

A guide to
Search Engine
Optimisation
[SEO]



Search Engine Optimisation is SeO Simple



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Introduction

This is an introduction to SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) and web site promotion. It is intended to give an overview of the techniques involved. The items here are the main areas, but not all of those that may require attention to tune a web site to achieve good results. Once a site is tuned you will still need ongoing adjustments, content and monitoring. Even then a site will take at least 3 months to start to grow from these methods.

Major indicators

These are the dials on the dashboard so to speak, easy to find information that you can gather before you start any SEO campaign. They give you your starting point and by checking them regularly you can see the effectiveness of your work. They can also be used to monitor how well the competition is doing and to see how you compare.

Google page rank

This is one of the easiest to find out but one of the hardest to influence. This is a simple 1 to 10 score, with 10 being the best, that Google uses to rate your web site. This affects how you're spidered, where your results rank and is a major indicator of the success of a web site.

Google cache and spidering

Google keep a copy of all pages and by viewing the copies of your site pages you can find out some interesting information. When did Google last index your page and put information in its results? How many pages did it spider – if any? And how do the pages look - if they are wrong then you need to fix your site NOW!

Alexa and the Alexa rating

The Alexa information is a great benchmark and stores data for years, so for any of the information it supplies you can look at growth (hopefully) for the last 2 years or more. Millions of people around the world have the Alexa tool bar and it monitors their web usage and patterns. From this, it gives a wealth of useful information to help both surfers and the webmasters/programmers. The rating is similar to the Google Page rank system, with 1 being the highest and going down to 5,000,000+



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Alexa reach

Reach measures the number of users. Reach is typically expressed as the percentage of all Internet users who visit a given site. So, for example, if a site like yahoo.com has a reach of 28%, this means that if you took random samples of one million Internet users, you would on average find that 280,000 of them visit yahoo.com. Alexa expresses reach as number of users per million.

Alexa page views

Page views measure the number of pages viewed by Alexa Tool bar users. Multiple page views of the same page made by the same user on the same day are counted only once. The page views per user numbers are the average numbers of unique pages viewed per user per day by the users visiting the site. The page view rank is a ranking of all sites based solely on the total number of page views (not page views per user).

Competitors figures

Alexa and to a lesser extent Google, let you view all of their information about any site, so check out your competitors - see how your site rates in comparison . The tool bar also shows similar site, sites which surfers also visited and sites which link to your site.

Links

Link popularity check is one of the best ways to quantifiably and independently measure your web sites online awareness and overall visibility. Simply put, link popularity refers to the total number of links or "votes" that a search engine has found for your web site.

Search engine saturation

Search Engine Saturation simply refers to the number of pages a given search engine has in its index for your web site domain. Not all search engines report this information, but enough of them do to create some meaningful benchmarks for your search engine marketing campaigns.



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Symptoms / Remedies

These are some of the major problems which will effect a site and its ability to generate traffic. They all combine but not evenly, so you could have all but one of them spot on, however, the one thing missing could cripple the site - conversely you can have all of them 90% right and nothing works, it is still a matter of trial and error but this gives a good framework to start working on.

Load times

While large numbers of people have broadband connections, there are still large numbers of people with slow or dial up connections, and with people accessing the web on mobile phones and PDA's we should still try to keep loading times to a minimum, or at the very least warn the user if they are about to attempt to download a huge file.

Frames

Not as common as they used to be, frames are a method of dividing up the page into small areas, the problem is they all have different addresses and can display very differently on different machines and / or browsers. Search engines don't like these much either and they really are not needed much now. There are occasions where they are needed, but make sure if you have them, you really need them and they are done properly.

Accessibility

While this should apply to all sites, in reality its much more important for some sites than others - typically government bodies and schools etc, however we should all try to be adhere to some rules, after all. Why would you want to hinder someone from using your site?

In the context of web sites, accessibility is a buzz word for a site's ability to be used by anybody no matter what their physical or technological circumstances may be. As authors we tend to only know if our site works in our favourite browser and look or come across ok to us. Accessibility is all about taking into account the variety of needs amongst our users - they may:

- Not be able to see, hear, move, or may not be able to process some types of information easily or at all.
- Have difficulty reading or comprehending text.
- Not have or be able to use a keyboard or mouse.
- Have a text only screen, a small screen, or a slow internet connection.



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- Not speak or understand fluently the language in which the document is written.
- Be in a situation where their eyes, ears, or hands are busy or interfered with (e.g., driving to work, working in a loud environment, etc.)
- Have an early version of a browser, a different browser entirely, a voice browser, or a different operating system.

Flash

This is a great programming tool that is unfortunately used in completely the wrong way. It is ideal for making pretty little animations, and cool logos etc. The problems occur when whole sites are made from it. The problem is that as well as requiring special add on software to view it, and plenty of users either don't have it, can't be bothered installing it or are not allowed to - in work environments for example, where a massive chunk of personal Internet use is done. However it gets worse, search engines really don't like flash based sites. They can't treat them as almost empty sites, with no navigation, no content and no search results....or traffic.

Flash has its place, but don't fall into the trap of spending thousands on a massive flash project because you could soon be regretting it. Sensible use in a good HTML site is the way to go. If you do insist on using flash, develop a HTML version of the site also, or at least a html navigation system and a few plain pages of text.

Spider result / map

No web site is of use without traffic and unless you have huge brand awareness like Coke or Ford, where people will probably be able to guess what your site is, (although we will come back to that later) you need search engines to supply you with visitors. Search engines work by looking at every page on your site, and reading it to see what it is about, how good it is and how relevant the content is. The first stage is to be able to penetrate the site. Remarkably a lot of sites are actually constructed in ways that prevent this from happening, the equivalent of producing a book and gluing the cover closed. We have the ability to analyse your site and run a virtual search engine over it to see how it looks from their point of view and if it can't get in - or SPIDER your site, you have very big problems.

Updated

Search engines are all about content, because that is what people search for. One of the things search engines take into account is how current your web site is, has it been updated recently? Is there something new for people to see? If a search engine has a choice of two sites with similar content, the one that is updated more recently will get the better results.



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Content

The most important part of any site, what is the point of having a pretty site that search engines love, you advertise to all your customers and its on all your printed material, if its dull, boring, uninformative and empty? No one is going to be bothered. There are sites that have dozens of pages, but if you add all the content together it barely fills two pages of A4 paper.

You need content for you readers, and for the search engines because they need it to decide what your site is about, and where to put it in the results. But its not just quantity. So while we are looking at content we need to look at clarity.

Clarity

The magnitude of an online presence is not in relation to the complexity of the verbal or linguistic content represented on each section of the development.get the point? Too many sites make no sense at all, full of abbreviations, jargon and buzzwords.

It's not big, it's not clever, and most of it it doesn't work. It alienates readers and makes sites confusing and off putting. Keep it clear, you don't have to write for a 5 year old, but be sensible. We were once asked to look at a client's site and after reading 6 pages, we genuinely had no idea what they did! Don't fall into this trap.

Quality

Lots of clear content is great, but the last thing is to check is the quality, is it true, spell checked, proof read, accurate and useful? Lots of content is of no use if it's all wrong! The other area that is vital is new content, Search engines don't like sites that never change. If you publish your site but then leave it, never add any new content then it will slowly lose whatever ranking it got in the initial few months.

You need to look ad adding 1000 to 1500 words of content every few weeks at least. But make sure it's clear, and relevant. This isn't as hard as it sounds. Industry news, product reviews, user guides, case studies.... be creative.

Relevance

Similar to quality, but worth considering, you can fill a site with lots of content that is clear and of good quality but be careful not to go off on a tangent. Readers get confused if the content is poorly focused and while a site may be about cars, it's too easy to end up with articles about boats, holidays, etc - keep focused.



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This is maybe more important for search engines, they assign weights to web sites - like the Google page ranking and put the highest first in the results, so relevant content is vital, 20 pages of tight, focused information will beat 200 pages of rambling off topic chatter.

Meta tags

A throw back from the early days of the web and often overlooked, metatags are an abbreviated version of your site purely there for search engines. They confirm the topic, highlight areas of interest, tell search engines what key phrases you want to be indexed under and a host of other information. A relatively easy fix, that needs to be very carefully crafted to work properly for you. Tags you need to include are Title, Author, Description and Keywords as a minimum. The actual content needs to match content and search terms used.

Step 1 - Decide on keywords you want to be found under.

In an ideal world you would then write content based around these words (and phrases - up to 3 words). Once the page is written you need to look at the text by using a keyword analyser. The page itself needs to be as big as possible, and at least 500 words as a minimum.

Analyse the keywords in your page and look at the ones that are reported as being between 3% and 9% of your content and rewrite the content if you need to. These are the ones that the search engines will consider your page as being about, also remember that keywords in heading tags (H1 and H2) are considered as important, as is the page TITLE which again needs to use as many of the page keywords as possible, while remaining readable.

These words should then be used to make the content for the KEYWORD tag, and add a few that are relevant but not on the page - keyword suggestion tools can help with this.

The DESCRIPTION tag needs to be made up from the page keywords and phrases with any that are relevant that you couldn't squeeze into your text added as well. This is typically the snippet of text that some search engines will display in their results list. The TITLE tag would be the heading they give it, however it is the keywords that are the ones they rank you with.

Keyword analysis

After you have added all your content you need to check that it is about the right things from a search engines point of view. It used to be that you literally had to write for search engines not people. While this is no longer needed you do need to keep an eye on keyword density, weights, repetitions and a whole bunch of other factors



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to ensure your site is running at its optimal level and not giving out the wrong messages. A technical challenge, but one that is definitely worth the effort.

Broken Links

It is amazing how many sites have bits that don't work, links that are dead or point to the wrong place. Check all of them, and fix them. Nothing is more off putting for a reader than clicking on something that doesn't work.

Alt text

Every image on your site needs to have a text alternative, so if people are looking on a text only browser they get some idea what was supposed to be there, but also search engines know what the picture is about. Once in place, an image intensive page suddenly gets a whole load of text content, people searching for images will find your site and your ratings will grow.

Link titles / names

Every link on your site and links you get pointing to your site will be analysed by search engines and they take into account the wording of the actual link. So two links one saying "click here", the other saying "information on widget polishing", will get very different treatment. It adds more content, and more importantly adds weight to the LANDING page, so if you can get 20 sites to link to you with information on widget polishing as the actual words on the link, the search engines will regard the LANDING page as being about widget polishing. So, better results and more traffic.

There are other areas and things you can do. From seeding forums, adding Froogle feeds, Google site maps and taking part in Google answers but these won't help until you have the basics fixed.

Inbound links are vital to a sites ranking, so you need to really pay attention to where they are coming from. Just getting links in is important but quality is more important than quantity - both are even better.

Look at the sites with the best results in your field, list all the sites that link to them - but only the relevant ones, then find the sites that link to those as well. This will take some time, but it is worth it. You then have to approach all of these sites with a personal and friendly contact, call or email and ask to exchange links.

Put these links on your site in small groups, not huge link pages and have some defined reason - not just masses of links, put them in context.



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If the sites that agree do place links to you and you should already have links to them, it shows goodwill and will be useful for your readers. You need to give a well crafted link to the incoming site. Do not just link to your URL, link to a deep page, something relevant and make sure the link text says something meaningful. See the previous section for more information on this.

Do this with all the major linkers to your competitors and the people that link to them as well. OK, so this may take a few days but if you want to succeed you have to put some effort in!

Navigation

Your navigation is probably on either in a column on the left or across the top of your site, either way it's one of the first things a search engine will look at, so you have to make it work for you.

Make sure its spiderable, some clever and visually attractive navigation systems are actually impenetrable by search engine - making you have a one page site!

Once your sure its spiderable (use something like XENU to check) look at the phrasing. Don't have buttons that say 'Products' have one that says 'Radios' or even better, 'Radios for under £20. Don't say 'contact us', say 'where to find company x'. OK this isn't always practical but do as much as you can. It can make a huge difference.

Conclusion

If you either change your existing site, or build one from scratch and take all of the above points into account, within 8 to 12 months your site will have a good ranking and better than average level of traffic for your field - but you have to keep at it. Keep the new content going in, keep the tags focused on the content and keep looking for new link partners and it will work.

You have to be realistic though, this is going to take you a few months to start to see results and it will take a few days every month at least to keep going. The big sites don't do this part time, they have teams, not one person, of people who do all this full time. That's why they are successful. You don't have to aim to beat these though, you just have to beat your competitors and they probably are not even trying.

Just by reading this guide you now probably know more than 90% of the so called webmasters in most companies. This guide though is just the beginning, we could easily add a few more pages under each topic, so you either have to find out for yourself or talk to us and let us help make your site a success.



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Final thoughts - Web sites don't work on their own.

Google indexes over 8 billion web pages, the vast majority of these never get any real traffic from the search engine and there are millions of sites that are not even in the search engines. This means that most sites are a waste of time and money, you would probably won't even notice if you turned yours off.

However a good site - one that is well produced, maintained and promoted can be a fantastic tool. When you consider that a single classified advert in the Times newspaper will cost you nearly £400, spending £2-4000 on a web site that can last for years and be there 24/7 to promote your business, answer questions, inform clients and educate users really is a bargain.

There is a reason why companies like Argos spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on a web site, in Argos's case its £1,000,000 of online orders a day in the run up Christmas Day.

Don't spend £1-200 on a cheaply produced website, you will literally be throwing money away. If you are looking for that kind of spend - get some leaflets printed or offer it as a bonus to your salespeople if they beat their best ever - it will achieve more than a bad web site.

The really worrying thing is that plenty of people are not spending £200 on a bad web site, they are spending thousands of pounds on poor web sites!, on sites that just don't work. They then defend them, with what can only be seen as an Emperors new clothes type of passion.

If you're not getting traffic, have no idea how many people are using your site, it's not being updated and you think that this is the way it has to be, you're wrong.

So whether you are a small garage, an estate agent or a multinational chemical company, be aware that anyone can have a web site that is under performing, but just as easily, anyone can have one that really does work.

This is only a basic guide to optimising your web site, and is intended to show you what you or your current developer should be trying to achieve. It is aimed at someone with moderate technical knowledge and is not a substitute for a professional survey of your site.

For more details on any of the topics mentioned or a free analysis of your web site contact SeO Simple. We will be happy to give you an honest appraisal of your site and suggest improvements and tweaks that will make your site perform better, attract more traffic and ultimately more sales.

Once complete you are free to take the appraisal to your current developer, however if they missed all this first time round maybe it is time to look at a different supplier?