



Search Engine Optimisation - For Business

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Introduction

This paper is an introduction to digital marketing with a focus on search engines and in particular Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). It is not intended to document all aspects of this discipline nor does it address topics in great depth. It is an introduction and as such a digital marketing agency and SEO specialist should be consulted where more detail is required.

Search Engine Marketing

There are two main aspects to marketing a website on search engines:

- Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) - this is the art of raising the rank of a website in the results of targeted searches without payment to the search engine.
- Search Engine Marketing (SEM) - this has the same goal but it is achieved by paying for a higher ranking.

This document is primarily focused on SEO.

Background to an SEO project

SEO should be treated as a project, not as a single activity. SEO is comprised *many* activities that are undertaken as an initial project and then as ongoing maintenance:

- Business Goals - document what the business is trying to achieve.
e.g. increase sales, profit or customer numbers by X% by the end of the financial year.
- Marketing Plan - how does the online marketing team hope to achieve the Business Goals.
e.g. target certain types of organisation/ demographics in particular geographies at certain times of the year, around particular events using SEO, e-mailings etc. Budget is \$Y. Timeframe. Success quantifiers.
- SEO Plan - strategy around improving SEO and proving success.
read on...
- SEO Implementation - the practical steps that are undertaken by the SEO project team to achieve the goals set out in the Marketing Plan.
read on...

This document is focused on the SEO Plan & Implementation.

The SEO Plan

The plan is comprised concepts that will be broadly familiar with business analysts and project managers:

- Current position
- Desired position
- Plan
- Who
- Quantify
- Budget
- Timing

Quantifiable Success

In order to determine if the SEO has been successful, it is necessary to document the current position of the search engine rankings. Some specific SEO-related statistics that can easily be collected follow. Links to assist with these activities can be found at the end of this document.

- How many unique websites and web-pages link back to your website
- Current page rank
- Check W3C compliance of each page.
- Page load times

The desired position can be defined from these results. This may comprise:

- Setting a goal for the number return-links. Try to qualify this by also setting goals for return-links from sites that have specific page ranks e.g. 20 links from PR3 sites and 30 links from PR4 sites.
- Increasing the page rank to a certain value e.g. equalling or exceeding a competitor.
- W3C compliance for all or at least the key pages.
- Increasing page load speeds at specific loads.

Set targets by analysing competitors when executing searches on chosen keywords. Targets will aim to exceed those results attained by competitors.

Project Management

The other aspects of the plan comprise project management. Defining timelines, resourcing and budget.

SEO is a long-term, on-going activity that requires continual management and tracking. The initial setup will also take time to affect search results.

SEO Implementation

This section explains activities that can be undertaken to improve SEO.

Define Keywords

First activity is a critical one: decide on the keywords that should be targeted for the website and for individual pages. This does not have to be done for all pages - just the key pages. The key pages are those that you wish prospects to link to directly from search results. These may be product pages, service pages, the home page etc. Define around 20 keywords for the site.

Keywords are not submitted to search engines, instead the search engines perform their own analysis (called spidering) which amongst other things will assess the words appearing on each page and form a conclusion of what the keywords are for the page/site. SEO is partially about structuring the site and content so that search engines come to the desired conclusion.

Marketing Keywords

Here is some guidance on choosing marketing-related keywords:

- Keywords will be pervasive in your site so must be chosen to carefully reflect your business/product/service.
- Use phrases rather than words - they are more specific.
- Check which keywords competitors are targeting.
- Be specific where possible e.g. a tree specialist would use arborist rather than gardener.
- Be aware of how your prospective customer might search for your site. Would they search by a model number or a description or a specification? What vocabulary do they use to describe what they want?
- In the case of an online shop, keywords may be created for product categories and sub categories.
- Check existing web server logs to see what people have searched on to get to your site.
- Key pages should be chosen to minimise the user action to achieve the required outcome e.g. if the outcome is a product sale then focus on the product page rather than the home page as that would require extra user-action to get to the desired product.

Technical Keyword Analysis

One of the primary roles of an SEO specialist is to help identifying keywords. For example they will identify variations on your chosen keywords that are often searched for but where the sites at the top of the results list are low quality. SEO specialists use software packages to assist them in efficiently identifying good keywords but still, much of the work hinges on the skill and experience of the specialist.

A good SEO specialist will assess the popularity of your keywords and suggest variations that will give your website a higher chance of appearing on that all-important first search results page.

Technical keyword analysis is not the subject of this paper as here, we are documenting what non-technical users can achieve.

Using Keywords in a Website

Now that you have determined your keywords, what should you do with them? Ensure that the keywords are used correctly in:

1. Page titles
2. Navigation
3. Page URLs
4. Headings
5. Body content
6. Alt-tags for images
7. Filenames (images, PDFs etc)
8. Meta-descriptions

The order of these items denotes an approximate importance. For example using a keyword in a page title is more powerful than using it in the body content.

Title & URLs

The page title does not have to just be the name of the organisation and the page name. Page titles should be individualised per page, and should use the strongest keywords identified for that page. Page titles should be human-readable too as Google will display approximately the first 66 characters of the title in the search results as the hyperlink back to the site.

For example: "Website developer & mobile app developer - Turtle Technology, Sydney"

If technology allows, URLs that are 'friendly' to search engine should be used. These URLs should correlate with the page title and with keywords.

Page titles and URLs are unlikely to be the same as page names in the navigation. Where possible, those should also utilise keywords and correlate with the page titles.

Body Content

Use keywords early in the body content - ideally in the first 100 words (there should be at least 250 words on each page).

Place keywords in headings, preferably at the beginning of the heading. Keywords in the body may be emphasised in some way (e.g. bold or italics). Don't use images in place of headings - they might look nice but all a search engine can do is read the ALT tag and it will have no idea that it is a heading.

Links should have descriptive text relating to what it being linked to e.g. use "View our product catalogue" rather than "Our product catalogue is here". Links can contain keywords where possible.

Link between pages - either in the content or in a related links side-box. This provides a further opportunity to connect keywords to a page at a high-level.

Use keywords as often as is practical - remember you are writing for humans too so content must be perfectly readable. Do not overdo the keywords - if it looks like you are "keyword stuffing", the search engines will punish the page/site. Always use keywords in natural sentences, and don't artificially repeat them - use synonyms or related phrases when there is too much repetition. Avoid technical language and acronyms where possible as these may be difficult for both humans and search engines to understand.

Don't use 'doorway pages' which are separate pages, stuffed with keywords that redirect to the real website.

Search engines like to see unique content on each page so in the case of an online shop ensure that product descriptions vary for each product.

ALT tags and Filenames

ALT tags are displayed in place of images when the browser does not display the image. This may be because the image is not available or a non-graphical browser is being used. Search engines will consider ALT tags as in theory if an image is displayed then it should be relevant to the content. So use keywords.

It also helps if image file are named consistently with the ALT tag. This also applies for other sorts of files such as PDF files that are linked to.

Metatags

Description is the only important metatag, as it will be displayed in search result listings along with the link to your site. Limit it to 150 characters. It should be written in a way that will sell the site to the target audience and encourage them to click your link in the search results.

Linking Back

The other key activity is to increase the popularity of your site by persuading other high quality websites to link to yours. The higher the page rank of those sites, the more credence and therefore page rank you will gain. Page Rank 3 is average, 5 is attainable, 6 or more is earned by major brands. Also the fewer links those page have the better.

One method is to approach other sites directly and ask them to link back to your site. We believe that that it is not beneficial to link back to them though. Link directories are a possibility but only use those that are relevant to your website. Some directories are free and some are paid. Do not under any circumstances use commercial reciprocal linking services. Add your site to the Open Directory Project. It is important because Google uses it as the basis for some of the ways in which it indexes sites.

Persuade partners to position their link back to your site near the top of the page. For some search engines this may give more credence to the link. At least try to obtain links that are located in the body content rather than in ancillary areas such as a sidebar or the footer. Multiple links from the same partner may be detrimental.

It is important to ensure that the text describing the links contains keywords. Ideally the page title of the page containing the link would also contain keywords.

The ideal method of generating link popularity is to build a website and/or business that is so compelling that people will want to link to you.

Consider writing articles for publication on other websites. Include a link in the article back to your website. You may also consider syndication of your article which means it will be republished on lots of websites, but we are wary of this practice as the search engines generally do not look favourably on duplicated content.

Write posts in forums and aim to win 'best answer' where possible. This will boost rankings in those sites which filter into the search engines. For example a highly connected and respected Linked In member will rate highly in Linked In's own search.

Note that when linking back to your site, it may not necessarily be to your home page. It could be the entrance to your online store or a landing page for your services.

Second note, linking back to your site from other sites hosted on the same server is not as effective as where the sites are on different servers.

It is beneficial to set up well structured internal linking. While not as important as external links, it still helps. These may include the main navigation, related links and inline linking from within page content. The normal rules apply, particularly usage of keywords in the link text. Following on from the rule that the more links there are on the page, the less strength they have, be frugal.

Search Engine Submission

Submit the site directly to the major search engines Google, Bing & Yahoo. Where applicable add a local listing as well if geography is important. Check the correct country has been set in Google Webmaster Tools. Links are listed at the end of this document.

Sometimes it is helpful to generate and submit a Sitemap to the major search engines, particularly if the site:

- has dynamic content;
- is new and has few links to it;
- has pages that aren't easily discoverable during the crawl process, for example page that are not linked from other pages in the site;
- has a large archive of content pages that are not well linked to each other, or are not linked at all.

Performance

Ensure pages load in a reasonable timeframe - ideally a few seconds. If they are too slow, ranking may suffer. Increase performance by reducing image/page sizes, optimising business logic (especially database queries) and up-scaling hardware.

For high-volume sites, performance testing is suggested to understand how the site behaves under spiked loads. Remember that loading will increase as a result of a successful SEO campaign.

Keeping SEO current

Keep the website current. Update it often with relevant content. Consider adding a blog, listing news items and issuing regular press releases. Write white papers and include other relevant content such as user guides for your products. It is fine to include historic content as long as it is clear to the user that it is not current. These are often written as files but should be converted to good quality HTML so they can be indexed effectively by the search engines. The PDF can still be offered as a convenient download. Remember to name the file descriptively!

If your business has or is capable of building a community of users then consider adding discussion forums. These may be used to discuss the industry, support your products or even review your products.

Ensure that you keep your keywords up to date with significant page/product changes.

Programming

The techniques described above are all activities that can be carried out by non-technical users (with the exception of performance tuning). The other area that is also important is the build of the web-pages. There are many practices that should be followed by the programmer so it is essential that an experienced user interface programmer is utilised. At Turtle Technology we use both the common techniques but also make use of some less well-known mechanisms to write highly optimised code for the search engines.

Programming techniques are not the subject of this paper as here, we are documenting what non-technical users can achieve.

Search Engine Marketing

Depending on the Marketing Plan, a Search Engine Marketing (SEM) campaign may be appropriate. The benefits of a SEM campaign (e.g. Google AdWords) is that it can quickly lift the profile/visibility of a site by having a description and link appear high in related search results. SEM may be Paid or Pay-Per-Click and requires budget and active management.

SEM will accelerate success but SEO is still required.

Useful Links & Tools

Design & Content

See <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35769#1> for Google's design and content guidelines. And for Google's quality guidelines see <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35769#3>.

Tools

The search engines themselves will show the popularity of keywords - just by searching for them. Note that the number of results is wildly exaggerated due to large numbers of automatically generated pages that duplicate content to draw eyeballs to their adverts.

Use www.google.com/webmasters to identify keywords, determine who is linking to your site, what people are searching on to find your site and more.

<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal> Tells you how many people have searched for keywords and suggests alternatives.

All sorts of free SEO-related tools: <http://www.seomoz.org/dp/the-internet-marketing-handbook>, <http://www.seochat.com/seo-tools/>, <http://www.submitexpress.com/> and <http://tools.seobook.com/>.

Where do competitors have back-links: <http://www.seosean.com/seo-tools/link-hub-finder/>. Enter ten high-quality competitors.

Check Page Rank with www.checkpagerank.net or a browser toolbar plugin.

Check W3C compliance of each page using validator.w3.org.

Online shops should utilise the Google Merchant Centre.

Tracking

Google Analytics free tools for measuring your site's performance
<http://www.google.com/analytics/>.

Opentracker is similar to Google Analytics but more advanced and is not free
<http://www.opentracker.net>.

Search Engine Submission

For a new site or a site with few back-links, manual submission will speed up indexing:

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

<http://www.bing.com/webmaster/SubmitSitePage.aspx>

<http://www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl>

Directory Submission

<http://dmoz.org/add.html>