



Some guidelines for SEO strategies

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1. What is SEO?

1.1 Definition

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization. The main 3 SEs that we worry about today (who knows who they may be next year!) are Google, Yahoo and Bing.

Quoted from Wikipedia: *“Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the visibility of a website or a web page in search engines via the “natural” or un-paid (“organic” or “algorithmic”) search results. Other forms of search engine marketing (SEM) target paid listings. In general, the earlier (or higher on the page), and more frequently a site appears in the search results list, the more visitors it will receive from the search engine's users. SEO may target different kinds of search, including image search, local search, video search, academic search, news search and industry-specific vertical search engines. This gives a website web presence.”*

So SEO, is the “science” of using various ongoing methods to place your site(s) on page 1 of a search for the particular phrase your site is optimized for.

1.2 Guarantee

There are some SEO companies who will guarantee you the #1 spot on page 1. Be careful what they're offering. Let's look at “Citrus Heights painters”. The opposition is just 222 pages indexed and not enough data to give search volume—that is, almost none. So that's not a very useful. Now look at “Sacramento painters”.

	Google pages found	Monthly US searches
“Citrus Heights painters”	222	-
“Citrus Heights house painters”	4	-
“Sacramento house painters”	12,300	270
“Sacramento painters” 770	3,090	

So I can guarantee you #1 on page 1 for the Citrus Heights phrases pretty comfortably, but it will do you little good as almost no one is searching for it. A more useful “guarantee” would be for the term “Sacramento house painters” or “Sacramento painters”. The problem with the latter one is it will also encompass artists.



1.3 Is it really necessary?

YES! I could leave it at that, but let's see why.

When you did your last 2-3 internet searches, how many pages deep did you dig before giving up and/or trying a different search phrase? If you're in the majority, it was likely just the first page, maybe just the first few results. We couldn't find any really recent data, but a study done back in 2003 out of Penn State University ([An Analysis of Web Documents Retrieved and Viewed](#)) found 54% only viewed page 1, 19% went to page 2, and just 9% went to page 3. The full table is below.

Number of Results Pages Viewed	Occurrences	Percentage
1	24,4441	54.1%
2	86,976	19.3%
3	43,509	9.6%
4	24,880	5.5%
5	14,999	3.3%
6	9,706	2.1%
7	6,583	1.5%
8	4,570	1.0%
9	3,219	0.7%
10	2,479	0.5%
>10	1,912	2.3%

So, this means you have less than a 9% chance of being seen on page 4 and beyond. This translates into lost sales and lost revenue.

The answer is definitely, yes, it is VERY necessary.



1.4 SEO types

There are 2 areas where SEO is completed—on page and off page. We will look at both these areas, and what it entails, in the next chapter.

On page is, obviously, completed on the site itself during, or after, the site is designed and compiled. This is where the majority of tweaks are available, but which, at least in the case of Google, have the smallest long-term effect. However, that's not to say this area should be avoided.

Off page is the ongoing, day to day, month to month grind of, mainly, building links back to the site. This is an area that never stops. The more links back the better. This is accomplished in a variety of ways. Again, we will look at some of these strategies in the next chapter.

2. SEO areas

2.1 Disclaimer

This guide is not written to make you an expert in SEO. The work involved just to become good at it is tremendous and the average business owner should be focusing on growing their business and working on their business than trying to do everything, including site design and SEO!

Secondly, SEO plays on a field where the goalposts change. A site that's ranking well today may slide rapidly down the rankings tomorrow because a search engine changes its algorithms. This requires constant reading, researching and testing. Usually beyond the time constraints, or interest of most business owners.

Your best bet is to find someone you trust whose business is SEO.

2.2 On page SEO

As a company, we do this as we're building a site. There's no reason it cannot be done afterwards, and many do, however, it seems a waste of valuable time doing it this way. Why have someone unskilled in SEO write content which then needs to be re-written to make it SEO-friendly? To us, it makes more sense to be thinking about good SEO strategy as we write.

2.2.1 Keywords

It all begins with your keywords. These are the words or phrases that people type in to the search engines to find information. If you have a look at our client sheet, you'll see we suggest writing down 5 words or phrases you think people would use to find your business, then get another 5 from other people. Hopefully, that way we'll get a good base to start developing from.

As you saw in section 1.2, the choice of keywords is critical in getting the traffic you need, to get the sales you need. It's pointless optimizing for the wrong phrases! Because this is so important, we spend a good amount of time working on this. It's not just picking good sounding phrases, but we check their usefulness at [Google keyword tool](#). This allows us to look carefully at the balance between competition and search volume.



2.2.2 Copy writing

Once we have determined the key phrases, when can start tweaking or writing the copy needed to ensure your pages are found in the organic searches. We do this as follows:

(A) Keyphrases in the web page title

Your web page title is very important because it is what the search engines display as link text as the result of a search. The title must include your main keyphrases, while at the same time it must describe your business very well and should entice readers to click on it.

Unless your business is big and well known (like Microsoft or Coca Cola) don't start your page title with the name of your company or welcome. Start your title with the words search engine users will most likely use (your keyphrases).

Put your main keyphrase at the beginning of your page title (keyphrase prominence) and keep your keyphrase together (keyword proximity).

Put your second keyphrase somewhere else in the title.

Make the title short (8 words or less).

(B) Keyphrases in your Keyword Meta Tag:

Search engines rarely, if ever, use the Keyword Meta Tag any more (Google completely ignores it). However, place a list of your main and secondary keywords in the Keyword Meta Tag of your page, just in case search engines decide to use them again in the future. They are also good for linking and creating "cloud tag" modules.

(C) Keyphrases in your Description Meta Tag

The Description Meta Tag is still important, since some search engines use them to elaborate on the results link. Include your keyphrases (main and secondary) in your Description Meta Tag.

The description should be 'descriptive', concise and professional. Avoid using hype and make it short (25 words or less).

Don't make your description sound just like a collection of keywords, and keep your keyphrases together.

(D) Keywords in the body of your page

Use keywords on your page at around 4-5%, since this will help the search engine determine the topic of your page. There is much debate on this ratio, but too much is as bad as too little.

Use your keyphrases several times, and place them as close to the top and bottom of the page as possible.

Place keyphrases in Header Tags (H1, H2 or H3) in the first two paragraphs of your page.

Bold face keyphrases at least once.

Repeating keyphrases often can make the text sound awkward and this can lose visitors attention. The copy should read fluently and effortlessly. It is ultimately the readers who will decide if the page is worth the time they spend on it. A pleasant experience will make them more likely to come back.

2.2.3 Other Design Considerations

The page must be easy to navigate by the search engines and humans. Search engines heavily favor text over graphics, and HTML over other editing formats.

Use text heavily, especially in the navigation bar. Avoid placing text in graphic format since the search engines can't read it. There have been stories circulating that Google can now read text in graphics, but don't rely on this. It's better to ensure every image has "alt text". That can be read by search engines and helps those visitors who may have images turned off to understand the page.

Avoid frames. Search engines have trouble following them, and they may index only the framed content page and not the navigation frame.

Avoid Flash and JavaScript. Again, search engines have problems here, though, like text in images, it's said Google can now read the contents of Flash files. When using flash, make an HTML version of the site. When using a JavaScript navigation menu, include an alternate text menu at the bottom of the page, so it can be followed by the search engines.

Create a Site Map that includes all pages in the site, and place a Site Map link close to the top of the homepage. When the search engine follows the site map link, it will find and index all the pages.

Search engines read navigation bars too, so we include the most important keywords there, too.

All internal pages link to the homepage.

Separate products or services onto different pages. The search engines can be confused and that will dilute page relevance for the selected keyphrase. Create different, very focused pages, each with its own content and keyphrases, and optimize them.

2.3 Off page SEO

Once keyphrases are selected and optimized onpage, the last step is to begin getting links to your site from others. The best search engines, and in particular Google (who alone can deliver 80% of the search engine traffic to your site), "crawl" the web looking for links to your site. They interpret a link to your page as a vote, and the more links (votes) you have coming from quality sites the higher your page rank will be, and the higher the possibility that your page will achieve a good position in the search results pages.

2.3.1 DMOZ: The Open Directory Project (<http://www.dmoz.org>)

The world's largest directory. It is maintained by voluntary editors who review sites prior to inclusion. Being listed in this directory is important because it is used by Google to build its directory. Getting listed is free, but it may take a few weeks or even months to get listed, which can be a bit frustrating. However, there is a strong believe among search engine optimization experts that an Open Directory Project listing can significantly increase page rank in Google. To add go to <http://www.dmoz.org/add.html>.



2.3.2 Google (<http://www.google.com>)

[Creating an XML sitemap and submitting it to Google](#) can speed up the spidering process. It goes without saying that, with about 80% of the searches, Google is a very good place to be!

2.3.3 Submit articles

There are many sites which accept articles. This can be a great way to establish credibility as an expert and to drive quality traffic to your site. The key to getting traffic is to include a resource box at the end of the article.

However, not all article sites are alike. Some are just full of trashy rubbish, or articles reproduced over and over again. These can actually harm your rankings, just as bad copy can (those verbatim reproductions). One of the best article directories, and one we use, is [Ezine Articles](#). It's free to join, and they are reasonable picky about

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what they will accept. Their [guidelines](#) are a must-read before starting as it will save much heartache.

2.3.4 Forum posts

Due to spamming, most forums now include a “no follow” tag on any URLs entered. This means that you won’t get any credit for spamming 100 forums with 100 signatures. However, there are still some that don’t include this, and a search on Google will find some. Again, it’s as for articles, research the forum carefully before committing your reputation to it.

2.3.5 Links from allied sites

Getting a link from a site that has relevance is good. If you’re a painter try to get links from paint suppliers, building contractors, scaffolding hirers. A link from the local taxi company isn’t really going to do you much search engine wise, but it may get the odd visit direct from the taxi company site. For search engines, it’s about relevance.

Write to the owner or webmaster requesting a link. They will often request a return link so it’s a good idea to put one on the site before asking for them to include one. It can be removed if no favorable reply is received. This would be an A => B => A link.

A better type of linking in search engine eyes is an A => B => C => A link. This will more usually occur where one site owner has another site entirely.

2.3.6 Craigslist

Whilst not an SEO tool per se, it is a great way to get Google to spider a new site. An advert on CL will have a new site spidered within 24 hours, often sooner. And frequent advertising services or products on CL is a good way to build traffic.

2.3.7 Pointer sites

This technique involves building allied sites (as in 2.3.5) which showcase a particular product or service not developed or not fully developed on the main website. The site MUST be able to stand on its own with unique content and of a good size. It must not be a 1 or 2 page regurgitation of content found on the main site.

Place links to the main site from these “satellite” sites and vice versa.

2.3.8 Blogging

When we talk to clients, we tell them that this is a non-negotiable. Blogging does two things for a website. Firstly it provides (hopefully) interesting articles that others will want to link to. Secondly, it gives visitors (both human and search engine spiders) fresh content.

2.3.9 Social media

Though left to last, this is fast becoming THE area of link building. There are some SEO experts who now use this almost exclusively as a means for ranking sites. There are many different SM sites to choose from, but we recommend, at a minimum, Facebook and Twitter. Get a business page set up with them and get links going back and forth.

Also, consider local sites within the city (we use [Sacramento Insights](#) for one), as well as having happy clients review you on [Yelp](#), [Merchant Circle](#), [Insider Pages](#) and the like.

3. Final thoughts

3.1 Testing & monitoring

This, too, is an ongoing process. Sometimes changing one phrase or a word in a headline can make a big difference in rankings—good or bad. We heard of a window cleaning company who went from almost invisible to #1 by adding keyphrases to the title tag and the H1 tag. This will be fairly rare, but shows that others in the same field hadn't optimized at all.

Get good software to monitor changes in ranking. Typing in even 5 keyphrases and scrolling through pages to find the result is tedious if nothing else. There is also software to help with link building and analysis.

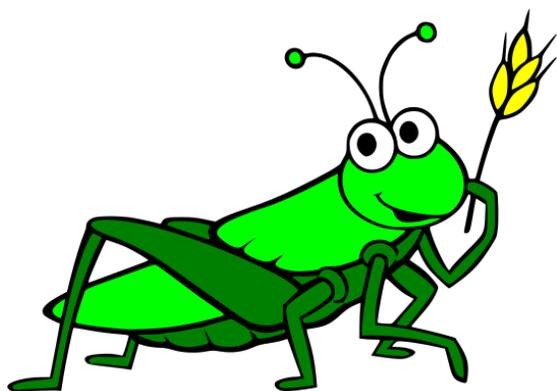
3.2 Being a little “sneaky” with SEO

Or, as it's called in the trade, blackhat SEO. This has nothing to do with black tie dinners or anything else nice. There are many different methods of trying to dupe the search engine's effort to provide relevant, targeted content. And as fast as someone thinks them up, the SEs change algorithms to penalize them. A classic example was keyword stuffing—that is, adding keywords everywhere in abundance. Not 4-5%, but 20, 30, 40% or more.

The bottom line is this. If any other the SEs find “dubious” SEO methods on a site, that site will generally be penalized in rankings. It's better to use legitimate, trusted methods.

3.3 Patience Grasshopper!

In New Zealand, there was a TV advert for Pantene shampoo that promoted great hair. The catch line was “It won't happen overnight, but it will happen!” The same applies to rankings. Just because a site is on the net, and has great SEO doesn't mean it will instantly be #1. It takes time, sometimes a lot of time. And monitoring. And tweaking. And monitoring. And tweaking. And monitoring. And tweaking...



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