Tips for Achieving High Positioning in the Results Pages of the Major Search Engines

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Abstract: Search engine optimization is the process of improving a website's position so that the webpage comes up higher in the search results of major search engines. All search engines have a unique way of ranking the importance of a website. Some search engines focus on the content while others review Meta tags to identify who and what a web site's business is. Most engines use a combination of Meta tags, content, link popularity, click popularity and longevity to determine a sites ranking. To make it even more complicated, they change their ranking policies frequently however this study will attempt to ensure that you now have the insiders 'know-how' to ensure that your website (s) has the necessary ranking criteria to appeal to each individual search engines needs.

Key words: Search engine optimization, internet marketing, WWW, search engine ranking

INTRODUCTION

The process basically involves you submitting your site (s) to the vast majority of search engines such as Altavista, Excite, Google etc and manual categorization in subject category engines such as Yahoo (which can't really be automated). Great effort should be taken in perusing directories such as Yahoo to familiarize yourselves with the available categories in order to place the site in as specific as possible a category. This will most often require "drilling down" several levels to find a category appropriate for each site's listing. The Holy Grail is to position each of your sites within the top most search rankings of the major search engines.

Google for instance, places great emphasis on link popularity which basically means that the more sites on the net which actually link to your site – the better, thus you should also create pages (also known as doorway pages) which point back to your site. Google is generally the best by far search engines. More and more people are using Google. Its also one of the hardest to get a good position on because it is one of the few that doesn't allow payments (apart from sponsored links). Google ranks sites on how many other sites refer to that site and on the information contained within the actual site. Page rank basically reads HTML code and text on a web page and allocates a 'score' which is then matched against the other pages which may also be appropriate when a search is made. The page with the highest score comes top and then works down putting the pages it regards as the most relevant in the first 2 or 3 pages of listings. In some ways the hands of a web promotion expert are tied if your site does not contain the relevant content that people search for. If you want people to find you under the term 'frying pan' but your site does not contain the word 'frying pan' (or 'frying pan' multiple times) then you will not be found under this search term from the search engines.

The first stages of your submission service should involve you looking at your site critically. You should examine content, competitors, key words among others in order to ascertain which parts of your sites content require changing (in accordance with the guidelines detailed later in this document of what is best for your site). For instance, some search engines give more weight to titles than to body text in a document. It is recommended to create a title that uniquely describes a page or site. This should be included in the <TITLE> tag of each HTML document.

You should also have Meta tags identifying important items, such as descriptions and key words, for each search engine. Most experts are agreed that the two most important tags are description and key words. The later stages involve actual submission, creation of doorway pages and monitoring (in order to see if your strategy needs improving).

The mechanics of search engine optimization: Search engine optimization is the art of preparing a web site and

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pages to be as attractive as possible to search engines, while keeping your web site attractive and easy to use for the average surfer. It's important to understand that search engines read and like pure HTML. Major key words should therefore be placed in the <HEAD> area by using meta tags and repeated again in the <BODY> area of the page. It is also recommended to emphasize targeted key phrases by putting them in <h1> or <h2> tags plus the early paragraphs on the page. Another useful approach is to place information into all the <ALT> tags associated with each photo/picture. This will then tell search engine robots what the graphic is depicting. Time should be spent deliberating over the actual text surrounding a link (or links from other sites to your site). This is given special precedence by the engines and care should be taken to avoid 'wasting' key word 'points' on senseless text such as 'Click here to.....'.

Search engine do not like Flash, JavaScript, Frames, words in graphics and (in many cases) dynamically produced pages (like.asp) which include symbols such as ? in the URL. These types of pages make it difficult to achieve good rankings. Static HTML pages are much more preferable for search engine listings. Spamming the engines is attempting to 'fool' the ranking system into presenting a 'spammed' site higher than it deserves to be in the results. All engines however are aware of spamming methods and there is a risk of becoming banned should a site be discovered to be using covert methods. Tricks that can get a site banned include repeating words over and over in tiny or invisible text, filling Meta tags with irrelevant terms, using competitor's names or trademarks and any other method of key word 'stuffing'. Although meta tags are often ignored, search engines are aware that so-called 'experts' fill them with words to attract surfers so many now check to see if the words listed are actually on the web page, if they are not then a site could be downgraded or banned for spamming.

Improved results can be had by having the title of each page state clearly in 8-12 words what the page is about, ensuring also that the first 20-30 words of text on the page explain what service or product is being promoted and making sure that there is also clearly written information about the subject and other sites linking back. Each site that links to a page is an extra vote of confidence in that site, but care has to be taken to ensure that the links are from a reputable third party or related web-site/portal. FFA (Free for All link page) sites and 'link-farms' (which contain links that no-one is likely to ever click on) can have the opposite effect and is now a days deemed as another method of trying to fool the

search engines. Upon completion of a site, search engine spiders can be 'invited' to visit the site by submitting them to most search engines. Repeatedly submitting a site can lead to severe penalties and all submissions should be done with great care. Spiders can take between 1 week and 8 months to actually visit and then list a site (if at all). It is also safer now a days to avoid automated submission tools such as Web Position Gold[1] or Topdog[2] which can be set to repeatedly submit a site to multiple engines however this is one of the quickest ways to get a site dropped and/or banned. As more search engines look for further methods of earning money, they have begun to charge for prompt spidering. Some professional companies such as Trellian[3] actually pay certain spiders to visit client pages on a regular basis and list them quickly (usually within 72 h). This ensures not only accurate submission but that pages are ranked quickly and efficiently, before competitors.

Key words: The key thing here is to attempt to place oneself in the seat of each potential customer. Attempts should be made to copy the potential key words that each surfer will attempt in their web session. It may be easy to get a top ranking for a company name or an obscure product but how many people will actually come to the site as a result of the obscure products or typing in a company name? Yes, selection of the proper phrases for each market is crucial. Targeting the wrong key words will be a wasted effort and possibly an expensive mistake if Google AdWords[4] or Overture's[5] PPC mechanism was been used. However, selection of the correct key words could see traffic growth and sales increases beyond a marketing manager's wildest dream.

A good practice is to check out what people are searching for. To help with this, there are a number of free and inexpensive tools available to help such as wordtracker.com[6], goodkey words.com[7] and fantomaster.com[8]. Some key words are always going to be much more competitive than others. For example, ranking well on the single word "Digital" will be much more difficult than ranking in the top 10 for "Digital Prints". In general, single key words usually return the least targeted leads. Targeting multi-word keyword phrases can result in achieving the highest quality leads. A recent study showed that only 34% of Web site owners knew to include the appropriate words on their Web page. Adding words in the key words tag is not enough. All major search engines (with the exception of Inktomi) ignore the keyword tag therefore the correct words have to be on the page. It makes simply makes sense.

Main search engines: The main search engines to include when submitting are as follows:

Search engine	Search engine	Search engine
www.about.com	www.go2net.com	www.espotting.com
www.ah-ha.com	www.hotbot.com	www.uk.overture.com
www.alltheweb.com	www.hotbot.co.uk	www.entireweb.com
www.altavista.com	www.itvsearch.com	www.dmoz.org
www.altavista.co.uk	www.iwon.com	www.ntlworld.com
www.ask.com	www.lycos.com	www.directhit.com
www.ask.co.uk	www.lycos.co.uk	www.dogpile.com
www.aol.com	www.mirago.co.uk	www.netscape.com
www.aol.co.uk	www.msn.com	www.clickey.com
www.bay9.com	www.msn.co.uk	www.nbci.com
www.excite.com	www.searchengine.com	www.gopile.com
www.findwhat.com	www.splut.com	www.google.com
www.freeserve.com	www.spriuks.com	www.go.com
www.galaxy.com	www.teoma.com	www.wisenut.com
www.yahoo.com	www.ukplus.com	www.yahoo.co.uk

Most of the above search engines and portals take results from a variety of other search facilities such as excite which no longer uses its' own database - but uses overture and inktomi listings. AltaVista takes directory data from LookSmart or LookSmart UK. AOL uses ODP data (Directory listings appear above search engine listings in US and are a separate option in UK) and Fast/AllTheWeb-uses ODP data to boost rankings. Although there are many other search facilities-most draw from one of the result databases listed above. An important site to be listed in - is the Open Directory Project[9]. It may not receive much traffic in its' own right, but it does feed many other search engines. Also, search engines share their databases with each other therefore Google gets data from the Open Directory Project and then gives back-up results to Yahoo.

Directory inclusion: Directories are an important place on the Web for a site to be listed. Yahoo and Google (which uses the Open Directory) account for 80% of all searches made on the 'net in Europe. Because each site has been reviewed by a human being it is considered by most people (and most search engine spiders) to be more likely to be relevant to their enquiry than other sites. Directories do not depend on any meta tags but are purely judged on the unique content of a site. However, there is only usually 1 entry in a directory so getting it right is important. Search engines view directory listings as a vote of confidence in a web site - which increases its chance of appearing in their searches. When targeting new markets in other regions it is also worthwhile spending a lot of time in researching which directories are the most appropriate regional and international versions in that region. Yahoo for instance has large audiences in many of their regional directories.

Things that can get a site rejected include selecting the wrong category for a listing. To avoid this, search for primary key phrases in the directory data base and note the category. This is probably where the site should be listed. The title should be the company name or the title of the site. All directories ask for a brief description of the site. This should be submitted accurately and precisely, avoiding any sales phrases such as 'the best site for..', 'we've got the cheapest...' etc. Things that can downgrade a site's score include having information which is available from other sites in their database, having a slow site, using excessive use of downloads and banner ads or having links that do not fully work. Re-directs or pop-ups upon entering the site and/or making it difficult (by disabling the back-button) to leave the site are also likely to reduce the success of being included.

Listings in paid for directories usually appear within 4 weeks of being accepted. Free directory listings can take from 2 weeks to a year to appear. Search engine optimisation services such as Trellian pay certain directories (Inktomi, AltaVista etc) to visit sites and review them quickly (usually within 7 days). To ensure that a site is listed then payment is a must. It also ensures that a site is listed quickly and efficiently, before its competitors. At present LookSmart charges a $49 review fee plus $150 deposit. If a site is accepted the 15 cents per referral is also charged. Yahoo charges $299 for commercial site review with listing being guaranteed within 3 weeks. Two other directories worth noting are Thunderstone which feeds information to the Dog Pile Meta Engine Directory and The Mamma Collection which appears on Mamma Meta Engine. Getting the right listing in directories is crucially important for a site.

Pay per click: Pay for Position search facilities are a way of driving immediate, focused traffic to web sites by selecting phrases that surfers may use; paying a deposit to various search facilities and biding a price to appear in their listings. Bidding higher than anyone else results in the #1 position, second highest gets #2 etc. The main International pay-for-position search engine is Overture.

Searching for your targeted phrases on Overture will result in you seeing not only your positions for the above terms, but also the amount you bid to get that position. Overture also pays other search engines a proportion of your bid price to display Overture's first 2, 3 or more results above the main results. The money you have bid for this position is only deducted from your deposit with the search facility when someone actually visits your site by clicking on the listing. Unlike banner advertisements, there is no charge for your listing appearing and not being

clicked on. What you bid is what you pay for each actual visitor to your site from that search engine for that search term.

In the UK, the primary search paid positioning search facility is the UK version of Overture. UK Overture results now appear on AltaVista, Freeserve etc. It's important to research the actual phrases people use and then design the listings to attract potential clients. With this facility, it is possible to have a site listed in the top results of many major search engines and producing traffic within a few days whereas normal search engine listings can take many weeks or months before they appear. As more and more search engines look for ways to earn income from the Internet; an increase in use of PPC methods will be inevitable. Correctly used, they can be a highly cost effective advertising medium.

Flash: Flash text can only be read by FAST Alltheweb.com. None of the other engines can currently read flash text or follow flash links...yet. FAST is now as large as Google and powers AllTheWeb, InfoSpace and Lycos. Although FAST Alltheweb.com is now indexing flash this does not make flash search engine friendly. Flash MX is supposed to move flash design away from "useless" and "fancy" and into "content" and "usability". It is meant to go some way towards making flash more accessible to disabled users and possibly search engines, but the designer needs to know how to use it correctly in order for it to be effective in this way. If the site is composed entirely in flash then design an accessible html site as well. If you do this, provide a link to the other option on each site rather than a splash page giving the options. All flash navigation systems should be complemented by text links either throughout the body copy or as an alternative set of links at the bottom, top or left hand side of the pages.

Another work around is to add at least one paragraph of very key words rich text with text links to the relevant inner pages of the site, saving the user at least one extra click and providing them and the engines with some information. Some is always better than none. If the splash page is a flash movie the above won't be possible unless the designer has put the text inside a txt, html or xml file. Another strategy involves using an absolute positioning technique called Z order within cascading style sheets (CSS). The Z order of a window indicated the window's position in a stack of overlapping windows. This window stack is oriented along an imaginary axis, the z-axis, extending outward from the screen. The window at the top of the Z order overlaps all other windows. The window at the bottom of the Z order is overlapped by all other windows. Z Order allows one to place content

partially, or even fully, on top of other content. Since only the content on top is viewable, it's entirely possible to ensure that site visitors see only the flash movies while the engine sees only the relevant keyword-laden text.

Google is more forgiving of the Flash SWF format because Google is link-centric. It calculates search relevance via the collective voting power of all the links on the web. Google analyses pages based on what is called link reputation. Google performs a link analysis by examining what pages purportedly suggest about the pages they are linking to. In this way, it seems to disregard content on the pages themselves. Google is not indexing the material inside a Flash movie yet but it reads every word on every html page. The key to making a Flash site successful is to employ a linking strategy that redistributes PageRank and link reputation within the site. Its also recommended to visit http://www.google.com/addurl.html as Google will follow links embedded in Flash content and submit these pages so as to have Google's crawler extract these links for indexing.

CONCLUSIONS

Finally, to conclude-I think the net guru Danny Sullivan; editor of searchenginewatch[10] says it much more elegantly than most of us in the search engine promotion world ....'Last year was a transition year; this year paid inclusions are expected of all companies. Some companies are budgeting enough for payments to search engines and they have to. Deciding not to is a bit like launching a media campaign and deciding to ignore one whole media, like TV'..... All the major engines have launched paid placement programs in the past year. With Google, for example, payment increases your sites profile.... Sullivan reckons that the cost of inclusion of a site (with a good hit rate in most good engines) "should cost approx £2,800 per annum and these costs are likely to rise".

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