

Optimizing for Search Engines Drives Clear Messaging: Better Marketing Means Better Rankings

By Kathleen M. Hosfeld

Creating more profitable sales is one of the primary goals of any marketing program. That goal is broken into two parts: volume and resource efficiency. We want more sales or more relationships with customers. We also want to increase efficient use of our time and money in getting more sales.

For many types of organization – both non-profit and for-profit – the Web site is vastly underutilized in achieving this goal. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is one of the best ways of making Web sites work harder within the marketing mix. This is the process by which we write, design and build Web sites so that they show up in searches on Google, MSN, Yahoo and other directories. Optimization makes Web sites work harder in part because good SEO strategy requires clear thinking about who you want to reach and what they need from you. Getting clear on your message and how to connect with your target audiences is not only pre-requisite for good SEO, it essential for marketing success -- period.

While there are many aspects to the process of optimizing your site, following is an overview of some key considerations:

Keywords – What are the words that people use if they try to find your organization, product or service with a search engine? What would they call your service or product? Keywords, which include your organization’s name, must be built into the live text of the Website, used in “meta tags” and page titles. Keywords, including the organization’s name, should be built into each page of the site since anyone can land on any page of your Web site from a search. Anywhere they land should tell them where they are and what you are about.

Don’t Try To Trick The Search Engine – While we are on keywords, let me add that although they are important, unnatural repetition of keywords is what is called “keyword stuffing.” This and other techniques – cloaking, link farms, and alt-text spamming – may work for you in the short term. If these techniques are detected, your site may be banned from directories altogether.

Good Code -- Do-it-yourself Web developers often use design programs (Frontpage, Dreamweaver). These programs often do not optimize the code; they create sites with up to 10 times the amount of code used by more efficient development methods. This “bloated code” reduces search engine page rankings. To give your site the best chance to succeed, work with a qualified developer to build your site using Cascading Style Sheets technology (CSS), to keep your code-to-text ratio low. By combining good code with a content management system on the backend, you'll achieve the best of both worlds – better search-ability as well as the capacity to update content regularly without knowing HTML.

Be Linkable – Inbound links from other sites are one of the best ways to increase search engine page rankings. But “link farms” are not the way to go. The best way to get these links is to include content on your site that others find worthwhile and interesting. Offer your expertise through articles, backgrounders, how-tos, etc. and then let people know the information is available.



Ongoing Learning – We create Websites to the best of our ability given whatever information we have at the time. There is nothing better, however, than experience and ongoing learning. Using web statistics systems and analytics programs can help provide information on how people find your site, what keywords they use, how they navigate through the site, and whether or not the site is working to create prospects or sales. Virtually every Web host offers free access to a web statistics service, which analyzes the traffic on your site and provides raw data. Google Analytics is an excellent and low-cost tool for more refined analysis of traffic, keywords and navigation. The two together provide lots of information that can be used over time to improve keyword and content use, site organization and more.



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