

## Just Google me: Laying the groundwork for Search Engine Optimization

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Is your business' web traffic bumper to bumper? Is your dot-com feeling a little dot-calm? Perhaps it's time you invested in a Search Engine Optimization campaign. This month, we discuss the basics.

So your organization has invested in a website. For a few weeks there, you thought it was destined for the HTML graveyard, but it's officially launched. You've shared your wisdom with the copywriter. Offered revisions to informative charts, graphics and product listings. You even posed for an updated bio photo after weeks of incessant requests from your marketing department (and two rescheduled hair appointments). Everything is in order. You're online, for all the world to see.

Now, wouldn't it be great if people could actually find their way to the site once in a blue moon?

The purpose of this piece is to encourage you to consider what your website could do if only more people would visit it. If you answer yes to any of the following questions, it might be worth your while to at least research a Search Engine Marketing campaign:

- I am confident a visit to my site will most likely lead to a conversion.
- I have ideas for content that simply aren't being used.
- I am confident that if I share my unique industry knowledge with like-minded individuals, they'd be more likely to visit my site.
- I have the staff to manage my website's content and social media profiles.
- And, finally, I want my site to at least appear when I search for my own company.

### SEM? SEO? OMG.

First, a few basic terms. **Search Engine Marketing (SEM)** is a marketing subcategory where the focus is the promotion of organizations through search engines. The two primary "techniques" associated with SEM include **Pay-Per-Click** advertising (sometimes called PPC, just to further complicate things) and **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**. SEO practitioners (called Search Engine Optimizers—also dubbed SEOs) will tell you that both are imperative to a truly robust SEM campaign, which translates to the utmost in visibility via search results.

### PPC Results vs. SEO Results

For Search Engine Optimizers, the goal is simple: to get your site to appear as close as possible to the top of page 1 of a search engine's results. There are two categories of search engine results:

**PAY-PER-CLICK ADVERTISING:** These are the results you see near the very top of a search engine's results page, usually denoted by a colored frame marked with an "Advertisement" or "Sponsored Result" notation. These ads will show up following searches for whatever keywords your Search Engine Optimizer has determined are the most effective. Companies like Google and Bing offer external keyword tools, which enable SEOs to check the search volume of specific keywords.

Entering "hamburgers" into Google's keyword tool, for example, tells us that there are 3,350,000 global monthly searches for the term. Fair enough. But "hamburgers" is so broad of a keyword term and has such a high search volume that it's going to be harder to get your site to show up. That's when phrase match and exact match keywords come into play.

“Phrase match” and “exact match” keywords help you show up for specific words, rather than unrelated content that happens to have “hamburgers” in the title. The more specific your terms are, especially when coupled with complementary terms that whittle down specifics, the less likely your guests are to find themselves on the MySpace page of Def Comedy Jam’s Alonzo “Hamburger” Jones.

Additionally, searches can be narrowed down to geographic location to ensure only the most targeted results. Google uses AdWords to set up paid advertising. Microsoft’s Bing uses AdCenter.

According to an Oct. 12 post on tech blog geekwire.com, Google accounted for 65.3% of searches in the United States during September 2011. When comparing Google’s numbers to sites like Yahoo! (15.5%) and Bing (14.7%), it’s clear why SEOs usually put most their eggs in the Google basket. At least, that’s the trend today. But with Google’s foray into the mobile phone market, the popularity of Gmail, useful developer apps and personalized searches, Google’s prevalence likely won’t fade any time soon.

That’s the paid advertising side of SEM.

**NATURAL SEO:** Natural, or **Organic SEO**, is technically unpaid optimization in the sense that you’re not paying for ads, but rather improving the likelihood search engines will consider your site relevant—something worth linking to. Improving your Organic SEO standing is all about pleasing a given search engine’s unique algorithm—or, the formula it uses to determine the importance of any given site. This is where the art of Search Engine Optimization truly begins.

The focus will remain on Google because of its popularity and because its algorithm happens to be the most storied. According to its support site, Google determines relevancy by considering over 200 factors, one of which is the **PageRank** for a given page.

PageRank is a link analysis algorithm named after Google Co-Founder Larry Page. The algorithm assigns a numerical weight to each element of a hyperlinked set of documents in an effort to determine its relative importance. Or, according to Google: “In simple terms, each link to a page on your site from another site adds to your site’s PageRank. Not all links are equal; Google works hard (...) identifying link spam and other practices that negatively impact search results. The best types of links are those that are given based on the quality of your content.”

That last sentence is an important one.

### **HOW DO I IMPROVE MY ORGANIC SEARCH RESULTS STANDING?**

*Exactly* what affects PageRank (and all the other, non-trademarked algorithms that other search engines use) is a well-guarded secret. But SEOs worth their weight in code know one basic truth: the more people are willing to link to you, the better the likelihood of a top-tier search result position.

The way that search engines rank sites is a lot like the way we ranked the popular kids in high school—by how much they’re being talked about. How many positive things are being said about them. And of course it doesn’t hurt if the site’s physically attractive.

The following are a few of the basics of Search Engine Optimization. Consider your organization’s capacity to meet the following needs. With a little research and time (which, let’s face it, equals money), basic optimization can be done in-house. But if you think your website is a conversion tool in waiting, you may consider outsourcing a SEM organization to manage the initiatives.

What follows are a few SEO basics that should be kept in mind. How deep you're willing to go to get your page ranked higher can mean the difference between tweaking your site to be more search engine friendly or hiring a full-time SEO and/or website content manager.

### **1. Content Above All Else.**

Why should a search engine brand that prides itself on generating the best results give top billing to a website that's little more than a glorified logo and three paragraphs of text that haven't been updated since 2007? You could be the foremost expert on your particular product or service, but if you don't make that clear on your own website, odds are people won't be very inclined to link to you.

As a general rule, more references to you across the web means better standing. Keep in mind another important piece of analytical data is time spent on site. Sure, website content generally favors short attention spans, but that doesn't mean the content that is there shouldn't be engaging and pertinent. The longer people stay on your site, the better it looks to the algorithm. Give people a reason to visit, stay and re-visit. That can mean adding a blog, which can be updated daily or publishing a newsletter. And don't forget even basic, well-crafted copy that hits on pertinent search terms can be a major draw.

Every bit of text on your site helps, whether it's header tags that contain popular keywords or naming image files in ways that point image searches to your domain. I'll wager that `Acme_CEO_Joe_Acme.jpg` would generate more image search hits than `DSC_0024.jpg`. Likewise, the more pertinent keywords you feature in individual page titles and your very own domain name could make a world of difference.

### **2. Knowing What People are Searching**

Google's Keyword Tool exists to help PPC advertisers get a handle on their language, but that doesn't mean you can't still use its results to improve organic searches. Whoever is put in charge of your organization's SEO should regularly update him/herself on search trends. Knowing what the market wants gives you a better idea of what type of content you're lacking. Then, you can revisit and revise.

Google Analytics is a free service that gives highly detailed insight into your own website's traffic. It automatically alerts of significant changes in data patterns.

### **3. Watch yourself. Watch Your Competitors**

Discovering who's linking to your site is as easy as visiting [alexa.com/siteinfo/yourstenamehere.com](http://alexa.com/siteinfo/yourstenamehere.com). Then, under the Reputation heading, you'll see a number/hyperlink showcasing your backlinks, or the number of people linking to your site. Click it for details. This same results page will show you top search queries (what led people to the site via various search engines). Now do the same for your competitors. Note the contrasting areas. What are they doing right that you're doing wrong—or vice versa?

Set up a Google Alert for your competitors' brand names to see if people are talking about them. The same tools that are used to optimize your own site should similarly be used to investigate your competitors. If you think that sounds sneaky, just consider that they're probably doing it to you!

### **4. Links. Links. Links.**

Back when the Internet was in its infancy, a few well-selected page titles, keywords and HTML metatags were all that stood between a site and decent search engine standing. Now, with the sheer number of competing sites out there, it's largely about maintaining quality backlinks. Consider all the ways you can get people to click a link to your site. It could

range from commenting on industry blogs with a signature that hyperlinks to your site to penning entire guest blogs with a referral to your organization. It could mean posting on forums, where the SEO might refer users facing a specific challenge to your site. Ask yourself, in what ways can I get popular sites to link to me? In what ways can I bring value as a resource?

Note that there is a fine line between legitimate links and spam links. Search engines frown upon dishonest backlinking, which could adversely affect ranking. So use judgment and avoid arbitrarily linking to your site for no good reason.

### **5. Expand Your Borders**

So you have a website—nicely done! Do you have a blog? How about a Facebook page, Twitter feed, YouTube account or LinkedIn profile? The more you're exposed, the greater the likelihood your content will be shared. The more your content is shared, the more you're pleasing those all-important algorithms.