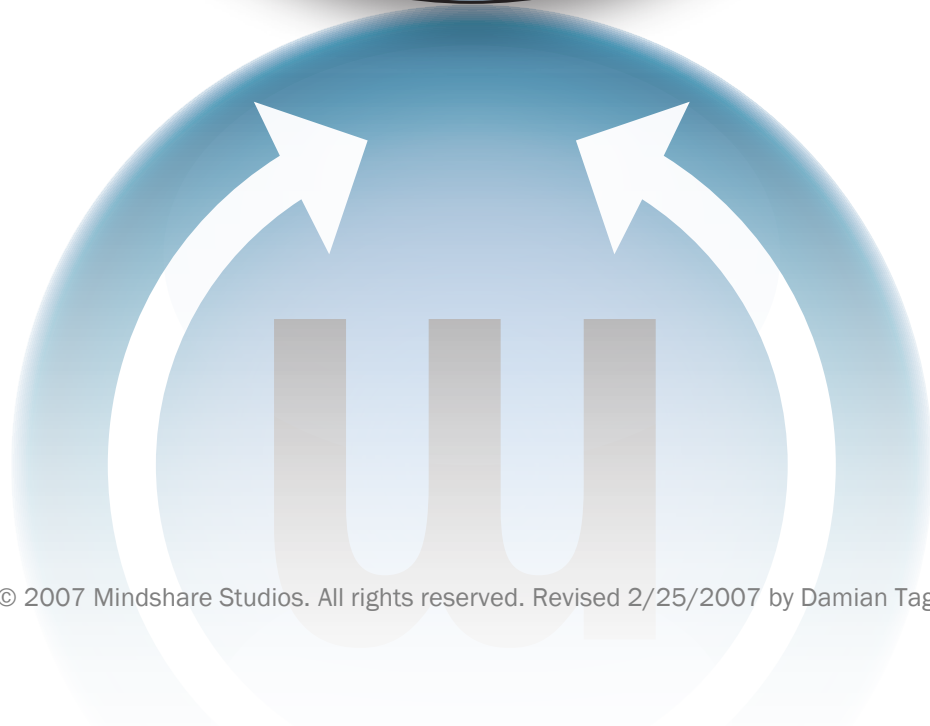


Mindshare Studios' Introductory Guide to Search Engine Optimization

An introduction to search engine inclusion & online marketing.



What is Search Engine Optimization?

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of altering the code and/or content of a website to improve the quantity and quality of visitors that are referred to the site by search engine results.

Mindshare Studios includes SEO as a standard component in every website we produce. More thorough SEO can be performed as needed upon request. This guide will help you understand the critical concepts involved in marketing your website through search engines and help you assess your SEO needs.

The Least You Need to Know

If you prefer to take a hands-off approach to your web presence, you should, at the very least, provide your web developer with a list of 10-20 **targeted keywords** (or search terms) to embed into your web pages as well as a **concise, articulate description** of your website.

Adding a site-wide description and keywords, in addition to standards-compliant code, comprise the minimum level of SEO the Mindshare Studios adds to every website. The rest of this document will explain in more depth how SEO works and help you contextualize it within the larger framework of your organization's overall marketing plan.

Be wary of SEO firms that promise you number one placement in search listings or use automated submission programs—these are probably scams and may even hurt your rankings or get your domain removed from search results entirely.

SEO Explained

Mindshare Studios employs long-term, low-risk strategies for SEO based on guidelines published by the major search engine companies including Google, Yahoo!, and MSN.

Controlled experiments that gauge the efficacy of different approaches to SEO have been performed by a number of organizations and as a result, there are some fairly universally agreed upon methods to increase both the quality and number of visitors a site receives. Before we look at the prescribed methodology, let's take a look at how search engines function and dispel some of the more commonly held misconceptions about them.

How Search Engines Work

Search engines work by automatically crawling the internet, link by link, storing information from each crawled page in a database that is later queried by users.

The process involves a search engine spider finding a web page and caching a version of it on the search engine's server. Once the page is cached, a second program, known as an indexer, extracts information from it. This includes the text and links on the page as well as page metadata. This information gets stored in the search engine's database so it can be displayed to users in search engine results pages.

Ranking

Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and Ask.com do not disclose the algorithms they use to rank pages. A Google spokesperson stated that Google uses more than 100 algorithms (or factors) when ranking websites in their search results.

The factors themselves and the weight each carries change continually, and algorithms can differ widely, with a web page that ranks #1 in a particular search engine possibly ranking #200 in another search engine, or even on the same search engine a few days later.

Paid Placement

Contrary to popular opinion, the dominant search engines (Google and Yahoo!) *do not* offer paid placement in their search results. This is clearly stated in [Google's Help Center](#), "Google never sells better ranking in our search results". They *do* offer organizations the opportunity to advertise in designated areas on search results pages. For more information on online advertising see the section below entitled, Marketing Your Website.

Why Text Is Important

Search engines can only "see" textual information. This means that if most of the text in your site is actually stored in images (a practice often used to preserve rich text formatting and specific fonts online) search engines will not include any of that text in their database, thus excluding any and all potential keywords from search results.

Visitor Quality

SEO is not just about your website's ranking in the results pages of a search. It also involves improving **visitor quality** which can be measured in a number of ways. For example, a quality visitor might purchase a product, request more information on products or services, or register for an email newsletter, rather just perusing your content and moving on.

Quality visitors are attracted by improving the caliber of your site's search listings through page elements such as attention-grabbing titles and pertinent descriptions. Once a visitor is on your site, this quality conversion process is further advanced through a usable and responsive user-interface coupled with clear, accessible information.

SEO can address these and other issues.

A range of strategies and techniques are employed in SEO. SEO targets the predictive, semantic, linguistic and heuristic algorithms used by popular search engine companies based on published guidelines and information.

Some of the more common factors that are widely understood to create a significant impact on a website's search engine ranking include:

1. Keywords in the title tag
2. Keywords in links pointing to the page
3. Keywords appearing in visible text
4. Link popularity
5. The Google PageRank of the page
6. Keywords in Heading Tag H1,H2 and H3 Tags in webpage.
7. Linking from one page to inner pages

SEO Methods Part 1: What to Do

Getting Your Site Listed

Most search engines do not require any extra effort on your part to become listed in their results—they will find you. It can take days or even months for all of the main search engines to index a new site and there is not much that can be done to speed up this process.

However, Google and Yahoo offer submission programs, such as Google Sitemaps. One of the advantages to using programs like Google Sitemaps is that you can see if the search engine is having any problems indexing certain areas of your website as well as access detailed data on traffic to your website.

Mindshare Studios Suggested Optimizations

As a general rule, website content should be architected for users, not for search engines. User-centric content can then be optimized to be easily accessible to search engine spiders using the following methods. A site that employs some or all of these techniques should, over time, elicit higher ranking for pertinent search terms and enhanced visitor quality.

- **Targeted keywords or search terms** embedded into the code of each page on your site. Inaccurate, incomplete, and inconsistent metadata will cause pages to rank for irrelevant searches, and fail to rank for relevant ones
- **Clear, relevant descriptions** embedded into each page
- **Relevant, descriptive text** within the title tag of each page

- **A readable, relevant domain name**
- **Use of keywords in a site-wide naming convention**, using keywords for directory and file names on the web server
- **Use of keywords in HTML elements** including headings, emphasized text
- **Maintaining good keyword frequency**, both in the document and site-wide
- **Planned keyword proximity, adjacency, sequence**
- **Use of alternative text descriptions for images**
- **Use of Google sitemaps** and other search engine submission tools
- **Site development using standards compliant code and techniques**
- **Appropriate incoming links from other sites**, links to your site from other organizations can increase the popularity of your site and are taken into account by most search engines

SEO Methods Part 2: Techniques to Avoid

Guidelines for Working with SEO Professionals

Some more aggressive SEO professionals and web developers employ SEO techniques designed to *trick* search engines by artificially inflating the relevance or popularity of a site. These service providers tend to eventually **get domains banned from search engines**.

The Wall Street Journal profiled a company that allegedly used high-risk techniques and failed to disclose those risks to its clients. Wired magazine reported that the same company sued a blogger for mentioning that they were banned. Google's Matt Cutts later confirmed that Google did in fact ban the company and some of its SEO clients.

One infamous example was the February 2006 Google removal of both BMW Germany and Ricoh Germany for use of deceptive practices. Both companies, however, quickly apologized, fixed the offending pages, and were restored to Google's list.

Methods that are disapproved of by search engines and/or involve some level of deception include:

- **Use of text that is "hidden"**, to artificially increase keyword density
- **Redirecting users and search engines** to different version of a page

SEO Advice from Google

1. Be wary of SEO firms that send you email out of the blue.
2. No one can guarantee a #1 ranking on Google. Beware of SEOs that claim to guarantee rankings, allege a “special relationship” with Google, or advertise a “priority submit” to Google. There is no priority submit for Google.
3. Be careful if a company is secretive or won’t clearly explain what they intend to do.

Keeping Private Content Private

There are times when you’ll want to keep certain portions of your site out of search engine results. Your web developer can instruct search engine spiders (or “bots”) not to crawl specific files or directories in your site using a robots file in the root directory of your domain or a robots metatag embedded into the code of a page.

When a search engine visits a site, the robots.txt located in the root folder is the first file the search engine will read and only pages that aren’t disallowed will be crawled.

Pages typically prevented from being crawled include login specific pages such as shopping carts and user-specific content such as search results from internal searches.

More about Marketing Your Website

SEO and marketing

The primary goal of SEO is not to achieve the highest ranking in search results pages, but rather to help you fulfill your business objective for your website. Ranking well for a few terms among the huge number of possibilities does not guarantee more sales or customer retention. SEO is most effective when it is combined with a larger marketing strategy.

A successful online marketing campaign is likely to include more than simply SEO. Other avenues for promoting your web presence and furthering your business goals may include:

- **A high quality website** or website redesign that engages and persuades prospective customers
- **Paid advertising** on search engines
- **Other paid online display and classified advertising** (banner ads, etc.)
- **Free online advertising** (Craigslist, MySpace, etc.)
- **Addressing technical issues** that may keep search engines from crawling and indexing your site

- **Tracking visitors** with analytics programs so you can measure the relative effectiveness of your site
- **Making sites accessible** and usable to the widest possible audience
- **HTML E-mail campaigns** and opt-in newsletters
- **Business blogging**

SEO, as a marketing strategy, can often generate a good return. However, the algorithms used by search engines can and do change, so there are no guarantees of success, either in the short or long term.

Due to this lack of certainty, SEO is often compared to traditional Public Relations, with Pay-Per-Click advertising being more analogous to traditional advertising. Increased web traffic to a site is similar to increased foot traffic in retail advertising.

Postscript

With any luck, this guide has helped you get oriented in the world of SEO and online marketing.

Don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about how some of these SEO techniques can be employed to improve your web presence.

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This article was based in large part on the [Wikipedia entry on Search Engine Optimization](#).