

Proper page (and code) structure

This one may be tricky for those who don't know HTML, but in essence it's not that complicated. A properly coded and structured page will be easier to index. By using lean, clean, standard and semantic (i.e. meaningful) markup, you literally make a hierarchical map of your content and your site for a crawler to follow.

This structure begins with proper titles (and therefore title tags) for your content, as well as keyword rich headings and well organized paragraphs. It can be a bit complicated and it does take some work to ensure your code is designed the

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right way. Quality code—from design to production—can make a huge difference in how your site is indexed. While there is an abundance of cut-rate code jockeys available, a development team with the skills to build the code with elegance will pay significant dividends both the site’s overall technical and search performance.

Hiring Web developers who know and understand Web standards and best practices would be a good place to start.

On keywords

It can be a challenge to determine which keywords to use in your content to ensure higher rankings. However, this doesn’t have to be something you pay a consultant to sort out for you. If you are willing to do a bit of research on your own, you can do quite a bit of this yourself.

Note that when it comes to placing keywords, the titles of your pages and the content itself should be where you put your effort. Spamming (yes—spamming) a search engine with huge lists of keywords doesn’t help much – and may well get you blacklisted. As well, the keywords meta tag isn’t all that important anymore, a common myth of SEO. It helps, just not that much.

In order to leverage keywords for SEO, first, you’ll want to understand the goals of your site as they relate to search. For example, prioritize what you want people to find on your site, as well as what they might be looking for. It is important to consider the Web site from the perspective of the user, as they ultimately determine what’s valuable, and the words or relational terms they use to search on are most important. Many plug and play statistical software packages are available, providing information on what users are searching for.

Once you’ve got those goals down and you have an understanding of your customers and how they use the Web, chances are you can make a pretty good guess as to some keywords and keyword phrases. You can then plug those keywords into tools like Suggestion Tool (www.suggestiontool.com) or Wordtracker (www.wordtracker.com) to see how they match up to actual searches.

Images

Without help a search engine cannot index image or multimedia content. For that reason, and many others, a general rule of thumb would be to style textual content, such as navigation and headings, with Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) instead of using an image for text.

When it comes to informational and decorative images on a Web page, proper coding of the ALT attribute is key. This is a good place to add a keyword rich description of the image. This doesn’t help a ton when it comes to SEO, but it does help some and has other benefits in terms of usability and accessibility.

Splash pages and home pages

Make sure that the top-level pages of your site have enough links on them to allow a crawler or spider to get down into the content of your site. If you’ve thought about having a Flash or image only splash page—think again—you’ll effectively be cutting the search engines off at the very beginning.

If you’re curious as to what a crawler actually sees when going through your site, try using a search engine spider simulator (www.webconfs.com/search-engine-spider-simulator.php). If nothing shows up, you’ve got some work to do.

Be patient

It can take quite a while for engines to re-index and re-rank your site once you’ve made some changes. I recently worked on a project where I was asked to restructure a site’s pages to rank higher on a very specific search phrase. When I started the site was ranked on page 6 in Google and it actually moved down to page 8 before it moved up to page 1 a few months later.

It’s easy to want to go back on any changes you make if immediate results aren’t realized. Search engines are smart, but they take time to sort through the vast amounts of information that’s thrown at them. Be patient and you’ll see results.

It’s not rocket science...

SEO does take effort and know-how. It begins with your content (hopefully good enough to get people to link to it) and the clean, meaningful structure of your code. Those two things combined will do more for your efforts in regards to SEO than almost any other trick or technique you could try (or buy). ■

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