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SEO Best Practices

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Best Practices

30 Practical Tactics to Improve your Search Results

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According to Google, search engine optimization is often about making small modifications to parts of your website. When viewed individually, these changes might seem like incremental improvements, but when combined with other optimizations, they can have a noticeable impact on your site's user experience and performance in organic search results.

The following sections are best practices for elements that will work in tandem to optimize your website. To get you started, here is a printable SEO Cheat Sheet.

When combined, small modifications can have a noticeable impact on your site's performance in organic search result

Keywords

Keywords, also known as key terms, are the basis for SEO. It's difficult to anticipate exactly how a user will find a particular website, as 40% of all search queries are unique. However having a deep understanding of a site's audience, business goals and content is crucial in determining ideal terms. Optimal key terms will reflect the theme of a page's content and should be chosen with the above three parameters in mind.

1. Keywords should actually be phrases. For example, if your company wants to be known for marketing, specializes in direct and does business in Maryland, your homepage should focus on a phrase such as "direct marketing Maryland."
2. Key terms should be very relevant to the content on each page.
    a. Chosen key terms should be repeated within content for not only SEO but also usability purposes.

Page Title Element

Titles appear at the top of a webpage. The title is also what displays at the top of an individual result on a search engine result page (SERP). This element is important in identifying the content on a page and should be different on all pages as it relates to that content. It will also help users determine the content on a specific page. For large websites with dynamic content, the CMS (Content Management System) will determine how this element is handled. Check with your developer for options.

3. Titles should be about 60-67 characters in length including spaces (only to prevent truncating).
4. Titles should be different for each page on a website but a loose naming convention is suggested for consistency.

5. Titles should be relevant to content on the page that it's identifying and should contain the same target keywords.

Meta Description

The meta description, an element in html, is a paragraph that will display on the SERP page under the title. This paragraph should accurately describe the content on the page. Duplicate descriptions can be penalized by some SEs. For large websites with dynamic content, the CMS will determine how this element is handled. Check with your developer for options.

6. Meta descriptions should be about 120 - 200 characters in length including spaces but can vary.
7. Descriptions should be different for each page on a website.
8. The description should be relevant to the content on the page and should include targeted keywords

h1-h3 (Header) Tags

The h1 tag should only be employed once per page and should define the most important key phrase. H2 and h3 tags call attention to other important information within the content.

9. H1 tag should be employed once per page. H2 and h3 can occur many times to emphasize key terms but usually in section headers.
10. H1 tags should not be the company name if the company name already has prime placement in the domain name. Exceptions to this can be an "about" page or "contact us" page.

Keep an eye out for an upcoming webinar from R2i on how to determine the right keywords to get your website in front of your targeted audience.

Homepage URLs

There should be only one resolving URL for the homepage of a website. The resolving homepage that a user types into the address bar is often what we suggest. However, asp.net sites function differently. When navigating to the homepage from within the site, the homepage sometimes defaults to www.domain.com/index.aspx or /default. Search engines see this as a different web page. Furthermore, this issue applies to the www. vs. non www. versions of a homepage (canonicalization). Search engines see multiple versions of content and don't know which one to index. Therefore both of these issues can result in duplicate content problems. Until recently, this could be fixed with a server side

redirect, but now you can at least specify a preferred homepage in Google (with 65% market share of search) using Webmaster Tools (signup and installation of code is required) or a snippet of code to specify the canonical in the document head.

11. There should be only one version of a homepage.
    a. A server side redirect could be applied to homepage "versions" and to the non www version of a site.
12. Specify your homepage within a Webmaster Tools account.

Subpage URLs

The URLs are a great place to house keywords and are readable to SEs when structured properly if your CMS allows URL restructuring.

13. Avoid use of characters such as "_" to separate variables. If variables are to be separated, they should be separated by "-" or "+".
14. With dynamic content, re-write URLs that contain long character strings and ids that may include characters such as "?".
15. Include key terms within your URL that match other targeted key terms and accurately describe the content on the page.

Download the printable SEO Cheat Sheet to get started today

Homepage and Subpage Content

Content is important not only to help users determine the usefulness of your site but also to serve as a place to house targeted keywords. If little content exists or is embedded within images, it's more difficult to repeat key terms at an optimal level. In addition, the meta keywords, page title and keywords in the description should describe content on the page. There is no magical amount of content. However, SEO and users favor usable content where a theme is present and understood. Although search engines can't read, the algorithm can pick up on character patterns.

16. Include top targeted keywords. No more than 2-5 per page should be targeted. The homepage can have a few more but variations and plurals are not needed as they dilute the keyword density.
17. Terms should repeat within context of all available outlets (URL, page title, meta keywords, meta description, content and tags) no more than 3-5 times for optimal keyword repetition.

18. Content should be readable and of value to the user. Connect with user's situation or goals in first sentence.
    a. Use conversational text wherever possible, using non-technical language, to engage the audience.
    b. Break up longer scrolling pages with clear type hierarchies and use of <h2-3> tags.
19. Limit the amount and variety of content on a page. If there is a large amount of content, consider making it a long annotated list with key terms.

HTML Tags for Key Term Emphasis and Differentiation

Replace bold and italics tags with more search engine friendly HTML tags

There are a variety of HTML tags that can be employed to further draw attention to key terms. These tags, when employed properly, can be a great way to add emphasis, add keywords, and define objects. These tags include, but are not limited to: alt tags (<alt>), strong indicators (), emphasis (), acronym and abbreviation tags.
Alt tags are descriptions of images and are a place where one can add key terms that describe the image's purpose within context. The strong indicator is a more search engine-friendly application of bold and should replace current <b> tags where applicable. The emphasis tag is a more search engine friendly version of italics and should be used in place of the <i> tag. The acronym and abbreviation tags can be used to define any acronyms or abbreviations that could be used, such as search engine optimization to define "SEO" or Maryland to define "MD."

20. Employ the strong and emphasis indicators to words within the content that you would like to add emphasis to in order to draw SE attention.
21. Employ the alt tag to all images and try to describe the image using key terms.
22. Employ the acronym and abbreviation tags to define acronyms and abbreviations.

Anchor Text

Anchor text is the text used to describe a link (internal linking, inlinks) and is the clickable text you see when a link is displayed on a page. Often, regarding those who link to a site, it's the company name and not the company's function that describes a link externally. Anchor text also applies internally, but recent tests have shown that it is not as important as links to your website from an external source. Although companies typically have little control over how other websites link to them, a

company can gain control when exchanging or requesting links within a link campaign. In addition, if your company is a service provider that stipulates client/partner linking, choose text that is key term rich in the contractual agreement.

23. Should be the most important key term for that page.
24. Should not be overdone to avoid penalties.
25. Can be requested when discussing links or reciprocal links.
    a. Ask partners, clients and vendors to not only link to the homepage but also to interior pages where it makes sense to do so.

Robots.txt

This is a root file that can be created to disallow access to search engines for non-relevant pages that take up valuable crawl budget. Instead of search engines crawling non-essential pages, disallowing access enables SEs to focus on pages with important content. Often, robots.txt can be applied to a website's Privacy Policy, Terms of Use, member login pages and non-essential dynamic pages associated with a store. One thing to note, however, is that items in this file (file names) can be seen by others who type www.domain.com/robots.txt into a browser. Thus, page names reflecting content a company wants to keep private, such as a new product launch, should not be in robots.txt.

26. Should be a file in the root of the site.
    a. Items in Robots.txt are case sensitive.
27. Noindex should be added to each page that should not be indexed.
28. Private pages should simply employ noindex with rel=nofollow for links to those private pages.

Flash

Although rules are evolving for this item, typically, Flash or Flex content is not indexed accurately as there is no way for SEs to determine the actual content. With the recent Adobe/Google understanding, text patterns in Flash can be picked up by SEs but an all image Flash piece or image splash page is still a detriment to search.

29. Use SWFObject script for readability when a user does not have the ability to view Flash.
30. Use captioning for accessibility. Accessibility rules closely parallel organic SEO rules.

Other accessibility tools can be found through Adobe. Think of a search engine as visually impaired. Some 508 Compliance accessibility rules aimed to assist those who are visually impaired also help search engines determine the theme of the animated content that you're displaying.

About R2integrated

R2integrated, a leading Internet marketing company, provides platforms and services that enable companies to more quickly and easily distribute critical marketing communications (publish), implement rich internet applications (engage), leverage social media and social networks (connect), and derive critical metrics on performance (understand). R2i technology empowers companies to create and manage the dynamic media and understand the social interactions that drive brand value and sales in the age of peer-to-peer communications.