

# Search Engines: Marketing and Optimization

## Table of Contents

- Disclaimer of Warranty.....1
- SEO: What Is It, Who Needs It?.....2
- “How can a robot know what I mean?” .....2
- Taking a Peek “Under the Hood”.....3
- Using SEO for Your Marketing.....3
- “What if there's a bunch of stuff that's nearly the same?” .....4
- SEO Mistakes and Problems.....4
- You Need a Plan.....5
- The Bottom Line.....6

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# Search Engines: Marketing and Optimization

## SEO: What Is It, Who Needs It?

Practically everyone who's got a computer with an Internet connection has heard about SEO (Search Engine Optimization). Most folks don't know what it really means. The mystery of how specific websites, blogs, discussion groups and Wikipedia entries end up at the top of the SERP's (Search Engine Results Pages) appears baffling to many people.

It isn't. Simply put, each Web page, no matter what it may be, gets looked at by automated programs called “spiders” or “bots” (short for robots). These Web “crawlers” use rules to decide what the meaning of the words on the page says about that page.

Then, the automated program assigns a place for this page in the search engine's Index of websites. That's all a search engine is; a huge index of content, like the index at the back of a non-fiction book.

The difference between the book and the search engine is that the book is “static” and the search engine is “dynamic”. The book's index stays the same (unless it's revised in a new edition). The search engine's index is constantly changing. New content appears on websites, blogs get new entries, discussion groups get new posts and topics, new videos appear on YouTube and so on.

The amount of new content appearing every day is breathtaking. If it were up to people to read, view, listen to and decide where each new page should appear, a search engine would be hopelessly outdated from the very first day it went to work.

## “How can a robot know what I mean?”

In the same way you can use a word processing program to check your spelling and grammar, search engines have rules to figure out the meaning of whatever a Web page says. Called *Latent Semantic Analysis*, this software knows the meaning of words and the rules of grammar.

Now, that doesn't mean some computer can decide if the content is wise (or even right). It does mean that some computer can decide if the content is *relevant* to a word or phrase that someone types into a search engine query box.

What if a Web page doesn't have any written content at all? There are videos,

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# Search Engines: Marketing and Optimization

pictures, Flash animations, audio files and other types of content that appear without any written content at all. How does a search engine decide where to index this stuff?

## Taking a Peek “Under the Hood”

Here is where file names and “tags” help identify what the content means. For example, a picture may have a file name like `nay-aug-park1.jpeg`. That name will help a search engine assign a place in the search results for those who are looking for **nay aug park pictures**. If that same picture has the file name `DSC0001.jpeg`, that won't help the search engines at all!

If, however, `DSC0001.jpeg` has an “alt tag” or “title tag” that reads *nay aug park*, the search engine has information that allows it to index the picture properly. An **alt** tag is simply text that's displayed if the picture itself doesn't work in a given Web browser. A **title** tag tells a browser that when your mouse pointer is moved over the picture, a little “tooltip” appears – in this case **nay aug park**.

The Web page itself may also have *meta* tags which describe the content on the page. These tags appear in the `< head >` portion of the code that tells Web browsers how to display the content in the `< body >` of the page.

## Using SEO for Your Marketing

For SEO purposes, the *title*, *description*, *geo-location* and *keyword* tags matter the most. The title is vital – it should have the right keywords, in the right order, for your most profitable merchandise, products or services.

This is where a lot of folks misunderstand what the title tag is for. They think it's like the title of a book or where the name of their company should appear. It isn't. It's an **index title**.

If you own Manny's Tonsorial Parlor on Main in Scranton, your title tag shouldn't read **Manny's Tonsorial Parlor – good haircuts at a fair price**.

Instead, try **Scranton hair cuts barber shop Manny's on Main 570-555-1212**.

The first example would rank well if folks are searching for “Manny's”. The

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# Search Engines: Marketing and Optimization

second will rank well for people searching online in **Scranton** looking for **hair cuts** or a **barber shop (on Main)** in the **570** area code.

Confused? Don't be. This stuff becomes clear when you do some searches for local businesses and professionals in the Scranton area. The words you type into the search query box tell the search engine what you think are the best words to describe what you're looking for. The results are the best match for what you asked for.

## “What if there's a bunch of stuff that's nearly the same?”

You may be wondering how the search engines decide who gets to be first, especially if there are two or more Web pages that have pretty much the same content. The answer is simple: the page with the most *authority* wins.

Authority is measured in several ways:

- The age of the website (older is better)
- The number of other websites that have clickable links or references to this Web page.
- The relative authority of the Web pages that point to this Web page.

Google measures a Web page's authority with something called Page Rank. It sums up the age, “backlinks” and Page Rank of those backlinks and comes up with a number between 0 and 10 for a given page.

So, who gets the most authority? Pages with “people power”. The more people that point to a website who are authorities themselves, the better that page ranks. Note well that blogs, social networking pages, some classified sites (like eBay and Craigslist) and other social media have high Page Rank.

That's because Google recognizes that real people, who take the trouble to look at websites and point to the ones that they like, have more authority than commercial websites who may be just boosting their colleagues' Page Rank.

## SEO Mistakes and Problems

By this time, you may be thinking, “I'll just put a bunch of cool tags on my website and stuff a bunch of keywords on my Web pages!” Don't! Tags, keywords

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# Search Engines: Marketing and Optimization

and other SEO techniques only work if they are used correctly and sparingly. Plenty of folks have tried to “game” search engines for long enough that the folks at Google and other search engines know how to penalize them in the search results. Here are a few mistakes and problems to avoid:

- Keyword stuffing – putting the same (or similar) keywords on your website many, many times. The more you abuse this, the more likely it is you will be pushed to the back of the search results (or kicked out of the search results altogether).
- Duplicate content – copying the exact same words and phrases from another website on your Web page. That's stealing. Aside from being punished in the search engines, the person who owns the copyright to the content can hire a lawyer (or attorney) who will gladly sue you for \$12 gazillion dollars for copyright infringement.
- Slow-loading pages – usually caused by huge graphics files, Flash animation, Java scripts and the like. The longer it takes for your page to load, the bigger the penalty you'll get from the search engines. “Small is the new big!”
- Little or content at all – except maybe an “under construction” notice or image. For those of you that have Flash animation pages with no text content, you may be hurting your chances of ranking well in the search engines.

## You Need a Plan

Search Engine Marketing and Optimization is not a simple, formula-driven effort. It's an art.

Good SEO starts with your own business plan. Just ranking well in the search engines won't make you money if you can't get prospects to become buyers. Your Search Engine Marketing and Optimization needs to fit in with your whole sales process and way of doing business.

You'll notice that this report doesn't really tell you enough about SEO to go out and do it yourself. That's because a quick report could only offer you enough information to be *dangerous* to yourself!

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# Search Engines: Marketing and Optimization

Before you decide to either buckle down and learn how to do it yourself or hire an outsource to do it for you, take a hard look at how you get and keep customers now. Identify your most profitable merchandise, products and/or services. Then look at what causes you the most aggravation (and wouldn't want to promote).

Armed with this research and information, you can start to develop an effective Search Engine Marketing campaign that will work for you. Skip any of these steps, and you'll be setting yourself up for underperformance (at best) or complete failure (at worst).

## **The Bottom Line**

Using search engines to promote a local Scranton business may make good business sense for you. If you own a service-oriented business, most people will start their search for a business like yours online. The old Yellow Pages ain't what it used to be!

Search engines do what they do according to a complex set of rules that assign a place for each and every Web page (that they can find) into an ever-changing index. The specific rules and methods they use are kept secret, to avoid giving scammers and quick-buck-artists an unfair advantage in pushing their pages to the top of the search results.

To make your own pages rank well in the search engines, you need to make good pages that inform people. Your on-page content will matter the most. Content is King! Write your content for people to read, not the search engine robots.

I sincerely hope this helps.

Vince Runza

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