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SAMPLE: Search Engine Optimization

Best Practice Guide

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SAMPLE: Search Engine Optimization

Best Practice Guide



Published October 2007

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Is this guide for you?

Who is this Econsultancy Best Practice Guide aimed at?

Econsultancy's Best Practice Guides help organizations improve their results from digital marketing through improved planning and execution.

Our guides explain best practice for successfully implementing digital marketing on a large-scale in medium and large organizations, but best practice guidelines also apply for smaller organizations.

The guides are being developed to be the definitive source for best practice on a range of online marketing topics.

Please send feedback and suggestions to **Chris Lake**, editor (chris@e-consultancy.com).

In particular, the reports will help (and are aimed at):

- **Specialists in digital marketing teams** who are actively involved in improving results from online marketing activities.
- **Managers of digital marketing specialists** in a team who plan and control digital marketing.
- **Managers and team members responsible for traditional marketing activities** who want to understand the issues involved with successful planning, implementation and integration of digital marketing activities.
- **Specialists in specific digital marketing activities** such as search engine marketing who need to understand more about integration with other digital marketing activities.

Key features of our guides:

- **Comprehensive** – covers all aspects needed for success in one place but also referencing other in-depth sources in different portals, forums, blogs, whitepapers and books.
- **Accessible** – content will be chunked to help readers navigate to and assimilate relevant content.
- **In-depth** – Cover topics in sufficient depth to successfully implement suggestions.
- **Practical** – explains how to implement techniques and describe success factors that can be applied straightaway.
- **Improvement focused** – will explain how to revise existing approaches through evaluation of current approach, refining strategy and then implementing an improved approach.
- **Leading edge** – incorporating the latest best-practice advice and regularly updated to stay current with new additions clearly highlighted.



Introduction to search engine marketing

Search engine marketing – opportunities and risks

Search engine marketing (SEM) is the single biggest opportunity in online marketing, which is unsurprising given the growing popularity of search engines for researching products, services and organizations. In this section we will set the scene...

Where are we at?

Search usage is continuing to rise among consumers and professionals, who use search engines like Google and Yahoo to find what they're looking for.

So what's the big challenge?

Tapping into the searching behaviours of your audience and figuring out which keywords you need to focus on requires great tenacity. Not to mention securing top rankings for your chosen keywords. If you have tried SEO you'll know how tricky this can be.

Constant innovations from the rival search engines, coupled with increased activity from your competitors, means that you have to identify the right approaches and deploy the right resources to rank well.

And the risks...?

You are probably aware about the risks of SEM. Since most search engine traffic typically originates from one source (typically 'The big G', aka Google) there is a significant risk that algorithm changes can seriously dent your traffic.

We've all heard the horror stories, about being top one day and nowhere the next, but how do you ensure this doesn't happen to you?

On top of all that you also need to manage the risks of pages not being included in the search engine, or of being barred completely for infringing its guidelines.

Where do I start?

You've already started. We created this guide to provide a super-comprehensive, hype-free compilation of best practice in SEM. Digest it in chunks, then act accordingly. And remember to educate agencies and colleagues along the way (no file-sharing though...!).

Most of this guide is aimed at helping you perform well in the organic search results, although there is some crossover with paid-search (which we will deal with in greater detail in a separate report).

By reading this guide you can maximise your opportunities from SEM while minimising your risks.

We recommend that you **print this guide** (two pages per page works well).

Shall we continue...?





<http://www.e-consultancy.com/publications/seo-guide/>

Why is search marketing so important?

Web users love to search. They use the main search engines like Google, Yahoo!, MSN Search and Ask to find one thing only – information.

What sort of information are they looking for?

Clearly this depends on the individual. They might be looking for entertainment¹ news, or hunting for product reviews, or trying to compare vendors and services, or seeking their soulmate, or buying a second-hand car. All these goals can start with a simple search query.

The use of keywords or keyphrases (combining several keywords) helps users find exactly what they want. Modern search engines are generally great at delivering **relevant results** to users.

Relevance (or relevancy if you are in the US) is the mantra of all search engine engineers.

A word from our resident lexicologist...

Understanding **keyphrases** enables marketers at companies to target users showing **intent** or interest in their products.

Notice that we say **'keyphrase'**² (short for 'keyword phrase') rather than **'keyword'**. This is because search engines such as Google attribute more relevance when there is an exact phrase match on a web page (a phrase that matches the user's search term).

Search engines also assess other occurrences of the keywords and synonyms on the page, and also those websites / pages linking to a page. We'll get onto that in due course...

So how big is search?

The number of searches by people trying to find information is still growing dramatically. Nielsen//NetRatings reported that there were 5.7 billion searches in the US in January 2006, a 39% year-on-year increase from 4.1 billion in January 2005³. Furthermore, the number of searches in the US is more than 183 million per day.

¹ Google Zeitgeist (<http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/zeitgeist.html> and <http://www.google.co.uk/press/zeitgeist.html>) shows that the most popular searches in Google are all about entertainment, but with some consumer brands making the top 10 in some countries. Yahoo! Buzz service shows similar results (<http://buzz.yahoo.com/overall/>).

² 'Key phrase' is also a term used by some Google scientists such as Krishna Bharat, a principal scientist in Google Labs who is best known as the instigator of Google News. For example, he uses it in his classic paper:

Hilltop: A Search Engine based on Expert Documents

<http://www.cs.toronto.edu/~georgem/hilltop/> By Bharat and Mihaila

In the article they say: "For example, the title, headings (e.g., text within a pair of <H1> </H1> tags) and anchor text within the expert page are considered key phrases".

³ Nielsen Netratings. http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_060302.pdf





How many people can we reach through search engine marketing?

Look at the examples in *Table 1* to see the volume of monthly searches in the UK for some generic keywords. As we shall see later, completing keyphrase analysis and demand analysis is an essential planning activity for search engine marketing. Fortunately, there are some great tools such as the Google Traffic Estimator available to find out the relative importance of different keyphrases in different countries at different times of the year. More on the tools later too.

The numbers in *Table 1* are huge in any country, but it gets better; most users narrow their searches using phrases like *'free online banking'*, *'cuba holidays'* and *'ski jackets'*.

Table 1 Volume of searches for single keywords in a single month

Keyword	Estimated Google Adwords UK daily clicks (Position 1.0)	Total estimated UK searches on Google
Online banking	187	112,000
HSBC	415	249,000
Holidays	9909	595,000
Thomas Cook	2,928	175,000
Clothing	8207	4,920,000
Debenhams	522	313,000
CRM	144	144,000
Oracle	94	56,000

Notes:

- 1. Google estimates from Google Traffic Estimator available through Google Adwords for UK, April 2007. Total Google searches based on assuming that on average Position 1 ad slot receives 5% clickthrough rate, so total searches is 20 times this (Uses exact match, actual clickthrough will vary by keyphrase, e.g. highest for brands).*
- 2. Overture UK search advertising network main search sources included Yahoo!, MSN and Wanadoo favoured by consumers rather than business people which results in different values for CRM and Oracle. Includes both singular and plural. * Includes singular version of word.*
- 3. Both include non-human, software generated searches from link tracking, rank checking and click fraud tools so overestimate actual searches by people.*



Marketers are increasingly investing in search engine marketing as a result of the changes in consumer behaviour indicated by *Table 1*, with billions of dollars spent annually on search engine marketing.⁴

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Exactly what is search engine marketing?

Simply put, search engine marketing (SEM) is about connecting searchers looking for information related to your brand with what they are looking for. It is about making your brand visible within the search engines to attract new visitors to your site(s).

SEM helps site owners meet their various online marketing objectives such as generating leads, sales or simply building awareness and delivering the right message to their audience.

For many marketers SEM is highly effective and highly measurable.

Where do I begin?

Because of the range of keyphrases used by searchers (which form a **long-tail distribution**) a key aspect of search engine marketing is deciding which phrases are used to promote a company.

Once you have a list of keywords and phrases, the next goal is to try to achieve favourable listings within the **search engine results page(s) (aka ‘SERPs’)**.

The screenshot shows a Google search for 'car insurance'. The search bar contains 'car insurance' and the search button is visible. Below the search bar, there are navigation links for 'Web', 'Images', 'News', 'Maps', 'Products', 'Groups', 'Scholar', and 'more'. The search results are displayed under the heading 'Web' and show 'Results 1 - 100 of about 115,000,000 for car insurance. (0.13 seconds)'. The results are divided into 'Sponsored Links' and 'Organic Results'. The sponsored links include 'Cheaper Car Insurance' from www.privilege.com, 'Cheapest UK Car Insurance' from moneysupermarket.com, 'MORE THAN™ Car Insurance' from MoreThan.com, 'Cheap UK Car insurance and home insurance quotes comparison from ...' from www.confused.com, 'The AA: Car Insurance, Breakdown Cover, Loans, Motoring Advice ...' from www.theaa.com, 'Car Insurance : Get a car insurance quote online - The AA' from www.theaa.com, 'Officially The Cheapest' from www.swiftcover.com, 'Compare Over 300 Prices' from www.CompareTheMarket.com, 'TESCO Car Insurance' from www.TescoFinance.com, and 'Prudential Car Insurance' from www.prulinsure.co.uk. The organic results include 'The AA: Car Insurance, Breakdown Cover, Loans, Motoring Advice ...' from www.theaa.com and 'Car Insurance : Get a car insurance quote online - The AA' from www.theaa.com.

Figure 1 Google search engine results page for keyphrase ‘car insurance’

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show how small differences in the search query entered by the user can deliver completely different listings on the SERPs.

⁴ According to SEMPO (Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO), advertisers in the U.S. and Canada spent \$5.75 billion on Search Engine Marketing (SEM) in 2005, a 44 percent increase over 2004 spending.



Within SEM, there are **three main opportunities** for organizations to get their message across, to gain visibility and to direct visitors to their sites.

The first two opportunities are via the SERPs and the third is on third-party sites.

1. **The natural or organic listings.** The part of the pages listing results from a search engine query which are displayed in a sequence according to relevance of match between the keyword phrase typed into a search engine and a web page according to a ranking algorithm used by the search engine.

The method for achieving placement in this part of the page is called search engine optimization (SEO) and is the focus of this best practice guide.

2. **2. The paid or sponsored listings.** A relevant ad (typically a text ad) with a link to a destination page is displayed when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. A fee is charged for every click of each link, with the amount bid for the click the main factor determining its position⁵.

Figure 2 and Figure 4 show that the number of brands in the natural listings (2) is much lower than the paid listings (8). This, together with the challenges of obtaining a high natural listing, helps explain why investment into paid search by marketers tends to be much higher than spend on SEO.⁶

The method for achieving placement in this part of the page is called **paid-search** (aka 'pay-per-click' / PPC). Econsultancy will publish a dedicated best practice guide to paid-search marketing, to help you plan, launch and optimize PPC campaigns.

The screenshot shows a Google search for 'car insurance uk'. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Web', 'Images', 'Groups', 'News', 'Froogle', and 'more'. The search bar contains 'car insurance uk' and a 'Search' button. Below the search bar, it says 'Search: the web pages from the UK'. The results are divided into 'Sponsored Links' and 'Organic Results'. The sponsored links include 'Find Cheap Car Insurance' from www.confused.com, 'Direct Line Car Insurance' from www.directline.com, and 'Cheapest Car Insurance' from insuresupermarket.com. The organic results include 'Car Insurance, Home Insurance, Travel Insurance, life quotes UK' from www.endsleigh.co.uk, 'Cheap car insurance, car insurance uk' from www.endsleigh.co.uk, 'Car Insurance, Home Insurance, Travel Insurance quotes uk' from www.churchill.com, and 'Car Insurance UK quotes' from www.churchill.com.

Figure 2 Google search engine results page for keyphrase 'car insurance uk'

3. **Content-network listings.** These ads are displayed on third party sites that have an AdSense relationship with Google, or which display Yahoo or MIVA listings on their website.

⁵ Google Adwords also uses a **Quality Score** based on ad clickthrough rate and engagement with site

⁶ According to SEMPO (Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO)), advertisers in the U.S. and Canada spent 83% was on paid placements, 11% was on SEO and 4% on paid inclusion. http://www.sempo.org/news/releases/Search_Engine_Marketers

These actually account for a sizeable proportion of Google revenue⁷, but tend to have much lower clickthrough rates.

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Introducing SEO Ranking Factors

What will make me top? Or more precisely: “What are the factors that determine my position in the natural listings for a specific keyphrase and what is their relative importance?”

These are the key questions that everyone involved in SEO, from clients to agencies, wants and needs to know. So let’s work through some answers for you...

Unfortunately, the number of people who can definitively answer these questions by concisely explaining the hundreds of factors (and the way these factors work with one another) is strictly limited to a handful of senior engineers who work for the search engines.

However, through combining the **experience of the authors**, the **review team** and **disclosure from the search engines** and **expert commentators**, we have compiled a comprehensive list of the most important factors which determine position in the listings.

What determines ranking position in the natural listings?

The position or ranking in the natural listings for a particular keyphrase is dependent on a search engine’s ranking algorithm.

For the search query entered into the search engine, the algorithm uses rules or heuristics to identify the most relevant pages, based on the page’s **text content** and its **context** (which can be indicated by **links** from other pages and sites).

Each search engine has a different set of algorithms created by engineers who strive to produce the best relevance for its users.

However, the ranking of natural listings has evolved as a science over the past ten years, based on an even longer history of document indexing and retrieval history. As with all sciences, there are fundamental principles which apply. So to deliver relevance search engines tend to use common **search engine ranking factors**.

Enough with the science: get with the ranking factors...

We will soon enough. But before we do here’s a word to the wise: **understanding some of the most common ranking factors is straightforward**. Keyword: ‘**straightforward**’.

*⁷ For Fiscal year 2005, Google reported its search revenues as follows:
Google Sites Revenues - Google-owned sites generated revenues of \$1.098 billion, or 57% of total revenues.*

Google Network Revenues - Google's partner sites generated revenues, through AdSense programs, of \$799 million, or 42% of total revenues.

<http://investor.google.com/releases/2005Q4.html>



Over the past few years many bedroom cowboys and unethical agencies have raked in fees by pretending that SEO is about wearing a black hat, doing the search voodoo, etc. But there is no need for any smoke or mirrors. If your agency refuses to reveal its techniques to you then our advice would be to move on. Immediately!

Despite the mystique perpetuated about SEO it really isn't terribly difficult to grasp the concepts. The difficulty lies in managing your keywords and optimization over the long term. Not in understanding the ranking factors.

Who in my organization needs to know about this stuff?

It is essential for your technology team / agencies to understand these ranking factors. It is also imperative that all content owners / authors / stakeholders understand how good quality content can improve search rankings. Authors need to know which keyphrases to use, otherwise you won't have a joined up strategy.

Applying simple 'house style' rules can help generate visits from qualified visitors. In fact let's coin a phrase: 'house strategy'. You need to develop a 'house strategy guide' for your authors and editors.

So I can ditch my SEO agency, right?

It depends, is the honest answer. You might be able to, but it is more likely that this guide will inform your search strategy, with you making the calls. But you will still need **somebody** to manage it (either in-house or outsourced). Ultimately this guide to search marketing is about increasing ROI and maximising rankings, not about saving costs.

There remains a great need for solid, ethical SEO agencies. Management and optimization is an ongoing task. The bigger your company / market / website, the bigger that task is going to be. High volume search-terms and intense competition means that applying specific optimization techniques is required to rank well. Ethical SEO agencies can help you with this.

The holy grail of SEO is to achieve a high, stable and long-term presence at the top of the SERPs for phrases which have both high volume and which convert well.

Agencies can also help by putting the brakes on your own enthusiasm, as over-optimization is a leading cause of search engine penalties. Equally, after reading this guide, you should be able to determine if your existing agency is over-egging the SEO cake, or feeding you unsound advice.

Remember that search engines also use **ranking penalties** for websites / pages. They employ filters within their algorithms that penalise websites for search engine spamming (such as over-optimization of a phrase or non-natural links from other sites⁸).

Now for the six key ranking factors...

1. Planning and strategy including setting performance targets.
2. Index inclusion and coverage.
3. On-page optimization.
4. Link-building (internal and external).
5. SEO process.
6. Conversion efficiency.

The content of each section are explained further in the section: Structure of this guide on SEO Best Practice.

⁸ <http://www.seochat.com/c/a/Google-Optimization-Help/Google-Filters-and-Avoiding-their-Screens/>

Of these six areas, those at the heart of search engine ranking are success factors 2, 3 and 4. Why? Well, if your pages are not included within the index then you cannot expect to gain any search engine referrals. Once included, results are dependent on the combination of on-page optimization and link-building.

When we talk about link-building we're mainly considering third party links, but a solid internal linking structure should be adopted within your own website/s. There are proven benefits.

SEO is challenging because there are literally hundreds of factors that the search engines take into account. Alan Eustace, a Google VP of search engineering recently announced in 2006 that there are over 200 signals that Google uses to determine document relevance for a searcher⁹. New approaches are continually being trialled, tweaked, and introduced.

The hundreds of factors used by the search engines to determine relevance can be simplified into the two most important factors which are essential for good ranking positions:

- 1. On-page optimization.** Matching between the copy on the page to the search terms entered (the main factors include keyword and synonym matches and density, keyword formatting, keywords in anchor text and page title tags).
 - This is not about spamming or “**keyword stuffing**”, so be sure not to overdo it.
 - Think of it as labelling content in the most appropriate way.
 - Headline and link text should reflect the editorial content.
 - Human readers should not be able to notice optimization.
- 2. Link-building.** This creates links into a page (inbound or backlinks). The search engine assesses each link to a page from another page or another site as a vote for this page. Pages and sites with more inbound links will be ranked more highly.
 - It is not just number of links which are important to determining the position, but the quality of links is vital.
 - Quality is determined by context, relevancy, and popularity of the linking page, as well as the link anchor text and adjacent text.
 - Not all links are treated equally. One link from an ‘authority’ website may be more valuable than 100 links from non-contextual websites.

As well as these positive ranking factors which help increase a sites position, there are also spam filters which could reduce a sites position or remove it from the index entirely.

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<http://google.client.shareholder.com/Visitors/event/build2/MediaPresentation.cfm?MediaID=20263&Player=1#>



Maximization for SEO

The concept of maximization is often applied to paid-search, indeed Google has ‘maximisers’ or advisors for its larger clients.

This concept can also be applied to SEO, if a balanced approach is used across each of the six success factors we review in this report.

Key recommendation 1

Adopt a balanced approach to SEO which creates a long-term plan and an effective process to maximise your performance in the key areas of index inclusion, on-page optimization and link-building.

We believe that successful SEO is all about deploying the right resources to achieving maximization across these six areas (highlighted in bold):

- It’s about maximising the inclusion and visibility of a brand online as users search for the brand and product-related information – is your brand visible in the SERPs.
- It’s about maximising the volume of quality visitors to destination sites from the search engines through encouraging them to clickthrough to your pages.
- It’s about maximising your position in the SERPS pages for both natural listings and sponsored or paid listings.
- It’s about maximising the return on your investment to achieve visibility and clickthrough by selecting the right approaches to SEM and the right execution.

An expert in on-page optimization or link-building will not generate the best results without sound planning based on detailed keyphrase analysis.

Similarly, these approaches will be unsuccessful if the company does not overcome the initial technical challenges of index inclusion.

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Key challenges of search engine marketing?

To develop an effective plan for SEM requires an understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of SEO and PPC marketing.

Advantages of SEO

Few would argue that SEO is potentially the most important search marketing approach for marketers since most searchers click on the natural listings.

Indeed, research shows that some searchers NEVER click on the sponsored listings. Others still don't realise these links are paid-for.

Generally, the 80:20 rule holds true with 80% of the clicks on natural listings and 20%¹⁰ of the clicks on the paid listings as suggested by the first Stats box earlier in this section.

A key benefit of SEO is that it is relatively cost-effective since there is no payment to the search engines for being placed there. This is particularly important for the 'search head', the high volume, low intent phrases shown in *Table 1* which can be expensive in paid-search. But it can also be useful for generating visitors on the long-tail of search shown in *Figure 9*. Many companies bid on these phrases through paid-search, so giving opportunities for those who use an SEO strategy for the tail.

Additionally, the cost of SEO is relatively fixed, independent of click volume. Effectively, the cost per click from SEO declines through time after initial optimization costs and lower ongoing optimization costs. Conversely, paid-search is essentially a variable cost.

So, there are no media costs, but resources are necessary for key phrase analysis and to complete optimization on the website pages.

Together with paid-search it can also offer a highly targeted audience – visitors referred by SEO will only visit your site only if they are looking for specific information on your products or related content.

Disadvantages of SEO

The challenge of SEO is that there are over 8 billion pages¹¹ in the search engine indexes with your position in the SERPs dependent on a constantly changing algorithm which is not published. So making your pages visible may require specialist knowledge, constant monitoring and the ability to respond.

As a consequence, the biggest disadvantage of SEO is a lack of control. You are subject to changes in the algorithm.

There are other possible issues. You may be prevented from competing on a level playing field, because competitors and even affiliates may use less ethical black hat SEO techniques.

In competitive sectors it may be very difficult to get listed in the top few results for competitive phrases. This is when PPC may have to be used, although this can be expensive in a competitive sector.

¹⁰ But remember that this is 20% by volume; the quality of clicks driven by paid-search may be higher since purchase intent is higher and so conversion rates are often higher

¹¹ Google is currently trialling an index of 24 billion pages (January 2006) as part of the Big Daddy update:

<http://www.directmag.com/searchline/1-25-06-Google-BigDaddy/> and <http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/bigdaddy/>

This lack of visibility makes it difficult to make a definitive business case for SEO, although it is fairly obvious what a sought-after number one position on Google would do for most companies.

It is nevertheless impossible to predict and guarantee positions and click volumes from SEO, because the impact of future changes to the algorithm is unknown. Ditto competitor activity – you don't know what they'll be doing in future.

So, for a given investment of £1, \$1 or €1 it is difficult to estimate the returns compared to paid-search, or indeed traditional advertising, or direct mail, where more accurate estimates are possible.

However, we will see that estimates of long-term returns from SEO can and should be made.

Key recommendation 2

SEO is a long-term strategy. To identify the correct investment requires a long-term cost/benefit analysis. If this doesn't occur, SEM strategy is often imbalanced in favour of SEO.

Technical disadvantages?

Technical constraints may also limit your SEO capabilities – for example, if there is not the right IT resource, knowledge or technology available to implement the changes to site structure and content markup needed for SEO.

For example, websites created entirely using Flash cause readability problems for search engine robots, so onsite optimization is somewhat redundant.

Content disadvantages?

There is a clear need for better education among content authors. They need to know what keyphrases to use, and where to use them, whenever they add and update content.

Balance is required when authors create pages, since they are being created for both search engines and humans.

Copy and language which is effective for SEO can be different to naturally written copy, although the search engines seek to identify and reward natural language. There needs to be a compromise and subtle balance between the two so that pages are intelligible to users, but are also great search engine fodder.

The mantra is to write for users, but to label content accurately for Googlebot.

Because of these problem areas many companies focus their online marketing strategy on PPC. Ad buying and planning remains the staple diet of marketers, so buying PPC ads comes naturally. Indeed, PPC is often the first step into the world of search for many 'offline' marketers, the lowest hanging fruit. ROI from paid-search can be excellent, but you mustn't allow these potential problem areas – or the ease of buying PPC ads – to distract you from the joys of organic search optimization.

Key recommendation 3

SEO is not purely a technical discipline to be conducted by a specialist team or agency. It requires a different style to traditional copywriting which requires training of content owners and reviewers.

Paid-search advantages

- Predictability. Traffic, rankings, returns and costs tend to be more stable and more predictable than SEO. It is more immediately accountable, in terms of ROI, while SEO can take much longer to evaluate.
- More straightforward to achieve high rankings – you simply have to bid more than your competitors, although Google also takes the Quality Score of your ad into account. SEO requires long-term, technically complex work on page optimization, site restructure and link-building, which can take months to implement and results to occur.
- Faster. PPC listings appear much faster, usually in a few hours (or days if editor review is required).
- Flexibility. Creative and bids can also be readily modified or turned-off for particular times. The results of SEO can take weeks or months to be achieved. Content modifications to existing pages for SEO are usually included within a few days. PPC budgets can also be reallocated to in line with changing marketing goals (eg: a bank can quickly switch paid-search budget from 'loans' to 'savings').
- Automation. Bid management systems can help financial predictability through using rules to control bidding in line with your conversion rates to reach an appropriate cost per sale. However substantial manual intervention is required for the best results for different search ad networks.
- Branding effect. Tests have shown that there is a branding effect with Pay Per Click, even if users do not click on the ad. This can be useful for the launch of products or major campaigns.¹²

Paid-search disadvantages

- Competition. Since Pay Per Click has become popular due to its effectiveness, it is competitive and because it is based on competitive bids it can get expensive. CPC/bid inflation has led to some companies reducing PPC activity. Some companies may get involved in bidding wars that drive bids up to an unacceptable-level – some phrases such as 'life insurance' may exceed £10 per click.
- Higher costs. IF SEO is effective it will almost always deliver a lower CPC.
- Favours big players. For companies with a lower budget or a narrower range of products on which to increase lifetime value it may be not possible to compete. Large players can also get deals on their media spend through their agencies.
- Complexity of managing large campaigns. PPC requires knowledge of configuration, bidding options of the reporting facilities of different ad networks. To manage a PPC account may require daily or even hourly checks on the bidding to stay competitive – this can amount to a lot of time. Bid management software can help here.
- Missed opportunities. Sponsored listings are only part of the SEM mix. Many search users do not click on these, so you cannot maximise the effect.
- Click fraud is regarded by some as a problem, especially in some sectors. Click fraud is covered in the detail in the Econsultancy Best Practice guide to Paid-search.

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<http://www.e-consultancy.com/publications/seo-guide/>

¹² An IAB US/NetRatings study http://www.iab.net/news/pr_2004_7_15.asp



What you will find in this guide

Structure of this guide on SEO Best Practice

We have seen that many factors influence successful SEO (SEO). To help simplify our explanation of best practice, Econsultancy has identified 6 key groupings of success factors for SEO which are summarised for quick reference in Figure 5. Within each of these areas, detailed recommendations of best practice for all significant ranking factors are explained.

Six groupings of success factors are used to structure the recommendations in this best practice guide:

Success factor 1: SEO planning and strategy

How to develop a structured plan to evaluate and improve SEO, covering these topics:

- Setting goals through demand analysis and conversion modelling.
- Auditing current performance including competitor benchmarking.
- Keyphrase analysis and selection.
- SEM strategy – integration between SEO, PPC and other online marketing.
- Evaluation and improvement process.
- Resourcing.

Success factor 2: Index coverage

How to achieve index inclusion in the different search engines covering these topics:

- Site submission – how to get a new site listed in the search engines.
- Google Sitemaps – an essential tool for evaluating and improving index coverage.
- Evaluating site index inclusion and robot indexing activity.
- Site inclusion and page exclusion – how to use Robots.txt and Meta tags to control.
- Domain strategy – approaches to distribute content across different domains including issues such as top-level domain variants, sub-domains, geolocation (international domains), domain hijacking and canonicalization.
- Time-related content issues including the Google sandbox effect, content freshness and link velocity.
- Indexing of dynamic content including problems with URL rewriting and Session ids.

Success factor 3: On-page optimization

In this section we make recommendations on how you should create documents which the search engine will assess as being highly relevant to a particular search term a search user has entered as their query. The most basic test of relevance is the number of times the search phrase appears on the page. However, there are many factors which are also applied. In this section we will review:

- Within page keyphrase factors including keyword density, synonyms and position
- Page markup keyphrase factors including syntactical accuracy, <title> tags, <meta> tags, hyperlink tags and alt tags.
- Document-level keyphrase factors such as the inclusion of keyphrases in the domain and document file name.



An additional guide on on-page optimization is provided in Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers.

Success factor 4: Link-building

In this section we show why the links between pages are at least important as on-page optimization in determining results from SEO. We will review the principle of PageRank, pioneered by Google to assess the relevance of pages based on their link popularity. PageRank has many implications for the way sites should be built and pages are linked, and we describe six principles you need to be aware of. Although PageRank is today not given as much weighting in generating search results, many of these principles can still be applied to give better results from SEO.

We will also recommend approaches on the six main strategies for external link-building from third party sites:

1. Natural link-building through quality content
2. Requesting inbound-only links
3. Reciprocal linking
4. Buying links
5. Creating your own external links
6. Generating buzz through PR

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Success factor 5: A structured process for SEO

In this section we bring together all the techniques detailed earlier in the report and recommend the best overall approach to SEO. We have identified 10 classic approaches to SEO which are part of a typical SEO project.

The ten processes or activities are:

1. Improve index inclusion.
2. Revise site architecture and linking strategy.
3. Internal linking strategy.
4. External link-building.
5. Improve page template effectiveness.
6. Improve SERPS effectiveness.
7. Refine SEO for homepage and other key pages.
8. Creation of themed pages for target keyphrases.
9. Partitioning of existing content between different pages.
10. Optimize other existing pages.



Success factor 6: Conversion efficiency

The main part of this report has focused on how to attract quality visitors to a website. But of course, to be of value overall, SEO must meet the marketing objectives of a site.

In this final section we review how to best devise landing pages of the site to meet this goal. We also look at the implications of structuring these pages. The principles we will explain for effective landing pages for SEO also support the aims of other e-communications such as paid-search, online advertising, affiliate marketing and e-mail marketing.

The main topics we will cover are:

- Setting balanced objectives for landing pages.
- Understanding different types of landing pages.
- Balancing usability, accessibility and persuasion.
- Measuring landing page effectiveness.
- Ten guidelines to improve landing page efficiency.

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Features of this guide

We have incorporated a range of features to help make this guide an effective learning tool:

1. **Key recommendations.** Guidance on issues which an organization should pay attention to in their SEO strategy.
2. **Tips.** Practical recommendations to improve results.
3. **The Stats.** Boxes which summarise research that supports a success factor.
4. **Links.** Links to tools, articles and portals found within the body text, footnotes and in the resources section at the end of the guide.
5. **SEO Ranking success factors boxes.** Designed for easy reference, these cover all of the major factors which affect SEO results. These are mainly positive factors which will improve factors, but associated negative factors are also referred to.

Each box often contains several related best practice ranking factors. These boxes have been designed to be consulted at a glance to understand best practice without reading too much text. The ranking success factors are structured based on the experience of the author and the review team, but as part of the review process each factor has been checked against other existing lists of ranking success factors¹³.

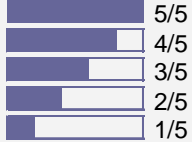
The Econsultancy best practice guide provides much more depth on each factor as shown in Table 2 including examples, several best practice guidelines and issues to watch for.

¹³ Google ranking factors list at: Vaughn's One-Pagers <http://www.vaughns-1-pagers.com/internet/google-ranking-factors.htm> and Rand Fishkin's seomoz (<http://www.vaughns-1-pagers.com/internet/google-ranking-factors.htm>)

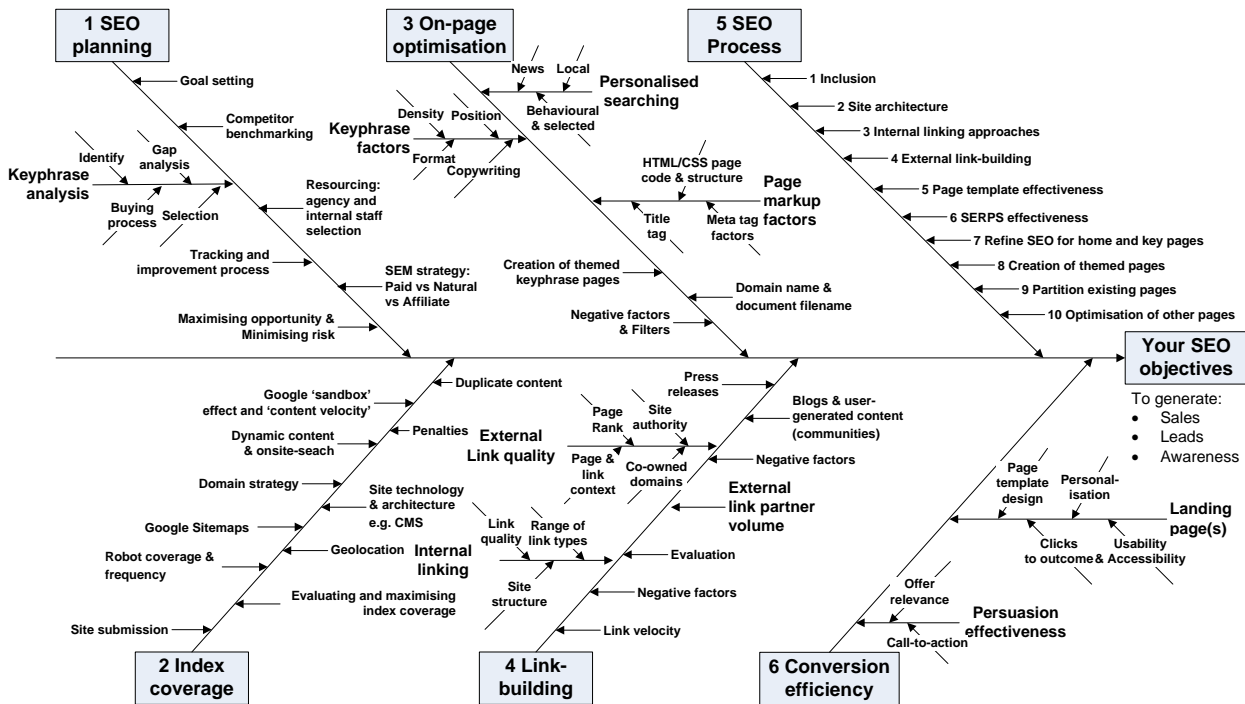


The **Importance** rating gives a general indication of the relative importance of each factor. Its main purpose is to highlight ranking factors to really pay attention to. The actual importance of the factors will vary for different search engines, markets and audiences. It also depends on previous SEO efforts. If you have solved an inclusion problem, it is no longer important!

Table 2 Example ranking success factor checklist box

SEO Ranking Success Factor 1	<Name of factor>	Applies to: <Scope:Whole site, each page, which search engine?>	Importance: 
What is it?	<A brief description of the factor and why it is important to ranking>		
Example:	<An example from a real site, search listings or search engine syntax>		
Best practice:	<A series of recommendations, starting with the most important>		
What to watch for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <Related factors to consider> • <Possible penalties or negative ranking factors associated with misapplication of factor> • <Tools to apply> • <Links to find out more information> 		

Search engine optimisation (SEO) success map



Keeping up-to-date with the latest developments in SEO

Part of the fascination of being involved with online marketing is the pace of change. The rate of change is certainly greatest for SEM and often it has the largest impact. Marketing techniques which are effective today may no longer be effective next year, or even tomorrow...

Engineers at the likes of Google and Yahoo constantly try to improve the relevance of search results, while staying one step ahead of the spammers. For this reason **algorithms never stay the same for very long**, and marketers must continually be on their toes, to react to changes.

Updates to the algorithms used by search engines change the positions of the listings, so you might be top of Google today and on the third page tomorrow, in theory. This is sometimes referred to as the 'Google Dance'. *It keeps some marketers awake at night.*

Google's 'Florida Update' caused dramatic changes to the natural listings, with some websites dropping out of the rankings altogether. And this is why it pays to **be ethical**, to **think about the future**, and to **avoid any grey areas**.

A big part of managing the opportunity and risk of search engine marketing is keeping informed about the latest developments and, in particular, identifying the developments that matter since there are many changes every week. Some changes are more serious than others.

The effects of these changes are not always immediately understood by search marketers. Given the rate of change, it is important that someone is permanently responsible for monitoring and improving SEO (in-house or outsourced).

Try not to think of SEO as a short-term project. SEO is more aligned to 'Grand Strategy': a series of smart micromoves undertaken to achieve a bigger business goal in the future. Alexander the Great would have been a good search marketer.

Key recommendation 4

Ensure there is ongoing commitment to SEO and responsibility for it within your organization rather than it being treated as an initiative.

Going forward...

To help in keeping up-to-date, Econsultancy is planning to regularly update each of its best practice guides at least once year.

With each new version of the best practice guide, the latest developments will be clearly highlighted.

In the interim period, the most significant changes which affect SEM practice will be posted to the new Econsultancy blog. As well as this, each guide will highlight the best sources to keep up-to-date about a particular topic.

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