MARKETING NEXT PRACTICES™

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

TOP 10 PRIORITIES

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Search Engine Optimization (SEO): Top 10 Priorities

Have you noticed a drop in website traffic? Anemic sales or lead activity from your website? You're not alone. Frequent search engine algorithm updates are wreaking havoc on website results. Especially sites that lack search engine optimization or SEO.

No question, achieving top position for keywords in search engine results pages (SERPs) is becoming one of the highest priorities of marketers. Why? Because studies show that only the top few search result positions drive click-through, website traffic, registrations, and other great results like sales (Source: Search Engine Watch). Yet still, the majority of company or brand websites lack even basic search optimization features and techniques.

Developing a website, or retrofitting an existing website with best practice SEO is critical to achieving improved organic or natural search engine results (vs. paid search results).

The following guide will identify and describe ten of the most critical search optimization practices, both on-page and off-page techniques that can help your website succeed, along with several useful SEO tools, many free-of-charge, to assist in the process.

Top 10 SEO Priorities

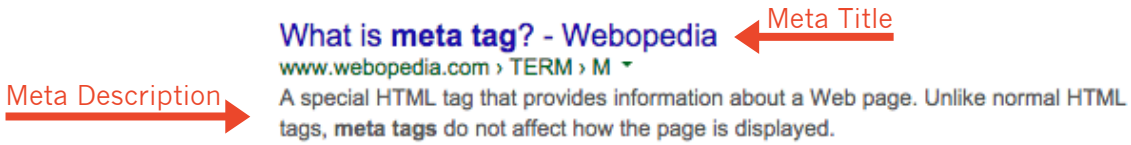
1. **Meta tag coding**
2. **URL structure and redirects**
3. **Mobile or responsive websites**
4. **Site maps and robots.txt**
5. **Blogging and social media integration**
6. **Keyword content and landing pages**
7. **Link-building**
8. **Local SEO**
9. **Paid search (PPC)**
10. **Ongoing SEO maintenance**

META IS FUNDAMENTAL

Invisible to the user, Meta tags are HTML (or XHTML) coding that enable search engines to correctly index a web page's contents. Meta tag coding is the most fundamental SEO technique, and critical to building search authority and includes meta descriptions and titles. Meta titles and descriptions tell search engines what your page is about and can help improve click-through to your website. In the past, meta keywords were used, but are no longer important.

<meta>
</tags>

Title tags or Page Titles, although not technically meta, work with meta descriptions and are typically displayed in the SERPs as the title, along with the meta description. Title tags are the descriptive words at the top of the browser window that, more often than not, only list the company name or website address. Title tags should be simple, keyword-rich, not duplicate of other titles, and approximately 50-60 characters in length including spaces.



Each webpage should have a keyword-rich meta description (also relevant and specific to the page), approximately 150 characters in length including spaces. While technically, meta descriptions do not effect rank, the meta description is what displays in a search result, so keyword relevance can effect click-through rate, and hence authority.

ALT tags are the invisible descriptions of an image on your website. They tell the search engine what an image is and useful when search engines index or "spider" your website since the engines automatically turn off images and read only text (including file names). Therefore, file names of your images are also important. Instead of image filenames such as "DCP0003.jpg," images should be re-named "KEYWORD.jpg," to increase search results.

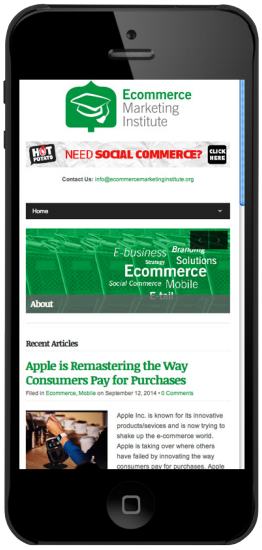
Header tags are headings within your page content that are used to represent different sections in your content. The H1 tag is the most important and should exist on every page, followed by H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6. Some content management systems (like WordPress) have drop down header tag selections available. In addition to SEO benefits, header tags improve user experience on the front end of your website.

URL STRUCTURE AND REDIRECTS

Another important ranking determinant is URL or domain structure specifically, keyword-rich sub-domains. When linking to website sub-pages that are often served dynamically via databases, the URL that appears on the "http" line often includes obscure database code with multiple back slashes or symbols. To eliminate this search engine hurdle, ideal URL structures use the base domain name, along with simple keywords or keyword phrases, in place of this coding (TIP: another best practice is all lower case characters separated by a dash).

A simple but often neglected SEO technique is setting up URL redirects, or more specifically, a **301 permanent redirect** for your website. Search engines will index both the www.domainname.com and domainname.com versions of your website. This scenario creates what is known as duplicate content, which dilutes or penalizes the search authority of the website without the redirect.

Also called a canonical redirect, the 301 permanent redirect is vital to proper search engine optimization and improved rankings. A simple way to test whether your website has a 301 redirect in place is to type "yourdomain.com" into your browser address bar then hit "Enter". If the URL does not automatically change to "www.yourdomain.com" or vice versa, then the redirect is NOT in place to resolve canonical issues, and therefore, is not optimized for the search engines. The redirect must be done at the hosting server level and can often be completed via hosting tech support requests.



MOBILE WEBSITES

Traffic from mobile devices now accounts for more than 30% of all website traffic, and 50% of Ecommerce traffic, and mobile is growing at double-digit rates each year (source: Ecommerce Marketing Institute). As a result, search engines are giving higher search authority to websites that are optimized for mobile, particularly for searches using a mobile device.

Just a few years ago, mobile required separate or redundant versions of the same website, or a mobile version. There are three significant problems with this scenario. First, the need to update both website versions. Second, the need for the aforementioned redirects to the mobile version. And third, back-links (to be described shortly) established by the desktop version of the website do not automatically redirect, and thus don't achieve the search authority.

Thankfully in 2013, responsive website design (RWD) was born, allowing for a single website design that functions on all devices, desktop, tablet and mobile, without the need for redirects.

Another huge SEO benefit of mobile and responsive website design is improved user experience (UX). Eliminating the pinch and zoom reduces bounce rate, and increases page views, which both support increased search authority. Indeed, non-mobile versions of content-heavy websites suffer high bounce rates, and thus lower search rankings.

SITE MAPS AND ROBOTS.TXT

Sitemaps help search engines crawl and discover all pages of your website. Typically there are two types of site maps: HTML and XML. HTML site maps are simply a page on your website that is a directory or listing of all the URLs (pages) on your website (or at least the most important ones). A link to your HTML sitemap is typically found in your website's footer. Some visitors who are familiar with sitemaps may prefer to use such a tool to find exactly what they are looking for.

On the other hand, XML sitemaps are a protocol that allow you to inform Google and other major search engines about the URLs on your website, which otherwise may be missed when indexing (especially if your internal linking structure is poor. Create and submit your XML sitemap to Google, Yahoo, and Bing. Generate one here.

A robots exclusion protocol (REP), or robots.txt, is a text file that instructs search engines how to crawl and index pages on your website. This file is important if there are files or directories on your website that you do not want to be indexed by search engines. You may want this in order to protect private content or avoid the indexation of duplicate content. If your eyes are glazing over, just ask your developer.

BLOGGING AND SOCIAL MEDIA INTEGRATION

Now more than ever, blogs and social media are major determinants of search authority. Why? Because when implemented properly, both drive measurable traffic to the website. Also, search engines continue to give greater authority to both social media channels and original content. Finally, search engines give higher authority to websites with a greater and growing number of indexed pages, and less authority to small websites that are stagnant or not adding fresh content. Blogs affect both, with each blogpost adding an indexed page, and growing the quantity of website pages over time.

Of course to achieve search authority, best practices are required. Ideally, the blog is a primary navigation link on the website, and properly "sub-directoried" to the site (ex. www.sitename.com/blog).

Best practice social media integration requires that social icons or buttons be placed in a prominent position in the global website template, ideally the top frame, but the bottom frame or other highly visible position are viable. Next, make sure the icons open in a new window. For business-to-business websites, we recommend LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Google+ (in this order). For business-to-consumer websites, we recommend Facebook in the first position, and possibly adding Pinterest and Instagram, while eliminating LinkedIn. Finally, for blogs or other content and resource pages, use social share tools or counters including AddThis, and ShareThis.

KEYWORD CONTENT AND LANDING PAGES

Before developing a new website, or making improvements to an existing website, undertake keyword analysis. Answer such questions as, what are the top keywords that drive traffic to your existing website? What are top keywords for competitor's websites? Use tools like SpyFu to identify these keywords. Then do keyword search volume analysis of these keywords, and related keyword strings using Google Adwords.

Armed with these insights, build landing pages for keywords/keyword strings with high search volume. Consider adding top keywords to primary or secondary navigation. Of course, these new landing pages should have complete meta coding relevant to their respective keywords, ALT tags, header tags; along with registration forms, videos, and other assests that relate to the keyword.

One of the goals is to meet the intent of the searcher in mind. As readers become more and more focused on finding the right information quickly, we as a society have become 'scanners'. This is why your landing page needs to be anticipatory of key searches, segmented to different users, and match headlines with search queries.

LINK BUILDING

Still a major search authority determinant, link building includes backlinks from external, ideally high page-rank websites, and interlinking. While link building, be sure to use anchor text properly, to be described below.

Submitting your website, blog, content, news announcements, whitepapers, infographics and related digital assets to both paid and free online directories can build valuable back links. Why? Because most search engines rank website authority based on the quantity, and more so, the quality (or page rank) of links to the site. At one time, the largest free website directory, DMOZ was SEO royalty, along with the largest paid website directory, Yahoo. We still recommend these, along with many others. Submitting website domains and blogs to Bookmark sites like Reddit, StumbleUpon, and Digg can build user-generated backlinks, along with social sharing opportunities.

Don't know where to start? Benchmark your competitor's backlink profile using a free tool like Majestic SEO to see how many backlinks they have, referring domains, and more. Browse through their list of backlinks to see if any would be relevant for your own website and reach out to these websites to try to get a link.

Interlinking is how you link to inner pages on your website. Typically, interlinking is adding links to other pages on your website (navigation, page links, breadcrumb links, related links). Interlinking helps search engines understand how to navigate your website and may help them find pages.

Anchor text links are the visible or highlighted text in a hypertext link. Ideally, anchor text should use keywords and avoid generic words like “click here”. However, it is important that the link is relevant to the page you are linking to. This will promote search engines to identify your webpages with the specific keywords you are trying to rank for.

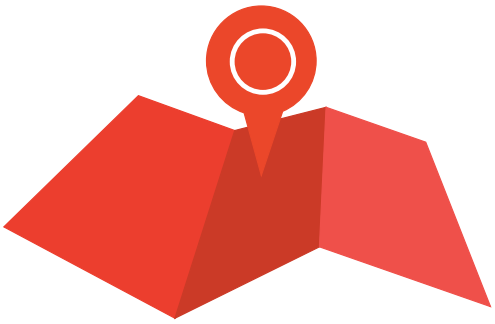
Consider these 7 Link Building Factors that will help to increase credibility with search engines from Moz.

- **Global Popularity:** the more popular and important a site is, the more links from that site matter; to earn trust and authority with the engines, you’ll need the help of other link partners; the more popular, the better
- **Local/Topic-Specific Popularity:** the concept of “local” popularity, suggests that links from sites within a topic-specific community matter more than links from general or off-topic sites
- **Strong Off-Page Anchor Text:** one of the strongest signals the engines use in rankings is anchor text; if dozens of links point to a page with the right keywords, that page has a very good probability of ranking well for the targeted phrase in that anchor text; see examples of this in action with searches like “click here”, where many results rank solely due to the anchor text of inbound links
- **TrustRank:** In order to weed out this irrelevant content, search engines use systems for measuring trust; earning links from highly trusted domains can result in a significant boost to this scoring metric; universities (.edu), government websites (.gov) represent examples of high-trust domains
- **Preventing Poor Link Neighborhoods:** spam links often go both ways; a website that links to spam is likely spam itself, and in turn, often has many spam sites linking back to it; by looking at the totality of these links in aggregate, search engines can understand the “link neighborhood” your website exists in; so choose sites you link to carefully, and be equally selective with the sites you attempt to earn links from
- **Link Freshness:** link signals tend to decay over time; sites that were once popular often go stale, and eventually fail to earn new links; it’s important to continue to earn additional links over time
- **Natural Conversational Links:** Links that are given naturally by sites and pages that want to link to your content or company; such links require no specific action from the SEO, other than the creation of worthy material (great content) and the ability to create awareness about it

LOCAL SEO

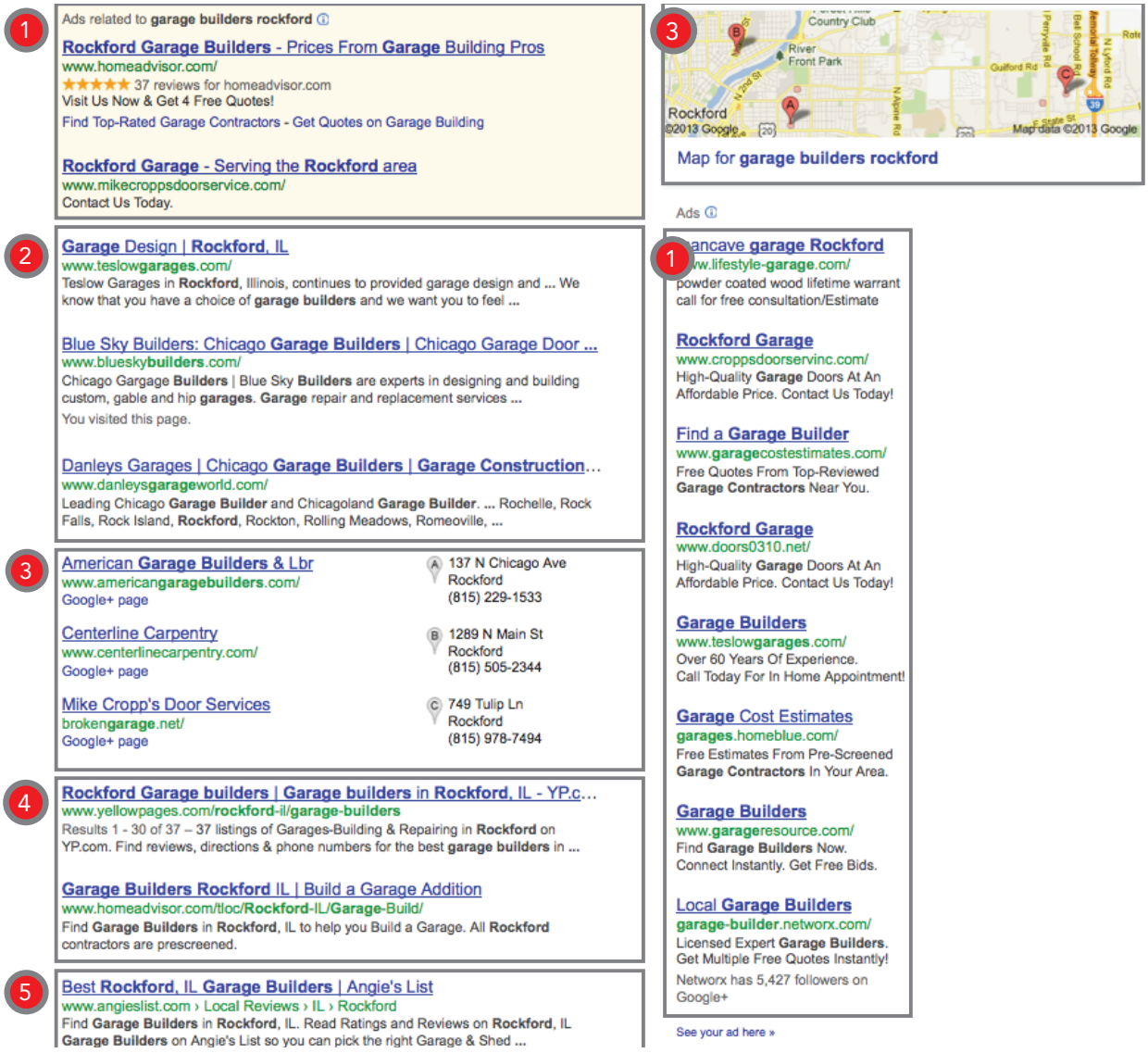
According to Google, 97 percent of consumers search for local businesses online, and 73 percent of all online activity is related to local content. To win the local "search war," you need a properly "localized" website, using SEO techniques geared toward your geographic location. Where should you start? Here are the top 5 initiatives to boost your local authority:

1. Claim your local listing pages and submit to local business or national directories: Google+, Yahoo, Yellow Pages, Superpages, Manta, etc.); check out this list of local business directories
2. Get online reviews: reviews can impact your rankings in local search engines, click through rates, and ultimately, a customers purchase decision. (Yelp, Google+, Tripadvisor, etc.)
3. Ensure your NAP (business name, address, and phone number) is consistent across all listings
4. Local markup: add local schema markup to the address on your website; visit schema.org for more information
5. City landing pages: Do you serve multiple locations? If you are located in a large city like Chicago, you want to rank for more than just Chicago if you serve the surrounding suburbs. Consider creating landing pages for all cities you serve. When creating your city landing pages be sure it's optimized for local search:



   a. Use the following structure CITY + SERVICE in your page's URL & title tag, & H1 tag
   b. Include specific service/product information for that location (if applicable)
   c. Avoid duplicate content with other local landing pages on your site with unique content
   d. Vary anchor text when interlinking with this page

Below is a sample search engine results page (SERP) with references to several different types of search results.



1. Paid Search
2. Organic Search
3. Google+ Local Results
4. Directory Listings
5. Review Sites

PAID SEARCH (PPC)

As seen in the above search engines results page (SERP), paid search or pay-per-click (PPC) advertisements, are displayed in top and right frame. While the reason for investing time and effort in SEO is to avoid paid search, the fact is, PPC has a positive effect on organic search authority. Why? Because paid search increases website traffic, and higher traffic builds search authority. How much? Of course that is dependent on the amount of paid search spending, along with the quality of SEO implementation.

That said, we have experienced 10-20% organic website traffic growth when implementing paid search. Still the downside of PPC, is that once spending is paused or stopped, traffic from paid search ceases, and likely any organic traffic that resulted from paid search. Moral of the story—make sure your SEO is excellent!

ONGOING SEO MAINTENANCE

The job of SEO is never done. Although, once the above-referenced SEO features and tactics have been properly implemented, SEO can evolve to a maintenance level. Critical to ongoing SEO maintenance is constant analysis of your website analytics, along with problem identification of such issues as broken links, duplicate content, site speed, and more.

First and foremost, use Google Analytics (GA) or similar tool to understand traffic trends and other metrics like page views and bounce rate. High bounce rates over 80% mean that percentage of visitors are leaving the website, without linking further, suggesting a poor user experience (UX), or weak content. GA also offers an in-page analytics report that identifies click-through rates (CTRs) for each navigation link, which of course, is excellent insight. For ecommerce sites, Google Analytics offers conversion codes and tracking, an important metric. Finally, it is always insightful to identify competitor's traffic and analytics. We recommend a tool called Similar Web for this.

Besides GA, there are many diagnostic tools to identify errors and issues. The 404 error, which means 'Page not Found', more often than not results from a broken link on your website. Sometimes, these are easy to find when you happen to be browsing through your site. On the other hand, once your website is built-out with thousands of pages it can be difficult to pinpoint which links are broken. Several diagnostic tools are available for you to check this including brokenlinkcheck.com.

Another common SEO error is duplicate content. Search engines can identify duplicate pages with the same content, duplicate meta code, even duplicate page titles—all of which penalize search authority. A great tool to pull or "scrape" meta code from an existing website is Screaming Frog, which also identifies duplicates. We recommend using this tool for analyzing competitor websites' meta code. Duplicate content is also a concern when curating your blog or website content from other websites. Make sure to paraphrase an external source's content, avoiding copying paragraphs verbatim.

Page loading or time, or website speed, is an often underrated factor in search optimization. However, the speed of your website is a critical component to overall user experience and even search engine rankings. According to Google's 2010 announcement:

"A search result for a resource having a short load time relative to resources having longer load times can be promoted in a presentation order, and search results for the resources having longer load times can be demoted."

Common culprits for slowing down your website include non-optimized images, bulky code, tracking codes, share buttons, etc. Want to test your website speed? Check out Pingdom website speed tester. It will analyze page-loading time, and provide actionable recommendations to improve your website's speed. If your speed score is less than 70/100, then start by identifying large images on your website using the Screaming Frog SEO tool. Run an analysis on your website, view images, filter by those over 100kb, and then sort by size. Use this list to start reducing images with tools such as TinyPNG.

IT'S TIME TO OPTIMIZE!

Achieving search authority, and growing website traffic is becoming more and more difficult with search engine algorithm updates, and more sophisticated competition. Both new and existing websites require excellent search engine optimization (SEO) to achieve top positions on search engine results pages (SERPs).

These top 10 SEO priorities, if implemented correctly, will improve organic or natural search results, along with website traffic, and, most importantly, sales leads and orders!

There a several options for measuring search authority and search engine optimization (SEO). Moz reports both domain and page authority, organic rank of keywords, back-links, along with competitor measures. We prefer and recommend Google Analytics, but this does require installation of a tracking code. GA offers several dashboards, along with the ability to select different time frames to further understanding of your website traffic. Finally, we recommend logging into Adwords to perform test searches for keyword rankings to avoid diluting traffic impressions.

Modern Marketing Partners is a full service marketing and communications agency specialized in the integration of traditional marketing and digital media for breakthrough results. To request a free Search Engine Optimization Analysis, contact Neil Brown at 630-868-5061, or visit our website www.ModernMarketingPartners.com.