Improve Search Engine Rankings
10 Hot Tips & Tools

By: Chris Bachman | March 24, 2017

This article contains everything you need to know to fix your own SEO, or to know what to ask a pro.

HOW'S YOUR SEO WORKING FOR YOU? SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization for those of you who are wondering, and it is vital to your online success. A quick definition would be: "*The science of understanding what elements the Search Engines want to see so they rank a website higher in the search results, along with the art of incorporating those elements into a website to realize those higher rankings*." Easy, right? Well, yes and no.

First off, just because you have a well-designed website doesn't mean your developer knows or knew anything about SEO. I have found that a large percentage of developers just don't understand SEO. It is an area of knowledge which is constantly changing and evolving, and staying updated requires dedication and a desire to not only understands what it takes to excel, but the willingness to do so. Many developers simply don't have the bandwidth to stay adept at both. *Finding an SEO pro or firm that you can trust is vital to your success.*

Black Hat vs. White Hat: Over the years, SEO developed a questionable reputation due to the number of Black Hat SEO people preying on businesses. Black Hat means doing SEO work which is devious, designed to fool the Search Engines, provide temporary improvements, or just plain take your money and not deliver. Warning signs of a Black Hat operator include: Guaranteeing Page 1 rankings; invisible text on pages; lots of useless Backlinks (links pointing to your website); etc. Google "Black Hat" and you will find many warning signs to help you steer clear. Remember this, anything Black Hat is temporary at best, and will likely get your site penalized in the long run.

Smoke & Mirrors: A step up, or sideways, from Black Hat are the operators who know that you don't know what works from what doesn't, what the difference is between an Inlink and a Backlink, or why you would want to use www or non-www format for your website. They prey on this lack of knowledge, and you will spend a LOT of money before wising up to the fact that whatever they did for you, if anything, produced poor results at best.

The good news is that honest SEO professionals do exist, and carefully checking references will help you find them. **The even better news is that there are some simple steps you can do yourself which will usually help you begin to outrank the competition quickly**. These are the steps I have outlined next. Even though they are simple, basic steps, knowing what they are and how they work is paramount to implementing them. I will give a quick overview of each suggestion, but you do need to Google them and learn a bit more. Then talk to your web developer, and if it seems you know more than he/she does at this point, it is time to start considering your options.

Clean & Current

Search Engines love brand spanking new websites with clean coding, responsive design, and well-crafted tags with no broken links or duplicate content. Unless you are the web developer, however, you probably won't know if this is the case with your site or even what some of those terms mean. While it can be easy to spot an out-of-date website, it can be much more difficult to know if something built in the last four years is really up-to-date.

If your site is responsive, chances are it is pretty much up-to-date and likely using HTML5. If your site is NOT responsive or does not have mobile capacity; i.e., a mobile version, you have a problem that must be addressed sooner rather than later. If this is the case, do not even bother reading the rest of this article until you have updated.

Content is King

Fresh, helpful, well-written content that aligns with the promise set forth in your meta tags for the page is going to be a real plus to your optimization efforts. So is splitting up the content of your site into individual pages, each with their own topic. Invest some time and/or money in keyword research, and remember: Every topic has its own page and every page has its own topic. If you have multiple topics on a page, the Search Engines don't know what the real purpose of the page is and will rank it lower. And, if your meta tags promise a certain result if someone clicks on them, then the resulting page had better be on topic and provide useful information or the person will leave, resulting in another drop in your rankings. More on this can be found in **Content: Why More Is Better.**

Title & META Description Tags

These are the first things a person sees when they are looking at the SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages). They can be viewed from your website by right-clicking on each page and selecting View Source. Way up towards the top of the page you will find <Title> and <META Description>. What shows here is what shows in the Search Engine's results pages. This is your signage. What goes here determines whether the person clicks on your site link or not. They need to be accurate, well-crafted, of proper length, and not include things that could be considered superlatives. The main keyword for the page should lead the Title tag and the Description copy. Mentioning it twice in the description is fine; just use a variation of the word. Try to add your phone number if possible. Many people want to call someone NOW and not bother with going to a website. If you show a phone number and the competition doesn't…Score! Your phone rings.

Bonus: The Search Engines typically make these numbers *hot links* so they can be touch-dialed from a smart phone. Max character length (including spaces) for the Title is 60; for the Description is 150. **Learn more…**

Videos

Not only does incorporating video into your website make it more appealing to the Search Engines, people like watching videos and will think more highly of your business for having them. Video topic ideas could include Testimonials, How-To's, See-It-In-Action, Helpful Tips, About Us, etc. There are many more ideas available online about how to use videos including: on your website, embedded into your newsletter or email blast, and offering access to them for free or at a cost as a class. A YouTube channel is a great way for many businesses to go.

H Tags

H tags are another piece of code which it is important to get correct. They look like <H1> H2>H3> and are used around headings and subheadings to indicate the relative importance of that bit of copy. Typically, a page will have one H1 (Main Topic), maybe a couple of <H2> (sub-topics), and perhaps even up to three <H3> (supporting topics). My two rules of thumb are: 1) If the heading doesn't have a keyword in it, then it does not get an H tag; and 2) If you find you have a lot of H tags in play on a page, you probably have too many topics on the page and need to begin splitting that page into multiple pages. Your ability to adjust H tags will often be dictated by the level of control you have over the code. Many free website builder sites don't allow you any control here.

In Links

These are the links within your website from one page to another. The more links a page has going to it from other areas in the site, the more important the Search Engine deems the page and the more likely it will be shown in searches. So, don't squander In Links by spending them all on non-priority pages. Also, remember that the links off of your Home page are SUPER important. Link only to the main and most important of your pages. The Search Engines view links off your Home page as having extra value, so use them carefully. For the same reason, NEVER link to an outside website from your Home page. You are basically telling the Search Engines: "Don't bother stopping at my site; this other site is much more important." If you absolutely must have a link off-site from your Home page, be sure to at least make it a rel="nofollow" link (Google the term to learn more).

Sweepstakes & Contests

Making your site "sticky" i.e. keeping people on it or coming back counts big with search engines. People love to play games and enter contests almost as much as they love to win. You can create quizzes that teach about your business, or ones that don't but are still fun. You could offer a sweepstakes with a worthwhile prize; perhaps something from your business or one that reflects well on or connects with your business. The possibilities are endless, and once you get your head into it, creating these can be a lot of fun. There are a couple of things to keep in mind. There are laws which govern certain types of gaming. The chances are you won't run afoul of these, but you need to be aware they are out there. A good article on this is available in the Resource area of our site. Another thing to consider is whether you want to cobble together a contest yourself or use one of the services out

there to handle it all for you. There are several companies such as RaffleCopter and ViralSweep that offer hi-quality programs and make it super easy to get started.

Back Links

Back Links are those links to your site which you receive from other sites. Not only do they steer traffic your way, but the Search Engines view them as votes of confidence that your site is good. The more links you have pointing to your site, the more your site rises in the rankings. However, there are a few things you must know about Back Links and link building, as Search Engines look at several things when considering the links you have. Not meeting muster can not only not help, it can flat-out kill your rankings:

1) **Relevance of the Link**: You run a bike shop. A link from a theatre has little relevance, while one from an outdoor magazine would. More relevance = more value.

2) **Quality of the Link:** A link from your son's soccer team page has little value compared to, say, a link from the Wall Street Journal. Higher quality = more value.

3) **Link Neighborhood:** Just like in your town, the people you hang with contribute to your reputation. Hang out, or share links with spamming, virus-laden low quality sites, and Search Engines will avoid you.

4) **Velocity of Links:** One day you have five links and the next day you have 500? Red Flag! The growth rate of your links is known as their "velocity." Grow them in a nice neat fashion like someone would naturally and you'll do fine. Spike that number and you'll get penalized.

Link building/growing takes time, patience, and often money. Since it is not easy and fraudulently gained links are easily spotted, links are and will likely remain a very strong ranking factor. Win the link game and you are in the home stretch. For tips on link building and easy to gain links, check out Low Hanging Links.

Citations & Reviews

Citations are simply mentions of your business anywhere on the Internet. Reviews are comments people leave about your business and they generate those magnetic star rating we all covet. Both of these help Search Engines gain an accurate picture of your business, as well as to determine how much credibility they are willing to give it. You see, the problem for a lot of businesses is that the information about their business such as the NAP (name, address, phone) can change over the years, creating a confusing and inaccurate portrayal of the business. Search Engines hate inaccurate information, and if they see your business has conflicting NAP spread around the Internet, they will play it safe and downgrade your website. Not good…but easily remedied.

Business directories are the easiest way to go about correcting NAP information. Submitting your correct business information to directories can build a better and more accurate picture of your business' true NAP, thereby

improving your credibility score with the Search Engines. Directories are a great way to increase your visibility and viability.

Now for the downside. The simple process of claiming and cleaning all these business directories takes hours and hours of time and is a mind-numbing process. Most business owners get a handful done and then walk away from the job. And even if they do manage to clean up their information, there are several big data aggregators, such as Factual and InfoGroup, that collect massive amounts of data on businesses and then resell this information to the business directories. If the information the data aggregators collects is inaccurate and they "push" that down to the business directories, the data will overwrite whatever cleanup efforts you have done. Ouch!

While you can do it yourself, I do recommend hiring a pro with the resources to identify the directories you are in, the ones you should be in, and the ability to claim and clean them all up. Cleaning your data at the aggregator level is something you will likely have to do once each year to keep it current.

Registration & Site Map

The last two things you can do yourself and that will help your website a lot are: 1) Create a Site Map and 2) Register your website with Google and Bing and submit your Site Map. You will need some access to the code and ability to post a file to the site:

Sitemap: Of the two types of sitemaps recognized by the Search Engines for indexing purposes, the easiest one to do create is a urllist.txt. It is a simple .txt file which lists each page on your site. For example:

http://proclasswebdesign.com/about-proclass-web-design.htm

http://proclasswebdesign.com/chris-bachman.htm

http://proclasswebdesign.com/how-we-work.htm

Add the file to your website, naming it urllist.txt, and when you register your website with the Search Engines provide them this URL when they ask for a sitemap.

Registration: Both Google and Bing offer a quick submission service where you just add your domain name and that's it. *Ignore this*. You will want to look for something they each call Webmaster Tools, or something similar depending on what the latest fad is. Once inside that console, you should be able to easily identify where to add a website URL as well as a sitemap URL. Do these two steps for both Search Engines and you will be well ahead of everyone else! Don't forget to add new pages to your urllist.txt as they are created and upload them.

Note*: If you are using WordPress, you may have Yoast installed. If so, much of this is handled for you if it is installed correctly. If not….*

You can check to see what pages a Search Engine has in their database for you by going to the Search Engine's search box and entering **site:yourdomainname** (remember to use www or not – this should be the same version as in your site map). This should pull up a results page with every page that engine has on file for you. See a bunch missing? You have a problem.

Resources

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