

Best and Worst Practices for Designing Highly Visible Websites

The following is a list of good things to do and bad things to avoid when designing or optimizing a website. When you choose a web developer to work with, make sure that they incorporate these practices into your website's design and content. If the web developer you are working with is uncertain of how to implement these practices or advocates the use of any of the "worst practices" we have one word of advice... find a new web developer. Building a great looking, useful website that no one can find is a huge waste of time and money.

Keywords

Keyword Best Practices

Keyword research is a critical component in improving online visibility. Before you can effectively optimize your website you need to understand the best words and phrases to use. This is not simply a matter of deciding what search terms you want to be found for, it is a matter of gaining a deep understanding of the words and phrases that people actually use to look for the product or service that you offer. In most cases, you'll want to work with a list of 10-20 primary keywords (high traffic keywords) and 100+ secondary keywords (lower traffic, more descriptive).

1. Keywords in <title> tag

+3

This is one of the most important places to have a keyword because what is written inside the <title> tag shows in search results as your page title. The title tag must be short (6 or 7 words; 64 characters or less), the keyword must be near the beginning, and your company name should be included at the end.

2. Keywords in URL

+3

Keywords in URLs help a lot – www.domainname.com/keyword.html, where "keyword" is the keyword phrase you attempt to rank well for. Make sure you also have that same keyword in the content at the top of the page – search engines want to see consistency from URL to page title, to page content.

3. Keyword density in document text

+3

Another very important factor you need to check. Your keyword density on a page should be 3-7 % for primary keywords, 1-2% for secondary. Keyword density of over 10% is suspicious because it looks like keyword stuffing to the search engine. Search engines punish sites they suspect of keyword stuffing and look for naturally written text.

3. Keywords in anchor text **+3**

Also very important, especially for the anchor text of inbound links, because if you have the keyword in the anchor text in a link from another site, this is regarded as getting a vote from this site not only about your site in general, but about the keyword in particular. Quality backlinks are especially valuable. A backlink could be considered as a Quality Backlink if (1) It links to your website with the keyword (keyphrase) that you are trying to optimize for; and (2) the Theme of the backlinking website is the same as your website.

5. Keywords in headings (<H1>, <H2>, etc. tags) **+3**

One more place where keywords count a lot. But make sure that your page has actual textual content – not just a heading - about the particular keyword.

6. Keywords in the beginning of a document **+2**

Also counts, though not as much as anchor text, title tag or headings. However, have in mind that the beginning of a document does not necessarily mean the first paragraph – for instance if you use tables, the first paragraph of text might be in the second half of the table.

7. Keywords in <alt> tags **+2**

Spiders don't read images but they do read their textual descriptions in the <alt> tag of a web page. If you have images on your page, fill in the <alt> tag with some keywords about them.

8. Keywords in metatags **+1**

Less and less important, especially for Google. Yahoo! and Bing still rely on them. In any case, a well worded meta description is important because it is the “advertisement” that shows up on the search results page. Use keywords, but focus on a compelling reason for the user to click on your search result.

9. Keyword proximity **+1**

Keyword proximity measures how close in the text the keywords are. It is best if they are immediately one after the other (e.g. “dog food”), with no other words between them. For instance, if you have “dog” in the first paragraph and “food” in the third paragraph, this also counts but not as much as having the phrase “dog food” without any other words in between. Keyword proximity is applicable for keyword phrases that consist of 2 or more words.

10. Secondary keywords

+1

Optimizing for secondary keywords can be a golden mine because when everybody else is optimizing for the most popular keywords, there will be less competition (and probably more hits) for pages that are optimized for the minor words. For instance, “real estate new jersey” might have thousand times less hits than “real estate” only but if you are operating in New Jersey, you will get less but considerably better targeted traffic.

Keyword Worst Practices

The best advice we can give you is to avoid trying to “game” the system when it comes to using keywords. Search engine algorithms are built to detect tactics that are meant to “fool” the search engines. If this is a game you think you can win... beware. You are up against a couple hundred PhD’s that spend their entire day tweaking algorithms to detect (and punish) deceptive, “black-hat” practices.

1. Keyword dilution

-2

When you are optimizing for an excessive amount of keywords, especially unrelated ones, this will affect the performance of all your keywords and even the major ones will be lost (diluted) in the text.

2. Keyword stuffing

-3

Any artificially inflated keyword density (10% and over) is keyword stuffing and you risk getting banned from search engines.

Links - internal, inbound, outbound

The importance of links cannot be understated. Search engines rely on links to find new sites, new content, and rank websites. It’s like a great big popularity contest – if your site is linked to lots of other good sites then search engines rank you high.

Linking Best Practices

1. Anchor text of inbound links

+3

As discussed in the Keywords section, this is one of the most important factors for good rankings. It is best if you have a keyword in the anchor text but even if you don't, it is still OK.

2. Origin of inbound links

+3

Besides the anchor text, it is important if the site that links to you is a reputable one or not. Generally sites with a high Google PageRank are considered reputable. Therefore you want sites with a higher Google PageRank to link to your site.

3. Links from similar sites +3

Having links from similar sites is very, very useful. It indicates that the competition is voting for you and you are popular within your topical community.

4. Links from .edu and .gov sites +3

These links are precious because .edu and .gov sites are more reputable than .com, .biz, .info, etc. domains. Additionally, such links are hard to obtain.

5. Number of backlinks +3

Generally the more, the better. But the reputation of the sites that link to you is more important than their number. Also important is their anchor text, is there a keyword in it, how old are they, etc.

6. Anchor text of internal links +2

This also matters, though not as much as the anchor text of inbound links.

7. Around-the-anchor text +2

The text that is immediately before and after the anchor text also matters because it further indicates the relevance of the link – i.e. if the link is artificial or it naturally flows in the text.

8. Age of inbound links +2

The older, the better. Getting many new links in a short time suggests buying them.

9. Links from directories +2

Great, though it strongly depends on which directories. Being listed in DMOZ, Yahoo Directory and similar directories is a great boost for your ranking but having tons of links from PRO directories is useless and it can even be regarded as link spamming, if you have hundreds or thousands of such links.

10. Number of outgoing links on the page that links to you +1

The fewer, the better for you because this way your link looks more important.

Linking Worst Practices

1. Inbound links from link farms and other suspicious sites

0

This does not affect you in any way, provided that the links are not reciprocal. The idea is that it is beyond your control to define what a link farm links to, so you don't get penalized when such sites link to you because this is not your fault but in any case you'd better stay away from link farms and similar suspicious sites.

2. Too many outgoing links

-1

Google does not like pages that consists mainly of links, so you'd better keep them under 100 per page. Having many outgoing links does not get you any benefits in terms of ranking and could even make your situation worse.

3. Excessive linking, link spamming

-1

It is bad for your rankings, when you have many links to/from the same sites (even if it is not a cross-linking scheme or links to bad neighbors) because it suggests link buying or at least spamming. In the best case only some of the links are taken into account for SEO rankings.

4. Outbound links to link farms and other suspicious sites

-3

Unlike inbound links from link farms and other suspicious sites, outbound links to bad neighbors can drown you. You need periodically to check the status of the sites you link to because sometimes good sites become bad neighbors and vice versa.

5. Cross-linking

-3

Cross-linking occurs when site A links to site B, site B links to site C and site C links back to site A. This is the simplest example but more complex schemes are possible. Cross-linking looks like disguised reciprocal link trading and is penalized.

6. Single pixel links

-3

When you have a link that is a pixel or so wide it is invisible for humans, so nobody will click on it and it is obvious that this link is an attempt to manipulate search engines.

Content

Content Best Practices

1. Unique content +3

Having original, relevant content is one of the most important elements to search visibility. Having lots of content is not enough. You must have content that is different from the content on other sites both in wording and topics. Search engines LOVE original content so it is a real boost for your site's rankings.

2. Frequency of content change +3

Frequent changes are favored. It is great when you constantly add new content but it is not so great when you only make small updates to existing content. When you think about changing content, consider adding new, keyword optimized pages to your site that contain original content. Size matters... large websites in terms on the number of pages on the site will be ranked higher than small sites.

3. Site size +3

Spiders love large sites, so generally it is the bigger, the better. However, big sites become user-unfriendly and difficult to navigate, so sometimes it makes sense to separate a big site into a couple of smaller ones. On the other hand, there are hardly sites that are penalized because they are 10,000+ pages, so don't split your size in pieces only because it is getting larger and larger.

4. Keywords font size and heading tags +2

When a keyword in the document text is in a larger font size in comparison to other on-page text, this makes it more noticeable, so therefore it is more important than the rest of the text. The same applies to headings (<h1>, <h2>, etc.), which generally are in larger font size than the rest of the text.

5. Keywords formatting +2

Bold and italic are another way to emphasize important words and phrases. However, use bold, italic and larger font sizes within reason because otherwise you might achieve just the opposite effect. Search engines are looking for natural wording and construction of content.

6. Age of document +2

Recent documents (or at least regularly updated ones) are favored. This is one of many reasons that blog posts provide excellent content for websites.

7. File size

+1

Generally long pages are not favored, or at least you can achieve better rankings if you have 3 short rather than 1 long page on a given topic, so split long pages into multiple smaller ones and optimize each page for maximum visibility.

Content Worst Practices

1. Content separation

-2

Content separation based on IP, browser type, platform, etc. might be great from a marketing and website maintenance point of view, but for online visibility it is bad because when you have one URL and differing content, search engines get confused about what the actual content of the page is.

2. Poor coding and design

-2

Poor design and poor coding inhibits a search engine's ability to crawl and index your website. It is more important than ever to use web-standard compliant design and coding practices to assure that your site is found and indexed properly.

3. Frames

-2

Frames are very, very bad for search visibility because they contain content stored in a database that can't be read by search engines. Avoid using them unless really necessary.

4. Illegal Content

-3

Using other people's copyrighted content without their permission or using content that promotes legal violations can get you kicked out of search engines.

5. Invisible text

-3

This is a "black hat" SEO practice that you should never engage in. When spiders discover that you have text specially for them but not for humans, the penalty will be harsh... you will probably be "de-listed" by the search engines.

6. Cloaking

-3

Cloaking is another "black hat" technique, which partially involves content separation because spiders see one page (highly-optimized, of course), and everybody else is presented with another version of the same page.

7. Doorway pages

-3

Creating pages that aim to trick spiders that your site is a highly-relevant one when it is not, is another way to get the kick from search engines.

8. Duplicate content

-3

When you have the same content on several pages on the site, this will not make your site look larger because the duplicate content penalty kicks in. To a lesser degree duplicate content applies to pages that reside on other sites but obviously these cases are not always banned – i.e. article directories or mirror sites do exist and prosper.

Visual Extras and Social Media

Here are some general recommendations regarding the use of video, blogs, and social networks.

1. Podcasts and videos

Podcasts and videos are becoming more and more popular but as with all non-textual goodies, search engines can't read them, so if you embed these items on your host server and don't have the tapescript of the podcast or the video actually posted on your website, it is as if the podcast or movie is not there because it will not be indexed by search engines.

2. YouTube video

YouTube is the highest traffic site on the planet – by a lot. Google now owns YouTube. One of the best visibility strategies available today is to create a YouTube channel for your business, create videos, upload them to your YouTube channel, categorize the video, add appropriate keywords for the video, and then embed the YouTube video onto your website.

3. Blogs

Blogs are an outstanding source of frequently changing, original, relevant content for your website. The investment here is not so much in terms of dollars, but in terms of time and writing ability. In terms of online visibility it is an outstanding investment.

4. Facebook

Facebook is one of the fastest growing social networks today and is second only to YouTube in terms of number of visitors. In terms of online visibility, Facebook can be great sources of referral visits to your website and valuable links to your website. Remember that search engines monitor the level of traffic to your site and follow links pointing to your site from other websites. Facebook is a website, so search engines are following those links.

Our words of caution... just like your website, Facebook is a portal into your brand and into your business that is open to everyone. Consider this when you formulate your Facebook strategy. Do you want potential customers to know what you did last weekend? Facebook is a social networking site originally designed for students, not commerce. Using a social network improperly can cause damage to your brand and reputation.

5. Twitter

Twitter has become enormously popular and basically provides text messaging capability on steroids. There are some very good and creative uses for Twitter in the commercial arena such as providing customer support for products. It is also a fantastic tool for influencing large groups of people to visit a website. Let's say that you are a follower of Oprah. Oprah has millions of Twitter followers. Oprah sends out a Tweet saying that she uses your product and includes your URL in the Tweet. You can count on millions of people visiting your website within seconds of the Tweet.

Our words of caution... Tweets can have unintended consequences. They can go to lots of people in an instant and can't be retracted. If the intent of your 150 character Tweet is misconstrued, you can harm your brand and reputation. Use Twitter wisely and it can be a fantastic tool.

6. LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a professional networking site that allows people to post their professional bio's and connect to other professionals through their personal network of business and personal contacts.

LinkedIn is used heavily by recruiters and HR departments looking for professionals with certain work experience and even provides job listings for members looking for a new job. It can also be a valuable source of information exchange through discussion groups.

LinkedIn is a wonderful tool to get a "warm" introduction to someone that you want to connect with, but don't know. It's the digital equivalent of getting an introduction at a cocktail party from a business associate to someone you want to do business with – find someone you know that knows the person you want to connect with and ask for an introduction.