

How to Implement SEO to Improve Search Traffic

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Defining SEO

Search engines are an indispensable part of the Internet. According to online statistics¹, Google logs 2 billion searches a day, which implies that many people rely on search engines for information. Websites that are displayed on the first page of search results—and thus have high search rankings—receive significantly more visits than those that rank low for the same sets of keywords. More visits, in turn, may translate into a higher number of customers for the former. Organic search traffic therefore contributes significantly to online marketing success and business growth. Companies have strong incentives to improve their rankings, thus giving rise to the term SEO, search engine optimization.

There are two types of search results—organic and paid search. Organic results are gathered by search engines' web crawlers and ranked according to relevance to the search terms. A website that contains fresh, authoritative, and keyword-relevant content may rank high for specific keywords at no cost. In contrast, paid results are listings that require a fee for the search engine to display their links for particular keywords. Paid search can become an ongoing expense, and a company loses traffic as soon as it stops paying. Organic search not only is free but also helps a company accumulate its online visibility. Since search engines record ranking history, a company can always improve its website ranking by building on previous content. Also, most people click on organic search results instead of paid advertisements, giving a business even more incentives to focus on organic search.

How to rank high on search engines, however, is rather complicated and constantly changing. Many factors contribute to the quality of a company website as perceived by a search engine. Different search engines such as Google and Bing may rank the same website differently because they prioritize those factors differently, not mentioning they update their algorithms constantly. Most factors that contribute to high search rankings, however, can be controlled and grouped into three categories: keywords, on-page SEO, and off-page SEO.

Keyword Selection

Keywords are words that a company website wants to be associated with on search engines. A website that optimizes for certain keywords appears in search results when these keywords are searched. They are important because they convey a business searchers' intent, interest, or need. To attract potential customers instead of random visitors, a company needs to understand what keywords potential buyers use to find the kinds of products or services it provides. Keyword selection is therefore key to a company's search ranking.

¹ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_people_use_the_search_engine_'Google'_everyday_day

To identify keywords customers use to find its products or services, a business needs to brainstorm customer needs. A company can use three methods to understand customers' perception of its products or services: web analytics, customer survey, and competitors' content. It can review current web analytics to see what keywords that bring searchers to the website are used most frequently. Customer interviews are another effective way of containing this information. A business can ask what features, functions, or advantages customers associate with its products. Researching competitors' website content also helps a company understand what keywords their competitors are trying to rank for, which may in turn lead the company to brainstorm what keywords can differentiate it from competitors or are worth competing for.

After compiling a keyword glossary from research, a company can narrow its selection based on four criteria: category, popularity, competition, and relevance. For category, a company can divide its keyword collection into verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Since people tend to remember a company by no more than a few words in total, a company should focus on one to two keywords from each category per page. On the other hand, keywords from different categories may be used together to form a unique brand.

Popularity, competition, and relevance also help determine which keywords to use. Popularity refers to how many businesses want to be associated with a keyword. The more businesses rank for a keyword, the more popular and thus competitive it becomes. Using popular keywords might not necessarily help improve a businesses' ranking since it needs to compete with many other websites for them. On the other hand, a company should avoid using words that are not competitive at all since non-competitive words tend to be rarely searched. It is therefore important to find words that both uniquely describe a company's services and are commonly used. Specific, long-tail phrases are an effective solution. Long-tail keywords are more specific and target less competitive niche markets instead of highly competitive broad keywords. Long-tail phrases containing commonly used words may significantly improve a website's search ranking.

On-Page SEO

On-page search engine optimization is another major contributor to higher search rankings. On-page SEO is the act of optimizing specific keywords on the most noticeable places of a website and making it search-engine friendly. An optimized website makes it easy for search engines to find and revisit it, crawl links, and read keyword phrases. Four elements, in turn, contribute to on-page SEO.

The first element is a site's "crawlability." The term refers to how easily a search engine can extract new content from a website. To make the website crawlable, a company should use text links—hyperlinks that contain texts—in navigation. Ajax, Javascript, and Flash are difficult to crawl, which means that search engines will display no results for a webpage containing content only in these formats. Yet eliminating content in these formats simply because of their low crawlability is unnecessary. Multi-media content can provide useful information that is searchable as long as a company uses relevant text elsewhere on the site.

URLs also determine the crawlability of a site. A straightforward, concise URL containing keywords makes it easy for search engines to decipher what that page is about. In contrast, a URL filled with question marks, numbers, and phrases irrelevant to the page content is less capable of providing useful information and thus less favored by search engines when people search for content related to that page. It is also important to have a consistent URL to accrue SEO credit for a specific domain—search engines may not recognize that two slightly different URLs lead to the same webpage.

The second element is search visibility, which refers to whether search engines recognize the existence of a website. Changes in website design, content management system, or just one character in URL can destroy search visibility. When undertaking content migration or URL update, a company can take several precautions to avoid a drop in search visibility. It can map old URLs onto new ones, identify top inbound link sources and ask them to change links if necessary, and build new inbound links to the new URLs. A business can also employ permanent 301 redirects. A 301 redirect is the most efficient and search engine friendly method for webpage redirection. It enables a website to preserve its search engine ranking and thus visibility. A business should also monitor site analytics including 404 not found errors and possible fluctuations in search engine rankings. With careful management and design, a site can both maintain and increase search visibility.

Keyword optimization is the third contributing factor to on-page SEO. Once a company decides which keywords to use, it needs to use them in the right places to help search engines identify them as keywords. According to a survey of over 50 CEOs who have extensive knowledge of online marketing, keywords placed in the following locations have strong positive correlations with search rankings:

- Page Title: Defines the title of a page. Keywords preferably should be used up front.
- Name of a Root Domain (e.g. keyword.com)
- Anchor Text in Links (e.g. www.abc.com/keyword 1+keyword 2)
- Meta Description: often appears in Google search results to describe a link
- Alt Text: text that describes an image

Of course, keywords also need to appear in the body content on a company's website to reflect that these keywords authentically summarize information on a company website.

A side incentive for optimizing keywords is that they not only help with ranking but also may increase the click-through rate on search engines. The more keywords in a link description match with search queries, the more relevant that link appears to searchers and the higher the click-through rate. Businesses should be wary of using all keywords on one page, however,. Using all keywords in the meta keyword tag (a place that allows a business to provide additional text for crawler-based search engines) reveals to competitors what keywords a company is trying to rank for and might lead them to compete for the same words. It is generally a good practice to

focus on one keyword phrase or two per page and ensure that each page has a unique title tag, which reinforces the use of different keywords on different pages.

Off-Page SEO

Off-page SEO, or link-building, is another decisive factor in search engine optimization. In fact, link-building constitutes 75% of what helps a site rank high in search engines. Link-building does not refer to creating links on a business's own website, however. Inbound links are the crucial contributor to improvement of a website's search ranking.

Inbound links refer to links embedded in the content of a website that link to another website which, in this case, refers to a company's website. A high-quality inbound link is one embedded in an authoritative and relevant website. For instance, a link from a page on New York Times that discusses video production is considered high-quality to a video production blog. The higher the quantity or quality of inbound links a page receives, the more credibility search engines assign to that page and the higher its ranking.

To acquire more inbound links, a business needs to first understand why others are willing to contribute links to its website. A website is worth mentioning and linking to only when it provides resources or valuable content. Content creation is therefore important to link-building. What constitutes good content for link-building is no different from that in general. Of course, the likelihood of acquiring inbound links increases with content promotion and optimization besides creation.

Inbound links from third-party sources are not the only type of links that boost search ranking. After all, it takes time to build a reputation of good content supply to draw inbound links. A short-run solution for a business is to provide "inbound" links to itself: cross-linking internally. Content promotion on social media utilizes links to direct interested readers to the website, and embedding links to other relevant pages on a company website may also add "link love." Businesses should prioritize inbound links over self-linking because the latter is not as valuable. When they do utilize self-linking, it is also important to appear authentic. It is appropriate to include links to pages where viewers of a certain page may find more value. Otherwise, the appearance of self-promotion may dispel visitors from the website, leave them a bad impression, and cause them to never revisit.

Measuring Results

As usual, measurement is indispensable to understanding the effectiveness of a business's SEO performance. Metrics to consider include indexed pages, crawling errors and webmaster tool reports, site rankings, inbound links in terms of quantity, quality, and longevity, keyword referrals from search, and many more. Using customer management system, businesses can track their search traffic on a monthly or daily basis. Only by watching the trends of changes in search traffic and corresponding lead conversion can a business visualize the effectiveness of search engine optimization in driving business growth.

Appendix



Figure 1.1 Organic Search Traffic Measured by Month

TRACK KEYWORDS?	SEARCH ENGINE	KEYWORD	VISITS	VISIT TO LEAD	LEADS	LEAD TO CUSTOMER	CUSTOMERS	VISIT TO CUSTOMER	LEADS
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	inbound marketing university	17	35%	6	0%	0	0%	■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	inbound marketing	32	9.4%	3	0%	0	0%	■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	keyword grader	32	9.4%	3	0%	0	0%	■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	marketing webinars	36	8.3%	3	0%	0	0%	■
<input type="checkbox"/>	Google	free facebook webinars	3	67%	2	0%	0	0%	■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	free marketing webinar	3	67%	2	0%	0	0%	■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	free search engine submission	43	4.7%	2	0%	0	0%	■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Google	free seo webinar	10	20%	2	0%	0	0%	■

Figure 1.2 Organic Search Traffic and Lead Conversion by Keyword Phrases

Review

1. What is SEO (search engine optimization) and why is it important?

- SEO refers to techniques to improve organic search ranking of a website. Most people rely on search engines for information, so ranking high helps a website obtain significantly more visits and strengthen its online brand.

2. What fundamentally contributes to SEO?

- On-page SEO: straightforward and concise URLs, search visibility by installing 301 permanent redirects during website redesign and ensuring unique URLs for specific webpages, and keyword optimization
- Off-page SEO: inbound links from third-party websites

3. What are the differences between organic and paid search and which one should businesses focus on?

- Organic search does not cost money and allows a business to accumulate visibility on search engines over time. Paid search can be costly and, when it is stopped, causes a business to lose the visibility it has paid to build.

4. Where can a business optimize keywords?

- Page title, meta keyword description, the name of a root domain, anchor text in links, alt text, and URL.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of long-tail keyword phrases?
2. What makes a long-tail keyword phrase effective?
3. What are some ways to add credibility to self-linking?
4. If a website does not rank well for particular keyword phrases, should it shift focus to entirely different keyword phrases that are less competitive? What other factors should a business consider?

Additional Resources

SEO Hub

<http://www.hubspot.com/search-engine-optimization-marketing-hub>

Class on Basic SEO Techniques

<http://inboundmarketing.com/university/seo-crash-course-to-get-found-gf102>

Class on Advanced SEO Techniques

<http://inboundmarketing.com/university/advanced-seo-tactics-on-beyond-keyword-research-gf401>

Free SEO Tools

<http://www.seomoz.org/tools>

Google's official guide to SEO for beginners

<http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2010/01/google-seo-resources-for-beginners.html>