thepartnersgroup
PR & marketing communications

Demystifying SEO

Demystifying SEO

Contents

twenty**five**years
of success & **partner**ships

the**partners**group
PR & marketing communications

Like a lot of the terminology

that has emerged in the digital era, Search Engine Optimisation – or SEO as it is more widely known - is one of those phrases which, at first, feels like it was conceived to baffle anyone outside of the digital marketing world with science. That isn't the case though. Instead, it reflects the fact that the web and its terminology is still incredibly young.

This whitepaper will help you make sense of SEO from a marketeer's or business owner's perspective – what it is in simple terms, why you need it, how to set up your site in the right way and what you need to do to keep an SEO programme going.

What is SEO?

The first documented use of the term "Search Engine Optimisation" was in 1997; just four years after University of Stirling employee Jonathan Fletcher invented the world's first search engine and a year before Google launched.

Wikipedia describes SEO like this:

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of affecting the visibility of a website or a web page in a search engine's "natural" or un-paid ("organic") search results.

This is a pretty good description, of which you can read more at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search_engine_optimization.

Every page will be visible to search engines, unless it is set specifically to be invisible or protected for security purposes, so SEO helps to enhance a page's visibility.

We will come onto the ways in which SEO does this, but it is important to establish why it is necessary in the first place.

Do I need SEO?

In the early days of the web, businesses still did the vast majority of their marketing and trading off-line. The website was really little more than a digital corporate brochure which would only really be of interest to the minority of customers. Things soon changed of course, and now the company website is the modern day shop window - along a very busy and cluttered street!

As the internet began to expand at a phenomenal rate, the amount of information online reached a level at which a sophisticated indexing and search system was vital. That came in 1993 in the form of a search engine, and subsequent systems like Google, Yahoo, Bing and Ask remain the way that the vast majority of us find what we need online.

At the time of writing this white paper (October 2013), Google estimated that there are around 3.89 billion indexed web pages (according to www.worldwidewebsize.com). In order to find pages that match the search term we enter into the search box, search engines use secretive and incredibly complex algorithms so we never really know how they do it.

Do I need SEO?

With approaching four billion pages to look through, the question about whether you should better identify your website and its pages or not is an absolute no brainer.

When we talk about search engines and optimisation, it's important to remember that we are really only talking about Google. In August 2013, Google was reported to have 89% market share in the UK (source: The E Word http://bit.ly/eZvzoq). So only 1 in 10 people use other search engines to find what they need.

Setting up your site for SEO

A note of caution...

If you are reading this in two years' time, this section may well be out of date – but as for the here and now, everything in this section applies and is crucially important.

Behind the scenes

There are a number of fundamentals that you should get in place to give your website good visibility to search engines.

These are the behind the scenes markers written into the HTML coding that inform search engines about the likely content of the pages of your website. Principally, this involves giving each page of your website meaningful **page titles** and **page descriptions**.

Getting these fundamentals in place

If your website has a content management system (CMS) you should be able to find a section or place to enter the information we are about to cover. If not, you should ask your web developer to code these for you.

Meta tag keywords

It's important that we cover **meta tag keywords** at this point. Like **page titles** and **page descriptions**, this is another behind the scenes element that isn't visible on the page but search engines can see.

Meta tag keywords are often wrongly regarded as the silver bullet for improving your website's visibility. Although there is some debate as to whether or not you should bother with keywords, the fact is Google hasn't used them for search ranking purposes since 2002.

That said, you may well find that your content management system (CMS) has the facility for entering keywords. If you want to enter them, there is no harm in doing so – but we would focus our time on page titles and page descriptions.

Page titles

Every web page should be given a title. This appears in the bar at the top of your web browser window and on the individual tab as shown over the page. It should be no more than 65 characters in length ideally and should inform both site visitor and search engines of its content.

For example, a shoe retailer selling a wide range of products via an online store could have a home page title such as:

Buy shoes, boots, trainers & sandals

The store may then have ranges for women, men and children. Each of these pages can then be given a more specific title - for example:

Men's shoes, boots, trainers & sandals

Then drilling down into more detail again, a visitor might then choose to look at brown shoes or leather specifically, in which case the next page may be called

Brown leather men's shoes

And so on – keep adding important keywords to the title, without going over the 56 character limit if possible.

As Google will read left to right, it is best to put your most important keywords at or near the start of your title.

Demystifying
SEO

Page titles display here.

Page descriptions

In the same way that search engines see and consider the content of your website's page titles, they also assess page descriptions. A page description can be created for every page of your website and should describe the content of the page, serving a dual purpose:

1. **To act as a preview when search results are displayed by a search engine, encouraging a potential site visitor to click through to your site.**

2. **To feature important keywords that search engines can see.**

   The page description should be kept to a maximum of 156 characters.

   An example of a page description for the shoe retailer's men's section could be along the lines of:

   Men's shoes in numerous styles, formal, casual and sports, including leather and suede styles available with UK next day delivery and free returns.

   The keywords in this include "men's shoes" and "next day delivery". As with page titles it's best to put your most important keywords at the beginning of the description.

Clean up your URLs

Search engines will also look at the URL for your web page
so you should try to put your keyword into a meaningful
URL. Often a URL will contain a 'query string' which is a
collection of words, numbers and symbols that look ugly and
meaningless to anyone other than a web developer.
So, using the shoe retailer example, they might have page
URLs such as:

www.shoeshop.com/mens-shoes-formal-leather

rather than

www.shoeshop.com/products?category=2&pid=445.

Most content management
systems will have a feature
to allow a URL to be
changed from an
auto-generated
one to a
clean one.

Picture alt tags

Every image used on a website should have 'alternative text' which describes the image and is often referred to as 'alt text'.

One of the key reasons why alt text exists is for screen readers to read out web pages audibly to users with visual impairment in order to understand what the image shows.

Google sees this alt text, too, so it is crucial that you enter a description which is not only meaningful but contains a suitable keyword.

twentyfiveyears
of success & partnerships

thepartnersgroup
PR & marketing communications

Give your images proper file names

Search engines will also see the file names of the images used to create your web pages. So ensure you rename images before you upload them. For example, if you have a photo of a an oak tree which has an auto-generated name called something like 'DSC0076.jpg' change it to 'oak-tree.jpg'. Use this opportunity to ensure the file size and resolution is right too – see under "Speed it up!" (page 25)

twenty**five**years
of success & **partners**hips

the**partners**group
PR & marketing communications

Which keywords should I choose?

There are a number of online tools and services available to advise you on which search terms and keywords people could potentially use to find your website. The quality of these tools varies – some are free to use such as the Google Adwords keyword tool. This is a useful starting point but won't provide the level of insights that paid-for services offer.

You have to start somewhere so why not ask yourself what you think your customer would type into the Google search box to get to your website. Then put that into one of the keyword tools and develop a shortlist based on estimated web searches, relevance to your website and competition levels.

High quality on-the-page content

Google reads your web page like a human – and it wants quality!

High quality content is now the single most important factor in SEO.

If you remember websites from the early days of the web which contained gibberish on the actual page you will understand how easy it was to fool search engines into thinking a site was relevant.

Simply publishing endless paragraphs containing phrases like "double glazing Halifax, double glazing Harlow, double glazing Huddersfield…" probably worked search rank wonders at one point. But did they convert into sales enquiries and other responses? Most of us probably felt duped when we realised a company was based in a totally different part of the country when we specifically asked for our local town. Not a great start to a conversion!

Google in particular has evolved to see right through that kind of behaviour. Nowadays its algorithms are so sophisticated that it interprets the page like a human would. So if the sentences on your web page don't make sense, your page will be downgraded.

High quality on-the-page content

The upshot is that you must make the quality of your on-the-page content your number one priority.

Yes, you must include keywords that are relevant, but you must also write the text to engage readers and convert them as required.

Text headings

Headings represent a particularly important aspect to your web pages so you need to carefully consider what you want each of them to say. Try to use your most important keywords in the main headings – the H1 headings, but don't cram with keywords so they become meaningless. Remember the human factor!

Inbound links

The value of your press release is now supercharged!

Search engines have always looked at the quantity of inbound links into a website when assessing its ranking. In the early days unscrupulous SEO practitioners used link farms to buy low quality inbound links – but those days are long gone. Now it is about quantity and quality.

Why does this matter? If a search engine sees that lots of credible websites are linking to your website, it assumes that your website must have the right kind of content that the search query requires. If there are high quality websites linking into your website that's even better – a link to your website from a site such as the BBC, a newspaper, a big consumer brand or a trade body is extremely valuable.

Reciprocal link exchanging is not as important as it was a decade ago but where an opportunity lies with a client, supplier, trade body, etc., there is no harm in taking the opportunity. Just don't make it a priority!

Inbound links

The best thing to do is generate good quality inbound links. You can do that by providing guest comment on other people's blogs but most importantly through media relations.

It's amazing to think that the media relations element of your PR campaign is now one of the linchpins of your SEO strategy. This is because coverage of a press release on a newspaper or broadcaster's website – remember the search engine gives these sites high value – will sometimes (not always) feature a link to the website of the organisation concerned. For example, a press release written by The Partners Group about a new kind of PR service may feature a link in the published story.

Interlinking and site navigation

Make sure your site has a logical structure and demonstrate this by at least one link per page to another page on your site.

Also ensure you have an HTML site map – very few web visitors will ever use it but Google will find it helpful.
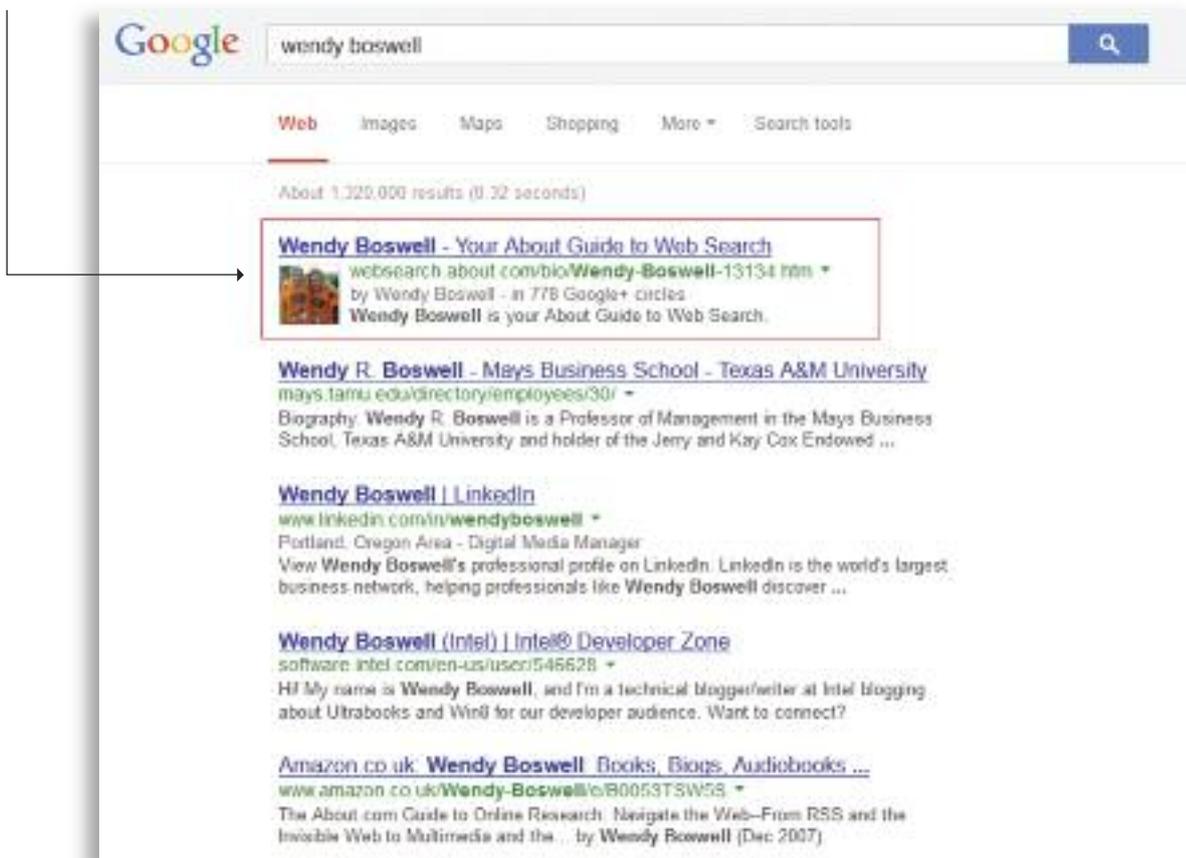
Going social

A presence for your website on social media channels will help to enhance the popularity of web pages. It's another valuable reason to get your business engaged socially!

Google will spot the number of Facebook likes, LinkedIn shares, tweets, pins, etc. and the more you have the more likely your site will be ranked favourably. A website's overall rank can also be influenced by the number of followers in has on channels such as Facebook and Twitter.

Author rank using Google+

Google+ profiles of the author help Google to recognise how authoritative a blog is. The more followers the author has, the more 'likes' their articles are likely to receive, so they'll be ranked higher. So set yourself up on Google+ and take advantage. You can see this example over the page for Wendy Boswell.

Demystifying SEO

Top rank and details about Wendy's 778 Google+ circles.

twenty**five**years
of success & **partners**hips

the**partners**group
PR & marketing communications

Don't forget video clips

SEO isn't just about written content. Video can also be optimised and you may already have noticed how Google now places YouTube videos within search results. So upload your video clips with the correct titles, file names, descriptions and tags for another opportunity to get ranked and to get users aware of your brand.

Location, location, location

Google changes results based on location and that's not just if a user searches for the location (i.e. 'PR Agency York'). If Google can recognise you're in a particular area (by IP or using the phone GPS), it will try to deliver local results to you. So make sure your site appears where your customers are searching by registering your business with Google for Business as a starting point – this is free to do!

The emergence of 'structured data'

This first emerged in summer 2011 but only really entered the mainstream in 2012, so it is still a relatively new way to improved search rank. It is called many different things including structured data, micro data, rich snippets and schema.org. It's basically where you mark up certain elements in the HTML coding, such as author name, product price, availability, rating and company name.

Google can then add these elements to the search result – giving the user a more unique and richer presence. It's mostly used for product information and ebay is one website that uses structured data really well.

On the example over the page, the rich snippets allow Google to show that there are 30+ products on the page of relevance and list two of them with their price (it's essentially the lighter grey text) – it provides much more detail than other results, most noticeably here compared to rival retailer Amazon:

Lots of extra detail given.

To benefit from structured data, you will need a basic HTML knowledge in order to label the various elements – alternatively your web developer can help. A full list of all the labels is available at http://schema.org/docs/full.html.

Demystifying
SEO

Speed it up!

The speed at which a page loads is a major ranking factor. Search engines don't want to annoy their users by sending them to pages that take more than few seconds to load. So what can you do to make sure pages load quickly? One quick-fix is to improve page speed by ensuring you upload images at the right size and resolution. Taking a bit of time to get images right could pay big dividends.

twenty**five**years
of success & **partner**ships

the**partners**group
PR & marketing communications

Quick recap

16 must-do steps for SEO

1. Think about which keywords people will use to find your website – use keyword tools and see where your competitors rank for these terms.

2. Check your page titles and alter them using your keywords.

3. Check your page descriptions – do they feature your keywords and make sense to web users? Alter them as required.

4. Clean up your URLs so they feature keywords.

5. Check your images for alt text – if they don't feature alt text descriptions, write something ideally featuring keywords and alter the image properties to accommodate it.

6. Give your images proper file names and make sure their sizes are small to avoid slowing down page load time.

7. Review the text on your website pages and alter the body text and headings to feature keywords.

8. Make sure your website pages feature well-written, engaging text – if they don't, re-write them.

Quick recap

9. Think about what's happening in your business and use the most newsworthy things to create press releases with a view to securing media coverage and inbound links.

10. Talk to your suppliers, customers and trade bodies about them linking into your website.

11. Make sure you have internal links throughout your site and create an HTML site map - feature these on every page.

12. Get active on social media channels to generate likes, shares, pins, tweets and more.

13. Sign up to Google+ and complete the author profile.

14. Upload video clips to YouTube and label them correctly – linked to your products, services and brands.

15. Talk to your web developer about structured data and establish how you can use this to your advantage in the HTML of your web pages.

16. Use Google for Business to specify your location and rank well for searches locally.

Need further SEO guidance?

As you may have gathered from reading this white paper, the SEO goalposts are constantly moving and there are always new things emerging. At the time of writing, Google had just launched its Hummingbird algorithm and the industry was still playing catch-up to work out the implications.

The Partners Group works closely with SEO specialists to keep abreast of developments so we are ideally position to help. From the technical aspects which require web developer expertise to the art of writing engaging web page text, we offer the complete package.

twenty**five**years
of success & **partners**hips

the**partners**group
PR & marketing communications

About The Partners Group

Partners is a friendly and professional public relations and marketing communications agency based in York, North Yorkshire - and this year we are celebrating our 25th anniversary.

If you're looking for strategic and creative as well as practical, hands-on PR and communications support - we're the people to talk to.

Services include:

PR consultancy	**International PR**
Partners Pathfinder	**Events PR**
Online PR	**Green PR**
Marketing support	**Public consultation**
Crisis communications	**Leisure marketing**

thepartnersgroup
PR & marketing communications

We help organisations throughout the UK - and across a range of industries - achieve their objectives. Our roots are in business to business public relations and marketing communications, but our experience spans local, regional, national and international campaigns for clients in the building, property, construction, manufacturing, food processing, professional services, family law, leisure and tourism sectors - among others.

For more information about our services please call:

01904 610077

or email:

karen@partners-group.co.uk.

Comments or queries about this white paper are very welcome.