

SEO Guide

10 Steps to Optimize Your Website for Search Engines

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MOST WEB USERS HAVE DEVELOPED A SORT OF “AD-BLINDNESS” WHICH PREVENTS them from clicking most advertised links. Most web users have also been disappointed with the sites that paid ads lead to, so they are increasingly dependent on search engine results to find what they are seeking. This means that the most effective way to drive traffic to your site (and subsequent services and/or products) is to gain high search engine ranking and receive the high volume of clicks given to the top organic search results. This guide is designed to help your website gain higher volume through organic search results by using the most up to date Search Engine Optimization (SEO) techniques. Keep in mind that SEO rules are constantly shifting so keep yourself informed and optimize your website accordingly.

1. Title Tag

The most important and often overlooked element of a website is the title tag. Make sure that your title tag is relevant to the individual page and also to your target audience. Make the wording relevant to the page content and also try to incorporate possible search phrases.

Code: The original title tag uses only the company name. The better way to code it is to mention the location of the company and what business you are in.

Original: <title>Johnson and Company</title>

Better: <title>Charlotte Landscaping | Johnson and Company Landscaping</title>

Quick Tip:

Make the title tag of each page unique. It will help you incorporate more keywords, and if each page's title is the same, your site will lose ranking for having duplicate content.

2. Keywords in the URL

Make sure to include relevant keywords in the URL. If you are looking to buy a domain name, consider making it a name that more relevant to your industry than to your business name. For example, your business may be in the landscaping industry in Charlotte, NC and called Johnson and Company. Rather than buying johnsonandcompany.com, consider buying charlottelandscaping.com or charlotte-nc-landscaping.com. It is more important to have relevant keywords in the domain name than your company name because people are more likely to search “charlotte landscaping” than “johnson and company”.

Code: If you already have a domain, renaming your files with relevant keywords will greatly improve your SEO results. For example, if you already have johnsonandcompay.com, rename your about.htm page to charlotte-landscaping.htm or some other variation that reflects your industry and location if possible. The same goes for any other pages in your site.

Quick Tip:

Make sure your page file names are search friendly. Sometimes content management systems automatically name pages things like sitename.com/?id=7835 which does not have any relevant or searchable keywords.

3. Keyword Density in Content

Make sure to include relevant keywords in the content of each page of the site. Keyword density is one of the ways search engines determine what topics a certain page pertains to. The words and phrases mentioned most should be the most relevant words and phrases.



Be careful: if more than 10% of the content is the same words and phrases, search engines will suspect they are being baited and you will lose search engine ranking.

Code: One of the ways to set certain words or phrases apart in a paragraph is by using `` and `` tags. Search engines rank the phrases within these tags higher than other content.

`make words italic`

`make words or phrases bold`

4. Quality Inbound Links and Anchor Text

Quality inbound links are links to your site from other websites. Getting quality inbound links is one of the hardest parts of SEO. There are some sites that promise to get you inbound links, but these should be avoided. Search engines look for the reputation of the referring site to determine how legitimate its outgoing links are. If you want quality inbound links, the best way is to have useful and unique content, which people will hopefully reference from their website and/or blog.

Quick Tip:

Provide a premade link to your site for anyone who wants to link to you, that way you can choose the best possible anchor text yourself.

Code: Search engines take into account the referring site, but they also look at the anchor text. That means that when someone links to you, they have the ability to tell search engines what they are linking to by using a relevant phrase. Using your company name would not help your ranking as much as using a relevant phrase for the anchor text.

Original: `Johnson and Company`

Better: `Charlotte Landscaping Company`

5. Heading Tags

HTML already has simple tags that allow you to point out the most important content. Much like the `` and `` tags, HTML also has six heading tags, `<h1>` thru `<h6>` which help search engines determine the most important information on the page. Search engines rank the `<h1>` tag highest, and the `<h6>` lowest, but they are all deemed more important than regular paragraph or list text.

Quick Tip:

Many sites use something like "Welcome!" inside their `<h1>` tag. It is better for SEO if you use something relevant like "Charlotte's Landscaping Company."

Code: Try to use each heading tag only once, since each time it is used, the effect is diluted. You do not have to use each tag, but the option is always there. Using heading tags also helps keep the look of your site consistent, especially since your site should be using CSS to style everything.

6. Alt tags

Alt tags are small lines of code in the head of your page file and are only visible to search engines and screen readers. Users who are visually impaired have the option of using a screen reader, which reads a website's content aloud to them. A good practice for screen readers is using an alt tag on all of your images to explain what the image is. Search engines have no way of knowing what an image is either so using alt tags allows you to throw in a few more keywords on each image. Search engines then decide that since you have chosen to use an image with certain keywords, those keywords must be important.

Quick Tip:

There are several online tools that allow you to experience your website the way you might if you were visually impaired.

Code: The alt tag is very simple and can be added to any image. Here is an example of where and how it should be added.

```

```

7. Metatags

Metatags are really only visible to search engines. Google does not look at metatags as much as other search engines, but make sure they are relevant to each page for the sake of other search engines. There are many tools for finding what kinds of keywords people usually search for, so look around and experiment with which ones work best for your site.

Quick Tip:

Instead of using only a single word in your keywords, use small phrases, between two and four words, to capitalize on possible search phrases.



Be careful: if you use the same metatags on every page, you will likely lose ranking for duplicate content. Avoid making the description too long or using too many keywords as both are also bad for search engine ranking.

Code: The description is what usually shows up below your page title in search results. The keywords are used too, but are only seen by search engines. Here is an example of well formed metatags:

```
<meta name="description" content="Landscaping Charlotte for over 20 years, Johnson and Company utilizes sustainable design, commercial landscaping and residential landscaping solutions." />
```

```
<meta name="keywords" content="sustainable landscaping, landscape design, charlotte nc, commercial landscaping, residential landscaping" />
```

8. Keyword Proximity

Relevant keywords and phrases are essential to being found in a search engine and it will take time to find the right way to blend human readability with wording things to get found by a search engine. Keyword proximity refers to the distance between keywords. Whenever possible try to keep keywords together to create small phrases that will likely be searched. Here is an example, without using **** or ****, only focusing on keyword proximity.

Quick Tip:

There are several tools online for finding the most common search terms and phrases.

Potential keywords are highlighted for illustration purposes.

Original: Johnson and Company has been doing **landscaping** for 20 years all over. We do everything from **commercial** types of **landscaping** to **residential** styles.

Better: Johnson and Company has been **landscaping Charlotte, North Carolina** for over 20 years. We are a **commercial landscaping** and **residential landscaping company**.

9. New/Changing Content

Search engines look favorably on sites that regularly add new content. The best and easiest way to add new content is to start a blog on your site and/or incorporate your twitter or facebook feed. Updating your content is also helpful for SEO but adding new content is even better.

Code: There are countless blogging solutions available to businesses of any size. Remember to incorporate keywords and phrases into your blog titles, and make sure they are reflected in the URL. This may mean changes the defaults of your blog, but there are endless posts about changing these settings in almost any system.

Quick Tip:

Creating great content is also helpful in developing inbound links (getting other websites to link to yours). Think about offering free information and posting often as a way to create and sustain interest in your blog.

10. Get Listed in a Web Directory

Getting listed in DMOZ, Yahoo Directory, or a similar directory can be very helpful for SEO. Usually these directories require someone manually entering a website listing so the listed websites are more likely to be powered by a real businesses and real people, thus search engines rank site within these directories higher.



Be careful: there are many directories that are not reputable and getting listed in one of them can actually be quite damaging to your website's SEO.

11. Sitemap

A sitemap is an overall listing of all of the pages on your website. It lets search engines see the structure of the site very easily and also displays any pages that they may not have indexed, and new pages.

Code: There are many sitemap generators that will do a lot of the work for you, which is especially helpful if you have a large site. For a more complete list, check out code.google.com/p/sitemap-generators/wiki/SitemapGenerators

Quick Tip:

Many CMS's have plugins available that will automatically create, update and even submit a sitemap for you.

12. Wait

Waiting may seem like a bit of an anti-climactic ending to SEO, but actually the age of your site and the age of inbound links are also big factors in SEO. Spam sites are usually only around for a few months, at most, sometimes only hours, so search engines have decided that the longer your site has been registered by the same company, the better chance that your site is legitimate. The same goes for inbound links, if someone sets up 1,000 links to their site, search engines would be at the mercy of each spam ploy. Instead, time builds legitimacy with inbound links too.

Quick Tip:

Successful SEO is an ongoing process so make sure to take the time to keep updating and creating content and adjusting things on your site.

Waiting is also important because all SEO efforts take time to take effect. If anyone promises SEO results in less than a week, or even a month, be suspicious that they may be inexperienced, because good SEO takes time constant effort.

Conclusion

SEO is constantly shifting and your site should be shifting too. Since search engines are always refining their algorithms, keep in touch with a web designer that knows how to achieve the best SEO results. Get in touch with me today if you would like more information, a free quote, or have any questions: Nate Ernst at Varloo Design, 704.759.6691 or nate at varloodesign.com