How to Optimize for Google – A StepForth Whitepaper

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In today's online world search engine rankings can make your business succeed, and while rankings in Yahoo and MSN are very valuable, their combined market value is still less than that of Google. This makes achieving top rankings in Google that much more important.

In this whitepaper on How to Optimize for Google I will touch on a number of aspects for top Google rankings including website optimization, links, Google Webmaster tools, and a number of other important considerations.

THE RIGHT KEYWORDS

This article is not about keyword research so I will not spend too much time on this topic, however, I felt it was important to at least brush on this slightly. If you are interested in reading more please see Keyword Research for Organic SEO.

Make sure that your targets are achievable. If you select the wrong keywords it can make your entire optimization experience essentially a waste. Choose keywords that are attainable but yet still offer a reasonable search frequency for your industry. Your phrase selection should also be targeted to bring qualified traffic to your site.

Using the hotel industry as an example, targeting the word "hotel" would make very little sense but by narrowing it down to "Victoria BC hotel" you now have less competition, and a more qualified audience. Keep your targets in perspective and go after the obtainable rankings.

WEBSITE OPTIMIZATION

There are many on-site factors that play a role in your search engine rankings. Here are a number of those factors and what you can do to increase your chances of success.

Title Tag

The title tag plays one of the most important roles in search results at Google, and is almost always the heading Google chooses for each of its listings. Placement of your target phrase is best used near the start of the tag and repeated again in the middle or near the end. Three uses of your target phrase may be helpful in some instances, as long as it is not too overwhelming. For best results each page on your site should have a totally unique title tag.

It is also important to remember that because Google will use this title as the main heading for your listing, you will want to keep it attractive to potential searchers. Try to also add a call to action, or other wording to help make your listing appear attractive to searchers.

To help illustrate the fact Google takes this tag into consideration, simply do a search for your target phrase and take a look at the titles of the top 10. I tried a search for a rather broad term "hotel" and saw that all 10/10 listings had it in the title tag, and 6/10 had it as the very first word. A quick scan showed that the entire top 30 either had the word hotel, or hotels in their title tags.

If you do only one thing to your website, make sure that all your title tags are relevant, unique, and contain your target phrase

for each page.

Meta Description Tag
The Meta Description tag is still occasionally used by Google as the description which appears in the search results themselves. While this used to be a more common practice Google tends to use it most often on sites with very limited content, or those which are flash based. I have seen it still used for content rich sites, however this is less common.

The Meta Description tag still has an impact on search rankings. Your best bet when using this tag is to keep it short and sweet with your target phrase close to the start and never repeated more than 3 times. Like the title tag, each page on you site should have its own unique description tag.

Meta Keyword Tag
When it comes to Google this tag is useless, and won't influence your rankings. There is some speculation as to whether a spammy keyword tag can however, have a negative effect on Google rankings. As a result, if you do utilize a keyword Meta tag for the smaller engines, it is best to keep it clean and play it safe.

Density
Keyword density plays a role in overall rankings; however, it is not as cut and dry as it once was. Once upon a time there was a magic number that when used could almost guarantee top rankings.

This is no longer the case. Today the ideal density varies from industry to industry, phrase to phrase. To find out what density you should aim for, take the top 10 or 20 search results and see what percentage those sites are using. In most cases you will find that the majority of these sites have a very similar density to one another, and this average density is a good estimation of what you should aim for.

Body Text and Keyword Placement
The location of relevant text on your site will help establish the overall importance of your target phrase. While you do not want to overwhelm the engines and site visitors with a bombardment of target phrases at the top of the page, try to sprinkle in some instances as close to the top of the page as possible.

Synonyms
Be sure to include various synonyms for your target phrases within your body text on your site. Google will use these synonyms to tie in the overall relevance of the page for your main target phrases, which in turn can improve your odds.

To find possible synonyms you can use a thesaurus, but the best way is to search Google itself and see exactly what they consider to be similar. Simply search in Google for your target phrase preceeded with a tilde, such as "~hotels". Next scan through the search results for any text Google has bolded. These are all words that Google considers to be related. Using the "~hotels" example Google brings up phrases such as 'travel', 'tourism', 'accommodation', as well as various hotel chain names such as 'Hilton Hotels'.

Keywords in Domain
There is still some speculation if having a target phrase as part of your top level domain (TLD) is of use to search rankings. From my experience, yes, there is value here, although, nothing like it was several years ago.

If you are starting off in the online world and are contemplating which domain to go for, consider one that uses your target phrase, assuming that it is both relevant to your business name, and uses no more than a single hyphen. While multiple hyphens in a domain can be successful, they are very common with highly spammy websites, so it is best to not take that route if possible.

While having a keyword located within your domain can offer some ranking juice, I would not suggest heading out and doing

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a domain swap. In most cases you would be better off working on your existing site than starting from scratch with a new domain.

Keywords in page specific URL

Using keywords for specific page URL's can also help add a little bit of value to your site, providing you use them responsibly. Consider using a keyword as a directory name and as part of a file name where it naturally makes sense to do so. If you have a website that focuses on tourism and includes local hotel listings, you may want to consider the following structure for your page on the Hilton:

> MyTourismSite.com/Victoria/Accommodations/Hotels/Hilton.html

Heading Tags

Placement of target phrases within heading tags helps to establish the importance of those given phrases. That said do not over do it, or abuse it. Only place target phrases within a heading tag if it makes sense to do so, and don't flood a page with numerous tags. Heading tags are not as critical as they once were, but still a good contribution to a well optimized page.

Link Anchor text

This is the actual text you click on as part of a link. When full or partial target phrases are used within your text links they help pass on some value to the linked page for those phrases. This is also true when considering surrounding text. When the content around the link is also relevant, the link holds slightly more value.

While a link that simply states "click here" or "www.domainname.com" does have its place, they provide considerably less value than a link that would use "discount hotels" as its anchor.

Image Alt Text

While image alt text still plays a minor role, its biggest part is within the use of image based navigation. If you have an image linked to another page, the alt text will be attributed much the same way as standard link anchor text is.

Image Alt text should always be short and to the point and should accurately describe either the image itself, or the page the image is linking to. Do not use alt tags as a place to stuff keywords.

Inline Links

These are links that are found mid sentence or mid paragraph as opposed to a simple listing of links as found in a menu or possibly on a sitemap. Links found mid paragraph tend to pass on a little more value from the surrounding text and can offer more relevance to the linked page.

Site Navigation

It is absolutely imperative that your website be fully spiderable by the search engines. This may seem obvious, but often webmasters overlook Google's ability to crawl a website. Google has become very advanced in what links it can follow and how it can spider a website, but there are still some things that can cause significant roadblocks.

- Flash: One of the most commonly made mistakes is the use of flash. If flash is used as a sole means of site navigation then you can count on Google not viewing your internal pages, and having a significant disadvantage in terms of site rankings.

- Java Script / DHTML: These days most Java Script and even DHTML menus can be spidered by Google, however, this is not always the case. If your site utilizes any kind of fancy navigation and you are wondering why Google has not indexed your internal pages, check out Google's Cached Text version of your page. If you do not see any text links, then your navigation may be invisible to Google.

- Images: Image based navigation has been safe for many years now, but if your site uses this form of navigation it is

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essential to have brief, relevant alt text on all your buttons. This alt text will act much like standard anchor text for text based links. This is not only for the purpose of search ranking value, but take a look at Google's cached text version of your page. If you have image based links that do not have alt text, those links do not appear. This doesn't mean Google won't follow them, but for anyone viewing your site on a text based browser, your links will be invisible to them.

URL Structure
Avoid long elaborate URL's with extraneous characters. While Google has reached a point where they can index massive URL strings, it is best to avoid them if at all possible. For dynamic sites consider utilizing mod rewrites to significantly clean up the URL to not only make it more search engine friendly, but more user friendly as well.

```
MyTourismSite.com/?locid="victoria"&catid="accommodations"
&type="hotel"&comp="hilton"
```

stands a better chance if cleaned up to read:

```
MyTourismSite.com/victoria/accommodations/hotels/hilton.htm
```
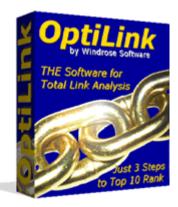
LINK BUILDING
Links are very important in today's Google rankings, but just how many links you need will depend on both the competitiveness of your target phrases, and the quality of the incoming links themselves.

Essentially the number one rule of links is to keep it relevant! Topical relevance is very important in order for inbound links to give your site the most value. If the page that links to you is relevant that is good, if the entire site linking to you is relevant, that is better.

First to get an idea of how many links you may need, take a look at the top 10 ranking sites in Google and record how many links Yahoo is noting for each site. (This is because Google does not display anywhere near all the links they have noted). The average of this count is often a good indication of how many links your site may need.

There are many different ways to get links to your site including the age old reciprocal link trade, directory links, article based links, and links from press releases.

Reciprocal Links
Reciprocal linking has seen its value drop considerably over the past few years, however, if the site you are trading with is relevant you can still receive value from these links.

Paid Links
Google frowns on paid links, however that is not to say that they don't work. Often you can find highly reputable and relevant websites which are offering paid advertising spots. If these links are coded to link directly to your website without passing through any tracking redirects, you will in many cases see value in the form of both direct traffic and increased link densities and rankings.

Articles
Writing and distributing industry specific articles is a great way to help increase both your link counts and site traffic; for examples of such content see StepForth's SEO Blog News articles. Consider writing articles on a regular basis and submitting them to some of the more popular services such as EzineArticles. Be sure to include a link to your site from somewhere within the article, or at the very lest within your bio. Try to use a target phrase as part of the anchor text for additional value. For more information on how to use a blog and make it work for you read our 3 part series How to Market

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Press Releases
If something of importance has happened to your company such as a new product launch, or other notable achievement - essentially anything news worthy, put out a press release. Submit this press release through services such as PRWeb or PRNewsWire. Again, be sure to include a target phrase as part of the anchor text.

There are also a number of places you can get links that have basically turned south, and are not generally recommended. These include signatures in form posts, guest books, and other typically free links.

Forum Posts
Forum posts can help to marginally increase your link counts; however, with this one you must be careful. Only add a link to your site in your signature if both the forum allows it, and you are a respected member of the forum. If you are a solid contributor and your posts have depth and meaning, and the forum is highly relevant to your site, then having a link in your signature may give your site some juice. Posting wildly to random forms will in most cases get yourself banned, and will be both a waste of time and potentially make you and your site look bad.

Guest Books
In nearly all cases, do not post your link to guest books. If you happen to stumble upon a guestbook that is highly relevant to your site, the other comments are relevant to your site, and you have something useful (and again relevant) to say, then perhaps consider it, but typically focusing on links from guest books is considered SPAM and is best avoided all together.

Blog Comments
Having a link from your blog comments is not necessarily a bad thing. If you find a relevant blog post of use, and have something relevant and constructive to say, don't be afraid to enter your link into the "URL" field of the form, but don't try stuffing links into the comment itself.

Link Farms & Bad Neighborhoods
These are sites that allow you to simply post your link no strings attached. They are mostly long scrolling pages with countless links. Stay away from them. If you see one, run in the other direction. These links are bad, will not help with your rankings, and in some cases can actually damage your rankings.

Stay away from sites that cross link with obvious spammers. These networks of SPAM sites are not ones you would want your site associated with, and if you achieve links from enough of these sites it can adversely impact your rankings. Even more important, NEVER link to any of these sites - as that will certainly tie in your connection to them and give Google reason to discount your rankings.

DMOZ, Yahoo and Other Directories
Directory based links can be of significant help, especially if they are from highly reputable directories, the two biggest being DMOZ.org and the Yahoo Directory.

Getting a site into DMOZ is like Gold. Google loves links from DMOZ and your site will reap the benefits. The big catch however is actually getting your site into the directory in the first place. Find the perfect category for your site and check to see if it has an editor. If you see a link "Volunteer to edit this category" try and find another relevant location. Pages without active editors take much longer to get listed into. Once you find the perfect directory submit your site every 4-6 months until listed. If you are lucky you will get in eventually.

Yahoo Directory is seen as an authority in the eyes of Google, and getting your site in will help your link reputation. This link does come at a price of $299 per year, but will play a role in helping your website achieve top rankings.

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There are a number of other valuable directories out there that can help you with your search rankings. Before submitting to any directory the key is a combination of relevance and authority. If the directory is relevant and active it may be worth considering. Also try looking at the other participants in the directory to see if the directory has quality controls; if not, it is likely the site has very little credibility at which point the link will not be worth your while.

GOOGLE WEBMASTER TOOLS
Google Webmaster Tools can be very useful for your optimization efforts. It may not directly help you obtain higher rankings, but can help you trouble shoot if you are experiencing problems. It will also allow you to remove URL's that you don't want indexed and set various preferences such as your domain, crawl rate, and geographic target.

XML Sitemaps
This is the most common reason people use Google Webmaster Tools - the submission of their XML sitemap. While you can use your robots.txt to have Google find your XML sitemap, by submitting it directly to Google you can check up on the spidering status. (Here is a free XML sitemap creation tool)

Error checking
Webmaster Tools is also quite useful for checking on various error URL's that Google may know about. Under the Diagnostics > Web Crawl you can view any errors that Google has to report on your site. By cleaning up any errors you can help increase your chances of rankings.

Links
From inside Google Webmaster Tools you can get a much clearer look at what sites Google is noting as having links to you, and give you a better indication of the need, if any, to increase your link counts.

WWW Preference
Be sure to select your domain preference under Tools > Set Preferred Domain. In nearly all cases you will want to select the version including the "www"

COMPLETING OPTIMIZATION: OTHER CONSIDERATIONS
Don't forget to keep in mind the following tips when optimizing your site or your site could experience significant problems.

Redirects
If you need to use redirects on your site it is very important to use the correct one. If a page is moving to a new location, or being removed all together, it is very important to have this page redirected to either the new location or the next closest page using a Permanent 301 Redirect.

While rare, if a page is being moved to a new location for a short term, with the intent of it returning to the original location, then and only then, you will want to use a Temporary 302 redirect. For more information please see Redirects: Permanent 301 vs. Temporary 302

Non WWW Redirects
To help eliminate page rank split, and provide your site with a little extra value, implement a non-www redirect. What this redirect will do is change the URL to include the "www" whenever a URL is accessed that does not include it. This can help to consolidate links to the correct page and give your site some additional strength. For more help on Non WWW redirects please see: How to 301 Redirect Non-WWW to WWW URL's

HTTP Headers
Check your page headers! If you have implemented any form of redirect on your site including mod rewrites, check your

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HTTP headers. You may be surprised at what you find. Some forms of redirects may use a 302 code where you really want a 301. By checking your headers you can ensure all is well, and troubleshoot problems. On our website we have added our own HTTP Header Checker for your convenience.

Home Page URL
Never have more than one URL for your home page. If your home page is available and displays on more than one URL, then utilize 301 redirects on all but the main URL you want to focus on - in most cases "http://www.xyzname.com/". All your links pointing to the home page should direct to the exact same URL otherwise you will split the value of your home page into multiple duplicate URL's.

Google sees "http://www.xyzname.com" and "http://www.xyzname.com/index.shtml" as different pages, but displaying the same content. This splits the overall value of your home page, and can decrease the chances of rankings. By keeping it consistent with a single URL, you remove this split and retain more of the strength.

In theory having your home page split like this could bring with it duplicate content penalties, however, I have yet to see this actually happen – that said, it is best to avoid the risk all together.

XML Sitemap
XML Sitemaps are great for ensuring that Google and the other engines are able to spider your entire site. While an XML sitemap will not directly impact your search rankings it can help as Google is more likely to see any SEO based changes more quickly, which in turn can have an impact. (Here is a free XML sitemap creation tool)

Robots.txt
This is the first file all search engines look for every time they visit your site. While placing a blank robots.txt file in your root folder will not help with search rankings, it will help reduce 404 errors appearing in your log files.

It is also highly recommended that if your site utilizes an XML sitemap, to include a call to this sitemap within the Robots.txt file. Simply add the following line to ensure that the major engines (including Google) can find your sitemap:

> Sitemap: http://www.xyzname.com/sitemap.xml

Potential Blockages
If you are finding that your site is simply not being indexed it is possible that you are blocking the spiders in one way or another.

Start with checking your main site navigation, if you are using Flash or some other fancy form of navigation that could be your problem right there. Next check your HTTP headers to ensure that your home page is returning a 2xx code which indicates that the clients' request was successfully received. Finally take a look at your Google Webmaster Tools for any noted errors. If you are blocking Google, chances are you will be able to uncover the issue with these steps.

Duplicate Content
Duplicate content can be quite damaging to your rankings. Ensure that all content on your site is unique. Never steal or "borrow" content from another site, and never cut and paste large portions of text from one page of your site to the next. By keeping all pages of your site entirely original you stand the best chances of getting a thumps up from Google.

Fresh Content / Regular Updates
Update your content. In highly competitive markets, sites with old static content can often slip away. Keep your content fresh and updated to keep bringing Google back to your site. If they find new pages and updated pages with every visit, they will come back more often.

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Site Age
The age of your site can also have an effect on search engine rankings. While there is little you can do (short of keeping the same domain) to help on this matter, remember that the longer your site is online, the better its chances for success. It pays to select the perfect domain right from the start and not to change domains mid-stream. Older sites that stand the test of time add a level of authority in Google's eyes. New sites seldom see rankings for competitive terms in their first year.

Note: Site Age is determined not by the date the domain was originally registered by rather by the date Google first discovered content on your site.

Load Time
Load time can have an impact in your Google AdWords Quality Score but it is unknown for sure if it can also impact your organic search rankings. It is best to keep you load time to as little as possible. If it is not already a part of the Google Algorithm, it likely will be soon. Besides, it is also best in order to give your site visitors the best experience possible.

Server Up Time
This can be a rather significant issue. If you find that your web hosting company has a history of down time, change hosts. If Google comes to visit your site once and it is down, not to worry, they will come back, but if Google visits your site often only to find that it is unavailable, you can find yourself with drastically depleted rankings.

Google Local
If you have a traditional brick and mortar store, consider submitting to Google Local. While this will not directly impact your regular organic rankings, you may find your site ranking above the organic results with a "local business results" map listing. This tends to be most common when your business is near the geographic center of a city, and when the search phrase uses a geographic modifier.

W3C Compliant Code
There is much speculation as to if W3C compliant code can have a positive impact on search rankings, and the majority believe "maybe" with some saying "yes". Regardless, it is definitely a good idea to have your site be W3C Compliant if at all possible. Not only may it help you in terms of search rankings, but having compliant code can decrease load times, and help to ensure cross-browser compatibility, all of which are good things. If at all possible, it is recommended that sites be made to be compliant.

Many experts who took part in the SEOMoz "Google Search Engine Ranking Factors" lean towards it not being a big contributor, however, it may be an issue if Google has difficulties indexing a page properly.

A code validation service is available at validator.w3.org.

WHAT <u>NOT</u> TO DO

I want to stress that this section is about things you should NOT do. These issues could be damaging to your rankings. If your site is implementing any of these, it may be best to remove it.

Hidden Text

This includes any text that you can simply not see when viewing the page. It may be text hidden in invisible div layers, text located below the fold with vertical scrolling disabled or even text on the same colored back ground (white text on a white background for instance). Whatever the case, hidden text can get your site into hot water and it is not recommended.

Excessive Keywords

Don't go over board in placing target phrases within your body text. Stuffing keywords everywhere possible just because you can, is not only unlikely to help you achieve rankings, it could very well have the opposite effect.

Duplicate content

Large amounts of duplicated content or pages, as well as stealing or scraping content from other sites is one good way to get your site banned.

Doorway pages

Creating multiple websites or pages with nearly identical, yet slightly different content for the purposes of trying to grab some Google rankings is a good way to get your site into trouble.

If you have created pages of this nature for PPC campaigns, make sure that they are blocked from the search engines as to not get you into any hot water.

Cloaking

Simple - Don't Cloak. In a nutshell cloaking is when you display different information to the search engines than you do to your human visitors. Google frowns on this, and if they catch you, watch out!

All Flash

Websites that are entirely flash based will not get you into trouble. The reason I have included it here however, is that they won't do you many favors either. Sites that are all Flash, have little to no content for Google to digest and thus, drastically reduce your chance of rankings. If you must keep your "All Flash" site, it is recommended that you also create a secondary HTML version for the search engines and for those visitors who simply prefer it.

Frames (including iFrames)

Frames are also one of those things that won't get you into trouble, but do significantly reduce your chances of rankings. If you want any chance of ranking in Google using a Frames site, be sure to copy your relevant content from each page into your 'noframes' tag. While this is far from ideal it may help you salvage some listings.

When it comes to including content through the use of an iFrame, remember, Google can not see any of this content located within the frame. It will be of no use to your rankings. If you rely on this content to help your listings, find another method such as a server side include.

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TOOLS

In this article I mention a few items which can be made much easier with the help of available online tools. Here are some to help you on your way:

- ❖ **HTTP Header Checker**
  The StepForth HTTP Header Checker

- ❖ **Spider Simulators**
  XML Sitemaps, Search Engine Bot Simulator

- ❖ **Page Size and Load Time**
  1-Hit Load Time Analyzer

- ❖ **Recommended SEO Tools**
  SEO Tools recommended by our CEO, Ross Dunn. Many of these are used at StepForth all of the time.

- ❖ **Google's Cached Text Version**
  Click on "cached" next to your listing in Google, then click "Cached Text Version" at the top of the page. This is Google's Cached Text version of your page. Substituting www.domain.com with your website will also bring up the cached version:

  `http://www.google.com/search?q=cache:WWW.DOMAIN.COM/&hl=en&strip=1`

To see a larger selection of tools visit our SEO Tools page at the StepForth website.

HOW TO OPTIMIZE FOR GOOGLE – THE SUMMARY

There are a lot of little pieces to getting a site to the top of the rankings in Google that I didn't have time to mention here. In most cases not all items noted in this 3 part Google optimization series need to be in place to achieve top rankings, however, the more you can implement the better. Links, optimization, and content all play a significant role in Google rankings and the more competitive the term, the bigger the role they play.

If you have a site in a competitive market it is best to ensure that the site is entirely Google friendly and well optimized, while working on increasing links, and expanding on relevant content.

Patience is important and Google rankings are possible, but they do take time and effort. In nearly all cases it can take several months before you start to see significant results, although in cases where a site is just missing one or two pieces of the puzzle and those are put into place, rankings can come much quicker. If you have any questions about optimizing for Google try sending them to us here at StepForth and we will get to them as soon as our workload permits. You can also read more whitepapers and web marketing tutorials at StepForth's Web Marketing Knowledgebase.

About the Expert Author
Scott Van Achte is the Senior SEO at StepForth Web Marketing Inc. You can read more of Scott's articles and those of the StepForth team at http://news.stepforth.com/. You can ask Scott a question by submitting it via our SEO Questions page.

About this Whitepaper
This whitepaper is the culmination of 3 mass-syndicated online articles created by StepForth Web Marketing Inc. They can be found online at the following URLs: How to Optimize for Google Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3

About StepForth Web Marketing Inc.

StepForth Web Marketing Inc. was launched by Ross Dunn in 1997 and has provided search engine optimization and web marketing services to clients of all sizes; from mega-corporations such as Time Inc. to small businesses such as Prince of Whales Whale Watching Ltd. (see our results)

StepForth has evolved from providing only SEO services to the creation of complete web marketing strategies based on a 6 step process combining client goals, competitive analysis, analytics analysis (of client traffic logs) and ongoing reputation building.

All of StepForth's services are 100% customized to meet the needs of our exclusive list of clientele.

For more information about StepForth's services please visit http://www.stepforth.com/ or contact us:
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