

Search Engine Optimization for Beginners

© By Angie Pedersen

"If you build it, they will come."

This may have worked for Kevin Costner in "The Field of Dreams", but a lot has changed since 1989. Unfortunately, the "if you build it" philosophy cannot be applied to a website – whether traditional, or a blog. Putting together a few HTML pages and posting them to the Internet doesn't automatically create a line of customers waiting outside your door. It takes a bit more than just hoping for the best. What it takes, my friend, is some Search Engine Optimization.

Search Engine Optimization (or SEO, as online marketers frequently refer to it) basically means making your site more "attractive" to search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and MSN. Wikipedia.org defines SEO more specifically: "search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a web site from search engines via 'natural' ('organic' or 'algorithmic') search results for targeted keywords." "Organic search results"? "Targeted keywords"? Don't worry - we'll get to those in a moment. Search engine optimization can be a bit of a beast to wrap your brain around - it involves several factors, all of them ongoing. Read on to learn how to make your website hit a "home run" with search engines.

The Basics – How Search Engines Work

When you start a search on a search engine, like Google, you're asking it to go find sites that are related to the terms you're searching for. Generally, search engines determine a site's relevancy to a search term or phrase through two factors – the location and frequency of the keywords in the site's content, and the number and types of other sites linking to it related to those keywords (sometimes referred to as link analysis). Blog or website, it doesn't matter – search engines use the same processes to return search results.

Search engines like it when keywords (another word for "search term") appear in the HTML <Title> tag, and near the top of a website (such as in a headline, or in the first few paragraphs of text.) Search engines assume that webpages with the search terms in the Title tag are more relevant than pages that don't optimize the Title tag.

What Search Engines Mean to Your Business

If your site is ranked well, and shows up on the first page for a specific search term, more people will find your site, which often leads to more people doing business with you. Remember, people can't do business with you if they can't find you.

Target Keywords – Get Familiar with Yours

Where you show up in search engine results depends heavily on what terms or phrases people use to search. The first step to optimizing your website for more effective search engine results is to determine your search terms/keywords for your business. Ask yourself what keywords your customers might use to find a business like yours. With what keywords do you want to be found? Create a list of possible search terms.

When brainstorming potential target keywords, be specific. Use more than two words. Many sites use very broad terms like "scrapbooking" or "quilts". But if you think about it, people who search for those keywords aren't really your target audience – they're probably searching for basic information on the hobby in general. Think in terms of specific keywords like "Kansas City scrapbooking" or "Dallas quilting classes" to draw your ideal customer. The purpose of your website is to allow people to find you online, and then encourage them to do business with you. Think about how you search for other businesses, and jot down your own search terms (particularly if they yield the results you want.)

The next step is to use an online search tool to identify what people actually use as search terms within your field. You can do some basic research with Google's AdWords Keyword Tool: <http://snipurl.com/adwordskeywordtool>. Just type in one of your potential keyword(s), and you'll get a list of keywords related to that term, as well as some additional keyword variations to consider. For example, type in "Dallas quilting classes", and you'll also see keywords like "quilting supplies", "quilting fabric" and "Dallas sewing classes". Also check out <http://tools.seobook.com/keyword-tools/> to find other search tools.

Also periodically review your website logs to see what search terms bring visitors to your site. This research can help reveal new keywords to target.

A Side Benefit of Keyword Research:

Researching the top keywords on related topics also gives you insight into what your target market is looking for, which gives you ideas for related article/blog post possibilities. For instance, when you do keyword research for "scrapbooking", you see related topics of scrapbooking idea, digital scrapbooking, scrapbooking kit, free scrapbooking idea, scrapbooking paper, scrapbooking layout, and digital scrapbooking design. When you know what people are searching for, you can make plans to give it to them.

Target Keywords – Use Them

1. Use target keywords in the webpage's HTML <Title> tag. Says Christine Churchill of KeyRelevance.com, "If you have time to do only one SEO action on your site, take the time to create good titles." Make it descriptive to the page content. Just search for "HTML title tag" for how to do this on your website.
2. Incorporate target keywords "behind-the-scenes" in the website or blog meta tags (description and keywords). If you're a local retailer, remember to include the name of your city.
3. Display your target keywords (and most of your site copy) as actual text. Graphics and flash images look great, but search engines can't "read" them.
4. If you have a blog, include target keywords in subject lines and posts. Let's say you just got back from CHA and you want to tell your customers about the new product you ordered. In a blog post, mention those products by brand name, and what kind of specific projects your customers can make, like "altered tins" or "knitting patterns for beginners". Then use the blog post subject line to entice readers with specifics: "Altered Make & Takes with My Minds' Eye, Technique Tuesday, and Rusty Pickle – Next Weekend!"
5. To attract search engines for specific keywords, highlight those keywords in the text on your site, and hyperlink them to a relevant page on your site. For instance, if you want to be found by people searching for "craft storage", write an article or blog post including craft supply organization tips, and make a point to use the phrase "craft storage" several times throughout the piece. Then highlight that phrase, and link it to a webpage on your site that lists the craft organization supplies you stock, or organizational classes you offer. That tells Google that information on "craft storage" can be found at *this* URL (the underlying URL, hyperlinked to that anchor text).

Add More Content to Entice Search Engines (and customers!)

Don't settle for just a page with your store hours and a class schedule. Add more content to give search engines more opportunity to display your site in results pages – and increase your customers' comfort level.

- Write an appealing "About" page – include the essentials: name/business name, photo, links to/examples of your work, and how to contact you. Use target keywords to attract search engine spiders. Include a section about what your business offers, and visitors will find on your website and in your store. Write another section about yourself, establishing your background and expertise. Also describe benefits/results of working with you.

- Link to your main website(s) – search engines like hierarchical navigation links.
- Create a post/page about your unique products/services – tell visitors how you can make their lives easier.
- Compile glowing customer/client testimonials, especially if they specifically mention your company name and/or services.
- Create an online Press Room of media coverage, recent press releases, tip sheets, talking points, magazine articles you've written and corporate history.

Bottom line - in order to market your business effectively online, you need to do some research and legwork. Check out some of the resources used to write this article to get started. Knowledge is definitely power -- you should get yourself some. Then the next thing you know, your website will be bringing your customers sliding into home plate.

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