Search Optimization for Beginners

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a difficult business. It's is full of misinformation and snake oil salesmen. SEO businesses are 80% scam, so if you hire someone to do it for you, you've got a one in five chance of things working out. Therefore, in order to get your website on the web so it generates the type of traffic to it that you are looking for you need to understand the basics of SEO so that you can do it yourself and save your money or when you do find someone to do the work for you; you know what to ask and how to moderate them.

A Quick Look at the Search Engine Landscape

Before you get started trying to optimize for the search engines, you should understand the basic landscape. What is a search engine, anyway? What's a directory? Which one is most important? The following points provide an overview of search engines:

- The search engine landscape consists of search sites, search systems, search engines, and search directories.

- A search site is a Web site where you can search. Google, AOL, and Yahoo! are search sites.

- Many search sites get their data from other companies. Google, for example, is a search system that feeds data to AOL and many other sites.

- A search engine is a system that indexes individual pages inside Web sites, whereas a search directory is a collection of information about particular Web sites; it doesn't index pages inside those sites, it just contains basic information about each site. You can find one of the oldest and most important search directories at http://dir.Yahoo.com/.

- The three most important search sites are Google, Yahoo!, and MSN/Bing.

- Both Google and Yahoo! allow you to search using both search engines (www.Google.com and www.Yahoo.com) and search directories (http://dir.Google.com/ and http://dir.Yahoo.com/). MSN/Bing provides only a search engine.

- Google and MSN/Bing have their own search engines. However, Yahoo!'s search engine actually provides data from MSN/Bing; it no longer maintains a search engine index itself.

- Google dwarfs all other search systems. Almost 66 percent of regular search engine searches occur on the Google search site. Add in the sites to which Google feeds search results (such as AOL.com, Earthlink.com, Comcast.net, and so on), and Google is responsible for a little over 70 percent of all searches.

- MSN/Bing is responsible for around another 26 percent of searches, at www.Bing.com and, via the results it feeds to Yahoo!, at www.Yahoo.com.

- Ask.com is often included in the list of the top search engines, but it's responsible for only about 2 percent of searches.

- Not all searches occur at regular "search engines"; people often search for information at video sites, social networking sites, online stores, and the like.

- More searches carried out every month at www.YouTube.com than at Bing. And Craigslist.com, Facebook.com, eBay.com, and Amazon.com combined account for more than two billion searches every month — more than Bing. So if you sell products, focusing purely on the regular search engines may be a big mistake; a huge proportion of "product" searches are being carried out elsewhere.

Basic On-Page Search Engine Optimization Techniques

When the search engines look at your pages to figure out what they are all about, you can in effect *tell* them what the page is about. You do that by putting keywords in the correct pages. Following are a few basic search-engine optimization techniques for your Web pages. Say that you're optimizing for the phrase *rodent racing*. Here are a few tips for where to place this text:

- The page's URL — its filename and path — is very important. Get keywords in there; don't waste this prime real estate. You might have something like this: http://www.*yourdomain*.com/rodent-racing-scores.html.

- The page's <TITLE></TITLE> tags are also very important. You should make sure to include keywords within the tags, like this: <TITLE>Rodent Racing - Looking after Your Rodents, Feeding Them, Everything You Need to know</TITLE>.

- The DESCRIPTION tag is important, though not always for search-results placement. Google says it doesn't use the tag to help rank your page. However, the tag often appears in the search results page, so make sure it contains good keywords, but also consider that it's a "sales pitch," encouraging searchers to click your link rather than someone else's. For instance: <META NAME="description" CONTENT="Rodent Racing - Scores, Schedules, Everything Rodent Racing. Mouse Racing, Stoat Racing, Rat Racing, Gerbil Racing. The Web's Top Rodent Racing Systems and Racing News">.

- Despite what you may have heard, the KEYWORDS Meta tag holds little value; search engines either ignore it or give it very little weight. My advice? Use it, but don't spend much time on it. Put a few basic keywords in there.

- Headings on your pages are valuable; they should contain keywords and be formatted in a manner that tells the search engines that they actually *are* headings, which means you should use <H> tags. Use an <H1> tag at the top; then use <H2> and <H3> tags lower on the page.

- Use keywords in your image filenames and in the image tag's ALT text. For instance: <IMG SRC="rodent-racing-1.jpg" ALT="Rodent Racing - Ratty Winners of our Latest Rodent Racing Event">. Using ALT text is particularly important when creating image links to other pages on your site, because it tells the search engines what the referenced page is about.

- Wherever possible, use text links. Search engines read the "anchor text" in the links to learn what the page the link points to be about, so you need lots of links in your site, with good keywords in those links.

- Repeat your keywords — but not too much. If you want a page to rank well for *rodent racing*, that phrase also needs to appear a few times throughout the body text. But if it sounds clumsy, you've overdone it.

- There are other ways to draw attention to keywords in your body text; make them bold; put them in bulleted lists, make them italic.

Here's the ideal optimized page:

- You used the keywords in the filename

  - . . . and in the <TITLE></TITLE> tags

  - . . . and in the DESCRIPTION meta tag

  - . . . and in the page's first <H1> tag

  - . . . and perhaps in some subheadings

  - . . . And multiple times throughout the body of the page.

    You have the keywords in links, elsewhere on your site, pointing to the page.

    You have the keywords in links, on other Web sites, pointing to the page.

Off-Page (Linking) for Search Engine Optimization

On-page search engine optimization is not enough. Every site needs at least a few links pointing to it, and if the keywords you want to rank well for are very competitive (lots of other people want to rank well for them, too), you need lots of links pointing to your site, and lots of links containing those keywords in them. Here are a few pointers:

  - Links help your pages in a number of ways:

- They make it more likely that the search engines will find the pages and more often. The more links, the quicker the site is likely to be indexed, and the more often.

- Links provide an indication of "value"; more links means your site is more valuable. A link is, in effect, a "vote" for your site.

- Better still, links from other valuable sites provide more value; in effect, links from popular sites provide more "votes" than those from less popular ones.

- Google uses a complicated algorithm called Page Rank to figure out the value of your page; you can see an indication of the general range in which your Page Rank lies using the Google toolbar.

- In HTML, a link tag is known as an "anchor" tag (this is a link to Yahoo, where <a means *anchor*). This comes from geek history; there's no need to understand *why* it's an anchor tag, it just is. So you'll hear people talk about "anchor text"; the "anchor text" is the text between the two anchor tags <a>This is the anchor text

- Putting keywords into anchor text in links pointing to your site is a very powerful way of telling the search engines what your site is about. Links like the following tell the search engines that your site is related to *Rodent Racing*: Rodent Racing.

- Don't let anyone tell you that low-Page Rank pages hold no value. Put lots of well-key worded links on low-Page Rank pages and you're *still* telling the search engines what your site is about.

- Even links *inside* your own site tell search engines what the pages they point to are related to, so make sure you have plenty of key worded links inside your site.

- Links from *related* sites may be more valuable than links from nonrelated sites. But because you have no way to know for sure whether a link is "related," don't let anyone tell you that links from nonrelated sites hold no value; it's simply not true.

- Here's another linking concept: Trust Rank. The idea is that search engines trust pages that are linked to from trusted sites. Thus, links from newspapers, government sites, educational sites, and so on can provide more value than other types of links.

- Links are not always links! Here's why:

  - *No follow* links tell the search engines not to follow them. You'll see this in the link: Rodent Racing.

  - Links sometimes appear to link to a particular site, but actually work through some kind of redirect, such as adserver software, and so do not pass value to the referenced site.

  - If a link to your site is on a page that isn't indexed by a search engine, then it does you no good!

Local Search Online for Local Businesses

If you have a business that provides goods and services in a particular location, local search is hugely important to you. Wouldn't it be great if your business were one of the "pins" in the map at the top of the search results? Here's how it happens:

- The local-search indexes are separate from the regular "organic" search information. The search engines gather this data from various business-record sources. But you can modify and add to the data, and in fact doing so is one of the most important things you can do to help yourself rank well in local search.

- In Google, click the More or Reviews links to go to the business page; then, click the Business Owner link at the top of the page. (You have to verify that you are the owner of the business by a code sent to your business phone, or a postcard sent to the location.)

- Add as much data as possible: information about your products and services; pictures; videos; and so on. Use all the important keywords!

- Do the same for Bing and Yahoo!

- For the moment, Yahoo! manages its own local-search directory. However, at some point this *may* be handed off to Bing as part of the Yahoo!/Bing merger.

- Consider also submitting to UBL.org, which will forward your data to dozens of other local-search systems.

- Keep track of your reviews, and encourage your customers to submit reviews. The local-search systems often display star ratings in the search results, so having five stars can encourage people to click the link to your information.

- You might also consider Google Tags and similar services. These help your listing take up more "real estate" on the page and encourage clicking.

Submitting Web Pages to Search Engines

You've probably seen "submission" services advertised, perhaps in the form of spam in your inbox, offering to submit your Web site to hundreds of search engines. In most cases, these submission services are a total waste of time and money. Here's how to get your Web site into the search engines.

- You *must* have links pointing to your Web site. If other sites don't care enough about yours to link to it, why should the search engines care enough to index it? The more links, the better.

- Use a sitemap tool (such as XML-Sitemaps.com) to create an XML sitemap, and put it in the root of your Web site. The XML sitemap is, in effect, an index of all the pages in your site.

- XML-Sitemaps.com (and others) provide a free tool for creating sitemaps on small sites; they also sell software that will automatically create a sitemap each night for instance.

- In your robots.txt file, add a line pointing to your XML sitemap, like this:

  Sitemap: http://www.yourdomain.com/sitemap.xml

- Create Google and Bing "Webmaster" accounts; you'll use these to submit information about your site. Not only is this the preferred method for letting them know about your site, they'll give you lots of interesting information about how they view your site:

  www.google.com/addurl.html

  www.bing.com/webmaster/SubmitSitePage.aspx

- "Verify" or "authenticate" your site with Google and Bing Webmaster consoles. You do so by placing a small text file in the root of your Web site, or a special Meta tag in your home page. After you've done that, you can access the reports about your site that both Google and Bing provide.

- Submit your sitemap to the Webmaster consoles, too.

- There's no direct way to submit to Ask.com. It will follow links to your site and may also find your sitemap through the robots.txt file (more that shortly).

- Don't forget to spend some time looking at all the information the search engine provides to you. For instance, Google shows you your "sitelinks," the small links that sometimes appear under your listing when it appears at the top of the search results. Google even allows you to block some of the sitelinks in case you don't like them.

- You may also want to submit to various directories. Here are the two most important directories:

  - http://dir.Yahoo.com ($299/year)

  - www.DMOZ.org (free)

    You may also want to submit to local directories, or directories related to your particular industry. Search Google or Bing for directories, or go to Yahoo! directory and look for Web directories in each category.

An SEO and Viral Marketing Checklist

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and viral marketing are two cost-effective and highly popular ways to get the word out about your online business. After you create your Web site, follow this checklist to make sure you aren't forgetting anything when it comes to optimizing your Web pages for indexing by Google and other search engines, and spreading the word about your products and services.

- **Put your keywords in the title.** Choose the keywords that your customers are likely to enter when they are searching for sites like yours, and make sure one or two (or more) appear in the titles of your Web pages.

- **Sprinkle around those keywords.** Make an effort to include your keywords in the headings on your pages and in the text as well.

- **Add Meta tags.** Meta tags are keywords added in the Head section of a Web page, between the <Meta> and </Meta> tags.

- **Register your site with Google.** Don't wait for Google to find you. Add your site to Google's database — and after that, to Bing's and Yahoo!'s sites as well.

- **Get on Face book.** Create a "fan page" for your business on Face book.

- **Start Twittering.** Promote your current sales and create special deals for those who find or follow you on Twitter.

- **The history of the Web page is important.** This includes the date the page was first discovered by a search engine.

- **Keep your Web page updated.** The frequency with which the content of the Web page changes is also important to SEO. This includes an average time between the changes, a number of changes in a time period, and a comparison of a rate of change in a current time period with a rate of change in a previous time period.

- **Keep your site growing?** The number of new pages associated with the document matters as well.

- **Get linked.** Make sure your pages ink to other well-designed, content rich sites. The more links you have, the better your search results.