

Top 10 Tips

Search engine optimisation

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the art of making your website as search engine-friendly as possible, so that it appears higher up in the search engine results pages, and stands out more than the competition.

1. Know your audience.

While SEO is incorporated as part of the design process, it's also key to your company's marketing activities, and as such, you must know who your message is aimed at. Knowing your audience allows you to produce content that will speak to them effectively – and this means you can identify keywords, which are critical to any SEO strategy. Know also what language they speak – if you anticipate doing business with non-English speaking users, make sure to have well-translated content and keywords. Most search engines can deliver results in more than one language, but sites can be submitted directly to regional engines, such as www.google.co.uk or www.google.ca, so you'll know your site is visible to certain segments of the market.

2. Know your keywords.

Your keywords will summarise the most important concepts relating to your company and the services you offer. Imagine a search on a keyword as the user asking, 'Do you do this?' - you want to confidently say, 'yes, we do'. Choose keywords not just for your company in general, but for each individual page of content – this means you'll have site-level and page-level keywords.

3. Write your content.

Having identified your keywords, now is the time to write or edit your site's content utilising these words and phrases. Not only will this make the content itself more relevant to your users, but the appropriate usage of keywords will increase your site's ranking in the search results. Two or three uses of a keyword or phrase per page is about the right kind of density, but remember that what's critical is making sure your content is clear and readable. Also, make sure that key phrases stay intact: having **web** and **design** appear separately is no good if you want users searching for **web design** to find you.

4. SEO is a team sport.

Tight, efficient coding makes your site better in every way, so it pays to have a strong technical team behind you. Likewise, it's good to have on board people who know how to write web content to make sure it's both relevant and optimised. Many SEO techniques are a combination of editorial and technical refinements to your site, so be aware that many different factors can improve a site's visibility.

5. Technical tip: Consider your sitemap and site structure.

Not only does well thought-out information architecture mean a more streamlined and intuitive experience for your users, it makes the site easier to index. Your sitemap should be linked to from every page on the site; not only will this aid user accessibility, it will make it easier for web crawlers (automated browsing programs, such as Googlebot) to index the site.

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6. Technical tip: Make everything visible to search engines.

Web crawlers don't just look at the body text of your site: as search engines have become more refined and powerful, they are able to scan HTML elements as well as content. Greater weight is given to keywords found in headings such as (<h1>) or bold text () than in plain text; likewise, if the keyword is in the page title or the domain name itself, it will be more significant still. Remember to give images alt tags, as this will aid accessibility as well as giving search engines to look for in your site.

7. Editorial tip: Be descriptive.

Use the meta description element of a page to provide a brief, paragraph-length description of the page, making sure to include the pertinent keywords. The meta description will be the brief summary that appears under the link to your page in the search results, and the more relevant and appealing this is to your potential customers, the more likely you are to get that click.

8. Editorial tip: Give each page in your site a title.

Be sure to use the title tag in your page's code: this will be the link that appears on the search results page, so it will be the first thing a potential customer of yours reads. Think of it as your 'open for business' sign! It's your chance to make a good first impression, so make it count – it should be concise and compelling. Naturally, it will need to contain the most relevant keyword for the page, and it should be phrased in such a way as to make it stand out from the competition.

9. Be mindful of the dark side.

Avoid using 'black hat' techniques to try to boost your search rankings. Using underhanded things like keyword stuffing, meta refresh and doorway pages may offer results in the short term, but gaming the system like this could lead to your site being excluded from a search engine's results – and if you are excluded by Google, who have around two-thirds of the market share of searches, then your web presence will be all but gone. SEO is a long-term process of refinement that aims to provide long-term results – don't be seduced by the dark side!

10. Finally, remember that content is key.

SEO is about making your site as good as it can be for your users, then polishing it such that it climbs the search rankings. When other web users become aware of your site, and start linking to it, your ranking will increase further. A key part of Google's search algorithm is PageRank, which is based on the number of ingoing links a site has from other places (each link acts like a 'vote' for your site). Naturally, it takes time to develop your web presence, but be patient: if you build it, they will come.

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