

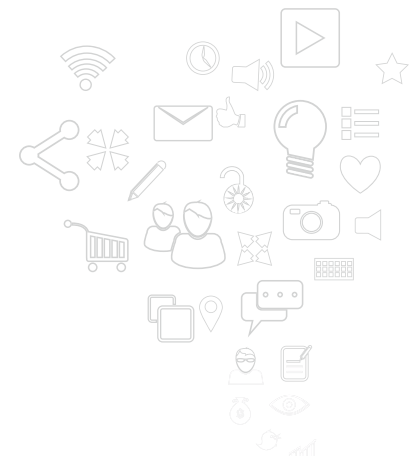


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Have you ever found yourself in a search engine quagmire? You know, when you type in some keywords for a “simple” search and Google spits out 10 million results and, after an hour of scrolling and clicking, you still can’t find exactly what you’re looking for? It can make you crazy. You have three options: start your search over with new keywords, enlist the aid of a teenager to navigate, or take a break and watch funny cat videos (which, by the way, you have 119,000,000 results from which to choose!).

The Internet can work wonders: If you are looking for guidance on a home improvement project, there is a YouTube video for every conceivable “how to.” Need a last-minute recipe or want to find a unique gift item? Presto, with a few clicks results appear on your screen. Of course, it can also be frustrating. **The key to using the Internet as a business tool is to reduce that frustration and connect with customers in the easiest, most direct way possible.** In other words, don’t let potential leads get lost on their way to your website!

On average, we conduct 12 billion searches per month on the web in the United States. (Comscore, July 2014)





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Start Your Engines

SEO (search engine optimization) is, perhaps, the fastest growing marketing tool available today. Although it sounds complex, it's basically the art of making your website appear in Google search results for potential customers—hopefully at or near the top of the list. However, before we delve into optimization, it might be helpful to have a basic understanding of how search engines work. Even if you're not a techie person, stay with us here—we promise to keep it short and simple.



First, search engines have two major functions: (1) crawling and building an index and (2) providing search users with a ranked list of the most relevant websites or pages. Like something out of a sci-fi movie, automated robots “crawl” through billions of documents, pages, files, and videos on the web, using links (interconnected paths) along the way. (Note: This can be a creepy visual when you consider these robots are called “spiders.”) The crawlers then store selected information in huge databases and later recall that information for a search query in a matter of seconds. It's actually pretty amazing, when you think about it.

Basically, search engines are “answer machines.” When you perform an online search, you're asking some type of question. The search engine determines which results are relevant and useful to your question and then ranks those results

according to the popularity of the websites offering the information. So, how do search engines determine relevance and popularity? They assume the most valuable information comes from the most widely used or popular site, page, or document using complicated mathematical equations or algorithms. These algorithms are made up of hundreds of variables referred to as “ranking factors.”

What this all boils down to for marketers is creating websites and pages that achieve high rankings and lots of traffic (without getting freaked out by complicated math and crawling spiders!). Why is this important? Because SEO connects your company with people who are looking for a specific solution, and if your company can provide that solution, you are one step closer to a sale. In fact, 57.4% of B2B companies say SEO has the biggest impact on their lead generation goals.¹ What's more, according to *Search Engine Journal*, SEO leads have a 14.6% close rate, while outbound leads (such as direct mail or print advertising) have a 1.7% close rate.

Why SEO Is Important

- *The percentage of Internet users who use search engines on a typical day has been steadily rising from about one-third of all users in 2002 to a new high of 59% of all adult Internet users.*²
- *In a Burke report, 76% of respondents used search engines to find local business information.*²
- *A #1 position in Google's search results receives 18.2% of all click-through traffic, while the second position receives 10.1%, the third 7.2%, and the fourth 4.8%.*²
- *54% more leads are generated by inbound tactics, such as SEO, than traditional paid marketing.*³

SEO 101

Remember that quagmire? Well, one of the most important elements of SEO is having empathy for the people searching for the products, service, or information that your company provides. With that in mind, it's helpful to start the process by thinking about what your target market is looking for and build a strategy to deliver those results. For instance, let's say your company sells parts for vintage vehicles. Now, put yourself in a searcher's shoes. If someone wants to find a carburetor for a 1964 Ford Mustang and they type a query into a search box, will they easily find your site? If they do find your site, will they be happy with the results?

That's where SEO comes in. The concept can seem a bit mysterious, but thankfully a whole community of experts has cropped up—people who have analyzed, tested, and performed experiments in order to understand how to optimize search engines. While there are now volumes being written on the subject, we'll try to summarize some of the most important findings, starting with a few vocabulary words that are basic to understanding SEO:

- **Keywords**, or search terms, are the words typed into search engines.
- **Inbound links**—links from other websites that point or direct people to your website.
- **Page rank**—When Google finds pages that match your search, it ranks each one based on trust. The most trusted result shows up at the top of the search results.
- **Meta page title**—This is simply a short description of what your web page is about. There is a different meta page title for every page on your website. Programmers who design websites place these titles in a special place in your website code. They are important because search engines use meta page titles as a ranking factor.
- **URL**, or uniform resource locator, is the same thing as a domain name or web address, such as <http://www.mybusiness.com>.



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Okay, let's review: A user types in a query and Google looks through the Internet for meta titles that contain the keywords in the search. Once found, it ranks each page based on trust, with the most trusted results showing up at the top. So, obviously, an important element is deciding on the right keywords to use. It's important to research keywords and keep them as specific to your company as possible. Again, put yourself in a searcher's shoes—what words would they most likely use? Another approach is developing quality content that incorporates keywords that may be broadly used although they didn't occur to you initially.

When it comes to keywords, you can also do a little competitive digging. Check out the keywords being used by competitors that rank highly. What types of content are they using on their pages? Finally, there is a free tool available from Google called AdWords Keyword Planner that shows how many people are searching for the keywords you enter, along with a list of related terms and their search results.

Free is nice, but spending some money on a pay-per-click campaign can provide a true understanding of what keywords perform best and the effect this can have. Using a Google AdWords campaign, you pay for your website to show up above the regular (organic) search results, in the shaded "Sponsored Results" area. While these results are generally less trusted, there are some definite advantages, such as learning which keywords produce the best results for you. This type of campaign can also be useful for testing out new product niches by giving you instant results. However, once you gather this information, it's best to stop using a paid campaign and concentrate on optimizing results organically.

The next important element in SEO is effective meta page titles. A good meta page title should include all your most effective keywords and be both user and search-engine friendly—succinct and natural. (Note: The meta page title is what appears as the blue underlined heading in



the search results.) It used to be common for webmasters to create long meta page titles consisting of every possible keyword and combination, such as:

carl's classic cars, vintage car parts, new and used auto parts, parts for vintage vehicles, large selection of hard-to-find auto parts, antique auto parts dealer

These days, long "unfriendly" meta page titles are typically considered spam by search engines and ranked at the bottom of the list. Since Google can read words in any order as long as they are written one time, it would be better to condense this meta title to:

Carl's Classic Cars - Large selection of vintage auto parts

This sounds more natural and includes the company name along with the keywords "classic cars," "vintage," and "auto parts." Keep in mind that the description below the search results can elaborate on your offerings.

Of course, all the mechanics of your website, including headers, titles, descriptions, internal links, and load times, can impact SEO results. For instance, more internal links to a page on your site may help to notify search engines that the content is valuable. This is an area where it may be extremely helpful to get advice from an SEO specialist.

After Google locates every site whose meta page title contains the words in your search, it checks to see how many trustworthy links each page has. The pages with the most trustworthy links receive top billing, so to speak. Links are anything on a website that directs you to another web page, allowing people to discover related content quickly. With Google, links from popular websites equal more trust. So, a link to a respected news source, university, or industry expert will be more valuable than a link to an

unknown blog or less popular site, or worse, a paid link. This means, of course, that you need to build links, organically through quality content, along with some scouting and recruiting. According to Evan Bailyn, author of *SEO Made Easy*, once "you get the link component and the meta title component right, you've got 85% of the job done right there."

The last element to consider is the URL, which may be the simplest. The keyword you would like *each page* of your website to rank for should be in the URL or address of that particular page. Every keyword should have its own landing page with the keyword somewhere in the URL. When developing a URL, it's again helpful to consider the user—you should be able to easily and accurately assess the content of a page based on the URL. Also, keeping it short makes it easier to cut and paste for sharing. Using our vintage auto parts dealer as an example, a URL that reads: http://carls_classic_cars.com/new-used-vintage_parts/64carburetor=?0sort is not ideal. First off, not all web applications accurately read separations, such as underscores, and symbols. This gobbledygook approach (sometimes called dynamic URLs because they track user activity) is not as reader-friendly and effective as a simple, descriptive URL, such as: <http://carlscars.com/vintage-auto-parts/carburetors>

Once you've accomplished these SEO tasks, be patient. It takes time for Google to trust a new website. In fact, it intentionally imposes a ranking delay in its battle against spam. Experts suggest it takes 6 to 12 months to start generating significant traffic.



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Putting It Together with Content

There is one essential ingredient that brings all of these SEO techniques together—quality content. After all, content is what searching is all about! Search engines want people to be able to locate informative, original content easily and find the answers to their questions. Therefore, if your company routinely provides quality content that addresses search queries, then your site/pages will rank highly. When developing content, here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Keep your content original, as search engines penalize sites that reuse content.
- Enhance content with images or video, as enriched content boosts search results. As an added bonus, content containing images is twice as likely to be shared as text only.
- Create comprehensive text that contains relevant keywords and concepts that go together naturally. Semantically comprehensive text boosts search results—meaning search engines “understand” words that should be related to each other in searches.
- More is more. If you consider a search engine helping searchers locate relevant text, it makes sense that longer, more in-depth text would rank higher in search results. A good strategy is to use both longer- and shorter-form content.
- Make it easy to read. Content that scores as easier to read also ranks higher in search results. By developing clear, direct content that reads easily, you may improve both search results and visitor engagement.
- Attract links through content. Quality content is valuable in establishing links with other sites. Search engines use the number and validity of links as indicators of the quality of your content. Therefore, an initiative to actively recruit links for your site should be part of your SEO strategy.

Beware of Penguins and Pandas

Over the years, Google has waged an ongoing battle with spammers, while trying to improve its search results by introducing new algorithms. In 2009, for instance, Google installed a link filter that penalizes sites with too many same-word keyword text links pointing to them. Then, in 2011, Google Panda was released, which changed its search results ranking algorithm. The change is meant to lower the rank of “low-quality sites,” sometimes referred to as “thin sites,” and return higher-quality sites near the top of the search results. (It was named after an engineer, Navneet Panda, who developed the technology.) Most recently, they introduced Penguin; not to be confused with Batman’s nemesis, this “Penguin” filters out unnatural links, enabling Google to tell a natural link from a negotiated link. Therefore, to be successful, websites must use quality content to which other sites want to link.



There are a number of guides you can use to avoid the wrath of these normally cute and cuddly critters (i.e., having your site penalized), but basically producing quality content is the key. What is quality content? Google’s Content-Quality Panda Guide defines it as “clear, simple and easy to understand. It offers elements that educate, inform, enlighten, change impressions, encourage trial behavior and inspire the readers to take useful action.” Other useful tips from the Panda Guide include:

- Use content that keeps visitors on your page. Google can study the bounce rates from search pages then back to search results.

- Use enticing headlines and subheads, good descriptions of benefits and features, along with customer testimonials. “Learn more” links appeal to more than 96% of readers. In other words, use content that sells without explicitly selling.
- Inspire repeat visits. By solving problems and improving readers’ lives, you’ll earn trust and bring them back. Google tracks repeat searches.
- Create natural links. Paid links are a definite “no-no,” along with articles that are obviously just marketing and low-quality links.
- Achieve authority status.
- Use keywords wisely. Simply stuffing content with the repetitive use of keywords will get you penalized.
- Make your content readable. Google uses linguistic tools to evaluate the readability of content.
- Use social media when it makes sense—in some cases, “likes” are the new links.
- Speak the language of your target audience. You’ll connect more effectively with your readers if your language is in tune with your industry and location. Include industry-specific jargon, the names of industry leaders, etc.
- Add words to your images. Google can read words more precisely than images. So, while videos and photos can enhance your site, be sure to transcribe your video soundtracks and describe photos with keywords.

So, there you have it, a crash course in SEO. While this information can help guide you in the right direction, there is obviously much more to learn. To complicate matters, you’ll find a lot of conflicting information on the subject, which can be confusing. If you don’t have an SEO specialist on staff (or your eyes glaze over just thinking about this stuff), we highly recommend working with a reputable agency. It’s also helpful to systematically try some SEO strategies and see what works. It’s important to remember that



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you don't have to be a tech guru to optimize search engines and attract customers. As SEO expert and author Evan Baily writes, "Your job as an optimizer is to stimulate true organic behavior... (it's) about creating content that people genuinely want to share... The only real commonality in all high-ranking sites is that they have links from many different websites and do not violate any of Google's rules." In other words, your elementary teachers' admonition to study hard and follow the rules is still the best advice.

Google Webmaster Guidelines to Improve Rankings

- Make pages primarily for users, not search engines.
- Make a site with a clear hierarchy and text links. Every page should be reachable from at least one static text link.
- Create a useful, information-rich site, and write pages that clearly and accurately describe your content. Make sure your <title> elements and ALT attributes are descriptive and accurate.
- Use keywords to create descriptive human-friendly URLs.



¹ MDG Advertising, 2013.

² As compiled and published in *The Beginner's Guide to SEO*, Moz, 2015

³ "State of Inbound Marketing," Hubspot, 2012

Other Sources:

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