Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Strategies and Approaches

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1   About the Author

Kevin P. Wojdak is a Web and IT Professional in the Chicago area with over 18 years experience in *full life cycle* delivery of websites and technology projects across many diverse industries. He is a contract consultant and employee who has worked on over 40 consulting projects as both a freelancer and employee through the years. His skills and experience have allowed him to pioneer new web techniques and tricks in Rich Interface Development and he has honed his Search Engine Optimization (SEO) skills over time. He enjoys transforming other people's creative inspiration into technical reality. Visit his personal website, Woj's Twisted World (http://www.wojzworld.com) to see his resume, to find other articles and development techniques, or to hire him for work.

Test his organic SEO skills by Googling his name, "Kevin Wojdak" to see some website samples and projects.

NOTE: The information contained in this document was researched and written in 2006. Most of it is still quality information and applicable to SEO in today's Web world.

2   Overview

Due to the ever-changing algorithms used by the major internet search engines, websites must continually be tweaked to capture the highest positions in searches.   By understanding the basics of how the algorithms decide relevance and position, we are better able to modify our sites to "organically" change the way search engines see our site and rank us better.

"Organic" changes are simple tweaks we can make to our site itself to increase our site's ability to rank higher in searches.

In a review of the many search engines and their submission policies, it was discovered that certain tweaks to a site could be made that would organically change the way a site appears to a search engine.

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief summary of research findings and propose changes that could be made to optimize a site for the search engines.

This document covers the following topics:

1. Keywords

2. Title META Tag

3. First Few Lines of Content

4. Text vs. Images

5. Back-Links to your Site

6. Internal Links

7. Optimization Strategies

3 Keywords

In the past, the keyword META tag and the keywords that populated it were a major contributor to search engine placement. A well optimized list of keywords would increase the chances that a website would appear higher in search engine results listings. However, as more people built websites and competition increased for higher search engine placement, many people found ways to manipulate the system and artificially improve their rankings.

Some of the ways the search engines were manipulated included:

- Lists of keywords were built that included words that were frequently searched upon but weren't necessarily relevant to the content of the page.

- Users repeated keywords many times in their META tags to give the search engines the impression that the page was relevant to the search.

Many users of the search engines complained that the results they were getting for searches weren't relevant to the search they were making. This forced the search engine developers to get smarter and more sophisticated in how they would index and rank a site in search results listings. One such way was for the engines to index a page's content and search for relevant keywords in the content.

Search engine abusers manipulated this by creating long lists of common search words within their Web pages and making them invisible to the user. The words weren't necessarily relevant to the topic of their page but would cause the search engines to deliver their pages more often in search results. Basically, they were spamming the search engines.

The search engines learned to combat this Spam by detecting these lists and blocking abusers but, this also caused the search engine algorithms to become a little more sophisticated in their site indexing techniques.

Today, only a few search engines still even look at the keywords META tags as a starting point for indexing a site. Nevertheless, for the few that do, the keywords should still be optimized and included in your Web page.

3.1 Keyword Strategy

Given the vast number of documents available on the Web, single keywords by themselves have become obsolete as a means to filter down a search result listing effectively. Instead, keyword phrases of two or more words should be identified and included in a Web page's keyword META tag. But, those keywords need to be "relevant" to the page topic they are identifying.

3.2 Keywords Related To Content / Keyword Density

With the proliferation of keyword spamming of search engines, search engine programmers developed more sophisticated ways of indexing Web pages. One of the main ways was to index the content of the page as well as the keywords. They went one step further with this concept by providing a relevancy relationship between the actual keywords and the content within the pages.

Search engines that read and use the keywords META tag weigh the keywords provided against their usage within the document content. Therefore, if a keyword appears in your keyword META tag, it must also appear within the page's content. If it does not appear, it is weighed as irrelevant and may or may not be included in the indexing schemes of the search engine. When a keyword does appear, some search engines track the number of times it is mentioned in the content and give it a higher relevancy rank than other keywords.

An optimized site should have keyword phrases relevant to and in common with the content of individual pages. Therefore, the keyword list should be defined based on the content of the page or, the content of the page should be well written to include specific keywords pre-defined for the content the page represents.

4 Title Tag

4.1 Before

The Title META tag is becoming the most important keyword META tag for websites!

The Title tag has several uses for a Web page and is now being used by the search engines to do even more.

The Title tag is a META tag that appears in the HEAD section of a Web page. It's not rendered on a page as part of the visible content but, it does appear in the window title position of the browser. The tag contains 7-10 words that appear as a title for the content of a page.

Aside from new search engine usage of this tag, a Title tag does the following for a Web page:

- Provides a title in the browser title bar for the page.

- When a bookmark link to your site is added to the Favorites list, the Title tag provides the visible text for the link in the list.

- In search engines, the Title tag is the text link that appears on a search results listing for any given page.

4.2 Now

Besides all of the former benefits of the Title tag, search engines are now using it as the key bit of information for search engine relevancy rankings and results list placement.

A well-formed Title tag shows the topic of a page as well as provides some of the keywords that describe the page contents. When appearing in a search results listing, a Title tag should be interesting enough to provide a reason for the user to want to click on the link.

Some search engines are ignoring the keywords META tag altogether and only looking at the Title tag for the key information for a page.

Title tags are weighed more heavily in the search engine algorithms and this provide more insight into relevancy of content.

5   First Few Lines of Content

The first few lines of content on a Web page are also becoming a key bit of information for search engines. The engines will pull your keyword information from your Title tag and then index the first few lines of your page, up to 100 words or so. If those lines do not contain the same key bits of information gleaned from the Title tag, then your site may not rank as well as it could have. The search engine algorithms weigh the Title tag contents against those first few lines to match them for relevancy.

For many search engines, the description META tag is used to provide the couple of lines of descriptive text that may appear under a link in a search engine results listing. But, for many other engines, the first few lines of page content is used instead to provide that same description.

Every search engine uses this information differently but, to be fully optimized, a Web page's first few lines should introduce the content of a page and reiterate what the page is all about and highlight some of the keywords.

For keywords plus relevancy, some engines look to the first few lines of content to match the keywords found in a Title tag. If they don't, the engine may flag the page as being irrelevant to its description and therefore not a good page to deliver high in the search results.

6   Text vs. Images

Since the search engines index your textual content, it is better for your site that images are kept to a minimum and that good quality content is written.

Search engine spiders walk your website for content and links to index. They cannot walk across JavaScript links and therefore do not see them. Image links may provide them with a branch to traverse but the images themselves do not give the spiders a content/keyword association for the index. To be most effective, create text menus and links in your pages and stay away from image links.

Keyword rich content should be the focus of your page and will bring the most search engine attention to your page in search results listings. Relevant content provides far more benefit than fancy graphics-only sites.

7   Back-Links

Popularity of a website is becoming another major factor in its ranking on search engine results pages. Besides having all keywords, descriptions, and other tags optimized for the search engines, the popularity of a site will also dictate how high it appears in a search engine results listing.

Popularity is calculated by the number of sites that back-link to your site. The more sites that link to a site, the more the search engine algorithms see the site as a popular source of information for the topics on the pages. Therefore, a sites popularity is weighed and measured and its ranking in search engine results listings goes up.

The more popular a site appears to be due to the number of back-links, the more likely it is that the site will appear higher in the search engine rankings.

7.1   Back-Link Content

To maximize the effectiveness of your back-link, the content of the link has to be meaningful. What is meant by that is that the link content affects relevance by linking keywords and keyword phrases to a website address. So, linking a company name to a company website doesn't do much more than continue to send traffic that knows a company to the company. But, take a keyword phrase such as "website design" and create a link on those two words to your company and you've created an association in the eyes of the search engines for your company. Hence, the search engines will weigh more relevance on your company link when a search for "website design" is entered. This simple link tells the search engines that your company address is a good link for the topic of website design and your company should rank higher in searches.

Of course, the "website design" link should point to a page of a site that talks about website design. The strength of the link becomes better as the topic of discussion is on the page linked to by the reference.

7.2   External Link Strategy

Links provide a company additional reference points. Every client or partner page that is indexed that has a back-link on it will refer to the site through a link which the search engine spiders will follow thereby building a web of input points for the site and telling the search engines it should be ranked higher in search results.

7.3   Back-Link Ideas

Some effective ideas for acquiring back-links are:

- **Press Releases** – Write a press release and submit it to a press release distribution service such as PRWeb. Your content and links get out to many sites in just a few days.

- **Articles** – Increase your exposure as an expert in your field by writing articles. Include a short, linked bio at the end.

- **Partners** – If a business partner has a web page devoted to Partners, make sure your company is listed with a link.

- **Associations** – For any association affiliations, make sure your company and link is listed in their directory.

8 Internal Links

Link text plays an important part in how search engines look at your web pages and the web pages to which you link. Link text plays a major role in how your internal links can help your own web site.

As you may have noticed on some pages, the various links used link text to help the reader and the search engines understand the topic of the linked page. Using links within your own articles, product support and description pages, and customer testimonials actually invites readers to read more pages. The more you entice people to read about your knowledge and products the more you begin to gain their trust.

Visitors that trust you typically end up buying from you.

9 Optimization Strategy

Deciding on an optimum Search Engine Strategy is difficult but, understanding and applying the techniques and tips from this document to a website will increase its ranking in the search engines.

For each page, review the content and address each of the following items to optimize rankings:

- **Keywords** – Create keyword phrases of 2 or more words for the keyword META tag.

- **Keyword Phrases** – Select 2-3 of the strongest keyword phrases that have the most relevance to the page and focus on those keywords to define a page. Use these at the beginning of the keywords META tag. Other keyword phrases can be used as well but, it is important that the page be optimized for 2-3 major phrases.

- **Content** – Revise the content on each page to optimize the use of the main Keyword Phrases without making the keywords appear out of place in the content.

- **First Few Lines** – Be sure the first few lines of content emphasize the keywords and description for the page contents.

- **Textual Content** – Text on a page is much more relevant to a topic than images. Search engines read and index actual content on your pages.

- **Title** – Create a Title META tag for each page that identifies the page but also uses at least one of the major keyword phrases.

- **Back-Links** – Find ways to get clients and business partners to link back to the website. The more links obtained that are related and relevant to the business represented in the page, the better ranked that site will be for pertinent searches. Make sure the links are focused content links and not just company reference links.

- **Internal Links** – Using links to other content on your site within your own articles, product support and description pages, and customer testimonials actually invites readers to read more pages. The more you entice people to read about your knowledge and products the more you begin to gain their trust.

Obtain meaningful back-links to your site and pages from different creditable sources. For each of those links, be sure the link words have meaning to the page they are linked to. Therefore, the keywords and content in the page must be woven together to bind the page to the search engine in the keyword METAs, the description META, the first 100 words of the page, the Title tag, and throughout the content on the page. Use internal links to keep visitors reading and developing trust in you.

9.1   Resources

To effectively do any optimization of a website, you'll need the right resources for the job. Some suggested resources to have available for a Search Engine Optimization project include:

- **Copywriter** – This person has the ability to effectively weave text into an understandable form. For SEO projects, this person will need to weave keywords and phrases effectively into a website's content.

- **Webmaster/Website Builder** – This person is needed to make the changes to the website.

- **Strategist** – This person will help decide the markets and messaging strategy for focusing the website in the direction it needs to be built.

10   Reference Articles

This list contains some of the reference data and articles used to compile this document. It is not comprehensive and does not have all resources listed but can be used as a starting point.

All About Title Tags –
http://www.highrankings.com/allabouttitles.htm

Common Sense Search Engine Optimization –
http://www.highrankings.com/commonsense.htm

How Search Engines Rank Web Pages –
http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/article.php/2167961

How to Submit Your Site to Directories such as Yahoo!, DMOZ and Zeal –
http://www.highrankings.com/directorysubmit.htm

How To Use HTML Meta Tags –
http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/article.php/2167931

Intro to Search Engine Optimization –
http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/article.php/2167921

Let's Talk About Links –
http://www.searchengineguide.com/hartzer/003067.html

Link Popularity –
http://www.highrankings.com/linkpopularity.htm

Major Search Engines and Directories –
http://searchenginewatch.com/links/article.php/2156221

Meta Keywords Tags & Keyword Optimization –
http://101topranking.com/meta_keywords_tags.htm

Meta Tag Description & Meta Tag Title –
http://101topranking.com/meta_description_tags.htm

Search Engine Submission Tips –
http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/

Search Engine Placement Tips –
http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/article.php/2168021

The Nitty-gritty of Writing for the Search Engines –
http://www.highrankings.com/seo-writing.htm?c1=email&source=ldsignup

Title Tag Optimization & Title Tag Design –
http://101topranking.com/title_tag.htm

Web Site Optimization & Important Body Tags –
http://101topranking.com/body_tags.htm