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Search Engine and Web Promotion - Quickstart

Plexus Media Ltd - 'How to..' documents

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'Build it and they will come'

Many people new to the internet who make a web site imagine that if they build it, then customers will come immediately and they will be able to abandon more traditional marketing processes such as leaflets and press advertising. This is very seldom the case, and we advise strongly against it.

A successful web site is a long-term project and should be combined with other marketing, not replace it. If you are in a busy market sector, such as accommodation, then we suggest that you should regard your web site as just one aspect of your marketing, and one which may take a long time to become truly effective. You cannot assume that it will succeed immediately and that you can rely on it to bring all of your business.

Your site - one amongst many

The web is not like the Yellow Pages, where your business advertisement can have the same immediate prominence as your competitors. Search engine prominence is a more organic thing - think of the web as a forest of close-growing trees. Your site is a new tree seedling, small and insignificant below the dark canopy of taller trees (your competitors sites) that have been growing for years. Yours is hidden by these, and your customers can't see it. You have to make your 'seedling' site taller so that it stands out and is easier to see.

How Search Engines rank sites

When someone types words or phrases into a search engine such as Google, the resulting list shows web sites which 'match' these words in order of prominence. How high a site comes in this listing depends on several things . . .

- 1) How old the site is
- 2) How closely the text on the site matches the words/phrases
- 3) How closely the page titles on the site match the words/phrases
- 4) How many other sites link to it
- 5) How regularly the site is updated

Sometimes your site may be competing with thousands of others dealing with similar competitive products or services. Your potential customers have to find your site amongst many others before this can be translated into business for you.

One hurdle that you have to overcome is that search engines usually give higher prominence to web sites which have been around a long time. Many of your competitors sites will be older than yours, so may already be well ranked in search engines because of this. To surmount this, your site must be constructed and promoted in a way which moves you quickly up the rankings. This can take some time and considerable effort.

Search Engines today are extremely powerful. Google, for instance, which currently accounts for 60-70% of all internet searches done, 'indexes' every single word on your site, and keeps a record of this. When someone types a phrase into Google, it hunts through the records it holds and matches the phrase against the text on sites around the world. It then shows a list of sites which use this phrase, with prominence based on phrase-matching balanced against the longevity of the site and its popularity.

Google 'calculates' how popular a site is, and how this should affect its prominence in search results, by assessing how many other sites have links pointed to it. It also assesses how important those sites are. So, if there is a link pointing to your site from the BBC or Microsoft site, then Google will consider it very important, and move it higher up the search results page even if the text on the page is a poorer match than other sites lower down the listing.

What YOU have to do to help your site succeed

When we prepare a web site for you we ensure that it is as 'indexable' by search engines as possible, and that the graphics, navigation and layout are also optimised to provide an enjoyable and effective information resource for your clients. The site admin tools we provide will allow you to optimise your page text and titles to target your business sector through search engines, and also to add and edit links pointing to other sites to encourage effective reciprocal linking.

Because we are web designers and developers, rather than copywriters or marketing specialists, we cannot provide you with tailored text or page titles for your site. We simply don't have the intimate knowledge of your business that **you** have, and therefore cannot anticipate the sort of keywords or phrases your potential customers may use in search engines. **You** are the one best placed to assess your clients needs and be able to prepare this material accurately and effectively.

How to get started

We suggest that you start by looking closely at your competitors web sites. What phrases have they used? Have they failed to include a key phrase that you consider important to your customers. If so, add it to your site.

If you find that one of your competitors achieves high prominence in search listings for a given phrase, look at their site, examine it, and learn how they have achieved this. Try to create phrases which effectively mean the same, but don't merely copy them. If you can use unusual terms or descriptions specific to your product, then this will help you to stand out from your competitors.

The importance of Links

A good selection of reciprocal links is also very important in ensuring that your site is successful. If you can get other complementary sites (preferably prominent and busy ones) to link to yours, then this is extremely valuable. Because they have come from a complementary site in a related business sector, visitors using these links to get to your site are already likely to be interested in the type of product or service that you offer. This can be much more productive than having many visitors coming 'cold' to you from a search engine, having used a search term which matches text on your site, but not your services. They will simply click away to the next site.

How to get reciprocal links to your site

This is simply a case of finding a popular, complementary (rather than competing) site, looking for an email contact address on it, and sending an email asking if they would be kind enough to add a link pointing to your site in exchange for one pointing to theirs from your site.

Many sites operate a policy of restricting 'external' links to a maximum of 15-20 so as not to distract their visitors from their own products or services. The site administrator may decide that they already have enough external links on their site and will refuse to add one pointing to your site. If this happens, look for alternative sites and contact them as well.

We recommend that you look for sites that your potential clients will be interested in and will find useful. Especially valuable are ones which attract regular visits as the visitor will be repeatedly exposed to your link. For instance, if you provide accommodation, look for sites which publicise activity events or holidays in your area. If you provide walking holidays, look for sites which provide information on your geographical area or on accommodation or local entertainment.

Optimising Your Page Copy

The copy on your page is very important in order to achieve better search engine prominence. In fact, it is very nearly as important as your page titles. By 'copy' we mean the actual text that a visitor to your site will read.

What are your customers searching for? Optimise your page text for the wrong keywords and all your efforts will be wasted. Don't guess -- **know** what they are searching for.

Just as a visitor to your site will read the copy on your page to see what you have to offer, the search engines do too. And search engines are looking for Keyword phrases, of course.

Page text tips:

- For best results we recommend that each page you submit has at least 200 words of copy on it. There are some cases where this much text can be difficult to put on a page, but the search engines really like it so you should do your best to increase the amount of copy where you can.
- This text should include your most important keyword phrases, but should remain logical & readable.
- Be sure to use those phrases that you have used in your other tags (i.e. metas, alt, headings, title, description, etc.) during the optimisation process.
- Add additional copy filled pages to your site. For example, how-to articles, tips or tutorials. These types of content pages not only help you in the search engines, but many other sites will link to them too.
- Optimising your page copy is one of the most important things you can do to improve your listings in the search engines. So, make sure you have plenty of it!

Optimising Your Title Tags

Without question the **title tag** of your page is the single most important factor to consider when optimising your web page for the search engines. This is because most engines and directories place a high level of importance on keywords that are found in your title tag. The title tag is also what the search engines usually use for the title of your listing in the search results.

Is every one of your title tags optimised? For best results in the engines they all must be!

What it looks like: Here's the HTML title tag of a web page:

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<TITLE>Your Title Tag - learn to optimise your title tag</TITLE>
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Tag limits:

We recommend that your title tag be between 50-80 characters long - including spaces! The length that the different search engines accept varies, but as long as you keep within this limit you should be OK.

Tag tips:

- We recommend that you include 1-2 of your most important keyword phrases in the title tag, BUT be careful not to just list keywords. If you just list keywords you risk being viewed as spamming the search engines which can ultimately lead to you being blacklisted by them. Your title tag should include your keyword phrases while remaining as close to a readable sentence as possible to avoid any problems.
- Make your title enticing! Don't forget that even if you get that #1 listing in the search engines your listing still needs to say something that makes the surfer want to click through and visit your site.
- Since the length of your title tag could be a little long for some engines we suggest placing the keywords at the beginning of the tag when possible so that you do not risk having them cut off.
- Each page of your site should have it's own title tag with it's own keywords that relate to the page that it appears on.

Optimising Your 'Meta' Tags

Meta tags were originally created to help search engines find out important information about your page that they might have had difficulty determining otherwise. For example, related keywords or a description of the page itself.

Many people incorrectly believe that good meta tags are all that is needed to achieve good listings in the search engines. This is not correct. While meta tags are usually part of a well optimised page they are not the be all and end all of optimising your pages. In the early days of the web people were able to get great listings from optimising just their meta tags, but the increasing competition for good search engine listings eventually led to many people spamming the search engines with keyword stuffed meta tags. The result is that the engines have changed what they look at when they rank a web page.

The search engines now usually look at a combination of all the best search engine tips to determine your listings, not just your meta tags - some don't even look at them at all (i.e. Google). What this means is that your page should have a combination of all of the search engine optimisation tips listed here implemented on your page - not just meta tags.

That being said, there are two meta tags that can sometimes help your search engine listings - meta keywords & meta description.

Tag limits:

- We recommend that your Meta Keywords not exceed 1024 characters including spaces.
- We recommend that your Meta Description tag not exceed 250 characters including spaces.

Meta 'description' tips:

- Make sure you accurately describe the content of your page while trying to entice visitors to click on your listing.

- Include 3-4 of your most important keyword phrases. Especially those used in your title tag and page copy.
- Try to have your most important keywords appear at the beginning of your description. This often brings better results, and will help avoid having any search engine cut off your keywords if they limit the length of your description.

Meta 'keywords' tips:

- Aside from what we mention in the other tips below you should only use those keyword phrases that you also used in the copy of your page, title tag, meta description, and other tags. Any keywords phrases that you use that do not appear in your other tags or page copy are likely to not have enough prominence to help your listings for that phrase.
- Don't forget plurals. For example, a travel site might have both "highland holiday" and "highland holidays" in their keyword meta tag to make sure they show up in both searches.
- If you know of a common misspelling of a popular keyword that could be used to find your site you should enter it in your keywords meta tag. For example, a travel site might use "ulapool" in their keyword meta since it is a common misspelling for "ullapool".
- Watch out for repeats! You want to include your most important phrases, but when doing so it can be difficult not to repeat one word many times. For example, "highland holiday" and "highland holidays" are two different phrases, but the word "highland" appears twice. This is alright to do in order to make sure you get the phrases you need in there, but be careful not to repeat any one word excessively. There is no actual limit, but we recommend that no one word be repeated in the keyword meta more than 5 times.
- If your site has content of interest to a specific geographic location be sure to include the actual location in your keyword meta.

Optimising for the Correct Keywords

What are your customers searching for?

Optimise for the wrong keywords and all your efforts will be wasted. Don't guess -- know what your customers are searching for.

To get listed correctly in search engines each page of your site that you want listed must be optimised to the best of your ability. Since the keywords that you decide to target will be used throughout the optimisation process choosing the right keywords is essential. If you choose the wrong keywords you will not be found in the search engines. If you are not found in the search engines how will anyone find your site?

Since the keywords you choose to optimise your pages with are so important we have put together some tips to help you make sure that you make the right choices. You should use these tips when selecting keywords for each page that you plan to submit to search engines.

1) Think "specific keyword phrases" not "keywords". Why? Due to the extreme amount of competition for general terms in the search engines, if your keyword phrases are too general it

is very unlikely you will rank well in the search engines. You stand a far better chance of ranking well for specific phrases where there is less competition. The resulting traffic, since it is more highly targeted, should also be much higher quality too.

Here's an example for a site selling shoes:

Much Too General

1. shoes
2. men's shoes
3. women's shoes

Much Better!

1. imported italian shoes
2. men's leather deck shoes
3. women's aerobic trainers

2) Try to think like your target audience. What would they search for when looking for the page you are optimising? It is very easy to fall into the trap of coming up with a short list of what YOU would search for, but what about everyone else? They will not necessarily use the same keywords as you. You should try to come up with as many keyword phrases as you can think of that relate to the page you are optimising. Try asking a few friends and family what they would search for when searching for a site like yours.

3) Check out your competition for ideas. Do a search using keywords that you already know you want to target and click through on the top sites that come up. Once on the site view the source HTML code and look at the keywords they have in their meta tags - this should give you many more ideas. Make sure to only use keywords that relate to YOUR site or page. To view the HTML code simply click the 'View' at the top of your web browser then select 'Source', or 'Page Source'.

4) You should develop a list of keyword phrases, following the tips on this page, for each page that you optimise for the search engines.

Optimising Your Images "alt" Attribute

The images on your page can help your listings too. Each image on your page can include a keyword phrase or two as an 'alt' tag that relates to the image. An 'alt' tag is the the name label that pops up when your cursor hovers over an image. This text also shows up to help those that may have their images turned off when visiting your site. This does not work for all engines, but it certainly does not hurt, so we recommend you give it a try where you can.

Tag limits: We do not recommend using more than a brief sentence to describe an image.

Tag tips:

- Be sure to use the keyword phrases that you also used in the copy of your page, title

tag, meta description, and other tags.

- Don't try to squeeze a large number of keywords into the "alt" attribute. We recommend using no more than 2-3 per image.
- Describe the image - do not just list keywords.
- The "alt" attribute is also a good place for misspellings and plural keyword phrases that you may not have used elsewhere.

What you should NOT do. . . (spamming the search engines)

There are several things, considered "spamming", that you can do to try to 'cheat' the search engines and get your page listed higher on their results page. You should **never** try to trick a search engine in any way, as you risk being blacklisted by them. Once blacklisted it can be very difficult to get listed again. Since a lot of your traffic can come from search engines the risk far outweighs the benefits in the long run.

Below is a list of the more common things we recommend that you never do when trying to achieve better listings?

Are you spamming the search engines?

It's easy to spam an engine by accident -- especially since the rules are constantly changing.

Do not:

- Do anything to trick the search engines into listing your site better. If what you are doing is not listed as one of our search engine tips, the search engines could probably view it as spam and penalise you.
- Use the same colour text on your page as the page's background colour. This has often been used to stuff a web page full of 'invisible' keywords. Search engines are now able to detect this and many will view it as spam.
- Use multiple instances of the same tag. For example, using more than one title tag. Search engines can detect this and many will view it as spam.
- Submit identical pages. For example, do not duplicate a page of your site, give the copies different file names, and submit each one. Search engines can detect this and many will view it as spam.
- Submit the same page to any engine more than once within 24hrs.
- Use any keywords in your keywords meta tag that do not directly relate to the content of your page.