The Basics of Search Engine Optimization

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1. What is Search Engine Optimization?

- Define Search Engine Optimization
- How does SEO help my business?
- How do search engines rank websites in search results?
- What are organic results versus paid results?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of improving a website to attract more online visitors through search engines.

SEO is part of the Attraction Stage of the buying process, and helps your business by attracting strangers to your website and to turning them into leads or customers.

Google is the most popular search engine in the world. It handles more than 3.3 billion web searches every single day. These searches usually contain questions or problems that people are trying to resolve like "How to keep my pool from turning green" or "homeowners insurance in scottsdale". Exposing your business to qualified customers is essential.

Unfortunately, Google doesn't really care so much about you or the success of your website itself. Their responsibility is with their customers - those conducting all these searches.

Search engines are charged with presenting the most relevant and trustworthy answers to online questions. To do this, they send what are called **web crawlers** all around the web to try to understand what each website is all about. A good website is not only crafted with cool, interesting content, but also makes it easy for these crawlers to know what's happening.

How can my website rank highly in Google? For each web search, Google crunches all of the data gathered by web crawlers and compiles a list of results based on the popularity and authority of each website. The most helpful and highly regarded sources of information are listed at the top.

In real life, to be credible you need a lot of experience, a quality product, a great track record, lots of referrals or testimonials, and offer an awesome customer experience. It's no different online. A good reputation has to be earned over time…Google is good as spotting fakers.

There are paid search results and unpaid search results. If you conduct a web search, you'll notice that the top few search results are marked with a small icon "AD". These are paid searches. Website owners pay money to be shown at the top of the results for the keywords you typed in.

Below these paid results are what are called **organic results**. Here is where you want to be. These are not paid, but ranked according to relevancy. Successful SEO means earning a spot in the top 10 search results. Statistically, about 94% of users will click on a search result from the first page of any web search. Less than 6% will bother to look over the 2nd page and beyond.

2. SEO Keyword Research and Selection

- What are search keywords?
- How do I pick the right keywords for my business?
- What are best practices for keyword research?
- How do I know which keywords people use to find my website?
- How can I expand the list of keywords I am using?
- What is the difference between long-tail and short-tail keywords?

Keywords are the words that people type into search engines. They are basically the subjects or questions that people want to learn about.

To attract people who are interested in what your site has to offer, you'll need to research what people are looking for in your line of business. What questions need answering? What do your prospects care about most?

You'll need to start by considering who your customers are. It might be tempting to talk about how great your company is and how awesome your products or services are, but this isn't what your customers care about (just yet). Put yourself in their shoes and make a list of words they might be searching for.

As you make your list, **categorize your keywords** according to where they fit in the buying process. Are they simply becoming aware of a problem they are facing? Are they considering their options or different kinds of solutions? Are they making their final decision on who to do business with? The information you present on each web page will vary significantly depending on where your customers stand in their buying process.

Now, **expand your list of keywords** by searching the web for alternatives. This gives you a great source of synonyms, related phrases, or other permutations that people are looking for in your industry. Add all these alternatives to your keyword list…as long as they relate to your business and the interests of your target market.

There tools to help you analyze what keywords your website users are already using to find and access your website. Google Analytics or Hubspot Sources offer great insights on where your web traffic is coming from and what people are doing to find your website. Maybe they're being referred through social media, or perhaps they're finding an article that you wrote months ago.

You'll need to decide which keywords present the best opportunity for you to rank for. Remember that there are probably tons of other websites out there trying to do exactly the same thing…and only 10 can make it to the first page of each search result.

Some keywords are going to be much harder to rank for than others. A very general term like "Sports Cars" is pretty broad and a small website would not get many qualified visitors from this.

Alternatively, a more specific play on these keywords might narrow the field to a more select group, allowing you to compete more favorably. Consider what we call a long-tail keyword such as "Red Italian Sports Cars from the 60's". This might focus on the specific users you're targeting and give you a better chance of ranking high.

Targeting keywords that are very broad could mean big challenges with achieving high search rank, and ultimately attracting either unqualified website visitors or people who just don't care about your offerings. It's much better to choose a specific niche for each page and target your audience more acutely.

Note that just because your keyword is long-tail and more specific, this doesn't mean it will be easy to rank for. Ranking is a function of how competitive the environment is for your specific search terms.

Again, tools like Google Analytics, Google Webmaster Tools or Hubspot Keywords allow us to analyze what the level of competition is like for every possible keyword. We also recommend **search engine audit report**s that evaluate your website in great detail as compared to the existing top 10 websites in your search result. These comprehensive reports outline every strength and weakness of your onsite SEO and what steps you should be taking to improve your results.

Some further SEO strategy:
- It takes time for websites to develop credibility in the eyes of search engines…measured in months or even years
- More website traffic doesn't always translate into more business. Targeted strategy is best
- Evaluate the competitive set for each keyword to find a niche or opportunity
- Set a process in place to continually develop content around keywords

The next step is to learn **how to optimize web pages for search engines.**

3. How to Optimize Web Pages for Search Engines

- How and where do I optimize pages for search engines?
- What types of links do I include on my web pages?
- Is user experience important for SEO?
- Do I need to optimize for mobile?
- What are inbound links?
- How can I be found in local searches?

Now that you've carefully selected your keywords and crafted beautiful, customer-focused content for your web pages, we need to optimize the page where it will be featured.

It's important that both your users and search engines quickly understand what each page is all about. Search engines go through a process to index each page, and you'll want to make things easy for them.

First, optimize each page around a specific keyword. Be sure the keyword you select accurately reflects what the page is actually about.

Add the keyword to the page title. The page title shows in a few places like the browser tab and the actual link shown in search results. You can include your company name, but after what is called a "pipe" – a vertical bar in the title of the page.

Example: "6 Critical Steps for Search Engine Optimization | Web Design Phoenix"

Add your primary keyword to the URL. If it's a longer url, use dashes to separate each word. Search engines don't like blank spaces so much. If you're changing the web page url, be sure to set up a 301 redirect to permanently deliver your users to the correct page.

Add keywords to page headers and within the content. Don't artificially or awkwardly throw your keywords into the discussion…use them naturally. Google is smart, and it knows when you're doing this and will penalize you for it. Google is also really good at recognizing synonyms and context, so mix things up a bit.

Add keywords to image alt text if there are any images on the page. Google can't understand what images are depicting unless you tell it. This is where alt tags come in, and how images come up in search results. Good alt tags will complement the subject matter on your page.

Add keywords to the meta description. Meta description is the small body of text that appears in search results beneath the page title. This serves as a short summary of what the page is going to be about. While this doesn't affect SEO so much, it does help users quickly understand what the page is about and will increase clicks. This text should be no longer than 160 characters.

Include relevant links in the content. Don't go overboard…perhaps a link or two per paragraph is enough. This contributes to the trustworthiness of your site and often enhances the user experience.

Internal links refer to relevant pages on your website, whereas external links credit sources outside your domain. Both are helpful in terms of user experience and credibility with Google. External links, when used appropriately, give Google the impression that you have done your homework, helps you build connections, and gives your readers additional resources.

Writing great content will earn you what we call "inbound links". This is when other sites credit your page and provide their users with a link. Google interprets this as your site being credible and trustworthy...of course depending on the nature of the referring website. Not all inbound links are created equal.

All links should have anchor text with your keywords. Anchor text is what the link itself says. Rather than "click here", a good link might read "3 Website SEO Pitfalls".

Optimize for mobile. Be sure that your layouts are completely mobile responsive. This means that information on the site adjusts to smaller screen sizes. Menus shift and button enlarge to accommodate finger tapping. Small fonts and miniature links are not good for mobile users, and Google knows this.

Images should be sized appropriately to speed refresh rates. Modern mobile design principles are moving toward longer scrolling pages rather than menus requiring multiple clicks.

Some further search engine optimization thoughts:

- Make sure you site is designed intuitively and easy to browse…don't hide stuff
- Always show users the next step they can take with your business
- Good content will earn inbound links…perhaps most valuable in the eyes of Google
- Seek out online directories where your site could be presenting – great for inbound links
- To optimize for local results, **set up your web listing in Google Maps**.