

SEO: search engine optimisation

A beginners guide



What is Search Engine Optimisation?

Search Engine Optimisation (also known as SEO) is the business of getting your website to the top of searches in Google, Yahoo and MSN et al.

I got an email/saw an advert promising No.1 position in Google ...

No one can guarantee number one position in Google, not for a regular search term anyway. You just can't buy the number one position.

“Think not what Google can do for you, but what you can do for Google”

The best place to start is by considering what it is the search engines are looking for. Google's success rests on it's ability to provide relevant search results. They spend a lot of time and money ensuring that this is the case. The two most important factors in how Google will value your website are:

1. **Unique, regularly updated and relevant content.** It makes perfect sense: When people search they generally want the most up-to-date and relevant information.
2. **Links to your website from other websites that Google believes are relevant and of a good quality.** It has the same effect as respected people talking highly of you. The quality and relevance of the links is important too. Links from other respected sites in your field are the best.

Keywords and phrases: *What is my customer actually searching for?*

How do your customers search for your business? You may feel that your business sells “Vintage Couture”, however your customers might be searching for “60s Mod suits”. It would therefore be sensible to ensure that your website is optimised with regard to the phrase “60s Mod suits”.

The importance of keywords and phrases

- Start by identifying a number of keywords and phrases that are highly relevant to your business — one for each section of your site.
- Research the words and phrases to ascertain the level of competition and numbers of people searching for those phrases.

On-site SEO

Once the best looking phrases have been identified the SEO then sets to work ensuring that the phrases are included in relevant and strategic places on your web pages such as titles, headings and the main text.

It is easy to get carried away with this, however a good SEO will ensure that the pages read well to both potential customers and search engines.

Off-site SEO

Off-Site SEO refers to SEO activities that are not performed on your own website and are therefore "off-site". It consists largely of building links, preferably backlinks (a one-way link to your site) as non-reciprocal links are valued higher by the Google.

The quality of each backlink can be partly judged by the popularity of the page from which it originates. Much better to have one backlink from a reputable, well established and relevant website than ten links from sites that bear no relation to what you do. Quality not quantity is key to SEO success.

There are many ways to garner backlinks but one, often overlooked, area is link-baiting: The more accurate and helpful information you provide on your site, the more people will visit—and link to—your site. Providing how-to guides and articles such as the “Top 10 <insert topic here> of 2009” can make a huge difference to your sites visibility. Also, reputable websites may want to ‘host’ the articles you’ve written, which in turn gifts you another chance to ‘get linked’.

Promote your site

Go out and tell the people. Seek out and participate in relevant forums. Make a worthwhile contribution and when the opportunity arises talk up your business. Try to create a buzz around your products and services and use your website as a point of reference.

W3C web standards & Accessibilty

Sites built using web standards are much easier for the search engines to index. Legal & General is a case in point. After upgrading their website to implement modern web standards and accessibility guidelines they enjoyed an enormous and immediate uplift in visitors and sales. Read the L & G case study at AbilityNet:
<http://www.abilitynet.co.uk/webcasestudies>

Don't do this

Don't try to trick the search engines. They spend an enormous amount of resources on ensuring that they produce relevant results, and that includes weeding out cheats. Using dubious practices to try and trick the likes of Google can get you banned. This is the ultimate disaster SEO-wise. If it sounds dodgy it probably is.

Don't hire SEO companies who cheat: Known as “**Black hat SEO**” there are those who will guarantee number one placement. They may even briefly succeed; but for how long?

If they get you banned from Google who will pay the price? And for how long?

So should I hire a firm of SEO specialists?

Dedicated and specialist SEO firms charge for their expertise. Whilst you may pay more to SEO specialists they may be more likely to yield the best results. If the success of your business hangs on being number one in Google this may be the route for you.

If you want to do well in the search engines, but don't have the budget, many web design companies have an SEO specialist on the books. They will typically be less pricey, especially when included as part of the overall cost of a website or maintenance & updates package.

Set it and forget it?

Making sure that your website is search engine optimised from the start reduces the need for updates. However, the web is a very dynamic medium, things change quickly and competitors will compete for advantage. To stay at the top requires regular updates to be made. You may also wish to reposition your brand from time to time to take advantage of opportunities.

Suggested further reading:

Google's SEO starter guide:

<http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2008/11/googles-seo-starter-guide.html>

The videos at SeoBook:

<http://video.seobook.com/>