

Increasing Website Traffic Through SEO Practices

Ever wonder why some websites rank higher than others on popular search engines? How exactly do they beat out the heavy competition and rise to the top? More than likely, these successful sites have spent a lot of time focusing on search engine optimization (SEO).

SEO is the process by which website administrators work to boost a site's search engine rankings through keyword research and placement, content development, and site structure optimization. SEO has become increasingly popular and, therefore, more competitive in recent years because of the realization that higher rankings can equal increased traffic for a site. And when implemented properly, SEO can improve a site's overall success—boosting brand awareness as well as sales.

How Search Engines Work


It's best to begin by describing how search engines work. Every search engine has its own closely guarded proprietary system, but they all go through a similar process to gather and rank the vast amount of information that makes up the World Wide Web.

Step 1 – Crawling

Search engines create automated programs, known as spiders, which regularly roam the Internet gathering information from the meta files, body copy, alt tags, and hyperlinks on pages and documents.

Step 2 – Indexing

Information gathered by spiders is stored by search engines on gigantic databases that are tightly managed to allow high-speed retrieval of information. Note that indexed information is not real-time information, so there may be a slight lag in getting a site's listings updated.



```
ontent
<meta name="
allow" />
<meta name="keywords"
content="advertising, marketing, pu
lations, public, relations, video,
action, lincoln, nebraska" />
<meta name="description" conte
Advertising Agency. A full
agency located in L
```

Search engine spiders crawl your site's meta tags. This example comes from SnitilyCarr.com.

Google's Advanced Search Options.

General advanced search:

<http://www.google.com/support/websearch/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=136861>

Google's advanced operators:

<http://www.google.com/intl/en/help/operators.html>

Step 3 – Processing Queries

When an individual submits a search request, the search engine retrieves documents from its index that best match the user's query.

Users have the option to simply submit keywords or phrases in what is called "findall" mode or employ advanced operators that can better narrow their search results. An example of an advanced operator for Google is to use "intitle:" in the search, which will only search for documents that contain the word/phrase in the title.

Step 4 – Ranking

Each search engine has developed algorithms to calculate and sort indexed documents based on relevance and popularity. They measure relevance based on how well the content of a document matches the query. Higher frequency of a query's keywords in the document equals higher relevance.

Popularity is measured by the quantity and quality of a site's inbound and outbound links as well as the site's age. Websites with a high number of links to and from high-quality and relevant sources are deemed to have more credibility.

The SEO Process

A well-planned SEO process can save a lot of time and headache in the long run, as well as produce higher rankings and increased traffic. The following are the key elements of an SEO plan.

Keyword Research and Selection

Keywords are the words and phrases Web users type into search engines to find the information they want. If a website doesn't have the appropriate keywords incorporated naturally within its content and in other key areas which the search engines index, it can easily get lost in the wide expanse of the Internet.

Without putting careful research and thought into keyword use and placement, all other SEO efforts may be pointless. Luckily, this is also the step that is easiest for site administrators to control.

The first step is to identify what words and phrases are used most frequently to locate similar sites. Online keyword research tools—such as Wordtracker (paid), SEO Tracker (free), and Google (free)—are available to assist in this research. Other tactics for identifying keywords include surveying customers or employing an analytics tool for the site. Simple brainstorming can also produce a list of keywords that are likely to be used in common queries.

Some industries are more competitive than others, and therefore keywords in these markets can become oversaturated. It's a good idea to come up with more unique niche terms that can help set the site apart. For instance, a Google search for "jeans" returns over 93 million results, but "toddler girls designer jeans" returns just over 78,000. More specific keyword phrases can greatly increase the chances of achieving higher rankings.

Once keywords have been identified, they should be incorporated into the site's page titles, meta description and tags, and body copy. This will help search engines index the site properly, and hopefully will help the site rank higher for those specific keywords and phrases. One thing to note, Google and many other search engines no longer utilize keywords meta tags in their rankings because of unscrupulous webmasters who loaded up these sections of their sites with irrelevant keywords in hopes of boosting their rankings. It's not a good idea to spend a lot of time on keyword meta tags, but it won't hurt to use them as some search engines may still include them in their rankings.

The best way to approach keyword usage is to consider how spiders actually crawl a page. They work from the top down, which means they see information in the following order:

- Meta description
- Headlines
- Body

Therefore, keywords should be concentrated toward the top—in the meta and H1 tags—then used as much as possible throughout the body copy without sacrificing the user's experience. Keep in mind that content should be enjoyable to read and filled with good information regardless of keyword usage. If keywords are simply scattered throughout the page, it will turn users off and can ultimately hurt the site's rankings.

“Think about what users are gonna type to find your page . . . and then make sure those keywords are on the page.”

—Matt Cutts, Google

Website and Content Optimization

Once keywords have been identified and properly incorporated, the next step is to create a site structure that best facilitates crawling by spiders. An optimized site should be accessible, usable, and readable.

An accessible site successfully delivers content to the reader as well as to the spiders crawling for information. Things to consider:

- Are all the hyperlinks working?
- Is the coding valid?
- Are files small enough to be easily loaded (>150K)?
- Does the host provider have adequate server storage capabilities?
- Is the site structure ideal for navigation?

Problems with any of these questions may lead to decreased rankings and lower usage rates. For instance, spiders may not be able to successfully crawl sites that use drop-down menus for navigation. It's best to review and eradicate any possible accessibility issues early on to avoid losing valuable traffic.

Website usability is key to providing a positive experience for visitors and ensuring that the site can be easily crawled by spiders. If users can't easily find the information they need, they will quickly go away. Optimizing a website's usability begins with an organized and well-thought-out structure. To make the navigation intuitive, categories should flow from broad to narrow. For this purpose, beginning with a solid sitemap will help keep content organized and easily located.

Last but not least, a site needs to be readable for both the audience and the search engine spiders. Readability refers to both the site's structure and the content that fills the pages. The main objective of any website is to disseminate information about a company and its products and/or services, and if the content is not clearly written, on topic, or fun to read, visitors will vanish and linking to the site will be unlikely. It's a major mistake to sacrifice the user's experience in order to fill the page with keywords for search engine crawlers. Good content will attract visitors and links, which helps boost the site's rankings.

Spiders need to successfully read a site's content in order to index the information. Unfortunately, some sites have been built using text

URL Selection

Example of simple URL:

<http://www.sportshop.com/baseball/gloves>

Example of complex URL:

<http://www.sportshop.com/vnews/display.article=3auo132xu8>

Example of URL with session ID:

<http://www.sportshop.com/page.php?id=4&ck=34rr&User=%Tom%>

embedded within image files. Spiders cannot read image text, so sites using this kind of layout may get completely passed over in search engine indexing and rankings. In addition, the URLs used on a site can aid or inhibit crawling. Simple URLs that incorporate keywords or page titles are best. Conversely, search engines will not index URLs that include two or more dynamic parameters or session IDs.

Attracting Incoming Links

The following activities may help a site attract more incoming links, which will help boost search engine rankings.

- **Issue regular press releases** – This will help get the word out about the website and can build reputation and rapport with other sites. Be sure to include a link back to the site in case the release is posted by others.
- **Ask for links** – Request that clients and partners add a link to their sites. But be careful to only ask for links from sites that are somehow related. After all, it doesn't make good sense to have a link to a car dealership from a paper supply company.
- **Be active in virtual communities** – Submit articles to online publications or post comments on blogs and include a link to the site in the author's bio or signature.
- **Submit to business directories** – Sites like Yahoo! and Business.com allow businesses to post a listing that can include a link to the website.

Do not pay for links! In the past, webmasters sometimes tried to boost their site rankings with link spam practices. Search engines have become much better at policing these schemes and will penalize sites that use them.

Search Engine Submission Pages

Google:

<http://www.google.com/addurl>

Yahoo!:

<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/submit>

Bing:

<http://www.bing.com/docs/submit.aspx>

Search Engine Submission

Submitting to major search engines can help speed the process of crawling and indexing. There are paid services available that claim to help boost rankings, but search engine submission is a simple process that can be done easily without incurring such costs.

The three major search engines to focus on are Google, Yahoo!, and Bing. On each of these sites, there is a page which allows site administrators to submit the website's URL. Simply type the URL for the site's home page and submit the request.

Once the URL has been submitted, it may take awhile for the search engine to crawl and index the site, so be patient. Do not submit a site more than once, as this may lead to penalization and lower rankings.

Tracking and Analysis

Once the website has been properly submitted to the chosen search engines, run keyword searches on each one daily to monitor whether the site has been indexed. Remember that this process may take a few weeks, as there can be a lag between the time the site is submitted to when it is crawled and then finally indexed.

Using Web Analytics to Increase and Optimize Website Traffic

http://www.snitilycarr.com/images/pdf/webanalytics_whitepaper.pdf

The final step involves ongoing analysis using a web analytics tool which can provide valuable reports on the specific keywords visitors are using to find the website. These reports can provide new ideas for keywords that can help with SEO efforts. To learn more about web analytics, check out Snitily Carr's white paper "Using Web Analytics to Increase and Optimize Website Traffic."

Getting the Most Out of SEO

SEO is an ongoing process that takes time and dedication to be truly effective. But a little effort truly can pay off big because the higher a site's ranking, the more likely people are going to find and ultimately visit the site. Just remember to start with a focused plan and then stay on top of the process for the best results.

To learn more about how Snitily Carr can help with SEO, contact us at 402.489.2121 or info@SnitilyCarr.com.