

A Common Sense approach to Search Engine Optimisation

(or "Search Engine Optimization" for our friends across the pond.)

One of the questions we get asked most - if not the most common - is "how do I get my website to come up top at Google". The purpose of this article is to look at what can be done, what can't, and why this is often the wrong question to be asking in the first place.

What does a search engine do?

Let's start at the very beginning. Why do people visit search engines in the first place? It might seem like a silly question, but you'd be surprised just how much search engine advice makes absolutely no sense when you think things through from the start.

When you visit a search engine such as Google or Yahoo, you do so because you're looking for some information. You'll enter some keywords which you think relate to the subject in hand - and you'll probably make a few attempts with different sets of keywords until you get the information you want.

The important point is that what you are looking for is information, and the search engine's job is to find it. Therefore, above all else, content is king. If you want someone to find your site, give them something worth finding!



How do search engines work?

Have you ever just sat at the computer and spent a few hours "browsing" the web? Starting somewhere you know - maybe a well known site like www.bbc.co.uk - and then just followed links from one place to another and discovered sites you never knew existed? Well, in a nutshell, that's what search engines spend their free time doing. Starting where they know and following every link they can find looking for new information. As they find it they "index" it (that is, they remember which words and phrases they've seen where) so that they can direct searchers to relevant pages.

In practise this alone would tend to give poor results, so search engines use a range of additional techniques to put good content higher up the results listing than poor content. This ranges from analysing the content in more detail than just looking at the individual words in isolation, looking at hints given by the site authors (see META tags), and looking at site popularity (for example how many other sites link to it).

By learning exactly what the search engines do it is, of-course, possible to fool them into rating your site higher than they should, but remember that their goal is to help people find relevant information, and they are wise to most tricks and the engines get cleverer all the time. So don't waste time trying to fool them into giving you a good rating; do the work to deserve a good rating instead - that way you'll get good rankings and keep them.

What can't search engines do?

Search engines are computers, and not humans. One day (no doubt) they'll be cleverer than we are, but for the time being they take shortcuts, and if you don't think about them when you design your website you might find that they cannot find all the wonderful information you've written.

A good way to lose a search engine is to put useful information in images, which computers can't read. This is also a good way to make sure blind or partially sighted visitors can't read your site, so it's always a good idea to provide the same information in a text form that screen reading software can understand.

Frames can be used to hide your site from some search engines, although it's possible to work around this problem.



www.stamfordtradefair.co.uk is an example of a frame based site we developed which also provides the information that search engines need to navigate, just to prove it can be done. JavaScript is another way to confuse a search engine. JavaScript-based links to pop-up

windows, for example, have their uses, but don't expect a search engine to follow them.

Spelling can be a headache as well. Obviously it helps to get it right, so that there is a better chance of people who spell their search words correctly finding you. Search engines like Google will automatically spell-check search queries so this makes it even more important, since someone searching for a wrongly spelt word may well have it corrected for them before they find you. Also remember that Americans in particular spell a lot of things wrongly, sorry differently, so keep that in mind too.

Can you guarantee me a top 10 listing?

Simple answer - no. Lots of people seem to offer it; presumably they never get more than ten customers between them for any set of keywords. (Otherwise, what would they sell the eleventh?)

Returning to where we started: content is king. No amount of work by a search engine optimisation company can compensate for poor content (although they can help if you have good content which is not being seen).

How many search engines should I register with?

Firstly, you should accept that the major search engines are the only ones that matter. Registering with a thousand engines might seem like a good idea but since nobody uses most of them it is meaningless.

Secondly, registering with search engines is little more than a hint that they should take a look at your site; registering repeatedly has little effect and has no guarantee of getting you listed.

With that in mind, get registered with the top sites (although we don't think that the sites which charge for registration offer any significant value for money, as no listing is guaranteed as a result). Meanwhile, remember that the other things in this article are more important.



How else should I get people to look at my site, then?

Search engines have their place, but don't forget the obvious options - like word of mouth.

Tell people your web address on your business cards and promotional material, and give people a reason to visit. Consider putting your catalogue online, for example, and sending out small samplers rather than sending the whole thing out on paper. Put newsletters and other useful information online, and mention it to people when they call you.

Above all, have reasonable expectations

Having a website with a top search engine listing almost certainly won't suddenly generate more business than you know what to do with - any more than sending out 10,000 promotional letters would generate 10,000 sales.

A good website will generate sales leads (and, if you have online ordering, actual sales). A good website will also help to cement relationships and build trust and understanding.

Just as important: a bad website will undo all the good work you do in other areas. Getting people to your site is one thing; keeping them there is another. Any decent search engine will work for people using Macs and Unix systems as well as PCs, and Netscape, Opera and others as well as Internet Explorer. Having found your site there, will those same people be able to view your site when they get to it?



To put it another way...

If search engine optimisation is important, then Web Site Optimisation is essential. So:

- Make sure your website has the information people are looking for
- Make sure anyone can access it, whatever the type of computer or browser
- Make sure any search engine can access it, without getting stuck at frames, images or JavaScript.
- Then, and only then, worry about getting search engines looking at them.