Search Engine Optimization Essentials

A Starter Q & A for Effective SEO Planning

One of the benefits of working with a company like The Webscaper for your website development is that we know that having a great website design is only *one element* of having a successful online marketing strategy. Without an effective marketing plan to promote your website, nobody will ever find it. The first step in this plan should be to ensure that the content on your site incorporates basic search engine optimization (SEO) best practices.

Every business owner has heard of SEO and knows that it is important, but few understand what exactly it is or how to implement it. Unfortunately, due to the unscrupulous marketing of shady "SEO companies" there is a lot of misinformation circulating about what search engine optimization is. Spam e-mail campaigns target businesses every day with promises to get websites at the top of search result pages. ***These claims are false - nobody can guarantee how high you will rank on any search engine result page.***

We have put together the following Q&A to help our valued clients understand what SEO is, what The Webscaper will do to optimize your new website, and how to best harness the tools available to ensure your customers can find your site.

What is SEO?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of making your website (and its content) highly visible to search engines (like Google, Yahoo!, Bing, Ask.com, etc.) so that when potential customers are searching for what your company is offering, YOUR website will return in the search results.

There are many, many facets of SEO beyond what is covered in this Q&A. How extensive your SEO strategy should be depends largely on what type of website you have, who your target audience is, and how much competition you have.

SEO should be just one part of your marketing strategy for promoting your website and company. SEO only targets the potential visitors who are *actively searching for sites like yours through search engines*. It is still important to have other means of reaching out and making your website known to potential visitors who are *not* actively searching for you (but may still need your product or services). This may include putting your website URL on your print marketing materials, advertising your website in print or online ads, engaging social media, implementing an email marketing strategy, and more.

How does The Webscaper incorporate SEO into my website?

When we develop your website for you, we make sure that the building blocks for effective SEO are in place *by optimizing the content that is delivered on your website*. This allows your website to be indexed by the major search engines properly, so when someone is looking for something that you offer, your site is suggested to them in search results. We do this in a number of ways, starting with properly coding the HTML on your site, making recommendations about your content, and installing tools to help you maintain your SEO.

How exactly do you optimize the content on my pages?

To ensure that your site is indexed as effectively as possible by search engines, we incorporate the following essential SEO building blocks into every site:

- *Proper tagging of your pages.* Search engines automatically scan the HTML code on every page on every website and, using complex algorithms, "read" the code and determine what a website is about and how they should index the site in their database. Certain "tags" in HTML code help this automated process determine what words on your website are important and what information to display back in search results. The title tags (which display the title of each of your pages at the top of web browsers) and meta tags such as the "description" tag are crucial to having your site indexed properly. Additionally, tags that are associated with headings, links and images throughout your site are also very important. We ensure that all of these tags are utilized effectively on your website before your site is launched.

- **Creating Excellent Navigation.** The navigational structure of your website is very important not only for your site visitors to be able to get around your website, but also to search engines. When search engines "crawl" your website to index it, they determine if your content is structured in an organized fashion, and that you do not have "orphan" pages that cannot be reached through your main navigation.

- *Content evaluation.* <u>The single most important factor for effective SEO and ensuring that your website is indexed properly with search engines is to have the very best content on your website possible.</u> The words that you use on the pages of your website are essentially your site's *keywords*, and these keywords are what will match up a person searching with your website. We will review the content on every page of your website, and make recommendations if we find ways that revising your content will help improve your SEO.

- *Internal and External Linking.* The links that you have within your website also weigh greatly on how search engines index your website. By inter-linking the content on your pages, using the proper anchor tags, search engines will be better able to "read" your content and index it properly. Additionally, we will help you identify all opportunities to link externally to websites that have content in common with yours (for example, you might link to professional affiliations you have, or to sites that you recommend). Search engines will evaluate where you are linking to, in order to determine what niche your site belongs in, and how credible the content on your site is.

- *Creation and submission of an XML sitemap of your website to search engines.* While search engines usually will find any website whether you submit your site to them or not, making sure that search engines know what pages you want them to index is most effective if you build a sitemap file for your website and submit it directly to the search engines, rather than waiting for them to find you. We build your sitemap, submit it, and configure it so that it will be re-submitted regularly as your content is updated on your website.

- ***Installation of tools to further optimize your site.*** A number of tools have been developed for WordPress websites that greatly improve your indexability and SEO. We will install and configure these tools and teach you how to use them so that as your site grows in the future, you will continue to take advantage of the SEO building blocks that we put into place for you.

Will the optimization that you do on my site guarantee my site will return at the top of searches?

No. We cannot guarantee where you will rank for any search, and ***neither can anyone else.*** Be wary of any so-called SEO company that promises that you will rank "at the top" or "on the first page" of search results. These are false claims and should be a red flag to the integrity of the company making the promise.

What we can assure you is that by implementing our standard SEO tools, your site will be effectively indexed with all major search engines, and the content that is on your website is formatted properly and indexed so that those searching for the products or services your website offers have the ability to find you and determine from search results whether your pages are worth clicking on.

What other things should I do to improve my SEO and/or ensure that my site is found above my competitors?

The extent of your company's SEO efforts depends largely on the type of website you have, the types of websites that your direct competitors have, and the time and budget that you wish to expend to improve your SEO. SEO should be just one facet of your marketing strategy, and the type of business that you have largely determines which facets should be focused on more heavily.

In general, the following are some of the best ways to maintain or improve your SEO:

- **Know your competitors.** Your SEO efforts should match or exceed those of your primary competition. Identify your competitors, study their websites, and determine what they're doing that you are not. For example, is their website content more extensive than yours? Do they have more pages? If so, they will likely be indexed higher than your site because more content will translate to more relevant keywords. Are they using social media such as Facebook or YouTube to market their services? If so, you may wish to consider it too (as long as you can commit to keeping up with it!).

- **Search for your business and your competitors.** The best way to know how well your site is indexed is to put yourself in your potential visitors' shoes. What will they type in a search box to find services like yours? Ask others what they'd search for if they needed to find someone like you. Don't just type in the name of your business into Google and be happy that you return first; of course you will return first - you're the only one with your company name. Instead, if your business is a house painting business, then you should be searching things like "house painting near [your town, state]," "interior painting [your town, state]," "professional painters [your town, state]," and so on. Identify keywords that are relevant to your business and perform many searches to see what sites are returning, and WHY. Then, do better than they do!

- **Consistently update and tweak your site content.** Search engines pay attention to how often your site changes. Sites that are updated frequently will rank higher than similar sites

that are static or stale. Adding a blog -- or using a blog to publish news and announcements, is an excellent way to achieve this. Also be sure to review your content frequently to ensure that all of the keywords - search terms - that your potential customers could be entering into a search engine are found on your site (as long as they are RELEVANT to your site - never, ever pad your site with non-relevant keywords!!)

- **Use social media** (but only if you will keep up with it!). Using social media tools, particularly in conjunction with your site's blog or news, will help to spread the word about your website and encourage people to share your content.

- **Get inbound links from reputable sources.** Not to be confused with "link exchanging" (which major search engines frown upon). Having reputable websites relevant to your industry link to your website will boost the credibility of your site to search engines. If you are a member of professional affiliations, see if they list links to member organizations and get your site listed. Get listed on local business directories such as the Chamber of Commerce. If applicable to your business, have happy clients link to your website from theirs.

- **Consider paid online advertising.** Major search engines all feature "sponsored results" usually at the top or right side of search result pages. The sites that made it to those spots did not do so through optimized content but rather through buying the placement. Paying for ads is not necessarily a bad thing to consider and is not limited to search engines. Facebook targeted advertising is also becoming a hugely successful avenue for getting your website in front of people that may be interested in what you have to share. If you REALLY need to make sure people find you, paying for placement may be a viable solution for you.

- **Be patient.** The day your website launches you will not show up at the top of searches! Even when you are first indexed by Google, etc., it can still take days, weeks, even months before your site crawls its way up. Keep up with your SEO efforts and they will pay off. The faster you move up largely depends on your competition. Also, how saturated your industry is will greatly affect how quickly you rank higher. If there are hundreds or thousands of sites that sell what you do, it will be harder to rank high for searches for your product than "niche" websites that only have a handful of competing websites. (Hint: in highly saturated markets, employing other marketing strategies - both online and off - is an absolute must).

There are also a number of tools available that can help you assess how your website is performing and provide information to you about how well your site is performing. Google Analytics is arguably the most popular website analytics tool to assist site owners. Analytics provides a ton of information, including how many people are visiting your website, what pages they are viewing, how long they are staying on your site, and what search terms they used to find your site.

If you would like more information on using Google Analytics or other tools to help improve SEO, or would like to discuss other ways to boost your online marketing efforts, contact us - we will help you identify the best solutions for your website and your business.