



SEO Guidebook

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What Is SEO?

Search Engine Optimization can be defined as the systematic process of improving a website or webpage's visibility on the "natural" or un-paid listings of a search engine results page. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of search engines that exist today, with the major ones including Google, Yahoo, Bing, and Youtube. These search engines are based upon extremely complex algorithms that aim to return the most relevant results for any search that they are given. While these exact algorithms remain hidden from public view, search engine optimization experts have been able to derive the most important aspects about a website that can lead to a higher ranking in a search engine results page.

How Search Engines Work

Before we can dive into the modifications to make to your website, it is important that we understand how these search engines work. We'll focus on Google for now because it is constantly leading innovations in the search engine industry, and because it is by far the most popular search engine.

Every second of every day search engine crawlers (also known as spiders, or Googlebots), are indexing pages they find on the internet. Each time a page is indexed, the Googlebot is gathering data to determine how relevant the indexed page is to a set of keywords or key phrases. These Googlebots are also following each and every link they find on a page to index what pages are connected, creating a true web in the process. All of the criteria that the Googlebots take note of are used in the ranking algorithm one way or another. Some aspects are given more importance than others, but it is important that all factors are taken into consideration when building or maintaining a website.

SEO Ranking Factors

There are literally hundreds of things that Google and other search engines take into account when they are ranking websites. These can be broken down into two major categories: On-page criteria and off-page criteria. On-page factors can be thought of as the search engine optimization foundation for any site. Depending on how competitive a search phrase is, on-page factors can be enough to rank highly for a specific search, however, the importance of on-page SEO factors has been diminished with the updates to Google in 2012. It is still important, but shouldn't be scrutinized on a consistent basis.

Off-page factors have changed dramatically in 2012. Previously, these factors boiled down to who had the most links and the best links pointing to their site. This is not the case anymore. With the huge changes that have been made to the algorithm, content strategy matters more than ever. The site that has the best content being shared and disseminated across the web will rank higher for more terms now.



A Few Important On-Page Factors	A Few Important Off-Page Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Keyword Usage in Title Tag • Keyword Usage in Content • Keywords in Anchor Text of Internal Links • Keywords in Meta Description • Keywords in Alt Text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Media • Quality links gathered from Quality Sources • Content Sharing Strategy

*These terms will be defined later in this guide

**Content is bolded due to importance in latest ranking factors

Paid Vs. Non-Paid Listings

One thing to take into account is that search engine optimization efforts only affect the organic or natural listings on a search engine results page. The sponsored, or paid, listings are purchased on an auction system from the search engine itself and can be equated to advertisements. Other terms that reference these paid listings are Pay-per-click (PPC), search engine marketing (SEM), or paid search. These advertisements can be very effective and should often times be used in conjunction with search engine optimization efforts.

As of August, 2012, the real estate for organic listings has become almost non-existent. Ads dominate the top and the right side of the page. This has diminished the value of targeting very competitive terms, as they are typically the ones with the most ads as well.

The screenshot displays a Google search results page for the query "cars". At the top, the Google logo is visible, followed by the search bar containing the text "cars" and a search button. Below the search bar, it indicates "About 2,450,000,000 results (0.20 seconds)". The results are categorized into several sections on the left: Web, Images, Maps, Videos, News, Shopping, and More. The "Web" section is the most prominent, featuring several paid advertisements. These include "Cars.com™ Official Site - Car Listings, Prices and Reviews", "Official Chevy Car Site | Chevrolet.com", "Buick Car Official Site | Buick.com", "New Cars, Used Cars, Car Reviews, Car Finance Advice - Cars.com", "Pre-Owned Ford Car", "2013 Hyundai® Cars", "Cars For Sale", and "Used Cars For Sale". Each advertisement includes a brief description and a link to the respective website. On the right side of the page, there is a section titled "See results about" which shows a thumbnail for the movie "Cars" and a brief description: "Cars is a 2006 American computer-animated comedy-adventure film produced by Pixar and ...". Below this, there is another section titled "Ads - Why these ads?" which provides more details about the advertisements. At the bottom of the page, there is a "Toyota" logo.



Why is SEO Important?

Devoting time and money into search engine optimization may not be the right avenue for every website out there. However, following the best practices for the on-page search engine optimization criteria can often times lead to a better user experience on any website. Because of this, clearly written, well-organized, original content should be the foundation of any website.

On the other hand what is the point of a website without visitors? Search engine optimization continues to showcase itself as one of the most successful avenues of marketing to achieve a true return on investment. Ranking highly for specific and targeted keywords can help drive relevant traffic to your website to read, subscribe, download, or purchase – whatever your conversion may be.

Keyword Research

Why Keyword Research Matters

Keyword research is the foundation of any great search engine optimization campaign. It doesn't do your website much good to rank for terms that nobody is searching for. On the other hand, it often doesn't make sense to target the most competitive phrase in your industry. Research must be performed to figure out exactly which higher traffic terms relate to your site and to see which search terms have an achievable goal.

The idea that you should target the higher traffic terms is pretty self explanatory; however, with each keyword comes competition. Chances are your website or company probably has a competitor or two. Somewhere out there, someone is trying to achieve the same rankings, and the same keywords, that you are for your website.

For instance, let's say that I run a website for a car dealership in Indianapolis. If I wanted to rank my website for the search phrase "Cars", I would have a difficult time doing so. I would have to compete with sites like Cars.com, Disney-Pixar (because they made a film named "Cars"), and Cars.gov. These sites are established and well-trusted by Google and anyone would have a hard time knocking them from the top. Also, returning a result for a car dealership in Indianapolis wouldn't exactly be relevant, since my customer base is very geo-specific.

Targeting a phrase like "Indianapolis Ford Dealer" would be a much more relevant and achievable term for me to pursue. Sure, it doesn't have the same amount of searches per month, but the searches are more specific and there is less competition gunning for that term on Google. Ranking number one for this term is a much better goal.

One last thing to keep in mind is that not everyone speaks your industry's language. Ask yourself "What would I type in to find my product?" Was your answer technical? Did you use industry related terms that everyone might not be familiar with? If your answer is yes, try putting yourself in the shoes of a customer...what do they call it? You can also use a product like Google Analytics to find out which keywords people are using to find your site.



As of August of 2012, keyword research remains an important piece of an overall Internet marketing strategy; however, it shouldn't be obsessed over. The real value of the newer strategy of site promotion and traffic increases focuses more on the long-tail keywords that can drive traffic.

How to perform Keyword Research

There are four main (free) tools to perform keyword research. They are:

1. Google Adwords Keywords Estimator
This tool can be found at <https://adwords.google.com> or simply search for the phrase "Keywords" on Google itself, and it will be the number one result. This tool is great for seeing a estimated average of how many searches per month you could expect from any given search phrase. It also gives a graphical representation for competitiveness of each keyword – For all intensive purposes, the more full the bar is, the harder the word will be to rank for. One thing to take note of however, this data is used for the paid search aspect of Google as well. The data could be skewed and the competition for a phrase could be distorted.
2. Google Insights for Search (<http://www.google.com/insights/search/>)
This tool is effective for comparing keyword search volumes across specific regions, categories, and time frames. This is a great tool to see if there is demand for your product or service based on specific parameters.
3. Google Analytics
Google Analytics is a free service that gives a wealth of information about how users interact with your website. Within this tool, you can view how visitors are finding your site, broken down into direct traffic, referral traffic and search engine traffic (what we are interested in). Within the search engine traffic section you can view which keywords visitors are typing into search engines to find your site. This can give great insight to how your users truly search for your product or service.
4. Freekeywords.wordtracker.com
This website is a tool that should be used in conjunction with the other two listed above. Simply type in a basic keyword phrase and it will provide data such as the amount of searches per month performed on that given key phrase, as well as some relevant searches that you may consider as targets. This data is pulled from a few less popular search engines, so if the search phrase you enter in doesn't return a high volume, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is a worthless phrase.

SEO Basics and Optimizing Content

These foundational tactics should be done and done well, however, don't spend too much time obsessing over the little nuances of keyword strategy and title tag structure. That time would be much better spent creating unique content and sharing it across the web.



Creating Accurate Page Titles

At the most basic level, a page title, also known as the title tag, tells both the user and the search engine what the topic of a particular page is about. Each page within your website should have its own unique, well-crafted title tag to streamline the user's experience and to increase exposure on search engines. This is the most important on-page factor that exists for search engine optimization and the most time should be dedicated to ensuring that each title tag is targeted, unique, and correct.

The reason that a page's title tag is the most important factor is because it is displayed on a search engine results page. The clickable link on the search engine results page is actually pulled directly from the title tag itself. If a user sees a keyword that pertains to their search (which will probably be bolded by the search engine), it signals to the user that this page is relevant to their search.

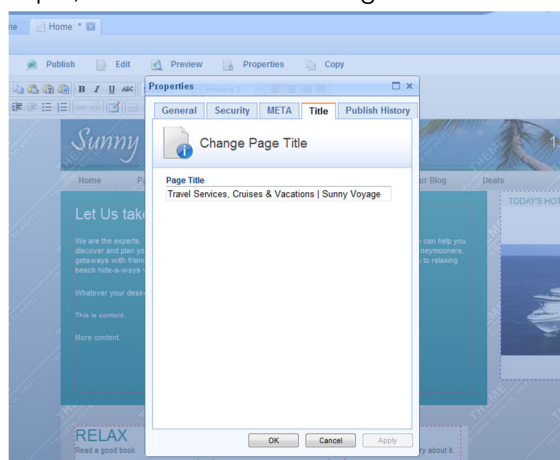
Checklist for a well-structured Title Tag:

- € The title tag should be limited to 65-69 characters (spaces included)
- € The first letter of each word should be capitalized
- € Key phrases should be separated by dashes (-), pipes (|), or commas (,)
- € The first words in your title tag should be your most important key phrase, not your company or organization's name
- € The company or organization's name should be placed at the end of the title tag

Example of well-structured Title Tag:

[New Cars, Used Cars - Find Cars at AutoTrader.com](#) ☆
Find used cars and new cars for sale at AutoTrader.com. With millions of cars, finding your next new car or used car and the car reviews and information you ...
[www.autotrader.com/](#) - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#)

Marketpath CMS users can update each page's title tag using the Properties tab for each page. Simply click "Properties" when any page is open within Marketpath CMS, click on the fourth tab called "Title" and input a unique, well-structured title tag that follows the checklist above.



Meta Description Tag

A page's meta description tag gives search engines a summary of what the page is about. It differs from the title tag in the amount of text that is displayed on the search engine results page. The meta description tag gives website administrators the ability to describe the contents of the page with two to three sentences of text.

Well structured meta description tags can give the users a clue as to specific items on a page. Any of the keywords that were searched will be bolded in the meta description tag if they match. This should help increase click-through rate and help drive more traffic to your site.

Checklist of well structured meta description tag:

- € Meta Description tag does not exceed 150 characters (spaces included)
- € Meta Description includes location of business or service (if applicable)
- € Meta Description Tag lists keywords that are relevant to the specific page
- € A call to action is used at the end of the description (call us today, buy today, etc), if it is applicable
- € Meta Description tag is written with proper grammar, capitalization, and punctuation

Example of well-structured meta description:

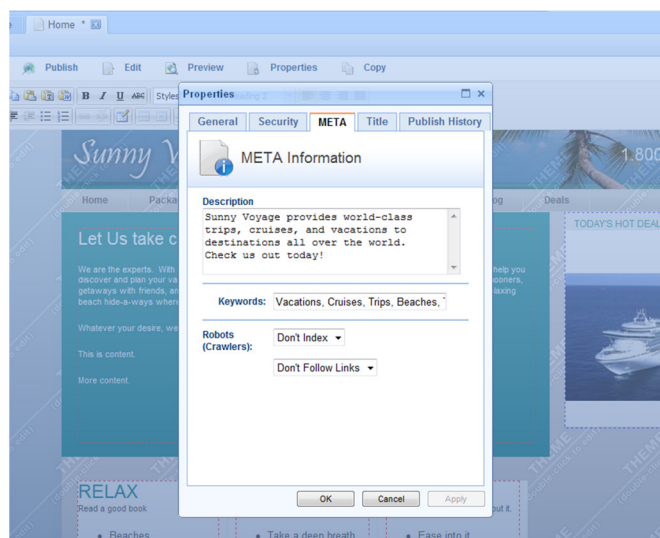
[New & Used Cars for Sale, Auto Dealers, Car Reviews and Car ...](#) ☆

Search 2.6 million new & used car listings, price a new car, get a dealer quote, read expert reviews, or sell your car at thousands over trade-in.

[www.cars.com/](#) - Cached - Similar

**Meta
Description**

Marketpath CMS users can update each page's meta description tag using the Properties tab for each page. Simply click "Properties" when any page is open within Marketpath CMS, click on the third tab called "META" and input a unique, well-structured meta description tag that follows the checklist above.



Creating Better Anchor Text

Anchor text is the technical term for the clickable text that users interact with as a result of a link. The text tells users and search engines what exactly the linked page is about, and should be crafted in such a way that it is descriptive and accurate.

Everyone is familiar with the much overused “[Click Here](#)” anchor text. By using such a generic phrase on your pages links, you are missing out on a very easy opportunity to convey the topic of your sites internal pages to both users and search engines. Instead, using a phrase such as “[2010 Ford Fusion](#)” as the link itself provides an accurate description of the contents on that linked page (assuming of course the page is about a 2010 Ford Fusion).

Checklist for well structured Anchor text:

- € Anchor text provides basic idea of what the linked page is about
- € Anchor text is short and descriptive (2 to 3 words)
- € Format links so they are easy to identify (blue text, underlined)

Checklist for things to avoid in Anchor text:

- € Avoid phrases such as Click Here, View More, About Us, Page, Article and Blog in links
- € Avoid spamming multiple keywords into one link
- € Avoid linking entire sentences or paragraphs
- € Avoid using off-topic keywords as links (non-relevant to the linked page)

Images and Image Tags

Images serve as a great way to convey an idea and break up large amounts of text. They should be used often and comprehensively throughout any website. There are two features of any image that are taken into account by search engines – the file name of the image itself, and the alt image text.

Creating descriptive file names is an easy process and should be done when the file is uploaded to a system. Accurately describing the image in the file name can also help you identify images easier when uploading them to your website, saving time in the process. A good example of a well-crafted file name for a 2010 Ford Fusion would be: “ford-fusion-2010.jpg” not “carimage1.jpg”.

The alt attribute or alt tag is a part of the image that is generated by the website administrator to describe, in words, the topic of the image. The alt tag allows you to display “alternative text” if the image cannot be loaded for some reason. The alt tag is also used by screen readers to allow Braille users to understand images. Finally, alt tags are used by Google Image Search to better display relevant images for users.

Checklist for creating File Names and Alt Tags:

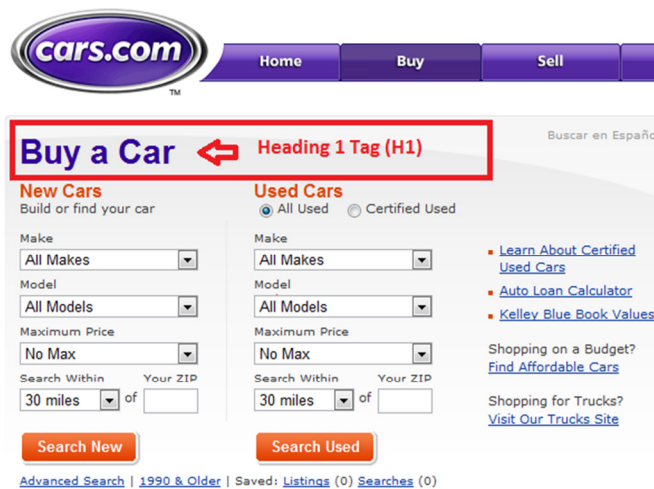
- € Craft accurate file names with words separated by dashes or spaces
- € Use brief, keyword rich descriptions in alt text (3-4 words)



Heading Tags

Heading tags aren't used as an important ranking factor for search engines much anymore, but nevertheless should be used within each page of your website to better direct your users to specific content. Since heading tags, such as H1 tags (heading 1), are displayed on the viewable content of each page, they should be used to emphasize the most important idea on a page. Since the heading 1 tag will be styled differently with bigger, colored text, it should encompass the topic of the page that it sits on.

Here is an example of a well crafted Heading Tag (outlined in red):



Checklist for creating good Heading tags:

- € Imagine you're writing an outline on each page with H1 tags being the top bullet points and H2's being subsets of those points
- € Use the Heading tags sparingly. Each page should have an H1, but not necessarily more than one

External (Off Site) SEO

Google's Updates - SPYW, Penguin and Panda

In 2011 and early 2012, Google made a series of algorithmic changes that have resonated throughout the SEO industry. Tactics that have been at the foundation of the industry for a decade no longer work...and they actually may work against your site. The mission behind all of these changes has remained in line with goal of Google - delivering the most relevant results to a searcher as quickly as possible. The emphasis on keyword research, site structure and linking strategies have been replaced by content marketing and social strategy concepts.



SPYW

SPYW, or Search Plus Your World, has completely changed the way that search results are displayed. If you are logged into any Google Product (gmail, YouTube, etc), your search results will be completely personalized based on your social networks. While this can be extremely useful for searchers, as you can see what your friends have recommended, it has created an almost impossible task for search marketers. No longer can you rely on page rankings alone for increased traffic, as results will differ from searcher to searcher.

Penguin and Panda

Because these updates were a little more technical, covering them together makes more sense. The purpose of Penguin and Panda was to "clean up the web". Basically, low-quality sites, content farms, and other sites that are violating Google's terms of service have been removed or demoted within the rankings. Keep in mind, buying links is a direct violation of Google's terms of service, so if you've contracted out to an SEO firm to "build links", you're playing with fire.

Again, these updates have completely changed the way companies and website owners should approach SEO. So, what should you do to gain more traffic? The answer is simple, but the tactics take time and expertise - create and share great content.

Content Marketing

At the end of the day, no matter how well your title tags, meta description tags, alt tags, anchor text and headings are written, your site must be comprised of quality, unique, up-to-date content. Creating compelling and useful content will help the website's online influence more than any of the items listed above. The content should be keyword rich, read well, and be grammatically correct.

The thing to keep in mind when writing content is that what you are creating is ultimately for a human being to read, process and then hopefully share via social networking and email. This is the underlying foundation for any good website. There are a lot of ways to create and disseminate your content. Here are a few:

Blogging

A great and easy way to create unique and relevant content is to start a blog. A blog is, in its most simple form, a series of chronologically based articles or posts about certain topics. Blogs are a great way to establish expertise in a certain area and create a following of readers. The keyword rich content that is created each and every post can be indexed by Google and other search engines and displayed right alongside your website in search engine results pages. The recommended frequency of blog posts will vary from industry to industry, but the general rule is the more the better. Companies who blog more often annually report more inbound leads than companies who blog sporadically.

Before your company rushes off to create a blog, or increase the number of posts, make sure you have the content creators to support the schedule. No matter what business you're in,



your online marketers are in the content creation business now. Make sure they have the ammunition to create relevant, useful articles for readers.

White Papers/Case Studies

White papers are a bit more formal than a blog post, and typically lengthier. These usually focus on one or two main topics and drive the point home with graphics, statistics, or mined data. White papers and case studies are great because they can really appeal to a potential client's needs, making it more likely they become a lead. Create a white paper or case study on a set schedule, just like blog posts, and distribute them via your website, your social media profiles, and...

Email

Email marketing can help your content spread like wildfire. Email is here to stay (at least for the foreseeable future), and everyone utilizes it on a daily basis. If you're not utilizing an email marketing platform to keep in touch with your clients and prospects, you're behind the times. There are hundreds of systems out there, all with their own features and price points. Find your favorite and give it a shot. Our favorite is Mailchimp.

Social

Social networks are amazing for helping your content spread across the web. Some users prefer these networks to get all of their news, so make sure you share your content across multiple platforms. Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram...the list can go on and on. Spend some time on each network and figure out what is right for you and your business. Tackling all of these networks can require a full-time employee, so if you're just getting started, start small. I'd suggest Twitter and Google+...you'll see why later.

As more and more social networks continue to emerge – think Facebook, Twitter, and now Google+, search engine algorithms have begun to implement data collected from these circle into their ranking factors. While external linking structure is important (addressed above); the “digital footprint” of a website includes much more than the on-page SEO and its link profile. Since Twitter has completely opened its data to Google, social signals from this network are much easier for Google to utilize. Facebook is yet to open its digital doors completely, and with the launch of a rival product in Google+ in July of 2011, it is doubtful they ever will.

Social signals go far beyond followers and likes. It is truly how a brand interacts on these social media platforms that seem to make the biggest difference. Creating viral content, such as infographics, a great blog post, or any other content that is easily shared, is key to success here. This task is not easy and should not be taken lightly. For help here, you may want to bring in the experts – paid SEO services.

Video

Video has quickly become one of the most used content mediums on the web in recent years, so it makes sense that it has factored into the SEO game in one way or another. People watch



videos because it is more compelling than reading the same content (usually). So, how does video increase the SEO efforts of a website?

A good video can drive a viewer to share it with their network pretty easily. Once a user shares a link to the website that hosts the video, it has begun to spread “virally”. Tons and tons of links can be generated to the video in very short periods of time, which leads us to the second aspect of search engine optimization, External SEO.

External, or off-page SEO, is the second part of any good search engine optimization effort. Once you have properly optimized the pages within your website to increase the chances of ranking highly for your targeted keywords, it may be time to embark on an external SEO campaign. Off-page SEO really boils down to one major idea, which is the site with the most “votes” and most trusted “votes” will win search rankings. I am using the word “vote” here instead of link because that is essentially what a link is – a vote from one website, for another website, about a certain topic (which is derived from the anchor text).

For instance if website A links to website B using a link that says “[2010 Ford Fusion](#)”, Google interprets this as a vote from website A that website B is the foremost authority on 2010 Ford Fusions and should rank for it if someone types that into the Google search.



This example is extremely simplified, but the idea is at the core of Google and why it became the most trusted search engine over the past decade, as this idea helped Google return the most relevant results in the history of search engines.

Links, Links, and More (Better) Links

So, now the question is “How do I get people to link to my site?” There are many ways to go about attracting attention and links to your website, some of which were touched on earlier (blogging and video). The main point that Google likes to preach, however, is content is king. If you are generating good, unique, timely content on a regular basis, the links will come naturally – which is what search engines prefer.

If you are too impatient for the links to happen organically and naturally, then you can force the issue by commenting on other blogs, forums, and community driven websites. Within these comments you can provide links back to your site, if it is not a violation of the blog or forum’s policy, of course. You’ll want to make sure that you do provide some substance in your comment when doing this, though, as simply pasting a link to your website will get removed quickly if it doesn’t add to the conversation. Keep in mind that nobody likes link spamming.



Another way to gain links is to simply ask for them from related websites. This is very time consuming and not guaranteed to work, but personal relationships can lead to more links. If you know the owner of a particular site that is related to your industry, ask them for a link.

One last thing to keep in mind is that not every link is valued the same by Google. A link from the New York Times to your website is worth much more than a link from “Billy Bob’s Blog” to your website. Credibility of the linking website is valued more than the sheer number of links themselves. One great, highly credible link can outweigh hundreds (if not thousands) of lower quality, less reputable links.

There is one word of warning, however. Links can get you in trouble. The prime example of this happened in February of 2011 to JCPenny.com. Google was able to prove that JC Penny was fraudulently acquiring links from all sorts of sites, mostly non-relevant ones. Once this was discovered, Google penalized JCPenny.com and manually demoted their rankings from page one to somewhere around page 70. Now, JCPenny.com didn’t create all of these links by themselves, they contracted it out, which leads into Paid SEO Services.

Paid SEO Services

August of 2012 has marked a definite change in the SEO industry. Firms that once specialized in rankings are shifting gears to become holistic Internet Marketing agencies. SEO is no longer accomplished by building link after link. It isn’t accomplished by the mathematicians and statisticians. It’s accomplished by marketers who can create content that is shared across the web.

If you’re in need of more traffic to your website and you feel as though you need a hand, make sure you discuss strategy with any potential contractor. If they are still focused on links, and unable to truly explain what you’re getting for your money, walk away. Any service these days should have tangible content, results, and transparency. Nobody has the magic SEO bullet anymore.

Final Thoughts

SEO is an ever-evolving industry that must be given plenty of attention if it is going to succeed. This is not an overnight process, nor will your website see noticeable results in a short period of time. It often takes a few months to achieve the desired rankings, if they happen at all.

The one thing that I can’t stress enough is that analytical data is invaluable in the search engine optimization process. If you can’t measure it, you can’t effectively optimize it. Analyze, optimize, analyze, optimize...and so on.

Website is for Users, not search engines

If you are going to take away one aspect from this guide to utilize in your website, it should be that your website should be built and maintained for your visitors, not search engines. If you are correctly labeling pages, images, videos and creating good content, your users will have a better experience with your site, and the search engine rankings will naturally follow.



Takeaways

So, that's a lot, right? Here is a streamlined to-do list:

- Make sure your website is designed well enough to handle an increase in traffic. If it's outdated, start with a redesign.
- Craft the fundamentals of your website in the correct manner – title tags, meta description, etc. While not as important as it used to be, it's still a good first step
- Create compelling content for the static pages of your site.
- Begin creating and frequently publishing GOOD, USEFULL content
- Utilize other channels to broadcast your content to users on the web
- Don't EVER buy links...the risks ALWAYS outweigh the rewards and they don't have the same value as they used to
- Track your results and tweak your strategy based on your data

Resources:

www.seomoz.org –Premier trusted advisors on SEO

<http://guides.seomoz.org/beginners-guide-to-search-engine-optimization>

http://static.googleusercontent.com/external_content/untrusted_dlcp/www.google.com/en/us/webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf - Google's SEO Beginner's Guide

<http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/> - Matt Cutts' Blog – SEO Guru that works for Google

<http://www.youtube.com/user/GoogleWebmasterHelp> - Matt Cutts' Youtube Channel

