Beginners Guide to SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is unlike any form of marketing.

While some may consider SEO to be purely technical, reserved for web designers and other tech folk, in truth SEO is really only 20% technical website factors. The rest is all marketing.

Those with strong marketing and writing backgrounds tend to understand SEO and how to successfully use it to their advantage better than others.

However, SEO shouldn't be compared to traditional marketing methods. It is a different animal with its own strategies, set of rules and dominating players. The number one thing to take away from this guide – SEO is an ongoing process.

It's the longest of long term and builds upon itself over time. True SEO is never done.

This SEO checklist guide is meant to serve as a frame for those just getting their feet wet in the SEO pool.

It will cover everything from pre-SEO tips, on-site optimization, the measurability of SEO and more.

While not an exhaustive guide, the goal of this guide it is to provide DIY website owners and marketing professionals with the information they need to begin their own SEO journey with a little more confidence.

Trends and tactics come and go, watched some websites flounder while others thrived and witnessed SEO grow into an invaluable marketing tool.

Why SEO is so Important

Web users love to search. They do this to find only one thing: information that"s relevant to them. They might be looking for entertainment news, hunting for product recommendations, trying to compare vendors and services, seeking their soul-mate, or buying a second-hand car. All these goals can start with a simple search query.2

Modern search engines are generally great at delivering relevant results to users and relevance, or relevancy, is the mantra of all search engine engineers.

The use of keywords or key phrases (combining several keywords) helps users find exactly what they want and understanding key phrases enables marketers to target users showing intent or interest in their products.

Notice that we say key phrase (short for "keyword phrase") rather than "keyword".

This is because search engines such as Google attribute more relevance when there is an exact phrase match on a web page (a phrase that matches the user"s search term).

-Lectores Legere

1. PAGE TITLE OPTIMIZATION

Developing a well optimized page title is typically among the first steps in optimizing a page. The page title establishes the page's overall relevancy for the search engine spiders.

The   content of the page title is also important for getting click-through from the results page, since the page title is generally displayed as the search results link.

Page title technical details

The page title tag should reside with other meta tags in the <HEAD></HEAD> of a document

Format

<TITLE>Your title goes here</TITLE>

Limitations

Maximum character limit – 85 characters max [we recommend you stick with 40-60]

Title Tags

Page title optimization tips

- Limit the phrases targeted in a page title to 2-3 closely related phrases (max)

- Limit your page title length – 85 characters max, we recommend you stick to around 40-60 characters

- Limit page title to targeted phrases, avoid irrelevant words (i.e. phone number, url, branding, tagline)

- Include phrases relevant to your page's content, avoid phrases the content doesn't support

- Include the exact target phrase toward the front of the page title

- Use simple characters to separate phrases (coma , ,colon : , hyphen - , pipe |)

- Avoid using special characters if possible (registration marks, copyright symbols etc)

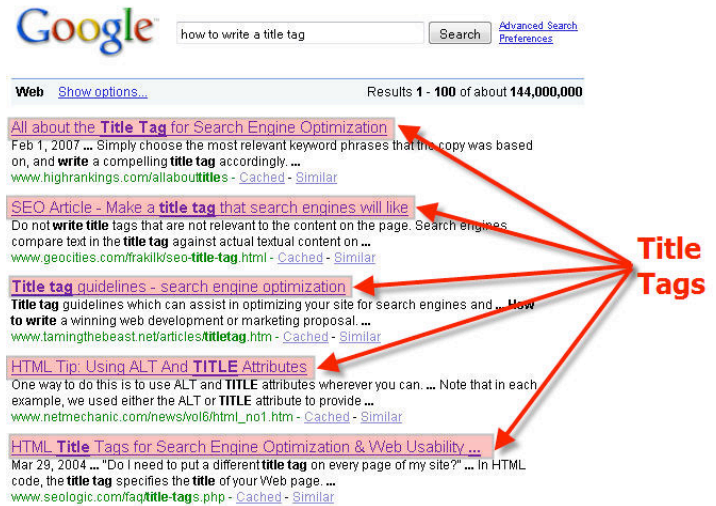- Avoid repeating a phrase back-to-back (i.e. "Free SEO Guide | SEO guide")

Optimized page title examples

Assuming the target phrase is "Free SEO Guide" here are a few examples of page titles with varying qualities of optimization.

Best Page Title:

"Free SEO Guide"
"Free SEO Guide | Free Online SEO Guide"

2. META KEYWORDS OPTIMIZATION

While the meta keyword element is now widely acknowledged to have little SEO value, certain search engines still refer to meta keyword content. It's always a good idea to thoroughly theme your pages, including meta keywords.

Note: Generally meta keywords content does not appear in search result listings content or in areas visible to human visitors.

Optimizing Meta Keywords

The meta keywords tag should reside with other meta tags in the <HEAD></HEAD> of a document

Format

<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="keyword, key phrase one, keyphrase two">

Meta Keyword optimization tips

- Limit the number of phrases targeted on a page to 2-3 core phrases (max)
- Limit meta keywords to target phrases relevant to the page, avoid irrelevant words
- Include phrases relevant to the page's content, avoid phrases the content doesn't support
- Include the exact target phrases, common plurals, and tenses (i.e. SEO guide, SEO guides)
- Separate each keyword with a comma and space, avoid double spacing
- Avoid repeating similar phrase parts back-to-back (i.e. free SEO guide, SEO guide)

3. META KEYWORDS OPTIMIZATION

A unique, properly written & optimized meta description is imperative for effective search engine optimization. Paired with an optimized page title the meta description establishes the page's relevancy for search engine spiders.

The content of the meta description is also important for gaining attention and promoting more click-throughs, since the meta description is often displayed as the search results 'snippet'.

The meta description should be brief, but should include your brand, target phrases and language that encourages searchers to click your listing in the search results.

Optimizing Meta Descriptions

The meta description tag should reside   with other meta tags in the <HEAD></HEAD> of a document.

<META NAME="Description" CONTENT="This is where the description content goes.

Limitations

Maximum character limit – 250 characters

Description optimization tips

IMPORTANT: Use unique descriptions, avoid using the same description across multiple pages

• Limit meta description to 250 characters (max), we recommend you stick to around 150 characters

• Limit the number of targeted phrases to 2-3 closely related (max)

• Limit the repetition of target phrases, avoid 'keyword stuffing'

• Include exact target phrases early in the meta description

• Include phrases relevant to the page content, avoid phrases the content doesn't support

• Include sufficient relevant content with-in the meta description (i.e. not just keyword list)

• Include compelling language and a call-to-action with-in the meta description

• Avoid repeating similar phrases close together   (i.e. ...free SEO guide. SEO guides are...)

• Avoid using special characters if possible (registration marks, copyright symbols etc)

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- Limit the number of targeted phrases to 2-3 closely related (max)

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- Include exact target phrases early in the meta description

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- Avoid using special characters if possible (registration marks, copyright symbols etc)

5. HEADER TAG OPTIMIZATION

H1 & H2 headers are among the more heavily weighed elements of on-page content. If leveraged properly, H1 & H2 headers can be very effective in helping to shape search engines perception of your pages content.

The header tags (H1, H2, H3 and so on) represent the beginning of a new section or area of a pages content and alert search engine spiders of the relevancy of the content that follows the heading tag.

Optimizing Headers/Heading Tags

H1, H2 & H3 headers/heading tag technical details

Headers should reside   tags with-in the <body></body> of a document, and should precede relevant content segments.

Limitations

Maximum character limit – No specific character limit

Header optimization tips

- More is not better, don't overuse! Limit each page to one H1 & 1-2 H2s, then use H3s

- Limit length of heading tags; avoid words that aren't relevant to the page's content

- Include exact target phrases for heading tags, but use variations to avoid obvious repetition

- Include target phrases toward the front of heading tags for best performance

- Include support content after heading tags; each should precede a body of relevant content

- Place heading tags in order. H1 should appear first in code, the H2, H3 and so on

6. CONTENT OPTIMIZATION

Content should be focused on a single theme to be most effective. Pages should support a specific theme or small, subset of closely related phrases through-out the page.

Many online content writers will first select the keywords they want to rank for and then compose content to support those themes. Other writers establish their basic content then integrate keywords through-out afterward.

Which ever method you apply, be sure to apply relevant keywords with- in your body content.

Optimizing Web Content

Content should reside   in the <body></body> of a document and should be crawlable by spiders.

Avoid placing content in JavaScript, Flash and images.

Limitations

Maximum character limit – No specific character limit

Keyword Density

Search engine spiders do not interpret content as humans can, but they do measure how often and how closely together phrases are used through-out content. This is referred to as your contents 'keyword density'.

Keyword density helps a search engine spider determine what your website is all about. Use a keyword too seldom and the search engine spider doesn't place much value or relevance on on the page for that term. Use a term too often and the spider may perceive this as spamming, and devalue the page for that term.

Keyword density can be determined by using any number of popular textual density measurement tools. See our Free SEO Tools page for a Keyword Density Checker.

Although it's best practice to achieve around 3-5% keyword density, there really is no magic target density, since it varies from time to time and from phrase to phrase.

Extremely competitive phrases may require more content with a more liberal application of the target phrase than less competitive terms.

One good method of determining a practical target density is to check the density of the sites with top 5 rankings for your desired target phrases and strive to match that density range.

Achieving Keyword Density

Getting sufficient keyword density while avoiding repetition & silly sounding copy can be tricky at times.

Keep in mind that although an 'exact' match to the target term is best, you can also help support the main target phrase by using variants that include part of the phrase or separate the phrase into manageable pieces.

Below are some examples of how you can use a partial match, reordered phrase, or broken up phrase to help achieve target density for your target phrase.

Content optimization tips

- Don't host duplicate content. Avoid using too much of the same content in multiple pages

- Avoid rendering content in certain unreadable methods (i.e. Flash, JavaScript, images)

- Limit length of content – the more content there is, the more difficult it is to achieve target density.

- Avoid 'borrowing' content – unique content is far more valuable to your sites ranking

- Place target phrases toward the front of sentences & paragraphs

- Embed links with-in your content to relevant pages – establishes relevancy for spiders & users

- Avoid presenting your content in certain dynamic methods (i.e. Flash, JavaScript, etc...)

- TIP: New content gets attention. Write well and write often. The more content your website has about a subject, the more of an authority you become – meaning your pages receive even more weight.

7. IMAGE OPTIMIZATION

Images have had a role in optimization since the early days of SEO. However, since these days most search engine's now provide convenient image search options it has become a significant opportunity.

In addition to image specific searches Google's shift to Universal Search introduced relevant images with-in regular search results making image optimization even more important.

Tactics to optimizing your images for search include applying relevant alt text, file naming and placement with-in relevant content.

Optimizing Images

Images should reside   in the <body></body> of a document

Limitations

Image Size Limitations
Avoiding placing alt text on minor/small images

File Naming Limitations
Maximum character limit – 127* characters

Alt Text Limitations
Maximum character limit – none , avoid exceeding 30ish

Header optimization tips

- Avoid stuffing alt text with unnecessary words or too many keywords

- Avoid placing alt text on minor images (i.e. 1 px images)

- Avoid special characters or HTML tags with-in image alt text

- Include relevant phrases in image alt text

- Include alt text for images links – acts much like anchor text for text links

8. LINK OPTIMIZATION

Links to your site are much like votes for your site. The more votes you get, the more popular search engines perceive your site to be.

Additionally, the quality of the page linking to you can affect how much value or 'authority' search engine spiders place on that link.

A very relevant or high authority website linking to you would be more effective than an unrelated or brand new website linking to you.

Optimizing Anchor Text

Anchor text, the text used in a text link, helps search engine spiders to establish or support the relevancy of the link.

An optimized link will be viewed as a vote for your site with special authority related to the content of the anchor text. A link with relevant anchor text would be much more valuable than a text link with "click here" as the anchor text.

Incoming Anchor Text Ratio

While you do want to obtain links to your website that contain highly relevant key phrases, you also want to avoid obtaining too many links, too quickly, with the same link text. This looks unnatural and could be a 'red flag' to search engines who frown on link manipulation.

As a webmaster you should be actively obtaining links to your website from other relevant websites, partners, activities & events you sponsor, merchants, fans, friends & family etc.

In doing so make sure to vary your anchor text while concentrating a majority on your most valuable target phrases (Primary).

Internal Linking

Clean, relevant linking from with-in your site to your sites other pages distributes link popularity, PageRank and builds cross site relevancy & authority.

Your website should have a comprehensive navigation that appears site-wide, this will

not only help visitors to navigate from page to page on your site, but will assist the search engine spiders in finding all of your pages and indexing them regularly.

As with external links you should use anchor text that includes keywords relevant to the content of the page you are linking to.

Outbound Linking

Sites with tons of inbound links and very few outbound links look suspicious to the spiders. Keep that in mind.

Avoid mass link exchanges, but build linking relationships with quality sites that have content that is complimentary to your own. Use relevant anchor text to link to relevant, authoritative sites.

Link optimization tips

- Obtain links from a variety of relevant sources

- Obtain links from authority TLD's such as .edu, .gov – these TLD's carry more weight

- Obtain links from authoritative sites – links from authority hubs care more weight

- Include relevant anchor text whenever possible

- Avoid getting stuck on a sites PageRank – Relevancy out-rates PageRank

- Avoid mass link exchanges, paid link placement and linking from non-relevant websites

9. URL OPTIMIZATION

Although search engines have worked hard to improve their ability to crawl and index dynamic sites, URL structure remains an obstacle for many website still today.

By implementing a few simple URL structure best practices your site can avoid or overcome many indexing issues.

Best practices for URL structure include limiting the number of directory levels from domain to file, limiting the number of name/value pairs or rewriting dynamic URLs completely, and infusing directories and file names with relevant phrases.

Limitations

Domain Name Length Limitations
Maximum character limit - 63 characters plus the TLD (interesting domain name info)

File/Folder Naming Limitations

Maximum character limit – uncertain

URL Length Limitations

Maximum character limit – 2083 characters in IE, even longer for other browsers

Link optimization tips

- Limit length; technical limitations of 63 characters is far to long for an effective domain

- Try to obtain a domain name that contains a keyphrase relevant to your targeted intent

- Avoid spammy URLs that have numerous hyphens (-) or misspellings

- Separate words using – or _ so they can be read as separate words (IE avoid "hereismyseofolder")

- Limit overall length, compress directory structure into file naming convention to reduce directory levels

- Limit the number of directory levels from the domain name to the file, avoid unnecessary folders

- Limit the overall length of the URL, avoid unnecessary words and characters

- Use keyphrases and real words – avoid shortened or meaningless words like /prod/ and /og/

10. ADDITIONAL SEO RESOURCES

In a nutshell, SEO is an on-going process. The Internet is constantly growing, with new pages being added and new technology being adapted every day. The definition and critical components of SEO have changed as the way we use the Internet has changed. And I fully expect the industry to keep evolving and keep adapting as time goes by.

I hope this SEO checklist guide shed some light on a few of your SEO questions and concerns, and gave you a clearer picture of what SEO really entails. It's not all black hat practitioners out to spam your inbox and flood your search results with low quality content.

Though this industry may have a negative reputation because of the actions of a few, it is still a critical component of online marketing and there are plenty of white hat SEO professionals fighting the good fight. As the world moves ever towards the web, our online marketing tactics must go with it.

Here are some recommended SEO resources:

- [Google Webmaster Guidelines](#)

- [Bing Webmaster Guidelines/Tools](#)

- [Google SEO Information](#)

- [Search Engine Optimization Journal](#)

- [Website Marketing Definition and Glossary](#)