SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION PROCESS OVERVIEW

You may have recently begun to hear the word optimization bandied about in discussion of search engines. Optimization is the process of making your site "search engine friendly" so that search engines will be more likely to rank your site highly in search results. With so many millions of websites competing to be found via search engines, it is wise to make it as easy as possible for a search engine to recognize that your site is a valuable match.

Many people new to the world of search engines assume that there is a significant human aspect involved to search engine rankings. That is, they think that a team of people review websites and then ranks the website accordingly. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Search engines are purely automated things. Google indexes over 4 billion web pages. It would be impossible to employ enough people to categorize so many. Therefore, search engines have automated computer programs called "search engine spiders" that look at each website and determine under which search terms it should appear.

So what exactly is done during optimization to make a site more search engine friendly? The search engine marketing process is multifaceted, and not easily pinned down to one or two steps. Because of this, optimization is often viewed as a vague, almost nebulous process, but its many aspects are actually well-defined. Optimization is something that involves the entire website: its design, marketing strategy, copy, structure and popularity.

There are several steps that go into the optimization of a website. Following is a brief overview only. It is not supposed to be a complete guide, but rather a general introduction to help newcomers understand the basic aspects of search engine optimization.

KEYWORD ANALYSIS

First, you should determine which keywords and phrases you wish to be optimized for. That is, when searching for your product or service, what search terms will your potential website visitors use? What words will they type into the search box? If you sell stuffed toys, will they type "stuffed toys" or "plush animals"? The phrase most often used could vary slightly but return quite different results, such as "used socks online" and "online used socks." So you will really want to put yourself into the mind of your customer. Once you have decided which keywords to aim for, you will want to include these key phrases and terms in your content.

DESIGN FROM THE BOTTOM UP

You get better results if you design with optimization in mind from the beginning. If you incorporate optimization into the very construction of your website, it is much more seamless and genuine than if you build your site and then try to tweak it for optimization. The most search engine friendly sites are straightforward sites built from basic, non-frame, non-Flash, HTML documents. Your site should also use basic HTML links (not links in dropdown flash menus or hidden in fancy animations) as these are most easily followed and indexed by search engines.

CONTENT

The web is a text-based medium, and search engines do not see graphics. Think about it: How is a computer program supposed to tell the difference between a picture of Willie Nelson and field of daisies? It can't. A computer program such as a search engine spider can only see and interpret text. So give them lots of it. Creating large websites with lots of great copy is one of the best ways to get ranked well in search engines. Not only do search engines appreciate the extra text, but people will be more likely to link to your site if it's got depth and plenty of information. This linking will help your link popularity, discussed below.

BEHIND THE SCENES: CODING, BASIC META TAGS, ALT TAGS, TITLES AND HEADERS

Yeah, what? Alt and META tags? As it turns out, optimization goes beyond your website copy into its coding. Your code can be optimized independently from your copy, with its own little tweaks and tricks. Your HTML can be really specific, with descriptions of your pictures and specific heading tags that make your code more visible to a search engine. This aspect of optimization is perhaps one of the most hotly debated and is sometimes the most overemphasized. The behind-the-scenes aspect of optimization is definitely important, but it is not the end-all answer to optimizing a website.

LINK POPULARITY

You can determine how popular you are by how many people would list you as a friend, and the same goes with websites. Search engines notice how many other sites have links to your site. This has unfortunately led to the rise of some "link farms," sites with no real content, just lists and lists of links. Link farms are considered "spam" by search engines. On the Internet, "spam" does not mean "spiced ham" but rather "undesirable and annoying stuff," which could describe the way some people think about spiced ham anyways. In any case, you do not want to be associated with a link farm or any sort of spam whatsoever because search engines don't like it. So, don't just link with anybody. Find some fellow, quality website that deals with similar content and see if you two can share links with each other.

SEARCH ENGINE AND DIRECTORY REGISTRATION

Once you have your site all pretty and optimized, you have to make sure search engines know you exist before you can hope to show up in their Top Ten ranking for your particular niche. As long as you have at least one quality link pointing to your site, search engines such as Google are more likely to pick up your site. To speed up the process, many people opt to submit their website to search engines and directories.

Some directories allow you to pay for inclusion, such as Yahoo that charges a flat fee for the year. DMOZ is another important directory. Their submission is free, but they can be very exclusive. When submitting to any directory, you will want to adhere to their submission rules exactly. Directory listings such as these will not only help searchers find you directly, but they will help with your link popularity as well.

Many search engines such as Google will not allow you to pay for inclusion. You can, however, submit to Google which will add your website to a queue which Google maintains and periodically trolls electronically.

Now, keep in mind, being submitted to a search engine such as Google will not automatically put your website in the top ten. This will merely include you somewhere in the billions upon billions of possible results. Getting ranked in the top ten under your chosen key phrases can only be accomplished through optimization. The two processes (submission and optimization) should be combined in your marketing efforts.

It should be noted is that there is a right way and a wrong way to do optimization, and if you or the company you hire does not follow the proper rules, your site could be banned for life from some of the most popular search engines available, which is suicide for your traffic. So, in order to make sure that everything is done correctly, you should know the proper processes involved. Do not allow any spamming, any connection to link farms, or any other shady dealings that you would feel uncomfortable explaining to your clients or to search engines. Remember, search engines, and more importantly your customers, are looking for useful content as the optimal result. So build your website with your visitors in mind, and it will be easier to succeed in your optimization as well.

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