

Search Engine Optimization

Understanding What It Is and How It Works

Jason Scheiner, *staff writer*

*“If information on the web
can’t be found,
it may as well not exist.”*

Thomas G. Field, Jr., Professor of Law
Franklin Pierce Law Center

*“If you have trouble finding
the pages, so will
the spiders.”*

Gary Woods, Computer Trainer
Santa Barbara Association of Realtors

The Internet is Huge.

The Internet is an ocean filled with billions of tiny islands. Every day, millions of people travel between these islands, in search of products, services, and information. But the ocean is massive, and maps are needed to travel between the islands.

Maps are provided by companies such as Google™, Yahoo!®, and Microsoft®.

A user enters the word “horse” into Google™, and suddenly the paths to many islands are illuminated. A user enters “seeds” into Yahoo!® and receives *over forty million* results.

But only ten “seeds” results appear on page one.

If your business is selling seeds and you don’t appear until page 1000, you won’t get many customers through Yahoo!®

How do search engines rank websites?

Search engines such as Google™, Yahoo!®, and MSN® index websites via programs called *spiders*. Spiders creep and crawl all over the Internet, digging into the deepest corners, leaping from website to website.

Spiders crawl from page link to page link. One by one, they access every single link throughout a website, indexing the website in the process.

But a spider’s job isn’t over after it’s indexed a page — the spider’s work has only just begun.

Spiders determine the quality of each individual page — the accuracy of contained information, the volume of useful content, the likelihood of a user wanting to visit that particular page when a keyword search is performed.

Keywords are, as the name implies, key. A “keyword” can simply be described as a word entered into a search engine when a user wants to find information.

One might think that the more times an individual keyword appears on a page, the more likely the page will be brought before a user performing a search.

“Think of providing value for your visitors first and foremost, in the form of useful and informative content, and you won’t go too far wrong.”

Wayne Hurlbert, Consultant
Blog Business World

“If your website does not have the keyword content that people are using for search, it will not show up in search results, period.”

Jennifer Ryan, CEO
The Marketing Shop

But mere repetition of keywords does not give a page quality. After all, a page consisting of nothing but the words “Cajun dining” over and over with one photograph of jambalaya wouldn’t help someone find dinner.

Quality is more important than repetition. The quality of keyword-containing information significantly impacts a page’s ranking in major search engines.

Links to and from external pages also affect page rank. If your page is high quality and contains links to an external page, the external page’s ranking can be improved, and vice-versa.

All these factors and more affect a spider’s opinion of your website. And when spiders like your website, search engines rank it favorably.

How can I improve my website’s search ranking?

There are many ways to improve a website’s search ranking.

First, obviously, is to have a large amount of good content. Because end-users always desire high-quality information, search engine developers have created impressive algorithms to separate quality content from poor content.

Once high-quality content is developed, it must be tailored to appeal more to search engines. Due to spiders’ programming, certain writing styles are more appealing to search engines. Also, strategic repetition of keywords and phrases can increase ranking — not mere ad nauseam repetition, but carefully-crafted prose designed to both be highly-readable by humans and highly-desirable to search engine spiders.

After strong, high-quality, search engine-friendly text is written, and once substantial keyword research has optimized a website’s content, search engine ranking should increase substantially.

Keyword research? But I know how to write a description.

Yes, and you have reason to be confident. When you create a product or service description, you fully understand what you are writing and why you are writing it. But remember: many searching individuals are less familiar with your product or service.

Many people routinely misspell words, or use incorrect terminology. Some appropriate keywords may not appear directly related to your business.

Thorough keyword research builds on what you already know. It can also direct you to add things you would’ve never thought to add on your own. Therefore, effective keyword research can bolster search engine rankings.

“Ignore tricky ‘backdoor’ advice. There is no such thing as a backdoor to a search engine’s index.”

Sebastian
Sebastian’s Pamphlets

“To truly succeed with eCommerce, businesses need to invest time and resources in SEO.”

James Curley, CEO
Mountain Media

Keyword research allows you to understand the terms that people actually search for. For example, let’s say you sell computer parts. You sell computers, motherboards, and hard drives. A user may enter “mainboard” into a Google™ search — “mainboard” is another word for “motherboard,” but if your website doesn’t show up for “mainboard” searches, you won’t sell a motherboard to a person searching for “mainboard.”

And when other websites link to your website, your website’s ranking will improve even further — especially if the link contains a relevant keyword.

Why do links help my website’s search ranking?

Imagine two identical websites. One is linked to by numerous highly-ranked industry affiliates, and the other has few sites linking to it.

The first site will have substantially higher search engine rankings.

When spiders index websites, they analyze many different kinds of statistics and information. In particular, spiders look at other sites which link to your website, how highly they rank, and how relevant they are to people performing searches. When other high-quality websites link to your site, spiders believe your page is also high-quality, so your page’s search engine ranking increases. Similarly, if your site is highly-ranked and it links to another site, that other site’s ranking will increase.

Think about it — when you like something, you tell other people about it, right? Linking to a site is the Internet equivalent of calling your friends to recommend the proverbial new restaurant downtown.

A link exchange is a powerful and often-overlooked tool for improving search engine rankings. Websites naturally linked to by numerous related pages consistently rank highly on all related search engine results, even if other websites maintain similar content and quality.

Spider-friendly text, keyword research, and link exchanges are all significant elements of Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

“SEO?” What’s that?

SEO is a highly-inclusive term for all processes used to make a website more appealing to search engines. SEO includes significant amounts of keyword research, writing, revising, linking, and general maintenance. It is an ongoing process, constantly evolving as the Internet changes.

SEO is a complex process requiring significant effort. Research, strategy development, keyword-rich content creation, competition analysis, and link exchanges can take hours or days to complete on your own, assuming you know where to perform research and how to use the necessary tools.

“The most effective campaigns are routinely expanded based upon what has been successful in the past.”

Scott Buresh, Managing Partner
Medium Blue Search Engine Marketing

“It can often be easier and more productive to bring the SEO consultants in during the planning stages of a web site than after a site launch.”

Lee Odden, President
TopRank Online Marketing

And after SEO, my website will keep a high search ranking?

Well, not exactly. Remember how we said the Internet is constantly evolving? Your competitors are also busy optimizing their websites for higher page rankings, and search engines frequently tweak their spiders. Only through constant vigilance can search engine rankings be maintained.

Maintaining search engine rankings is a daunting task. You are busy running your company; do you have time to perform SEO?

Can you afford not to perform SEO?

Maybe I could use a hand.

Fortunately, you’re in luck. Many companies exist to help you in your quest for SEO — companies with experience, talent, dedication, and skill. We refer to these companies as “White Hat” organizations.

Unfortunately, there also exist “Black Hat” organizations. Black Hat organizations make promises and take your money, but they don’t perform any long-term beneficial optimization. They can even get your website banned from search engines!

How do I find a good White Hat organization?

Here are some important questions to ask:

How did I learn about the company?

Be wary of unsolicited e-mail from unknown sources.

Many Black Hat SEO companies use spam to solicit new customers. Don’t be taken in by e-mail scams — be as skeptical of SEO spam as you would be about spam selling “v1agra” or “mort.gages.”

Reputable SEO companies never advertise over unsolicited e-mail. They make themselves known through legal and acceptable means, such as website and magazine advertising and publication of accomplishments.

Does the company make outrageous claims?

Often, Black Hat SEO companies make far-reaching claims, such as guaranteeing #1 placement on Google™ within a day. In contrast, reputable companies know that it can take weeks or months to gain genuine first-page rankings on all major search engines.

“[Search engines] are smart enough to detect SEO-keyword-stuffed text. And they don’t much like it.”

Frederick Townes, CEO
W3 EDGE

“Anyone offering SEO services should not have a problem explaining how they intend to get you results.”

Joe Balestrino, Consultant
Mr. SEO

Some Black Hat SEO companies infect individual users’ computers with *malware* — malicious software that adversely affects a computer. This malware deliberately alters search results, artificially altering site ranking on infected computers. And many companies who fall for such phoney “top rankings” can have their artificially-ranked pages suddenly plummet on infected computers, if someone else is willing to pay a higher price to the Black Hat SEO company.

No major search engines accept bribes. No major search engines have any type of “priority” submission system to quickly place a website at the top of search results.

Federal, state, and local governments are constantly investigating and prosecuting authors and distributors of malware, due to malware’s inherently malicious and destructive nature. No White Hat organization would ever illicitly install malware on any user’s computer.

How will the company increase my rankings?

All reputable SEO companies will happily explain to clients how rankings can be improved. Be very wary of any company that promises increased rankings, but won’t describe the methods used to increase rankings. Many illicit methods are frowned upon by major search engines, and can in fact damage your website’s long-term search ranking.

Black Hat SEO techniques can include stuffing of unrelated keywords, large-scale link purchasing, back-linking from phony websites or blogs, and link-farming. When spiders find sites engaging in such Black Hat techniques, the site’s ranking can drop substantially, or the site can even be banned from the spider’s search engine!

White Hat SEO techniques can include analysis of keywords to determine relevance, inclusion of relevant keywords in all related text, utilization of plain-text URLs for easy indexability, analysis and modification of page title tags, and individual link exchanges with high-ranking pages.

Where will my money go?

It’s always important to spend your money wisely. And it’s just as important to understand how a SEO company will be spending it.

You wouldn’t hand a blank check to a used car dealer, right? For the same reasons, it’s important to understand exactly what a SEO company will be doing before you open your wallet.

Black Hat SEO companies don’t explain what they do with your money. They fast-talk you, make promises and allusions, and in the end you don’t really understand what you paid for. White hat companies, on the other hand, walk you through the process from beginning to end; you pay them with a clear understanding of how they will help generate targeted traffic from search engines.

*“To a great degree,
organic search engine
optimization is simply an
extension of best practices
in web page design.”*

Daria Goetsch, Director of SEM
Search Innovation

*“...if an SEO company
can get their sites high in
the search engine rankings,
chances are they can do
the same for you.”*

Kevin Kantola, CEO
SEO Resource

What are some common signs of Black Hat SEO companies?

Any or all of these conditions should immediately raise a red flag:

- Ownership of “shadow” domains
- Linking unrelated clients’ homepages to each other
- Failure to distinguish search engine advertisements from rankings
- Lack of concrete information on organically increasing rankings
- Falsified WHOIS information
- Multiple aliases/names tied to one organization
- Utilization of any illicit software application (malware)
- Absence from major search engines
- Invalid or redirected phone number or mailing address
- Poorly-written e-mail or print correspondence rife with typos

*Now that I know what to look for,
where can I find a “White Hat” SEO company?*

It can be tough to find a good White Hat provider of SEO services. It takes time and research to understand each company’s services, and some companies have more experience and resources than others. Many web directories include advertisements from SEO companies, and many SEO companies also provide related eCommerce services. Directories can give you basic information about each company, but to really understand products and services, it’s important to contact companies directly.

At Mountain Media, we have years of experience performing White Hat SEO techniques. Mountain Media has analyzed what works and what doesn’t, and understands how to implement SEO to improve your rankings in all major search engines, including Google™, Yahoo!®, and MSN®. Mountain Media’s in-house SEO experts carefully track keyword and link patterns, learning what’s best for each individual client. And each client’s project is an independent task, so client website rankings are in no way tied to each other.

Mountain Media is a one-stop solution for SEO, as well as eCommerce solutions, payment gateways, custom graphic design, Web and search engine advertising, hosting, and content management.

Before signing a contract, It’s important to understand a White Hat company’s plans, expectations and competencies. We at Mountain Media are always happy to provide a free initial consultation.

Shop around. Compare options and learn what services you need. When you find the right company offering the right services, your rankings and visibility will increase — and, most importantly, your business will prosper.

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