

SEO Demystified

Use Search Engine Optimization to increase your website visibility and reach more prospects

by Vann Baker

What is SEO?

SEO is really the art and science of building a website that can easily be found, and doing as much as possible to be relevant so search engines will want to list your website first.

While every website owner wants their website to appear at the top of search results, the reality is that many websites have faulty website design which makes them practically invisible, and website owners often focus on only one or two SEO strategies, or simply neglect their website content—all of which will result in less than desirable search results.

How do basic search engines work?

Search engines use “bots” which are automated programming scripts to first visit websites and learn what a website is about and then catalog what it finds.

Later, when someone uses the search engine, the search engine can find websites or pages quickly that match the search phrase or keyword.

Once the search engine goes to your website, the bot “looks” at the website source code for all the website’s page titles, keywords and page description, going through the website link by link, until it finds all your pages. To speed up searching and cataloging,

the search engine stores each website’s “Meta” data, which are also called

What Are The Top Search Engines?

According to Experian’s Hitwise statistics (www.hitwise.com), for the four weeks ending on December 11, 2010, the top five search engines by search volume are:

| | |
|------------------|--------|
| Google | 70.55% |
| Yahoo | 15.04% |
| Bing | 9.83% |
| Ask | 2.53% |
| AOL | 1.43% |

meta tags, and relies on the meta data to provide a summary or snapshot of all the websites pages.

When someone searches using a phrase or keyword, the search engine will try to find website matches within the search engine’s database, then determine which website pages should appear in the search results and finally, rank the results.

How does Google work?

Google, on the other hand, visits and both reads and analyzes your website. Google looks at each page’s actual page text, the links to and from the website, and uses a content

relevancy scoring algorithm to determine what website results are good matches for the word or phrases being searched by internet users.

What is “Organic” SEO?

Organic Search Engine Optimization is making sure a website has exactly what Google, Bing and Yahoo are looking for in a website, so that a website can be found “naturally” or organically.

Wikipedia.org, the online encyclopedia, will often be in the first two or three search results for almost any given topic. Wikipedia is a vast website, with hundreds of thousands of articles, and dozens of inbound and outbound links for almost every article.

From an organic SEO perspective, Wikipedia is doing all the right things, and they are rewarded with very high search result placement.

Why are some websites “invisible” to search engines?

Imagine a car race track where all the cars are lined up, with engines revving and then the starting flag is waved.

The cars roar off and around the track, except for a few cars that only lurch forward slowly and fall far behind.

From a distance the cars look fine,

but on close inspection flat tires are preventing the cars from keeping up with the other racers.

Recently, I worked on a website which looked great, but the website was totally invisible to the search engines. The entire website was Flash-based, so that all the website content, while visible to the visitor and nicely animated, was actual invisible to the search engines.

Because the website had no meta data *or actual content* for Google, Bing and Yahoo to see and analyze, the website was practically invisible.

Why are search engine results so different?

For any given word or phrase, using Google, Bing and Yahoo—the top three search engines—will generally yield different search results.

Each search engine is using a different set of rules for how they rank results. In some cases a website may be more visible to one search engine, but less visible on other search engines.

The word order of the keywords or whether the search phrase is singular or plural, all make a difference in the search results.

What is PPC (Pay Per Click)?

For websites that can't easily be found, or where marketers want specific phrases associated with a website or where a company offers a wide range of products, Pay Per Click ad campaigns can be effective, as PPC ads appear at the top and right-hand side of Google, Bing and Yahoo.

Ten strategies for improving your SEO

Website architecture is playing a greater role when creating a website that is search engine optimized, especially in larger websites where there are dozens, hundreds or thousands of pages of content. If your website is more than a few years old, or has been an internal project that has not been worked on by someone with SEO experience, it may be time for a change.

There is no one single formula or strategy you can use for getting to top rankings in all search engine. However, by using as many of the following SEO practices and good strategies, will greatly increase your organic search engine rankings.

1 - Make sure your website is searchable

If the search engines can't find all your website pages, your SEO will suffer. Avoid the use of frames, Flash, and link coding within a website which may hinder search engines from seeing and evaluating your website content.

2 - Use Search Engine Friendly (SEF) URLs

Make sure your website page URLs are **not** overly complex like:
“www.yourwebsite.com/article_234234-23359-23xie2af.html” or
“www.yourwebsite.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&itemid=5”

Instead, use more natural URLs like:

“www.yourwebsite.com/articles/about_our_new_products.html”

3 - Offer quality content

Consider offering tips, articles, white papers and other information that would be useful to prospective customers. Google typically ranks higher websites that go the extra mile in offering informational or “how-to” articles.

4 - Add new content to your website regularly

Adding one new article or website page every other week to your website is a good goal. While it may seem like a lot of extra work, additional website content is actually an investment in your SEO effort. If your website is getting lower search results on some words than others, adding pages that focus on one or two keyword phrases is a way to improve your rankings.

5 - Link to relevant websites

Google looks at the websites your website is linked to, and at what websites are linked back to your website, and uses this information as part of their ranking algorithm. Lack of links to and from your website sends a message

Ten strategies for improving your SEO (continued)

to Google that your website is not very important. Outbound website links need to go to websites that are relevant, that is, they should be related to what your website is about in some way. Quality inbound links are also important.

6 - Analyze your website

Google, Bing and Yahoo all provide free “webmaster” tools which allow you to submit your website easily and help you to understand how exactly their search engine “sees” your website. Google’s Webmaster Tools offers a vast resource of great SEO information and tips and will quickly show you what keywords they are associating with your website.

Review your website quarterly at the very least, and make sure all your submitted pages are being listed.

7 - Create a sitemap.xml file

Provide an updated **sitemap.xml** file in your website’s public directory and make sure the search engines you submit your website to are using it. This file tells the search engine all the page URLs associated with your website and it’s important that this is updated as you add more content to your website.

8 - Use Google Analytics

Google Analytics will give you insight into how to improve your website by showing you what is being under-utilized and over-utilized. You can also use this tool to not only track the number of visitors, but to also see where visitors come from, what paths they take through your website, how long visitors stay on each page and there is an “overlay” tool you can use to identify website design flaws.

9 - Track traffic conversion

Be sure to place “conversion code” and use Google Analytics to track visitors who complete forms or go to specific pages in your website, or to track visitors who come to your website as the result of a marketing campaign and then “convert” to a lead, prospect or a customer. By analyzing your website traffic you can work on boosting conversion by making content adjustments to your website.

10 - Avoid “quick fixes”

There are many companies who advertise guaranteed search engine placement using their “special software” or “proprietary techniques.” Be careful as companies which use manipulative techniques or “tricks” to artificially enhance your website’s natural SEO may lead to Google actually penalizing your website with lower rankings.

While Pay Per Click can be a great marketing tool, many companies today are looking for their website to rise to the top of search engine results naturally, and don’t want to pay the click-through costs.

The challenge is that since website owners cannot control what an internet user types into a search engine, nor control how a search engine behaves, SEO can only go so far and PPC can be a great tool for marketing in targeted geographic areas or for getting your website more visibility than your organic rankings will allow.

About Vann Baker

Vann Baker has a BFA degree from Auburn University where he studied graphic design and marketing. Since moving to Atlanta in 1984, Vann has helped hundreds of companies to create dynamic marketing materials.

In 1995, Vann began creating corporate websites and learning how search engines work—and how to create websites that can be more easily “found” by search engines.

Today, Vann helps clients with both print and website marketing, including SEO and ecommerce.

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