

What Is SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is often considered the more technical part of Web marketing. This is true because SEO does help in the promotion of sites and at the same time it requires some technical knowledge – at least familiarity with basic HTML. SEO is sometimes also called SEO copywriting because most of the techniques that are used to promote sites in search engines deal with text. Generally, SEO can be defined as the activity of optimizing Web pages or whole sites in order to make them more search engine-friendly, thus getting higher positions in search results.

One of the basic truths in SEO is that even if you do all the things that are necessary to do, this does not automatically guarantee you top ratings but if you neglect basic rules, this certainly will not go unnoticed. Also, if you set realistic goals – i.e to get into the top 30 results in Google for a particular keyword, rather than be the number one for 10 keywords in 5 search engines, you will feel happier and more satisfied with your results.

Although SEO helps to increase the traffic to one's site, SEO is not advertising. Of course, you can be included in paid search results for given keywords but basically the idea behind the SEO techniques is to get top placement because your site is relevant to a particular search term, not because you pay.

SEO can be a 30-minute job or a permanent activity. Sometimes it is enough to do some generic SEO in order to get high in search engines – for instance, if you are a leader for rare keywords, then you do not have a lot to do in order to get decent placement. But in most cases, if you really want to be at the top, you need to pay special attention to SEO and devote significant amounts of time and effort to it. Even if you plan to do some basic SEO, it is essential that you understand how search engines work and which items are most important in SEO.

1. How Search Engines Work

The first basic truth you need to learn about SEO is that search engines are not humans. While this might be obvious for everybody, the differences between how humans and search engines view web pages aren't. Unlike humans, search engines are text-driven. Although technology advances rapidly, search engines are far from intelligent creatures that can feel the beauty of a cool design or enjoy the sounds and movement in movies. Instead, search engines crawl the Web, looking at particular site items (mainly text) to get an idea what a site is about. This brief explanation is not the most precise because as we will see next, search engines perform several activities in order to deliver search results – *crawling, indexing, processing, calculating relevancy, and retrieving*.

First, search engines **crawl** the Web to see what is there. This task is performed by a piece of software, called a *crawler* or a *spider* (or Googlebot, as is the case with Google). Spiders follow links from one page to another and index everything they find on their way. Having in mind the number of pages on the Web (over 20 billion), it is impossible for a spider to visit a site daily just to see if a new page has appeared or if an existing page has been modified. Sometimes crawlers will not visit your site for a month or two, so during this time your SEO efforts will not be rewarded.

After a page is crawled, the next step is to **index** its content. The indexed page is stored in a giant database, from where it can later be retrieved. Essentially, the process of indexing is identifying the words and expressions that best describe the page and assigning the page to particular keywords. For a human it will not be possible to process such amounts of information but generally search engines deal just fine with this task. Sometimes they might not get the meaning of a page right but if you help them by optimizing it, it will be easier for them to classify your pages correctly and for you – to get higher rankings.

When a search request comes, the search engine **processes** it – i.e. it compares the search string in the search request with the indexed pages in the database. Since it is likely that more than one pages (practically it is millions of pages) contains the search string, the search engine starts **calculating the relevancy** of each of the pages in its index to the search string.

There are various algorithms to calculate relevancy. Each of these algorithms has different relative weights for common factors like keyword density, links, or metatags. That is why different search engines give different search results pages for the same search string. What is more, it is a known fact that all major search engines, like Yahoo!, Google, MSN, etc. periodically change their algorithms and if you want to keep at the top, you also need to adapt your pages to the latest changes. This is one reason (the other is your competitors) to devote permanent efforts to SEO, if you'd like to be at the top.

The last step in search engines' activity is **retrieving** the results. Basically, it is nothing more than simply displaying them in the browser – i.e. the endless pages of search results that are sorted from the most relevant to the least relevant sites.

Keywords – the Most Important Item in SEO

Keywords are the most important SEO item for every search engine – actually they are what search strings are matched against. So you see that it is very important that you optimize your site for the right keywords. This seems easy at first but when you get into more detail, it might be a bit confusing to correctly determine the keywords. But with a little research and thinking the problem of selecting the right keywords to optimize for can be solved.

1. Choosing the Right Keywords to Optimize For

It seems that the time when you could easily top the results for a one-word search string is centuries ago. Now, when the Web is so densely populated with sites, it is next to impossible to achieve constant top ratings for a one-word search string. Achieving constant top ratings for two-word or three-word search strings is a more realistic goal. If you examine closely the dynamics of search results for popular one-word keywords, you might notice that it is so easy one week to be in the first ten results and the next one– to have fallen out of the first 30 results because the competition for popular one-word keywords is so fierce and other sites have replaced you.

Of course, you can include one-word strings in your keywords list but if they are not backed up by more expressions, do not dream of high ratings. For instance, if you have a site about dogs, “*dog*” is a mandatory keyword but if you do not optimize for more words, like “*dog owners*”, “*dog breeds*”, “*dog food*”, or even “*canine*”, success is unlikely, especially for such a popular keyword. The examples given here are by no means the ultimate truth about how to optimize a dog site but they are good enough to show that you need to think broad when choosing the keywords.

Generally, when you start optimization, the first thing you need to consider is the keywords that describe the content of your site best and that are most likely to be used by users to find you. Ideally, you know your users well and can guess correctly what search strings they are likely to use to search for you. One issue to consider is synonyms. Very often users will use a different word for the same thing. For instance, in the example with the dog site, “*canine*” is a synonym and it is for sure that there will be users who will use it, so it does not hurt to include it now and then on your pages. But do not rush to optimize for every synonym you can think of – search engines themselves have algorithms that include synonyms in the keyword match, especially for languages like English.

When choosing the keywords to optimize for, you need to consider not only their relevancy to your site and the expected monthly number of searches for these particular keywords. Very often narrow searches are more valuable because the users that come to your site are those that are really interested in your product. If we go on with the dog example, you might discover that the “adopt a dog” keyphrase brings you more visitors because you have a special section on your site where you give advice on what to look for when adopting a dog. This page is not of interest of current dog owners but to potential dog owners only, who might be not so many in number but are your target audience and the overall effect of attracting this niche can be better than attracting everybody who is interested in dogs in general. So, when you look at the numbers of search hits per month, consider the unique hits that fit into the theme of your site.

2. Keyword Density

After you have chosen the keywords that describe your site and are supposedly of interest to your users, the next step is to make your site keyword-rich and to have good *keyword density* for your target keywords. Keyword density is a common measure of how relevant a page is. Generally, the idea is that the higher the keyword density, the more relevant to the search string a page is. The recommended density is 3-7% for the major 2 or 3 keywords and 1-2% for minor keywords. Although there are no strict rules, try optimizing for a reasonable number of keywords – 5 or 10 is OK. If you attempt to optimize for a list of 300, you will soon see that it is just not possible to have a good keyword density for more than a few keywords, without making the text sound artificial and stuffed with keywords. And what is worse, there are severe penalties (including ban from the search engine) for *keyword stuffing* because this is considered an unethical practice that tries to manipulate search results.

3. Keywords in Special Places

Keywords are very important not only as quantity but as quality as well – i.e. if you have more keywords in the page title, the headings, the first paragraphs – this counts more than if you have many keywords at the bottom of the page. The reason is that the URL (and especially the domain name), file names and directory names, the page title, the headings for the separate sections are more important than ordinary text on the page and therefore, all equal, if you have the same keyword density as your competitors but you have keywords in the URL, this will boost your ranking incredibly, especially with Yahoo!.

a. Keywords in URLs and File Names

The domain name and the whole URL of a site tell a lot about it. The presumption is that if your site is about dogs, you will have “dog”, “dogs”, or “puppy” as part of your domain name. For instance, if your site is mainly about adopting dogs, it is much better to name your dog site “dog-adopt.net” than “animal-care.org”, for example, because in the first case you have two major keywords in the URL, while in the second one you have no more than one potential minor keyword.

When hunting for keyword rich domain names, don't get greedy. While from a SEO point of view it is better to have 5 keywords in the URL, just imagine how long and difficult to memorize the URL will be. So you need to strike a balance between the keywords in the URL and site usability, which says that more than 3 words in the URL is a way too much.

b. Keywords in Page Titles

The page title is another special place because the contents of the <title> tag usually gets displayed in most search engines, (including Google). While it is not mandatory per the HTML specification to write something in the <title> tag (i.e. you can leave it empty and the title bar of the browser will read “Untitled Document” or similar), for SEO purposes you may not want to leave the <title> tag empty; instead, you'd better write the the page title in it.

c. Keywords in Headings

Normally headings separate paragraphs into related subtopics and from a literary point of view, it may be pointless to have a heading after every other paragraph but from SEO point of view it is extremely good to have as many headings on a page as possible, especially if they have the keywords in them.

There are no technical length limits for the contents of the <h1>, <h2>, <h3>, ... <hn> tags but common sense says that too long headings are bad for page readability. So, like with URLs, you need to be wise with the length of headings. Another issue you need to consider is how the heading will be displayed. If it is Heading 1 (<h1>), generally this means larger font size and in this case it is recommendable to have less than 7-8 words in the heading, otherwise it might spread on 2 or 3 lines, which is not good and if you can avoid it.

