Search Engine Optimization Basics

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Understanding Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

The Basics of SEO

The goal of nearly every website owner is to be ranked number one on Google for their preferred keywords and key phrases. To possibly claim that number one spot someday, you can't view SEO as a one-time task. It requires regular site care, ongoing optimization, keyword research, consistent content creation, link building, and more.

This guide focuses on the on-page optimization efforts — what you can do to optimize the content added to your site to help more of your content get found online by those who need it most.

There are three basic components to a well-optimized website:

- Search engine friendly, user-friendly, smart design
- Compelling content that gets visitors to take action
- Optimization to maximize your website's effectiveness

Search engine optimization, also known as SEO, is the practice of getting found online — boosting your rankings in the search engine results pages (SERPs) so more people visit your site and become aware of your services, products, and other offers.

SEO Is Important To The Success of Your Website

A large amount of organic website traffic comes from search engines — especially traffic from new visitors that have never been to your site before. If you don't show up in the search engine results pages when someone searches for a keyword or key phrase associated with your website, you're losing opportunities to connect with those who are looking for what you offer.

Many elements of search engine optimization, like writing an HTML title for a page or an HTML meta description, alone can seem insignificant, but when combined, the results can be powerful!

No Guarantees

Yes, every bit of optimization helps and makes a difference in the success of your site. But there are no guarantees that optimizing your website will put you in the first spot or on the first page of a Google search results list. And, even with an expertly-crafted HTML title tag and meta description tag, there isn't a 100% guarantee the search engines will use the ones you write — sometimes they create their own!

SEO Words Of Caution

The goal of a search engine is to provide searchers with the best, most relevant, helpful, useful, informative websites possible based on their search queries.

- Experts at all reputable search engines tell website owners to create content for users first and search engines second. A search engine should never come before your website visitors. With that said, search engines want the same thing visitors want — clean design, simple navigation, smart site structure, helpful links, and valuable, relevant content.

- One optimization strategy on its own won't make a big difference. The secret to effective SEO is starting with great content and then taking advantage of every available optimization opportunity.

- Don't get caught up in search engine optimization as the "get found magic pill." You should never put more effort into optimization than into improving your website, refining your content, and testing/ tweaking your conversion points.

Avoiding The SEO Smarm

Receiving an email with your URL in the subject line or email itself doesn't mean someone ever looked at your website or really knows that you are missing out on a hot keyword opportunity or your site's rankings can be improved.

Usually, these emails are generated automatically by a computer program or bot and are sent to millions of people around the world in hopes that a few will say respond.

Also, anyone guaranteeing a number one ranking or page one ranking without a relevant keyword strategy or a long-term plan to keep you there is suspect.

- Anyone can earn a top ranking for a keyword or keyphrase no one is searching for!
- Every person who does what you do around the world wants that same spot. If you're lucky enough to score top ranking for a hot keyword or phrase in your niche, it's going to take work to stay there — otherwise, someone will take it from you.

If you're going to hire an SEO company to help boost your site's visibility online, you want to go with the company that:

- Researches keywords to identify where you can be competitive and provides a keyword research report and a recommended package focusing on specific terms.
- Reviews analytics for your website and provides detailed reporting and insights to guide ongoing site improvement actions.
- Provides recommendations and guidance on how to use the selected keywords in content, blog posts, guest posts, links, and more.
- Creates a plan to improve your site and make it more appealing to search engines through content, blog posts, landing pages, and more.
- Has a plan/option to monitor and maintain rankings over time that includes reporting and course corrections.
- Doesn't participate in blackhat frowned-upon practices.

Remember, nothing about search engine rankings can be guaranteed and your site's rankings, along with everyone else's, fluctuate on a regular basis. But with consistent effort and by taking advantage of every optimization opportunity, you can beat out your competition.

HUMANS + ROBOTS
Everyone Wants And Needs the Same Things

Optimize For People And Search Engines

SEO can be overwhelming. It can also feel like to keep track of and a lot of work — because it is. The good news is that the more you do it, the easier it gets and the results compound over time.

Helpful Headlines

Headlines and subheadlines must be clear, easy to understand, and written in natural language. A simple way to test for that is to read your headline or subheadline out loud. It feels natural and easy to say, you're on the right track.

ADDITIONAL HEADLINE TIPS:

- Write persuasively. The main headline is what people will see in search engine results listings and on social media and it needs to capture their attention and convince them to click to your site.
- Use the primary keyword or key phrase for the page or post in the main headline and at least one subheadline.
- Use HTML Heading tags (H tags) to identify headlines and subheadlines. H tags tell search robots that the content is more important

than the body copy or paragraph copy and that it's the start of a section of content.

- For human visitors, make sure the H tags on your website provide visual cues that they have reached a new section of content. For example, headlines and subheadlines should stand out from the rest of the content on the page and be larger or bold and in a different color or a different typeface.

- Each page or post should have one H1 tag. This is the primary headline for the page.

- Secondary subheadlines should use the H2 tag. To further break up a section of content with an H2 subheadline, use H3 tags. Think of headlines tags as an outline of the content. When outlining content, you wouldn't jump from the first level to the third or fourth level, and you shouldn't do it when formatting text either.

Easy To Read Content

People want information but they don't want to have to work for it. If you want people to read your content, it needs to feel fast and easy to read.

Above all else, write naturally. It's important to work your focus keyword or keyphrase into your content but not if it sounds forced or unnatural. Use it in different ways and different contexts and use variations of the word or phrase. Again, reading your content out loud can identify any areas that feel unnatural.

ADDITIONAL CONTENT TIPS:

- Avoid large blocks of content that create an unappealing wall of grey text and avoid light or medium grey text. The body copy needs to have enough contrast against the background to stand out.
- Use small, short paragraphs of no more than 1-3 sentences. Online, one long paragraph seems daunting and even painful to readers, while several shorter paragraphs seem like a quick, easy read. This is especially true on mobile devices.
- Break long page and post content into several smaller sections with contrasting headlines and subheadlines.
- Style lists as bullet lists or number lists. Lists are visually quick to digest, they stop scanners and scrollers, and they provide greater visual interest.
- Use bold and italic styling to make important points stand out. These styling options are used to add emphasis to specific words and phrases, which helps signal to search engines and people that they're important.
- Use your focus keyword or key phrase (or a variation of it) in the introduction paragraph and the conclusion paragraph, a subheadline, a bold phrase, and if it makes sense, in the anchor text of a link.

Avoid The Ick Factor

Once you get the hang of it, optimizing content is pretty simple — and as long as you stick to the best practices, you'll create content that people want to read and search engines want to reward. We can't, however, talk about best practices without also warning you of some worst practices.

Optimization tactics to avoid:

- Don't overuse your target keyword(s) or key phrase(s) and stuff every possible variation of your keyword into your content and headlines. This technique is called keyword stuffing and it's a no-no.

- Don't overuse the bold or italic style options and bold every word that could be a keyword. When everything is bold and has added emphasis, nothing may as well be. Think of bold type as you think of salt. Just enough and it perfectly accents the dish letting the taste of the other spices come through as well. Too much and it takes over the entire dish, making the other spices irrelevant — and it ruins the whole dish.

- Don't format entire paragraphs of content with H tags to try to give all the keywords you used more importance. If it's not a headline or subheadline, don't use an H tag.

- Don't underline text that is not a link. Worldwide, underlined text is assumed to be a clickable link. When you use an underline to add emphasis instead of using bold styling, it confuses everyone.

- Don't get too cute or clever with your headlines and subheadlines. If people can't "get it" right away, neither will search engines — and if search engines can't understand what a page is about, it can't decide where to rank it.

- Don't add a paragraph of keywords or a big list of keywords to your website footer. This is another form of keyword stuffing. With that said, there are a few exceptions such as a local business that serves very specific regions and lists those regions.
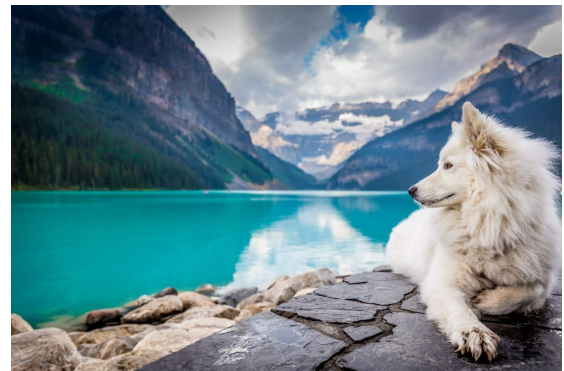
Optimizing Images and Graphics

How To Optimize Images For SEO

Look at the two images below — while they look exactly the same, only one of the images is optimized for search engine optimization.
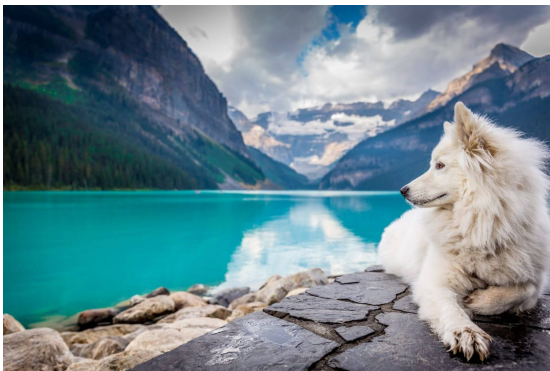
An Unoptimized Image

An Optimized Image

There are five different ways you can optimize an image or graphic for SEO:

1. Size Images Appropriately For Web Use

Large images can cause slow page speeds, which can negatively affect rankings and irritate impatient visitors. It's important to upload images that are sized appropriately. The measurement of width should not exceed the width of your content and the measurement of resolution should be set to web resolution (72 dpi).

2. Use Descriptive Image Names

Never upload images with generic names like the names assigned by your digital camera, the generic names from a stock photo site, or the numbered names from a photographer.

While artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies are advancing rapidly, in general, search engines can't "see" images but they can "read" HTML. Naming images with descriptive names helps you find those images later using search, helps search engines understand images, and helps people too!

Bad image name examples:

- Photo.jpg
- logo.gif
- IMG_1423.png
- ebookcover.jpg

Good image name examples:

- farmers-market-fresh-vegetables.jpg
- business-name-logo.gif
- sun-dried-tomato-polenta.png
- how-to-get-clients-ebook.jpg

3. Define Alternate Text For Each Image

Alternate text or alt text is the text that appears in the image HTML to describe the image. It is used by accessibility screen readers, search engines,

and in place of the image if the image doesn't load. While most visitors will never see an image's alt text, it is still an important part of creating a more accessible website and providing more context about images to search engines.

Alternate text is added to images using the Alt Attribute, commonly called the Alt Tag. Below is an example of an image's HTML, showing a descriptive name and the alt text:

<img src="farmers-market-fresh-vegetables.jpg" alt="a collection of fresh vegetables sourced from the Sacramento farmers market">

Alternate text should describe the image and what it is about or the intended meaning, which if appropriate, can include keywords. If displaying text in an image (a quote image), use that text as the ALT text. The most important thing to remember is that alt text should help someone who can't see the image understand what the image is and it's meaning or relevance to the content.

4. Remove Extra Data From Your Images

Images contain extra data that you can't see. Removing this extra data can reduce the size of your images, which means they'll load faster and your page load speeds will be better. Two tools to do this are ImageOptim, Ewww.io, JPG Optimizer, Tiny PNG, and Kraken.

5. Add Caption To Your Image

Image captions aren't right for every website, but several user experience studies have shown that captions stop the scroll. When used, they're one of the most-read parts of a page. Image captions also provide another opportu-

nity to share a short, relevant description of an image — ideally, with your focus keyword or key phrase included — in a non-spammy way.

One Image, Five Optimization Opportunities

Each time you add an image to a page or post, you have five opportunities to optimize it.

1. Crop and size the image appropriately for your website.
2. Give the image a descriptive, keyword-rich name.
3. Add descriptive alternate text.
4. Shrink the image even further by removing excess data.
5. Write a compelling caption for the image.

Optimizing Links to Increase Discoverability

Links Make Your Content Findable

As with the optimization of images, optimizing links on your website helps people and search engines discover more of your content.

People and search engine bots move through the internet in the same way. They both use links. Links are like the roads of the internet, connecting pages (destinations) all over the world. Optimizing the road is like adding an of-framp and signage that tells people and search bots what they'll find when they get there.

Similarly, when you add internal links — links to other pages on your own website — you are helping search engines and people discover more of the content on your own website that you have worked hard to create.

Take a look at the following two link examples:

- An unoptimized link: https://inspiredimperfection.com
- An optimized link: Sacramento Blog About Family Travel and Recipes

Search Engines' Perspective

- In the first example, the only thing search engines see is the website URL. It doesn't communicate anything about what the website is about or what subject category or keywords the website should be placed in.
- In the second example, search engines see the website URL (hidden in the HTML) and they get the descriptive anchor text (the text of a link) that is displayed in place of the URL. Anchor text creates an additional opportunity to optimize your content.

Peoples' Perspective

- In the first example, the only thing visitors see is the website URL, which again, doesn't tell visitors anything about what the website is about.
- In the second example, visitors see the text "Sacramento Blog About Family Travel and Recipes" as the link. This descriptive link tells visitors that clicking the link will take them to a site about family travel and recipes owned by someone in Sacramento.

What you need to know about optimizing links:

Link optimization is about helping people and search engines understand what they will find when they click a link — hinting at the content that's on the destination page. When done correctly, optimizing links benefits two pages: the page the link is on and the one it is linking to.

ADDITIONAL LINK OPTIMIZATION TIPS:

- Links must be relevant to the content on the page and relevant to the destination page being linked to.
- Link text should describe the content or topic of the page it is linking to and fit naturally in the page content without feeling forced.
- Link text should include the focus keyword or key phrase for the page it is linking to.
- Too many links with the exact same anchor text can be detrimental and appear spammy. Similar keywords, variations of the keyword, or the keyword used in different contexts are also acceptable.

Leveraging the HTML Title and Meta Description

What Are The HTML Title And Meta Description?

HTML page titles and HTML meta descriptions are two often forgotten tools for optimizing web pages and blog posts because they exist in the HTML of a page or post. They're also two of the most important tools you can leverage to better optimize pages and posts.

To get started, let's take a look at what a page title and meta description look like in HTML:

\<title\>Cajun Fish Tacos With Spicy Garlic Broccoli Slaw Recipe\</title\>

\<meta name="description" content="An easy and fast dinner recipe for Cajun Fish Tacos with a spicy Garlic Broccoli Slaw that will have your family begging for seconds"\>

Search engine results page listings are, at the most basic level, lists of web pages and what is most often displayed for each listing are the HTML title and Meta description. This means that a compelling HTML title and persuasive meta description can highly influence the amount of traffic your receive from organic search.

- **An HTML page title** is like signage on the front of a building, telling people which store is in the building. You wouldn't pull off the free-

way, park, and walk into a building if you had no idea what was inside, would you? No! Neither would search engines! Search engines look for signage — the HTML title tag — to tell them what a page is about.

- **An HTML meta description** is a brief description of the web page or blog post and what can be found on the page or post. The meta description is like an advertisement for a store or a window display. It tells search engines and people more about the page so they can decide whether or not to visit it.

How Search Engines Use Titles And Descriptions

Here is an example of a search engine results page (SERP) listing showing the HTML title in blue as a link and the meta description in black below the URL:

While search engines often use your HTML title and HTML meta description for the link and description shown in the search results listing, it isn't guaranteed. Sometimes search engines write their own, especially if it doesn't think the description you entered matches the page content closely enough.

Writing An Effective HTML Page Title

Again, a page title is a short, clear, compelling statement about a page or post that helps people and search engines figure out what the page is about.

While a page headline is seen by human visitors and found in the content of a page, a page title is not seen on the actual web page. It is a special HTML tag that can be seen in the code of your web page, in search engine results page (SERP) lists, in open browser tabs, and in-browser bookmarks lists that is defined in the SEO settings for the page or post.

Because it is often used for the link text in search results listing, the HTML page title is meant to give users and search engines quick insights into the content on the page. It is often the first piece of information seen by a prospective visitor when reviewing their search results and helps users determine which link they should click on.

ADDITIONAL HTML TITLE TIPS:

- No two pages or posts should use the same title tag. Each HTML title should be accurate, relevant, and descriptive, reflecting the content of the page it is written for.
- The keywords included in your page title will appear bolded on the search engine results pages if they match the same keywords the user searched for. This makes it easier for users to determine if your web page is a good match for what they are looking for.
- The optimal title length for search engines is about 55-60 characters.

Writing An Effective Meta Description

Writing a simple, effective, compelling meta description is no harder than writing a simple, compelling, effective sentence or call to action. In fact, a meta description is just a short summary of what a page or post is about.

When someone views a list of pages in a search engine results page (SERP), they scan the list, read the descriptions, and decide which results are most interesting and closest to what they are looking for — and those links are the links they click. That's why your meta descriptions need to be persuasive, interesting, and accurate.

ADDITIONAL META DESCRIPTION TIPS:

- Each page and blog post on your website should have a unique meta description that is helpful.
- Keywords can be included as long as they fit naturally into the description without feeling forced.
- If keywords or phrases in a meta description match the same keywords used in a search query, they will appear bolded in a search engine results page listing. This helps people quickly see how your page or post is relevant to what they are searching for.
- HTML meta descriptions should be no more than 160 characters.

Keywords Still Matter for Search Engine Optimization

No More Keywords Meta Tag

This guide has referenced keywords many times but it hasn't yet addressed the official keyword HTML meta tag — and there's a reason for that.

While the HTML keyword meta tag used to be an effective, highly regarded optimization tool, today most search engines don't even look at it and most websites don't use it. But how did it come to this and why has the keyword meta tag lost its luster?

The answer is keyword abuse (also known as keyword spam).

Website owners were trying to "game the system" and trick search engines into ranking their sites by stuffing hordes of keywords into this meta tag — sometimes repeating the same keywords over and over in the hope of tricking a search engine into thinking the page was more relevant for that specific keyword. This practice got out of control and soon the keyword meta tag was no longer a viable way to assess what a page or post was really about.

Using Keywords Today

Experts will tell you the keyword meta tag no longer matters and it's not something to waste your time on. Unfortunately, many site owners hear this advice and incorrectly assume that means "don't bother with keywords."

But that's not accurate!

Just because the actual HTML keyword tag doesn't help your website's organic rankings, it doesn't mean you should ignore keywords altogether!

Search engines and people want focused, valuable, helpful, relevant, quality content — and writing your content around one specific keyword or keyphrase helps you do that.

To build an authority site, you need to research and create a core list of keywords and key phrases your website will focus on as a whole. Then, each page or post will use one of those keywords or keyphrases as its specific focus. The more specific and focused your content is, the better it will perform in the search engine rankings.

ADDITIONAL KEYWORD TIPS:

- Define a specific keyword for the page or post to keep the content focused.
- Use the designated keyword for a page/post in the main headline, at least one subheadline, the introduction, the conclusion, the HTML title, and the meta description.

- If it fits naturally, use the keyword in an image name and alternate text, in an image caption, and in the anchor text for a relevant link.
- Use variations of the keyword throughout the content and reference it in different contexts just as you would when speaking to someone about the topic.

KEYWORD PRACTICES TO AVOID:

- Don't use the exact same keyword or keyphrase repeatedly or unnaturally.
- Don't add paragraphs or lists packed with keywords in your website footer or hidden off-screen. That's spam!
- Don't use the HTML title or meta description as an opportunity to list multiple keywords.
- Don't assign a bunch of categories or tags to posts as if they are keywords.

One Last Reminder...

If you're not sure your keyword usage sounds natural, read your content out loud and pay attention to how it feels speaking the content. You'll notice where the content doesn't feel natural, and where you use a specific word too many times.