

## Search engine positioning, optimisation and submission: a science or an art?

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**Positioning:** the process of ordering web sites or web pages by a search engine or a directory so that the most relevant sites appear first in the search results for a particular query.

**Optimisation:** the process of making something the best or most favourable.

**Submission:** submitted for processing and judgement.

**Science:** making empirical observations, proposing hypotheses to explain those observations, and testing those hypotheses in valid and reliable ways.

**Art:** a superior skill that you can learn by study and practice and observation.

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### INTRODUCTION

SEPOS services provide useful services for website owners, from writing copy to giving advice on site architecture and helping to find relevant directories to which a site can be submitted.

Organisations need to optimise their search engine positioning to acquire more customers or members sell more online and for many other reasons. There are nearly 1 billion people with Internet access. Almost 550 million searches are conducted worldwide on the Internet every day. 65% of searches involve research or reference information. 35% are commercial in nature. A searcher is proactively requesting information. They are already looking for what you offer. They are a live prospect.

Search engine optimization has become much more difficult in recent years. It is no longer sufficient to add a few META tags, submit your website, and wait for top placement.

Today, obtaining a top ranking with all of the major search sites is attained by only a very few companies, and maintaining a top ranking requires constant monitoring and rework. What was once thought of as "FREE" now has a relatively high cost (either in terms of time and effort or in terms of fees paid to professionals).

Factors contributing to increasing difficulty:

- As the Web continues to grow, so do the number of sites competing for top ranking on the same few critical keywords for each industry.
- There are more optimization professionals, using sophisticated tools to help companies achieve better positioning.
- New tools enable crawlers to access content that was previously hidden in dynamic content sites, thus increasing the number of total pages indexed.
- Search engines, directories and crawlers are becoming more sophisticated in how they index and categorize sites. Old tricks, which many people depended on, no longer work.



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For these reasons, most successful search engine marketing programs now involve both optimization and paid advertising. Search marketers must understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of SEPOS, paid inclusion, and paid listings, and should evaluate all three to see what best meets their needs. Most often, a blending of all of these methods yields the best results.

## ABOUT SEARCH

Recent research [“Into the mind of the searcher” from Enquiro Search Solutions] shows that search engines are much more likely to be used during the research or consideration phase of the buying cycle.

The search process is also complex as a typical search involves the search query being refined a number of times (generally becoming more specific) and the opportunity to introduce brand occurs early and repeatedly in the search funnel. The level of familiarity a searcher has with the product or potential vendors of the product affect searches. If there was a high level of familiarity, the searcher would often bypass search engines altogether and go right to a vendor’s site, or use a trusted vendor’s site in conjunction with a search engine. Interaction with search results early in the process can dramatically affect the search process, taking it in totally new directions. Confidence in search results reduces, the longer it takes a searcher to find what they are looking for.

### A search process

Awareness	8.7%
Consideration or Research	68.3%
Decision	42.6%
Purchase	28.2%

“Into the mind of the searcher” from Enquiro Search Solutions 2005

Unsurprisingly for big ticket purchases extensive research is done, often involving multiple online research sessions and repeated use of search engines. The search process and the queries used are usually much more involved and diverse than in smaller ticket purchases and the path to conversion is much longer and there is a higher likelihood that the conversion will happen offline.

Men make decisions faster, spend less time on sites, are more likely to have pre-established “favourite suppliers” that they use in the search process and show less resistance to sponsored listings. Women tended to be more deliberate in reading search results, spend more time with their searches and spend more time on sites before making decisions.

It would also appear that many searchers divide the search engine results page into distinct ‘mind-sections’, and many will ignore some of these sections completely. For example, it appears that for many people organic listings are frequently seen and sponsored links ‘blanked’. More research from Enquiro shows that the number one organic position receives 27.4% of all organic clicks, while 51% of all who click on paid results, pick the top paid search listing. This clearly shows that in paid search, you need your ad to be in the top position, while in organic, you can be in the top 3 to 5 results and still get a good share of the click-thrus.



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The same research shows that visibility dropped quickly with organic rankings, starting at a high of 100% for the top listing, dropping to 85% at the bottom of the “above the fold” listings, and then dropping dramatically below the fold from 50% at the top to 20% at the bottom.

The golden rule is, like property: location, location, and location.

When looking at the search results page, most users look for a number of specific items, at least one of which must be present to capture a click through. These items include the key phrase in the title or description, product information and trusted brand names and vendors.

Nearly 60% of users have a search engine of preference, but will use another engine if they're not satisfied with the results from the first engine. So, although users may give Google as their engine of preference, they may actually use another engine, such as Yahoo or MSN, for a significant percentage of their searches.

There is a 'big 3' in search:

Engine	Nielsen NetRatings	MediaMetrix	StatMarket
Google	39.4%	35%	32%
MSN	29.6%	15%	13%
Yahoo	30.4%	28%	36%

Source: Searchenginewatch.com March 2004

So it's important to get listed with them.

## WHAT TO DO

### In general, the following things will improve your search ranking:

- **Optimized page text.** Every page should be optimized for a few key search phrases. These are phrases that people actually use when searching for information related to that page.
- **Crawler friendly navigation.** Make sure a crawler can easily navigate your entire site. This is often accomplished by providing a secondary text-link navigation scheme.
- **In bound links from important sites.** Links to your website from important sites (such as the most popular directories) will boost your popularity ranking.
- **Proper use of META tags.** Write a unique and compelling Title for every web page. Include target phrases in each page's Title, Description and Keywords META Tags.
- **Search engine friendly website design.** Excessive use of design features that cause problems for crawlers (such as flash, frames, and dynamic content) will negatively impact your search engine visibility.

**In more detail these are the things to do and not to do but they are always in a state of flux, AS THINGS CHANGE:**

## ONPAGE

Crawlers read a site. This is what Google say about what they do when they crawl a site:



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**“Hypertext-Matching Analysis:** Google's search engine also analyzes page content. However, instead of simply scanning for page-based text (which can be manipulated by site publishers through meta-tags), Google's technology analyzes the full content of a page and factors in fonts, subdivisions and the precise location of each word. Google also analyzes the content of neighbouring web pages to ensure the results returned are the most relevant to a user's query.”

So, if you create a useful, information-rich site and write pages that clearly and accurately describe your content you're on your way to a good search engine ranking.

Make pages for users, not for search engines. Don't deceive your users, or present different content to search engines than you display to users. Make sure each page has a 'theme' that goes with the keyword(s) and that it is kept updated and 'fresh' by adding news, new links etc. regularly.

In the visible page text, include words users might choose as search query terms to find the information on your site. Think about the words users would type into a search engine to find your pages, and make sure that your page and site actually includes those words within it.

Make a site with a clear hierarchy and text links. Every page should be reachable from at least one static text link. Create a site that is fairly flat (i.e., each page is only one to three clicks away from the home page). Links embedded in menus, list boxes, and similar elements are not accessible to web crawlers unless they appear in your site map. Offer a site map to your users with links that point to the important parts of your site. If the site map is larger than 100 or so links, break the site map into separate pages.

Try to use text instead of images to display important names, content, or links. Web crawlers don't recognize text contained in images. Keep the text that you want indexed outside of images. For example, if you want your company name or address to be indexed, make sure it is displayed on your page outside of a company logo.

Put keyword(s) in the page name and in the page title. Use <h1> header tags placing the keyword within those tags. Place the keyword once at the very beginning of the copy, and once at the very end of the copy. Use subheadings and the <h2> header tag for them. In the body copy embolden, underline, or italicize the keywords of the webpage once. Try to mention each keyword as you are writing, but be sure to include at least one of the keywords per 1-2 paragraphs, depending on how large your page is, but don't force them in. Remember, make pages for users, not for search engines.

Use <alt> image tags and placing the keyword within that tag but do not 'spam'. Use the keyword in links to site pages (anchor text) and ensure that the filename linked to contains the keywords. Use hyphenated filenames, but not long ones.

If you decide to use dynamic pages (e.g. the URL contains asp, jsp, cfm etc), be aware that not every search engine spider crawls dynamic pages as well as static pages. However the good ones can as stated by Google: “we are able to index most types of pages and files with very few exceptions. File types we are able to index include: pdf, asp, jsp, html, shtml, xml, cfm, doc, xls, ppt, rtf, wks, lwp, wri, swf.” It helps to keep the parameters short and the number of them small.



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Limit all pages to a reasonable size. An HTML page with no pictures should be under 150 KB. Keep the links on a given page to a reasonable number (fewer than 100). Validate all links to all pages on site and off site. Ensure correct HTML.

## OFF PAGE

In general terms Google PageRank is measured by the number of websites and the "importance" of those websites that link to your website.

This is what Google have to say about it:

**“PageRank Technology:** PageRank performs an objective measurement of the importance of web pages by solving an equation of more than 500 million variables and 2 billion terms. Instead of counting direct links, PageRank interprets a link from Page A to Page B as a vote for Page B by Page A. PageRank then assesses a page's importance by the number of votes it receives.

PageRank also considers the importance of each page that casts a vote, as votes from some pages are considered to have greater value, thus giving the linked page greater value. Important pages receive a higher PageRank and appear at the top of the search results. Google's technology uses the collective intelligence of the web to determine a page's importance. There is no human involvement or manipulation of results, which is why users have come to trust Google as a source of objective information untainted by paid placement.”

In general terms then, the more websites that link to your website, the higher your PageRank will be based on the number and quality of links to you.

Make links with pages with the same or similar themes and page titles to yours and with similar keyword(s). Make links in HTML so that crawlers can read it easily. Make sure that your back-links anchor text accurately describes your site - use your keyword(s) and description. The PageRank of referring sites is important as is the way they place their links, the fewer links they have on a page and the higher up the page you are the better for you.

Get listings in relevant directories, worldwide ones such as DMOZ but also local ones too. Make sure you are in the correct category.

Live for a long time! Site age shows stability and helps.

Use relevant marketing programmes to drive site traffic. Bigger and more popular sites have, of course, more visitors that came from an 'authoritative' or 'relevant' referrer, using a relevant keyword and stay for a reasonable while because they find the site relevant.

Do allow search bots to crawl your sites without session ID's or arguments that track their path through the site. These techniques are useful for tracking individual user behaviour, but the access pattern of bots is entirely different. Using these techniques may result in incomplete indexing of your site, as bots may not be able to eliminate URLs that look different but actually point to the same page.



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Make sure your web server supports the If-Modified-Since HTTP header. This feature allows your web server to tell web crawlers whether your content has changed since we last crawled your site. Supporting this feature also saves you bandwidth and overhead.

Make use of the robots.txt file on your web server. This file tells crawlers which directories can or cannot be crawled. Make sure it's current for your site so that you don't accidentally block the web crawlers.

If your company uses a content management system, make sure that the system can export your content so that search engine spiders can crawl your site.

## **WHAT NOT TO DO**

### **ONPAGE**

Avoid tricks intended to improve search engine rankings. A good rule of thumb is whether you'd feel comfortable explaining what you've done to a website that competes with you. Another useful test is to ask, "Does this help my users? Would I do this if search engines didn't exist?" For example pages that give the search engine different content than what the end-user sees are 'spamming' the search engines as are many similar pages. They will, eventually, not benefit the site. In the opposite vein over optimising everything will probably attract penalties too. Also don't set up sites with numerous, unnecessary virtual hostnames or use other methods to artificially inflate search engine ranking

Don't participate in link schemes designed to increase your site's ranking or PageRank. In particular, avoid links to web spammers or "bad neighbourhoods" on the web as your own ranking may be affected adversely by those links.

Avoid hidden text or hidden links such as single pixel links. You should use only text and links that are visible to users. Don't present text only in graphic form as it won't get indexed. Don't employ cloaking or sneaky redirects. Don't load pages with irrelevant words. Don't create multiple pages, sub-domains, or domains with substantially duplicate content.

Avoid "doorway" pages created just for search engines, or other "cookie cutter" approaches such as affiliate programs with little or no original content. Avoid refresh through pages but when page locations change set up the page's original URL to direct people to the new page, and tell them whether the move is permanent or temporary.

Avoid loading pages with irrelevant words in an attempt to increase a page's keyword density. This includes stuffing ALT tags that users are unlikely to view. Avoid techniques to artificially increase the number of links to your page, such as link farms and excessively cross-linking sites to inflate a site's apparent popularity.

Don't misuse competitor names/products or steal images/text blocks from another domain.

Avoid dynamic pages, excessive Javascript and Flash, frames and HTML code errors. If fancy features such as Javascript, cookies, session ID's, frames, DHTML or Flash keep you from seeing all of your site in a text browser, then search engine spiders may have trouble crawling your site.



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## **OFFPAGE**

Make sure you link with mostly with relevant sites. Non-relevant sites (e.g. hotels linking with web design, farming linking with car dealers) probably don't help but some also probably don't harm.

Make sure that you don't 'overgrow' your back-links too fast. How many webmasters can you really persuade to link to you in a day or week??

Make sure you have some links. No links to your site is a disaster as you must have at least one incoming link from some website somewhere, that Google is aware of, to remain in their index.

Don't buy links and don't get too many too soon.

Don't cloaking by presenting one webpage to the search engine spider, and another webpage to everybody else. You will be banned.

Don't go for links from 'bad neighbourhoods', such as participating in free-for-all link schemes and many affiliates programmes, perhaps even web rings.

Don't go for massive cross-linking from the same IP address it at the very least looks like 'spamming'.

Don't have an unreliable server. You need 99.9999% uptime. This is the worst reason to get dropped – because you just aren't there!

And the answer to Search engine positioning, optimisation and submission: a science or an art?

## **BOTH.**