

This article aims to give relevant tips on current best web practice. As Google and other leading search engines are constantly refining their algorithms to stay one step ahead of spam bots, you can never be sure what the search engines look for most. 5 years ago, the buzzword for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) was 'meta-tag', whereas now it is all about 'link text'. You must constantly look for ways to refine your SEO techniques. **There is no quick fix and the internet never stops evolving!** In order to gain maximum exposure on a search engine, a website has to be optimised properly. Search engines look at several different things in establishing how well it sees a site ranking. In order for a website to successfully function, it requires stringent attention to detail on these areas.

Which search engine should I optimise for?

Well, we estimate that Google accounts for 1 of every 2 searches - that's 50%. Yahoo is next at 25%; 1 of every 4, with MSN (now called Live) accounting for 10%; 1 of every 10. The remainder of the market is fought out by the thousands of other search engines on the internet. So, it makes good sense to aim your site primarily at ranking highly in Google's organic listings.

KEY TIP

A site with a page rank of about 2 can often out perform a site with a page rank of about 6 on certain keyword searches. Page Rank can be tampered with and artificially inflated by a variety of methods, so Google doesn't just use its Page Rank algorithm to list sites. SEF URLs, good back-links, good indexing, a web standards compliant site and most importantly **good, relevant, keyword-rich** content will often lift sites of lower Page Rank above those with a higher page rank.

“Well, it's all about my PageRank, right?”

Anyone involved in web circles will have heard this statement when talking about search engine optimization. The Google Page Rank is only an indicator of the strength of a page, **but it shouldn't be relied upon as the sole judge of page health**. For those that don't know, Page Rank is defined as the degree of importance, or value, that Google has for a specific web page. A site assigned a page rank of 0 is generally an unimportant or new page, whereas a page rank of 9 (there is no page ranked 10) is a page of great value or importance. A site that's well maintained and 'spidered' regularly will gain a better page rank over time, but by applying a few tips and tweaks you can rapidly gain an increase in your page rank.

So what is PageRank?

The heart of Google's software is PageRank™, a system for ranking web pages developed by Google's founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin at Stanford University. And while Google has dozens of engineers working to improve every aspect of Google on a daily basis, PageRank continues to play a central role in many of Google's web search tools.

PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at considerably more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; for example, it also analyzes the page that cast the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves “important” weigh more heavily and help to make other pages “important.” Using these and other factors, Google provides its views on pages' relative importance.

Of course, important pages mean nothing to you if they don't match your query. So, Google combines PageRank with sophisticated text-matching techniques to find pages that are both important and relevant to your search. Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page and examines dozens of aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for your query.

Google's complex automated methods make human tampering with your search results extremely difficult. And though Google may run relevant ads above and next to your results, Google does not sell placement within the results themselves (i.e., no one can buy a particular or higher placement). A Google search provides an easy and effective way to find high-quality websites that contain information relevant to your search.

WARNING

Getting your site listed on link exchanges may be a good way of getting traffic to your site. But be warned! Your site may be blacklisted if links to your site appear on spam exchanges. Make sure you list your site only on relevant sites and in relevant sections. You don't want a link to your site from a blacklisted site because the results will be a reverse of the 'halo-effect' on your site.

So, its all in the page links (internal and in bound)?

One key thing that Google looks for is in-bound links off other sites, preferably ones with a high page rank. One link off a reputable site such as the BBC or Pixelsurgeon is worth over a dozen links from low ranking sites. This is because Google sees the high ranking site as being important, and any site that has an outbound link from it benefits from a 'halo' effect. To go into technical terms, it is called the "Trust Rank". If possible, reciprocate the link from a 'links page' (always make sure the link pops up in a new window or new tab so as not to drive traffic away from your site.)

Recent speculation has led many to believe that Google is paying a lot of attention to the quality of the text that makes a link. For instance, if you have a link on your page that says 'click here', Google will think that it is a link to a page with a subject of click here. Therefore it makes sense to make the link a mini description of the page you are linking to. Use targeted keywords to build links, and encourage others to link to your site in the same way.

Bad Example:

[Click here](#) to visit Design Plus One »

Good Example:

[Visit Design Plus One, an online multimedia resource](#) »

Make use of the page title and the H1 tag.

One of the key things that most search engines look for is each individual page title. This is inserted into a site between the <title>

</title> html tags. By making the page title as descriptive as possible, and always including the site's name, these pages will show up more favourably on a search engine. Do not include the same word multiple times, or make the title of a page nonsensical, as Google will dismiss the site as being a spam-like site. So, make it clear and concise.

WARNING

Don't forget, each page on your website must have a different title and meta description tag, which directly suits the content of your page. If you do not do this, Google may consider the page to be spam and may add it to its supplemental results. This means Google trusts these pages less, and will 'crawl' these pages less frequently.

Google will also look to the main title or page heading on each page, and it will register this as being an important element in describing the page. Make sure you use the <h1> tag for each page heading. Then use <h2> and descending html tags for less important headings (i.e.: <h3>, <h4>, <h5>, and <h6> respectively) as Google gives more weight to the more important heading tags.

Bad Example:

```
<title> Welcome to Design Plus One </title>
```

Mediocre Example:

```
<title> Welcome to Design Plus One // Web Design and Development </title>
```

Good Example:

```
<title> Design Plus One // Online multimedia resource and personal portfolio of Daniel Edwards // Web Design and Development in Newcastle Upon Tyne, United Kingdom </title>
```

Text on a website should be informative and targeted. Google reads all html text on a website, and is able to interpret if a search query is relevant or not to your site. If the site is making use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) then it is better to re-format the primary html tags (<h1> through <h6> and <p>) to the design specification than writing out new classes. Make sure the headings are clear, using target keywords. Try to use these keywords in your text, where relevant.

Do a search for a competitor on Google using a search term you wish to rank highly on. Click on the 'cached page' link and look at the results. You should see what Google saw last time it 'spidered' your site. It will highlight all the words included in your search. Take note of the keyword density and proportion in the body text, as well as appearance in both the page title and any headings. Use this as a benchmark for your site.

Images and Their Attributes

All images on a website need to have appropriate ALT and TITLE text. Not only is this a requirement of web standards, it will also be of benefit to how Google indexes the site. ALT text should expand on what the image is, but again it should be clear and

concise. If a user places their mouse over the image, a text box will pop up with a text description. Also, in the case of a text only or speech browser, this description will be printed or read aloud in place of the image. The title attribute on images should also be used, and this should be an exact copy of the ALT attribute. It is also never a bad idea to give the image a NAME attribute too.

Navigation and Repetition of Navigation

Ease of navigation around a website is fundamental. However, many sites decide to neglect this, and make navigation as difficult as possible. Avoid Flash navigation like the plague. Google finds it almost impossible to 'read'. The same goes for javascript and image-based menus. Keep things simple, using (x)html and CSS. You will be surprised at how elegant you can make your menus using just these languages. Search engines will be able to index and map your site effectively. If possible, repeat navigation at the bottom of the page. Not only does this aid usability, it provides more internal links on your site for Google to catalogue.

Meta Tags are Dead?

Meta tags are no longer considered to be important in web optimization, but are still recommended as they can assist with some search engines. A good meta description tag is recommended (usually only one tag is necessary for the entire site). Notice that Google uses a meta description tag in displaying its results. Key words are less important, but should be included as a matter of routine. Choosing between 10 and 20 keywords is usually recommended, as any more can be seen as spamming, and search engines may kick you off their results page.

WARNING

Only ever use keywords that are relevant to your page. Choose them wisely. Do not use a keyword more than 3 times in your keywords tag, as Google may consider the site to be spam. Do not fall into this trap. Remember to change the description tag for every page.

Google provides different webmaster tools which can assist in the indexing and development of a website. These tools are free, and two of them are indispensable to a website. Firstly, by verifying a website with Google, the progress of it (the site) can be closely monitored. It is also possible to check when Google last crawled (indexed) a website, as well as finding out dead links on a website. By keeping a close eye on the statistics that Google gathers on your website, it is possible to see how users are getting to your site via Google searches.

Search Engine Friendly (SEF) URLs

With the advent of PHP and other dynamic page script languages, individual pages no longer have their own unique web address (other than a page id number). Search engines like friendly URL's and not a non-descript page number. For those of you building pages the old school way, (ie, in html), then name the page with some keywords.

Bad Example:

www.randomsite.com/index.php?pageid=19

Good Example:

www.randomsite.com/search-engine-optimization.html

NOTE:

Those of you using PHP may be interested in the `mod_rewrite` function. This module provides a rule-based rewriting engine to rewrite requested URLs on the fly.

Build and Submit a Sitemap

Developing a site map can be seen to be integral to aiding web usability. Have the sitemap page linked to from every other page in the site, or at the least from important high-level category pages and the home page. For example, put a link at the bottom of the page entitled 'sitemap' which points to the site's sitemap.

Google's webtools can work harder for your website if they have a sitemap they can successfully follow. By submitting a detailed sitemap, Google can successfully crawl all listed pages, and include them in its index of your site. In turn, this will provide your pages with increased visibility on key Google searches.

Study your Website's Analytics

For a closer analysis of your website, Google provides a specialist free package called Google Analytics. By placing a snippet of code into your website's html, Google is able to collect key data about the amounts of visitors to your website, how they entered (and if it was from a Google query - what that query was), and what their exit point from the site is. All this data can be used to understand what users look for in a particular site, which in turn can be used to tailor certain pages to gain maximum user interaction.

Paying for Positioning

Paid advertising (Google AdWords) is only a worthwhile exercise if a product is being sold via the internet. An AdWords campaign will make sure that your site features prominently when certain key words are inputted. Links, and even if they do, each click will cost. Google Adwords will NOT have any effect on the organic listings of your webpage.

"(Successful websites) write lean, keyword-rich, buzzword-free content that's actually relevant to their customers - and let semantic markup...push their text to the top of the digital data pile. Coupled with appropriately written and edited copy, CSS layout and structural Xhtml are the golden keys to find-a-bility. Companies that know this are prospering online."

-Jeffrey Zeldman in Designing With Web Standards 2nd Edition