

Search Engine Optimization

7 SEO Secrets Your Webmaster Won't Tell You

Still ranking below your competitors on search engines?

Follow these tips to reach new heights BY BOB BLY AND BECKI DILWORTH



Put 10 search engine optimization consultants in a room and ask them how to optimize your site. You'll get 10 different answers.

So, how do you separate fact from fiction when implementing an SEO program to raise your rankings on Google and other search engines? Here are 11 truths, strategies and rules of thumb that are proven to optimize sites and generate a flood of organic search traffic:

1. Don't overdo link directory submissions.

Yes, having respected websites in your category link to your site is something Google's algorithms look for. Yet submitting your site to every single link directory in existence can actually be very detrimental to your SEO efforts.

This ploy for more attention can be seen by Google as an attempt to manipulate your ranking, and it may penalize you for it. It's better to submit your website to one or two of the horizontal link directories that humans actually visit, such as the Open Directory Project, or vertical directories serving your industry or niche, such as Healthlinks.net or iCivilEngineer.com.

2. Optimize for humans, not search engines.

Google detects and rejects most blatant attempts to mechanically optimize sites for search engines.

Since Google's algorithm is designed to "think" like a human, optimizing your site for human visitors instead of robots will result in higher rankings.

In the early days of SEO, clunky copy stuffed with keywords sometimes resulted in higher rankings. Today, while you still should use meta tags and keywords in your page copy, it also should contain good content that reads well and is relevant to your audience.

Simply put: The copy shouldn't

be crammed with keywords in a clumsy effort to boost PageRank.

3. Focus on optimizing pages that are already well-ranked.

Approximately 80 percent of search engine users click on one of the first three results on search results pages. You'll get the most traffic leverage by focusing your optimization efforts on pages already ranked for your target keywords, incrementally improving their SEO.

4. Know which keywords to focus on for best results.

There are dozens of factors to consider when selecting keywords to optimize. The three that identify the best opportunities are volume, competition and relevance.

Volume tells you how many users are searching for the keyword in any given month. Higher volume means more opportunity to reach your audience. Competition tells you how competitive that search term is — i.e., how difficult and expensive it'll be to rank highly there — which will in effect help you prioritize your efforts. Relevance tells you how pertinent your site is to a specific term or phrase.

If you're highly relevant for a lower-volume term, you'll likely have a greater opportunity to rank higher and ultimately convert that traffic. "Long-tail" keywords — phrases that are specialized, such as "dark German draft beer" —

typically have less competition and greater relevance to users than “short-tail” keywords that are more generic — such as “beer.”

5. Optimize within the limitations of existing web systems and technology.

It’s impractical to replace or override legacy systems that aren’t SEO-friendly. Instead, work with your IT partners to understand what can and can’t be changed on your site.

Case in point: A site generates dynamic URLs that are strings of characters unrecognizable to humans and search engines. You cannot move away from dynamic URLs, but you may be able to change segments of the string to include keywords that attract search engines.

6. Keep XML site maps current.

Your site should have an XML site map that keeps current with all new

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pages added and deleted. Search engine robots crawl your entire site to rank it, and site maps make it easier for them to navigate.

XML site maps are a guide, but they can’t override poor navigation structure or the lack of an HTML site map, which are critical for your users and the engines. Since site maps are time consuming, and their creation and upkeep often not a priority with webmasters, look for a content management system that generates maps automatically.

7. Focus on title tags.

The most important meta tag from an SEO perspective is the title tag.

Make sure the title tag contains the keyword the page is being optimized for, preferably at the beginning.

If you are optimizing for “web design,” for example, “Web designer Christopher Carpenter” is stronger than “Christopher Carpenter, web designer.”

Content management systems often generate title tags and other metadata dynamically.

The ultimate goal is to work toward a structure that utilizes data connected to that page, whether it’s the article title or product name.

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