

Understanding SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a strategic process for priming your website's content for visibility in search engine results. Understanding SEO — and then implementing it well — is critical to any online marketing program.

You're likely familiar with search engines from a user's perspective. What may be more mysterious is the surprisingly complex chain of events set into motion by every click of the "Search" button. This tutorial will walk you through some of the basics of this process, and get you started optimizing your website for improved traffic.

Think of the proverbial tree in the forest. A state of the art website brimming with leading content is irrelevant if potential customers aren't finding their way to it. Your firm's website is likely a considerable investment — maximize it with quality SEO.

Step 1. Understanding How Search Engines Work

All of us rely on search engines — Google, for most. Search engines make the internet useable, sifting through billions of webpages to bring desired content into our reach. They take users' prompts (keywords and phrases) and deliver their best suggestions for relevant, useful webpages.

Astoundingly, a search engine will consider hundreds of factors in the half-second it takes to return results. These calculations blend together to form an algorithm.

Each search engine's algorithm is unique. It is also constantly being modified and updated to provide better, more relevant results. For example, Google's algorithms are a recipe of over 200 signals updated on a near-daily basis.

The algorithm latches on to what it determines as the best results and routes them to the top of the page.

Step 2. What is Search Engine Optimization?

Making your website's content favorable to these algorithms is the work of SEO.

Good SEO will produce two important improvements for your firm's content — 1) make it appear more frequently in search results, and 2) drive those appearances closer to the top of the page. This process, in turn, introduces your firm to more prospective customers.

Because SEO considers a tremendous number of factors, we'll focus on just a couple of the bigger and easier-to-implement strategies. Later, once you've mastered the basics, we encourage you to learn more advanced techniques.

For most SEO programs, the most important concepts to understand are relevance, keywords, and authority.

Step 3. Relevance

Search engines consider many factors when measuring relevance. And one key component of relevance is *user satisfaction*.

Frequently, the search engine will place high importance on how useful people find a webpage ("user satisfaction"). It might surprise you that search engines track a user's movement within a site to make this calculation. For instance, if a web visitor clicks on a Google search results link then lingers on the destination page to read its content, Google will consider that a useful impression. Search engines look less favorably on webpages when users click and immediately return to the search results.

SEO takes advantage of this two-way relationship. When you provide a good user experience — and useful, relevant content — your webpage is more likely to rise in search engine rankings. Why? Because search engines are motivated to send their users to the best resources. This is just one reason to fill your website with high quality, captivating content.

Step 4. Keywords

Finding good keywords (or, more often, multi-word keyword phrases) is one of the most important components of any SEO program. That's how you drive the right visitors to your content.

Keywords are the words or phrases people type into a search engine that produce a list of relevant links. For example, let's say that you run a leading website on the subject of... tomatoes. If a user Googles "tomato," and you've properly implemented this SEO tactic — and your site has sufficient authority (more on this shortly) — your site should show up.

Of course, most firms and companies are working with content that's more nuanced and niche-focused than a single word. Next we'll discuss finding the perfect balance between the answers users are looking for, and the content you're marketing.

For more information, check out *How to Research Keywords* and *How to Optimize Web Copy*.

Step 5. Authority

Unfortunately, it's not enough to publish great content to a web page and seed it with relevant keywords. Your site has to have sufficient gravitas — we call it web authority — in the eyes of the search engines for its individual pages to show up on the first page of search results.

There are many factors that contribute to a website's authority, but the most important by far is the number and quality of other websites that link to it. Think of these links as votes, and each new vote gives your page a boost in the rankings. Of course, not all links are the same. A link from a high-authority site (say, the *New York Times*) might be the equivalent of hundreds of links from low-authority sites. And some links (from link farms or sketchy paid link directories) will lower your rankings.

So how do you increase your site's authority? You have to find ways to encourage people to link to your website. And the first thing you should do is write great content that people are likely to share. Nine times out of ten, that content should be educational. A blog is the perfect vehicle to share this type of content.

Another common tactic is to reach out to bloggers, journalists, and other people who can direct traffic your way. You may be able to have a news story written about your firm, or an outside blog may allow you to write a post on their site. The important thing is that you get a link back to your own site in the process.

There are many other ways to get quality links and increase your web authority, but these are the most important for a beginner.

A Final Word...

Search engines are fickle creatures. They like new, youthful content. As your pages age, they will begin a steady, dreary descent in the rankings until they become buried on page 2 or 3, rarely to be clicked on again. But there is a remedy. If you update your pages periodically, Google and other search engines will see them as new or refreshed content, and your once popular pages may be rewarded with an extended life. Just keep in mind that there are no guarantees when it comes to SEO, and sometimes a page simply loses its luster forever. Accept it and move on.