

# Search engine optimisation

**Search engines are perhaps the number one way people locate information on the Internet.**

They can be a major source of traffic for your website. If you sell online, they can provide a steady stream of paying customers too:

This briefing explains:

- What search engine optimisation is.
- Targeting search terms.
- On- and off-site optimisation.
- The risks of search engine optimisation.

## 1 Search engine optimisation explained

**1.1 Search engine optimisation (SEO) involves improving the performance of your website in search engines.**

- Websites which are ranked highly on search engine results pages receive more clicks and more traffic.
- The top three results get most clicks. After that, the number of clicks falls rapidly.
- SEO aims to improve the ranking of your website when users search for relevant things.  
For instance, a wedding planning company might use SEO to appear top of the results when people search on Google for 'wedding planner'.

**1.2 When you perform a search online, a large number of factors influence the order of results.**

- Your SEO strategy should target these factors to help improve the ranking of your

website.

- The main search engines include Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft Live Search. They rank sites in slightly different ways, but the basic rules are the same for all of them.

**1.3** SEO is complex, but the **basics** are easy to learn.

- Many websites implement the fundamental elements of SEO badly.
- By following some simple guidelines (see **3**), you can usually see improvements in your search rankings.
- Once the foundations are laid, you can continually tweak your site to see improvements.  
This detailed work is often best done by an SEO specialist. See **6**.

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#### 1.4 The best SEO strategies are **highly targeted**.

- Your aim is to rank highly when people enter search terms which are relevant to your business.  
This makes it more likely that the people who visit your site will be interested in what you have to offer.
- To succeed, you should target very specific search terms with your website. See 2.

#### 1.5 Your SEO strategy will **take time** to show results.

- Your site should climb the rankings gradually as search engines update their indexes.
- Three months is a reasonable period to measure results over, though new sites with poor rankings will take much longer to show significant improvement.

## 2 Targeting

The first stage of an SEO campaign is to decide which search terms to target.

#### 2.1 You should pick words and phrases which are **highly relevant** to what your business offers.

- The aim of SEO is to drive relevant traffic to your site.
- You need to target the search terms you think people interested in your business would use.

#### 2.2 **Brainstorm** a list of relevant search terms.

- Think about what your business sells, and the types of customer you target.
- Do not restrict yourself at this stage. Make a list of any words or phrases you think might be relevant.
- The list might include product types and names or words which relate to your target audience.
- This exercise is best done in a group. Try word association, writing down the first things that come to mind.
- You can also use an online thesaurus for inspiration.
- Aim to produce a list of words and phrases, 100-200 altogether.

#### 2.3 **Narrow** your list of terms.

- You need to assign a priority to each search term you have generated.
- Your aim is to identify search terms which

have high search volumes (lots of people enter them into search engines).

- You are also looking for terms which few websites rank well for.  
It is easier to rank highly for these low competition terms.
- #### 2.4 Use **online tools** to identify the search terms with the highest volumes.
- Useful tools include Keyword Discovery ([www.keyworddiscovery.com](http://www.keyworddiscovery.com)), Wordtracker ([www.wordtracker.com](http://www.wordtracker.com)) and the Google keyword tool (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>).
  - Each of these tools allows you to input search terms.  
They will then display the number of times those search terms were entered into various search engines.
  - The figures supplied by these tools are indicative, but generally reflect the way people use search engines.
  - These tools will also supply a list of suggested search terms.  
This may give you further ideas about which terms to target.
  - As you work through your list of search terms, record the volume of searches next to each one.  
If you do this using a spreadsheet, you can sort the terms by volume too.

#### 2.5 Get a feel for the amount of **competition** for each search term.

- High volume search terms often have many websites competing for the top rankings.
- When competition is extremely high, it may be impossible for smaller, newer websites to get near the top.
- You should check competition levels for the highest volume search terms on your list.
- Some online tools (like Wordtracker) give you a score which indicates the level of competition.
- Alternatively, enter the exact search term into a search engine like Google. Search engines highlight keywords in the results in bold.
- As a general rule, if most of the results on the first two pages contain the exact search term, competition is high.

#### 2.6 Build a **final list of target search terms**, ordered by priority.

- Low competition, high volume search terms are most important.  
You should target these because they can send significant traffic to your site.
- Prioritise relevant search terms with low

competition over less relevant terms with large search volumes.

Your aim is to attract relevant visitors.

Having a lower number of visitors is fine, as long as more of them buy from you.

- Do not disregard search terms just because they have a low volume of searches. If the terms are very relevant to what you offer, keep them on your list.

### 2.7 Use **website analytics**.

- By checking website analytics information you can see which target keywords bring up your site in the search engine results.
- You can also use it to identify new keywords that you may not have thought of.

## 3 On your site

Once you have a list of target search terms, you should optimise the pages on your website for these terms.

### 3.1 **Match** pages on your website to search terms in your list.

- The more specific your targeting, the more likely you are to see results.
- Aim to target two or three search terms with each page on your website.

### 3.2 Incorporate your target search terms into page **metadata**.

- Metadata includes the page title, description and keywords.
- Page titles and descriptions have a significant influence on search rankings.
- Try to include your exact target phrases in each element.

### 3.3 Ensure the **URL** of each page includes a target search term.

- Search engines check words in the URL for relevance.
- For instance, if your page is about men's trousers, you might name the page 'mens-trousers.html'.

### 3.4 Work the target search terms into the **text** on your pages.

- Use the search terms in a natural way, so text remains readable.
- Search engines give extra weight to text in titles or in bold.
- Terms included in Javascript and flash navigation are less likely to be interpreted

correctly than HTML.

### 3.5 Use your target search terms in **links** within your site.

- Search engines look at links to determine what a page is about.
- For instance, if the linked text says 'how to play golf', the search engine will rank the page higher for the phrase 'how to play golf'.
- Try and build lots of links between pages on your site.
- Pay close attention to the linked text. Ideally, this should be the exact search term you are targeting with the linked page.
- A quick way to build more links is to create a site map which links to every page on your site.

### 3.6 Create an **XML sitemap**.

- An XML sitemap is a very useful way to make sure that search engines can index all of the pages on your site.
- You can submit the sitemap yourself to the major search engines via their webmasters.

## 4 Link building

Other websites play a huge part in determining your own website's ranking in search engines.

### 4.1 The single biggest factor which determines your search ranking is **links to your website** from other sites.

- Search engines like Google regard every link to your website as a vote of confidence in your site.
- Links from websites which themselves have a high ranking are worth most.

### 4.2 Approach sites you **already have a relationship with**.

- Ask loyal customers, partners and suppliers if they would be willing to link to you.
- Approach other contacts to see if they would be happy to include you on their website.

### 4.3 Leave **comments** on forums and blogs.

- Many forums and blogs allow you to link back to your website if you leave a comment or take part in a discussion.
- Make sure you have something worthwhile to contribute. If not, your contribution will likely be regarded as spam.

#### 4.4 Offer to **contribute to other sites** in return for links.

- For instance, offer articles on relevant subjects to high-profile websites in your industry.
- Ensure the articles are credited to your website, with a link back to the site.

#### 4.5 Run an **affiliate scheme**.

- An affiliate scheme encourages websites to link to you by offering commission on sales.
- See **Marketing on the Internet**.

#### 4.6 Submit your site for inclusion in **online directories**.

- Many online directories act as jumping off points to other websites. They will be happy to link to you.

#### 4.7 Give people a **reason to link to you**.

- The best links are usually the ones that come naturally.
- Try and add something to your site which will encourage other websites to link to you, simply because what you offer is of value.
- Some websites generate links by running humorous or controversial advertising campaigns which attract attention.
- Run a company blog which contains interesting insights and debates.

#### 4.8 **RSS aggregators** can distribute your blog content online.

- If you have included keyword-relevant links in your blog posts, it also becomes an easy way to gain links.

## 5 Take care

SEO will increase traffic to your website, but take care when optimising your site.

#### 5.1 Always **remember your users**.

- Ultimately, your website has to be designed for people, not search engines.
- If visitors to your site cannot understand it, they will go elsewhere.
- Keep your visitors in mind when writing text and optimising pages. Always check the content makes sense.

#### 5.2 **Do not go over the top**.

- Search engines use very sophisticated methods to identify sites which are trying to

'play the system'.

- If a term appears too often, this may actually count against you. Aim to use a target term two or three times in the body text of your page.

#### 5.3 Make sure **reputable sites** link to you.

- In the same way that links from recognised sites count in your favour, links from blacklisted sites count against you.
- Only approach sites you are familiar with and which are well established online.

#### 5.4 Keep it in **perspective**.

- SEO should be only one element of your online marketing strategy.
- Be careful not to spend too much time tweaking your site.
- Getting the basics right should be your main priority. If you have an interesting site with good content then much SEO will happen naturally.

## 6 Getting help

SEO is a complex subject. There are many ways to get assistance.

#### 6.1 Use an **SEO agency**.

- There are many specialist SEO companies who can help optimise your website.
- Choose an SEO agency with care. Try and get personal recommendations and check references.
- Be wary of agencies promising instant results or guaranteeing top placements. Such companies are likely to use dubious techniques which could damage your site's ranking over the long term.

#### 6.2 Ask your existing **web designer**.

- Many web designers are knowledgeable about SEO.
- They may be able to improve your site's ranking for a small additional cost.

#### 6.3 **Look online**.

- There are many websites offering SEO advice.
- Again, be careful of who you believe. Many so-called 'experts' offer incorrect or conflicting advice.
- Good places to start include SEOMoz ([www.seomoz.org](http://www.seomoz.org)) and SearchEngineWatch ([www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com)).

#### Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name, such as **Marketing on the Internet**.

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