

HOW-TO

Understand SEO

BY CHRIS HEILER

Search engine optimization (SEO) seems like such a dirty term, yet it has a tantalizing, almost magical, aura about it. SEO doesn't require a degree in rocket science, but it requires a basic understanding of how search engines work and a healthy dose of common sense.

SEO isn't easy. An ongoing effort is required to rank consistently in the search engine results pages. There's no one-time fix. Sure, your website needs to be designed with SEO in mind, but you also have to create meaningful content regularly and participate in social media.

Search engines such as Google and Bing reward web pages with the right combination of ranking factors or signals. SEO is about ensuring that the content on your website generates the right type of signals. We're

going to cover the most important signals, on page and off page, that impact your website rankings.

On-page SEO

On-page SEO refers to how you optimize the pages on your website to rank higher in search engine results pages (SERPs). There are three primary on-page ranking factors or signals: the website content, site HTML and site architecture.

CONTENT. Each page on your website has an opportunity to rank in SERPs for specific keyword phrases. This is why creating content regularly, typically by blogging, is so critical to ranking high and frequently in SERPs. The search engines love fresh content. Websites regularly updated with original content are considered more relevant and credible.

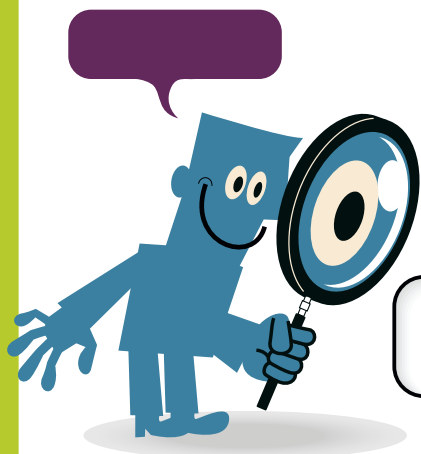
While search engines love fresh, original content, they also look for signals such as quality and relevancy of content, which means creating well-written, substantial content that's relevant and timely to site visitors. Using common keyword phrases people are searching for

online is a strong signal to the search engines. Keyword usage contributes to 26 percent of a rankings impact, according to the 2011 "Search Engine Ranking Factors" report by SEOMoz. If you're not using keywords properly on your site, you're going to fall short in the rankings.

HTML. The meta descriptions, title tags and keywords on your site need to represent what your site is all about—showing the search engines you're credible and you know what you're doing. Title tags and meta data (like keywords) need to be relevant and support each specific page on your site.

ARCHITECTURE. Make it easy for search engines to crawl your site and index all your pages. Your site's navigation plays a key role—make sure it's consistent from page to page and your web pages are organized logically. Speed, as in page-load time, is also a strong signal to search engines. The faster your site loads the better. If you have many images on your site, these could be inadvertently slowing down your load times.

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QUICK TIP

Your website needs to be designed with SEO in mind, but you also have to create meaningful content regularly and participate in social media.



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Off-page SEO

Off-page ranking signals might be more important than the on-page ranking factors. And what happens off-site is much more difficult for you to control. This is where reputation and trust come into play and why inbound links and social media are so critical to determine how your website's pages rank.

LINKS. Inbound links to your website drive search rankings more than any other factor—they account for 42 percent of impact, according to the “Search Engine Ranking Factors” report. Companies that blog regularly have 97 percent more inbound links than companies that don't, according to HubSpot's “State

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of Inbound Marketing” report. The data clearly illustrate the importance of content and how vital it is to attract valuable inbound links. The bottom line is if you're not creating original content regularly, no one is linking to your site.

When it comes to inbound links, the total number of links isn't the only factor. The quality of the inbound links is an even stronger signal to the search engines. You need inbound links from relevant, credible, highly authoritative sites if you want to rank high in the SERPs.

SOCIAL. Social media contributes to 7 percent of the rankings impact, according to “Search Engine Ranking Factors.” The impact of social signals on the SERPs is only going to increase in the coming months and years. It's all about reputation and relevance. Are people talking about your business online? Are they sharing your content? Are they interacting with your content by liking it, retweeting or giving it a +1 on Google+? These are strong social signals that point to how relevant your business is online. If you're nowhere

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to be found, and no one is talking about you, the search engines see your business as less relevant and reputable.

TRUST. There are a couple of factors at play as it relates to trust—history and authority. Websites that have a long history are seen as more trustworthy to the search engines. It's similar to how your customers might view your business: Experience can be a strong signal of trust and authority. Search engines also consider how long your domain name has been registered. Always maintain your domain's expiration date a minimum of two years into the future.

Also, do the links you're sharing on your site make you a trusted authority? If you're linking to irrelevant websites from your site, it can be a strong signal to the search engines that tarnishes your authority and ultimately damages your rankings.



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PERSONAL. How your site appears in the rankings is partially determined by the individual conducting the search. If the individual is in your local community, he or she is more likely to find your business. Social signals are starting to play a role, which personalizes the search experience even more based on your social graph. Google and Bing have introduced these social signals into search within the past year.

The SEO world and search engines have evolved considerably during the past 10 years, most dramatically during

the past three years, with social media signals playing a key factor in how websites rank. The search engines will continue to get better at serving up relevant results for users. It's up to you to take the proper steps to remain relevant in the eyes of the search engines. **LM**

Heiler is the founder and president of Landscape Leadership, an inbound marketing agency that combines social media, content marketing and search marketing into integrated and measurable campaigns. Contact him via LandscapeLeadership.com.

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