

White paper

An introduction to effective search engine optimization (SEO)

Written by:

Christine Mariconda

President

Mariconda Marketing Solutions

631.462.6139 **Tel**

631.462.6138 **Fax**

cm@mariconda-marketing.com **Email**

An introduction to effective search engine optimization (SEO)

Christine Mariconda, President, Mariconda Marketing Solutions

Abstract

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of organizing and constructing web pages to make them easily found and indexed by search engines. SEO helps to make web pages visible and more relevant to search engines and web searchers, and helps to get your pages get displayed in search engine results pages. Why is this important? Search engines typically drive well over half of website traffic. Some studies indicate that 2 out of 3 website visitors come from search. Nowadays most marketers understand the importance of search engine optimization, but don't often have the resources to effectively perform SEO. Search Engine Optimization takes a lot of time and resources, and results take time to develop. To get visibility in search engines, many marketers turn to Pay Per Click (PPC) advertising. PPC is an excellent medium for quickly gaining search engine visibility, however, it can get expensive over time. Marketers should not rely solely on PPC for their search engine marketing efforts. Research has shown that top organic listings receive over twice the click-through rates as paid listings. This is likely because searchers know that sponsored ads are paid, and put more trust in the value of organic listings. It's important to strike a balance between PPC and SEO activities. Depending on the size of your website, you may not have the resources to optimize every web page of your site and/or optimize for every keyword or phrase that you would like. If this is the case, you should select the pages and keywords/phrases that are most critical to your business and get started with these. This paper provides an introduction to Search Engine Optimization (SEO). It covers some of the fundamental considerations and tactics for SEO.

Introduction

Today's marketers understand the importance of search engines and most integrate some type of search engine marketing strategy into their marketing plans. Because customers use search engines as a primary resource for product and other research, it is critical for companies to maintain a strong presence in search engines. Many companies focus their efforts on paid search advertising (e.g., Pay Per Click / PPC) and neglect search engine optimization (SEO). PPC is certainly an effective method for increasing visibility in search engines, however, it is a mistake to focus only on PPC. Industry research suggests that top organic listings receive at least twice as much click-through traffic as PPC ads. A focused SEO effort is important for creating a strong presence in organic search engine results. The benefits can be significant and include increased brand awareness and increased quality referral traffic (clicks) from search engines to your company's website.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Fundamentals

When a search engine user types a word or phrase into a search engine's query box, the search engine wants to return results (web page listings) that are highly relevant to that word/phrase. If the search engine fails to do this, the search engine is no longer valuable and users will move on to the next search engine. Most search engines generate revenue via paid advertising, which leverages large amounts of traffic. Search engines want to provide the best search results (sites/pages) for their visitors (the searchers) to ensure high traffic on their sites, which attracts advertisers.

A web page's position in search engine results pages (SERPs) is determined based on a number of search engine ranking factors. These factors are designed to provide users with helpful, accurate search results. No one except for the Search Engines knows the exact algorithms used for their specific page rankings, but search engine marketing professionals generally have a good idea on which factors are most important.

Ranking factors can be grouped into “on-page” and “off-page” SEO factors. Effective SEO must address both. SEO basically refers to the process of “optimizing” both the on-page and off-page ranking factors in order to achieve high search engine rankings for targeted search terms.

On-page SEO factors and strategy

On-page SEO factors are those elements that are directly related to your website design and content. There are two general areas to focus on:

- Site design/architecture, e.g., ensuring that your website is easy for search engines to crawl. If search engine spiders (programs that fetch and index web pages) can't find your key pages, these pages will not get indexed and will not get ranked in SERPs.
- Website content, e.g., ensuring that your web pages include the terms and phrases that your customers are using as search engine query terms. Why is this important? In order for your website to rank high for a term related to your product, your website content must include the term—in all the right places. Search engines must be able to easily crawl to the specific pages with these terms. If not, the search engines will not find the pages. Your pages won't be indexed and your site won't rank for the term/phrase.

To summarize on-page SEO, it's all about optimizing your website for search engines to increase your site's relevance to specific keywords and to remove barriers to the indexing activities of search engines.

Off-page SEO factors and strategy

Off-page SEO factors primarily refers to the search engines' external link-based analysis. Search engines have decided that if other sites are linking to your site, your site must be important and deserves a boost in rankings (when everything else is equal.) If your website does not have inbound links from other websites it will not achieve high rankings in highly competitive categories. Nowadays all major search engine algorithms place some emphasis on link popularity when determining the most relevant answers (results) to search queries. Even if you have web pages that are well-designed and well-written for search, you will typically not optimize rankings without strong link popularity. Boosting the link popularity of a particular web page or website is essential for consistent visibility in SERPs.

Link popularity is determined by the number of external links that you have pointing to your website—and, more importantly, the number of quality links (those that originate on trusted websites that include content that's relevant to your site.) The anchor text that is associated with the external link that points to your site also influences link popularity.

To summarize off-page SEO, it's all about securing external “quality” links to your site from sites that are relevant to your business; for example, sites that focus on the same keyword phrases as your site focuses on, and online business directories that have category listings relevant to your business.

SEO Tactics

Search Engine Optimization campaigns that focus on both on-page and off-page SEO factors achieve the best results. Listed below are the fundamental steps for effective SEO. The sections that follow provide additional information.

- Keyword research, analysis and list building
- Site audit
- Benchmarking
- On-page site optimization
- Link building
- SEO performance tracking

Keyword research, analysis, and list building

Keyword (and key “phrase”) research, analysis and list building is the first step for all Search Engine Marketing activities, whether SEO or Pay Per Click advertising. It is the process of identifying the keywords or phrases that are relevant to your website and that customers use as query terms in search engines. Before implementing any SEM program, you must first identify the words/phrases that customers put into the query (search) box to find your products, services, and company, and those of your competitors. Keyword research is not about defining the keywords that you want to be found on; it's about identifying the keywords and phrases that your customers are using. Specific tasks related to keyword research, analysis and list building include:

- Keyword brainstorming & discovery
- Keyword research & analysis
- Final keyword selection

Site review and audit

Before beginning any SEO campaign, it is important to conduct an analysis of your existing website. The site should be evaluated based on a variety of search friendliness and ranking factors. Structural and content issues need to be documented. Depending on the site design and architecture, all issues may not be easily addressed. Regardless, they need to be written down and put into a search engine optimization plan that is realized over time.

Benchmarking and SEO campaign tracking

Benchmarking should be conducted to get a baseline reading of where your website pages stand with the major search engines. Major competitors should also be tracked. Specialized SEO tools can be used to collect this information.

Once you start implementing an SEO campaign, results need to be tracked on a scheduled basis. Typically a search engine optimization and submission effort (once fully implemented) needs up to six months to show significant results. In particularly competitive fields, it may take longer to achieve good results. Once the SEO campaign kicks in, rankings should be sustained at a good level as long as SEO best practices are continued. Search engines change their algorithms from time to time. This can alter rankings and may require some tweaking of SEO activities. The competitive landscape can also impact rankings over time. It is, therefore, important to continue tracking SEO activities even after the initial campaign is implemented.

There are many Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that should be tracked. Some of the most critical KPIs include:

- Keyword positioning (for primary keywords)
- Page Rank (PR)
- Backlinks to the site
- Keywords searched - internal / external
- Top referring sites; search engine traffic share
- Number of search engine referrals;
% New / % Returning
- Number of organic vs. paid search engine referrals
- Search engine referral traffic bounce rates
- Average time on site
- Number of keywords driving traffic
- Volume of non-branded and branded traffic
(are you ranking for “generic” terms)

In addition to your website benchmarking, top competitors should also be tracked as it relates to:

- Keyword positioning (for primary keywords)
- Page rank
- Backlinks to site

On-page site optimization

On-page search engine optimization involves the review and optimization of your existing web pages for search engines. Even if you have a wealth of product and related applications information on your website, if it is not written in a way that is search engine friendly, you will not achieve high rankings.

On-page optimization involves editing/optimizing your website pages to make sure that the keywords, phrases, and variations of descriptive keywords are included in the web page areas that search engines crawl. Your website text may need to be edited and/or text added to integrate relevant keywords and phrases. There are specific areas of the web page that need to include keywords and phrases. The areas of your web pages that should include keywords are:

- Page titles
- Headlines
- Subheads
- First sentence or two of body copy
- Inner anchor text linking to deeper pages
- Photo captions
- Photo alt text
- Meta descriptions
- Meta tags

Keyword density is also important. Keyword density is the percentage of times a keyword or key phrase appears on a web page in comparison with the total number of words on the page. Industry experts suggest that Google’s requirements say that pages not exceed a keyword density of 2%, whereas Yahoo and Bing have higher density tolerance of up to 5%. With proper SEO, it’s also important not to “over edit” content for search. The content has to be user friendly first. If a term doesn’t work in a page headline or title, it should not be forced even if it’s a targeted keyword. If keyword density is too high, search engines may consider that you are “keyword stuffing”, which can negatively impact rankings.

A good idea is to create and maintain a data matrix of keywords/phrases by page, by specific area of the page (e.g., page title, headline, etc.) The data matrix can then be provided to your web programmer/designer for implementation, and reviewed on a periodic basis to ensure that the most relevant keywords/phrases are included in the right places of each page. You should create a web page that contains a site index. This can help search engines crawl your site.

Link building

As noted previously, all major search engines place emphasis on link popularity when determining the most relevant answers (results) to search queries. Even if you have web pages that are well-designed and well-written for search, you will typically not rank as high as possible without strong link popularity. Link building is not only a key component to ranking in the search engines, it will also bring direct traffic to your site from websites that have relevant content and audiences.

The key is to secure links on sites that are relevant to your business. There are many sites that offer footer and other links for a low fee and/or companies that will submit your site to hundreds of sites for a nominal fee, but these sites typically do not constitute quality links. Hundreds of links from sites that focus on topics that have nothing to do with your site could help give you a boost in the short term, but will eventually reflect negatively on your rankings. Search engines are able to detect tactics designed to artificially inflate search engine rankings, and your site will get penalized for using these types of practices. The key for link building is to identify sites that will help to boost your site's link popularity over the long term. There are a variety of site types that should be considered, including online business directories, industry-related sites and portals, news sites, blogs, and more.

White hat vs. black hat SEO

When conducting Search Engine Optimization, it's important that everything you do is on the up and up. If search engines determine that you are implementing practices designed to manipulate rankings, your website will be penalized. Google, for example, will remove your website pages from its index. The major search engines include guidelines for search engine optimization; it's a good idea to carefully review their guidelines to ensure that you don't do anything that conflicts. There are many techniques that have been employed through the years that search

engines consider "black hat" SEO. Black hat tactics sometimes work to boost rankings in the short term, but eventually cause more harm. These tactics are designed to manipulate rankings and are considered spamming, which you should always avoid. Following are just a few black hat SEO tactics to avoid.

- Hidden text on pages that include keywords and phrases
- Extensive keyword stuffing (e.g., using too many keywords on a page)
- Loading pages with irrelevant keywords
- Loading pages with hidden links
- Automatically generate
- Creating duplicate content on multiple pages and/or sites
- Utilization of link farms and/or sites that are completely unrelated to your site in order to generate inbound links to your site
- Cloaking and use of false redirects

When looking for a search engine marketing company to help with SEO, be cautious of companies that make claims about quick ranking results and also generating hundreds or thousands of inbound links to your website. Credible "white hat" SEO is typically not a very quick process. Often times the companies that make claims about quick rankings and unbelievable link building are typically using practices that should be avoided.

Knowledge transfer

As part of your overall SEO, it is important to have a web champion driving the effort. This should be an individual that has sound fundamental knowledge of Search Engine Marketing (SEM) best practices. It is also important for all individuals involved in content development and web design to have a fundamental understanding of SEO concepts. This helps to ensure that new content and website features are always developed with SEO in mind.

About the author



Christine Mariconda is the President and founder of Mariconda Marketing Solutions, a full-service marketing consulting and communications company based in New York. Christine is a marketing communications professional with 20 years experience working for startup and global companies.

She has expertise in a wide range of disciplines: marketing strategy and planning, branding and corporate identity, traditional marketing communications (print advertising, direct mail, trade shows, print catalogs, public relations, etc.), online media (website design, search engine marketing, e-mail marketing, social media, etc.), as well as lead management, including the development and implementation of closed-loop sales force automation systems.

Prior to establishing Mariconda Marketing Solutions, for over 15 years Christine held senior management positions at market-leading companies serving the life science research, pharmaceutical, biotech, analytical chemistry, clinical and related markets. As Executive Director of Communications and e-Business for

Brinkmann® Instruments and Eppendorf®, Inc., Christine ran a full-service in-house advertising / marketing communications department that was responsible for all marketing communications activities in North America. Christine was also responsible for local corporate identity management, internal corporate communications, lead process management, customer database development, and the implementation of a Sales Force Automation application. As a member of Eppendorf's Global Creative Committee, Christine provided strategic and creative input for a wide range of global projects. Throughout her 20+ years in corporate life, Christine helped to evolve some of the most well known brands in the laboratory products and analytical instrumentation industries.

Christine's background also includes a strong academic foundation. She has a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Business Administration in Marketing.

Learn more about Christine's background at:

www.linkedin.com/in/christinemariconda

www.mariconda-marketing.com

Mariconda Marketing Solutions

Tel: 631.462.6139

Fax: 631.462.6138

Email: cm@mariconda-marketing.com

Web: www.mariconda-marketing.com

www.mariconda-searchmarketing.com

MARICONDA
Marketing Solutions