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## Search Engine Optimization: What to Expect

By Keli Etscorn, keli@etscorn.com, ©2011 Keli Etscorn

When it comes to using search engines to find information on the Web, it's been shown that most Internet users don't look beyond the first several pages of results.

**It's crucial that your Web site show up on that first page!**

**This is where Search Engine Optimization (SEO) comes in.**

SEO is not an exact science now, nor will it ever be and good ranking does not happen overnight. It takes time, patience, and commitment from both the SEO professional and the client. Once a site achieves a desired ranking, you must continue to monitor the site in several different ways. It's just too competitive now days to just optimize a site and leave it, you won't stay on that first page very long if you "set it and forget it". Ten years ago that might have worked but not now, there's a lot more work involved to stay ahead and stay on top because this industry is CONSTANTLY changing.

**What can you expect from SEO?**

**How does it work?**

Here are some common questions, misconceptions and myths about the SEO world, as well as some explanations of popular practices.

## What is SEO?

### Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Defined

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of making a Web site visible in search engines via "organic" (unpaid) search results in order to drive targeted traffic to the site. SEO is a subset of Search Engine Marketing (SEM) which encompasses all the techniques used to drive targeted traffic to your Web site using the Internet. A well optimized site abides by the rules of the search engines and should contain unique, enticing content. Since SEO takes aim at improving a Web page's visibility in the search engines it makes SEO a vital piece of a successful online marketing strategy.



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Each Search Engine uses a unique "algorithm," which is the set of rules that govern the way a Web page is ranked and indexed by the search engine. A well optimized site takes into consideration the necessary elements a site needs in order to be "search engine friendly" while following the rules of those algorithms. There are ~200 different elements ("ranking signals") and techniques used when optimizing a Web site. The techniques and practices change on almost a daily basis which makes it very important to go with an optimization firm that has their finger on the pulse of this exciting industry if you want to maintain your presence in the search engines.

Good optimization is achieved by following mix of tactics: abiding by each search engine's rules, utilizing researched keyword phrases properly, avoiding spammy techniques, creating unique content (and PLENTY of it), presenting a user-friendly interface with an intuitive architecture, interlinking and a strong back link profile.

## The Basics

### Keyword Phrases

As an SEO professional, the most important part of what I do is keyword research. It's the starting point for ALL SEO projects as the following come directly from the keyword research:

- 1) the pages you'll create for your Web site (copywriting)
- 2) the Web site plan (assigning filenames, page names and navigation)
- 3) keyword phrase assignment – anchoring your researched phrases to your assigned pages

Keyword phrases must be thoroughly researched, analyzed, and tested. Why optimize a Web page for a keyword phrase that no human types in? A good SEO professional should provide a list of keyword phrases pertaining to your service and/or business that are not too competitive while still being popular enough to drive targeted traffic to your site. The "competitiveness" of a keyword phrase can give insight as to the amount of time necessary it will take to obtain desirable search engine rankings.

### How Long Does it Take to Achieve Good Ranking?

Keep in mind that simply submitting your Web site to the free search engines and directories provides no guarantee that you will be indexed; much less achieve a high ranking. A site must be optimized and abide by all search engine rules before it is assigned ranking consideration.



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If your site has existed for at least a year (meaning that it's been indexed or \*seen\* by Google) then you can expect ~3 to 6 months to achieve some rankings and ~9-12 months for a brand new site. Web sites lacking a good back link profile that have no history in Google can expect to reach their ranking goals in ~6 to 12 months. Please keep in mind that SEO is NOT cookbook and because of this **it's hard to give exact numbers and timelines because so many factors are taken into consideration when ranking is assigned to a Web site.** I've seen a client's site rank in as little as a month's time, that is not unusual, but I certainly wouldn't promise it nor guarantee it.

The complexity of the SEO strategy depends on the competitiveness of the keyword phrases, the amount of redesign the Web site needs, SEO copywriting, site architecture, history of the site, and many other factors. We will discuss these factors and let you know what to expect when it comes to achieving good ranking in the search engines.

## How is Good Ranking Obtained?

The most important factor is time. SEO is a patience game. It's never immediate. Be prepared to wait.

Some factors include a collection of good practices/techniques; Great home page copy, a strong backlink profile (with one way, incoming links being the most desirable type of link), the use of well researched keyword phrases in key areas of your Web site and other techniques that have proven to work over the 14 years since I've been an SEO professional.

A search engine spider (or crawler) looks for two things: 1) text and 2) text links. Spiders follow text links and look in your copy for reiterations of your keyword phrases as well as text surrounding those phrases. Make sure you have PLENTY of good copy on your homepage. ("Good" means good writing, of course, but also the smooth, logical inclusion of your keyword phrases in the copy.) We have several seasoned SEO copywriters on staff to create our clients copy. It really does make a difference. Writing for the search engines is NOT the same as regular marketing copywriting.

## The Myths

### "We'll submit your site to thousands of search engines!"

I regularly get this E-mail in my "admin" or "webmaster" accounts for most of the domains I manage and I bet you've seen it too. What are these 1000 search



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engines? Are humans actually using them? No. The following statistics show search engines that are actually on our radar:

## The 4 largest search engines on the Web are:

1. Google 63.56 %
2. Yahoo 16.20 %
3. Bing 14.83 %
4. Ask 2.96 %

**March 2011 / Source:**  
Hitwise

These search engines above are where YOU want **your Web site** to be (namely Google as it has the lion's share of the search market) and **NOT** "Fred's-Cool-Search-Engine.com." Listing your site in second-rate search engines – even 1000's of them! - will probably generate nothing but spam and end up wasting your time. Concentrate on the search engines people use - THAT'S where your traffic will come from.

## "Guaranteed #1 Ranking!"

This is just as popular a gimmick as the "we'll submit your site to 1000's of search engines" E-mail. **No reputable SEO firm promises this.** Why? *We don't own Google, Yahoo, or any other of the major search engines.* I'd love to make this promise to my clients, but to do so would be highly unethical and untrue at best. Usually this claim involves picking some obscure keyword phrase that's easy to obtain good ranking with – that usually means it's a phrase that no one searches on! RUN away from SEO firms that make this type of promise.

Google has the following to say about firms that guarantee ranking #1:

*"Beware of SEOs that claim to guarantee rankings, allege a "special relationship" with Google, or advertise a "priority submit" to Google. There is no priority submit for Google. In fact, the only way to submit a site to Google directly is through our [Add URL](#) page or through the [Google Sitemaps \(Beta\)](#) program, and you can do this yourself at no cost whatsoever."*

## Do I resubmit my site every week?

If your site is already in a search engine, why resubmit it? It wastes bandwidth and time. Many services tout this as a feature to their program when it's really not necessary at all; in fact, this practice is construed as spam by some search engines.



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Multiple submissions may result in your Web site getting permanently removed from a search engine.

## The Practice

### Organic SEO

Organic SEO (or “natural” SEO) is what I've practiced since 1997. It is based on common sense optimization that doesn't utilize Pay-Per-Click (PPC) programs (buying traffic) or spammy/blackhat techniques that can get you banned from ever ranking. These type of techniques usually don't keep your site ranked high for very long and that sends you right back to your SEO professional again. **Do it right the first time.**

### Monitoring

In order to keep your Web site ranking high in the search engines, it should be monitored closely and regularly (along with audits and other site checks). Some clients don't realize the importance of monitoring until it's too late and they've lost a lot of unique targeted traffic.

Trends on what people search on change. This is especially noticeable around big holidays. Do you think people will be searching on “valentine's gifts” in the summer? Not! Constant keyword research allows you to make changes and optimize your site for seasonal trends.

The biggest changes that your site will need are usually after the search engines undergo a big algorithm change, but consistent monitoring also allows you to tweak the site if need be. Most monitoring packages include incorporating the changes needed for your Web site to maintain good rankings.

When you're considering hiring an SEO professional, be sure to ask what kind of monitoring service is included. Some SEO professionals include 6 months of monitoring with your SEO services; others charge a monthly fee. If you're not paying for monthly monitoring, and your site ranking drops, you'll usually pay a consulting fee (much higher!) to correct the problem.



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## What To Do If Your Search Engine Ranking Falls

Search engine rankings **constantly** fluctuate, mainly due to three factors:

- 1) There are literally thousands of new sites going live on the Internet every day;
- 2) People are becoming more and more aware of SEO; and
- 3) Algorithms constantly change to work around spamming practices and to provide more relevant results.

## Google is not a static index!

*it's **always** changing*

If you notice that your ranking falls drastically or drops out of the index completely, the first thing to remember is not to panic! The search engines are a very dynamic beast and will constantly change. Your listing may reappear in the same position - and it may not. If your ranking doesn't come back after a few weeks of monitoring, it's possible that the search engine made a major change in the algorithm. Consult with your SEO professional at that point (although they're probably already aware of the slip).

The **worst** mistake you can make during this time is to try and "chase the algorithm," making many frantic changes to your Web site. You'll never know what's actually working and what isn't. This is where patience comes in. After a major change, it's best to wait at least a month before analyzing and making changes to your site. A monthly monitoring service usually includes these changes for you.

## After Optimization

After your site is optimized and live on the Internet you'll want to have ongoing link building in place. It's simply imperative these days as one of the most important ongoing, off-page SEO tactics you can do at this time. Another important task would be form audits – these should be done on a monthly and quarterly basis along with a quarterly site analysis and a ranking report. Do you ever wonder how strong your keywords are a year later after optimization? Do they still perform as well? Are there any phrases we're missing? These are just two of the audits done to your Web site, there are many more that are performed with monitoring packages to insure your site is healthy. It's imperative to keep up with current searching trends and it's even more important that your site is using the *\*latest\** keywords phrases.



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## Keeping it Fresh

When Google released a patent (April 2005) that stated how they “might” be evaluating Web sites, some very important points became apparent.

Nowadays, it’s pretty obvious that Google evaluates your Web site’s historical data. It’s suspected that Google looks at:

- 1) how long has your domain has been registered for
- 2) how many years ago was your domain registered
- 3) how often do you make changes to your site (Google supposedly “likes” a site that is updated frequently, this tells Google there’s some importance to it although I’ve seen sites that rank well that haven’t been updated in years)
- 4) link inflation (did the number of back links drastically increase all at once? Drastically decline?)

## Wrap-up Checklist

Keep it fresh  
Keep it unique  
Keep it spam free  
Keep it updated  
Keep it easy to navigate  
Keep it error free  
Use thoroughly researched keywords wisely  
Use your head.

## SEO Glossary

### Algorithm

The set of rules each search engine follows to rank your site. Each search engine uses a unique algorithm that is constantly being updated and changed.

### Back Links

Links from other Web sites to your Web site. This is also referred to as incoming links. Quality (linking to site related to the theme of your site) incoming links will help your Web site with its ranking in the search engines.

### Keyword Phrases

Keyword phrases are multi-word phrases used in search engine queries. SEO is the process of optimizing Web sites for keyword phrases so that the sites rank highly in the search query results.



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## **Link Popularity**

Link popularity is the total number of Web sites that link to your site. It's best if the sites linking "to" and "from" you are related in theme to your site.

## **Paid Inclusion**

Some directories will only consider placing your URL/Web address into their database if you pay them a fee. We don't use any of these type services for our clients.

## **PPC**

Pay Per Click. Paying for your traffic by bidding on search terms and keyword phrases. Bidding price is determined by popularity - generic keyword phrases cost more than precise, highly targeted keyword phrases. Competitive keyword phrases drive lower amounts of traffic but result in a higher ROI (return on investment) and sales conversion.

## **ROI**

Return on investment.

## **Search Engine Friendly**

A user-friendly Web site that can be easily found in the search engines without violating any search engine policies, spamming or any other techniques frowned upon in the SEO industry.

## **SERP**

Search Engine Results Page. This is the list of results that appear in a search engine from a keyword phrase query.

## **Spam**

With respect to search engines, spam is defined as any technique used to give your Web site an unfair ranking advantage over other pages. If you employ tricks to obtain high ranking, it is probably spam and will not keep your site ranked high for long. Spam techniques also violate search engine terms-of-service (TOS) in most cases - and can get your site banned permanently.

## **Spider**

Spiders are also known as a "robots" or "crawlers." These programs are used by search engines for indexing a Web site and gathering the content on Web pages within a Web site. Spiders crawl a Web site by following the links between Web pages. This is why it is essential that all the Web pages within your Web site be linked to each other.



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## About the Author

[Keli Etscorn](#) is a search engine optimization specialist who focuses on organic search engine tactics. Former founder of a fiber optic ISP, she now runs her own company, [Bear Canyon Consulting, LLC](#). Keli has created nationally featured Web sites and Ecommerce sites since 1997. Her work is featured in publications such as PC Magazine, Parade Magazine, The New York Times, Hamptons Magazine, US Weekly and APC Currents magazine, just to name a few. She started concentrating on [search engine optimization](#) in 1999 and uses her master's degree in mathematics to get her clients top rankings in the most popular search engines.

Her endeavors include starting and heading the SEO process for one of the biggest attorney portals online (now SonicSEO.com, a company concentrating exclusively on SEO), including overseeing the optimization and design of over 2000 nationwide attorney and small business Web sites. Her biggest projects to date are daughter Sage and son Seven, both future UNIX system administrators.

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