11 Steps to Successful Search Engine Optimization

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Introduction

This guide is for new and existing websites. If you are in the planning phase of creating a new website, then you are in an advantage, because you will be able to avoid mistakes right from the start.

Existing websites have to start with step one as well and can't take any shortcuts. Depending on how well or poorly each of the steps was done right or wrong in the past (on purpose or coincidentally) are more or less significant changes to the existing site necessary. It might be necessary or advisable to redo parts or in extreme cases the whole website as a consequence of this. There is no general answer to this question and it will be necessary to make that decision on a case by case basis.
Search Engines

People use search engines to find things. Although you should avoid making your business depending entirely on free traffic from search engines, so is it still important to consider search engines in your overall internet marketing strategy. Ignoring search means leaving a big chunk of business go to waste on the table, which will make it much harder to impossible to stay competitive depending on the industry you are in and what your competition is doing. SEO is not rocket science and to a certain degree technical. It has nothing to do with magic and fairy dust will do nothing to help you with it. It also requires a long term strategy and commitment in order to become and remain successful. There is no silver bullet and no shortcuts. There are ways to cheat, but cheating in this space will always be discovered eventually and never be without negative to catastrophic consequences for sites that did it.

No Magic, Only Boring Logic

The reason why it is so technical has to do with the fact that general search engines like Google, Yahoo!, MS Live Search and Ask.com are using automatic systems and programs like "spiders" or "web crawlers" or "bots" to gather and collect content and then sophisticated and complex algorithms to rank the collected content (pages) based on many, sometimes 100 or more factors. Those factors come not only into play during the building and updating of the search engine's index, but also in real-time at the moment when a user is entering a search term into the text box at the search engine's website.

As sophisticated as search engines might seem are they still lacking the ability to emulate accurately the human intelligence and understanding. They are far away from an artificial intelligence that would be able to apply common sense and understanding to search. Search engines are essentially extremely stupid and search engine optimization is used to help search engines to understand what your site is about to compensate for the lack of common sense to fill the gaps. This is different than cheating. Cheating is to deceive search engines to make things appear to them that are in contradiction to what things really are.

The Steps

I broke the steps to take for successful optimizing your site for search engines into multiple steps. You can outsource most of the steps or do them in-house. It depends on the resources in personal, time and money that are available to you and if you feel comfortable enough to involve a third party and provide them with critical insights of your business or not. None of the steps is a one-time thing and need to be repeated over and over again during the life time of your online business. Some steps repeat less frequent than others though.
1. **Keyword Research**

You want to find out keywords that are relevant to your business, are actually used by your targeted audience and potential customers in search engine to find what you are offering, are the least competitive as possible and are the least ambiguous to ensure the highest conversion as possible.

There are a number of keyword research tools out there, some are free and others cost money, but all have one thing in common; they are not 100% accurate. Rule of thumb: commercial keyword research tools usually have a better and bigger data pool where they derive numbers and estimates from, which tends to make their results a little bit more realistic than the results from the free tools. In other instances free tools only provide information for a single search engine and only based on paid search data. There are differences between the engines that can be significant in some verticals. Keep this in mind if you use ANY of the research tools for your own research.

Keyword research tools can only do so much for you. They can provide information about a keywords popularity and competitiveness. They can also provide you with ideas for related and similar keywords. While all of this is very helpful, so is it not very good at determining the MAIN keyword or top 3 keywords you should your site optimize for. While you can play around with hundreds of different terms easily in paid search campaigns and change them virtually overnight, so is this not possible when it comes to organic search and SEO. You can effectively optimize a page for one, two or maybe three terms and this will also take a while before you will get any results back in terms of actual traffic and conversion. Determining the most relevant terms right from the start is not to underestimate and the main reason, why you should not rush this first step of the process.

Business owners tend to make the mistake to pick the terms that are the most obvious to them. This might be the terms that are used by their customers, but they are often not. It is invaluable information, if you can get feedback from your customers or outsiders, like family members about how they would describe your business and what you do in one short phrase. What would they (or did) type into a search engines input field to locate your business?

Use this data and your own keywords in keyword research tools to check their popularity and how strong the competition is for them. You might even want to run some paid search campaigns with those keywords to see how they perform for your site, before you decide to optimize your whole website for a term organically.

**Related Resources**

- [Keyword Research Basics](#) - An Introduction to Keyword Research
- [Keyword Research Tools and Services for SEO and SEM](#)
2. Competitive Intelligence

Learn who your competitors are on the web and what they are doing. The amount and type of competition you are facing will have impact on what you will have to do in order to compete with them and outperform their sites in the search engines. While you are doing your research about your competition, you will encounter sites that do not compete with you, but are related to your business. Those are potential partners and/or sites where you could get inbound links from in the future, so make sure that you note those sites and the information you gathered during your research for later use.

Related Resources

- Competitive Intelligence and Competitor Analysis of Paid and Organic Search Marketing Activities

3. Web Design and Development

Build a Website that search engines can crawl and make it easy for them to understand the theme and subject your website is about. Get the basics right and worry about the details later. Tweaking is not a problem if you got the foundation right and avoided basic mistakes that could make a complete redesign of your website necessary. Just by doing that could it be that you are already outperforming a large number of your competitor’s websites. Establish clear goals of what you want visitors to do once they got to your website and create the pages in a way that will guide those visitors to it.

Make it as easy for them as possible and don’t require them to look for it themselves. Keep in mind that every page of your site is a possible entry page or door to your website. Do not design the site as if every visitor will enter your site through the homepage or front door of your website. Step 6 talks about web analytics. If you plan to use a web based ASP solution rather than a software package that analyzes your website log files, you should implement it already while you create your website.

Related Resources

- Search Engine Friendly Web Design and Site Architecture
- Website Code Validation, ISAPI Filters, Meta Tags, Redirects

4. Get Your First Inbound Links

Once the first version of your website is ready it is time to get your first and easy to get inbound links from major directories that are recognized as authority by search engines. If you have business partners with an established web presence, contact them and asked if they would be willing to link to your new site from theirs. Search engines will find your website naturally during their normal crawls of the internet. I do not recommend using the search engines submission forms as means to tell search engines about your website, but it is up to you.

Related Resources

- List of popular Web Directories
5. **SITEMAPS**

Once you notice that search engine spiders found your website naturally because of the inbound links you got in the step before and search engines know about your site and started to crawl it, submit your sitemap to them.

**Related Resources**

- Site Maps, Site Feeds, Submission Tools and Tips, Paid Inclusion

6. **WEB ANALYTICS**

In order to see if search engine spiders hit your website is it necessary to analyze your websites log files. To analyze your websites log files it is necessary to use web analytics software, which does also provide other critical information for your business and will become an essential tool for you to track and measure success or failure of any type of website promotion and also if your website itself is doing a good job in converting visitors to customers (or makes them do whatever your goal was when you started your website). Alternatively could you also signup for a web based ASP solution which usually requires the addition of some specific code to your web pages to perform the collection of data. Those ASP solutions are not using your websites log files and do the tracking themselves for you and on the fly. If you decide for a solution like this, it is advisable to implement it already in step 3.

**Related Resources**

- Web Analytics Resources and Services

7. **CONTENT BUILDING**

Your website should never be static and completing step 3 does not mean that you are done with building your website. Once the initial development was done, the ongoing work to improve and expand it begins. This process will never end for as long as you operate the site. The stop of content building and other ongoing work (steps further down) will in almost every case cause an eventual decline of your websites popularity, ranking, traffic and at the end, your absolute bottom line (revenue and profits). What content to build depends on several factors and will become clear during the steps outlines below. It has in essence to be content that is useful for people and related to your business. The goals for the content can be different. It should not always just be for the purpose of directly increase sales. There are other purposes that do not increase sales or profits directly, but have impact on other indirect factors that will eventually have impact on sales and profits.

**Related Resources**

- Copywriting Resources
- Keyword Density Resources and Tools (only relevant for very competitive niches)
"Content is King", but links are putting the king on the throne and create the foundation for a kingdom that grows and flourishes. In the search landscape today is quality content without links to reinforce it like a "king without kingdom". To keep the kingdom healthy is it necessary to make the link building an ongoing effort together with the content building process.

Good content that ranks well because of many existing inbound links will gain new links automatically, but at the beginning is this not the case and your high quality content is buried under all the clutter that is out there on the internet. To make your content speak and make it heard through the noise of the net is an active link building strategy key for success. Quality link building is a very active process and also a personal one. It is unfortunately not possible to automate or do on a large scale. There are services out there that try to convince people otherwise and they might be able to generate many inbound links to your website as they promise, but it is highly impossible that those links will have long term value for your site. Short term success and boost of ranking and traffic is certainly possible and can be highly profitable.

I won't lie to you about this, however, those links are in almost every case unnatural and only have the purpose of deceive search engines to obtain higher ranking. Search engines spend a considerable amount of time and efforts to counter these ranking schemes and often penalize participants once they discover the scheme and undo its effects. If you are a business that is in it for the long haul and years to come, this kind of methods should be avoided, because they always come back to hurt you eventually. Believing that you can get away with it or that it will be forgotten one day is foolish and never the case.

Quality links are always given to the worthy and you have to earn them by proving the worthiness of your content and your site. It is also a very personal process that can almost never become automated. It has to do with communication and engagement of other people like you who have similar goals and needs as you have. Quality links are links that will help your business, even if they would not count for search engine ranking. If you take away the search engine ranking factor away from a link and the value that is left is nothing, don't pursue the link. I suggest that you even reject it altogether.

Related Resources

- Link Building Resources
9. ENGAGEMENT, TRUST AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Web 2.0, User generated content, conversation, blogs, social networking

General search engines are not the only source of traffic and text content alone is also not the only king in the country anymore either. If you did not notice the changes over the recent years, then it is time to look around you. Social media is growing in size and relevance and it is no fag or bubble. Social media is here to stay. People got a taste of it and love it and chances are very good that they will not let it go and give it up.

Social media is more than a phenomenon and its impact is very real. It can not only impact small businesses and cause good things and harm to them, but to large businesses and brands as well.

Content generated by social media activities is not only good content for the most part, but also tends to get highly ranked in search engines. Create a blog related to your business.

Don't use it for direct sales purposes, but to create a voice and face for your company, people can relate to. Provide content via the blog that is useful to your existing or potential customers. White papers are great content for a technical audience, but not for the general consumer. You got the chance to educate people about what you do and how they can benefit from your products. You can also use it as research tool to learn about what your customers want and need.

Allow customers to comment on your products and services on your site. This is not only good and unique content that distinguishes your generic product detail page (for online retailers for example who use the same short description from the manufacturer just like most of your competition). It also increases trust and loyalty of people to your brand. Have no fear for negative comments. They will occur, but they are okay, because nobody is perfect. You know that and so does your audience.

Related Resources

- Blogging Platforms, Wikis and CMS
10. Ranking and Traffic Analysis

Check where you stand and evaluate the performance of current and past campaigns to devise new strategies or change existing ones. You can't tell if you were successful, if you do not know where you were yesterday and where you are today. You have no reference to anything. Having clear set goals are vital. It does not matter if the goals are short term or long term. You won't know if you are on track with them, if you do not check where you are on an ongoing basis.

Use the chance to check where your competition is as well and if something changes. Don't risk to get overrun by unexpected moves by existing or new competitors that appeared on the market place. Reacting to negative event after it occurred is always harder than to prepare and may be avoid such event before it occurred. You can't see it coming if you don't check what is happening around you.

General shifts in the market place also happen from time to time and require a change of general strategy to adjust to the changed environment. You don't want to be the last one "who got the memo", but if possible the one who sends the memo out in the first place. Tap into new sources of traffic and business while they are young, untapped and not exploited to the death. This does not mean that you should jump on every band wagon that comes along, but you should look out, if there is a band wagon coming and then decide if it is worth jumping on it when it arrived or if you better wait for the next one.

Related Resources

- Ranking Analysis Tools
- Research, Trends and Statistics
- Competitive Intelligence and Competitor Analysis
11. Conversion Analysis

Whatever you do, it has to be measured against your ultimate goal. Does it help to keep or improve the bottom-line or not. You have to distinguish between your long-term and short-term goals, but you should measure both as good as you possibly can.

Your decision made in step 6 (web analytics) is playing a critical role in how good and efficient your ability for the analysis process will be. Many companies consider the cost of a good web analytics solution and expense and the department that uses it a cost-center. This is wrong and if it plays out to be like this in your company, go ahead and re-evaluate how you are using your web analytics.

Web analytics should do more than just report monthly figures of traffic, unique visitors and number of page-views. Web analytics must be playing an integrated part in your entire internet marketing campaigns and efforts, because web analytics is the tool that can tell you what works and what doesn’t, if you make sure that it is tracked properly.

The results you get back from web analytics should be taken back and impact on your campaigns. It shows you what works and what doesn't. It can discover bottlenecks and places where you lose potential business for different reasons. It can also help to discover sources that are performing well for your business, but are currently underdeveloped and could be leveraged and expanded.

Most importantly does it tell you where you waste your time and money and should either adjust what you are doing or maybe stop it all-together.

Consider it what it really is, a profit-center that can save cost and help increase revenue and/or profits if used properly. Without it are all other efforts only a shot in the dark that might work or might not and is not a very healthy business strategy to guarantee long term success, growth and prosperity. If you do it well, you will be fine today and in the years to come!

Related Resources

- Web Analytics Resources and Services
Introduction to Search Engine Optimization
Search Engine Marketing and SEO Training and Certification
In-Depth Competitive Analysis and Keyword Research Tools
Web Analytics To Measure Your Success!
Poor Search Engine Rankings Caused by Duplicate Content Issues

Search Engine Optimization Resources, SEO Resources
Search Engine Background Information and SEO Research Resources, Statistics and Patents
Search Engine (SEO) Ranking Factors 2007 - Quick Reference