

The Internet Specialist

Fact sheet - one of a series of no-nonsense fact sheets.

The basics of Search Engine Optimisation: Getting found by search engines

Why read this Fact Sheet?

Understanding the basics of Search Engine Optimisation best practice will help you begin the process of optimising your web pages for maximum visibility in search engines.

Firstly, some essential knowledge: 'Organic' search results vs. 'Paid' search results

'Organic' or 'Natural' search results are the search engine listings you get for free.

These are the results most favoured by people using search engines (around 70% of all clicks are on these listings).

You should concentrate first on optimising your web pages to get the highest search results possible for your web pages.

N.B. If you don't you can be sure that your competitors most certainly will!

'Paid' Search Results are the search engine listings you pay for, every time someone clicks on the listing (i.e. Pay Per Click)

This applies whether the visitor stays on your site or not.

Around 30% of all clicks are on these listings.

Pay Per Click listings are based on keywords* you select as being the ones most likely to be used by people searching for your type of product or service.

The more popular your keywords are, the more you will pay per click.

*A keyword is a phrase people enter into the search engine search box, e.g. 'cheap DVD players'

Overview - When will I get a top ranking in the search engines?

Any search engine optimisation expert will tell you that just about the first question that they get asked by a new client is "When will we get to the top of Google page rankings?". That of course is the question everyone (including the experts!) would like to know the answer to!

The truth is that *no one* can guarantee at what position a particular web site will appear in the rankings on Google, MSN or any of the other search engines for that matter, and when it will get there.

The position will change day by day and week by week in any case, depending in no small measure, on what *other* competitive web sites are doing with their SEO (which is why I always stress to clients that search engine optimisation should most definitely be regarded *not* as a 'one off' but as an ongoing activity).

Getting the search engine optimisation basics right

There are basically two key optimisation areas where best practice should be followed. These are 'On-page' and 'Off-page'.

On-page (not surprisingly) covers what's you do with the content and coding *on* your web site. Off-page is what you do to away from, or *off* your web site.

What all search engines *love* and what will get the highest rankings are web pages with lots and lots of 'relevant' content, and pages that are 'popular'.

What does 'relevant' content mean?

Quite simply it means content (headlines, body text, captions, images etc.), that is absolutely focused on what your web site is promoting, whether its a pure 'brochure' site designed to get people to contact you by phone or email, or whether its selling products or services via e-commerce.

The content of my own web site, for example, is focused completely on the three services I offer (search engine optimisation, search engine marketing and web analytics). Nothing is allowed to dilute the 'relevance' of the content to those three subjects.

It is vitally important that content is focused on the keywords you have selected as being the ones most likely to be used by people searching for products or services like yours.

What does being 'popular' mean?

Popularity, in the context of search engines, is based on how many other 'relevant' web sites link to yours (e.g. a garden design web site linking to a bicycle shop web site is unlikely to score very highly for relevancy, whilst a cycle clothing site linking to it, is - you get the idea).

Favourable content about you or your business and linking to your site from other sources like blogs and social networking sites also scores very highly with search engines.

Here are some key tips on Search Engine Optimisation best practice

On-page optimisation

1. Select your keywords after careful research to find out which phrases are most often used to search for products and services like your's.
2. Use your keywords in your URL (web site address), page title (that appears in the web browser tab), page headings and body text.
3. Do not overuse your keywords as this will be penalised by search engines. Aim for a keyword density of between 3% to 7% (i.e. ratio of keywords to other words on the page).
4. Your page description appears with your entry on the search engine results pages. Make sure it is a clear and accurate description of what you are offering, ideally including some keywords and your location (e.g. town and / or county).
5. Put keywords in the meta data of your page HTML coding but only use those keywords that are most relevant.

Off-page optimisation

1. Inbound links are very important. Get as many *relevant* links *into* your web site as possible. Take the time to build up the list of links gradually.
2. Try to make sure the page text of any inbound links contain your web address (i.e. rather than just the words 'click here' for example)
3. Reciprocate by placing outbound links on your own web site to any relevant sites linking to you.
3. Build references to your company and web pages on blogs and social media sites.
4. Create an entry for your business in relevant online business directories for countries where you are looking for customers.
5. Remember, off-page optimisation is a time-consuming, gradual process that has to be done properly if you want those valuable high page rankings!

Key 'takeaway' from this Fact Sheet: Working hard on your Search Engine Optimisation to get found by search engines is one of the most important activities you can do to maximise the return on investment of your web site.