A Marketer’s Guide to Optimizing Your Web Presence for Search Engines
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Abstract

This whitepaper addresses the fundamentals of search engine optimization including on page factors such as keyword use as well as off page factors such as link development. Optimization tips are offered for everything from the coding, to the writing, to the design of your site as well as tips on multimedia and mobile search. Skillfully employed, they can dramatically strengthen your search engine ranking, and with it, hopefully, your bottom line.
Introduction
As a strategy, *build it and they will come* may work in Hollywood movies, but it is not an effective business strategy for a web site. The Internet can be a jungle, and it takes the right tools and techniques to excavate the rich opportunities it can offer your business. Businesses that leverage the right tools and techniques bolster their chances for success. Those that do not are rarely around long enough to matter.

Just as with exploring any jungle, good directions can mean the difference between life and death on the web. Businesses must, therefore, make their sites as easy to find as possible. This whitepaper is intended to help you do just that using the most critical tool of all – search engine optimization (SEO).

By optimizing the search engine viability of your site, you are putting your business on the Internet map. This is crucial. Because if search engines like Google, MSN and Yahoo! cannot find you, it is unlikely your prospects will find you, either.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
SEO addresses the central question posed by all enterprising web site owners and operators: what do search engines look for to determine the relevance of that page in a given search? The answer, as it turns out, sounds rather simple: you must design, write, and code your site with the keywords and phrases most likely to be used by your target audience in their searches. The core concepts of the SEO strategy can be boiled down to what we like to call The 3 C’s: content, code and credibility.

- **Content**: unique, valuable and filled with descriptive vocabulary that prospective customers/clients are most likely using to describe your offerings and/or find related information with.
- **Code**: a clean code that will not detract the engines from finding your site’s content. At a very high level, this includes the type, placement and amount of code.
- **Credibility**: factors that help to build credibility include but are not limited to domain age, PageRank (a value assigned by Google and based a scale from 1 to 10 - gives site owners a rudimentary idea of how authoritative Google views their content), and inbound links from relevant and credible sources.

The ideal time to optimize your site for search engines is in the initial, planning stages – when you’re drawing up your site map and selecting a content management system (CMS). However, if your site is already up and running, you can still optimize it by implementing best practices, many of which are outlined in this document.
SEO vs. PPC
Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Listings are usually distinguished from editorial results to illustrate that they are, in fact, ads. Such listings can be found above editorial links, at the bottom of editorial content, or in sidebars to the right of search engine results.

Also called “pay for placement,” “pay for performance,” or “CPC listings” (cost per click), PPC refers to paid ads that guarantee placement, though CPCs and PPCs only require payment if someone clicks on their ads.

In some cases, a site owner will pay to have his web pages included in a search engine’s listings, known as pay-for-inclusion (PFI). While this typically does not buy a bump in the ranking, it does ensure that the pages will be listed more rapidly (within days vs. weeks with a spider-based search engine).

Having a combination of organic and paid listings in search results, especially top-of-the-page paid listings, dramatically increases overall branding effectiveness for a site. Branding has become equally important to the internet as in traditional marketing venues. Making your brand as visible as possible online is critical to high click through rates on both paid and organic listings. (MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Guide 2009)

Why Optimize?
Return on Investment (ROI): When done properly, SEO can be cheaper than any other online marketing medium. Although up-front costs (whether hiring an agency or investing in the necessary resources like a CMS) may seem overwhelming, SEO is a highly beneficial activity for the long run.

You may think of search as a “pull” form of marketing in that prospective users are actively seeking the information or product described by their search query. Given this (and depending on the query itself) searchers are already a much more valuable prospect than say, someone watching a television show where an ad is “pushed” in front of them.
Furthermore, ROI can be tracked down to the very keyword that eventually translated into a sale or a desired conversion. Marketers can access comprehensive revenue data to facilitate budget decisions and impact their organization’s bottom line.

While PPC is a valuable and effective method that can raise awareness, drive traffic to a new site that hasn’t yet gained organic rankings and generate sales – increasing bids and expensive keywords may not always be as justifiable as investing in an effective SEO strategy. SEO expenses diminish over time, enabling them to survive for years. They also have a better chance of delivering return customers because they focus on what the customer is looking for rather than what the PPC-sponsoring company thinks the market wants.

Appendix: Figure 1.0 – Long Term Benefits of Organic vs. Paid Search

Competition: On average, organic listings make up 95% of clicks in search engines, while only 5% of clicks are for paid advertisements. (MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Guide 2009). If your company is not optimizing site content to achieve the best possible ranking in those search results, you are missing important opportunities for your business. A recent study done by MarketingSherpa found that after optimizing a website for six months using SEO standards you could receive up to a 110% increase in relevant traffic.

Appendix: Figure 1.1 – Natural vs. Paid Search Clicks (All vs. Business Decision Makers)
A new study by Radar Research reports that fewer than 10% of Fortune 100 companies are effectively using SEO for their sites. Such a situation promises great opportunities for those companies, large and small, employing SEO.

Appendix: Figure 1.2 – Increased amount advertisers and SEM agencies plan to spend on SEM in 2008
Appendix: Figure 1.3 – Daily online activities of US internet users, April – May 2008

Motivated Prospects: By researching and targeting strategic key phrases that appeal to your target audiences, SEO puts you in front of precisely those people looking for what you offer. As a result, CPL (cost per lead) numbers can be much lower for organic search engine rankings than other more traditional marketing methods. SEO is one of the few marketing strategies where your targeted audiences are actively engaged in the process of seeking information. Consider the following:

- 220 million Americans have Internet access at home and/or work and 73% went online in May 2008. (Nielsen, May 2008)
- For every $1 in online sales, the Internet influenced $3.45 of in-store sales. (eMarketer, 2007)
Top Search Engines
There are several different search engines in existence today; but Google dominates the market with just under a 72% market share.

Appendix: Figure 1.4 – Search Engine Market Share

Based on this information, Google’s guidelines and recommendations are taken very seriously within the search industry. Although there are some exceptions and differences, best practices for Google are typically best practices for all engines.

How Search Engines Work
Search engines help people find information on the Internet that is relevant to the keywords or phrases they have used in their search. To do this, search engines rely on programs called “spiders,” “crawlers” or “robots.” How it works:

The search engine sends out a spider to a particular web page. It reads the content found on that page and then follows links to the other pages within the site to read those pages. This information is collected in an index, or catalog, with search engines indexing as much of your site as they can access.

These indexes include most of the content that visitors see when viewing pages, as well as pieces of the hidden code used to build the pages. Search engines cannot spider all types of content however, and sometimes encounter problems with certain kinds of graphical content, flash files, portable document format (PDF) files and dynamic content.

Facilitating the indexing process is the first step to obtaining rankings. To ensure that all of a website’s optimized pages are ranking in the engines, both an HTML sitemap and XML sitemap should be added to your site.
**An HTML sitemap** should include links to all pages within your site. This not only helps search engines to locate all pages on the site, but improves usability as well by showing visitors all available content.

**XML sitemaps** are placed in the site and should be submitted to Google, Yahoo and MSN webmaster tool accounts. Once this is done, the search engines will spider and index the pages accordingly. The frequency that a search engine re-indexes your site can be set in the XML sitemap file, more frequent updates are recommended for sites with a lot of fresh content, while sites can be indexed less frequently if content tends to be static. Google recommends only adding pages you would want to rank in search results in the XML sitemap, and consequently, because there are fewer total links, Google will index your site more frequently. ([Official Google Webmaster Blog, 10/15/2008](http://www.google.com/webmasters))

Each time a person searches on a keyword or phrase, the search engine consults the millions of pages in its index to find matches. These matches are then ranked in order of relevancy. So what determines relevancy?

**Determining Relevancy: Keyword Location & Frequency**

To optimize your content, you must start with your keywords and phrases. They are the link between your site and search engines, therefore between you and your customers, so they must be carefully selected.

To determine ranking and relevancy, search engines analyze page elements and other factors, weighing each based on a chosen formula, or *algorithm*. Ranking algorithms rely heavily on the location of keywords and their frequency on the page. When keywords appear near the top of a page, such as in the HTML title tag, the headline or in the first few paragraphs of text, those pages are typically assumed to be more relevant.

Frequency is another key determinant surrounding how search engines establish relevancy. A search engine will analyze how often keywords appear in relation to other words on a page. Those with a higher frequency are characteristically deemed more relevant.

When writing copy for a well optimized website, keep the 3P’s of copywriting in mind:

- **Placement** refers to putting keywords on the page as well as in the coding of the page.
- **Prominence** requires that you place your keywords near the top of the page as often as possible.
- **Proximity** allows you to break up keyword phrases as long as all parts of that phrase remain relatively close to each other in the text. This allows your copy to be written with a natural sounding flow and does not look like you are trying to spam the search engines by repeating keyword phrases on a page. As content remains a core concept of SEO it is critical that the content present on your site is well optimized and well written.
Assessing the SEO-friendliness of Your Site

“SEO-friendly” refers to the factors that enable search engines to access, read, and rank web pages. These factors can be broken down into three categories: site architecture, on page factors and off page factors. The ability to effectively optimize all of the elements within these categories will impact how search engines read code, understand content relevance and determine credibility.

Site Architecture

URLs: search engines look for descriptive keywords in URLs in order to aid in the process of determining relevance and rankings. This is important not only when choosing a site domain, but also when developing a site hierarchy and folder names. Using descriptive, keyword-rich URLs benefit not only search rankings, but has proven to increase organic CTR as well.

Dynamic pages that require URL-based parameters, (i.e. a “?” or equivalent in the URL) are able to be read and indexed by search engines but can result in lower click through rates. Historically, search engines have had difficulties indexing dynamic URLs however this is no longer the issue that it used to be. As a result, webmasters often rewrite dynamic URLs to appear as static although this is no longer necessary.

Tip: When using a keyword phrase in your URL, separate words with a dash (as opposed to underscores or hyphens) for the best search engine comprehension.

Directory Structure: a well organized directory structure improves usability as a visitor has clear paths both into deep content as well as back to higher pages within the site’s hierarchy.

Tip: Place relevant pages as high in the directory structure as possible. A good CMS will permit you to control your menu items and directory structure to place the most relevant pages at the top. It will also have a flat file structure that allows spiders to index the whole directory. Look for a CMS that automatically generates a site map (HTML and XML ideally).

Domains and Sub-domains: Search engines look for keywords in domain names to further assist them in the process of determining relevancy for search queries. A simple, easy to remember domain is beneficial for branding purposes and sharing between prospective customers. Lengthy domains, or domains made up of abbreviations and acronyms can be difficult both from a usability perspective and are less desirable for SEO purposes.

Search engines treat subdomains as separate sites. While it is possible to obtain additional rankings with optimized subdomains, the major search engines have said they will no longer allow subdomains to rank for an additional two search results. These changes have not yet been implemented, but should be taken into consideration when planning site structure and organization of your site’s content.

Tip: Include keywords in main domain as well as sub-domains.

Navigation: all site navigation elements in text format impact search engine visibility. Using keywords in the site’s navigation will provide another opportunity for keyword usage on a page and help search engines understand relationships between pages on your site. Utilizing breadcrumb navigation (i.e. Home > Products > Widget) can improve both usability and visibility. If using dynamic or image-based navigation, it’s essential to complement with HTML text navigation (usually in the footer).
Tip: Try to avoid CMS platforms that utilize Javascript or AJAX for navigation, as dynamic navigation is not easily indexed by spiders.

On Page Factors

**Title Tags**: one of the most important pieces of the SEO puzzle. As most search engines assume that the title describes the content on its page, they weigh it more heavily than other areas of keyword placement when determining relevancy. Though the titles are not seen on the actual page itself, they do show up at the top of the browser window and in the viewer’s list of favorites (or as bookmarks). More importantly, this is the title viewers see in their search results.

Tip: Search engine results typically cut off title tags after 70 characters, making it difficult for users to fully understand your site’s content. Keywords should be placed near the beginning to emphasize importance and ensure critical information isn’t cut off in the search results. If your site has other information in between the `<head>` tags (such as JavaScript code), place the title and META tags before this other data so that it is placed “higher” on the page and will be read by the search engines first.

**META Description Tags**: search engines will often use the META description tag as the description provided in the search results. Search results may also include snippets of content from the page itself based on a user’s query and the relevancy determined by the search engine. META tags are not weighted as heavily by search engines as they once were; in fact, some search engines do not index them at all anymore. Nevertheless, they remain an important element for boosting rankings and click-through rates from the search engine results page (SERP).

Tip: Be sure to write compelling and descriptive snippets that will increase your organic click through rate (CTR). Typically, descriptions should not exceed the 150 character limit and every page on the site should contain a unique description that represents the page’s content.

**META Keywords**: while not as important to search engines rankings as they once were, it is still a best practice to include unique keywords in the source code of each page. Like title tags and META descriptions, use only keywords relevant to the content on the page, not the entire keyword set you want your site to rank for. Typically no more than 15 META keywords should be used per page.

Tip: use the META keyword tag to include common misspellings for products and services.
Header Tags: header tags, or <H> tags, are an HTML element used to create emphasis for specific content, like headlines or subheads at the top of a page. Search engines place additional weight on keywords that appear in header tags. <H1> tags provide the most emphasis on a page and should only be used one time per page. Other <H> tags of lower values can be used multiple times on a page.

Tip: Make sure your CMS auto-generates header tags, as it will ensure proper optimization of site code.

Body Copy and Emphasized Text: integrate targeted keywords throughout the body copy of a given page. Remember the 3 P’s of keyword placement to help guide you through this process. Furthermore, search engines often consider text in larger fonts, bold, or italics to be especially relevant. Where relevant, use this emphasized text (such as sub-headers and bolded image captions) to help meet optimization goals.

Tip: Use font size or heading tags for titles, subtitles, or other important text. Within body text, emphasize keywords by bolding or italicizing them.

ALT Tags: provide a text description of a graphic. Search engines cannot read words that are in the form of a graphic such as a logo or site navigation menu. Some search engines however, will read the ALT tags that correspond with these images.

Tip: Place keywords in the beginning of your ALT tag, and keep tags brief. Do not add ALT tags to images that are purely visual, such as backgrounds.

Hyperlinks: hyperlinks are “clickable” pieces of text that connect a viewer to another page or web site. Keywords within hyperlinks (also known as ‘anchor text’) are an especially important area of placement in terms of SEO.

Tip: Within body copy (and as relevant) link to other pages on the site with targeted keywords within the hyperlink. Note that by optimizing anchor text links you are telling the search engine that the page that is linked to is the most relevant for the keywords within the anchor text.

Off Page Factors

Inbound Links
Arguably one of the most critical factors surrounding search engine optimization is the inbound links that point to your site. Search engines not only find content by following links, they also determine relevancy and credibility by looking at the quantity, quality and topical relevance of sites that are linking to your content. Keep in mind that link quality, i.e., links from popular, highly trafficked sites, is always more important than link quantity.

Indicators of a Quality Inbound Link

- Optimized anchor text (descriptive keywords within hyperlink)
- Trusted and credible site (.org and .gov are typically “trusted” for example)
- Industry/topical relevance (think of this as your link “neighborhood”)
Appendix: Figure 1.5 – Link Building Matrix

No two search engines determine relevancy in precisely the same manner. Historically, Google has placed more emphasis on inbound link quality than search engines such as Yahoo and MSN. The result is that the indexes of competing search engines differ, meaning their search results may vary.

**Human-Powered Directories:**
Unlike a spider-based search engine, a human-powered directory, such as the Open Directory [dmoz.org] or Yahoo! are created by people as opposed to a software program. Its catalog is comprised of editorial reviews of sites and short site descriptions submitted by site operators (and often edited by site reviewers).

Directories rarely drive a substantial number of visits to a site, and are being used less frequently as supplemental result sources for the main search engines. Google no longer deems submitting to directories as a necessity for achieving a high ranking in search results. Consequently, submitting your site to any of these general directories should be considered optional. However, finding industry specific directories such as MacRae’s blue book or ThomasNet for industrial sites are more successful at driving qualified visitors.

**Optimization beyond HTML**
With the addition of social media outlets such as YouTube, Facebook and Flickr, it’s becoming increasingly popular for websites to create their own multimedia services including audio, video, and image based content. Additionally, PDF content can often index and rank well, so it’s important not to leave this content out. Overall, optimizing multimedia content is similar to optimizing any other content on a site, with a few slight differences. The following includes best practices surrounding how to best prepare multimedia content for search engines.
Audio/Video
- Offer audio and video content in as many formats as possible. Some search engines only accept certain file types, so being prepared for all formats is necessary.
- Implement Title and META tags.
- Use targeted keywords in social media “tags” where applicable.
- Use targeted keywords in the filename and URL.
- Use targeted keywords in the link text for the file.
- Optimize the video's presentation page using standard SEO techniques.
- Make the audio and video content available in text format.
- Create RSS feeds for distribution and promotion.
- Add call-to-action buttons to submit content to Digg, Del.icio.us, StumbleUpon, etc.
- Create a video thumbnail for display in search results for branding purposes and to entice users to click through.

Images
- Use quality images with high resolution.
- Use targeted keywords that are related to the image.
- Store images in .jpg format.
- Include links with anchor text that is targeting keywords in the photo captions and point those back to relevant pages on the site. Alternatively, point links from related web pages on the web site back to the photo pages.
- Use less restrictive licensing so others can use the photos, which will encourage links back to the web site.

PDF Documents
- Consider offering an HTML version of the PDFs; include these pages in your XML sitemap.
- Use descriptive keywords to name the PDF.
- Find a CMS that can automatically convert HTML to PDF at the prospects’ request, enabling you to avoid serving up two versions of the same information.

Mobile Search
Mobile search is rapidly growing and is expected to eventually surpass standard search in terms of volume. This has become especially true since the release of the Apple iPhone. Now more than ever, people are using mobile technology to connect to the web. While mobile usage is rapidly growing however, many websites are having trouble keeping up. Websites must now be properly optimized for mobile device screens. The following includes a handful of best practices surrounding mobile friendly websites.
- Users should be able to navigate through the site by clicking on links, not by typing in text. Mobile devices can offer limited text capabilities and most users prefer to use text sparingly.
- Use short and sensible URLs.
- Links should be large font sizes and easily accessible from any mobile device. Some devices require the use of a stylus to navigate while others allow the use of a finger. Links should not open a new page when clicked.
- Each page should have clear and extensive navigational links, both at the top and the bottom of the page to save on scrolling.
- Don’t build mobile sites out of Javascript or Flash. Most mobile devices aren’t compatible with these formats. Instead, use CSS.
• Lay out your page linearly. All mobile devices have different resolutions and aspect ratios. To combat this, keep the most important content at the top of the page.
• Ensure a strong call to action towards the top of the page to encourage visitors to complete a desired action.

Common Impediments to Effective SEO
Not all content is visible to search engines. As sophisticated as they are, there are still several roadblocks many site owners and search engine specialists encounter surrounding SEO. Content in this format is not ideal but fortunately there are still some workarounds that can be employed for improved search visibility and performance. Furthermore, it is recommended to avoid any spam techniques as these will typically hinder your ability to achieve optimal visibility.

Excessive and Improper Flash Use
Flash is a useful Adobe vector graphics animation tool that creates small file sizes. Used in the right context, it can be effective in a variety of ways on your site. Although the use of Flash can make a site aesthetically pleasing, it is not ideal for search engine optimization. This is because it is difficult for search engines to read and understand content within Flash files. There are however, a few workarounds that can be employed when dealing with Flash optimization. Flash should not be used as the sole content of a site. Instead, use Flash sparingly and as necessary.

Tip: Embed Flash content within HTML documents and break Flash videos into multiple pages with relevant content.

JavaScript and AJAX
As a de facto site development standard, JavaScript usually contains several lines of code placed at the top of a web page. JavaScript code pushes your more important content down the page, making it seem less relevant to search engines.

Tip: Use external .js files which contain your code, and refer to them from within your page. Or, enclose JavaScript within comment tags or move it to the bottom of the page. An effective CMS solution will allow you to easily link to .js files from within your pages.

Frames
There are major drawbacks to frame-based sites when it comes to search engines. For example, most major search engines (except Google) cannot index pages contained within frames, meaning they will not appear in search results.

Tip: If your site utilizes frames: 1) include good titles and meta tags on all pages; 2) use <noframes> tags, remembering that some search engines will use the text in the <noframes> tag to help determine the relevance of the page; and 3) include your company name and logo, and links to your homepage and other major sections of the site, in each frame. On all top-level frames pages, include a <noframes> tag below the </frameset> tag that contains a keyword-loaded description of your site and links to other major pages within the site.

Spam
Search engines must also respond to increasingly sophisticated and sometimes “black hat” techniques designed to achieve higher rankings. Black hat practices refer to spam techniques that are considered unethical in the search industry.
Examples of Spam Techniques to Avoid:

- **Hidden or Partially Visible Text/Links** - all text and links on a page should be clearly visible to visitors and search engines.
- **Stuffing of Meta Tags and Alt Tags** – excessive use of targeted keywords in tags is considered spam.
- **Bait and Switch** - do not replace a page used to achieve rankings, with another page.
- **Misleading Text** - the title and META tags text should accurately depict the page they are describing. Unrelated or misleading keywords should not be included.
- **Hindering back button use** - do not create a page which doesn't allow returning to the search engine results.
- **Layering** - do not use layers to hide content from visitors on a page.
- **Cloaking** - do not serve different content for the search engine spiders than what actually appears on a page.
- **Duplicate Content** - content should not be deliberately duplicated across domains in an attempt to manipulate search engine rankings or win more traffic.

Most of these techniques are used to boost ranking status. Sites employing such methods can be penalized via poor rankings or excluded from indexes altogether.

**Developing Your Internal SEO Process: A Checklist**

Now that we have a basic understanding of the core concepts of SEO, the following checklist may be used a starting point for optimization efforts.

- Identify target audience
- Identify the theme for each all site pages
- Create a list of keyword phrases appropriate to your target audience
- Position target keyword phrases near the top of each page to boost relevancy
- Craft keyword-loaded META descriptions, title tags, etc
- Address the frequency of use of keywords and phrases
- Ensure that the position of graphics, images, and/or other design elements support, rather than hinder, the relevancy of each page.
- Optimize internal your linking strategy
- Execute dedicated link development efforts to increase quality links from other sites
- Submit a keyword-loaded description of your site to industry relevant directories
- Monitor search engine rankings for targeted keywords
- Track search engine referral traffic
- Submit an XML feed
- Continue to develop unique, fresh content
- Ensure that you are able to edit content and tags via a reliable CMS
Conclusion
With all the details and caveats, search engine optimization can seem like a daunting task. At the end of the day however, what will make sense for the user will typically make sense to a search engine.

While organic traffic is free and one of the best ways to increase brand awareness and generate new leads, there are many other ways to drive traffic online. Taking advantage of pay per click is often an incredibly cost effective way to drive a significant amount of traffic and can be especially valuable as a short term solution while waiting to gain organic listings for a newer site.

Additionally, it is imperative that a brand’s visibility be monitored online via branded search results and user generated content such as social media and review sites. Current and past customers are talking about products and services in unprecedented ways and prospective customers are reading about those experiences, whether or not they were positive or negative. Site owners and brand managers must be aware of, and engaged in, these conversations in order to exert control over their brand’s online reputation.

SEO plays a key role in website performance. However, remember to explore all avenues of search engine marketing when looking to enhance your brand and bottom line.
Appendix

Figures
1.0 Long term benefits of organic vs. paid search; Elliance, Inc.
1.1 Natural vs. Paid Search Clicks; MarketingSherpa Benchmarking Guide 2009
1.2 Increased Amount That Search Engine Advertisers and Agencies Worldwide Plan to Spend on SEM in 2008; eMarketer
1.3 Daily Online Activities of US Internet Users, April – May 2008; eMarketer
1.4 Search Engine Land, 6/17/2008
1.5 Link Building; MarketingSherpa 2009 Search Marketing Benchmark

Resources
eMarketer: www.emarketer.com
Internet Advertising Bureau: www.iab.net
SEMpdx: www.sempdx.org
SEMP: www.sempo.org
WebmasterWorld: www.webmasterworld.com

Publications
ClickZ: www.clickz.com
DMNews: www.dmnews.com
SearchEngineLand: www.searchengineland.com
SearchEngineWatch: www.searchenginewatch.com
SEOMoz: www.seomoz.org

Blogs
Google Blogoscoped: www.blogoscoped.com
Reputation Watch: www.reputation-watch.com
Search Engine Roundtable: www.seroundtable.com
Search Engine Watch Blog: blog.searchenginewatch.com/blog

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