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The Goodness in the Evil of SEO: Why Search Engine Optimization Matters to Information Professionals

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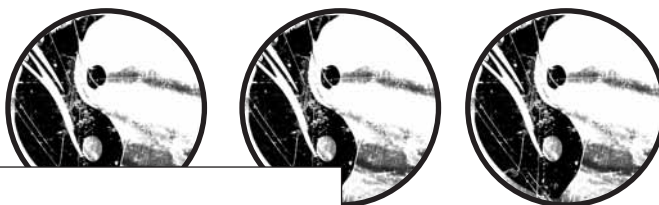
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The Goodness in the Evil of SEO

Why Search Engine Optimization Matters to Information Professionals



During the past 10 years, the adoption and saturation of search engine optimization (SEO) of web content has been on a strong growth trajectory. Advanced search algorithms developed mainly at research universities have turned into “monetization” and marketing opportunities for the mainstream (Think Google and its research origins at Stanford University.) Yet, there are those information professionals who view SEO with some reservation or even actual contempt due to the rampant SEO techniques that reduce the quality of search results by driving traffic to sites that take advantage of trending searches rather than useful information.

“SEO Gaming,” as some call it, has led to search results that are not good or adulterated — the total antithesis to the role information professionals play in the process. Earlier this year, Google addressed the criticism and concerns by tweaking its search algorithms to ensure better quality search results. So how has this affected the role of the librarian, “the original search engine”? What are the issues? Why should SEO matter? How do we remain relevant like the search results we evaluate?

In 2011, OCLC published “Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community,” its newest OCLC membership report. According to the report, more than 84% of respondents began their search for information using a search engine; no respondents began their search for information at the library website (De Rosa & Cathy, 2011). Similar trends have been documented in other studies, and the explanation is almost always the same: Compared to libraries, search engines are more convenient, faster, and easier to use. Clearly, there is no longer any competition between libraries and search engines. If libraries and information centers want to remain relevant, they need to

harvest the power and popularity of search engines to direct traffic back to their website.

The key to being discovered on search engines is through SEO. Optimization can improve the ranking and visibility of library resources and services. Many libraries, for example, invest time and effort into digitizing books, images, and items from special collections. This material, along with subject guides, finding aids, newsletters, blogs, etc., may be of interest to the public, especially researchers, the media, and potential donors. Improved ROI on the millions spent annually to support the purchase and access to high-quality research databases, journals, and books is another benefit of SEO. These resources are often unknown or overlooked by users who rely solely on search engines for their research. SEO can improve the visibility of these tools and lead to increased usage

While SEO has been widely adopted by businesses and non-profits, few libraries and information centers have incorporated the practice into their websites. In this age of information choice, being competitive with the commercial sector is tantamount to being relevant. Even if not directly involved in web development, it is imperative for information professionals to understand the implications of SEO on search result lists so that they can better evaluate and educate users on how search engine results are generated and the value of the information displayed.

SEO Optimization Techniques

The goal of SEO is to help websites rank higher on a search engine result page (SERP). A highly ranked website results in increased targeted traffic, which leads to more successful conversions (i.e., favorable actions on a website). Information professionals are encouraged to practice SEO, especially as once

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implemented, many basic techniques and strategies can make a website more competitive and visible on a SERP. Here are some points, relative to SEO optimization techniques, that info pros are probably already familiar and that are worth considering.

Keywords

The selection and placement of keywords on a website is at the heart of SEO, because search engines retrieve results based on keywords. If the keyword searched does not match the keywords on a webpage, then it is unlikely that the website will rank high.

Optimizing with keywords is a two-step process. The first step is to identify targeted keywords to include on the website. For example, if university students are known to search "free full text articles" when researching online, these keywords could be incorporated into a webpage about library research. A variety of tools exist, some free, that show the popularity of keywords as well as related terms. Information professionals, of course should also rely on their own skills and expertise for brainstorming keywords. It is also useful to review web logs to identify keywords relevant to the webpage.

Once relevant keywords have been identified, the next step is to place the keywords in locations that search spiders deem important, such as the title tag, headings (H1, H2, etc.), alt tags,

and hyperlinks. For example, a webpage about "friends of the library" should include those terms in the title tag. Webpages should never be titled "index" or "home." When possible, be descriptive. For example, the Friends of the Library webpage may also include the keywords "join today" or "application form" or the name of the library in the title tag.

Links

Search engine spiders index the web by following hyperlinks. If a webpage does not link to another webpage, it may not be found. Creating a site map is an effective strategy to ensure that spiders can easily and completely index a website.

Links, especially inbound links, are also important metrics used by search engines to determine the ranking of results. For example, a link to Site B from Site A is viewed as a vote of popularity and trust for Site A. Libraries and information centers should seek opportunities to increase the number of inbound links to their sites. This can be accomplished through reciprocal linking (e.g. Site A links to Site B and vice versa), adding links to directories, and linking to popular and authoritative websites, such as other libraries, museums, organizations, and even Wikipedia. (See Figure 1 below.)



Google AdWords (pay-per-click)	www.google.com/ads/#s
Word Tracker — subscription	www.wordtracker.com/order.html
Keyword List Generator (free)	komarketingassociates.com/tools/keyword-generator.php
Other Free Keyword Generators — A List	http://keyword-list-generator.winsite.com

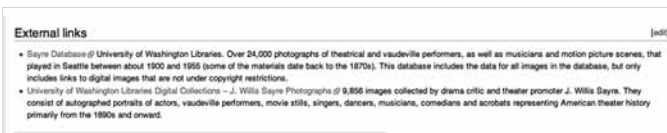


Figure 1. University of Washington Libraries links in Wikipedia

Metadata

While spiders pay little attention to metadata, these tags should not be overlooked. Often the description tag appears in the SERPs, so this bit of text can impact whether someone will visit the website. Remember that optimization is not only about ranking high in the SERPs — it's also about increasing targeted traffic and favorable actions at the website. Any tactic that makes a website appear more attractive from the SERP page will ultimately have a positive impact on optimization. Libraries and information centers should therefore ensure that each webpage includes a unique and relevant metadata description. (See Figure 2 below.)



Figure 2. The snippet under the site name is from the metadata description.

Popularity

As previously discussed, inbound links significantly impact a website's ranking on the SERP. The more inbound links a website acquires, the higher it will rank. Other factors that affect ranking include traffic (i.e., number of visitors), average time spent on site, and number of repeat visitors. It is important that libraries and information centers not only increase targeted traffic to their sites but ensure that visitors remain on the website as long as possible.

Indexing of Webpages

Not everything is visible for indexing. If a website cannot be indexed by a spider, it will not appear in the SERPs. Currently, spiders crawl HTML text format, which means that search engines can't "read" anything but text. Webpages that include images, documents, spreadsheets, audio files, etc., need special consideration when it comes to search visibility. The following are some points to consider:

- Make sure the media or document file is stored on a server open to search engines and not blocked by robots.txt file.
- Name files using descriptive words. Do not use file names that are automatically generated like 08222011.JPG (camera format). SEO relies on descriptive words. Rename the file such as "Lunch at Sandy Neck Beach." The more descriptive, the better.
- Add Metadata Tags. Using ALT attribute gives you another opportunity to add more descriptive words.
- Add Adjacent captions. Another opportunity to use more descriptive words for captions next to images, etc.

Local SEO and Localization

When you perform a search using Google or Bing, the results are significantly guided by your physical location, even on queries where you don't indicate a location. This is known as localization and Google and Bing have made it an integral component in their ranking algorithms. For example, if you are in Washington, D.C., and search for "museums" or "libraries", your results would be very different than if you did the same search in New York City.

If it is important for a website to appear in search results for users in specific geographic locations, it's important to create content and link connectivity that tell the search engines that the site is relevant for users in those locations. Once the content has been created, it is important to establish the link connectivity by using directories (Google Places, Yahoo! Local, Citysearch, Yellow Pages) to ensure high-ranking SERP results.

Social Media and SEO

Both profit and nonprofit organizations would benefit from SEO strategies for social media. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and video and audio user-generated content sites are being used for "social presence" to reach additional audiences and increase opportunities for branding, revenue, and feedback. Marketing constraints and fewer resources also make a digital strategy cost effective. And, search engine optimization and social media marketing tactic increase social network discovery via the ability to attract links for improved SEO.

For example, the Wisconsin Historical Society uses Facebook to promote its image collection as well as a social media presence. Viewers can not only learn about the collection, but also have the opportunity to purchase images like those representing the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect and "a native son of Wisconsin." (See Figure 3 below.) A graphic here shows the

text continued on page 35



Figure 3. Image of Frank Lloyd Wright with a direct link to Wisconsin Historical Society website



Figure 4. More information on Frank Lloyd Wright image, including opportunity to buy



SEO Tools and Resources

We cannot endorse all of the following resources and tools, but we invite you to consider them.

SEO Guides and Tools

Search Engine Guide

www.searchengineguide.com

The small business guide to search marketing

SEOMoz.org

www.seomoz.org

Serves as a hub for search marketers worldwide by providing education, tools, resources, and paid services to help make every SEO the best they can be.

Search Engine Land

<http://searchengineland.com>

SEO tips index

www.seoconsultants.com/seo/tips

Google AdWords

<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>

Keyword tool generates keyword ideas)

30 SEO Bookmarklets to Save You Time

www.seomoz.org/blog/30-seo-bookmarklets-to-save-you-time

Learn SEO in 30 Minutes a Day

www.seomoz.org/blog/learn-seo-in-30-minutes-a-day

The Online Marketers Tool Box

www.websitetestingtools.com

The Beginner's Guide to SEO

www.seomoz.org/beginners-guide-to-seo

Websites and Blogs on SEO

A Librarian's View on SEO

Delicious.com/novascotia32/seo

E. Rushton's bookmarks and comments on SEO

ClickZ

www.clickz.com

News and expert advice for the digital marketer

Google Webmaster Central Blog

<http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com>

Official news on crawling and indexing sites for the Google index

Search engine optimization tips for libraries, from The Other Librarian

<http://otherlibrarian.wordpress.com/2008/07/14/search-engine-optimization-seo-tips-for-libraries>

Is SEO Evil?

www.slideshare.net/gleddy/is-seo-evil-web-directions-2007

Conferences

SES (Search Engines Strategies) Conference

www.searchenginestrategies.com

Enterprise Search Summit

www.enterprisearchsummit.com

Other Resources

Rebecca Lieb. *The Truth About Search Engine Optimization* (New Jersey: FT Press, 2009)

Peter Kent. *Search Engine Optimization For Dummies, 4th Edition* (New York: For Dummies, 2010).

Jennifer Grappone and Gradiva Couzin. *Search Engine Optimization: An Hour a Day, 2nd Edition* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Pub, 2008).

Eric Enge, *The Art of SEO* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly, 2010).

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Rushton, E. E., M. D. Kelehan, and M. A. Strong. "Searching for a New Way to Reach Patrons: A Search Engine Optimization Pilot Project at Binghamton University Libraries," *Journal of Web Librarianship*, 2, 4, 525-547 (2008).

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Facebook posting and a click to the Wisconsin Historical Society website for more information. (See Figure 4 on page 33.)

Web Analytics

The use of web analytic products does not directly impact optimization, but the knowledge acquired from such tools can help in making optimization decisions. Most analytics software provides reports about incoming traffic sources, average time spent on pages, referring keywords, and visitor demographics. Information professionals should consider installing web analytic software on their site, especially since many packages, such as Google Analytics [www.google.com/analytics], are available free.

The information garnered from web analytic tools can help information professionals identify the most popular as well as underperforming webpages. Analytic tools are also useful for keyword research (e.g., which keywords directed traffic to the website) and for understanding how visitors navigate the website.

Case Study: SEO at Binghamton University Libraries

A team of librarians at Binghamton University Libraries conducted a search engine optimization pilot project (Rushton, Kelehan, & Strong, 2008). The purpose of the project was to optimize the Libraries' Ask a Librarian webpage and several special collections pages related to Edwin A. Link, a pioneer in flight and native of Binghamton. The project had several goals: Increase the number of successful conversions, increase traffic from search engines, increase the number of site visitors, and achieve a higher page rank than "competitors" (e.g., other libraries). The project consisted of three phases:

During Phase I, the team established a baseline of typical web traffic activity. The team also reviewed existing keywords, metadata, and HTML tags and calculated the number of indexed pages and inbound links.

In Phase II, the team optimized the webpages by adding relevant keywords to the title tags, text, and metadata description. Inbound links were added to Wikipedia and several other websites. Alt text was added to several images, and a sitemap.xml file was created. The robots.txt file, the file that permits a search engine to index a site, was also configured

In Phase III, the team conducted postoptimization testing and analyzed traffic changes as a result of SEO. Optimization increased referrals from search engines on several pages and the new keywords, such as "Edwin A. Link archive" and "Ed Link papers", generally ranked higher. Most impor-

tantly, optimization activities increased the number of pages indexed by search engines.

Overall, the project demonstrated that optimization could have a positive impact on the library website. The team acquired practical experience in optimization and became more knowledgeable on how to improve optimization techniques in the future. When the libraries' website was redesigned in 2009, some SEO was built into the site. In addition, the libraries were awarded a university grant to further explore optimization both within the libraries and throughout the campus. The goals of this project include forming a universitywide search engine optimization task force; conducting focus groups to better understand information-seeking behaviors of students, faculty, and staff; and educating other departments on how to incorporate SEO practices to their own websites.

At the same time, the Binghamton University Libraries SEO project exposed some of the challenges information professionals may face when attempting to optimize their own institution's websites.

- Lack of SEO skills and knowledge can be a hurdle.
- The SEO industry is constantly evolving and it is difficult to keep on top of the latest strategies and trends. Resources such as SEOmoz Daily SEO Blog and Search Engine Land are helpful resources to keep informed.
- To incorporate SEO practices into the daily workflow can also be a challenge. SEO is not a one-time fix, it is an iterative process that must be regularly refined and improved upon.

Final Thoughts

Concerns about "SEO gaming" are well-founded and important. While we should stay aware and informed on this topic, it should not deter us from the overall goal of pursuing the positive benefits of SEO, such as the goal of increasing traffic to a website. In addition, opportunities abound for information professionals with enhanced job responsibilities to contribute to their organization's presence on the web. In the midst of tough economic times, SEO can also help with marketing strategies, improved branding and circumventing budget constraints. The challenges, as mentioned, can easily be turned into opportunities for those information professionals motivated to learn the principles of SEO and to integrate them into their web-related activities. SEO should not be thought of as a "necessary evil" but as an opportunity for information professionals to do a better job. ◆