



The Basics of Implementing an SEO Campaign

by Hooman Moayyed

We all aspire to establish a web presence that receives millions of hits a day and is an overnight financial success. We've all heard the glory-day dot.com stories of founders becoming instant millionaires. Much has changed in the not-too-distant past. Search engines are becoming increasingly difficult to manipulate when it comes to increasing your ranking. If you have established or are establishing a web presence and want to take it to the next level, here are some real-world tips that we recommend you take note of before expending valuable time and resources in hiring a Search Engine Optimizer (SEO).

How It All Works

The purpose of a search engine or directory is to allow you to find web sites relevant to the search terms you entered. This means that it is the search engine's responsibility to ensure that if you do a search for "rain coat" you don't get a site selling tractors. If search engines allowed people to exploit them, it wouldn't be long before you would be forced to search through thirty pages of listings to find the one that benefits you. As a result, search engines struggle daily to refine their algorithms in order to ensure you find what you need quickly.

Naturally, your objective is to be #1 on all search engines and directories. The position your web site is in after doing a search is called the rank order. It should always be your goal to achieve #1-#10 rank order positions.

The main factors that search engines consider when calculating rank order is relevancy and popularity. Relevancy has recently taken on a whole new meaning. In the past, search engines considered this as the primary factor for rank order. When a keyword such as “rain coat” was entered, the site would look at its database and determine which web site contained the word “rain” and “coat,” then how similar the spelling was and how many times the word was repeated. Naturally, many search results may contain this text and the one that repeated it the most became #1 in the rank order.

Today, relevancy is used concurrently with popularity to determine the rank order. Popularity refers to the number of times that other web sites have linked your web site. So if 300 web sites have links to “aceraincoats.com,” this site’s popularity would increase and supercede the other ones in rank order. Sites such as Google have taken this to the next level. Google examines the relevancy of the keywords, examines its popularity and then compares the relationship of overall popularity to relevancy. So if “therotaryclub.com” links to “aceraincoats.com,” Google may not count this link toward the popularity calculation. Their objective is to raise popularity of the sites that have taken the time to form a community of relevant content such as similar trades, hobbies, interests, etc.

Search Engines vs. Directories

The term search engine is used somewhat loosely. Technically, there is a difference between a search engine and a catalog. A search engine allows you to request your web site to be spidered. When this request is made, a program called a spider visits your web site. The spider’s job is to examine your web page for links, make a list of all the pages linked within your site and store the content of these pages into its database. Once the information is stored, it is available for people to search against it on the search engine’s site. It is important that the web site is coded properly so that the spider can index all the linked pages. A site that is not search engine friendly can cause the spider to stop indexing prematurely. An example of bad coding can be a site using frames, no text links and dynamic content with unrecognized characters. Search engines often use relevancy and popularity to determine rank order. An example of a search engine is [Google](#) or [AltaVista](#).

Directories are quite different. They do not use spiders and are much more difficult to manipulate. A directory is similar to your local yellow pages. If you want to be listed, you drill down to the category you would like to be listed in and request to be added within that section. Directories normally allow you to enter your company name, URL and a 25-word description. When searching on a directory, if you drill down to a category, the rank order is alphabetical. If you do a keyword search, the rank order is by relevancy. A keyword match is made only against the information you have submitted to the directory and nothing else. Therefore it is important that the information you have submitted contain keywords that people use to search with. Another important consideration is that a live person will review your submission so any attempt to manipulate the directory may result in deletion of your request or banning of your site. An example of a directory is [Yahoo](#).

Obsolete Tactics

Back when search engines were more primitive, it was easy to fool them into increasing your rank order by using “not quite honest” methods. I’m sure you’ve heard of some of these tactics, however they are not effective anymore. Employing them can actually lower your ranking and get you banned from the search engine all together. Such illegal tactics, similar to its email counterpart, is called spamming. Here are some of the tactics to be cautious of.

Doorway Pages

These are separate web pages usually filled with keywords, content, or anything that the promoter thinks will improve rank order. These pages may or may not be linked to your web site. They are only intended for search engines to see. The idea is that the more web pages there are within the site, the more likely it will be that such pages will achieve higher rank order. Search engines today can detect this.

Cloaking

Suppose that your SEO offers 100 or so domain names that will be used to promote your web site. Each site is filled with content similar to doorway pages and is submitted to the search engines for indexing. When someone does a search and stumbles upon one of these cloaked domains, they are redirected to the site they were intended to see. The problem with this is that only SEOs usually have the time and resources to implement cloaking tactics. So if the relationship sours with the SEO, they can terminate all cloaked sites or better yet redirect the domains to a competitor's web site. (This actually happened with one devious SEO. See Dot Com Noir)

Irrelevant Content

In the past you could fill your site with content that had absolutely nothing to do with yours in the hope that someone would find you by coincidence. For example, if your site sold a certain software application, you may try to generate traffic by using keywords such as computers, Microsoft, pda, keyboards, mouse, etc. Obviously the site has nothing to do with Microsoft or hardware but the idea is to lure someone looking for computers to this site and grasp their interest. Sounds like a good idea, no? Not only is it dishonest but also search engines have wised up to this tactic.

Hidden or Redundant Content

Webmasters used to fill their pages with repeated keywords and mask them by making the text the same color as the background. Search engines can detect this now and will discount this content. Some sites allow you to see the keywords. You probably have come upon a page that had a lot of junk at the bottom. Search engines can detect such content with consistency.

Abuse of Meta Content

Meta tags are coded into the HTML of each of your web pages. The Metas are a convenient way of including keywords and description about that particular web page into your code to assist the search engine in indexing content. Many times, webmasters will repeat the same keywords many times in order to increase relevancy. One time I viewed the HTML source of a web page and I was shocked to see three pages of keywords. Despite the fact that this worked fairly well in 1997, it would be immediately discounted today.

Link Farms

Links farms are web site communities whose sole purpose is to link to each other's site in the hope of increasing popularity. You scratch my back, I scratch yours, right? The problem with this is that these link farms have no purpose other than to exploit the search engines. The links have no relevance to content thus degrading the usefulness of the search engine. The technique works only until the farm is discovered whereby every site within the farm can be instantly banned.

Do your research

Research is the most crucial step in promoting your web site. For example, you sell home décor. If the content within your site does not contain the keywords that your customers use to find sites like yours, all the optimization in the world will prove fruitless. For example, you place emphasis on the keywords, “home, decor” but your customers are searching for “home decoration” or “home furnishings.” Surely they will never find you, or your site’s rank order may be #2343 where no one would ever look. It is important to get into the heads of your customers and figure out how they think and search on the web. This is why companies spend thousands of dollars in focus groups and market research. Since this may not be feasible for a small business, here are some tips in accomplishing your research.

Web sites

There are web sites such as [Word Tracker](#) that assist you in finding keywords relevant to your industry. You can sign up for a free trial and get the information you need quickly. The beauty of this site is that it allows you to do a cross-reference search of certain keywords in order to find other relevant ones.

The competition

One sure fire way to find keywords is to look to a successful competitor and see what keywords they are using. Simply viewing their web site and HTML source is not enough. Often, the Meta tags don’t give enough information about what influenced the rank order. Once you feel confident about the keywords people use to find sites like yours, do a search and make note of which sites are in the top 10. Then go to those sites and figure out the keywords that appear to be prevalent and use those. Never copy and paste content from other sites into yours as this could be considered as copyright infringement.

Independent focus groups

Just because big companies have deep pockets and do formal focus groups doesn’t mean you have to. Make this into a fun event by inviting friends and family to an Internet café or somewhere with a few computers. Treat them to refreshments and ask them to visit a search engine you have pre-determined. Then ask them to imagine they are looking for a company like yours and make note of what they type after they make the search. Ask them to stop after they performed the search so you can make note of which search terms they used. The search terms are always visible at the top and bottom of the results page. The more people you can get to do this, the more data you will have to work with. Once you are done, put all your data into Excel or Word and figure out how many times certain terms have been repeatedly used. The ones that were repeated the most should be used in your SEO campaign.

Targeting Keywords

It is important to consider how popular your keyword combinations are. Targeting “home decor” may be too broad as there may be over 2000 companies competing for this combination. It may be more effective to target “home decor dallas.” Including the geographic region may prove easier in achieving higher rank order especially if you’re concerned with walk-in traffic over online sales. If you are targeting the U.S. or the whole planet, specializing in niche products may be the edge you need. People tend to search the web for hard to find products and leave the generic stuff to local shops or sites like [Amazon.com](#).

Paid vs. Organic Promotion

The most challenging method of promoting your site is the organic method. Organic promotion involves submitting your site to free or open directories and search engines and working to improve rank order. With organic promotion, the idea is to submit your sites to the search engines and directories and refine content and popularity until your site is ranked high.

There are several methods of paid promotion. Directories like Yahoo will allow you to pay a premium for expedited consideration. This means that you will be considered for inclusion faster and is not a guarantee that your site will be listed. Another method is paid placement or sponsorship. There is a certain section on each search engine or directory that paid listings are placed in. This is usually at the top, the bottom or the far right. Sites such as Overture allow you to bid for a keyword combination and places the highest bidder as #1, the second highest as #2 and so on. Google offers a similar service called AdWords. Each time someone clicks a paid link to your site, you are charged the bid price. The problem with paid placement is that the bid price for #1-#3 will always increase especially for popular keywords. This can get quite expensive especially when non-customers such as salespeople click-through to your site just to cold-call you. It is recommended that if you choose paid placement, you pick a keyword combination that is not too broad. Sometimes targeting a geographic location can provide better quality clicks.

Content is King

The more content you have on your web site, the more likely it is that your relevancy will improve. Sites with good content are also linked to from other web sites as source of information. People appreciate the fact that you have taken time to write useful information without charging them for it. As a result, your popularity may increase due to the number of links from other web sites.

Try to write about what you know, include articles about hobbies, interests or anything that is relevant to the product or service you are offering. Ask webmasters of similar sites to link you and offer a reciprocal link to them on your links page. Remember to choose quality over quantity. It's better to be linked from 20 relevant sites than to be linked from 200 non-relevant ones.

Technical Things to Know

Meta Tags

Metas are elements of HTML coded within your web site. If they exist (and sometimes they don't) you may view them within your web browser by clicking View and then Source. They often look like this:

```
< meta name = "language" content = "en-us" >  
< meta name = "robots" content = "FOLLOW" >  
< meta name = "rating" content = "SAFE FOR KIDS" >  
< meta name = "distribution" content = "GLOBAL" >  
< meta NAME = "copyright" CONTENT = "2004 - All rights reserved by Interweb New Media, Inc. (www.interwebnewmedia.com)" >  
< meta name = "Author" CONTENT = "Interweb New Media, Inc." >  
< meta name = "revisit-after" content = "7 Days" >  
< meta name = "keywords" content = "web, site, ecommerce, designer, designers, hosting, flash, page, developer, developers, development, merchant, account, software, solution, solutions, custom, applications" >  
< meta name = "description" content = "Based in Dallas, Texas, Interweb New Media offers full service web development solutions including web site design, cutting-edge flash animation, 3d animation, multimedia development, ecommerce development and web site hosting since 1996.">
```

As you can see, they contain all kinds of information that the search engine can use. Some search engines use this information, others use the text within the visible portions of your web site.

Server-Side Rewriting

Server-side rewrites are usually used by web sites that have dynamic content. E-commerce sites and news web sites serve information from databases. In order to pull information from a database to a web site, you have to create a query. Here is an example of a query:

http://www.bigdcom.com/prod_detail.asp?productid=11403&ref_catid=1173&ref_subcatid=1205

As you see, characters such as ? and = may not be recognized by a search engine and will therefore be skipped by the spider. A solution to this problem is to create the link:

http://www.bigdcom.com/exec/prod_detail.asp/productid/11403/ref_catid/1173/ref_subcatid/1205

Notice that this link only contains characters that can be indexed by the spiders. When clicked, this link is translated to a real query that can be recognized by the server. In other words, the search engine sees a link that it likes but the server converts it to a query without the engine knowing it. [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), [Cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) and many others use server-side rewrites to ensure all the content within their databases are spidered.

Frames

Web sites that use frames are convenient to code, but once a spider visits the page, it sees no links and leaves. One way around this is to use the /noframes tag and include the links there.

Good HTML Coding

Clean code, proper syntax, and good spelling are important within your SEO campaign. Having a professional design firm with a proven track record code your site is a safe bet.

Avoid Spamming

Using old tricks to fool the search engines will ultimately result in short-lived results. You may get away with it for a while, but all it takes is someone reporting you to the search engine or their algorithms changing. Once this happens, you will be at square one.

What You Need to Provide to Your SEO

Page Titles

The title is important. It should be unique to each web page within your web site. It's not a bad idea to include keywords in the title that are relevant to the page's content. Provide one title per page within your site.

Meta Keywords

Hopefully you've done your research and know which keywords will work best within your campaign. Provide a master list of keywords with #1 being the most important and so on. These are the terms that are important to the overall campaign. Then provide up to 25 keywords that are relevant to each page. Remember, we're looking for quality, not quantity.

Meta Descriptions

This is a description that is unique to each page within your site. A description can contain up to 255 characters. Spaces are counted as characters. Provide a generic description on the home page and more relevant detailed ones for each page within the site.

Directory Description

This is a generic, abbreviated description about what you do. This is normally limited to 25 words and/or 255 maximum characters. This description is used in directories so you only have one chance so make sure it is rich with your master keywords.

Relevant Sites

These are web sites that you would like to be linked from and link to. It is recommend that you offer a links page and create reciprocal links to people who have linked you on their site. Remember to choose complementary sites that have something to do with your content.

Monitor Results

It is very important to regularly monitor the performance of your SEO campaign and adjust it based on what is and is not working. Many web stats programs exist which help you accomplish this. Some include Webalizer, WebTrends, Wusage and LiveStats. Each one compiles and displays information differently. You SEO will have a favorite program that they prefer to use. Your web stats program will tell you how many overall hits you have received, how many unique hits, spiders that have visited you, keywords people use to find you with, top ten search engines used to find you, most popular pages, least popular pages, pages with errors and so on. Find out how often your report is generated and try to view it as often as possible. Once a week should be the minimum you should check your stats report.

Hooman Moayyed is founder and CEO of Interweb New Media, Inc. Hooman holds an MBA from Southern Methodist University in Dallas and a B.S. in Radio/TV/Film from the University of Texas at Austin. He has been consulting for firms such as Ericsson and Nortel since 1996.