

Optimizing Your Web Site: Strategies for Online Success

What is search engine optimization (SEO)?

The art of creating a new – or altering an existing – Web site so that it ranks well in organic (unpaid) search engine results when someone searches for a specific phrase related to the site.

For example, if you are a PR professional in Montreal, your keyword phrases might be "public relations consultant Montreal" or "PR agency in Montreal"

But there could be many others – we'll talk about keyword research a little later.

The three key elements of search engine optimization are: **content, design, and linking strategies.**

Optimized content incorporates:

- Keyword and competitive analysis
- Natural-sounding copy that incorporates one or two keyword phrases per page
- Content that appeals to two markets – your prospective customer and the search engines
- The creation of optimized tags, then supplied to the designer to integrate

Optimized design encompasses:

- Intelligent, intuitive site architecture
- Quality, streamlined coding
- Integration of optimized tags such as headings, meta description and browser titles
- Avoiding search-engine blocking techniques like Flash, frames, important text within graphics, URL masking, Javascript-only navigation

Linking strategies include:

- Onsite linking – text-based navigation, site maps and anchor text (text that is a clickable link)
- Incoming links from relevant sites
- An ongoing linking campaign from quality directories, alliances, professional organizations, quality content (sometimes known as "link bait"), optimized press releases & social media sites.

What separates ordinary SEO from GREAT SEO?

While SEO touches on the factors mentioned above (design, content, linking strategies), GREAT SEO uses a "holistic" approach that not only targets all three elements but considers the project as a whole, and how all three aspects interact together. GREAT SEO acts as an advocate for the site user, gearing everything toward the ultimate goal of providing value to the site visitor: your prospective client.

What does all this mean to you?

Let's look at each section of SEO and apply it to **your** business.

OPTIMIZED CONTENT

How do you find your keywords?

Think like a potential client! Use your services as a basis. For example, "PR agency in Montreal" might be a general keyword phrase, but don't forget specific tasks like "media training in Montreal" or niche markets like "public relations for the fashion industry" Concentrate on no more than 2-3 related keyword phrases per page.

Tips

- "Long-tail" keywords (multi-word, very targeted phrases) have better conversion rates.
- Start by "bucketizing" your potential keyword phrases.
- Use multiple resources to validate – your own knowledge, keyword tools, customer input, competitors' sites, etc.
- Use keyword tools and customer input for content inspiration.

Where do I put my keywords?

Make sure your keyword phrases can be found throughout the body of your copy, as well as in your headings (H1 tags) and page titles. Pages should be at least 225 words. As well, don't forget your alt tags and meta description. (Covered in the next section.)

Keyword Density

You'll often hear people talk about various percentages for keyword density. It's a myth. While your keywords **MUST** be on the site, there is no proven density. Besides, search engines are very advanced and consider "term weights." If you're really interested, there's some rather dry reading filled with equations here: <http://www2.sims.berkeley.edu/courses/is202/f98/Lecture17/sld001.htm>

Bottom line: Keep your keywords in mind, and write naturally for people. This includes keyword stemming. (Fish, fishing, fished)

OPTIMIZED DESIGN

Intuitive Design (People Friendly, Search-Engine Friendly)

How can people get to what they are looking for quickly and easily? Talk to your designer and get ideas on how to organize your site in a way that makes sense for the services you offer. For example, instead of lumping all of your services together as a list, you might want to divide them into separate pages to take advantage of natural keyword groups as well as to provide decision-making information to potential clients.

Coding

Keep the code “underneath the hood” of the site as clean as possible. This means using external CSS and JavaScript as much as you can, and validating code. Try to keep form/design and content separate.

Digital Assets & File Names

Images, PDF files, videos should all be quick to load. This makes for a better user experience, as no one likes waiting for a page to fully open/load. Slow-loading pages lead to “bounces,” when a site visitor leaves after just a few seconds.

As well, where possible assign short description file names, ideally with a keyword. But do not “keyword stuff.” If you have an image of “blue widgets” your file name might be “blue-widgets.jpg” **Tip:** Keep it “lightweight” (Not: “three-blue-widgets-on-a-white-background-for-sale-by-the-widget-factory.jpg”) The same goes for videos/podcasts – optimize the title and use accurate descriptions/show notes. As well, for file names use descriptive, meaningful wording, preferably with a keyword or two. For example, if you offer business coaching services, instead of naming the file “services” (www.yourcompany.com/services) name the page file “business-coaching.”

Tags, Titles & Attributes

Be sure that each page has a unique optimized title, meta description and alt tags for images. Alt attributes are good for people who may have images turned off due to accessibility issues or who are using a PDA. Almost every single image (except for spacer images, bullet point images, etc.) on every single page of your site should have a text equivalent "alt text", specified in the alt attribute of the tag. Alt attributes are good for people who may have images turned off due to accessibility issues or be using a mobile device. As the Googlebot cannot “see” images, it relies on alt attributes. Alt tags help your images appear in Google’s image search. Keep it short and sweet.

Testing

Before launching, test your site in multiple platforms (Mac, PC, possibly Linux), browsers (Firefox, Explorer, Safari, Chrome, possibly mobile browsers, etc.), and at multiple monitor resolutions. Make sure it looks acceptable in all common configurations. Run a dead-link check to make sure all links are working, and do dead-link checks on a regular basis if your site content changes frequently.

LINKING STRATEGIES

Internal Linking

Use text-based links based on your keywords. If you have decided that "corporate video production" is one of your keyword phrases, try to incorporate text-based links from your homepage or services to a page that discusses this service. Instead of having "[Learn more.](#)" or "[Click here.](#)" as the hyperlink, use your keyword phrase as the text-based link. For example, "[Learn more about our corporate video production services.](#)"

Once your site is built – it's not over yet!

Develop quality incoming links. How?

- Links from professional and industry associations to your site
- Links from complementary services (i.e. your strategic alliances, suppliers etc.)
- Links from directories, including local, provincial, national and international
- Links from articles or online press releases
- Start a blog (and make it easy to tag & share), podcast, videos or other compelling content ("link bait")
- Links from social media sites (StumbleUpon, Digg, LinkedIn)
- Leave intelligent, relevant comments on other blogs or message boards, with a link to your site in your signature line (if it is just an advertisement – your comments will be deleted!)

Tip: Is your LinkedIn profile "optimized"? Instead of filing your links under the default "My Blog" or "My Company", you can file them under "Other." Other means anchor text. Type in the name of your company or blog and – poof – that's what will appear.

Blogs Vs. Traditional Websites

Blogs **are** websites, but they are more dynamic in that they allow people to update the site easily without damaging the design. For non-techies who are afraid of programs like Dreamweaver, a blog is an excellent option. There seems to be a myth that blogs are better for search engines. Not quite. Blogs are simply the tool – the fresh content is what the search engines like.

Blogs also allow you to “ping” search engines, such as Google, Technorati and more. Pingomatic.com is a popular pinging service.

Tips:

- Match your blog to the look & feel of your business collaterals. In short, invest in a customized look.
- Ensure your blog is readable & shareable – this means an RSS feed as well as social networking tools.
- Avoid widget overload. Widgets are great and can add value, but not at the expense of a slow load time.
- Use your own domain name. Matt Cutts (Google Guru) suggests **not** putting your blog at the root domain, as people will often link to your homepage as well as your blog, so by having it as a subdomain or subdirectory it could be advantageous.

DEADLY WEB SITE SINS THAT CAN KILL YOUR BUSINESS

1. Image-only splash or Flash homepages
2. Investing only in paid advertising and not optimization
3. Spider-inhibiting design (i.e. frames)
4. No, or hard-to-find contact information
5. Outdated information/old obsolete links
6. Underlining things that aren't links (or conversely not highlighting links)
7. Poor overall look
8. Spelling or grammatical errors
9. Confusing navigation
10. Too many large graphics, videos, or other heavy files on one page

SEO MYTHBUSTERS

Myth #1 = Build it and they will come.

You can create a gorgeous-looking site, but unless it is optimized it is the equivalent of having a really great sign for your company that you keep in your basement.

Myth #2 = An SEO company can guarantee a #1 position on Google (MSN, Yahoo, etc.) for a keyword phrase.

No credible SEO/design company will guarantee a specific ranking on any search engine. Just as a stockbroker cannot predict a specific return on investment, a good SEO/design company can demonstrate past results but not guarantee future results. Usually companies that make guarantees employ "black hat" methods, disreputable techniques that can get your site blacklisted.

Myth #3 = Once my site is #1 for a specific phrase, I'll always be #1.

Permanent rankings simply don't happen – new competitors enter the market, existing ones optimize their site, search engine algorithms change on a regular basis, etc., etc. A serious business must monitor their site at least quarterly, if not monthly.

Myth #4 = All I need to do is have tons of incoming links and my site will be popular.

Linking needs to be relevant. Best practices include linking to industry-related sites, or industry resources: articles, statistics, associations, etc. Quality is always better than quantity. Besides: why would a Montreal professional organizer link to a lobster wholesaler in Maine? Bottom line = If it doesn't make sense, don't do it.

Myth #5 = I have to pay someone to submit my site to search engines. (Or: I know a company/software program that will automatically submit my site to thousands of search engines and directories.)

False, false, false. While you might want to pay for an expert (designer, optimizer or webmaster, etc.) to spend time submitting your site to various online directories, and creating targeted industry links, search engines will find your site and crawl it for free. They just have to know where to find the site. Many search engines block automated submission tools. Old fashioned hand submission, although time-consuming is always the best method. As well, you have control over where your site is listed. Many submission companies that boast thousands of submissions will submit your site to FFA (Free-For-All) link farms.

Myth #6 = If I list all my keywords in my "meta description" and "meta keywords" tags, my site will increase its ranking.

If only it were that easy, we'd all be doing it!! Meta tags are a very small part of any search engine's algorithm, and because they were so abused in the '90s, most search engines completely ignore them. Only a combination of quality, optimized design, keyword-rich content – that sounds natural and does not cross over the line into spam – and internal and external linking strategies will help a site improve its search engine position.

Myth #7 = Optimized sites cost too much. I can't afford it.

While it is true that there are no free lunches and you do get what you pay for, a quality, optimized site isn't that much more than any other site. In fact, a good designer and online marketer/content writer (that would be us, folks!) can probably save you money in the long run, by addressing issues like site usability, "growable" architecture, target and niche markets, how to increase the ROI of a page and other factors that should be considered when designing a site.

Myth #8 = I need a cool intro page (with Flash is even better!).

Consistently, this is one of the biggest design and SEO mistakes that a company can make. If you have to include something that says "Skip Intro", common sense should kick in. Studies show that people hate to sit through something that separates them from the information they are trying to access. People are busy and want to find what they are looking for quickly: treat your prospective customers with respect, and allow them to do just that!

Myth #9 = I'm in the X business (travel, insurance, consulting) so my keyword is X.

In almost every situation the most general keyword is not one that the online searcher is looking for. Find your niche by thinking like a potential client. Instead of "travel" a potential client may look for "weekend getaways", "Cuba vacation" or "discount travel packages."

Myth #10 = My site will launch and I'll see results immediately.

For new sites, while you will see results on some search engines relatively quickly (a month or two), other search engines can take six to nine months before you see anything. Particularly on Google, where new sites have a dampening filter applied to them; this "aging delay" affects **all** new sites. Sites that have been on the 'net longer are seen as more important, or having more value. Also, Google as well as other search engines find your site by crawling to it from other links (incoming links), and the directories where your site has been listed can take up to several months to update their indices.

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