



Search Engine Optimization

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Tips to get you started

"If you build it, they will come." It worked for Kevin Costner in Field of Dreams, but it doesn't work for Web sites. You can build a site, but if you don't rank high on the search engine results. . . well, let's just say you shouldn't hold your breath waiting for any impromptu games of catch.



Search engine optimization (or SEO as it is commonly abbreviated) involves tactics and tools that get your site listed high on search engine results. Your goal is to get listed on page one when searchers enter search topics that are relevant to your site. Anything much past page two and you're pretty much invisible.

A successful SEO campaign is one of the most cost effective marketing strategies you can implement. A high ranking search engine result will bring targeted visitors to your Web site, generating valuable leads—often at a fraction of the cost of traditional advertising.

Before you get started, keep in mind that optimization is not an isolated activity. You cannot optimize a site without an ongoing plan to add new content, build incoming links, and target the right keywords. Optimization is not a one-time job.

Here are a few more basic precepts before we get started:

- "Google is the one to watch. Do well on Google and you do well on them all." So says John Smart, founder of [Internet Design](#), currently writing his own book on SEO. Sure there are folks who'd like to debate this, but when you are a beginner, Google is definitely the place to start.
- SEO is ever evolving. A few years ago, you could buy and trade links en masse and boost your search engine ranking. Today, you get penalized for participating in these spurious "link farms." Once upon a time, submitting to Web directories was absolutely critical. Today, the search engines will likely find you anyway. And, five years ago, many developers stopped bothering with meta keyword tags—things change, so keep up your research.



- SEO is an art. Google keeps its algorithms (how it decides what drives your ranking up or down) a secret. As people find devious ways to get artificially high results, Google keeps updating its methods – so you're always better off to avoid ways to "fool" the search engines. They likely won't work in the long-run and may even penalize your ranking.

We think this post from the [Jacksonville SEO Blog](#) says it best: "Anyone who claims to fully understand SEO is either working at Google or exaggerating a bit. There are good strategies, but even the professionals occasionally get together and ask each other speculative questions about what may or may not impact rankings."

However much time you put into SEO, remember this: It doesn't matter if people can find your site if they don't like what they find when they get there. You must still provide an attractive design with easy navigation and valuable content. Consider human consumption first, or known in the industry as usability, and then build your SEO strategy around that.



10 SEO rules for beginners

If you're just getting started, you need to build a keyword strategy and site structure that will set you up for success and support the rest of your SEO activity. Here are ten important tips for beginners (and their Web developers):

1. Choose specific keywords
2. Choose popular keywords
3. Be 'spiderable'
4. Be World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards compliant
5. Write keyword rich content
6. Write a unique title for every page that includes critical keywords
7. Place content strategically
8. Update content regularly
9. Generate incoming links
10. Make yourself known to the search engines

#1 Choose specific keywords

SEO is quite competitive, with thousands (if not millions) of site owners vying for top placement. Consider the competition for general search terms like vitamins, cabinets or security. Good luck vying with the Fortune 500s for terms like that.

To be seen, choose search terms that are two to three words long and that better

define your market niche. Folks in the industry call this “long tail” search.

Long tail search terms are easy if your market is strictly local—just tack on your city: Portland cabinets, Madison vitamin store, Wausau home security. The job gets trickier when you’re trying to reach a regional or national audience.

Look for specific product niches of interest to buyers; think vintage cabinet replicas, organic vitamins or vacation home monitor.

#2 Choose popular keywords

Naturally, there’s no point in optimizing a site with keywords that no one is searching. Find out which terms people are actually using with [WordTracker](#), [Keyword Discovery](#), or [SEO Book Tools](#). These are mostly paid tools, but worth the nominal investment.

If you need help brainstorming keyword ideas, the tools above can help with that too. SEO Book lists several free Keyword Suggestion Tools including the [Google Keywords Tool](#). Note, the Google Keywords Tool shows pay-per-click advertiser popularity, not actual search popularity. But it’s still a great place to generate ideas.

The Google Tool will also show you which keywords are currently prevalent on your Web site (or enter a competitor’s site to see what they’re emphasizing.)

3 Be spiderable

Time to develop your Spidey Sense. The search engine applications that visit and index your site are called spiders. Your job (and most of all your webmaster’s) is to make sure these spiders can find you and get at all your wonderful content.

Minimize graphic and flash navigation. Spiders have a hard time getting through Flash code. If your Web developer is recommending these tools for the site’s visual aesthetics, make sure to build in text-based navigation options as well.

Be sure your text appears in HTML format as well, not pasted in as part of a graphic image. Spiders cannot “see” graphics. If you must place text within a graphic, be sure to set the graphic’s “Alt text ,” as that is searchable by spiders.

#4 Be W3C compliant

This is another techy thing for your Web developer to be worried about. It means your site is built according to certain accepted international standards which create consistency and structure across the World Wide Web and are accessible to users with a variety of disabilities. (Yes, Web sites can and should be accessible to everyone!)

SEO experts who track this sort of thing agree—Google prefers compliant sites. As an added



bonus, W3C compliant sites are better accessible to people with visual or other disabilities and are better displayed on cell phones along with other mobile Internet devices.

For example, a W3C complaint site will have ALT tags (i.e. description tags) on all of its images. In other words, a dentist's site might have photos tagged "teeth cleaning," "clear braces" and "Park Falls dental office." These tags help the visually impaired explore ALL the content on your site and allow search engine spiders to index your photos.

Use the [W3C validator](#) (it's free) to see if your site passes muster. The error messages can be quite technical, so seek support from your Web developer.

#5 Write keyword rich content

John Smart writes, "If you sell umpa lumpa bars on your site and there is only one written reference to umpa lumpa, you will not be found in the searches for umpa lumpa."

Makes sense, right? Use your keywords in your text. Build a content rich site so that you have many logical places to insert all those critical key terms. But remember, the site must make sense and read well for your visitors. You can't just load it up with keywords or "spam-glish."

Learn more about using content to build search engine rankings below.

#6 Write a unique title for each page

Open any Web page and view the colored bar across the top of your browser—the text inside is your title. Use keywords in this title tag, or now commonly referred to as an element, for each page on your Web site. This is one of the most valuable tools you have for SEO.

To boost your SEO, create a different relevant title for each page on your site. For example, instead of Bay City Realtors appearing across every page of your site, you'd include page titles such as Green Bay Schools, Green Bay Relocation Services, and Green Bay Homes for Sale.

To see an example in action visit [Axe Heaven](#) and click on any of the artists listed in the right hand column and then click again to the specific product descriptions. Each product includes several keywords in its title. (An SEO case study for Axe Heaven is below.)



#7 Place content strategically

Google looks at the way you design your site and figures certain text must be more important than others. Headers and links are given greater SEO weight.

So skip the big bold “Welcome” at the top of the page and use keywords as your headlines. Replace “Click here for more information” links with something like this: “Learn more about our multi-fuel burners.”

#8 Update content regularly

If you are not updating your site on a regular, frequent basis, the search engines learn that you have nothing new and don’t come back as frequently. Your site becomes less relevant in the search engines’ eyes. So, when you eventually do have new content, it’ll take much longer for the search engines to discover it. Now suppose a competitor posts new content every day. Google says “Oh, this site has fresh important things to say” and increases its rating. (See more about updating content below .)

#9 Generate incoming links

Link building is an important way to build credibility for your site—at least as far as the search engines are concerned. Incoming links (i.e. links from other Web sites to yours) have two benefits: 1) they help the spiders find your site, and 2) they tell the spiders your site is quality stuff.



Check your incoming links (and your competitors) at [MarketLeap](#). (More information about how to build incoming links below.)

#10 Make yourself known to search engines

Register a new site with [Google Directory](#), [Yahoo! Directory](#) and [MSN's Live Search](#). For sites new and old, you should also submit a search engine “site map” in a standard XML format used by the search engines (ask your Web developer for help). This more data-friendly language “site map” will guide the search engines where to find the content on your site.

Note—registering with the search engines was once a critical component of SEO. Today, most engines will find you rather quickly as long as you’re linked from another site. However, registering your home page can speed up that process.

Bonus #11 – Analyze and adjust

We could write a whole ‘nother Blue Paper on analyzing your Web traffic and SEO results. But for now, we’ll just point you to some recommended free tools at Google Analytics and [SEO Book](#).

Bonus #12 – Paid search

Paid search is a good way to build traffic for your site, and if you use long tail search and set daily spending limits it can be quite affordable. It's a cycle, really. The more visitors you get the better rating you get. The better rating you get the more users you get. But that's a whole new Blue Paper, too.

Beyond the beginning

If you've covered these first 10 tips, you have set the groundwork for SEO success. Now the ongoing maintenance work begins: building content and incoming links.

Something to say: Using content to build rankings

Content is king. It helps visitors find your site and keeps them engaged once they're there. The more content on your site, the greater opportunity you have to incorporate keywords. Naturally, a sparse site with just a few short pages of text can't pack the keyword punch of a site rich with articles, news and other resources.

What's more, good content makes your site "link-worthy" and encourages other Web site owners to point at you.

Building content can't be a one-time effort. A savvy site plan will include places to provide fresh content on a regular basis.

Be sure to update that content regularly by adding new pages or simply changing the information. Spiders are very smart—they learn whether or not your site is updated frequently. The more you update it, the faster the spiders come back.



Think about the sort of information your customers would find beneficial and provide those resources on your site. Brainstorm how-to articles, best practice information and relevant industry news. Beyond the keyword benefits, helpful content builds goodwill with your customers and keeps visitors coming back.

[Burt's Bees](#) and [Home Depot](#) are two large retailers who understand the value of content. Burt's Bees is a personal care products company that has built its brand around using all-natural ingredients. The site includes an online newsletter and blog with regular updates about organics legislation and all-natural labeling. Home Depot has a large library of how-to articles, videos and Q&A sections surrounding home improvement issues.

Small companies and service providers can emulate these practices. [Cornerstone Business](#)

[Services](#) is a Wisconsin-based business broker that posts new best practice articles once a month. In Oshkosh, their community foundation continues to regularly update its news section, which has provided it with strong optimization.

On your site, “Media” pages and “Information Centers” are two natural places to provide regularly updated content. Blogs are another great way to provide fresh text. Because blogs tend to have a casual, conversational tone, they are generally faster and easier to write than formal articles and white papers.

Consider opportunities to offer user-generated content on the site. For example, large retailers like Amazon and Target include customer product reviews. Local retailers can emulate this practice by soliciting reviews and comments from their own customer-base. If you do, though, you’ll want to diligently monitor user-submitted content for inappropriate language or comments. Spammers simply love free postings for the exact reasons we’ve just been talking about. You wouldn’t want see your site popping up Viagra comments, for instance.

Posting content not developed by your company or its customers also poses some caveats. Remember, you must have legal rights to use any published content on your site. It’s not only illegal and unethical to copy text, but publishing duplicate content (even with permission) could hurt your rankings. So do it judiciously.

Writing takes a long time, even for professionals. If you can’t dedicate regular time yourself, consider outsourcing the work. A vast content development industry is growing to meet these needs. You can hire a local freelancer or post your content needs at a content development site like [Helium](#).

If you can’t spend much money for content, ask suppliers for product information or guest articles. Be on the lookout for print articles relevant to your industry and request reprint permission. Post customer testimonials and ask staff members to share customer success stories.

We’re not going to downplay the effort involved. Building content is time consuming. Make a real commitment by dedicating funds and/or realistic staff time to the project.



Popularity counts: Building links

In addition to the keyword value, content helps generate inbound links for your site. Inbound links are links from other people's Web sites and blogs that link back to your site. They not only build traffic to your site, they increase your search engine ranking, too.

It's a bit of a popularity contest as far as the search engines are concerned. If lots of people think you're cool and link to your site, the search engines figure it must be so and rank your site higher. And there's more ... if you're linked-to from sites that are themselves popular, and have content similar in nature to yours, you'll see better rankings above that!



By providing valuable content, your inbound links will grow naturally. Best case scenario, people will find your site and want to tell others about it. There are a few steps you can take, however, to help link building along:

- **Directory listings** – Get listed on chamber of commerce, industry association and business association Web pages. Only link with reputable and appropriately related directories. Don't respond to e-mail promotions offering to submit your site to thousands of directories across the Web. At best, these paid listing schemes are a waste of money. At worst, they could actually hurt your rankings.
- **Vendors and suppliers**– Ask to trade links with your vendors and suppliers. Create a featured partner section on your own site to house these links.
- **Online press releases** – Distribute newsworthy press releases through online services such as PRNews and BusinessWire.
- **Blog comments** – Track a few relevant blogs in your industry and join the conversation. Most blog commenting tools include linking features.
- **Article publication** – Provide free content for other publishers to use on their site.
- Visit the SEOBook.com blog for loads more [link building ideas](#) (101 in all).

Overall, consider popularity and relevancy as the two underlying guidelines for your SEO strategy. Content should be relevant to the keywords in your page titles. Incoming links show popularity, while links from sites in your industry demonstrate greater relevancy. Even mere traffic volume will impact your search engine results.

Spend a few hours updating your site and tweaking your keywords each and every week. It may take some time, but sooner or later you'll see your rankings climb—and that's when customers will see you.

How'd they do it? Page tags and content

Axe Heaven SEO Case Study

[Axe Heaven](#) sells miniature guitar replicas, providing 1:4 scale copies of famous guitars played by legendary artists like Jimi Hendrix and Gene Simmons. The company launched its Web site in early December 2007 with an SEO strategy that included paid search advertising and content development.



Axe Heaven looked to [Drive](#), its Web development firm, to build search engine rankings. According to Ken Zweigel, president of Drive, the company spent a peak of \$300 per week during the initial launch—at the height of the holiday shopping season.

Today, the paid advertising budget has been slashed and content development is the site's key strategy. The company does well for the long tail search term miniature guitar replica, typically landing near the top of the first page of Google results.

The musical eras section is popular with visitors and draws organic traffic. Beyond articles, Zweigel says the site's photos have drawn a surprisingly large amount of visitors. (To leverage the value of images each one must have an individual ALT tag. (See Tip #4 above .) About 15 percent of site traffic comes through Google Images.

The company also pays close attention to keywords in its page titles and has been careful to produce a unique title for every product sold. (See Tip #6 above .) Creating unique titles for each page takes time, but the payoff is enormous.

Zweigel says the paid search budget will probably increase at holiday time again, but for now the emphasis is on growing content and keeping those title elements populated.

How'd they do it? Content

Skin Natural SEO Case Study

[Skin MD Natural](#) developed a new kind of skin lotion that mimics the natural protective layer people have on their skin. While the company sells some product through its site, the real challenge was to get accepted by major distributors like Rite Aide and Walgreen's.

For distributors to stock the product, Skin MD Natural had to demonstrate demand. The idea was to get consumers walking into retailers and asking for it. But because the product worked so differently from standard lotions, the company had to build an awareness campaign about what it was and just why it was so unique. To emphasize the differentiation, Skin MD landed upon the term shielding lotion.

“Of course, no one had ever heard of a shielding lotion,” said Sally Falkow, president of SEO optimization firm [Expansion Plus](#). “We’d be trying to get people to find or look for something they didn’t even know existed.”

What Expansion Plus did was start by optimizing the site for keywords that people would search—terms like dry skin, cracked skin, eczema treatment, and so on. The strategy was to write educational materials addressing these issues and then educate readers on the whole idea of a shielding lotion.

That strategy including massive amounts of non-promotional content posted to the company’s Web site as well as RSS feeds—a content syndication tool that pushes content out to the search engines and blog aggregators.

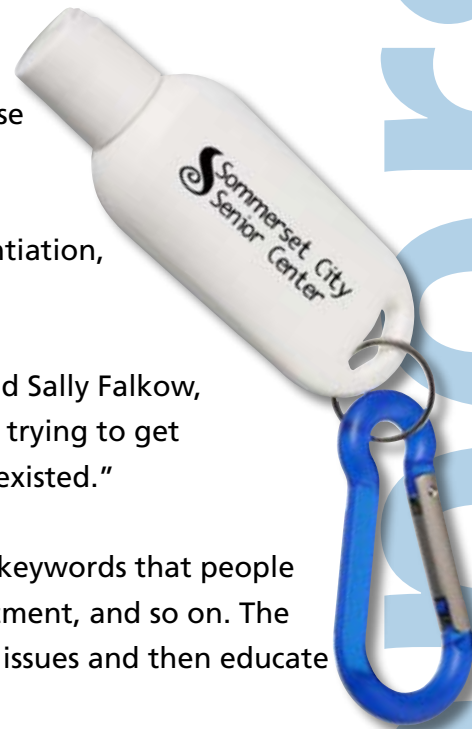
In the beginning the company was publishing at least one new article a week. Today, they publish daily skin care tips and have hit the holy grail of SEO—not only are they getting page one hits, they’re getting it with a very general, very competitive search term: skin care.

Falkow emphasizes that the quality of content was crucial. “The whole thing in an SEO strategy is the quality of the content. No one is going to come back if you write boring content.”

The information articles certainly aren’t overly promotional either. For example, in one December piece about skin care gifts you can make at home, the product isn’t mentioned once. Three quarters of the way through, however, the writer works in a mention about shielding lotions.

“I’ve read a lot of things that people write about article marketing, and I’ve seen some people say, ‘Just write 100 articles, it doesn’t matter what’s in it,’” said Falkow. “I disagree. I don’t think any blogger would use these if they were promotional.”

Two years after launching its SEO campaign, Skin MD Natural is consistently appearing on page one search results for terms like dry skin, dry skin treatment and skin care treatment.



You can do it too

Now that you have some starting questions to ask your Web developer about site architecture and coding, research your keywords and get started. If your Web company isn't up to speed on SEO, don't despair. Seek outside support or use this Blue Paper to develop your own action list. You'll probably be able to start optimizing with only a few tweaks and improvements to your current site.

Whatever you do, make a commitment. Just like any marketing campaign, SEO takes ongoing attention and maintenance.



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