

Search Engine Optimization

The Basic Facts Every Small Business Owner Should Know

RICK EISENBART

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Introduction : Why Should You Care About SEO?

It's a fair question, though I suspect you already know the answer or you wouldn't be reading this in the first place.

Let's say you paid for a web hosting account, bought your domain name, and either developed your site yourself (congratulations!) or hired someone to design and build it for you. Depending on how complex your site is, it may have cost you hundreds or thousands of dollars. Now your site is online and you can't wait to reap the rewards of that investment; to hear the phone ring, or see those first e-mails or orders coming in from your new customers! Two months later, your business hasn't picked up, the phone isn't ringing any more than it did before, and the site isn't getting you any e-mails. What went wrong?

You forgot the most important aspect of your new website.

Putting up a website and hoping it will be discovered is like sending out an SOS by using a message in a bottle: you cast it out into a sea of billions of other web pages, and hope it will be found. If your site can't be *found*, it won't do you much good. You can tell your existing customers where to find your new website, but how do you get *new customers* to find it? They're searching the web *right now* for your products and services, but amongst all the other web pages out there: will they find your site or will they find your competitors' instead? The answer depends on the search engines, and how they evaluate pages.

It's the search engines' job to examine and sort all of those billions of pages on the internet in order to present helpful search results. To accomplish that, the search engines need to determine how *relevant and useful* a page is for any given search term. SEO prepares a website to be 'found' by helping the search

engines to determine what each page is about.

Through careful SEO, your pages can be placed higher on the search engine results pages, where they're more likely to be seen and more likely to lead customers to your site. When was the last time you had to search beyond the third page of search results to find what you needed? Like most people, you probably found just what you wanted on the first or second page of search results. That's where you need your web pages to be in order for your customers to find them. And SEO can help you accomplish that. You might say a properly optimized web page is more like sending out that SOS via an email blast, rather than using a 'message in a bottle'.

This e-book is not intended to serve as a do-it-yourself manual for search engine optimization. The subject is far too broad for that. Rather it is intended to help website owners understand the basics of search engine optimization, and how the search engines index web pages. It will include many tips that you can implement yourself with little or no technical knowledge, and will hopefully get you thinking about how to write your website content to make it more relevant to your readers, as well as easier for your customers to find you. And if you decide to hire an SEO consultant, this e-book will provide you with the background you need to converse with and interview those potential consultants.

In this document I often mention Google, but I rarely mention the other search engines by name. This is not to suggest that you ignore the other engines. But each search engine assigns different levels of importance to various factors in their ranking process, so what may be an accurate statement about Yahoo (or Bing) is not necessarily accurate for Google. Since Google currently has approximately 63% of the search market share,

and since this document deals only with the basics of search engine optimization, concentrating on Google seems a reasonable place to start.

Search Engine Optimization – A basic definition

Search Engine Optimization (**SEO**) is the process of preparing web pages to be searched by search engines such as Google, Yahoo, Bing, and many others. The effort begins with the selection of certain "**keywords**" which customers are likely to use when searching for your products or services. These keywords are then incorporated strategically within your web pages. When someone conducts a search for these keywords, the search engines will recognize that your page says something about them, and will display your page among the search engine result pages (**SERPs**). Proper optimization of your pages for those specific keywords can help the page to be placed higher within the search results. A higher position on the SERPs should lead to more visitors to your web page, and correspondingly higher sales.

An important concept to note is that Search Engines rank web *pages*, not web *sites*. The search engines are interested in determining how relevant and useful a page is for a given search. Each page is ranked on its own merits. If you have a page that talks about one specific product, that page is going to rank more highly in a search for that product than your page that discusses your company policies. There is not much point in applying more than a low level of optimization effort to your company policy page, or other pages not directly related to your product or services.

The SEO effort consists of both on-page and off-page techniques. Your on-page SEO should be targeted at maximizing the *relevance* of each page for the topic or product the page is about. Your off-page SEO can

help search engines determine the *usefulness* of your page by increasing its PageRank.

It's important to understand a few terms and concepts in order to digest some of the information in this document.

Relevance is a measure of how well your page's content matches the user's search phrase. In other words, if your page is properly optimized for the keywords that the user is searching for, that page is relevant to that search.

PageRank results from Google's interpretation of the quality, authority, and credibility of an individual page. This is the measure of how *useful* the site appears (to the search engines) for a particular search term. In very general terms, the more inbound links you have on your page, the higher its PageRank will be. Inbound links with higher PageRank than yours will provide more benefit.

Inbound Links are links from other websites to yours. These can be very powerful for your pages' position on the SERPS. Having inbound links from other web pages to yours, especially from very popular pages or pages with high PageRank, is a great way to achieve high PageRank for your own page.

Google Analytics is a tracking program that provides a wealth of data about the visitors to your website. Among the many details it can report are: visitor's geographic location, which websites are sending traffic to your site, the keywords used to find your site, time spent viewing each page, etc. Google makes the tracking code freely available (though you still need to install it, and make sense of what the data tells you).

Bounce Rate – A “bounce” is a visitor that lands on one page of your site, but does not move to any other page of your site. This usually happens if they immediately realize they are not on a page that meets their

needs, or if they followed a link to a blog post, read the post, and were satisfied. Your website design should make efforts to ensure that the viewer is engaged by what they see on every page, and feel a need to explore the site in more depth (for example, to read the About page, or go the contact / portfolio/ quote request pages, etc.). Bounce Rate is reported as part of the data within Google Analytics. The “Time on Site” and “Average Page Views” data (also provided by Google Analytics) are also useful measures of how engaging a site is.

Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) - These are the pages presented by your search engine after you submit your search criteria. They show what the search engine determines to be the most relevant and useful pages that match your search term.

How it's Done – The Basics

Baseline Data Collection

Before you can evaluate the effectiveness of an SEO effort, you'll need to have baseline data about your website traffic. This represents the “before” component of your “before and after” comparison. Baseline data should include things like: how many unique visitors did I have this month? How many pages did each visitor view on average? How much time did the average visitor spend on my site? How did my visitors get to my website? What percentage of visitors 'bounced' (ie, viewed only one page, then left the site)? Which keywords were used to find my site? These are some of the criteria that SEO will improve for you, but without collecting baseline data, you won't be able to evaluate the success of your SEO efforts.

Analytic software can be coded into each appropriate page of your website. Google makes this software freely available to users (www.google.com/analytics). Soon after this code is installed, data collection will begin automatically. You'll usually want one full month of baseline data to allow easy evaluation of SEO success from month-to-month. To make a clean comparison, don't initiate any SEO modifications during the baseline data collection period. There are other tasks to perform during this initial month, such as competitor and keyword research.

Competitor Research

Take a moment to do a quick little exercise. Go to your favorite search engine and just type in the name of the primary product or service your company provides. Depending on how common your product or service is, you may see thousands of pages in the search results, so let's narrow this down a little. Do another search for the same term, but this time add the name of your city or county along with the product or service. Again, if you're providing something common, you may still see quite a few results, but at least now it should be a more manageable list. Do you notice any of your main competitors near the top of the search results? Click on one of them, and spend a little time reviewing the page that comes up. What do you notice about this web page that you think might cause it rise to the top of the results list for the term you searched? This is the first step in Competitor Research.

Of course, Competitor Research can quickly reveal how much competition you have for the terms you entered in your search. But there are many possible keywords to consider, and some may have very little competition.

Keyword Research

Deciding which keywords to optimize is another important initial step in the SEO process. Recall that search engines rank web *pages*, not web *sites*. So each page must be optimized separately, and you should only try to optimize any page for a few (1 to 3) keywords. This is a good reason to split a 'Services' page into several pages, each with its own optimization for one specific service/keyword. These resulting pages would almost certainly be placed higher on the SERPs than the combined 'services' page for their respective keywords.

Since a page can realistically only be optimized for a few keywords, the selection of relevant keywords is critical. Keyword relevancy is defined (by Google) as the likelihood that users searching on that keyword are interested in the advertiser's product or service. It shouldn't be too hard for website owners to generate a basic list of keywords for their products or services, but using the Google Keyword Tool (www.google.com/sktool/) can help identify relevant keywords to add to your list.

it's likely that your list of keywords will be modified as the SEO effort progresses. SEO often requires the testing of keywords and page content to find out what works best. There's a fair amount to know about keyword selection, and some keywords that you think are perfect will prove to be too broad to attract serious customers.

On-Page Search Engine Optimization Efforts

One part of the on-page effort includes making a page “search engine friendly”. This just means that the code is clean and easy for the search engines to navigate and index. Whoever built your site should have done this for you; it's just good coding practice, and a standards-compliant website will almost certainly be 'search engine friendly’.

If you have search engine friendly pages to optimize, and you've selected your keywords for each page, it's time to optimize your content for those keywords. You may have already written your content, and included the keywords, but their placement within the page and in the HTML code associated with the page can make a significant difference in your placement on the SERPs. At this point (if not sooner) it's probably best to hand the SEO task over to a professional. The search engine algorithms are quite sophisticated, and subtle changes in the placement, density and formatting of your keywords can give you the edge you need to get your page placed higher than your competitors'. I'm not trying to hide things from you here (after all, I'm making this ebook available for free, right?), but this isn't a “how-to” manual. Just check to see that your SEO consultant has included your keywords within your title tag, URL, meta description, headings, internal page links, and text. If any of that previous sentence confused you, you probably shouldn't be trying to do this yourself!

Basic Off-Page Search Engine Optimization Efforts

Basic off-page SEO efforts will usually include items such as: a 301 re-direct; adding your site to several directory listings; ensuring that links pointing to your site are written correctly; and any of a variety of other tactics.

A 301 re-direct ensures that traffic coming to your site via “<http://www.yoursite.com>”, “<http://yoursite.com>”, <http://www.yoursite.com/index>”, etc are all credited to *one address* for your homepage. You can decide which of those various addresses will receive all of the re-directed traffic. Anyone typing any of these addresses would land on the exact same page, but if not for the 301 re-direct each of those 3 addresses would

be considered separate, and traffic data would be split between them. The 301 re-direct makes SEO data analysis easier, and allows your homepage to rank higher on the SERPs.

Directory listings can be valuable for increasing traffic to your site. This is an easy part of the SEO process that any site owner can quickly do on their own. Start with a search for industry-specific directories, and evaluate them according to their apparent professionalism and lack of 'spammy' advertisements (such as ads for things wholly unrelated to your industry). If the directory looks very focused and highly relevant to your business, it is more likely to help your site traffic and your position on the SERPs. Some directories will charge for listing your site, some will be free. This is pretty simple research you can do for yourself. But if you pay for listing from a directory, you'll want to carefully watch your traffic levels to determine what percentage of your traffic comes from that paid listing. It may not be worth renewing.

The way a link is written can have an effect on its relevance for SEO. If the link to your site is written as a simple URL, (like “<http://www.website.com/>”) with no associated text, it's not immediately apparent to the search engines what the linked page is about. But if the link is written inside of a sentence, the search engines have the ability to use the associated text within the sentence as keywords to determine what the linked page is about. As a keyword appears more often in links to your web page, the SERP placement of that page improves when that keyword is searched. Of the following three examples, the most effective choice should be obvious (yet people still continue to use all of these regularly).

[Click here.](#)

www.joesparts.com

[Joe's Appliance Parts](#) has the best selection of refrigerator parts in Fulton County!

You or your SEO consultant can work with your customers, distributors, and anyone else that may have a

link to your site to ask them to re-write their links in more SEO-friendly ways.

As mentioned, there are a variety of ways to do off-page SEO. Some of these tactics are termed “black hat” tactics (frowned upon by the search engines, and the web community in general). Black hat techniques can quickly get your site banned from appearing on the SERPs. The techniques I've mentioned in this section are commonly approved “white hat” tactics, and should give you a good idea of some of the ways your site can be optimized without direct changes to your web pages.

Advanced SEO efforts/ Social Media and Link Building

Hubspot.com provides an excellent explanation for the term 'link building' ...

“A critical factor for ranking higher in search engines is the number of links into your website. Links are the currency of the Internet and each link into your site acts as a 'vote' that tells the search engines that your site is a quality site.”

The use of social media is among the most effective forms of link building. When you think about it, it really makes sense: if you create interesting and valuable content, people will link to it and share it with others.

Are you a good writer? Are you passionate and *very* knowledgeable about your industry or services? Do you (or does someone you employ) have the time and interest to devote to writing regular blog posts? If so, then adding a blog page to your site could give you a significant boost in traffic! Every post within a blog is handled by Google as a separate web page, so by blogging you're adding lots of (hopefully) interesting content that someone will find useful. That useful content will be indexed by the search engines, and will

appear just like the other pages of your website within the SERPs. This makes it easier for your potential customers to find your website.

If you have a Twitter account (www.twitter.com), you can “Tweet” about your business promotions, sales, new products, recently acquired skills, projects you're working on, etc. Many people also use Facebook (www.facebook.com) to promote their business in a casual environment. An account with LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) allows you to connect with other professionals in a more business-like environment. All of these can help you to reach out to your customers and keep in touch with them.

But there is another method of link building that typically involves a direct request for (and possible purchase of) links from relevant and popular websites. Relevant sites could include your providers or suppliers, customers, trade groups, and other affiliated (but non-competing) businesses. You may find a local directory for your services that will be willing to list your business and link to it. Be careful what you pay for, as not all directories are equally effective, and not all of them have listing charges. Links coming from more popular and authoritative websites are (as we've discussed) very valuable in terms of your own site's SERP positioning, and in terms of their ability to drive traffic to your site.

How to Stay On Top

SEO should be considered as a component of your regular marketing strategy and/or website maintenance. Think of it this way...you need SEO because you want to have more site traffic and gain an advantage over your competitors. But it's very likely they're doing their own SEO program. If you use SEO to move your pages up near the top of the SERPs, but then you halt your SEO efforts, your competitors may overtake you

and push your listings back down...and all of your efforts could be lost.

Google AdWords (Pay-Per-Click) Campaign

One final SEO technique well worth considering is the creation of a Google AdWords account. AdWords are the tiny little ads you see on the right side of the SERPs when you do a Google Search.

With AdWords, you'll compose your own ad. Google usually starts running the ad the same day you create it. Currently, it costs \$5 to activate your AdWords account (you'll want to make an initial deposit to cover the per-click charges too). Once your account is set up and funded, it will be debited only when someone clicks on your ad. You can set the maximum amount you want to spend per-click and per-month so you won't get any unpleasant surprises. This is an inexpensive way to target ads to people that are already searching for keywords related to your services. If you're currently paying for a yellow page ad in the phone book, creating an AdWords pay-per-click campaign could prove to be a more effective and less expensive option.

Your SEO consultant can handle the details of this marketing campaign for you. There is a tremendous amount to learn about AdWords, and it's a good idea to watch the data several times per week, if not daily, until the campaign is well-established.

Results 1 - 10 of about 4,230,000 for [Marietta Web.](#)

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Something to Remember

Be aware that several months will be needed to complete even a basic level of SEO for your website. This is due to the need for gathering baseline data before actually beginning the optimization process, and baseline data collection takes a full month (unless your site already has 1000 visits or more per month). The SEO effort involves constant testing and adjustments. Your SEO consultant will need to collect some data on the initial efforts, and once sufficient data is collected and analyzed, adjustments will be made. Some of the initial adjustments during the first month won't really show their full effects until the second month of monitoring. Sites with more limited traffic levels may require longer to optimize, since the lower amount of data will be harder to correctly interpret.

Thank you for reading this e-book. I hope you found it useful and well worth your time. If you're ready to add SEO to your existing website, ask me for a **FREE WEBSITE EVALUATION**, including an analysis of the SEO friendliness of your site, some keyword suggestions, and your current SERP position for those keywords. If you'd like to discuss any of the concepts in this e-book, please contact me at rick@latitude17south.com, or visit my blog page at <http://blog.latitude17south.com/>.

I provide website services to small business owners, with a patient 'hand-holding' approach for those that need it. I'm constantly looking for partnering opportunities with web designers and hosting companies that need coding help.