



Practical Search Engine Optimization

Making your site search engine friendly.
What works. What doesn't. Strategies and myths.



erickson **barnett**





Search engine optimization (SEO) is all about content. And keywords. And how you code your site. And how many people are linking to you. And how well their pages rank. And which search engines and directories to which you submit. And how often you resubmit. And... Whew! Tired yet?

The amount of information available on SEO is remarkable and can be overwhelming. Everywhere you look there's a new tip or bit of code promising to help increase your pages' rank. To add to the confusion, you often run into conflicting views on the subject.

There's no one person who can even attempt to be the end-all be-all of knowledge on search engine ranking (except maybe those guys over at Google), and there's no one thing that will launch you to the top of all search results.

We'll attempt to cut through the hype and ever-expanding collection of advice and boil it all down to the most effective strategies for making your site as search engine friendly as possible.

We know you're busy, so let's get to it.

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Content and Keywords

Bottom line, *SEO is* all about keywords and content. Every page on your site should focus on a set of carefully chosen keywords, and the content on each page should be written around those keywords.

For the nuts and bolts of choosing keywords and writing content for search engines, see our white paper, *Copywriting for Search Engine Placement**.

The All-Important Page Title

When creating your site, be sure to include a page title for each page. Why bother with page titles?

1. All search engines put considerable weight on page titles when ranking pages and returning search results.
2. Most search engine results pages (SERPs) use page titles as links to your web site.
3. If a site visitor bookmarks your page, the title is displayed in their bookmark list.
4. Page titles appear at the top of the browser window and provide context for site visitors.

Given the breadth and prominence of the page title, there is little doubt this is one of the most important elements of your pages—both for search engines and for site visitors.

You should put just as much effort into writing your page titles as you do your page content.

Here are some practical tips for what to include—and what not to—in this all-important area:

- Include your top two or three targeted keywords.
- Make these keywords among the first words in the title.
- Don't include your company name (unless you've found that people tend to search for your site by company name).
- If your region is important to your business, include your city and state.

* <http://www.ericksonbarnett.com/news/publications.php>

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Links: To, From, and In-between

Links are what make the Internet so very unique and valuable. They also happen to play a major role in search engine optimization. Search engines look at links both within your site (to other pages and other sites) and links to your site from other sites.

Google's explanation of its own PageRank system reveals how important links are:

PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important."

Links within your site

Links between the pages in your site and links to other sites are usually a good indicator of subject matter. They help to categorize the type of information you provide. Search engines examine the text you use in your links and put more weight on this text when they index your site.

To optimize your internal links:

- Use sidebars and/or callouts in your site to create "internal ads" that link to other pages within your site.
- Look for keywords in your main content that could be used as links to other related pages.
- Use pertinent keywords (NOT "click here" or "more info") in your link text, on both internal links and links to other sites.

Links to your site

Links from other sites to your site also play a large part in how often your pages show up in search engine results.

To optimize external linking:

- Search out links only from other sites that are related to your site's content.
- If possible, always specify what link text a site linking to your site should use. This way you can be sure the right keywords are used.
- Avoid (like the plague) free-for-all link exchange programs, link farms, and "webring", which can all hurt your ranking.



Getting those incoming links

Ok, that's great, you say. I can change my own site's links, but how to I get other sites to link to me? Here are some ideas:

- Become active in online communities related to your site's content. Without violating the community's policies or etiquette rules, link to your site wherever you can (forum posts, signatures, etc.).
- Get published online. If you've written an informative piece, get it posted in related industry sites. Use the space provided for bio information to insert a keyword-laden link to your site.
- Work with partners, clients, etc. and request links from their sites to yours.
- Start a blog – on another domain – related to the subject matter of your site. This will give you an opportunity to link to your site. But don't overdo it. Savvy users can easily tell the difference between a true blog and one there only for promotional purposes.
- Join a professional association. Most will have lists of members with links to their sites.
- Some school districts and universities will link to web sites with pertinent information to their course offerings. A local school or college would be a good place to start.

Code Your Site Properly

Here's where we get slightly technical for a bit.

Most of the top search engines, Google included, do not use humans to rank pages or determine if your site gets into their databases. It's all done by computerized "spiders" that "crawl" the web looking for and indexing web pages, so it is important that your code is easy for these spiders to understand. The easier it is to spider, the better your site will perform on search engines.

Increase your content-to-code ratio.

A web page consists of two basic elements:

- **Content** – the actual words the site visitor reads.
- **Markup** – the code that controls how content appears on the page.

Search engine spiders are only interested in the parts users can see (the content). The less markup on your page, the better.

The best way to slim down your markup is to abandon the use of tables for layout and use cascading style sheets (CSS) instead. This not only dramatically increases your content-to-code ratio for search engines, but it also makes your site leaner and faster for your users.

The easier it is to spider, the better your site will perform on search engines.



Use heading tags (H1, H2, etc.) for headings and subheadings in your content.

A search engine spider places more importance on content found within heading tags than other parts of the page. It is especially important to make sure the top two or three keywords for that page are contained within heading tags.

Often, the title of the page is repeated in the H1 tag (since it is already laden with the most important keywords), and subsequent content subheadings are put into H2 tags (and so on with H3, H4, etc.), with main content in regular paragraph (P) tags.

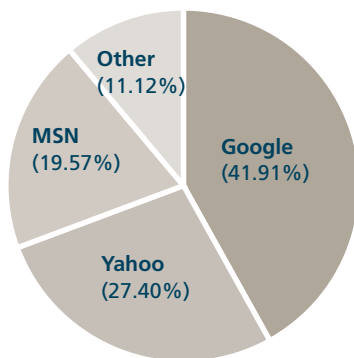
Avoid JavaScript links and pop-up windows.

Search engine spiders aren't very smart. In fact, they can only follow regular hyperlinks. Any link using JavaScript is essentially invisible to them. Using JavaScript pop-ups is a popular method of linking to press releases, news articles, and other keyword-heavy content. However, this effectively hides these pages from search engines.

Drop-down menus can be ugly.

Many sites are now using drop-down menus in their navigation. These menus can spell trouble for search engine spiders, if links to the inner pages of your site are only accessible after clicking on a JavaScript-controlled navigation item. As you've just learned, search engine spiders can't follow these links.

The solution: Make sure the main navigation items that activate the dropdown menus include regular hyperlinks into the rest of your site. If your particular menu system does not permit this, you should place separate text links (probably at the bottom of your home page) to the inner sections of your site.



Percentage of Search Engine Referrals

SOURCE:
StatMarket by WebSideStory
Data gathered on March 30, 2004

TIP

Submit your site by hand to each search engine individually.

Focus Your Efforts on the Top Search Engines and Directories

Get your site listed in the major search engines / directories (this is crucial):

Google, Looksmart, Yahoo, MSN

When I launched a site back in the 90's one of the first things I did was to visit one of the many search engine and directory submission services in order to submit my site to "thousands of the top search engines and directories!" I thought more was better.

Simple math, however, will tell you that there cannot be thousands of top sites. And the facts tell us that there are only a few top search engines and directories. According to StatMarket by WebSideStory, the top three search engines make up for 88% of all search engine referrals.



Meta tags are no longer as important as they used to be.

Site submission is best done by hand, not by some automated piece of software. In fact, some search engines will outright not list you for using auto-submission services or software. Google themselves expressly mentions these services as prohibited on their [Information for Webmasters*](#) page.

The subject of effectively and properly submitting your site to the search engines and directories that matter the most is too big for this paper. Luckily, Danny Sullivan, the founder of one of the top sites on all things search engine related, [SearchEngineWatch.com**](#), has recently tackled the subject for us. Read it and be wise.

The Myths

You (or a hired SEO firm) have ultimate control over your ranking and placement in search engines.

As it stands, the only company who can “control” ranking and placement is the search engine firm themselves. Since you can’t hire them to optimize your site, the only way to guarantee placement on a search engine results page is to buy advertising space or keywords. Period.

Meta tags are important to getting listed in search engines.

Due to the use of these tags by nefarious search engine marketers to cheat the search engines into ranking their pages higher, meta tags are no longer as important as they used to be. At last check, no major search engine indexes meta tags or uses them when ranking pages. Your time is better spent elsewhere.

Search engines do not like dynamic, database-driven pages.

A common mantra heard in SEO circles is that dynamic or database-driven pages cannot be indexed by search engines. This is simply false, as is demonstrated by this screen shot from Google:

[Erickson Barnett :: news](#)
... The **Awards**, which began in 1994, have grown consistently over the years. ... **Erickson Barnett's** creative scored among the very best. ...
www.ericksonbarnett.com/news/index.php?id=263 - 5k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

The page listed here is dynamically generated by a database (you can tell by the “?id=261” at the end of the URL). Myth busted.

The key to the above page being listed is that there is only one item after the question mark. Complex dynamic URLs with multiple parameters may indeed not be indexed by some search engines. Luckily, there are ways around this, including paid inclusion programs, generating static HTML pages, and URL rewriting to remove the offending “stop” characters.

* <http://www.google.com/webmasters/guidelines.html>

** <http://searchenginewatch.com/links/article.php/2156221>



The Search Continues...

Despite the volume of information on search engine optimization and the shroud of mystery that surrounds the practice of SEO, making your site more search engine friendly isn't a monumental task fit only for high-priced SEO professionals. By focusing on the key areas above, anyone can improve their standing with search engines, and more than likely make their sites better for their users along the way. To review:

- Use keyword-laden titles on all of your pages
- Include keywords in all internal and external links
- Code your site with lean, meaningful code
- Submit your site to only the major search engines and directories while avoiding services and software that submits to thousands automatically.

In this paper, we've attempted to demystify the practice of SEO somewhat and give you easy ways to make your site more search engine friendly. However, SEO is an ongoing task for site owners. It doesn't stop with the above tips and strategies.

Site owners will have to constantly tweak their sites to appease the search engines and scratch and claw with their competitors to achieve top ranking. As you continue your quest for search engine superiority, refer to the resources listed below, and—to quote Sgt. Phil Esterhaus of Hill Street Blues—“Let’s be careful out there.”

Online Resources

[Google’s Information for Webmasters \(www.google.com/webmasters\)](http://www.google.com/webmasters)
You’re not going to get more “from the horse’s mouth” than this.

SearchEngineWatch.com
The recognized leader in search engine news and knowledge.

SEOChat.com
A fine collection of original and informative SEO articles. Updated often.

SearchGuild.com
Practical articles and research on all kinds of SEO tactics and tips.

About Erickson Barnett

Erickson Barnett is an established creative and marketing agency with a strong heritage and reputation in the interactive world. We've helped our clients create award-winning corporate web sites, support sites, extranets, and micro sites to help them achieve their marketing communications and sales objectives.

At Erickson Barnett we believe that following a proven and repeatable process ensures we meet our client's goals on time and on budget. TechnIQ, our proprietary design and development process, has been at the heart of our success for more than a decade.

For more information about writing effectively for the web, or for an assessment of your needs, please contact Erickson Barnett at:

Erickson Barnett
12012 Sunset Hills Road
Suite 460
Reston, VA 20190

703.834.1250
www.ericksonbarnett.com

