

Introduction to SEO

(Search Engine Optimization)

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What is SEO & How Does it Work?

Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, is the process of improving a website's visibility in search engine results with intentions of increasing traffic. This is done through editing the site's code (HTML), as well as how your site is affiliated with other sites, both good & bad. Factors such as load times, how long it's been since your content was updated, and physical location of the searcher can influence search results.

Higher ranked pages are more frequently visited. Therefore, SEO is an effort to make your site more relevant for one or more search terms, thus appearing higher in the search engine results/rankings.

This goal can be accomplished a variety of ways, and is significantly dependent upon the content of your website. Trying to achieve better relevance with more pigeon-holed terms is significantly easier than trying to complete with more vague terms. For instant, '*commercial press alabama*' is going to be far easier to complete with than '*commercial press*' due to the sheer volume of applicable results for the more vague term than the one limiting the results by location.

Early SEO

In the early days, SEO was namely reliant on:

- **Meta tags** - keywords & description in the background code of the site
- **Content** - the words on your site (order & emphasis had little influence)
- **URL** - the domain name: If you searched for oranges, floridacitrisco.com/oranges would be more relevant than floridacitrisco.com/node48
- **Page Title**
- **Organic Click-throughs** - when a user would search for a term & click your site among the search results

Modern Day SEO

15 years ago, we had 5-7 major search engines. Today, there are about 30 major search engines across the world, but the big contender remains to be Google. Because of the immense growth of the Internet, search engines now take significantly more information in considering when populating results. In fact, due to the high-stakes of competing in these rankings, search engines have had to implement negative consequences to penalize gaming of the system.

Search engines work by grading sites based on particular terms using an elaborate algorithm to determine relevance. Every major search engine uses it's own algorithm, and to keep their search results as reliable as possible, these algorithms are kept very secret. They also constantly adjust priority of particular aspects to prevent anyone from reverse-engineering their formula. This is common practice to ensure as organic & accurate results as possible.

What Helps Ranking?

Factors in modern day SEO include the previously mentioned, as well as:

- Age of your content (when you last updated)
- Content headings
- Emphasis on words or phrases
- The order of content
- The searcher's IP address (geo-location)
- The web server's IP address (for previous or neighboring blacklisted sites)
- Load times
- In-bound/out-bound links to/from relevant sources
- Content legibility (colors)
- And countless other aspects...

Where to Start?

The beginning of SEO can be a bit overwhelming just because of the vast number of things you can do to influence ranking. The very basics, though, are simple enough to be implemented in a few moments time (depending on your web sites' environments). These things also have a surprisingly high influence on your ratings, so they're a great way to start! These simple first steps are:

- 1. Ensure each page has a relevant title.** Having the same title on every page doesn't hurt, but it doesn't necessarily help. Keep your titles short & relevant, ie: *Metal Cogs - Joe's Cog Co*
- 2. Use proper headings.** From an HTML standpoint, you should use H1 tags for your largest, more prominent headings, and work your way down. Header tags go from H1 (largest) to H6 (smallest), but it isn't necessary to use them all, and abusing them (putting the whole page in a big H1) will actually hinder your ranking.
- 3. Use descriptive meta tags.** While most search engines don't rank these very high, every bit helps, and these are super easy to implement. And because they don't have any bearing on the visual front-end of the website, if you were to make a mistake, it won't effect the styling of your site.
- 4. Update content** - New content is more timely, thus relevant, according to search engines.

What to Avoid

It might be tempting to try to *beat the system*, but it isn't worth the risk. These sorts of tactics can actually get your domain blacklisted from search engines, so avoid the following:

- **Cloaking** - allowing search engines to see particular content, and having different content displayed for humans.
- **Link building sites** - I recommend avoiding these services. Some can be fruitful, but if you get in a negative ring of these sites, search engines can associate your site as having malicious content (spyware, viruses, etc)
- **Illegal content** - When your site's content is deemed illegal, search engines tend to blacklist you to prevent them from being responsible in making said illegal content available to the masses.
- **Invisible text** - This was the original way of gaming search engines: putting dozens (sometimes hundreds) of unrelated keywords on your site & coloring them the same as the background color.

There are some completely legitimate web design tactics that really hinder search engine rank. The following are completely allowed, but highly discouraged:

- **An all Flash website** - Flash should be used very sparingly, as search engines have no way of scanning the associated data. Google can now index plain text contained in Flash files, but most search engines cannot.
- **Frames** - While search engines can index your site if it's build with frames, it doesn't read the frames in proper fashion, resulting in links pointing to partial content.
- **Duplicate pages** - It may occur to you that the more versions of a page that are out there, the more fish you have in the proverbial barrel. However, having duplicate content tells search engines that you're simply copying content from another source & results in your ranking dropping.
- **Content separation** - Though necessary for certain web applications, redirecting users based on browser types & IP (geo-location) results in a confused search engine. It won't be able to index anything besides the information applicable to this server, based on their browser user-agent & system IP

An SEO company called me...

You've probably had a few of these. A sales rep calls from an SEO/SEM company with raving reviews about how they helped Company X go from page 6 to the number 1 search result for just \$5,000, and they could do the same for you!

They aren't lying. They just aren't being completely upfront.

While most companies that are fishing for SEO opportunities will give you a legitimate SEO tune-up, and some may do a great job, they cannot guarantee your ranking. It's 100% out of their control. However, they can reduce relative competition by narrowing the field of play: instead of being #1 for *Bob's Welding*, you'll be #1 for something like *Bob's Welding Birmingham Alabama*.

It's best to deal with a web developer with an understanding of SEO. Because, just like with anything else, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Questions?

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