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Best Practice Search Engine Optimization

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Content

Content is king for Search Engine Optimization (SEO). If possible, use at least 200 to 450 words of total relevant content with 2 to 4 targeted keywords for search indexing on each page. These keywords should be researched by business goals and frequency of searches in Google. Use keywords in the metadata title and description; boldface one keyword or keyword phrase per page; use keywords in the URL, anchor text links to other pages within the website; use H1, 2, 3...6 tagging in section or paragraph titles; and alt=tags for images (see below). Regularly (at least every 3 months) refresh and add to content.

URL's

Sample:

www.domain.com/main-category/sub-category/filename

Guidelines:

- Do not go past three subfolders deep
- Only use lower-case letters
- Use hyphens to separate words (Google sees hyphens or dashes as spaces.)
- Do not use spaces or underlines between words
- Only include filename extensions on download documents but not on any page names (Example: www.domain.com/main-category/download-file.pdf is ok, but www.domain.com/main-category/web-page.html is not.)
- Note: Removing “.html” or any other extension from URLs does not affect SEO

See: <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/googles-john-mueller-says-parameters-urls-not-matter/246675/>

Title Tag

The contents of the title tag may appear in the first line of the search engine listing. Make sure the title tag accurately describes page content.

Code Sample:

```
<head>  
  
<title>Primary Keyword - Secondary Keyword | Brand Name</title>  
  
</head>
```

Format Options:

Primary Keyword - Secondary Keyword | Brand Name (48)

or

Primary Keyword | Secondary Keyword | Tertiary Keyword (50)

Guidelines:

- <65 characters (including spaces)
- Use active verbs – shop, buy, find, etc.
- Place relevant keywords toward the beginning of the title
- Must be unique on every page
- Must be included on every page
- Make titles natural and conversational
- Ask questions in titles your clients might ask when searching

Meta Description Tag

Google recommends that, “every page on your website has a meta description.” Even so, Google may not use the meta description and use other on-page content. See:

<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/35624?hl=en>

Code Sample:

```
<head>  
  
<meta name="description" content="This is an example of a  
meta description. This will often show up in search  
results.">  
  
</head>
```

Guidelines:

- <155 Characters (including spaces), because Google can truncate longer descriptions
- Write compelling promotional copy explaining what the user will find when they land on the page
- Avoid duplicating across pages; however, uniqueness is not as critical as with title tags
- Do not use quote marks because these will cut off descriptions on the Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs)

Image Alt= tags

Code Sample:

```

```

Guidelines:

- Is not required on all images
- Include keywords when possible
- Avoid repeating keywords more than twice and never consecutively
- Limit to <150 Characters

Write image alt= text to support accessibility by providing a clear description of what the image is about. Alt=tags are a place to possibly include misspellings of words if the misspelling is commonly entered into search queries

Use header tags

Header tags tell search engines and viewers the theme and what content is essential on the page. Business relevant keywords such as branded product, generic product names, and phrases from page content should be used in the main header or “H1” tag. This header should be followed by a paragraph (or more) of content, optimized with keywords.

Code Sample: `<h1>This is heading 1</h1>` (H1 through H6 may be used)

Keyword Density

The keyword density metric is less important for SEO than it once was, although keyword targeting is still essential for successful SEO. Write content for the consumer. Make content very semantic and conversational, as if answering a consumer’s question. It’s most important that main keywords appear in the page URL, title, description, header tags, related image alt=tags, and content. Keep how many times a keyword is used natural and not forced. If using a keyword density tool such as [SEOQuake](#) (SEO extension toolbar), keyword density is a part of the reporting suite and will show keyword frequency and density on any page. Depending on the content, a keyword density over 3% might be too much and be potentially seen as spam.

Sitemaps

File and URL Samples:

1. www.examplewebsite.com/sitemap.xml
2. www.examplewebsite.com/sitemap.html

See: <https://www.sitemaps.org/protocol.html>

Guidelines:

There should be two sitemaps for any website:

1. The `www.examplewebsite.com/sitemap.xml` file should be placed in the root directory of the website and submitted to the search engines for validation (Google and Bing/Yahoo!).
2. The `www.examplewebsite.com/sitemap.html` is actually one of the web pages on the website. This one should be built as a list of anchor texts from the page titles and edited to be user-friendly. A link to the sitemap should be on every page of the website.

Anytime a web page is added, the complete and new URL should be added to both sitemaps. See: <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/183668?hl=en>

Robots.txt

There are two parameters; "index" and "follow." "Index" refers to whether or not you want that particular web page to be indexed by a search engine spider. "Follow" refers to whether or not you want the spider to follow the links on that page. You need to decide whether you want the page indexed and whether you want the links followed. Based on that decision, you choose one of several code options. This coding must be done correctly, or a failure to be indexed is possible. The below robots.txt code allows the entire site to be indexed with links followed and is placed in the root directory of the website. Also, the file tells the index bot where to find the sitemap.xml file.

Code Sample:

```
User-agent: *  
  
Allow: /  
  
Sitemap: https://www.example.com/sitemap.xml
```

To exclude bots or pages from being indexed, see Google Reference:

https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6062596?hl=en&ref_topic=6061961

You can use Google Search Console to verify the robot.txt file code and find URLs that are being blocked by this file. See: <http://www.robotstxt.org/robotstxt.html>

Google Search Console

THIS IS A MUST! Install Google Search Console and use its tools and see reports about your website, including overall search traffic, fixing indexing and other code structure issues, and seeing what pages and content are attracting the most traffic. Also install Bing Webmaster Tools.

To get started with Google, visit: <https://search.google.com/search-console/about>

To get started with Bing, visit: <https://www.bing.com/toolbox/webmaster>

HTTPS URL

Google now requires adding a HTTPS SSL 2048-bit key certificate to a website and doing so is considered a ranking factor on SERPs. This will result in an HTTPS (Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure) URL. If this is not implemented, a notice may appear with the website listing (Chrome) showing that the website is not secure, which discourages engagement.

See: <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6073543?hl=en>

Canonicalization

If there is duplicate content on different pages, canonicalization tells the search engines which page should be indexed. Doing so prevents Google's duplicate content penalty from impeding indexing and high ranking. This is also true of URLs with and without "www" which may be seen as having duplicate content, which may cause a search engine penalty and prevent desirable ranking.

For more information about canonicalization, see:

<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/139066?hl=en>

Use Google's URL Inspection Tool to see the index status of a URL:

<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/9012289#google-selected-canonical>

Rel= Tags

These tags are a type of metadata used to tell a search engine spider about the relationship between a link and the page URL. These tags instruct search engine spiders to act in a variety of ways, such as rel="canonical" which is to say which page contains the main content and to not index similar or same content elsewhere on the site. The rel="nofollow" tag instructs a spider to not follow a link for indexing. For additional Rel= tags and instructions, see:

https://www.w3schools.com/TAGS/att_a_rel.asp

Code Sample:

```
<a rel="nofollow" href="http://www.sample website.com/">Don not follow this link</a>
```

Anchor Text Links

An anchor text link points to another webpage and appears as clickable text in a hyperlink. The text used in the link should be relevant to the linked page and contain a keyword that someone might search to find the content.

Code Sample:

```
<a href="http://www.exampledomain.com/" title="This is a href title attribute. It is exposed to a user when they hover their mouse over a link on a page or when they use a screen reader">Keyword Text</a>
```

Guidelines:

- href must exactly match target URL
- Include keywords whenever possible
- Avoid repeating keywords more than once
- Avoid repeating keywords more than twice and never consecutively
- Limit to <150 Characters

Write title attribute to support accessibility by providing a clear description of where the user will go once they click the link.

See: https://www.w3schools.com/tags/att_a_href.asp

Redirects

If you need to point an existing website URL to another URL, a new URL, or a completely different domain URL and the original URL has been indexed by the search engines, it is best practice to use a server-side 301-redirect command. Do not use the 302-redirect command. This will allow legacy SEO status to follow to the new URL or website. See:

<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/93633?hl=en>

Custom 404 Page

Create a custom and helpful 404 “page not found” webpage that tells a visitor to your website that a missing page no longer exists, but they can go to other pages in your website to be helped. If possible show visitors who land on a 404 page options for similar products or services they were attempting to find. See: <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/93641?hl=en>

Structured Data Markup: Microdata or Microformats

This is a SERP and conversion effort related to SEO performance. It’s used to “nest” important information in the content of web pages to provide a richer experience on SERPs. Search engines will index specific types of information to display. Information types have specific item property attributes used in the HTML code of the website. Information that might be used includes names, brands, dates, times, etc. This is another way to distinguish important information that’s specifically recognized by search engine’s indexing.

See: <http://www.schema.org/>

<http://moz.com/ugc/getting-the-most-out-of-schemaorg-microformats>

Accelerated Mobile Pages

Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) are web pages designed according to an open source specification. Validated AMP pages are crawled, stored in, and served from a cache, which allows them to be served even more quickly.

See: <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6340290>

<https://www.ampproject.org/docs/reference/spec.html>

Image Files

Large image file sizes can cause slow page-load times. Image files should be either a JPEG or PNG. JPEGs are best for compression and have smaller file sizes, although lack color transparency. A PNG file (from Photoshop) can be saved as a PNG-8 with 256 colors or PNG-24 with 16-million colors. Required image quality is the determining factor for which file format to choose, but page-load times are also an important consideration. See: <https://helpx.adobe.com/photoshop-elements/using/optimizing-images-png-24-format.html> , or <https://helpx.adobe.com/photoshop-elements/using/optimizing-images-jpeg-format.html>

Online Video SEO

Have a YouTube channel to host videos, even if self-hosting videos that play on a website. Do not use Flash formats. If self-hosting video, do not have videos auto play because page-load time can be extended. Name video files with keywords relevant to the video and business purpose.

Wherever uploading videos, be sure to complete the title and description fields with unique keyword-rich content for each video playback site showing the video. If the video has a spoken dialogue, be sure to include a transcript where possible. Finally, promote videos by asking people via email and other channels (Facebook and LinkedIn) to watch, like and share.

See: https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2734799?hl=en&ref_topic=7296214

See: <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2734796>

Link Building Strategies for SEO

The very first algorithm used to determine “PageRank” on SERPs (named for Larry Page, co-founder of Google) was based on the quality and number of anchor text links (also known as backlinks) pointing to a website.

Code sample:

```
<a href="https://www.websiteexample.com">Anchor Text Content</a>
```

The above “Anchor Text Content” is the clickable anchor text content that shows on the back linking website. This is the code provided to the back-linking website. Be sure to use a keyword relevant to search and the landing page on your website.

See: <https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-link-building>

Link building is very time consuming. Building links entails contacting webmasters of other websites and asking them to include a anchor text link with keywords pointing to your website.

DO NOT BUY BACKLINKS because Google penalizes websites that get caught and this can result in having a website removed from the Google Index.

This is an excellent blog post that looks at all sides of buying links at:

<https://ahrefs.com/blog/buy-backlinks/>

Be Mobile Friendly

Statista reported (2018) more searches are happening on mobile devices (52%) than on desktop computers (42%) or tablets (6%). Google is now emphasizing a “mobile-first” indexing algorithm, which has begun rolling out. Not all websites will be affected simultaneously. SEMRush found that 30% of websites (2019) having a top-ten and first-page ranking on desktop moved beyond first-page ranking on mobile. All websites need to be mobile friendly.

From digital.gov of the U.S. government comes these comprehensive guidelines (2018):

<https://digital.gov/resources/guide-create-mobile-friendly-websites/>

Finally, use Google’s Mobile Friendly Test: <https://search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly>

Website Speed Optimization

Every second of additional page-load time means more users bounce from a website. The generally accepted optimal page-load time is less than 3 seconds on both mobile and desktop devices. Remember that Google will eventually index all websites based on mobile performance.

According to Yahoo! Developer: “80% of the end-user response time is spent on the front-end. Most of this time is tied up in downloading all the components in the page: images, stylesheets, scripts, Flash, etc. Reducing the number of components, in turn, reduces the number of HTTP(S) requests required to render the page. This is the key to faster pages.”

See: https://developer.yahoo.com/performance/rules.html#num_http

Yahoo! Developer recommends these tactics:

1. Minimize HTTP Requests*
2. Use a Content Delivery Network
3. Add an Expires or a Cache-Control Header
4. Use Gzip Components*
5. Put Stylesheets in the Head*
6. Put Scripts at the Bottom*
7. Avoid CSS Expression
8. Make JavaScript and CSS External Files*
9. Reduce DNS Lookups
10. Minify JavaScript and CSS*
11. Avoid Redirects*
12. Remove Duplicate Scripts*
13. Configure ETags (Apache and IIS)
14. Make Ajax Cacheable
15. Flush the Buffer Early
16. Use GET for AJAX Requests
17. Post-load Components
18. Preload Components*
19. Reduce the Number of DOM Elements
20. Split Components Across Domains
21. No 404s*
22. Reduce Cookie Size*
23. Use Cookie-free Domains for Components
24. Minimize DOM Access
25. Develop Smart Event Handlers
26. Choose <link> over @import
27. Avoid Filters
28. Optimize Images*
29. Optimize CSS Sprites
30. Don't Scale Images in HTML*
31. Make Favicon.ico Small and Cacheable*
32. Keep Components under 25k*
33. Pack Components into a Multipart Document

Note that not all of the above tactics may be necessary or are even possible. These tactics are dependent on the server platform operating system and website development coding, CMS and the like. Those tactics marked with an asterisk are generally most often addressed to optimize page-load speeds on mobile and desktop devices. To test page-load speed, see:

<https://tools.pingdom.com>

Install Google Analytics

It is highly recommended that Google Analytics is installed on any website. Reasons to include Google Analytics are:

1. Google Analytics is free.
See: <https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/1008015?hl=en>
2. Automates the collects an assortment of valuable website data, including traffic, within any calendar range.
3. Provides dashboard reporting that is accessible 24/7/365.
4. Allows the customization of reports.
5. Integrated with Google AdWords, Google Display Network, and Google Search Console.
6. Allows identification tagging of any visitor source.
7. Tracks website visitor movement and time spent across website.
8. Track bounces and, importantly, web pages bounced from.
9. Reports, age, gender, language, interest, device used, social networks sending traffic, and geo-locations of website audience.
10. Tracks page views, including shares and likes.
11. Tracks conversions from forms, calls, emails, downloads and sales.
12. Use Google Tag Manager to see all traffic and conversions from advertising sources in Google Analytics.
See: <https://developers.google.com/tag-manager>