

Techniques for Improving Search Engine Visibility

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly all Internet users rely on search engines to find what they are looking for. If the search engines cannot find your website, you're missing out on valuable opportunities to have search engines connect searchers to your site.

Although it is a popular notion, you cannot simply create a website and then expect people to find your site. You have to take additional steps to connect search engines—and hence searchers—to your site.

Whether you're planning to have a website or have had one for years, this article will help make your site more visible to search engines. More specifically, it will help you to:

- ❖ make your website search engine friendly
 - ❖ improve your search engine ranking
 - ❖ attract visitors who are genuinely interested in your products and services
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SOME SEARCH ENGINE TERMINOLOGY

Crawlers, robots (a.k.a. **bots**), and **spiders** are programs or automated scripts used by search engines to methodically visit websites and index their content.

Keywords are significant words or phrases on a web page that best describe the page's content. A web page's META tags also contain keywords that are normally invisible to the viewer. Keywords also refer to the words or phrases used in a search engine query.

Organic search engine listings (a.k.a. **natural listings**) refer to the search results produced by search engines and specifically exclude paid placement and paid inclusion listings.

Paid search results refer to the paid placement and paid inclusion listings on search engine results pages (SERPs) that are typically located above or to the right of the organic listings.

Search engine marketing (SEM) is a form of Internet marketing and encompasses both organic listings and paid search results.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of designing or redesigning a website so that it does well in organic search engine listings.

Search engine results pages (a.k.a. **SERPs**) are the web page listings returned by search engines in response to a keyword query.

A FIVE-STEP PROGRAM

A methodical approach offers the best strategy for improving your website's search engine visibility. I recommend completing each of the following steps in the order they are presented.

Step 1: Design your website to be search engine friendly.

Search engines use sophisticated algorithms to produce search results. A well-designed site allows the search engines to easily crawl and index your site. There are some widely recognized guidelines that you should consider when designing or redesigning your website.

Search engines like:

- ❖ **Logically structured sites.** Search engines do a better job of indexing sites that are designed with a clear hierarchy. An added benefit is that visitors will find it easier to navigate your site.
- ❖ **Information-rich sites.** Provide high-quality content on your website and update it frequently. A website that contains useful information will attract more visitors and entice other sites to link to it.
- ❖ **Site maps.** A site map provides the overall layout of your website at a glance and is helpful to both your visitors and your search engine visibility.
- ❖ **Text links.** It is best to use text instead of images for navigational elements. Footers are useful for providing redundant links at the bottom of web pages that use buttons or JavaScript for navigation.

- ❖ **Descriptive and accurate TITLE tags.** Search engines rely heavily on page titles and consider the words at the beginning of the title to be more relevant than subsequent words.
- ❖ **Descriptive and accurate ALT tags.** ALT tags allow web browsers and alternative devices for the visually impaired to provide descriptive text for images. ALT tags should include keywords.

Search engines don't like:

- ❖ **Sites structured with frames.** Frames can cause problems for search engines because they display several URLs (one for each frame) within a single page.
- ❖ **Flash sites.** Crawlers may experience problems indexing Flash sites because they are constructed with graphics rather than text.
- ❖ **Dynamically-generated sites.** Crawlers may ignore sites that use dynamically-generated pages because the pages don't actually exist until they are requested.
- ❖ **Images that display important content or links.** Crawlers don't recognize text contained in images.

Refer to Google's [Webmaster Guidelines](#) for additional suggestions as well as workarounds for websites that use frames, Flash, and dynamically-generated pages.

Step 2: Find the right keywords for your individual web pages.

Try to think of the keywords that targeted searchers would use to find your website and then incorporate those words into your META tags and—more importantly—your copy. Do not use the exact same keywords on each of your pages. Instead, choose keywords for each page that best describe its individual content.

It is best to use two- to four-word keyword phrases that are commonly used by web searchers, but that are selective enough so that you are not competing with millions of other pages for the search engine's attention. Very specific, well chosen keywords will generate targeted traffic from searchers who are genuinely interested in what your site has to offer.

Place the keywords in your META tags, page titles, headings, and body text. Keywords that appear in page titles, headings, and the first part of your body text are generally considered more relevant by search engines.

Although many search engines ignore keywords in META tags, some search engines still use them, so it is still considered good practice to include keywords in your META tags.

If a competitor's website attracts many visitors and has a high search engine ranking, it probably means they have chosen good keywords. For that reason, it makes sense (and is perfectly ethical) to examine the keywords used on your competitors' websites.

Tip: To see the descriptions and keywords your competitors are using in their META tags, simply view their source code with your browser. In Internet Explorer click on View ⇒ Source, and in Firefox click on View ⇨ Page Source. Most other browsers have similar menus. Look towards the top of the code for the lines that begin *<meta name="description">* and *<meta name="keywords">*.

Step 3: Optimize your web pages for these keywords.

Search engine optimization takes into account how search engine algorithms work and the keywords that people use when performing searches. The combination of keywords and website content must show search engines that your website is relevant to a specific topic.

SEO primarily involves examining a site's coding and structure, placing keywords in the right places, and addressing problems that could prevent search engines from fully indexing a site. It is a complex and time-consuming process that is beyond the scope of this article, but is nonetheless crucial if you want to achieve high search engine rankings. SEO efforts typically require 2-3 months to yield appreciable results.

Step 4: Submit your website to search engines and directories.

After finding the right keywords and optimizing your website, it is time to submit your site to the major search engines and Internet directories.

Currently, there are only four major search engines: Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft Live Search (formerly MSN Search), and Ask (formerly Ask Jeeves). These search engines have relationships with other search engines, so it is not

necessary to submit your website to every search engine. See the excellent [Search Engine Relationship Chart](#) at Bruce Clay, Inc. for more information.

Although search engine submission is not as important as it once was (since most search engines will index your website from links on other sites that point to your site), it can still help to get your website listed more quickly.

Tip: To expedite Google's indexing of your website, create a Google account and submit your site map using their [Webmaster Tools](#). Google uses your site map to learn about the structure of your site and to increase coverage of your web pages. Several other useful tools are available, and all are free.

Internet directories differ from search engines because actual people review all website submissions. You should submit your website to the Open Directory Project (a.k.a. DMOZ), local directories, and topic-specific search engines that are pertinent to your site.

Step 5: Obtain links from related websites.

Inbound links from related websites have become very important in achieving high search engine visibility. "Link popularity" refers to the number and quality of inbound links that point to a particular website and, as far as search engines are concerned, can literally make or break the site. If another website considers your website important enough to link to, the search engines consider your site important as well.

A "quality link" is simply a link from a related website that complements the contents of your site. It is important to have an ongoing link-building campaign in place in order to build high-quality inbound links from related sites. Inbound links help the search engine crawlers find your site and provide improved visibility in SERPs.

An effective link-building campaign involves:

- ❖ identifying complementary websites that do not directly compete with your website by performing searches on your keywords,
- ❖ contacting their webmasters by telephone or email to request a one-way or reciprocal link, and
- ❖ documenting your searches, contact information, and results (a spreadsheet is ideal for this).

Websites that link to your competitors are often websites that are related to your site, so you may want to request that they link to your website as well.

Tip: To determine which web pages link to you or to one of your competitors, enter a Google search query using the following format:
link:http://www.example.com

Search engines don't like "artificially created" links—they want "natural" links from sites that share the same subject matter as your site. Your search engine visibility will benefit if you focus on building links that are useful to your visitors and your business. This link-building approach will help search engines connect targeted searchers to your website.

Tip: To determine which web pages Google considers similar to one of your web pages, enter a Google search query using the following format:
related:http://www.example.com

Outbound links can also benefit your website because they show you have confidence in your site, add value to your site by providing additional resources, and allow you to build business and linking relationships with other sites. You should link to another website if it would be of interest to your site's visitors or offers something related to your site.

SUMMARY

Improving your website's search engine visibility requires a committed, long-term approach. Patience is required because it can take weeks or even months before your efforts are rewarded. Keep in mind that your perseverance will eventually result in improved search engine visibility and, as a result, increased targeted traffic.
