

Guide to SEO

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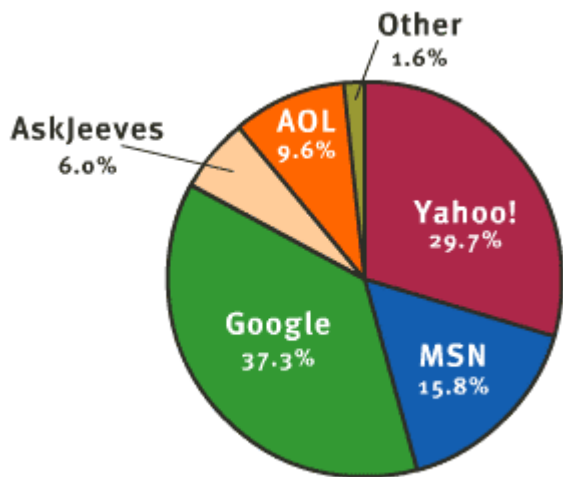
What is SEO?

SEO is the active practice of optimizing a web site by improving internal and external aspects in order to increase the traffic the site receives from search engines. Firms that practice SEO can vary; some have a highly specialized focus while others take a more broad and general approach. Optimizing a web site for search engines can require looking at so many unique elements that many practitioners of SEO (SEOs) consider themselves to be in the broad field of website optimization (since so many of those elements intertwine).

This guide is designed to describe all areas of SEO - from discovery of the terms and phrases that will generate traffic, to making a site search engine friendly to building the links and marketing the unique value of the site/organization's offerings.

Why does my company/organization/website need SEO?

The majority of web traffic is driven by the major commercial search engines - Yahoo!, MSN, Google & AskJeeves (although AOL gets nearly 10% of searches, their engine is powered by Google's results). If your site cannot be found by search engines or your content cannot be put into their databases, you miss out on the incredible opportunities available to websites provided via search - people who want what you have visiting your site. Whether your site provides content, services, products or information, search engines are a primary method of navigation for almost all Internet users.



*SOURCE - ComScore Media Metrix, Oct. 3, 2005

Search queries, the words that users type into the search box which contain terms and phrases best suited to your site carry extraordinary value. Experience has shown that search engine traffic can make (or break) an organization's success. Targeted visitors to a website can provide publicity, revenue and exposure like no other. Investing in SEO, whether through time or finances, can have an exceptional rate of return.

Why can't the search engines figure out my site without SEO help?

Search engines are always working towards improving their technology to crawl the web more deeply and return increasingly relevant results to users. However, there is and will always be a limit to how search engines can operate. Whereas the right moves can net you thousands of visitors and attention, the wrong moves can hide or bury your site deep in the search results where visibility is minimal. In addition to making content available to search engines, SEO can also help boost rankings, so that content that has been found will be placed where searchers will more readily see it. The online environment is becoming increasingly competitive and those companies who perform SEO will have a decided advantage in visitors and customers.

How Search Engines Operate

Search engines have a short list of critical operations that allows them to provide relevant web results when searchers use their system to find information.

1. Crawling the Web

Search engines run automated programs, called "bots" or "spiders" that use the hyperlink structure of the web to "crawl" the pages and documents that make up the World Wide Web. Estimates are that of the approximately 20 billion existing pages, search engines have crawled between 8 and 10 billion.

2. Indexing Documents

Once a page has been crawled, its contents can be "indexed" - stored in a giant database of documents that makes up a search engine's "index". This index needs to be tightly managed, so requests that search and sort billions of documents can be completed in fractions of a second.

3. Processing Queries

When a request for information comes into the search engine (hundreds of millions do each day), the engine retrieves from its index, all the document that match the query. A match is determined if the terms or phrase is found on the page in the manner specified by the user. For example, a search for [car and driver magazine](#) at Google returns 8.25 million results, but a search for the same phrase in quotes ("[car and driver magazine](#)") returns only 166 thousand results. In the first system, commonly called "Findall" mode, Google returned all documents which had the terms "car" "driver" and "magazine" (they ignore the term "and" because it's not useful to narrowing the results), while in the second search, only those pages with the exact phrase "car and driver magazine" were returned. Other advanced operators can change which results a search engine will consider a match for a given query.

4. Ranking Results

Once the search engine has determined which results are a match for the query, the engine's algorithm (a mathematical equation commonly used for sorting) runs calculations on each of the results to determine which is most relevant to the given query. They sort these on the results pages in order from most relevant to least so that users can make a choice about which to select.

Although a search engine's operations are not particularly lengthy, systems like Google, Yahoo!, AskJeeves and MSN are among the most complex, processing-intensive computers in the world, managing millions of calculations each second and funneling demands for information to an enormous group of users.

Speed Bumps & Walls

Certain types of navigation may hinder or entirely prevent search engines from reaching your website's content. As search engine spiders crawl the web, they rely on the architecture of hyperlinks to find new documents and revisit those that may have changed. In the analogy of speed bumps and walls, complex links and deep site structures with little unique content may serve as "bumps." Data that cannot be accessed by spiderable links qualify as "walls."

The key to ensuring that a site's contents are fully crawlable is to provide direct, HTML links to to each page you want the search engine spiders to index. Remember that if a page cannot be accessed from the home page (where most spiders are likely to start their crawl) it is likely that it will not be indexed by the search engines. A sitemap can be of tremendous help for this purpose.

Measuring Relevance and Popularity

Modern commercial search engines rely on the science of information retrieval (IR). That science has existed since the middle of the 20th century, when retrieval systems powered computers in libraries, research facilities and government labs. Early in the development of search systems, IR scientists realized that two critical components made up the majority of search functionality:

Relevance - the degree to which the content of the documents returned in a search matched the user's query intention and terms. The relevance of a document increases if the terms or phrase queried by the user occurs multiple times and shows up in the title of the work or in important headlines or subheaders.

Popularity - the relative importance, measured via citation (the act of one work referencing another, as often occurs in academic and business documents) of a given document that matches the user's query. The popularity of a given document increases with every other document that references it.

These two items were translated to web search 40 years later and manifest themselves in the form of document analysis and link analysis.

In document analysis, search engines look at whether the search terms are found in important areas of the document - the title, the meta data, the heading tags and the body of text content. They also attempt to automatically measure the quality of the document (through complex systems beyond the scope of this guide).

In link analysis, search engines measure not only who is linking to a site or page, but what they are saying about that page/site. They also have a good grasp on who is affiliated with whom (through historical link data, the site's registration records and other sources), who is worthy of being trusted (links from .edu and .gov pages are generally more valuable for this reason) and contextual data about the site the page is hosted on (who links to that site, what they say about the site, etc.).

Link and document analysis combine and overlap hundreds of factors that can be individually measured and filtered through the search engine algorithms (the set of instructions that tell the engines what importance to assign to each factor). The algorithm then determines scoring for the documents and (ideally) lists results in decreasing order of importance (rankings).

Information Search Engines can Trust

As search engines index the web's link structure and page contents, they find two distinct kinds of information about a given site or page - attributes of the page/site itself and 'descriptives' about that site/page from other pages. Since the web is such a commercial place, with so many parties interested in ranking well for particular searches, the engines have learned that they cannot always rely on websites to be honest about their importance. Thus, the days when artificially stuffed meta tags and keyword rich pages dominated search results (pre-1998) have vanished and given way to search engines that measure trust via links and content.

The theory goes that if hundreds or thousands of other websites link to you, your site must be popular, and thus, have value. If those links come from very popular and important (and thus, trustworthy) websites, their power is multiplied to even greater degrees. Links from sites like NYTimes.com, Yale.edu, Whitehouse.gov and others carry with them inherent trust that search engines then use to boost your ranking position. If, on the other hand, the links that point to you are from low-quality, interlinked sites or automated garbage domains (aka link farms), search engines have systems in place to discount the value of those links.

The most well-known system for ranking sites based on link data is the simplistic formula developed by Google's founders - PageRank. PageRank, which relies on log-based calculations, is [described](#) by Google in their technology section:

PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important."

PageRank is derived (roughly speaking), by amalgamating all the links that point to a particular page, adding the value of the PageRank that they pass (based on their own PageRank) and applying calculations in the formula.

PageRank, in essence, measures the brute link force of a site based on every other link that points to it without significant regard for quality, relevance or trust. Hence, in the modern era of SEO, the PageRank measurement in Google's toolbar, directory or through sites that query the service is of limited value. Pages with PR8 can be found ranked 20-30 positions below pages with a PR3 or PR4. In addition, the toolbar numbers are updated only every 3-6 months by Google, making the values even less useful. Rather than focusing on PageRank, it's important to think holistically about a link's worth.

Here's a small list of the most important factors search engines look at when attempting to value a link:

- **The Anchor Text of Link** - Anchor text describes the visible characters and words that hyperlink to another document or location on the web.

- **Global Popularity of the Site** - More popular sites, as denoted by the number and power of the links pointing to them, provide more powerful links. Thus, while a link from Crown Resorts may be a valuable vote for a site, a link from bbc.co.uk or cnn.com carries far more weight. This is one area where PageRank (assuming it was accurate), could be a good measure, as it's designed to calculate global popularity.
- **Popularity of Site in Relevant Communities** - In the example above, the weight or power of a site's vote is based on its raw popularity across the web. As search engines became more sophisticated and granular in their approach to link data, they acknowledged the existence of "topical communities"; sites on the same subject that often interlink with one another, referencing documents and providing unique data on a particular topic. Sites in these communities provide more value when they link to a site/page on a relevant subject rather than a site that is largely irrelevant to their topic.
- **Text Directly Surrounding the Link** - Search engines have been noted to weight the text directly surrounding a link with greater importance and relevance than the other text on the page. Thus, a link from inside an on-topic paragraph may carry greater weight than a link in the sidebar or footer.
- **Subject Matter of the Linking Page** - The topical relationship between the subject of a given page and the sites/pages linked to on it may also factor into the value a search engine assigns to that link. Thus, it will be more valuable to have links from pages that are related to the site/pages subject matter than those that have little to do with the topic.

These are only a few of the many factors search engines measure and weight when evaluating links.

Link metrics are in place so that search engines can find information to trust. In the academic world greater citation meant greater importance, but in a commercial environment, manipulation and conflicting interests interfere with the purity of citation-based measurements. Thus, on the modern WWW, the source, style and context of those citations is vital to ensuring high quality results.

Keywords and Queries

Search engines rely on the terms queried by users to determine which results to put through their algorithms, order and return to the user. But, rather than simply recognizing and retrieving exact matches for query terms, search engines use their knowledge of semantics (the science of language) to construct intelligent matching for queries. An example might be a search for *loan providers* that also returned results that did not contain that specific phrase, but instead had the term *lenders*.

The engines collect data based on the frequency of use of terms and the co-occurrence of words and phrases throughout the web. If certain terms or phrases are often found together on pages or sites, search engines can construct intelligent theories about their relationships. Mining semantic data through the incredible corpus that is the Internet has given search engines some of the most accurate data about word ontologies and the connections between words ever assembled artificially. This immense knowledge of language and its usage gives them the ability to determine which pages in a site are topically related, what the topic of a page or site is, how the link structure of the web divides into topical communities and much, much more.

Search engines' growing artificial intelligence on the subject of language means that queries will increasingly return more intelligent, evolved results. This heavy investment in the field of natural language processing (NLP) will help to achieve greater understanding of the meaning and intent behind their users' queries. Over the long term, users can expect the results of this work to produce increased relevancy in the SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages) and more accurate guesses from the engines as to the intent of a user's queries.

Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff

In the classic world of Information Retrieval, when no commercial interests existed in the databases, very simplistic algorithms could be used to return high quality results. On the world wide web, however, the opposite is true. Commercial interests in the SERPs are a constant issue for modern search engines. With every new focus on quality

control and growth in relevance metrics, there are thousands of individuals (many in the field of SEO) dedicated to manipulating these metrics in order to control the SERPs, typically by aiming to list their sites/pages first.

The worst kind of results are what the industry refers to as "search spam" - pages and sites with little real value that contain primarily re-directs to other pages, lists of links, scraped (copied) content, etc. These pages are so irrelevant and useless that search engines are highly focused on removing them from the index. Naturally, the monetary incentives are similar to email spam - although few visit and fewer click on the links (which are what provide the spam publisher with revenue), the sheer quantity is the decisive factor in producing income.

Other "spam" results range from sites that are of low quality or affiliate status that search engines would prefer not to list, to high quality sites and businesses that are using the link structure of the web to manipulate the results in their favor. Search engines are focused on clearing out all types of manipulation and hope to eventually achieve fully relevant and organic algorithms to determine ranking order. So-called "search engine spammers" engage in a constant battle against these tactics, seeking new loopholes and methods for manipulation, resulting in a never-ending struggle.

This guide is NOT about how to manipulate the search engines to achieve rankings, but rather how to create a website that search engines and users will be happy to have ranking permanently in the top positions, thanks to its relevance, quality and user friendliness.

Paid Placement and Secondary Sources in the Results

The search engine results pages contain not only listings of documents found to be relevant to the user's query, but other content, including paid advertisements and secondary source results. Google, for example, serves up ads from its well-known [AdWords program](#) (which currently fuels more than 99% of Google's revenues) as well as secondary content from its [local search](#), [product search](#) (called Froogle) and [image search](#) results.

The sites/pages ranking in the "organic" search results receive the lion's share of searcher eyeballs and clicks - between 60-70% depending on factors such as the prominence of ads, relevance of secondary content, etc. The practice of optimization for the paid search results is called SEM or Search Engine Marketing while optimizing to rank in the secondary results requires unique, advanced methods of targeting specific searches in arenas such as local search, product search, image search and others.

How to Conduct Keyword Research

Keyword research is critical to the process of SEO. Without this component, your efforts to rank well in the major search engines may be mis-directed to the wrong terms and phrases, resulting in rankings that no one will ever see. The process of keyword research involved several phases:

1. **Brainstorming** - Thinking of what your customers/potential visitors would be likely to type in to search engines in an attempt to find the information/services your site offers (including alternate spellings, wordings, synonyms, etc).
2. **Surveying Customers** - Surveying past or potential customers is a great way to expand your keyword list to include as many terms and phrases as possible. It can also give you a good idea of what's likely to be the biggest traffic drivers and produce the highest conversion rates.
3. **Applying Data from KW Research Tools** - Several tools online (including [Wordtracker](#) & [Overture](#) - both described below) offer information about the number of times users perform specific searches. Using these tools can offer concrete data about trends in kw selection.
4. **Term Selection** - The next step is to create a matrix or chart that analyzes the terms you believe are valuable and compares traffic, relevancy and the likelihood of conversions for each. This will allow you to make the best informed decisions about which terms to target.
5. **Performance Testing and Analytics** - After keyword selection and implementation of targeting, analytics programs (like [Indextools](#) and [ClickTracks](#)) that measure web traffic, activity and conversions can be used to further refine keyword selection.

Wordtracker & Overture

Currently, the two most popular sources of keyword data are [Wordtracker](#), whose statistics come primarily from use of the meta-search engine [Dogpile](#) (which has ~1% of the share of searches performed online) and [Overture](#) (recently re-branded as Yahoo! Search Marketing), which offers data collected from searches performed on Yahoo!'s engine (with a 22-28% share). While neither's data is flawless or entirely accurate, both provide good methods for measuring comparative numbers. For example, while Overture and Wordtracker may disagree on numbers and say that "red bicycles" gets 240 vs. 380 searches per day (across all engines), both will generally indicate that this is a more popular term than "scarlet bicycles", "maroon bicycles" or even "blue bicycles."

In Wordtracker, which provides more detail but has a considerably smaller share of data, terms and phrases are separated by capitalization, plurality and word ordering. In the Overture tool, multiple search phrases are combined. For example, Wordtracker would independently show numbers for "car loans", "Car Loans", "car loan" and "cars Loan", whereas Overture would give a single number that encompasses all of these. The granularity of data can be more useful for analyzing searches that may result in unique results pages (plurals often do and different word orders almost always do), but capitalization is of less consequence as the search engines don't deliver different results based on capitalization.

Remember that Wordtracker and Overture are both useful tools for relative keyword data, but can be highly inaccurate when compared to the actual number of searches performed. In other words, use the tools to select which terms to target, but don't rely on them for predicting the amount of traffic you can achieve. If your goal is estimating traffic numbers, use programs like [Google's Adwords](#) and [Yahoo! Search Marketing](#) to test the number of impressions a particular term/phrase gets.

Targeting the Right Terms

Targeting the best possible terms is of critical importance. This encompasses more than merely measuring traffic levels and choosing the highest trafficked terms. An intelligent process for keyword selection will measure each of the following:

- **Conversion Rate** - the percent of users searching with the term/phrase that convert (click an ad, buy a product, complete a transaction, etc.)
- **Predicted Traffic** - An estimate of how many users will be searching for the given term/phrase each month
- **Value per Customer** - An average amount of revenue earned per customer using the term or phrase to search - comparing big-ticket search terms vs. smaller ones.
- **Keyword Competition** - A rough measurement of the competitive environment and the level of difficulty for the given term/phrase. This is typically measured by metrics that include the number of competitors, the strength of those competitors' links and the financial motivation to be in the sector. SEOmoz's [Keyword Difficulty Tool](#) can assist in this process.

Once you've analyzed each of these elements, you can make effective decisions about the terms and phrases to target. When starting a new site, it's highly recommended to target only one or possibly two unique phrases on a single page. Although it is possible to optimize for more phrases and terms, it's generally best to keep separate terms on separate pages, as you can provide individualized information for each in this manner. As websites grow and mature, gaining links and legitimacy with the engines, targeting multiple terms per page becomes more feasible.

Critical Components of Optimizing a Site

Each of the following components are critical pieces to a site's ability to be crawled, indexed and ranked by search engine spiders. When properly used in the construction of a website, these features give a site/page the best chance of ranking well for targeted keywords.

Accessibility

An accessible site is one that ensures delivery of its content successfully as often as possible. The functionality of pages, validity of HTML elements, uptime of the site's server and working status of site coding and components all figure into site accessibility. If these features are ignored or faulty, both search engines and users will select other sites to visit.

The biggest problems in accessibility that most sites encounter fit into the following categories. Addressing these issues satisfactorily will avoid problems getting search engines and visitors to and through your site.

- **Broken Links** - If an HTML link is broken, the contents of the linked-to page may never be found. In addition, some surmise that search engines negatively degrade rankings on sites & pages with many broken links.
- **Valid HTML & CSS** - Although arguments exist about the necessity for full validation of HTML and CSS in accordance with [W3C guidelines](#), it is generally agreed that code must meet minimum requirements of functionality and successful display in order to be spidered and cached properly by the search engines.
- **Functionality of Forms and Applications** - If form submissions, select boxes, javascript or other input-required elements block content from being reached via direct hyperlinks, search engines may never find them. Keep data that you want accessible to search engines on pages that can be directly accessed via a link. In a similar vein, the successful functionality and implementation of any of these pieces is critical to a site's accessibility for visitors. A non-functioning page, form or code element is unlikely to receive much attention from visitors.
- **File Size** - With the exception of a select few documents that search engine consider to be of exceptional importance, web pages greater than 150K in size are typically not fully cached. This is done to reduce index size, bandwidth and load on the servers, and is important to anyone building pages with exceptionally large amounts of content. If it's important that every word and phrase be spidered and indexed, keeping file size under 150K is highly recommended. As with any online endeavor, smaller file size also means faster download speed for users - a worthy metric in its own right.
- **Downtime & Server Speed** - The performance of your site's server may have an adverse impact on search rankings and visitors if downtime and slow transfer speeds are common. Invest in high quality hosting to prevent this issue.

URLs, Title Tags & Meta Data

URLs, title tags and meta tag components are all information that describe your site and page to visitors and search engines. Keeping them relevant, compelling and accurate are key to ranking well. You can also use these areas as launching points for your keywords, and indeed, successful rankings require their use.

The URL of a document should ideally be as descriptive and brief as possible. If, for example, your site's structure has several levels of files and navigation, the URL should reflect this with folders and subfolders. Individual page's URLs should also be descriptive without being overly lengthy, so that a visitor who sees only the URL could have a good idea of what to expect on the page.

Search Friendly Text

Making the visible text on a page "search-friendly" isn't complicated, but it is an issue that many sites struggle with. Text styles that cannot be indexed by search engines include:

- Text embedded in a Java Application or Macromedia Flash file
- Text in an image file - jpg, gif, png, etc
- Text accessible only via a form submit or other on-page action

If the search engines can't see your page's text, they cannot spider and index that content for visitors to find. Thus, making search-friendly text in HTML format is critical to ranking well and getting properly indexed. If you are forced to use a format that hides text from search engines, try to use the right keywords and phrases in headlines, title tags, URLs and image/file names on the page. Don't go overboard with this tactic, and never try to hide text (by making it the same color as the background or using CSS tricks). Even if the search engines can't detect this automatically, a competitor can easily report your site for spamming and have you de-listed entirely.

Building a Traffic-Worthy Site

One of the most important (and often overlooked) subjects in SEO is building a site deserving of top rankings at the search engines. A site that ranks #1 for a set of terms in a competitive industry or market segment must be able to justify its value, or risk losing out to competitors who offer more. Search engines' goals are to rank the best, most usable, functional and informative sites first. By intertwining your site's content and performance with these goals, you can help to ensure its long term prospects in the search engine rankings.

Usability

Usability represents the ease-of-use inherent in your site's design, navigation, architecture and functionality. The idea behind the practice is to make your site intuitive so that visitors will have the best possible experience on the site. A whole host of features figure into usability, including:

- **Design**
The graphical elements and layout of website have a strong influence on how easily usable the site is. Standards like blue, underlined links, top and side menu bars, logos in the top, left-hand corner may seem like rules that can be bent, but adherence to these elements (with which web users are already familiar) will help to make a site usable. Design also encompasses important topics like visibility & contrast, affecting how easy it is for users to interest the text and image elements of the site. Separation of unique sections like navigation, advertising, content, search bars, etc. is also critical as users follow design cues to help them understand a page's content. A final consideration would also take into account the importance of ensuring that critical elements in a site's design (like menus, logos, colors and layout) were used consistently throughout the site.
- **Information Architecture**
The organizational hierarchy of a site can also strongly affect usability. Topics and categorization impact the ease with which a user can find the information they need on your site. While an intuitive, intelligently designed structure will seamlessly guide the user to their goals, a complex, obfuscated hierarchy can make finding information on a site disturbingly frustrating.
- **Navigation**
A navigation system that guides users easily through both top-level and deep pages and makes a high percentage of the site easily accessible is critical to good usability. Since navigation is one of a website's primary functions, provide users with obvious navigation systems: breadcrumbs, alt tags for image links, and well written anchor text that clearly describes what the user will get if they click a link. Navigation standards like these can drastically improve usability performance.
- **Functionality**
To create compelling usability, ensure that tools, scripts, images, links, etc., all function as they are intended and don't provide errors to non-standard browsers, alternative operating systems or uninformed users (who often don't know what/where to click).
- **Accessibility**
Accessibility refers primarily to the technical ability of users to access and move through your site, as well as the ability of the site to serve disabled or impaired users. For SEO purposes, the most important aspects are limiting code errors to a minimum and fixing broken links, making sure that content is accessible and visible in all browsers and without special actions.

- **Content**

The usability of content itself is often overlooked, but its importance cannot be overstated. The descriptive nature of headlines, the accuracy of information and the quality of content all factor highly into a site's likelihood to retain visitors and gain links.

Overall, usability is about gearing a site towards the potential users. Success in this arena garners increased conversion rates, a higher chance that other sites will link to yours and a better relationship with your users (fewer complaints, lower instance of problems, etc.).

Professional Design

Elegant, high quality, high impact design is critical to gaining the trust of your users. If your site appears "low budget" or only marginally professional, it can hurt the chances of gaining a link and more importantly, the chances of engendering trust in your visitors. The first impression of a website by a user occurs in less than 7 seconds. That's all the time you have to convey the importance and authority of your company through the site's design.

Authoring High Quality Content

Why Should a Search Engine Rank Your Site Above all the Others in its Field?

If you cannot answer this question clearly and precisely, the task of ranking higher will be exponentially more difficult. Search engines attempt to rank the very best sites with the most relevant content first in their results, and until your site's content is the best in its field, you will always struggle against the engines rather than bringing them to your doorstep.

It is in content quality that a site's true potential shows through, and although search engines cannot measure the likelihood that users will enjoy a site, the vote via links system operates as a proxy for identifying the best content in a market. With great content, therefore, come great links and, ultimately, high rankings. Deliver the content that users need, and the search engines will reward your site.

Content quality, however, like professional design, is not always dictated by strict rules and guidelines. What passes for "best of class" in one sector may be below average in another market. The competitiveness and interests of your peers and competitors in a space often determine what kind of content is necessary to rank. Despite these variances, however, several guidelines can be almost universally applied to produce content that is worthy of attention:

Growing a Site's Popularity

While developing a great website is half of the SEO equation, the other half is promotion. Search engines are very particular about growing their ability to detect artificial manipulation and link spam, so effective SEOs who want to promote sites to the fullest extent must use natural, organic link building processes in order to have success.

The techniques and approaches described below are all ultimately designed to improve search engine rankings by growing the number and quality of links that point to a website. However, each also offers natural growth of your user base and provides visitors that come through systems other than search engines. Strangely, although the goal of SEO is better search rankings, the best sites in each industry often receive 50% or fewer of their total visitors from search engine. Why? Because if thousands of visitors are anxiously visiting your site via bookmarks, links and direct type-ins at the address bar, you've achieved the content and status necessary to not only be ranked exceptionally well, but have visitors that know your site and want to visit, no matter what the search engines say. This methodology is particularly valuable because a site that doesn't rely entirely on search engines for traffic, ironically, has a far better chance of getting visitors through them.

Press Releases and Public Relations

Influencing mainstream or niche press outlets to cover your company or its actions can be a highly effective way to drive attention to your site, which, if link worthy, can earn a fantastic number of links in short order. Press release sites like [PRNewsWire](#) and [PRWeb](#) are good starting places for driving traffic and links, and as both feed the major online

news search engines ([Yahoo!](#) & [Google News](#)) they can provide high visibility as well. Optimizing press releases is a unique practice in and of itself - placement of text in the title and in visible headlines, compelling story writing and proper content structure are all important elements. Beyond releases, however, is influencing journalists to write editorial news stories about your subject and including a link or mention of your site. Some of the most highly touted PR (public relations) firms in the world charge a fortune for this service, but on a small scale, it can be performed in-house. The trick is to have content and information so compelling and interesting that journalists would love to cover it. If you have the makings of a great story with a near-perfect fit for your site, email a few journalists whose work you've found to be on similar topics.

Link Building Based on Competitive Analysis

Looking at the links obtained by your top competitors and pursuing methods of your own to get listed on those sites/pages is an excellent way to stay competitive in the link building race. It's also a good way to get natural traffic, as these are the links and sites that send your competitors their traffic, they will also bring visitors to your site. The methodology for investigating a competitor's links is fairly straightforward, although more complex methods can be used by the advanced researcher.

The best source of linkage data is Yahoo!. Google purposely does not report accurate link data with their link: command and MSN's rankings of links can often show less valuable and effective links at the top. Yahoo!, however, currently shows the greatest accuracy in numbers of links, and also sorts well, typically placing more valuable links near the top of the results.

Competitive analysis also includes using the top search results themselves as sources for links. If a site or page ranks particularly well for many related searches, a link from that site can send a healthy number of interested surfers to you. Rankings in the SERPs is also an excellent way to determine the value of a link, so if a page ranks highly for the term or phrase you're targeting, a link from that page is sure to provide great assistance in your goal to achieve top placement.

Highly Competitive Terms & Phrases

For some terms and phrases, even the best websites with the most diligent promotional efforts will have a very difficult time penetrating the top 10-20 results. In these instances, it can be tempting to rely on efforts outside of the search engines' guidelines. However strong this temptation may be, be advised that search engines do not tolerate spam or manipulation via automated links, nor do they allow such results to flourish for long. Although these methods, commonly referred to as "black hat SEO", may have some effectiveness in the short term, they have little chance of long-term success and may become permanently banned from search results.

For highly competitive results (from "mortgage" to "car insurance" to "university degree"), targeting the above described "long tail" (the more niche related search terms for which a smaller degree of heavy competition exists) can be the best method. Search engines are also careful to consider the age of a site and its links, and give heavy weight to those sites with long-held, highly trusted links. Thus, while rankings may be sparse at first, over time, an enterprising site owner can achieve some measure of notice, even in the most competitive of searches.

Implementing an SEO Strategy

The process of SEO is not easy to tackle, largely because so many pieces of a site factor into the final results. Promoting a site that writers on the web are unlikely to link to is as deadly as creating a fantastic website no one will see. SEO is also a long-term process, both in application and results - those who expect quick rankings after completing a few suggestions in this guide will be deeply disappointed. Search engines can often be frustratingly slow to respond to improvements that will eventually garner significant boosts in traffic.

Patience is not the only virtue that should be used for successful SEO. The strategy itself must have a strong foundation in order to succeed. The best site's adhere strictly to these guidelines:

1. **Unique Content** - Something that has never before been offered on the web in terms of depth, quality or presentation (i.e. a unique value proposition)

2. **Access to an Adoptive Community** - Connections or alliances with people/websites in an existing online community that is ready to accept, visit and promote your offering
3. **Link-Friendly Formatting** - Even the best content may be unlikely to be linked to if it displays ads, particularly those that break up the page content or pop-up when a visitor comes to the site. Use discretion in presenting your material and remember that links are one of the most valuable commodities a site/page can get and they'll last far longer than a pop-up ad's revenue.
4. **Monetization Plan** - Intelligent systems for monetizing powerful content must exist, or bandwidth, hosting and development costs will eventually overrun your budget.
5. **Market Awareness** - If your site is targeting highly competitive terms you should make available, an online marketing budget, including funds for link buying, and hire or consult with someone experienced in bringing newer sites to the top of the SERPs.

If you take these steps and have a robust knowledge of the methods described in this guide, you are ready to begin an SEO campaign.

Quantity vs. Quality

In order to optimize a site to rank well in the search engines, diligent attention to the quality of your website and the effectiveness of your promotional tactics. While creating thousands of pages targeting every conceivable keyword may seem like a viable tactic, in fact, a single, phenomenal article or content source on a single term is far more likely to be profitable and less likely to be flagged for spam by the search engines.

This same rule applies to the sphere of promotion. While thousands of low quality, spammy pages or reciprocal free-for-all links pointing to you may provide some boost in the SERPs, a far greater effect can be achieved with just a few highly valuable, well-placed links from relevant sources that will drive both traffic and rankings. In the age of advanced link spam analysis, search engines will give greater credit to one link from CNN.com, Berkeley.edu or Usability.gov than from 50,000 guestbooks, forum signatures or reciprocal link directories.

Measuring Success: Website and Ranking Metrics to Watch

One of the most valuable sources for data, analysis and refinement in an SEO campaign is in the statistics available via website tracking and measuring programs. A good analytics program can provide an incredible amount of data that can be used to track your visitors and make decisions about who to target in the future and how to do it.

Below is a short list of the most valuable elements in visitor tracking:

- **Campaign Tracking** - The ability to put specific URLs or referrer strings onto ads, emails or links and track their success.
- **Action Tracking** - Adding the ability to track certain actions on a site like form submission, newsletter signups, add to cart buttons, checkout or transaction completions and tying them together with campaigns and keyword tracking so you know what ads, links, terms and campaigns are bringing you the best visitors.
- **Search Engine Referral Tracking** - Seeing which search engines sent which visitors over time and tracking the terms and phrases they used to reach your site. Combined with action tracking, this can help you determine which terms are most valuable to target.
- **Referring URLs & Domain Tracking** - This allows you to see what URLs and domains are responsible for sending you traffic. By tracking these individually, you can see where your most valuable links are coming from.
- **First-Time vs. Return Visitors** - Find out what percentage of your visitors are coming back each day/week/month. This can help you to figure out how "sticky" and consistently interesting your site is.
- **Entry Pages** - Which pages are attracting the most visitors and which are converting them. You can also see pages that have a very high rate of loss - those pages which don't do a good job pulling people into the site.

- **Visitor Demographics** - Where are your visitors coming from, what browsers are they using, what time do they visit? All these questions and many more can be answered with demographics.
- **Click Path Analysis** - What paths do your visitors follow when they get to your site? This data can help you make more logical streams of pages for visitors to use as they navigate your site, attempting to find information or complete a task.
- **Popular Pages** - Which pages get the most visitors and which are neglected? Use this data to help improve low popularity pages and emulate highly trafficked ones.
- **Page Views per Session** - This data can tell you how many pages each visitor to your site is viewing - another metric used to measure "stickiness."

Applying the information you learn from your visitor tracking is a science unto its own. Experience and common sense should help to discover which terms, visitors, referrers and demographics are most valuable to your site, enabling you to make the best possible decisions about how and where to target.

Working with a Pro vs. Do-It-Yourself SEO

As in many other areas of web development, a long-standing argument exists between those who feel that learning and practicing SEO should be done in-house, vs. those who feel it is best left to the professionals. There are advantages to either side, and it's best to weigh these against each other when making a final decision:

Advantages of Working with a Professional SEO

- **Diverse Experience** - Professionals with several years of SEO experience under their belts can tell you what to expect from the search engines as you conduct the optimization process. They can also interpret and understand rankings data and "hiccups" in the results that may indicate certain trends or strategies that should be implemented or avoided.
- **Pre-Existing Relationships** - Many SEOs have contacts inside the SEO industry to folks with experience in certain fields, expertise in unique areas (i.e. press releases, article distribution, directories, etc.) that can have a great impact on the success of your efforts. Several SEOs even have personal relationships with the folks at the search engines, although the use of these contacts is very rare and SE representatives pride themselves on not showing favoritism.
- **Link Building Knowledge** - Professionals will have the ability to quickly identify topical communities and the most popular and relevant sites in them, saving time when link building. SEOs also have considerable experience with link acquisition, and will recognize the requirements of certain sites for paid links, link requests, etc.
- **Identifying Linkable Content** - SEOs are often masters of crafting and launching content. Not only can they identify the content most likely to get links from the specific web community, they're also experienced in how to package and promote it.
- **Fixing Possible Problems** - Professionals are competent at identifying and managing issues that can cause a lack of indexing, low rankings or penalties from the search engines. This is a skill that can be very hard to develop without years of practice and experience. If you have a ranking issue, an SEO can be of great value.
- **Time Savings** - SEO can be an exceptionally time-consuming endeavor. An experienced SEO has the processes and systems of optimization down to a science, and can use that efficiency to provide better service in less time.

Advantages of Do-It-Yourself SEO

- **Complete Control** - With personal responsibility comes complete control for each element of your site's progress. There can be no question as to who or what created a link or modified a document.

- **Learn from Your Actions** - The ebb and flow of the SERPs will quickly teach an amateur SEO what works and what doesn't. Certain links, timing and on-page changes will be fully visible and recordable, making it a learning process.
- **Personal Responsibility** - Your success or failure will depend entirely on your own efforts, narrowing responsibility and preventing overlaps in work or issues of blame.
- **Cost Savings** - Doing SEO yourself means you don't have to pay someone else. If you find that your time is less expensive than hiring an outsourced provider, do-it-yourself SEO can be a great way to save money.

With these pieces of information in mind, you're prepared to make an informed decision. Remember, too, that many SEOs offer consulting services, which provide you with a strategic plan that can be implemented and a helpful consultant to provide advice as needed on the project. This type of arrangement may offer a good balance if you're torn about which direction to choose. Look for costs between 100-300 per hour depending on the experience and notoriety of the consultant.

If you choose to outsource to an SEO firm, be well aware of the many pitfalls that await the uninformed. SEO has classically been an industry that has attracted many untrustworthy and dishonorable firms, resulting in an unfortunate perception from many. Pay particular attention to the following:

- **Manipulation & Search Spam** - Overly aggressive tactics can get you banned from search engines
- **Link Exchanges & Free-for-All Links** – While the promise of easy link building through link exchanges or link farms is tempting, these tactics often achieve sub-par results. Natural, organic inbound links from sites that your competitors can't get links from are the best way to rank well in the long term
- **Optimizing Pages for Search Engines vs. Visitors** – Professional SEOs should have specialist copywriters who can craft well-written pages that attract both users and search engines. Repetitive keyword use (as noted above) is largely useless, but compelling, intelligent dialogue is a great way to get both searchers and engines interested in your content.
- **Guaranteed Rankings** – Guaranteeing rankings is often one of the first indications that you're dealing with a less-than-reputable firm. No SEO can guarantee rankings, because the search engines are responsible for the results and are constantly changing. Be wary, too, of promised success at "thousands of engines" (remember that the top 4 account for 95%+ of all search traffic), daily submission (completely unnecessary) and other "tricks" or "secrets". Great rankings come from having great sites with quality links – no tricks or secrets required.
- **Investigate** – The firm you work with should be able to provide references, preferably from both customers and industry folks that will let you know their skill and ability. Use your best judgment here – if a review or response seems canned or fishy, it probably is.

Finally, if you opt for do-it-yourself-SEO, be aware that there are many, many parts of the SEO process not covered by this guide. SEO is a practice that has even the most respected professionals learning and researching every day to keep with trends on the web and algorithmic shifts in the search engines. A business or site owner will certainly want to join several SEO web communities (see the list in the links section) and keep up-to-date with information and best practices from the industry experts.

Where to Get Questions Answered

Whether you're considering running an SEO campaign yourself, or hiring a professional, there are thousands of additional questions about the practice that I discover each day. Getting these questions answered quickly, with the best possible information, may require paying an SEO consultant. Finally, if after reading this guide, you have questions that need a quick, direct response, you're always welcome to email me at k@konstruktdev.com.