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Search Engine Optimization Basics

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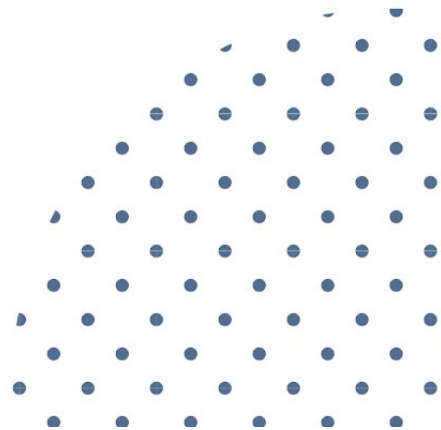
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Search Engine Optimization Basics

Search Engine Optimization Basics

The goal of pretty much every website owner is to be ranked number one on Google for their preferred keywords and key phrases — but to someday, possibly claim that number one spot, you've got a lot of work to do. You've got to maintain the site, update it with new, valuable, and relevant content, market the site, and optimize it.

There are three basic components to a well-optimized website:

1. Search engine friendly, user friendly, smart design

2. Compelling content that gets visitors to take action

3. Optimization to maximize your website's effectiveness

This guide covers basic search engine optimization to help more of your content get found online by those who need it most.

What Is Search Engine Optimization?

Simply put, search engine optimization, also known as SEO, is the practice of getting found online. It encompasses everything you can do naturally or organically (unpaid) to help boost your results in the search engine results pages (SERPs) so more people can find you.

Why Search Engine Optimization Is Important To The Success of Your Website

Most of all major website traffic comes from search engines — especially traffic from new visitors that have never been to your site before. If you don't show up in the search engine results pages when someone searches for a keyword or key phrase associated with your website, you're losing opportunities to connect with those who are looking for what you offer.

After all, no one can hire you, buy from you, or learn from you, if they don't know you exist!

Many elements of search engine optimization, like writing an HTML title for a page or an HTML meta description, alone can seem insignificant, but when you combine them together, the results can be pretty powerful! While SEO is important, please heed my words of caution:

> *Yes, every little bit of optimization helps and makes a difference in the success of your site, there is no guarantee that optimizing your website will put you in the first spot on the Google search results page — or even on the first page for that matter (even Google says this publicly). And, even with an*

expertly-crafted HTML title tag and meta description tag, there isn't a 100% guarantee the search engines will use the ones you write and not make one up on their own.

Important Things To Note About Search Engine Optimization

The experts at Google (and all reputable search engines) tell website owners to create content for your users first and foremost, and search engines second. Never should a search engine come before your user in priority. Search engines are looking for the same thing your visitors are — appealing design, simple navigation, smart site structure, valuable and helpful links, valuable and relevant content, etc.

The goal of a search engine, especially Google, is to provide the searcher the best, most relevant, helpful, useful, informative websites possible based on their search query — weird, obscure, or too clever headlines don't help.

- Don't put your eggs all in one basket. One optimization strategy won't do a lot of good all alone. While optimizing your site will definitely help, you also need to constantly publish new optimized content, create social proof, build authoritative and quality links to your site, work to improve your site, and more.

- SEO is not only about inbound links or backlinks, your outbound links are important too! Who you link to makes a difference because the search engines want to make sure that if they send someone to your site, you're not sending them somewhere totally irrelevant.

- Don't forget about internal links! Internal links — links between pages of your own website — are important because they help both visitors and search engines find and access more pages on your site.

- Don't get caught up in search engine optimization as the "get found magic pill." You should never put more effort in optimization than in improving your website, refining your content, and testing/tweaking your conversion points.

Avoiding The SEO Smarm

Just because you received an email with your website URL in the subject line or in the actual email itself, doesn't mean someone actually looked at your website, cares about your website, or really knows you're missing out of a hot keyword opportunity or that your rankings can be increased.

Usually these emails are generated automatically by a computer program or pieces of software and they are sent to millions of people around the world, with the hope that a few will say yes.

Any service provider guaranteeing you a number one ranking or page 1 ranking without a continuously ongoing plan to keep you there doesn't know what they're doing.

Think about it — every person who does what you do in the whole world wants that same spot and they're all trying to get it too. If you're lucky enough to score top ranking for a hot keyword or phrase in your niche, it's going to take work to stay there — otherwise someone else will take it from you.

Any service provider guaranteeing you a number one ranking or page one ranking without doing any research or confirming the keywords or phrases that you can compete successfully on, doesn't know what they are doing or they just want your money.

Anyone can earn a top ranking on Google for a keyword or key phrase that no one is searching for — that's easy! But who cares about that? And, with focused effort most people can make it to page one for a long tail keyword phrase, but staying there for more than the blink of an eye is a whole different story.

If you're going to hire an SEO company to help boost your site's visibility online, you want to go with the company that:

- Works with you to research keywords and see where you can be competitive

- Provides a keyword research report and a recommended package focusing on specific terms

- Provides recommendations and guidance on how to use the selected keywords in content, blog posts, guest posts, links, and more

- Includes continuous reporting, stats, and course-corrections in their package

- Has a plan/option to continue with them to monitor and maintain any high rankings achieved

- Doesn't just talk about keywords and links, but actually creates a plan to improve your site and make it more appealing to search engines through content, blog posts, landing pages, and more

- Doesn't pitch, sell, or recommend bad, frowned upon, or blackhat practices (some still do this)

Remember, nothing about your search engine ranking can be guaranteed and your site's position and rankings, along with everyone else's changes every day. But with consistent effort, and by taking advantage of every optimization opportunity you have for your site, you'll already be way ahead of the competition.

How To Optimize Website Content For Search Engines And People

I know SEO can be overwhelming and I know it feels like A LOT of work — because it is. But, when you take time to understand individual elements and strategies, one at a time, it does get easier!

When talking about organic search engine optimization, I always start with optimizing your on-page content because it's the easiest and most natural thing to do. It's as simple as formatting your content like you would in a word processing program — as long as you follow the best practices.

What You SHOULD Do When Optimizing Content For SEO

First, you need to make sure your headlines and subheadings are written clearly and use your focus keywords naturally and in a normal context that makes sense. Be sure not to force it.

Second, use H tags or Heading tags in your content to mark which parts of your content are headlines and subheadlines. The H tags tell search robots that the content is more important than the body copy or paragraph copy — and provide visual cues to readers and scanners.

- Make sure your main page headline or blog post headline is an H1 or Heading 1. The H1 tag tells the search robots that this headline is the most important headline on the page. Just be sure to only use one H1 heading on each page.

- Break up content with sub headlines that stand out visually. Make them bolder, bigger, or another color. Make sure they are formatted as a sub headline, using the H2 and H3 tags so they are given more importance visually, as well as signal the search engines that this content is important.

Third, avoid large blocks of copy that run together and create an unappealing, unattractive mass of grey on the page. No one wants to read that! Instead take advantage of the content formatting options you have:

- Use small, short paragraphs or no more than 1-3 sentences. Think newspaper-style. A large, long paragraph will seem daunting and even painful to potential readers, while several shorter paragraphs will seem like a quick, easy read.

- Break up lists of anything into bullet lists or number lists. Readers love lists because they are usually quick, to the point, and easy to digest. Bulleted and numbered lists not only make your content more appealing visually, but they also make your content seem like a faster read.

- Use bold and italic formatting to make key points in your content stand out. Using bold and italics in a smart, strategic way will help your reader and help the search robots identify important content on the page.

- Write naturally. Search engines and people want the same thing — well written, useful, helpful content that is easy to read.

What You SHOULD NOT Do When Optimizing Content For SEO

Optimizing content is pretty simple. If you use the basic formatting tips I shared above, your content will not only look amazing (which will make your whole site look better), but it will also perform better.

Now that you know what you should do, here are some techniques you should avoid:

- Don't overuse your target keyword(s) or key phrase(s) on the page. Don't stuff every variation of your keyword into every possible chance. This technique is called keyword stuffing. It is not only painful for the visitors who have to read it, but the search engines don't like it. Remember, write for your readers. Your content needs to feel natural to them.

- Don't stuff keywords into your headlines when they don't naturally fit.

- Don't bold every word that could be a keyword. I'm sure you have been to those websites, where almost every fifth word is bolded, or sometimes half the content on the page is bolded. It is overwhelming and hard to read. Don't overdo it. Too much bolding makes the important phrases blend in and become less important.

- Think of bold type like salt. Just enough and it perfectly accents the dish letting the other spices tastes come through as well. Too much and it takes over the entire taste of the dish, making the other spices irrelevant, and it ruins the whole dish.

- Don't format entire paragraphs of content with H tags to try to give all the keywords you used more importance. If it's not a headline or sub headline, don't use the H tags.

- Don't underline text that is not a link. When it comes to the internet, it is a common understanding that anything online that is underlined is a clickable link. When you underline text that is not a link, you're potentially confusing everyone! Instead use bold formatting, italic formatting, or both.

- Don't get too clever, "heady", or off the wall with your headlines and subheadlines — if people won't get it right away, neither will search engines. Plus, then you're just confusing them and making it hard to figure out where/what the page should rank for.

- Don't add a paragraph of keywords to your footer. If you don't think that by now everyone knows what you're doing — keyword spamming with your website — you're out of touch. This doesn't add value to your site and may hurt you more than help you.

How To Optimize Images For SEO

It is highly recommended that you leverage every free and simple way to boost your website's SEO and the chances your website has to show up in the search engine page listings when someone is searching for your target keywords and key phrases. One part of that is learning to optimize images for the web.

Look at the two images below — while they look exactly the same, only one of the images is optimized for search engine optimization.

An Unoptimized Image

An Optimized Image

Visually, an un-optimized image and an optimized image look exactly the same. But, if you look at the HTML behind the above images, they look drastically different.

There are four different ways you can optimize an image or photo for SEO:

1. Size Images Appropriately For Web Use

Large images will cause your page speed to slow down and page load speed plays a role in how the search engines view your website. One large image is bad enough, but image a page with a gallery of images sized for print use instead of web viewing. No visitor will be happy waiting a long time for an image to load, especially on mobile devices.

Size your images appropriately for your content or featured image width. If your content or featured image (use the largest one) width is 750 pixels, there is no reason to upload images that are larger than that — let alone thousands of pixels wide.

Downgrade the image resolution. Often images from stock photo sites or even some digital cameras are set to a resolution of 300 dpi — print use resolution. Make sure all images you upload to your website are set to 72 dpi — web resolution.

Remember, the smaller your images, the faster your page load speed — and that is good for your potential search engine results page listings.

2. Use Descriptive Image Names

Never upload images with generic names, or worse, the names assigned by your digital camera or the agency you bought the images from.

Search engines can't "see" images but they can "read" your HTML, which means they will read/scan the image name. Naming your images with descriptive names will not only help find or identify images in the future, but if you allow Google Images to pull your website images, the images names will play a role in helping them show up in the search results.

Bad Image Name Examples (Not helpful, Generic, Confusing):

- Photo.jpg
- logo.gif
- img_23.png
- ebookcover.jpg

Good Image Name Examples (Helpful, Descriptive, Clear):

These examples include keywords relevant to the image.

- farmers-market-fresh-vegetables.jpg
- business-name-logo.gif
- sun-dried-tomato-polenta.png
- how-to-get-clients-ebook.jpg

Here is a sample of the HTML structure for an image:

```
<img src="farmers-market-fresh-vegetables.jpg">
```

3. Define Alternate Text For Each Image

Alternate Text or Alt Text is text that appears in place of an image to supply information about it if the image doesn't load. Alternate Text is important in website accessibility, as it is also used by screen readers to describe the image to someone who can't see the image, such as a blind user.

Alternate text is important in on page search engine optimization, as search engines use Alternate text or ALT text to decipher what an image is about.

In almost all cases, your visitors will never see the Alt Text you define for an image, but again, search engines can't "see" images but they can "read" your HTML, which means they will read/scan the Alternate Text — and this could improve your on-page search engine optimization.

Alternate Text is added to images using the Alt Attribute, commonly called the Alt Tag.
Here is an example of the same link used above with the Alt Attribute used:

> <img src="farmers-market-fresh-vegetables.jpg" alt="a collection of fresh vegetables from the Sacramento farmers market">

When writing the Alternate Text for an image:

- Make sure it describes the image or what the image is about

- Include keywords as appropriate — but don't use it to stuff keywords

- Be sure it is useful to anyone who can't see your image and is having the page read aloud to them via a screen reader

- If you are using an image to display text, like a quote, use that text as the ALT text

4. Remove Extra Data From Your Images

Images when saved, have extra data that you don't see. Use a third-party tool like ImageOptim, a free app that makes images take up less disk space and load faster, without sacrificing quality. It optimizes compression parameters, removes junk metadata and unnecessary color profiles. After you save an image to use on your website or blog for use online, run it through ImageOptim to shrink the image even further, optimizing the size, which in turns helps keep page load speed down.

Another option, if you think you'll forget to use ImageOptim, is Ewww.io. This solution has a small fee, but it is integrated with your website and automatically optimizes all images for you and lets you choose the parameters.

One Image, Four Opportunities To Optimize

Each time you add an image to a web page or a blog post, you have four opportunities to optimize the image and possibly boost the chances of the page ranking well in the search engines.

To wrap it up nice and neat, here's the low down you need to remember:

- Crop and size each image appropriately for use online

- Give each image a descriptive, keyword-rich name

- Give each image descriptive Alternate Text, using the image alt attribute / HTML alt tag

- Optimize the image with an app like ImageOptim, to remove extra data

- The image name and alt text ideally should be unique

- Don't use any of these opportunities to stuff keywords and be spammy

Bonus Image Optimization Opportunity!

While there are four core ways to optimize images for the web, there is one more way your images can give your on-page optimization an even bigger boost — image captions.

Image captions aren't right for every website, but when you need to provide image attribution, want to note the people in the image, or share a short description of the image, an image caption is the perfect solution. Plus, depending on the image and the content in the caption, it may be another opportunity to better optimize your web page or blog post (as long as it doesn't feel or look spammy).

How To Optimize Links

Optimizing website links is probably one of the simplest strategies you can implement because there aren't a lot of options! I'll bet you didn't realize that when it comes to optimizing links on your website for search engines, you're actually doing your website visitors a favor too.

You see, people and search engine bots move through the internet in the same way, through links. So, by optimizing links, you are creating links that are more descriptive and helpful to your visitors, and more descriptive and helpful for the search engines.

Just think of web links like roads connecting pages (destinations) all over the internet — and when you optimize the road, it's like adding signage that tells people and search bots about the destinations and where to click to reach them.

Similarly, when you add internal links — links to other pages on your own website — you are helping search engines and people discover more of the content on your own website that you have worked hard to create.

How Link Optimization Works

Here's an Example of a Basic Unoptimized Link: https://inspiredimperfection.com

Here's an Example of an Optimized Link: Sacramento Blog About Family Travel and Recipes

Search Engines' Perspective On Links

In the first example, the only thing search engines see is the website URL https://inspiredimperfection.com. This doesn't tell the search engines anything about what the website is about or what subject category or keywords the website should be placed in. All the search engines know is that it is a link to another website.

In the second example, the search engines not only see the website URL, but they will also read/scan the anchor text (the text "Sacramento Blog About Family Travel and Recipes" in place of the URL). Adding keyword rich anchor text (the text of a link) to your link creates an additional opportunity to optimize your page, and adding a title provides further description of the link.

Peoples' Perspective On Links

In the first example, the only thing visitors see is the website URL https://inspiredimperfection.com. This doesn't tell visitors anything about what the website is actually about. All they know is that it is a link to another website.

In the second example, visitors see the text "Sacramento Blog About Family Travel and Recipes" as the actual link, instead of https://inspiredimperfection.com. This link is much more descriptive, telling the visitor that the link will take them to a site about family travel and recipes.

What you need to know about optimizing your links:

The thing to remember about optimizing links is that it's all about providing more value in terms of helping people and search engines understand what they will find if they click a link — what content will be on the destination page.

For example, by linking to a page with the words "family travel" in the link, I am telling search engines and visitors that there is a page on this website about family travel. Likewise, if a different website links to the same page on my site with the words "family travel" they are also telling people and search engines that the page, and this site, is about family travel. Their inbound link acts as a vote for my page to be included in search results for the key phrase "family travel".

Link Anchor Text Tips:

- Should describe the web page or the core topic of the page it is linking to

- Should include the main/focus keyword or key phrase for the page it is linking to

- Similar keywords, variations of the keyword, or the keyword used in different contexts are also helpful in anchor text

- Too many links with the exact same anchor text can be detrimental and appear spammy

Understanding The HTML Page Title And Meta Description

Now that you know how to optimize your content, optimize images, and optimize links, it's time to tackle your HTML page titles and HTML meta descriptions — two often forgotten, but powerful tools for optimizing your web pages and blog posts.

To get started, let's take a look at what a page title and meta description look like in HTML:

> <title>Cajun Fish Tacos With Spicy Garlic Broccoli Slaw Recipe</title>
>
> <meta name="description" content ="Get an easy and fast recipe for Cajun Fish Tacos with a spicy Garlic Broccoli Slaw that will have your family begging seconds at dinner">

As you can see, they aren't used on your actual web pages and blog posts for your visitors to see. Instead these optimization tools are used in the HTML of your web pages and posts because they are meant for the search engines.

Most experts agree that HTML page titles are a very important optimization tool, with meta descriptions coming in a close second because the results listings in search engines are, at the most basic level, just lists of titles and descriptions of websites that match the searcher's query. They will then review the listing of results, read (or skim) over the titles and descriptions, and THEN decide which links to click.

What Is A Page Title And Meta Description?

An HTML page title is like signage on the front of a building, telling people which store is in the building. You wouldn't pull off the freeway, park, and walk into a building if you had no idea what was inside would you? No! Well, neither would search engines! Search engines look for the web page signage — the HTML title tag — to tell them what the page is about.

An HTML meta description is a brief description about the web page or blog post and what can be found on the page or post. The meta description is like an advertisement for a store. It tells search engines and people more about the page so they can decide whether or not to visit it.

How Search Engines Use Titles And Descriptions

While search engines primarily use page titles and meta descriptions to figure out what keywords and categories to file your pages under, they are also often used in the search engine results pages (SERPs) when a user performs a keyword search query.

Here is an example of a SERP listing showing the HTML title in blue as a link and the meta description in black below the URL:

5 Healthy Green Smoothie Recipes | Real Simple

https://www.realsimple.com/food-recipes/recipe-collections.../green-smoothie-recipes ▾

The freshest, fastest way to get your veggies is in a **smoothie**. Try these easy tips and healthy recipes before mixing up a **green** drink.

As you can see from the example, my blog post showed up on the search engine results page for my search, and in the listing, it is displaying my HTML page title as the anchor text link (text of a link), my blog post URL, and my HTML meta description as the short description of the post — the same as you see in the HTML example above.

Search Engines Do Change And Edit Things

While search engines often use your HTML title and HTML meta description for the link and description shown in the search results listing, it isn't guaranteed. Sometimes search engines occasionally write their own, especially if a search engine doesn't think the description matches the page content closely enough.

Titles Are Used Elsewhere Too

The HTML title is also used in other places, such as individual browser window tabs, and the top of the overall browser window. How and where it is used depends on the browser.

How To Add An HTML Page Title And Meta Description

We will install the Yoast WordPress SEO plugin — which we use and highly recommend — when building your website. The plugin adds a box below the WordPress page and post content editor that will allow you to easily add the title and meta description without knowing or writing any HTML. We'll go over exactly how to do this during your WordPress Training session after your site is launched and live.

Writing an Effective HTML Page Title

Creating powerful, client-attracting titles for your pages and posts is a low effort, high-impact search engine optimization strategy — as long as you use them the right way — and not a spammy way.

Understanding The Difference Between a Page Title And a Page Headline

A page title is NOT seen on your actual web page. It is a special HTML tag that can be seen in the code of your web page, in search engine results page (SERP) lists, in open browser tabs, and in browser bookmarks lists that is defined in the SEO settings for the page or post. A page title is a short, clear, compelling statement about a page or post that helps people and search engines figure out what the page is about.

A page headline is found in the content of your web page. It is the headline your visitor sees when they visit your web page and it is usually defined in HTML with the H1 (Heading 1) tag. The headline is defined in the content editor for the page.

What You Need To Know About HTML Page Titles

- No two pages or posts should use the same title tag. Each HTML title tag should be accurate, relevant, descriptive, and concise, reflecting the focus and content of the single page it is written for. Otherwise search engines, visitors, and potential visitors could get confused.

- Because it is often used for the link text in search results listing, the HTML page title is meant to give users and search engines quick insights into the content of the page. It is often the first piece of information seen by a prospective visitor when reviewing their search results and helps users determine which link they should click on.

- The keywords included in your page title will appear bolded on the search engine results pages if they match the same keywords the user searched for. This makes it easier for users to determine if your web page is a good match for what they are looking for.

- The title tag is an HTML tag that gets inserted into the HTML header of a web page or blog post

Optimal Title Tag Length

Previously, HTML title tags could be as long at 70 characters in length, with best practices saying you should keep it to about 60 characters. But with Google's redesign things have changed. While the content width of the search results hasn't changed, the font size for page titles has increased and it is using Arial, a proportionally-spaced typeface.

Proportionally-spaced means that every letter doesn't use the same amount of horizontal space — so an "i" takes up less space than an "m". Also capital letters take up more space than lowercase letters, and bold letters take up more space than non-bold letters. This means the character count isn't consistent for every page title shown in the search results.

SEO Moz wrote a great post about this, stating that the new optimal page title length for search engines is about 55 characters. If you stick to this average character count, about 95% of your page titles will be displayed in full, with only 5% (1 in 20) of them getting truncated.

SEO Moz also reminds us that a cut-off page title isn't the kiss of death — Google still processes keywords beyond the cut-off (including for ranking purposes). Plus, other formats, like vertical results and Google+, may still display your full titles.

HTML Title Tag Copywriting Tips

- The title should include your main/focus keyword

- Use geographic or niche specific keywords in your titles when possible as long as they make sense

- Your title should be interesting and persuasive. Convince people to click your link!

- Make sure it is relevant to the content on the page

- Often sites automatically include their brand name at the beginning or end of their page titles, separated from the actual page title with a delimiter like a hyphen, colon, or pipe. If you are going to do this, we recommend putting your brand name at the end of your titles, this way important words aren't the ones getting cut off. Just remember that your page title now just grew by that many characters in length!

Things To Avoid When Creating HTML Page Titles

- Don't stuff keywords into your titles or use a list of keywords in your title — it's spammy

- Don't write titles that are irrelevant to the content on the page

- Don't write really long titles just to fit more keywords in the title tag — again, spammy

- Don't use the same title on more than one page or post (This is a big no-no)

To quickly check and see if you're using the same HTML page title on multiple pages or posts on your website, type site:yourwebsite.com into the search field of your web browser and hit enter. This will produce a list of all pages or posts on your website that are indexed with the search engines and show you the page titles and meta descriptions of each.

Writing an Effective Meta Description

Writing a simple, effective, compelling meta description is no harder than writing a simple, compelling, effective sentence or call to action. In fact, your meta description, at the most basic level, is a just short summary of what your web page or blog post is about.

Like your HTML page title, your meta description is very important in attracting new visitors to your website from organic search. Often, but not always, the description shown by the search engines for your web page or blog post is the HTML meta description you write.

When someone is viewing a list of web pages in a search engine results page (SERP), they scan the list, quickly reading the descriptions for each listing. They then decide which results are closest to what they are looking for or which are the most interesting — and those links are the links they click.
Needless to say, a well-written, compelling, unique description written for every web page or blog post, can help persuade people to visit your site and increase click-throughs from search.

HTML Meta Description Tips

Before you run off and write descriptions for every one of your web pages and blog posts, here are some tips to help you write effective meta descriptions:

- Optimal HTML meta description length is 160 characters. Anything longer will be truncated and not be displayed. Some experts will tell you the meta description can be longer and the added text can help your rankings — but please know that it is not a best practice

- Each page and blog post on your website should have an accurate, focused meta description that is unique to that page or post. Unique descriptions for each page help both search engines and people tell your pages apart, especially when multiple pages from your site are shown on the same search engine results page

- Make sure your description is helpful — that it gives people the information they need to make the decision to click your website link. Think of what might compel them to click and include that in your meta description

- Meta descriptions for blog posts may also include the author's name, date, or other relevant information — especially for guest posts

- Consider including contact information in the meta description tag for Contact pages

- If keywords or key phrases in your meta description match the same keywords used by the person searching, the keywords will appear bolded in the search engines results page listing. This way people can quickly see that your web page or blog post is relevant to what they are searching for

What To Avoid When Writing HTML Meta Descriptions

- Don't stuff keywords into the meta description tag or use a long list of keywords separated by commas — that approach is pure spam and is completely unhelpful

- Don't write descriptions that are irrelevant to the content on the page

- Don't write really long descriptions just to fit in more keywords

- Don't copy and paste a large block of content from the page or post as the meta description

- Don't use the same description on more than one page or post

Why Keywords Still Matter In SEO

You may have heard that while the keyword meta tag used to be super effective and highly regarded, nowadays pretty much all search engines don't even give the keyword meta tag another thought! A lot of websites, even some top authority sites don't even bother to use the meta keywords tag anymore for this exact reason.

But why did it come to this? Why has the keyword meta tag lost its luster?

Because of keyword abuse (also known as keyword spam). Website owners were stuffing keywords into this meta tag like crazy, sometimes even repeating the same ones over and over, thinking that it would make the page more relevant for that specific keyword.

Many sites even stuffed keywords into the web page keyword meta tag that didn't have anything to do with the actual page content. It got out of control and soon the keyword meta tag was no longer a viable way to assess what a web page or blog post was really about.

Using Keywords Today

A lot of experts will tell you, "Don't bother the keyword meta tag," and while that's true, most people hear, "Don't bother with keywords."

As you can see, there is a problem with the communication and understanding of keyword strategy. So, in this post, I am going to break it down for you and hopefully remove any confusion.

1. The Keyword meta tag doesn't hold any weight

Search engines no longer take the keyword meta tag into account when scanning and indexing your site. It does not count toward your search engine rankings and should not be considered a viable search engine optimization tool.

But, just because the actual HTML keyword tag doesn't help your website's organic rankings, that doesn't mean you should just ignore keywords all together!

2. Defining Keywords Is Still Important

Today, search engines and people want the same thing — focused, valuable, helpful, relevant, quality content — and writing your content around one target keyword helps achieve that. Without a focus, you risk scattered thoughts, unfocused and meandering paths, and content that is all over the place.

- To build an authority site, you need to research and create a core list of keywords and key phrases your website will focus on and target as a whole.

- When creating new content — like blog posts — you must define the primary focus keyword or key phrase for content.

- Keep pages and posts focused on one single keyword and its variations. If the content gets too wide or diverse, the page will lose some of its power.

- If you don't have time to research your core keywords thoroughly and/or don't have the budget to hire an expert to do it for you, make a list of the core topics your website/blog will focus on and brainstorm all the main keywords and key phrases for those topics. Next, make sure you create pages and posts targeting those words. (Then once you have time/budget, invest in doing the serious research and get a data-driven set of keywords.)

3. Keyword Variety And Context Matter

Taking the time to define the focus keyword for each web page or blog post will help ensure your content stays focused and on topic. But that alone is not enough. Your focus keyword or key phrase should be used in different ways and in different contexts throughout the content.

You want to avoid using the exact same keyword or key phrases over and over or too many times in your content. It's seriously painful to read a single paragraph, let alone and entire page, of content that repeats the same word(s) over and over again!

Instead shake it up a bit and use variations, such as changing the grouping or order of words in the key phrase, using it in singular and plural formats, and using in different styles of sentence structures.

Tip: Think of all the different ways you would use the keyword if you were speaking naturally about it. You'd probably use it in different ways, and you would refer to the word at "it" or "them" etc. sometimes too. The same principles apply when writing — make it sound natural and not forced.

How to Use Keywords In Content

Once you have defined your keyword, you want to make sure you use it:

- In the URL for the page (whenever possible, easier for blog posts)

- In your page title (HTML title tag) and toward the beginning if possible

- In your page description (HTML meta description)

- In your main page headline (h1) and if possible in at least one sub headline (h2, h3, h4)

- In your page or post content, with it bolded at least once

- In an optimized link, so the keyword appears in the link anchor text and the link title (if appropriate) — great for helping search engines and people access more relevant content on your site

- In an on-topic, optimized image, so the keyword appears in the name of the image and the image alternate (alt) text (as long as it is appropriate for the image)

Using your focus keyword in the places listed above is great if it naturally works well. But be careful! Don't overdo it! If your keyword doesn't work well in your headline or it doesn't sound natural in one of the places listed above, don't force it and stuff it in there anyway — that's spammy!

What Not To Do When Using Keywords:

- Don't use the exact same keyword or key phrase over and over

- Don't believe that "the more it shows up in your content, the better the SEO results will be"

- Don't put paragraphs of content in your footer that are nothing more than a big list of keywords — it's so obvious you're spamming!

- Don't use the title tag and meta description tag as another place to list your keywords

- Don't forget to define a focus keyword for your pages and posts, and use it in the places listed above

Remember: Stuffing keywords and key phrases into your content in every single possible spot makes your content not only painful to read, but it is also painfully obvious to your visitors that you wrote the content for the search engines and not for them — and no one likes to feel like second best.

How To Tell If Your Content Is Spammy

If you have optimized your content, but are not sure your keyword usage sounds natural, simply read your content out loud and pay attention to how it feels reading the content and listen for any weirdness.

- You'll quickly be able to see where your content doesn't feel natural, or where you stumble because it doesn't easily roll off the tip of your tongue.

- You'll notice where you use a specific word too many times.

- You'll find places in the content that could benefit from some editing and finessing.