

Search Engine Optimization: A Road Map to Better Listings

James Bake, Search Engine Marketing Specialist

Getting noticed by search engines is critical to online success. We want to not only appear in the search engine's results pages, called SERPs, but we want to appear prominently, as high up on the page as possible. Since search engines are a form of marketing and advertising, our goal is to rank high without having to pay for ad banners or sponsored placement. Presented here are resources to assist you as you make the website not only human visitor friendly, but also search engine friendly.

Defined

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a website from a search engine. This is done by carefully managing the site's content, structure, and behind-the-scene coding. The intent of a website is to communicate with human visitors. Making a site easier for users to navigate and providing meaningful content for human visitors increases the chances of higher ranking on search engines.

Alt Tag - An HTML attribute is typically used within other tag to provide alternate text when images cannot be displayed. Other tags include: hyper link tags and image tags. Alt=" "

Backlink - Links originating from one website and pointing to another website or web page.

CPC - Cost Per Click. Advertising method where advertisers pays for their ads (which are displayed on a given website or a search engine) if and only if someone actually clicks on the ad.

Google PageRank - Google PageRank™ is a numeric value that represents how important a page is on the web.

Index - A database of web pages and their content used by search engines.

Keywords - Words that are used by search engines to determine the topic of a given web page, suggested at least 3-5 times.

Keyword Density – Frequency of keyword appearance on a given page.

Keyword Stuffing - Keyword stuffing refers to the practice of loading a webpage with keywords in an attempt to manipulate a site's ranking in search results. Filling pages with keywords results in a negative user experience, and can harm your site's ranking. Focus on creating useful, information-rich content that uses keywords appropriately and in context.

Landing Page - A content-rich web page geared around a particular topic, product or conversion goal. Typically a main navigation item of a website.

Link Farm - A link farm is a page with links to other pages listed in order to generate indexing and popularity of websites. This is considered a negative SEO practice, and will get sites banned on search engines.

Organic Search Results - Organic search results are the results that are generated by search engine's spiders. These results are not paid for, and are increased by SEO practices.

SEM - Search Engine Marketing. The act of marketing a website via search engines, whether this be improving rank in organic listings, purchasing paid listings or a combination of these and other search engine-related activities.

SEO - Search Engine Optimization. The act of altering a website so that it does well in organic listings of search engines.

SERP - Search Engine Results Page. The listing of web pages that a search engine shows a user once they've entered a search value.

Site Map - A quick reference guide for visitors and search engine spiders. Used by visitors to quickly find what they are looking for. Search engine spiders can quickly find an index in the least amount of time.

Title Tag - A meta data element that determines the actual "title" of a given webpage. The title is what shows up in the top bar of your browser. It is also the hyperlink that shows in search engine results listings.

How Search Engines Work

Search engines work by sending automated spiders (also called a crawler or robot or bot) out into the web. The spiders follow links on pages and collect information from every page they visits. The information is then returned into a central index or catalog. When a searcher requests a word or phrase from a search engine, software sorts through all the indexed entries and creates result pages based on that request. The exacts of how and whys are considered secrets.

Understanding Users

Understanding human activity on your site is powerful information. User activity is collected through web analytics and can tell you the following things:

- How many visitors are visiting?
- Where are they coming from?
- Were they referred in by search engines? Which keywords did they search for?
- Were they referred in by a paid form of advertisement?
- What is the frequency of their visits? Do they only visit once and never return?
- What are they doing? What are they not doing?
- How deeply do they dig into your site? Do they visit one page and then leave or do they look around at other pages?
- How much time is spent on your site? Do you want them to look around or do you want them to find the information they need and leave?

Goals and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Step one in optimizing a website is to define business goals. These goals are then measured by Key Performance Indicators. Key Performance Indicators or KPIs are behaviors you want your target site visitors to complete.

Goals

- **Increase traffic to the University's website**
- **Increase keyword density throughout site**
- **Increase organic search results (SERPs)**
- **Increase overall usability**
- **Increase and track go-to-actions**

KPIs

- **Increase traffic to the University's website** - promote the website as a valuable tool for research, student and faculty functionality.
- **Increase keyword density throughout site** - drawing attention to programs, degrees, news, facts, faculty, research, and points of pride.
- **Increase organic search engine results** - simple visual searches on search engines such as; google.com, yahoo.com, msn.com, and others.
- **Increase overall usability** - analyzing site usage and customer feedback allows for identification of usability issues.
- **Increase and track go-to-actions** - increase visibility and usage of go-to-actions such as apply now, request information, register.
- **Decrease the number of customer service calls** - by increasing the number of useful information available on the web, time can be freed up for internal staff.

How to Optimize

Optimization is accomplished as a result of measuring and modifying. By measuring the site's goals, using benchmarks, we are able to determine if the efforts we are making are worthwhile or if we need to revamp our efforts.

- Content and Keywords
- URL Names
- Internal Links
- Image Tags
- Page Descriptions
- Go-To-Actions
- Site Maps
- Landing Pages

Content and Keywords

Content is key to any successful website, since it is the predominant reason why people visit sites. Keeping content accurate and up-to-date is beneficial to everyone. Content can act as supporting material for research papers, increase backlinks from news sources such as CNN.com, motivate a student to apply for admission, and even encourage donors to support programs. When developing content, use what is currently available; brochures, press releases, news articles, program write-ups, almost anything that has importance and interest can be valuable to a websites' success.

Improving content is important. Not just any content, but quality content. Get to the point, be descriptive, be informative and keep it fresh.

Put on the thinking caps - Think about the words users would type to find your pages, and make sure that your site actually includes those words within it.

Focus your content on the audience, not search engines - Humans are the ones who will be buying your products, not search engines. Ask yourself, does this help the user?

Include Keywords in Page Tags

Page Title <TITLE>
Images
Internal Links <A HREF>

Include using <ALT> property

Name Pages (URL Names)

When naming pages write out the page title. Think of it as leaving breadcrumbs for your visitors. For example, <http://utoledo.edu/graduate/prospectivestudents/programs/>, visitors know where they are on the site. This is also a great method of adding valuable keywords for search engines to index.

Internal Links

Search engines use internal links on pages to find other pages on the site. Having internal links in content helps both users find content relative to what they are currently reading. An article on electrical engineering could point to another article about the college's efforts in solar engineering, which could spark and motivate a prospective student to apply to the college.

Image Tags

Search engines are not able to read images, in order to help search engines index images Alt tags are needed to add. Alt tags should be descriptive and use keywords.

Go-To-Actions

We have actions we want our visitors to perform. These actions can range from registering for an event, applying for admission, signing up for membership, and requesting information. By having Go-To-Actions we can significantly achieve our goals and KPIs.

Site Maps

A site map like any other map acts as a form of navigation for web users as well as search engines. Each department and college should have a site map to increase usability.

Benefits of having site maps on the site:

No page on the site left behind - Just as with purpose of internal links, search engines use links on pages to find other pages. If a page has little or no backlinks then the exposure to that page is limited. By including a page on a site map the relevance and the chances of being indexed by search engines increases. List site maps on the homepage page, this will ensure all searched from the homepage down.

Easier navigation for users - With a site map, users can find what they are looking for. If what they are looking for is in your site, then they would have an easier and faster way of locating it.

Do not list more than 30 listings - Over listing can cause search engines to think that the site map is a link farm.

Check for broken and incorrect links - Ensuring all links are accurate helps both users and search engines.

Add Keyword-rich titles - Keyword-rich titles give your site more advantage in being searched properly under the right category.

Use the suggested site map template - We have spent hours perfecting a site map that is both user and search engine friendly. Go ahead give it a try.

Landing Pages

Landing pages aid advertisement and promotion strategies, say we are emailing possible supporters in the business community about a co-op opportunity. Different from the home page, the landing page acts as a specific page with relative content and information for that campaign. Traffic to a landing page can be tracked to monitor the campaign's response rate.

Utilizing Analytics and Feedback

Seek outside perspectives, watch how your target audience uses and navigates the site. Something that seems to come natural for you and I, might be new and unknown to others. By using feedback from others you can make changes to the sites navigation, edit content, change pictures, and/or change link placement. Overall, making the site user friendly.

What Not to Do

Submitting Site Maps - Do not submit site maps to search engines, this is done by the web department already. Excessive sitemap submission can harm search engine results, and even get a site banned from search engines.

Stuff your site with keywords - Keyword stuffing is a sure way to be blocked from search engines and is a practice we do not recommend.

Conduct your own paid advertisement campaign. Paid advertisement is centralized in the University's Office of Marketing, to decrease the amount of duplication in ad buying, to help optimize campaigns and to use the knowledge and resources they have gathered through their experience. The Office of Marketing has valuable resources to help create and maintain a successful campaign.

Conclusion

Search engines are valuable forms of advertising, and when used correctly they can present the right information to a broad number of potential customers. Making sure your site appears prominently in search engines helps utilize this valuable tool. To achieve this goal you must:

1. Know the business goals for your site;
2. Balance your understandings about search engine spiders and human visitors, to accommodate both through research and carefully written pages;
3. Finally measure and modify pages based on what you have learned, analytics you have gathered, and feedback you have collected.

Resources and recommended reading:

<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/>

<http://sitemaps.org/>

<http://jamesbake.com/blog/>