



Fundamentals of Site Optimization

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Overview

Search Engines consider many factors in their algorithms that determine how well a Web site ranks for keywords. Some of the most important aspects of their algorithms depend on various components of the pages found within a Web site. The crux of Web site optimization for search has been stable over the past few years. The Search Engines have released guidelines for Webmasters regarding optimization. Viable and accepted tactics and strategies are more commonly known.

This white paper will cover in depth the aspects of a Web page that should be optimized. It will also lightly cover a few other core elements that directly relate to Web page optimization like site architecture, keyword research, robots.txt, and Web site analytics.

Fundamentals of Site Optimization

HTML Meta Information

HTML is the code that is used in Web site design. It is actually a programming language that a Web browser (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Netscape, etc) translates into the graphical representation that Web users see. This code contains a lot of information for the browser in order for the pages to look and function like a Web site. Within the HTML code of a page, there may also be meta information. Some of this information is used by the Search Engines. The meta tags "keywords" and "description" were built into HTML coding for Web sites in the 1990s to assist Search Engines in their indexing duties.

While being a noble concept of how to tell a Search Engine about the Web page, meta tags were abused by savvy Webmasters to drive irrelevant traffic, mostly for financial gain (Spam). Search Engines had to find other ways to judge a Web page and determine how it should rank in their results.

Today's Search Engine Algorithms are light years ahead of the simplistic ones of earlier engines. There are more factors than could reasonably fit on a page. Meta information is making a comeback because the abused tags are easier to differentiate. Other phenomena like "tagging" are putting the ranking of pages in the user's hands.

Title Tag Rules

- Most important part of a Web page to optimize
- Should be limited to 120 characters (less than 70 is best)
- Should contain the most important keyword that appears on the Web page
- Appears as the first line in the search engine results pages
- Appears at the top (title bar) area of the Web browser
- Should not repeat words
- Should be unique to the Web page
- Should read well where possible
- Should be marketable
- Should contain the most important keywords toward the beginning of the title
- Looks like: <title>Real Estate Marketing</title>
- Should appear within the <head> section of the HTML code

Title Tag Examples

Example: A Web page that describes Real Estate Marketing

Title 1: Home Page

Title 2: Remax – New York, NY – Real Estate Marketing

Title 3: Real Estate Marketing – Learn about today's successful marketing techniques

Title 4: Real Estate, Real Estate Marketing, NY Real Estate, Realtor Certification

Title 5: Real Estate Marketing, Learn About Property Advertising Now!

Title 1 is not descriptive enough.

Title 2 is getting there, but the branding of Remax at the front of the title is taking away from the main keyword "real estate marketing".

Title 3 is pretty good.

Title 4 looks like keyword stuffing. It does not read well. It may work for optimization, but there are better ways to do it.

Title 5 is also a good title. A small marketable phrase was inserted that also may include a keyword (property advertising). Title 3 was the most optimized, but this one is also a possibility.

Description Tag Rules

- An important part of a Web page to optimize
- Should be limited to 180 characters (Less than 120 is best)

- Should blend keywords that appears on the Web page and a marketing message
- Sometimes appears as the second line in the search engine results pages
- Should not repeat words
- Should be unique to the Web page
- Should read as a complete sentence
- Should contain the most important keywords toward the beginning of the description
- Looks like: `<meta name="Description" content="Real Estate Marketing Techniques">`
- Should appear within the `<head>` section of the HTML code

Description Tag Examples

Example: A Web page that describes Real Estate Marketing

Description 1: Welcome to the source for real estate marketing information. This page covers the basics of real estate Web site optimization, including meta tag and content optimization strategies.

Description 2: Remax

Description 3: Realtor license, real estate marketing, property management, real estate.

Description 4: This Real Estate Marketing page covers the basics of site optimization, including meta tag and content optimization strategies.

Description 5: Remax is the leading Realty Company in the United States.

Description 1 is pretty good. Keyword phrases would be better at the beginning, but it is marketable.

Description 2 looks like it would be a generic description that every Web page on the site may have. It should be unique to the page.

Description 3 is just keyword stuffing. Some of those words do not even appear on the page.

Description 4 is the best. It is a good description that informs the searcher about the Web page using quality and relevant keyword phrases.

Description 5 also looks like it would be a generic description that every Web page on the site may have. It is not unique to the page.

Keyword Tag Rules

- A less important part of a Web page to optimize
- Should be limited to 12 keyword phrases
- Should use commas between phrases
- Should not repeat words

- Should be unique to the Web page
- Should contain the most important keywords toward the beginning of the list
- Looks like: `<meta name="Keywords" content="real estate marketing, realtor marketing, realty marketing">`
- Should appear within the `<head>` section of the HTML code

Keyword Tags

The beauty of the keyword tag is its use in organizing the Web site. There is very little weight assigned to this tag by the Search Engines because of past abuses. However, it is a great way for a copywriter to focus the content around keywords. By using this tag it is clearer which keywords are the important ones. Just because a word is mentioned in the keyword tag, does not mean a Search Engine will assign it to the page. If a keyword phrase is used predominantly in the title, description, content, and appears in the keyword tag, it will rank somewhere within the search engine results pages (SERPs).

A good keyword tag for the Real Estate Marketing Web page would look like:

```
<meta name="Keywords" content=" real estate marketing, realtor marketing, realty marketing ">
```

A poor keyword tag would look like:

```
<meta name="Keywords" content="Super Bowl Ads, Real Estate Marketing, Nintendo Wii, SEO, Martha Stewart Recipes, Realtors">
```

Some of those words do not appear in the content of the page and trying to capitalize on popular traffic is not considered a Best Practices approach.

Alt Tag Rules

- Use the alt tag on appropriate pictures for keywords
- Great place to strategically place keywords and boost relevancy
- Use the alt tag on the site logo – it should contain the company name and possibly the slogan
- Use the alt tag on product pictures
- The alt tag is part of 508 compliance (accessible to people with disabilities)
- Search Engines cannot interpret a picture, the alt text, file name, and text around the picture are their guides
- Text should never be used in a picture, but if it has to be, then it should also be repeated in the alt tag

- The alt tag can usually be seen by hovering the cursor over a picture
- The alt tag should not be overused
- Do not use it on spacer or placeholder gifs
- Do not stuff it with keywords

H Tag Rules

- H tags are a built-in function of HTML that denote the text as a header. They are assigned a value (1 being most important) and repeated on the same page. Their most common use would be the title or top line of text that appears on the Web page.
- Use CSS to control how H1 tags are displayed by the browser
- Do not overuse H1 tags as an optimization technique
- The most important keywords should appear towards the beginning of the tag
- The H1 tag should not exactly match the HTML title
- The format looks like this: `<h1>Real Estate Marketing Information</h1>`

Other Tags

There are many other meta tags which have been added to Web pages in the past that do not serve a good purpose for optimization. If such tags are being used for other internal purposes it is ok, but they should not be used as optimization strategies.

Some of these tags are:

```
<meta NAME="meta tag author" CONTENT="">
<meta NAME="robots" CONTENT="index, follow">
<meta name="revisit" CONTENT="7 days">
<meta NAME="rating" CONTENT="General">
<meta NAME="resource-type" CONTENT="document">
<meta NAME="distribution" CONTENT="global">
<meta NAME="VW96.objecttype" CONTENT="">
<meta NAME="ABSTRACT" CONTENT="">
<meta NAME="DC.Title" CONTENT="">
```

Do not ever use comment tags for keywords - `<!-- keyword1, keyword2
/-->`

Content

Content is king. Content is king. Content is king. When optimizing a Web page for keywords, it is critical that the content on that page supports those keywords. HTML titles are the first place to optimize, but content is

the most important area of a Web page. Search Engines are in a battle for relevancy. Slick, low-text, brochure Web sites are usually no match for robust, informational Web sites. Search Engines love content-rich sites that are regularly updated with fresh information.

Good content also leads to natural linking. Web users that find pages or sites useful will often link to those sites. Such inbound links not only provide sources of direct traffic, but they are also favorably weighted in today's search algorithms.

There are many ways to develop good content for a Web site.

Keyword Frequency / Density

There are two main ways to write content for keywords.

The first is to write good subject-based content where the main keyword phrase is central to the subject matter. This is the less scientific method, but most natural way to develop content. If an article is being written on Real Estate Marketing, many valuable keywords would appear in that document just because of the subject. The phrase Real Estate Marketing would also appear a few times in the content because it naturally fits into the context.

Keyword frequency and density are two parts of that analysis. Keyword frequency refers to how often that keyword appears in the content and tags of the page. Keyword density refers to the percentage of the page that the keyword appears on.

Older optimization techniques involved repeating keywords hundreds of times on a Web page. Sometimes they were hidden with white on white text. Sometimes they were hidden with tiny text. And sometimes even more creative ways were used to hide them, like putting them under pictures or behind tables. These techniques are Spam. They do not work and they can be easily found by spiders.

The second way to write content for keywords is adding keywords to existing content. This process is most commonly utilized when keywords were an afterthought of the original content development for a Web site. Existing content is reviewed and keywords are strategically placed. This can be accomplished by adding a few keyword-optimized sentences to the page, as well as by adding keywords to existing sentences, bullet points, and/or bold or H1 tags.

Keyword frequency and density may play a more important role when plugging keywords into existing content. The content has to remain beneficial to the user and not unreadable for the sake of SEO. There are always ways to develop new content if the existing content can not support the keywords.

Content Rules

- The most important keywords should appear toward the top of the HTML version of the page
- Content must be unique
- Segments of content should not repeat across Web pages
- Geocentric content needs more than a few words changed from page to page
- Form-based content needs more than a few words changed from page to page
- 200 words is a minimum target for content on a Web page (it can be much higher)
- Keywords should be mentioned at least once (twice is better) in the content
- Keyword density should be between 4% - 12%
- Content should be well written
- Do not use automated programs to develop content with plugged-in keywords
- Do not hide text or use very small text on a Web page
- Build the content for the user first and Search Engine spider second
- Keep it fresh – the consistent addition of new content is a sign of a strong Web site

Which Pages Should Be Optimized?

All content can be optimized, but some content is better for Search Engines than others. "About Us" pages may be optimized for the company name, but the "Services" pages are better suited for more technical keywords. The most important keyword is usually associated with the Home page. Three different types of Web sites will be examined for page optimization:

1. THE BROCHURE WEB SITE (LESS THAN 10 PAGES)

- Every page counts
- Look carefully at the content of each page and see what keywords are already in the text

- Optimize based on those keywords
- If important keywords are not found, new Web pages may need to be added
- Consider editorials, newsletters, white papers, press releases, and other informative articles for very competitive keywords

2. THE INFORMATIONAL WEB SITE (LESS THAN 5,000 PAGES)

- Top level pages
- Article pages
- CMS (Content Management Systems) fields for meta tags
- Template page optimization
- Consider editorials, newsletters, white papers, press releases, and other informative articles for very competitive keywords

3. THE ECOMMERCE WEB SITE (UNLIMITED NUMBER OF PAGES)

- Top level pages
- Category pages
- Product pages
- Content must be unique
- Do not utilize ready-made databases of content to populate a Web site
- Add custom comments
- Rewrite manufacturer's descriptions
- Consider editorials, newsletters, white papers, press releases, and other informative articles for more competitive keywords

Matching Keywords to Pages

When matching keywords to pages, there are two important factors: Does or can this page have content to support the keyword, and if a searcher lands on this page, would they be satisfied with the information provided? Assigning the keyword "Introductory Realtor Classes" to the Real Estate Marketing page would not be a good idea. Although there is a correlation between the two topics, there is no information on that page that talks about becoming a realtor. If a searcher landed on the page, they may not be happy because they were looking for information on becoming a realtor, not how realtors market themselves.

A quick way to assign keywords to pages would be to print out the text from the pages. Scan them for meaningful keyword phrases and highlight them. Based on repetition and perceived value, determine which keywords stand out. Group keywords into themes, and then include them in the text together.

Trying to squeeze keywords into pages where they do not belong is not a good practice. It is better to build out new content that is focused around the desired keywords

Internal Linking Strategies

Google brought link value to the forefront of Search Engine Optimization. Internal linking can also be very valuable. Search Engine spiders may start crawling from any page in the Web site they find. It is important for them to easily find links to all of the content within the site.

Text based links hold high value in search algorithms. This text is also called anchor text. It is the difference between a link looking like: <http://www.remax.com> vs. [Real Estate Marketing](#). The second link is descriptive of the link. Search Engines correlate the text in the link to the Web page it is linking to.

These links should be used naturally in the text. If it is valuable for the site user to find more information about the subject matter, then include a link to it. Links to authoritative Web sites like Wikipedia are also valuable.

Internal links and anchor text should not be abused. More than one or two links per paragraph may be considered spam. Using text-based navigation is better than using graphic buttons for linking pages of the site internally.

Internal Linking Strategy Rules

- When a valuable keyword phrase appears in the text of a page, but a better page of content about that keyword exists on the site, the individual phrase should link to the more content-laden page
- Text Navigation
- Bread Crumb Trails
- Table-of-Contents Style Sitemaps
- Nested Sitemaps
- Content Interlinking outside of the main Navigation or Sitemap

- Newsletter linking
- Blog Linking
- Clean Links, avoiding duplicate content because of URL tracking

Optimized HTML Code

CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) has revolutionized the way Web site coding can be accomplished. Well built CSS and well planned Web sites can have extremely clean code. There are debates about the value of reducing code bloat and HTML validation as it relates to organic SEO. It only makes sense that the better built and cleaner the code is, the less digging spiders have to do to find what they are looking for.

Clean code means:

- Minimal repetition of formatting aspects like font color, font size, and divs
- Minimal nesting of tables
- Minimal use of JavaScript for navigation
- Minimal use of comments
- No Frames

Some of the benefits of well-optimized code:

- Faster page load times
- Easy visual manipulation of the pages through CSS for different browsers (including mobile)
- Easier to visually review the HTML code in text format
- Easier for spiders to crawl and find deep content

Robots.txt and the Robots Meta Tag

Robots.txt is the first file a Search Engine Spider looks for when crawling a Web site. It provides a roadmap of what not to index. If the file does not exist or is setup improperly, it could hinder effective crawling.

It was recommended earlier not to use the Robots meta tag. It is ok to use it, but only for the purposes of not indexing the page or directing a spider not to follow any links. This can be accomplished with `<meta NAME="robots" CONTENT="noindex, nofollow">` and a few variations

Reasons for using Robots.txt and the Robots meta tag:

- It is better to have a blank file than no file at all

- Ability to use the crawl-delay
- Ability to block access to non-public areas of the Web site
- Ability to prevent duplicate content
- Ability to prevent types of files (like images) from being indexed
- Ability to block troublesome spiders

Submission Tactics

Search Engine submissions have evolved considerably over the years. In the early days of search, there were programs that would submit every page of a Web site to each Search Engine. Today, Search Engines crawl the Web so well that it is not always necessary to submit a Web site or be concerned when new content is added.

In November of 2006, the major Search Engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Ask) agreed to the Sitemap protocol (sitemaps.org). This is a new program where Web pages are not just submitted to Search Engines, they are registered with Search Engines. Through the registration process, the Search Engines have a direct contact with the Webmaster or Marketer if they need to reach them. Also through this registration, the Webmaster or Marketer gets access to data directly from the Search Engines that was not previously available. This move further proves the acceptance of Search Engine Optimization by the Search Engines and their desire for collaboration on making their databases better.

Below are links to the programs from Google, Yahoo & MSN:

Google Webmaster Tools (Formerly Google Sitemaps)

<http://www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps/>

Yahoo Site Explorer

<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/>

Submit to MSN

<http://beta.search.msn.com/docs/submit.aspx>

Yahoo Site Explorer

<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/>

To use this service, a Web site must be verified by adding and uploading a custom-named blank file provided by Yahoo. The file gives you access to:

- Pages indexed – by domain or subdomain
- Inlinks – by page or domain

- Subdomains

Submit to MSN

<http://beta.search.msn.com/docs/submit.aspx>

MSN is still working on their Sitemap product as of the creation of this document. The regular submit option may be used. Only the domain has to be submitted and should only be submitted if there are no pages from the domain within their index.

Local Search adds a new channel for submissions. These submissions are also more of a registration with the local engine because more information is provided than just the URL.

Submit to Google Local Business Center

https://www.google.com/local/add/login?hl=en_US

Submit to Yahoo Local Business

<http://listings.local.yahoo.com>

Submit to Live Local (MSN)

<http://webapp.localeze.com/bizreg/add.aspx>

Search Engine Optimization Tools

There are many SEO tools available to Webmasters and Online Marketers. Any off-the-shelf solutions that analyze Web pages or automatically provide recommendations are going to do the same thing for every user; such products have their benefits but they're not customizable. More resourceful tools can quickly provide raw data that is better for Search Marketers armed with good SEO knowledge.

FREE TOOLS:

- The Firefox Browser – Fast access to Web page info (meta tags)
- Firefox Web Developer Toolbar – <http://chrispederick.com/work>
 - Disable JavaScript
 - View the Web page as a spider would
 - Display response headers, alt tags, comments, meta tags, and more
- SearchStatus for Firefox – <http://quirk.biz/searchstatus>
 - Display backlink info for Google, Yahoo and MSN
 - Display indexing info for Google, Yahoo and MSN
 - Show Keyword Density
 - Highlight nofollow links

- GSiteCrawler - <http://gsitecrawler.com/>
 - Crawl most (even dynamic) Web sites
 - Generate XML Sitemaps to the Sitemap.org protocol
 - Generate spreadsheets listing all meta tags
- SEO Books' Tools - <http://tools.seobook.com/>
 - Keyword density analyzer
 - Link analysis tools
 - Page comparison tool

Sample Templates

Many Web designers use a template once the design is complete to build out the rest of the pages. It is a great practice to have all of the optimization elements present in the template to make optimization easier as the new pages are built. It is important to remember however, that the same title, description and keywords should not just be repeated on every page of the Web site.

Dynamic Web sites use templates to generate pages. It is possible for a Web site with thousands or hundreds of thousands of pages to be generated from just a few main templates. In these cases, a minor tweak or two can have a profound change on an entire site. It is always nice when the database that is used for the Web site has the fields required for optimizing the templates: title, description, keywords, short description, long description, abstract and heading.

The next page is an example of a very optimized (but plain) Web page. It can provide the structure needed when generating templates for a Web site.

```
<!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.1//EN"
"http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml11/DTD/xhtml11.dtd">
<html xmlns="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml" xml:lang="en">
<head>
<title>Real Estate Marketing</title>
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=ISO-8859-1">
<meta name="Keywords" content="real estate marketing, realtor marketing, realty
marketing">
<meta name="Description" content="Remax presents their Real Estate Marketing
Informational Web site. It covers a wide array of online marketing subject matter like
organic search optimization, keyword research, and ppc advertising.">
</head>
<body>

<h1>Real Estate Marketing Information</h1>
<p> The section is actually about 200 words that talks about Real Estate Marketing.
The main phrase, real estate marketing, is used twice in the body text. Other
phrases like realty and realtor are mentioned as well. Click here for information on
the other <a href="http://www.remax.com/realestateseminars">Real Estate
Marketing Seminars</a>

</body>
</html>
```

Measuring Results

Measuring results may be one of the most difficult aspects of natural search engine optimization. There are so many factors that affect the results pages, it is difficult to accurately test different techniques. The indexing cycles and unknown changes in Search algorithms make it difficult to know how long it will take to gauge results. Optimization efforts could be felt within a few days or could take up to six months.

There are several ways to measure results:

- Amount of pages indexed
- Amount of back links
- Amount of keywords in referrers
- Traffic from natural search
- Keyword ranking
- Amount of keywords ranking

Log Analyzers play a huge part in data collection and interpretation. Google Analytics is an amazing product that is available free of charge. It is kept up-to-date and provides Web site performance insight that mirrors packages like Webtrends, Hitbox, and Nettracker.

At a minimum, three months of log data should be archived and used for benchmarking. Review Search Engine reports for the amount of keywords in referrers and traffic from natural search. The amount of pages indexed and the amount of back links are available either by using the SearchStatus tool mentioned earlier, or by visiting each engine and using search commands like `site:domain.com` and `link:domain.com`.

Keyword ranking was an obsession of companies involved in the early days of SEO. It is still a valuable thing to know, however the personalization of Search that is likely to continue as engines strive to deliver the most relevant results will make keyword ranking reporting virtually impossible.

To explain further, the next generation of search algorithm changes will take into account previous search patterns, search history, location, search behavior, and other factors that will customize each searcher's experience. The days of knowing or caring if the Web site is number 1 for a certain keyword may be drawing to a close. It is more important to

have a Web site that is the best it can be, than to just focus on ranking number one for a keyword.

That being said, there are still marketers who have to report on positions for management. The Search Engines do not want automated queries of their engines. It wastes their bandwidth and displays ads where human eyes will never see them.

Programs used to measure keyword ranking should use the APIs provided by the Search Engines. These allow the programs to interface directly with the Search Engine Indexes for position checking. Aside from some of the tools mentioned above, Webposition and AgentWebRanking are popular tools for rank checking. They should be run infrequently.

Assuming the benchmarking was completed and all of the initial site optimization changes are done, a regular schedule should be developed for running updated reports. A good schedule would be at 14 days and then monthly. Even if there are significant drops, do not panic. It could take time depending on the amount of optimization and the size of the Web site.

Optimizing a Web site is not a one-time effort. It is an ongoing commitment of adding new content and following the rules of the Search Engines. Tweaks can always be made to any web page as long as enough time is allowed to reap the rewards of previous optimization. Page optimization is an art and a science. The accepted, best-practices techniques are known and should be followed, but the individual implementations are what separate strongly performing optimized sites from the rest.

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