Search Engine Optimization

Terms and Overview

A guide to help explain and understand search engine optimization concepts.

July 2012

SEO Basics

An SEO keyword is a word or phrase that people type into search engines when looking for a product or service. Search terms made up of several keywords are sometimes called Keyphrases.

Keywords are the cornerstone of SEO. It is impossible to get the results you're seeking if you try to promote a website without the right keywords. SEO without keywords is like digging for buried treasure without having a specific location; keywords are the crucial starting point of any keyword campaign.

To get top placement in a search engine, you must first select appropriate Keywords or Keyphrases. But you do not want to drive just any traffic to your site, you want traffic that converts. Successful search terms are those keywords or Keyphrases that, when someone types them into a search engine, they are likely to find your site listed, click on the listing, and actually convert – take the desired action – complete a sale, fill out a form, register, etc.

Search Behavior

When people use a search engine, they most often use 2-word Keyphrases and slightly less frequently use 3-word Keyphrases. 1-word Keywords and over-3-word Keyphrases are searched for far less often.

Targeted traffic is defined as people coming to your site because they are looking for what you sell. If they buy after coming to your site from a search, this is known as *a conversion* – the search result **converts** to a sale.

If a person types a Keyword or keyphrase comes to your site and simply looks around and leaves, then you have a **visit** but not a conversion.

Typically, the longer and more precise the keyphrase (called a long-tail keyword), the fewer visitors you get but the more targeted your traffic is and the higher your conversion rates are.

Example:

> *"Samsung" - (very broad keyword with a high amount of competition) Samsung makes many products. The search term may bring someone to your site, but if you are selling televisions and I am looking for a dishwasher, then ranking high for "Samsung" obviously won't work well for conversions.*

> *"Samsung Dishwasher" - (narrower) This is better, but you are not sure why people are searching for this phrase (Looking to buy? Parts? Repairs?, etc.)*

> *"Samsung DMR77LHS Dishwasher" - (very specific) This will most likely be searched by people who have made the decision to buy and are shopping for the best deal, but may be looking for a review or info to support a buying decision.*

> *"Best Price Samsung DMR77LHS Dishwasher" - (extremely specific) If you sell this model, you want to rank high on this keyword. You are not likely to get many hits, but the hits you do get will likely have a high conversion rate.*

Choosing Keywords

Selecting keywords is a 2-step process. First, you make a list of possible keywords to choose from, and then you pare them down into a shorter list of the most profitable keywords.

Step 1 – Brainstorming. Make a list of every word or phrase you can think of that someone may use to search for what you sell. This is best done as a group exercise, including asking others who are not intimate with your offerings to provide suggestions on what they may type to find what you offer. Many search engines differentiate singular and plural forms of the same word as well as other word extensions like "-ing,", "-ed," etc. Common misspellings are potentially good keywords as well on some search engines. Lastly, don't forget to localize your search terms. Most people look for businesses that are in the same locale they are.

Try and come up with 50-100 or more Keywords/Keyphrases. Put them into a spreadsheet so that you can rank them.

Step 2 – Paring your list for quality. When reducing a list, look for Keywords with a high Keyword Efficiency Index (KEI). This is a calculated value based on the formula below. The importance of your Keyword depends on Relevance, Search Volume, and Competition. Relevance (**R**) is how closely your keyword is related to what you offer. Search Volume (**Sv**) is how many queries are made for a keyword per month. Competition (**C**) is how many websites are already more or less optimized for this keyword. Generally speaking, these are your online competitors. The fewer websites that are optimized for that keyword, the better the KEI for this keyword. The formula for calculating KEI is: **KEI = Sv/C**. However, a better KEI formula includes Relevance: $\mathbf{KEI_R = ((4-R)/3)*(Sv^2/C))}$. Relevance is a bit subjective and is determined by ranking each keyword as follows: **1** for **Excellent**, **2** for **Good**, and **3** for **Poor**.

If you place these categories in a spreadsheet, your headings will look something like this:

#	Keyword	Relevance	Search Volume	Competition	KEI_R

Sort these keywords by $\mathbf{KEI_R}$ largest to smallest. Mark the top 5 or so keywords. These are the keywords that should be optimized for first. Then mark the next 30 or so keywords. These are important keywords that will be worked on but with less emphasis than the top words. Finally, mark the next 50 or 60 keywords. These are our supplemental keywords. These will be worked on but with less emphasis than the other 2 groups. Now that you have your top keywords, we want to run a Keyword Report to find where you rank currently for these keywords.

Keyword Rank Report.

It is hard to tell how well the SEO campaign is going if there is no benchmark of where your site was when the SEO campaign was started. One way to do this is to manually search your keyword in search engines and then see where your site shows up in the listings. There are some free tools to help with this and there are better fee-based tools. The free tools are typically good enough to give you a good idea. Here are 3 free tools:

1) http://www.googlerankings.com;
2) http://www.seomoz.org/rank-checker;
3) http://www.rankingcheck.com.

At least once a month you should check your ranking for your keywords to see they have improved.

Landing Pages

Simply put, a landing page is the page that someone arrives at when a unique URL is typed into a browser, or a link is clicked. Landing pages can be a page on your current website, or a unique page created with a different URL. Landing pages are designed to help steer a visitor to take a desired action.

Choosing Keyword for specific pages.

Remember the keyword list we created and ranked based on KEI_R? Now we can begin to put this into play. First we grouped these keywords into our top 5-10 major terms. Then our secondary, and finally our supplemental key words were defined. Take those top 5-10 key words and place them in separate columns of your spreadsheet. What we are attempting to do is to optimize pages (landing pages) for these most important key words. For a wedding shop, these keywords might look like this:

Page1	Page 2	Page 3	Page 4	Page 5
Wedding ideas	Wedding website	Wedding dress	Wedding gifts	Wedding planning
Wedding ideas flowers	Wedding tips	Wedding dresses Philadelphia	Wedding gifts personalized	Wedding planner

Complete the sheet filling in the secondary keywords. These do not need to have the same number of secondary keywords in each column. You are simply trying to complete the columns with the 3-9 best keywords that relate to the primary keywords the best. Why are we breaking these keywords into multiple pages? There are 3 main reasons:

1. First it would be very hard to use all of your main and secondary keywords on a single page.
2. If you were able to do so, it would probably look and read strangely to people, which is our primary concern.
3. It would look strange to search engines as well, which is what we are trying to avoid.

The key to effective search engine optimization is to start with a manageable number of pages to optimize, and when those are performing, move on to other pages. This is why most search engine optimizers start with a relatively small number of pages, typically 1-5, and then expand once those pages are doing well.

Now that you have your keywords organized, you need to determine which landing page(s) you will optimize. These can be existing pages or new pages.

Take your first keyword and determine which of your pages ranks best for that keyword. Go to the search engine you want to rank well in and type: *your_keyword site:your_domain_name.*

Example: *wedding ideas site:www.weddingsite.com*

Ideally, you will have some pages listed. These pages have already been indexed for the keyword you are attempting to optimize, and it will take less effort to get one or more of these pages to rank well for that keyword. If you have lots of pages, choose the top page to start with as this one will require the least effort. But what if you do not want to optimize the top page or any of the listed pages for the keyword you have selected? Then you want to make a new page. Why might you not choose to optimize any of the listed pages? It could be that they are already well optimized for that keyword, or that the function of the page is already successful. For instance, if your goal is to get someone to register and the top page of your listing is your registration page, then it may not be wise to optimize this page as it is already doing its job.

If you are creating a new page, try and choose a page name that contains a keyword in it. Then, develop your content around your keyword and the goals of the page. To do this, you have to be aware of **keyword density or KWD**.

Keyword Density

Keyword density is the ratio of keywords to the number of other words on the page. If your page has 25 total words and you mention your keyword 5 times, you have a keyword density of 20% **((5/25)*100).** Is this a good ratio or a bad one? The only answer is *it depends*. If you use text with too low a percentage of keywords, search engines won't pay much attention. If you stuff your page full of keywords so that your keyword density is too high, then search engines will not "trust" your page content as it will look and read unnaturally. The worst case scenario is that the search engines will not just ignore your page, but will exclude it from being indexed. Unfortunately there is no rule of thumb or right number for keyword density. Most recommendations are a keyword density of 5% - 7%, but it *depends* on your keyword, competitiveness of the keyword, and to some extent the industry your website relates to.

One of the ways to determine what a good keyword density for your keywords might be is to look at the KWD of the top performing sites for that keyword in your search engine of choice. These can be your best advisors.

View the top competitor's page, count the number of total words and count the number of times your exact keyword or keyphrase is used. Then count the individual components of your keyphrase. Then calculate the keyword density of the phrase and the individual keywords.

Example: let's assume your keyphrase is "wedding ideas" and a search for this phrase turned up that a top competitor's statistics looked something like this:

Keyword	Total Words	Occurrence	Density
Wedding ideas	362	3	.8%
Wedding	362	21	5.8%
Ideas	362	4	1.1%

What this tells us is that your competitor is fine with a density of .8% for your keyphrase "wedding ideas", but they have pretty high density for the word wedding. So, to outrank them for the keyphrase "wedding ideas", you need to have approximately as many total words – 300-400 – and your keyphrase should have a density of at least, .8% *AND* at least 5.8% for "wedding", as well as at least 1.1% for ideas.

There are other factors that must be considered as well, such as titles, tags, alt text on images, links, bold content sections, etc. But this at least gives you a starting point for the type of content you must have on your page in order to out rank your top competitors, or at least be on par with them.

Tuning up the page.

Make sure your page has a good **page title**. Page titles are displayed by search engines in their results page. The page title is quite often the most prominent thing for your users AND for search engines. It is best if no two pages have the same title. Always try to start your page title with keywords and put other words at the end. Keywords can be separated by a comma (,), hyphen(-), or pipe sign (|). Try and make the page title look natural, if you can, by using commas and hyphens. Common questions also make great titles.

Meta keywords and meta description tags.

A meta keyword tag is like a brief list of your page's most important topics. These meta keyword tags ease the spider's job and, though search engines do not put much emphasis on meta keywords, they still help your SEO efforts, particularly when sites are submitted to directories. Meta keyword tags simply help non-human visitors concentrate on the most important things.

Meta descriptions, however, can play a more important role. This is a brief description of your page. Search engines quite often place the site's meta description below the page title on the search results page as shown below:
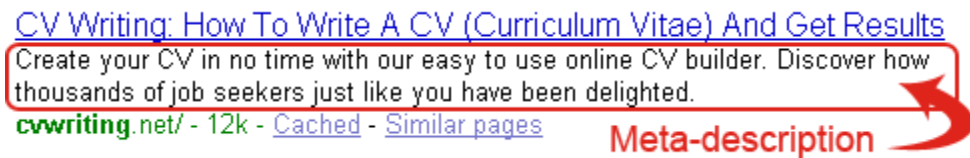
There are 2 main things to keep in mind about meta descriptions.

1. Search engines' spiders - make use of good keywords
2. Real people read meta descriptions and use them to decide if they want to click on your link, or move on to someone else's.

Meta descriptions should use the keywords you want that page to be found for AND should be well written to attract visitors to your page.

On-page Optimization – The art of cleaning up and making changes to pages on your website.

Indexed Pages – These are the records of all of the pages of all of the sites that a search engine has crawled contained in a giant database. It includes the keywords and keyphrases reported by the spider *in context*.

Search Engine Crawlability – Search engines learn about your site by sending a "robot", "spider", or "crawler" to your site to crawl through the content and index your site pages and content in context. They typically start with your Home page and crawl the site based on links to other pages unless you have specifically provided them with a map to follow. Search engines cannot index pages they do not know about. To find out which pages of your site are indexed by a search engine, type the command: *site:yourdomainname.ext* (where *yourdomainname.ext* is the name of the site you are inquiring about.) You will typically get one of 4 results:

1. No results are found.
2. Some pages of the site are listed by the Search Engine, but they make up less than half of the pages.
3. The search engine shows the approximate correct number of pages
4. The search engine shows many more pages than your site actually has.

The desired result is option 3, unless you have specifically hidden pages of your site from the search engines.

No Results Found: If your issue is that no pages are found, it is likely that you need to submit your site to the search engines to alert them that your site exists. This can be done for almost all search engines, but is a must for Google, Yahoo!, and Bing. Though it does not take long to submit your site to search engines, it may take some time for the site to actually be crawled by their spiders. One or more links from popular sites to your site can speed up this visit, but these may be hard to get.

Some Pages are Found: In this case, the search engine knows about your site but the spider was not able to crawl through all pages. It is either too inconvenient, or the pages are not search engine friendly. The goal is not necessarily to have all pages crawled and indexed, but to ensure that the important pages have been crawled and indexed. Use of internal links that a spider can follow from one page to another will help the robot crawl the site. An HTML sitemap is good, but an XML sitemap is better. An HTML sitemap is created typically for human users, whereas an XML Sitemap is for search engine robots. Creating an XML sitemap of all of your important pages is another way to ensure that a spider crawls your important pages. An XML sitemap is a listing of all of the pages of your site that you want a search engine to crawl. These are not human friendly sitemaps, but are designed specifically for search engines to tell them how to get to important pages. You can also use a Robots.txt file to tell a search engine which pages to crawl and which ones to avoid.

A common problem with many database driven websites is that the URLs are unclear. URLs with too many "?", "&", "=" and descriptions like "/?Item=21" are difficult for spiders to read and follow. Not only are these difficult for search engines, but the URLs are difficult for humans as well. Try to eliminate all or as many non-text based URL characters as possible in your web application.

You can also use internal links and navigation links to point to these pages from other important pages of your website. This will provide search engines with multiple ways to get to the same place from multiple locations on your currently indexed pages.

Another item to check on your currently indexed pages is broken links. A broken link is a hyperlink that has some missing or incorrect element to it such that following the link does not take the user to the desired page or location. If a spider encounters a broken link, they are just as likely to leave the site as to try and figure out where to go next.

Does your site use Flash, particularly in the Navigation? Flash can be difficult, if not impossible, for spiders to read. If your site has Flash navigation, it is critical that you provide alternative ways for spiders to crawl your pages. If your site has a Welcome or Enter page, consider removing it. These are not robot friendly and do more harm than good for both humans and search engines.

Many More Pages are Shown: This is usually a case of the same page being indexed differently due to not using canonical URL structure. This is generally an easy fix. What typically is happening is that the content on the page http://www.mysite.com is being indexed as a different page than the page http://mysite.com. Redirecting these pages as a canonical URL so that they are seen as the same page will eliminate most of this duplication. Canonical URLs also prevent the possibility of getting a penalty for having duplicate content.

Page Content.

Website content is for humans, but you must also be aware of how search engines crawl content and index keywords. We attract people to our sites based on our indexed keywords, but we convert visitors into customers by providing compelling content to get them to take action. Landing pages must be a combination of both search engine friendly content and calls for action. You need to be to-the-point and make your invitation compelling. You need to be fantastic and natural at the same time. The thing you need to remember is that high traffic is good, but high conversion is the goal. Good human-friendly content with keywords helps convert visitors to take the desired action.

Spend some time contemplating your first sentence. Both humans and spiders think that the first sentence is important. Most often that is a prominent Headline. Apply the marketing equation to your landing page content. This equation is: Interrupt (headline), Engage (why the reader should pay attention), Educate (what the product or service will do for the prospect), and Offer (your action item). The headline should be placed in a Heading 1 (H1) tag so that there is no doubt to a spider that this is an important paragraph. It should be keyword-rich and something that will interrupt the reader to make them pay attention.

Think about how a visitor reads your page, or rather, how they scan your page. Study after study has indicated that website visitors generally do not *read* your page content from start to finish, but rather they *scan* it for important and relevant information. That is why the use of larger font <H1-3> tags are important to both humans and spiders.

The same goes for bolding, italics, and lists. These items make it easier to call out the important section of your page content for humans and search engines. Make sure you make use of your primary keywords in your H1 tags, and use your H2-H6 tags for your secondary keywords.

While writing the content for your page, keep in mind that people are not going to read everything, at least initially. Since they came to your page because of keywords, you must make them quickly determine that they have arrived at the right place. Do this by making the page easy to scan and visually pleasing. Images are human friendly, but search engine unfriendly, so you need to make sure any/all images you use are described using Alt text. Alt text is simply a brief keyword rich description of the image that has been put into an image tag. Keep in mind that people can also see the Alt text descriptions, so make these meaningful and to the point.

Remember, the content on your page and how it is displayed is very important to both humans and to search engines. Write good, compelling content, but make sure you take full advantage of Header tags, bold, italic, lists, and image alt tags.

Internal Links

Internal Links are links that go from one page of your site to another. Internal links can assist with the SEO efforts by linking one or more important keywords to other relevant pages of your website. This helps the search engine spiders follow your content from one page to another to index these additional reinforcing content pages. Internal links can also be bookmarks to more information about that link further down on the page. This is particularly helpful if the page content is lengthy.

All of your links should use keyword rich **anchor text**. Anchor text should contain keywords specific to the page to which the link leads, not for the one that it is on.

For instance, if your page is about vacationing in the Caribbean and one of your keyphrases is: "*tours to the Caribbean*" and the link to this page looks like this:

> To learn more about tours to the Caribbean, [click here.](#)

then you should consider replacing it with:

> Learn more about [tours of the Caribbean.](#)

This concludes our SEO overview. We have discussed Search Engine behavior as it relates to traffic and more importantly to conversions, Keyword selection and ranking, Landing pages and their purpose and how to optimize using Keyword Density and how to tune up your pages using Onpage optimization of links and images. These are the basics of every SEO program. None of these is difficult or beyond the realm of individual site administrators to do. These things simply take time and a bit of thought about the goals of the site and search terms being optimized for and the competition. Once all of these things have been done, the next step in search engine optimization is to seek incoming links.

We will save that discussion for another overview as we will save the discussion of Pay-per-click as both of these require a significant amount of preparation and work to ensure any degree of success as well.