

Topic | Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

Tutorial 19

Search engines 101

This tutorial will explain how search engines work and why a website needs to follow a search-engine-friendly format.

Reading time: 10 minutes | Prerequisites: None

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1. What is SEO and why do I absolutely need it?

Search engines such as Google, Yahoo! MSN and Bing are the Internet stakeholders. Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of designing and improving a website so it ranks high in search engine results when someone who doesn't know your business searches for the services or products you offer.

Search engine optimisation is not an elective but a business prerequisite.

If your website is not optimised for search engines there is little chance that it will appear high in the search engine results list. Since more than 95% of people start their search on search engines your website needs to meet key search engine requirements.

a). How do search engines operate?

One of the objectives of search engines is to rank the most trusted, usable, functional and informative sites first. They want to provide the user with the **most relevant information**. It comes as no surprise that SEO has become an integral part of web development and **needs to be first considered at the planning stages of your online strategy or website project**.

Let's first review how search engines operate.

They send their robots to crawl your site to:

- **Understand** what your website and business is about
- **Index** all your pages in their database
- **List your website's pages on the first pages of results** when a potential visitor enters keywords that describe your offer
- **Increase targeted visitation** to your website and eventually grow your bottom line



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If your business is a luxury bed and breakfast along the Great Ocean Road, you will need to optimise your website so it appears in search engine results for words such as “luxury bed and breakfast”, “romantic getaway” and/or “great ocean road” instead of just appearing for its business name.

b). What can I expect if I have an optimised online strategy?

Having an optimised website means that you are growing its online visibility. Accompanied with quality content, the online visitor will be enticed to contact you and book your product. With an optimised website, relevant inbound links and a sustainable strategy you can expect to:

- Rank on the first pages of search engines for the keywords your target market uses to search for you.

If you are a transport company providing airport transfers to a coastal destination such as Byron Bay, you want to also list on search engines when people search: “how do I get to Byron Bay from Brisbane” and not only when people search for “transfer to Byron Bay”. It often pays to optimise for the “symptoms” instead of the “solution”.

- Be visible on other sites that are often used by your target market to research and share holiday experiences.

Do you have a YouTube account (video sharing site) where you have personalised videos about your product and area? If set up properly, people will stumble upon your video whilst searching travel related videos on YouTube.

Are you a member of your local or regional tourism organisation? You will be able to get a listing on their website.

2. Before I start what do I need to know?

- Search engine optimisation takes time. Allow up to 3 months for search engines to pick up your new content.
- Search engine optimisation and web design are two different professions but they need to work hand in hand for your project to be visible on the Internet.

The following questions will allow you to assess the level of expertise of the SEO company you hire:

- Assess if they are small-business specialists
- Ask them for case studies of projects (if the clients do not want to be named, ask for tactics, results, site type)

- Ask for detailed outlines of how projects are priced
- Ask for a clear list of services (keyword research, how many keywords optimised on how many pages, how many hours will they spend on sourcing quality inbound links)
- Ask them how you will be able to measure the effectiveness of the optimisation they will perform on your site(s). Will they send you clear reports with your keyword rankings on a monthly basis?
- Work hand in hand with your search engine consultant; provide them with as much input as required, just like you would with an architect that would design your new house.
- Be cautious if the company tells you they will “submit” your site to numerous search engines. Sites do not get submitted nowadays but search engines crawl and index the site if the content is accessible and relevant. Keep in mind that Google, Yahoo!, MSN and Bing are still the main key players.
- Ensure your website’s content management system (CMS) is search engine friendly.
- Setup your own tracking in Google Analytics to monitor your visits and your conversions.

a). **Is my site in its current state traffic-worthy?**

Before you start optimising your site, you need to ensure that optimising it in its current state is not going to be a waste of money. Your content might be dated, the format of your website might not be search engine friendly and you may be using a content management system that may limit your future search engine efforts.

When shall I really consider a site-reconstruction?

This question can be difficult to answer. However, if you do not have access to your files, if your site is dated, if integrating a content management to your existing website is not worth it or if search engines cannot see the content of your website, you should definitely seek assistance from web professionals.

Start by asking for the opinion of your local tourism e-marketing expert (your Regional Tourism Organisation should have a specialist staff on board) or attend online marketing workshops.

Then write a brief and ask for proposals from at least 3 web specialists.

Keep in mind that a site reconstruction could take approximately 3 months from brief to Go Live. If you are promised a turnaround of 2 weeks or less, there is little chance that the content of your site will be improved. Since content is key for search engine optimisation warning bells should start ringing.

It is a good project to do during the low season, as you will need to be fully involved and (re)write (or work with a web copywriter) your new content! A website is not something you have on the side but it is one the most important component of your marketing strategy.

3. Key learning outcomes

- There is no point of having a website that is not optimised for search
- Search engine optimisation starts with keyword research
- You need to track your keyword rankings and conversions on a monthly basis to see if your investment was worthwhile
- Search engine optimisation takes times and is an activity that needs to be done regularly.

4. Related material

a). Related tutorials

- Target market 101
- What is a content management system
- Search engines 101
- Critical components of optimising a website
- Google tools

b). Related websites

- Google basics: www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=70897
- Search engine optimisation:
www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35291