

From Secondary to Necessary

Overhauling
Your

SEO

By
Patrick Murray
and
June Pinyo



Associations and businesses alike can no longer disregard search engine optimization (SEO) as merely a buzzword. Much like websites were once considered to be supplementary but are now a key requirement for businesses, SEO is a necessary practice to yield success on the web. Nearly all of the largest and most influential businesses now rely on agencies or internal SEO teams to compete for top search rankings.

The marketing ROI of effective SEO cannot be overstated: Search Engine Journal reports that SEO-generated leads have a 14.6 percent conversion rate while outbound leads, such as direct mail or print advertising, have a mere 1.7 percent conversion rate. Translation: securing organic traffic from search engines (that is, getting people to your site without the use of paid ads) pays off. What's more, Search Engine Watch says 90 percent of users will click on one of the first three Google search results. Translation: get as high up on that results page as you can and you will drive more customers to your website and increase your conversions.

SEO is a marketing discipline that acknowledges and harnesses the great power that drives most problem-solving and purchasing decisions in the modern age: The Google Search. Biznology reports that 89 percent of customers begin their buying process with a search engine. If your site is not achieving high rankings on the right search engine results pages (SERP), serious dollars are being left on the table.

The barriers to better search engine results are low. An SEO overhaul, regardless of scale, costs relatively little and yields a high ROI. Staff time for keyword research, implementation and content development account for most of the costs.

As a well-established professional association, your homepage probably already ranks well for at least some of the search terms that are relevant to your business. It's likely that your website is receiving some benefits from search engines because of your position within your field. By implementing even a modest SEO improvement plan, you can vastly increase the likelihood that

your target audiences will discover the products and services that meet their needs. SEO is very much a game, judged and refereed by Google's algorithm. Those who most effectively navigate the rules are rewarded with a higher ranking. The challenge is that Google's rules, the exact factors and the weight of each within the algorithm are a constantly-changing secret closely guarded by Google.

What we do know, however, is that relevant, effective and specific content is your best weapon. In a 2014 survey by Inside Enterprise SEO, marketers, sales and business professionals stated that the most effective SEO tactic was the creation of quality content. Even Google itself has signaled that it favors relevant, high-quality content.

When you are creating web content, think about what makes your organization (and its products and services) unique, valuable and engaging. Make your website stand out from others in the field by relying on those attributes rather than tricks aimed at deceiving the system.

The Pillars of SEO

The general agreement among SEO experts is that there are three primary factors that will affect your search engine ranking: relevance, technology and authority.

Relevance is based on the actual content found on your website and web pages. Search engines rely on the keywords within your content to generate results on the SERP for user queries. Keywords are the building blocks of search. Keyword research to identify the primary words and phrases for your



Diagnose Your Technical SEO

Symptoms of a website with poor technical SEO:

- Ugly URLs: Instead of keywords, do your webpage URLs include question marks and illegible numbers like “.dhtml?id=38”?
- Scary Sitemaps: Are your navigation and sitemap easy to understand by the end-user? Is any of your content more than a couple clicks away from the homepage?
- Missing or Ineffective HTML Tagging: Are any of your pages missing a unique <title> tag in the code? Do your images have appropriate metadata associated with them? Are your headlines missing the <h1> attribute?
- Fearful Flash: Are Flash or Java animations keeping your useful content hidden from search engines?

If you tested positive for any of these symptoms, technical factors may be harming your search engine rankings. Talk to your webmaster or IT team about taking measures to address your technical SEO.

Beware the Black Hat

There is a dark side of SEO practiced by less scrupulous elements on the Internet. Practitioners of Black Hat SEO try to outsmart the policies set by search engines, breaking established rules in an attempt to boost search engine traffic. These search engine villains might buy links, post spam comments on high-traffic content, or attempt outdated approaches like keyword stuffing or invisible text. Black Hat SEO can get you penalized or even banned from Google—consequences not worth any potential short-term gains. If you are outsourcing your SEO, do your research and make sure you avoid a Black Hat firm.



Is Your Website Mobile-Friendly?

Websites that aren't properly optimized for smartphones get penalized by Google and impact search results for mobile device users. Use this tool to find out if your website is losing out on valuable mobile search traffic: www.google.com/webmasters/tools/mobile-friendly.

What About Bing?

One in five organic searches are performed on Bing. Google owns 60 to 75 percent of the search engine market share. A primary difference is that Bing emphasizes strong brands and older websites with more official domain names. It tends to emphasize social media sharing more backlinks slightly less than Google.


content is a natural starting point for most SEO efforts. It helps ensure you are thinking and talking like your best customers.

Once you have determined a list of keywords for your SEO strategy, it is time to edit or rewrite your website's content to emphasize the appropriate keywords and their synonyms throughout each page. With effective use of relevant keywords for your brand and audience, you will see an increase in traffic from the audiences that are most likely to become your customers.

The **technology** pillar of SEO is largely about reducing any possible friction that your website might have with Google that may result from the infrastructure and code of your site. Ensure that your website features clean HTML and a clear sitemap or link structure from a user perspective. This also includes the structure of your URLs and HTML elements such as <title> and <h1> tags. Improving your performance in this pillar may require the assistance of a webmaster or IT department.

Authority is based on the quantity and quality of links directly to your content from other websites. As the authoritative voice that provides essential resources and services to your field, it is likely that your website is already the beneficiary of a variety of high-quality links. Augmenting your performance in this pillar may simply involve encouraging members or industry partners to prominently link to your website; for example, in a hyperlinked badging campaign.

The High Cost of No SEO

Although not an exact science and not the easiest ROI to calculate, SEO should be a priority for your marketing team. A poorly optimized website is costly to run and will not help you reach new customers. If you are not ranking on the first page for Google searches, your potential customers will not find your website. Before you spend another penny on a mailing list or print ad, consider an investment in SEO and the work your website could be doing for you to secure those leads of people who are already looking for what you have to offer. 

Patrick Murray is senior marketing & communications specialist at the American Hospital Association in Chicago. He can be reached at patlmurray@gmail.com. **June Pinyo** is content strategist for the Association Management Center in Chicago. She can be reached at june.pinyo@gmail.com.

SEO Start-Up Tools

Learn the Basics

- Google Webmasters (www.google.com/webmasters)
- MOZ Resources (<https://moz.com/learn/seo>)
- HubSpot SEO Blog (<http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/topic/seo>)

Research Keywords

- Google Keyword Planner (<https://adwords.google.com/KeywordPlanner>)
- Buzzsumo (<http://buzzsumo.com>)
- How to Do Keyword Research for SEO: A Beginner's Guide (<http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/how-to-do-keyword-research-ht>)

