



Basic Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Search Engine Optimization (or Optimisation!) / SEO is the way of making your site extra nice for search engines to use!

This can be very complicated and there many good sites and books that cover this subject very comprehensively (such as: <http://www.seobook.com/>). However, this tutorial will just cover the basics of SEO.

Keywords, Keywords, Keywords!

When someone performs a search, they use keywords (or phrases made up of keywords) to find what they're looking for. To allow people to find your site, you need to use the keywords/phrases that they're likely to search for!

As well as common sense (!), there are many tools to help you choose keywords to use in your site. The one from SEO Book is most of the most useful (I think!):
<http://tools.seobook.com/keyword-tools/seobook/>

Think about what you would search for if wanted to find yourself to find you. Also ask family, friends and colleagues what they'd search for to find you. Look at other sites (especially in the same area as your site) and see what kind of words they're using.

When you've chosen your keywords, you can to use them in your site (more on that later), but you'll also need a site to use them in!

The way the site is made/what's in the site

The first thing to do is to make sure you have a site that works! I know this sounds obvious, but if your site can't be used by people, chances are that search engines will also have problems finding your site!

Think of search engines as huge and powerful 'normal' visitors! What does a normal visitor want? An easy to use site with good quality and interesting content. That's what search engines like as well!

How it's Made

Search engines also like sites that have good html code. The best way to test your site for this is to use the W3C HTML Validator: <http://validator.w3.org/> Try your site/pages in that and see what it says! If there are lots of errors, your site might need a bit of help and Simple Web Help can help you with that!!!

It can also help if the site uses <div>s and css (style sheets) to layout the contents rather than tables. When I re-coded a site, from tables into 'pure' html & css, it went up several pages on Google because Google found it easier to 'read'. There was no change to the content!

Also try to avoid using 'html frames' on a site as these can also confuse search engines.

Use heading tags (<h1>, <h2>, etc.), for the page headings and to break the pages down into relevant sections. Heading tags can help search engines work out the structure of a page and the words in the heading tags can also be important.

Search engines can't follow links made in 'flash' (unless properly done and made accessible) or in javascript menus (where all the links are in the javascript code rather than in html). Try to keep your navigation items in text links (or at least have a copy of text links on the page somewhere) so search engines can find all the pages in your site.

The Content of the Site

Have good quality content on the site, with information people want to read and can understand. Try to keep sentences short and don't waffle! Within your content, try to use your keywords as much as possible. But keep it within reason, you don't want 'keyword stuffing' (over using them to try and make the page more visible to search engines – they really don't like this!). Write naturally, for people, don't write clunky text to try and fool search engines!

A good rule about writing for the web is to take your original paragraph, take out half the words, then take out half of what's left and you've got a paragraph ready for the web! This rule comes from an excellent book called “Don't make me think” by Steve Krug. It's a very good read on making sites more user friendly and you can purchase it from the Simple Web Help Amazon Store.

Update the Site

Search engines also like sites that have regularly updated content. This way they know the site is being maintained and is more likely to be relevant. If it's right for your site, consider having a blog – perhaps with news, updates, events, new developments or on topical matters.

Meta Tags

Meta Tags are special bits of html that go in the <head> section of a page. They are invisible to normal site visitors, but search engines can read them! There are three tags:

Page Title

The title of the page (this is what you see at the top of your browser when you're on a page). It's a good idea to use the keywords about the page and have the company/organisation name in the title. It's best to use between 5-10 words and try to keep it under 65 characters (as that's all that will fit in most browser windows!).

Example for this tutorial:

```
<title>Basic and Easy Search Engine Optimization (SEO) – Simple Web Help</title>
```

Meta Description

This is a brief description (one or two short sentences) describing the page. Rather than helping with rankings, many search engines now use this tag to show a summary of the page in the search results.

Keep it about 150 characters long as that's all Google will display. (Yahoo will display slight more.)

Example for this tutorial:

```
<meta name="description" content="A tutorial about basic Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Internet marketing and how it can help search results for your website." />
```

Meta Keywords

These are a series of words separated by commas (no space needed). Include the most important keywords for the page. The keywords tag can also have phrases in it if you leave spaces between the words e.g.: tech,support,web help,simple... Keep it under 30 words.

There's some discussion about whether search engines use this tag at all! Some people say not at all and some say they're used by some search engines, if you have the same keywords in your page contents! So it's up to you as to if you want to use the tag or not!

Example for this tutorial:

```
<meta name="keywords" content="search engine optimization,search engine optimisation ,seo,search results,internet marketing,website support,web support,technical support,tech support,web,website,help,support,help,easy,tech" />
```

With all the meta things, it's important that each page should have its own unique title, description and keywords tailored to that page.

There's a good page at SEO Book describing meta tags in more detail at:

<http://tools.seobook.com/meta-medic/>

Have a Sitemap

A sitemap is a file that lists all the pages you've got in the site. It helps search engines to know what to find and index. There are a couple of ways of making a sitemap.

You can have an 'xml' sitemap (that several sites and programs can generate for you - a simple xml sitemap generator is at: <http://www.xml-sitemaps.com/>); or for a very simple site you can create a simple text (notepad) .txt file that is a list of every web page address (one per line).

When you've got your sitemap, you can submit it to to Google's Webmaster Tools:

<https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/> and Yahoo's Site Explorer:

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

You need a Google and Yahoo Account to use these services, but it's a good idea to do it!

In and Out Links

Another factor search engines take into account is the number and quality/relevance of sites that link to you. (Like a vote of approval for your site.)

So it's a good idea to ask any relevant sites/companies/associates to link to your site. You will often exchange links, with you linking back to them (often on a links page). For SEO purposes, it's best to only exchange links with good quality sites that are preferably in the same kind of business or geographical area to you (i.e. you've got some relevance to each other!).

You can add the site to directories such as dmoz: <http://www.dmoz.org/> (free) and the Yahoo Directory: <http://dir.yahoo.com/> (an annual payment)

It's also a good idea to add your site to smaller but relevant directories (e.g. if you're a Church add it to Church site directories!).

If your town/city has a directory add the site to that. If you're in a local chamber of commerce site, add it to their site/directory.

You might get some companies (normally by email) offering you a 'three way link' (where you link to someone, they link to a third party and the third party links back to you). However, these are best avoided as the links are often irrelevant to your business and Google can track them and actually penalise them! More on three way linking at: <http://www.seobook.com/archives/000467.shtml>

Get listed on the Local sections of Search engines

Another way of making your site more prominent (especially if your site/business/organisation has a physical address) is to be listed on Google and Yahoo local sections.

You might notice that when you do a search on Google, sometimes business(es) are listed at the top of the results with a map showing their location. You can kind of jump to the top of the results! It doesn't improve your 'search ranking' but can make your site more visible.

For Google go to: <http://www.google.com/local/add> and sign in with your Google Account.

For Yahoo, if you're in the USA go to: <http://listings.local.yahoo.com/csubmit/index.php>

If you're in the UK go to: <http://yahoo.infoservegroup.com/businessdetails.html>

For other countries and Yahoo, please follow the instruction in your local section!

Conclusion

Whatever you do to improve your search ranking it normally takes a while, e.g. often a month or two, before you see any change. Don't Panic! this is normal.

There's another good article on basic SEO at: <http://knol.google.com/k/aaron-wall/seo-basics/>

If you'd like Simple Web Help to help you with SEO, then please go to www.simplewebhelp.com and 'Get Help Now'!