

Search Engines Revealed

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1. Introduction to Search Engine Optimization

A search engine is the most effective tool that can bring a prospective customer to your Company website. Millions of web visits are initiated daily through one or the other search engine to locate information or sources of supply. This is considered to be the most effective and targeted channel for you as a website owner to acquire a hot lead. Businesses all the over the world spend a huge sum on designing, building, maintaining and promoting their websites.

1.1 SEO plan and objective

Online advertising and marketing budgets have also soared. Relative to these, the investment required for getting traffic through search engines is much lower. However, as search engines have millions of pages in their coverage, it is important to have a proper approach to using this channel effectively.

The art and science of understanding how search engines identify pages that are relevant to a query made by a visitor and designing marketing strategies based on this is called search engine optimization. Search engines offer the most cost effective mechanism to acquire “real” and “live” business leads. It is found that in most cases search engine optimization delivers better ROI than other forms such as online advertisements, e-mail marketing and newsletters, affiliate and pay per click advertising, and digital campaigns and promotions.

Before you begin to develop your own strategy and implementation plan to optimize your website for improved page ranking, you have to reflect on what is the major objective of this initiative. Is it your objective to attract more visitors to your site or convert more persons from being a visitor to a loyal stakeholder in your business? The dot com mania period showed a marked change in evaluating a website's success in terms of number of eyeballs that it could collect, without taking into perspective what these eyeballs or site visits meant to the organization. That has changed by now, and most companies realize that critical to a business unit's success is sticky visitors, loyalty and ultimately the impact this has on its bottom line.

Valuing a website in terms of what advertising it can attract and sustain is no longer the benchmark or performance indicator; what is certainly more important is what the site does to acquire and retain new and existing customers.

As search engines have several million pages that are available on the world-wide web, it is necessary to use specialized techniques to match your web page with the algorithms and ranking criteria that such engines use, thereby improving the chance of catching the limited attention span of the visitor.

The first step that advertisers and marketing professionals need to take to apply optimization techniques to a website is to articulate the objective and

characterize the visitor, the desired visitor experience and outcome. The optimization plan should evolve out of this.

1.2 Defining the SEO budget

The word optimization is by itself suggestive that the plan should balance the initiative and the budget so as to get cost effective results. If the stakes are high, it may sustain higher advertisement and paid listing options. How much would you like to spend on this exercise? If the budget is limited, the expensive options of several advertisements, linking programs, directory listings will have to be forsaken and attention given to getting the best results from limited but focused efforts. The key metrics to this program is to assess the ROI it delivers: marketing dollars vis-à-vis measurable benefits to the organization.

1.3 Avenues for promotion

Search Engines provide you an effective vehicle for promotion of your website. There are no doubt other channels available. ‘Directories’ is often included in the generic term ‘search engines’ although they are distinct in their characteristics and function. Advertisements through banner displays at popular and often visited sites and “portals”, reciprocal links, affiliate links and programs that direct visitors from one site to a targeted site (with a

payment associated with such arrangements) and publicity through other media are other well known avenues of promotion. Mass email campaigns, publishing and distributing internet newsletters, 'permission marketing' using list servers and internet based marketing promotions including coupons and sweepstakes are other forms of online advertising. The key determinant is what value the initiative offers you in return for the investment. Metrics are somewhat more difficult to establish for search engine optimization compared to other direct forms of advertisement. Some suggested measures for determining ROI are discussed in a later section.

2. Search Engines and Directories

You would be using search engines so you know how they work from the user perspective. From your own experience as a user, you also know that only those results that list at the top of the heap are most likely to attract you. It doesn't amuse you to know that your search yielded 44316 results. Perhaps even number 50 on your list will not get your custom or even your attention. Thus you know that getting listed on the top or as near to the top is crucial.

Since most of the search engine traffic is free, you'll usually find it worth your time to learn a few tricks to maximize the results from your time and effort. In the next section, you will see how search engine works – from your perspective as a website owner.

2.1 How do Search Engines Work?

Most of the top-ranked search engines are crawler based search engines while some may be based on human compiled directories. The people behind the search engines want the same thing every webmaster wants - traffic to their site. Since their content is mainly links to other sites, the thing for them to do is to make their search engine bring up the most relevant sites to the search query, and to display the best of these results first.

In order to accomplish this, they use a complex set of rules called algorithms. When a search query is submitted at a search engine, sites are determined to be relevant or not relevant to the search query according to these algorithms, and then ranked in the order it calculates from these algorithms to be the best matches first.

Search engines keep their algorithms secret and change them often in order to prevent webmasters from manipulating their databases and dominating search results. They also want to provide new sites at the top of the search results on a regular basis rather than always having the same old sites show up month after month.

An important difference to realize is that search engines and directories are not the same. Search engines use a spider to "crawl" the web and the web sites they find, as well as submitted sites. As they crawl the web, they gather the information that is used by their algorithms in order to rank your site.

Directories rely on submissions from webmasters, with live humans viewing your site to determine if it will be accepted. If accepted, directories often rank sites in alphanumeric order, with paid listings sometimes on top. Some search engines also place paid listings at the top, so it's not always possible to get a ranking in the top three or more places unless you're willing to pay for it.

Let us now look at a more detailed explanation on how Search Engines work.

Crawler based search engines are primarily composed of three parts.

2.1.1 Spidering

A search engine robot's action is called spidering, as it resembles the multiple legged spiders. The spider's job is to go to a web page, read the contents, connect to any other pages on that web site through links, and bring back the information. From one page it will travel to several pages and this proliferation follows several parallel and nested paths simultaneously. Spiders frequent the site at some interval, may be a month to a few months, and re-index the pages. This way any changes that may have occurred in your pages could also be reflected in the index. The spiders automatically visit your web pages and create their listings. An important aspect is to study what factors promote "deep crawl" – the depth to which the spider will go into your website from the page it first visited. Listing (submitting or registering) with a search engine is a step that could accelerate and increase the chances of that engine "spidering" your pages.

2.1.2 Indexing

The spider's movement across web pages stores those pages in its memory, but the key action is in indexing. The index is a huge database containing all the information brought back by the spider. The index is constantly being

updated as the spider collects more information. The entire page is not indexed and the searching and page-ranking algorithm is applied only to the index that has been created. Most search engines claim that they index the full visible body text of a page. In a subsequent section, we explain the key considerations to ensure that indexing of your web pages improves relevance during search. The combined understanding of the indexing and the page-ranking process will lead to developing the right strategies. The Meta tags ‘Description’ and ‘Keywords’ have a vital role as they are indexed in a specific way. Some of the top search engines do not index the keywords that they consider spam. They will also not index certain ‘stop words’ (commonly used words such as ‘a’ or ‘the’ or ‘of’) so as to save space or speed up the process. Images are obviously not indexed, but image descriptions or Alt text or “text within comments” is included in the index by some search engines.

2.1.3 The Search Engine Program

The search engine software or program is the final part. When a person requests a search on a keyword or phrase, the search engine software searches the index for relevant information. The software then provides a report back to the searcher with the most relevant web pages listed first. The algorithm-based processes used to determine ranking of results are discussed in greater detail later.

2.2 Human powered directories

These directories compile listings of websites into specific industry and subject categories and they usually carry a short description about the website. Inclusion in directories is a human task and requires submission to the directory producers. Visitors and researchers over the net quite often use these directories to locate relevant sites and information sources. Thus directories assist in structured search. Another important reason is that crawler engines quite often find websites to crawl through their listing and links in directories. Yahoo and The Open Directory are amongst the largest and most well known directories. LookSmart is a directory that provides results to partner sites such as MSN Search, Excite and others. Lycos is an example of a site that pioneered the search engine but shifted to the Directory model depending on AlltheWeb.com for its listings.

2.3 Hybrid Search Engines

Hybrid Search Engines are both crawler based as well as human powered. In plain words, these search engines have two sets of listings based on both the mechanisms mentioned above. The best example of hybrid search engines is Yahoo, which has got a human powered directory as well as a Search toolbar administered by Google. Although, such engines provide both listings they are generally dominated by one of the two mechanisms. Yahoo is known more for

its directory rather than crawler based search engine.

2.4 How do Search Engines rank web pages?

Search engines rank web pages according to the software's understanding of the web page's relevancy to the term being searched. To determine relevancy, each search engine follows its own group of rules. The most important rules are

- The location of keywords on your web page; and
- How often those keywords appear on the page (the frequency)

For example, if the keyword appears in the title of the page, then it would be considered to be far more relevant than the keyword appearing in the text at the bottom of the page.

Search engines consider keywords to be more relevant if they appear sooner on the page (like in the headline) rather than later. The idea is that you'll be putting the most important words – the ones that really have the relevant information – on the page first.

Search engines also consider the frequency with which keywords appear. The frequency is usually determined by how often the keywords are used out of all the words on a page. If the keyword is used 4 times out of 100 words, the frequency would be 4%.

Of course, you can now develop the perfect relevant page with one keyword at 100% frequency - just put a single word on the page and make it the title of the page as well. Unfortunately, the search engines don't make things that simple.

While all search engines do follow the same basic rules of relevancy, location and frequency, each search engine has its own special way of determining rankings. To make things more interesting, the search engines change the rules from time to time so that the rankings change even if the web pages have remained the same.

One method of determining relevancy used by some search engines (like HotBot and Infoseek), but not others (like Lycos), is the Meta tags. Meta tags are hidden HTML codes that provide the search engine spiders with potentially important information like the page description and the page keywords.

Meta tags are often labeled as the secret to getting high rankings, but Meta tags alone will not get you a top 10 ranking. On the other hand, they certainly don't hurt. Detailed information on meta-tags and other ways of improving search engine ranking is given later in this chapter.

In the early days of the web, webmasters would repeat a keyword hundreds of

times in the Meta tags and then add it hundreds of times to the text on the web page by making it the same color as the background. However, now, major search engines have algorithms that may exclude a page from ranking if it has resorted to “keyword spamming”; in fact some search engines will downgrade ranking in such cases and penalize the page.

Link analysis and ‘clickthrough’ measurement are certain other factors that are “off the page” and yet crucial in the ranking mechanism adopted by some leading search engines. This is quickly emerging as the most important determinant of ranking, but before we study this, we must first look at the most popular search engines and then look at the various steps you can take to improve your success at each of the stages – spidering, indexing and ranking.
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