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Search Engine Optimization: What to Expect

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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 – we can't stress this enough. 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 and work on the site in several different ways to maintain your good standings. It's too competitive to just optimize a Web site and leave it. You won't stay on that first page very long (if you get there) if you "set it and forget it". Ten years ago that might have worked but not now, there's a lot more work involved and new practices you must employ to stay ahead. This industry is CONSTANTLY changing which means your Web site MUST keep up if you want to stay in the game. If you're serious about your SEO, you will benefit most from a monthly SEO service rather than the "hit and quit" some people do.

What can you expect from SEO?

How does it work?

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

What is SEO?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Defined

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of affecting the visibility of a Web site in the search engines "natural" or "organic" results. SEO is a subset of Internet Marketing which encompasses all techniques used to drive targeted traffic to your Web site which can include paid services. When a site is properly optimized, you should expect your organic traffic to increase after a period of time (many factors affect this time line). A well optimized site abides by the rules of the search engines



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and should contain unique and 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 Internet marketing strategy.

Each Search Engine uses a unique "algorithm," which is a set of rules that govern the way a Web page is ranked and indexed by the search engine in question. 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 the search engine algorithms. There are ~300 different elements ("signals") and techniques used when optimizing a Web site. The techniques and practices change almost on 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 a mix of tactics & strategies. Samples include: abiding by each search engine's rules, utilizing researched keyword phrases properly throughout the Web site, avoiding spammy techniques, creating unique content (and PLENTY of it), presenting a user-friendly interface with an intuitive architecture, proper interlinking, strong title tags, good meta tags and much more.

The Basics

Keyword Phrases

As an SEO professional, the most important part of what they 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 (or optimize) 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.



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How Long Does it Take to Achieve Good Ranking?

A site must be optimized and abide by all search engine rules before it is assigned ranking consideration. If your site has existed for at least a year (meaning that it's been indexed or *seen* by Google) then you can expect ~12 months to achieve some sort of changes in your metrics and more than 12 months for a brand new site (this number could be longer or shorter depending upon how competitive your niche is). Web sites lacking a good backlink profile that have no history in Google can expect to reach their ranking goals in ~12 months (again, competition can be a factor here that might make that number bigger). 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**. We've seen a client's site rank in as little as a month's time (this was years ago), that is not unusual, but we certainly wouldn't promise it nor guarantee it – ever.

The complexity of the SEO strategy depends on the competitiveness of the keyword phrases, the amount of redesign the Web site needs, the SEO copywriting required, site architecture, history of the site, and many other factors. We will thoroughly analyze your site 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.

A sample of good practices & techniques include: 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, your use of Social Media (VERY important these days!) and other techniques that have proven to work over the 17 years since we've been an SEO company.

A search engine spider (or crawler/bot) looks for two things: 1) text and 2) text links. Spiders follow your text links around your site 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 excellent 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 (this service is included with our monthly SEO packages). It really does make a difference. Writing for the search engines is NOT the same as regular marketing copywriting – it never will be.



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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 engines? Do humans actually using them? The following statistics show search engines that are actually on our radar:

The 4 largest search engines on the Web are:

1. Google 70.03 %
2. Bing 9.51 %
3. Yahoo 7.55 %
4. Ask 3.99 %

October 2013 / 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 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.* We'd love to make this promise to our clients, but to do so would be highly unethical and untrue at best. This claim typically 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 by submitting a [Sitemap](#) and you can do this yourself at no cost whatsoever."



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However these days, there's no need to even submit to Google! As long as your site is already in Google, you're fine. If not, getting backlinks and letting Google "naturally" find your site is in your best interest – again, no need to submit!

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. 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 we'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 your site banned or penalized. 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 well 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 which again, sends them right back to their SEO professional again. With a monthly SEO plan, you won't need to worry about this, it should be included if the SEO company has your best interests in mind.

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 (some niches don't fall into this practice) allow 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, consistent monitoring will allow us to tweak the site when needed. Most SEO packages include incorporating the changes needed for



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your Web site to maintain the health of your site. You'll need to ask your SEO company about their policy regarding monitoring and changes.

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.

What To Do If Your Ranking Falls

Search engine rankings **constantly** fluctuate, mainly due to four 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;
- 3) Algorithms constantly change to work around spamming practices and to provide more relevant results; and
- 4) The search engines are dynamic, not static and the results after a search will always be changing. Expect your site's ranking to fluctuate – it's going to happen. As long as you continue to see an upward trend with your metrics, overall, you should be good.

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 month or so, it's possible that the search engine made a major change in the algorithm or something spammy has happened to your site. 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 in the hopes of bringing your ranking back. 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 SEO plan usually includes these changes for you.



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After Optimization

Once your site is optimized, we keep working on it. Your optimization should ideally **never stop** as changes in the algorithms, constant new competition and new practices (think Social Media) never stop. Performing audits on your site will be done on a monthly and quarterly basis for those on a monthly plan. Do your forms work? Do all your lead capturing methods work properly? If your contact form doesn't work, you're losing potential clients. Does your site have broken links? Do you ever wonder how strong your keywords are a year later after initial optimization? Do they still perform as well? Are there any phrases we're missing? These are typical audits we'll perform for our monthly SEO clients. There are other areas of your site that we evaluate to insure your site is healthy, working properly and are up to date with current standards. 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.

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 your domain has been registered
- 2) how many years ago your domain registered
- 3) how often you make changes to your site (Google supposedly "likes" a site that is updated frequently, this tells Google there's some importance to it)

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.



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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.

Backlinks

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.

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



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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.

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 has been 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 fully 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, including overseeing the optimization and design of over 4000 nationwide attorney and small business Web sites. Her biggest projects to date are daughter Sage and son Seven, both future UNIX system administrators.

Last update 8/8/2014