Search Engine Optimization Starter Strategies
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Ok, let's just get the requisite rhetorical questions out of the way…

<<Said in an exaggerated infomercial-like tone of voice>> Would YOU like to improve your ranking in the most popular search engines and directories? Would YOU like to drive more targeted traffic to your Web site? Would YOU like to make simple improvements to your Web site and eliminate common barriers in order to optimize your site for high search engine rankings? Well, today is YOUR lucky day…

All kidding aside, search engine optimization (SEO) is serious business though not necessarily complex. While there is an endless array of tips and tricks one can employ to make a site more attractive to search engine robots, spiders and other creepy cyber-crawlers, this article serves to arm you with the most basic strategies that will help ensure a successful search engine optimization program.

As with any project, it's important to first establish your objectives toward which all related tasks will be focused. Typical SEO objectives are as follows:

- Identify and create a list of brand, product and/or service specific keywords and descriptions
- Establish high rankings in top search engines and applicable industry directories
- Drive targeted traffic to the site

Pretty cut and dry objectives – get ranked higher…increase qualified site traffic. Short. Sweet. Here's how…

Navigation
Many Web sites employ graphical menus (image maps and the like) to direct navigation through the site. These graphical "primary" menus typically only include links to the main, top-level sections of the site and require users to enter one of the available top-level sections in order to access related content contained therein.   Not only would Web site navigation be vastly improved by reducing the number of clicks required to access relevant content via the home page, but internal pages of the site would also become more accessible to search engines if expanded "secondary" sub-navigation text menus were instituted in addition to the primary menu. Typical placement for a sub-navigation text menu of this nature is at the bottom of each and every page of the site, and should include text links to both the primary top-level pages as well as the corresponding internal pages relative to each section. For example, a primary page-oriented sub-navigation text menu might read as follows:

<u>Home</u> | <u>Products</u> | <u>News</u> | <u>About Us</u> | <u>Contact Us</u>

Once inside one of these primary sections such as "About Us," all related main section links should also reflect in this sub-navigation text menu as follows:

<u>Home</u> | <u>Products</u> | <u>News</u> | <u>About Us</u> | <u>Contact Us</u>
<u>Who We Are</u> | <u>What We Do</u> | <u>Press Room</u> | <u>Investor Relations</u> | <u>Employment</u>

Crawler Pages

Site maps, also known as crawler pages, which list and text link every page within a given site should not only be established, but also directly submitted to all search engines and directories of interest. Submitting these actual crawler pages makes it easier for spiders to find and index optimized pages on a given site.

In addition, some sites use an internal search index function whose results are often hidden from the search engines due to complex path algorithms and/or a series of forms that spiders can't follow. In these instances, it's imperative to ensure that static links to each of these databased pages are included in the site map link list to facilitate a spider's ability to index this presumably important content.

Content

Before we start our discussion about back-end META data and code, it's important to first discuss front-end site content. Where appropriate, each page of a Web site should contain content – verbiage – that's relevant to the purpose of that page and/or section, and should leverage as many "keywords" as possible to ensure the page is appropriately delivered when those words and/or phrases are queried in the engines. This content relevancy is a critical factor toward optimizing one's site for high ranking. In addition, this targeted content will also be leveraged in the associated page title, META data and Alt tags to further ensure the page is optimized for delivery during applicable keyword/phrase searches.

To facilitate inclusion of your site in geographic-specific search results, applicable geographic terms in both fully spelled and abbreviated formats should also be integrated throughout the Web site content and appropriate back end code. A "Where We're Located" page could be used to even further enhance such geographic search term opportunities.

Regarding Alt tags, eMarketers should ensure that each and every image on their Web site uses an Alt tag that leverages specific keywords relative to the image itself and the content on the page where the image is located. Because spiders often rank pages by the frequency of a given keyword on a given page, the strategic use of Alt tags is yet another opportunity to maximize high search positioning of your site's pages.

WARNING: There are many abuses of this keyword frequency concept that spiders can easily discern, so don't try to "trick" the spiders by placing a slew of non-relevant page content or repeating the same keyword over and over and over again, either on the back-end or on the front-end using a font that's the same color as the background. The spiders will know…and will penalize you greatly by completely banning your site from inclusion in their index. The use of only "legitimate" keyword strategies is advised.

Titles

This isn't rocket science, folks. A page title is exactly that – the name of a given page of a site relative to its content and/or purpose. Page titles provide site users with quick visual checkpoint as to where they are in a given site, as well as dictate how that page will be represented in a bookmark or "favorites" list. They also provide the search engines with a top-level index of that Web page's content. Enhancing page titles with keywords reflecting the content of each specific page is another way to legitimately optimize a site for the search engines, and generally speaking should not exceed 10 words in length.

The back-end code for page title assignment is as simple as:
<TITLE>Title Text Here</TITLE>

META Description Tags

Because META tags alert search spiders of the content found within a page, the tags are an important variable for obtaining relevant and high search engine rankings. META descriptions of between ten and thirty words should be used wherever possible, and should directly correlate to the content of each specific Web page – especially those pages to be pro-actively submitted to the engines. While not viewable on the front-end, this important descriptive copy also helps maximize your site's ranking when keywords used in this description are searched on the engines. Accordingly, the same or similar keywords to those earmarked for page content and titles should be heavily integrated into these descriptions.

The back-end code for META description assignment is as simple as:
<META NAME="description" content="Up to 30-word description here">

META Keyword Tags
By now, the importance of identifying and building a list of page-specific keywords for use in optimizing page content, titles and META descriptions has been clearly established. There's yet another search engine-friendly opportunity to leverage these all-important keywords and phrases through the use of META Keyword tags. Each page of a Web site should have between ten and thirty META keywords, with no duplication outside of plural and non-plural formats. Again, these keywords should also be also be utilized within that page's content. A site is simply not optimized if it employs the same generic set of keywords (and other META data for that matter) throughout all pages of the site - customization is key! Note that although most searches are conducted using lower case font, one should try to include different capitalization formats for those keywords deemed necessary.

TIP: When developing your keyword lists, consider using information gleaned from your back end site analysis software such as WebTrends, and/or popular search queries on select search engines and directories that publish this kind of information, to discern what the most popular word and phrase searches are relative to your business. You can then integrate this language into your site's content.

The back-end code for META keyword assignment is as simple as:
<META NAME="keywords" content="list up to 30 keywords here, separated by commas">

Bridge Pages
Bridge pages, also known as mirror pages or information pages, are Web pages designed to rank highly in the search engines for keyword phrases. These pages are specifically engineered to meet the criteria of the continually changing algorithms that search engines use to determine rankings, and are generally employed when there are obstacles, technological or otherwise, to optimizing the "regular" pages of a Web site. Though largely indistinguishable from the normal site pages, such bridge pages are only intended to be a one-time "doorway" for visitors who find a site via the search engines and are not accessible to a user subsequent to their initial visit.

Obstacles
There are several technical obstacles one may face when trying to optimize a site. Such obstacles will need to be eliminated through special filters and/or workarounds before SEO can be achieved. Some of these obstacles may include:

- Cold Fusion/Dynamic Page Generation – Many sites are dynamically generated using Cold Fusion, as indicated by ".cfm" extensions in the site paths. This software application creates unique URLs that include symbols considered by several search engines as "spider traps." To avoid spider traps, some search engines avoid indexing URLs that that include the following problematic symbols for fear of getting caught in a crawling loop: ?, $, &, =

- JAVA Script – Many sites also use JAVA script. The complexity of this type of code can distract a search engine spider from indexing the site in appropriate categories.

- Frames – Some of the major search engines cannot follow frame links. An alternative method for spiders to enter and index the site, either through META tags or smart design, will need to be established.

The good news is that there "are" workarounds for these varied SEO roadblocks. Just ask your friendly neighborhood Webmaster for details.

Link Popularity

The last strategy I would like to discuss is somewhat – ok, completely - out of your control – links on OTHER external Web sites that point to yours. Yes, I know that's the ultimate objective of this search engine optimization initiative, but many search engines first discern how your site is ranked and/or listed on other Web sites and directories in deciding how you should be ranked on theirs.   The more links pointing to your Web site that a search engine can verify, the higher it will rank you on their list by virtue of presumed popularity – it's as simple as that. Of course, this is somewhat of a catch 22 in that to establish high rankings and listing frequency on these engines and directories, the site in question must first be optimized. Don't be discouraged, though.   Simply institute a concerted, ongoing grassroots search engine and directory submission initiative in an effort to establish such links wherever possible.

SEO Starter Wrap Up

As mentioned previously, there are endless strategies that can be enlisted to improve a site's rank in the search engines. To attest to this, there are numerous agencies that make their living based solely on guerilla SEO methodologies. However, even if you leverage the simple techniques described above that are largely relative to content on your Web site, you will vastly improve your positioning with the engines and will undoubtedly realize increased traffic – qualified traffic – at your site.

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