

Search Engine Optimisation

HOW DO I OPTIMISE MY WEBSITE FOR GOOGLE SEARCH?

The Basics

Google (and nearly all of the other mainstream search engines) work in much the way you would image, if you ever stopped to think about it — they crawl around the net, following the web page links as they find them from one page to the next, and index everything that they find in a huge online database.

Then, when a user enters a phrase into the search page, they look up the words in this index, finds those that match, and then sort these entries into what they think is the best order.

And this order is critical. There may be thousands (even millions) of matches in the search results and Google, for example, will only show 10 results per page. Since very few people ever look beyond page two only the first 20 matches matter — and the first five are by far the most important. The rest will probably be ignored.

So how do the likes of Google decide what gets shown at the top of the results list? Part of the answer to this is a secret – search engines don't want to be manipulated by those anxious get to the top and so they try to be equally devious in separating the wheat from the chaff. However, from what is known, entries will be sorted in this order of priority:

- Exact search matches first. This means those entries that contain all of the search words in exactly the same order. If the search phrase is originally entered by the user between quotes then these exact matches are the only ones included in the results
- All of the words entered, grouped together, but not in the exact sequence entered.
- All of the words entered, grouped close together on the page but with other words in between.

They are then prioritised using these criteria:

- Matches with text in the domain name of the web site
- Matches with text in the title of the web page (*ie.* between the <title> tags)
- Matches with text within the first 200 words or so of the body of the page (but the nearer to the top the better)
- Matches with text used in links to other pages on the site
- Matches with text used in heading (*ie.* between <h> tags)
- Repetition of the whole search phrase more than once within these areas (but not too often, or it will be regarded as spam)
- Repetition of the individual words used in the search phrase, but not in the same order. Testing suggests that the words that go up to make the search phrase should account for as much as 5% of all the words appearing on your web page, a measure referred to as *keyword density*.

So far, so good? To recap, based on what we know so far we will get to the top of the Google (and Yahoo and Bing) search results page if we have an exact match for a search phrase that a visitor enters provided that the match appears (say) three times on our page, preferably including within the title of the page and within the first 200 words of the body of the text. The individual words used in the search phrase should also appear frequently within the body text, preferably accounting for up to 5% of the text on that page. And if some of the words are also included within our domain name, then so much the better.

At this stage the only difficult part is knowing what phrases visitors are likely to use — but there are tools available to help with this by showing you an analysis of what search phrases have actually been entered recently into Google and the rest.

Notice that we use the word *phrase*. People rarely enter a single word (or even two words) into a search engine unless they are searching for a particular company or brand name. Experience quickly teaches them that entering one word, or using broad terms, brings too many results (and too many irrelevant results) to trawl through and that they will get the best results by being fairly specific and using three or four words in their search phrase.

For example, if you are looking for a place to service your car you probably will not enter *garage* into Google because you know that it will respond with a list of every garage on the planet. Even *garage newbury* is too broad, since most garages in Newbury will not be the right choice for your particular car. So you enter *audi garage newbury* — and not surprisingly the first entry at the top of the list (when searching with google.co.uk) is *www.newbury.audi.co.uk*.

The other thing you will have noticed is that one page can only really be optimised for one phrase (two at a pinch — a major phrase and a minor one) and that you will therefore need to create additional pages for each phrase that you want to optimise for. These are called *Landing Pages* and become multiple points of entry into your web site, each one a response to a particular search phrase.

PageRank

What happens if there are hundreds of web pages containing the exact search phrase that you have optimised your page for?

This is unlikely to happen if your phrase is *audi garage newbury* but what if it is *low cost uk mortgages*? Remember that most of your competitors will have also used the tools referred to above to check to see which are the most popular search phrases for their business and optimised their pages accordingly. This means that there is going to be stiff competition to get to the top of the list — and remember, only the first 20 results will ever be seen (and it is the first five that count most).

How does Google decide who to put at the top of the list when there are multiple exact matches to the search phrase? The answer is something it calls PageRank. This is a score that the Google search engine gives to every page it indexes that reflects how ‘valuable’ Google thinks that page might be for someone doing a search.

The scoring is on a scale of 1 – 10 with the majority of pages on the internet scoring zero and very few rising above 6. The score is set according to three main criteria (together with a number of additional undisclosed factors):

The quality of the content on the page

The quality and number of links pointing to this page from other sites

The age of the web site

The quality of the page is estimated by looking at the length of the text in the body of the page and the diversity of words within this text. Very short and very long pages are scored low — pages with less than 500 words assume less ‘value’, as do pages with more than 3000 words. Pages with marketing buzz words and sales-orientated phrases get scored lower than pages with a wider and more diverse vocabulary.

The second criteria — the quality and number of inbound links to this page from other sites — is the more decisive factor and also the harder one for you to do anything about. Google counts how many other web pages on other sites point to this page. It is looking for more than 25 links (and a lot more than 25 for high PageRank scores). And if this wasn’t hard enough to achieve it wants to see links from pages that themselves have a PageRank of 4 or more (which is high). And it wants the text that is contained in those links (the *anchor* text) to be relevant to the text of your page, and it wants the text in the body of the sending page to be relevant to the content of your page.

So forget links to your page from blogs or directories — the best quality inbound links are going to come from newspapers and other media, universities, government, major trade bodies and other institutions of similar standing in Google’s opinion. And they are going to be from web pages that cover topics relevant to your own web page.

Not something that can easily be engineered.

And if that were not hard enough you need to understand that these criteria apply for every page that you optimise — not the site as a whole. Having one set of external links all pointing to your home page will not work — the page optimised for a particular search phrase needs to have its own inbound links pointing to it.

The third criteria, the age of the domain name, is obviously an issue for those newly-registered names. Google will start indexing a new site almost immediately but will not include it in the search results for several months, at which point it will probably have a PageRank of zero.

Find your niche

What all this boils down to is that it is very tough to get to the top of the search results page for popular search phrases — your competitors know what these phrases are, some of them will have optimised pages on their site for them and they may have worked hard to lift their PageRank as high as it will go.

You may find therefore that you will achieve more if you work on optimising your site for some of the less competitive keywords and phrases. By using the keyword analysis tools referred to you can test a whole battery of phrases to try and identify those that are less competitive than the obvious and popular ones, but which can still attract visitors.

In which case you will probably be looking for niche phrases. For example, instead of *low cost uk mortgages* you might try *cheap domestic re-mortgages* or *low cost mortgages Bristol* or *mortgages for bungalows* or *best mortgages for military personnel*.

Remember that there is no limit as to how many of these phrases you can optimise for, but that each phrase will probably need an additional page on your web site optimised for that phrase.

The alternatives

If your site is new or your pages have low PageRank scores or you are in a hurry to get the responses in, then instead of (or as well as) leaving it to Google to do an “organic” search you can get yourself listed by using Google AdWords.

These are the ads that appear down the right side of the search results page. You may be relegated to page 12 of the search results with your organic search but you can offset that by being on the front page of the results every time with an AdWord placing.

These can be created within minutes and are free to set up.

You start to pay each time someone clicks on your ad, which brings them to your site. AdWords are priced by auction. You decide what to pay for each click for each keyword phrase that you select and the person who bids highest gets listed first, with the second highest bid shown next and so on. In practice you want to make sure that you are always on the first page and so will need to make sure that you always bid higher than the 10th bid.

For less popular keyword phrases you would probably expect to pay 10-25p for every click on the ad (*click-through*). For the most popular (words like *Loans, Mortgages, Pensions*) however the figure can rise to over £10 per click.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

A CHECKLIST TO HELP YOU GET STARTED.

Who is your web site aimed at?

Some people who visit your site are existing client or previous prospects who know what you do and will come to the site direct or through a search on your company name. Google search will not need optimising for them. Focus on the new visitors who are visiting for the first time and do not know who you are.

What will they be looking for?

What do they want from you?

What search phrases will they be entering into search engines?

What are your competitors doing?

What keywords have they focussed on?

Which are the popular search terms?

What is at the top of the Keyword Analysis Tool list?

Try searching on these — who gets listed first?

Which other terms will work for you?

Which niche terms can you take advantage of?

Which ones have viable frequency?