

How to Get Top 20 Search Engine Rankings

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This paper is an introduction to Search Engine Optimization (SEO). This paper is designed for beginners, and covers all the essential components of SEO.

Is SEO Really the Slimy, Scamming, Money-Sucking Nightmare That Leads Nowhere?

Unfortunately, these days – that is a valid question.

With so much to know in an ever-evolving industry, it can be difficult to learn everything that you need to know about SEO. If you handle your own SEO in-house, you need an understanding well beyond the basics. However, even if you outsource your SEO to an SEO Firm, you need at least a basic understanding.

You need to be knowledgeable enough to avoid the pitfalls and setbacks that many have often experienced from SEO Firms that are "a little behind the times," or even worse a little unethical in their practices.

The truth is SEO has gotten a bad reputation. Promises have been left unfulfilled, money has been taken, and rankings have actually dropped after hiring an SEO Firm. There are many people that don't have anything nice to say about SEO.

In spite of the confusion, bad feelings and general mistrust of the industry, one thing everyone knows for sure is:

Top Search Engine Rankings Deliver Traffic – Targeted Traffic.

With 84.8% of Internet users finding websites they using the search engines, it is clear there is traffic there for the taking.

How Do You Tap Into That Traffic, and Avoid the Pitfalls Along The Way?

You have two choices, and both involve a certain level of self-education.

Your first option is to learn SEO from top to bottom, inside out and handle your SEO. You can control the results, and keep your money safely within your pockets.



Stay tuned for information and a checklist to help you determine if you should handle your own SEO, or outsource it to the pros. Coming soon!

The other option is to hire a pro. Rather than proceed with blind trust, you need to understand the basics of SEO to protect your site's interests. You also need to know what to look for in an SEO Firm.

“SEO: Understanding the Basics” Whitepaper. The Solution You've Been Looking For.

From understanding the basic concepts and terms, to learning how to select the best SEO Firm, we have provided you with a comprehensive beginner's crash course.

Read the information that follows, and then contact EcomBuffet with any questions or concerns.

SEO is also known as Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Search Engine Positioning (SEP) and various other titles. SEO is a service that “optimizes” or prepares your web site in order for it to be spidered, indexed and ranked by major search engines. Over 400 million searches are performed EVERY DAY on various search engines, and business owners today are seeing that they need to get a piece of that action and be prominently listed to be found by the potential customers performing these searches. Not being ranked prominently literally means giving business to your competitors that are ranked!

Search engines today are focused more than ever on the quality of website content.

Just like you and me, site visitors want to see useful, easy-to-read and up-to-date information.

A recent study showed that 1 in 7 websites have a significant number of broken links, spelling and grammar errors, and outdated content.

Starting with a solid foundation of clean, error-free HTML. Use an HTML Validator to ensure there are no silly, overlooked errors that could be stopping your site from getting the results you are after.

Ensure your site is Search Engine Friendly, which means it doesn't have any technology that will block the spiders from traveling your page and easily finding your content.

If you take two sites, one SEO friendly and one not, optimize them both identically and submit them at the same time, you will see better rankings faster on the site that is SEO friendly. Search engines require that your site be valid from a SEO friendliness perspective and reward you with higher rankings for compliance with their criteria. However, criteria are subject to change and an effective SEO company keeps up with the most current information.

Important SEO Friendly Criteria:

- Copy should be dense with keyword rich text, and you should have at least five pages of copy on the site (content is king – relevant keyword rich text is the most important criteria – 5 pages is a bare minimum).
- The site should be static and low on dynamically delivered content that the engines can't read.
- Add ALT tags to images – using the keywords assigned to that page
- Avoid an **overuse** of Flash and graphics. They can pose a problem for some engines.
- Avoid the use of frames.
- Interlink the pages within the site – take a keyword within the text and turn it into a hyperlink that leads to another page on the site. Make the page it goes to relevant to what the text is about. This is an important step.
- For pages that have no keyword rich text at the top, and/or bottom, you can add a simple one liner of text using the keywords. Keywords at the start and end of the page are important.
- CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) should not be defined on page. It should be called from a file in the root directory.
- Java script should not be on page, it should be called from a .js file in the root directory.
- Imagemaps are not search engine friendly – if there is an Imagemap, removing it would be the best solution. However if that is not possible, we suggest adding static navigation to the page as well.
- Images should be named with keywords.
- Pages should be named with keywords.
- Avoid “Black hat” techniques (“Black Hat” has become a common term to describe unethical search engine practices, just as spamming, keyword stuffing, cloaking, etc).
- Watch for broken HTML code (an HTML Validator is a great way to catch errors the eye may miss).
- Avoid tricks intended to improve search engine rankings. A good rule of thumb is whether you'd feel comfortable explaining what you've done to a website that competes with you. Another useful test is to ask, "Does this help my users? Would I do this if search engines didn't exist?"

SEO Service Components:

Software

You will encounter many automated software services that will claim to submit you to thousands of engines and gain you so many rankings, this has become a popular and confusing trend – as companies see the opportunity to automate the process and gain profit for little work.

These software packages appear attractive, due to their ease of use and low cost. The old saying, you get what you pay for is true once again. Without the proper education and understanding of the SEO process, you are limiting your success – you need to know what criteria the engines have in place to ensure your site's SEO readiness, you need to know when to submit and how often to submit (and this varies from engine to engine).

Over submitting can harm you and under submitting does not really benefit you. Also submitting a site that does not meet their basic criteria will not gain you the rankings you are looking for.

The investment in the software or automated service actually may not benefit you and could potentially jeopardize your ability to be ranked in the future.

Keywords

Keyword research is the first and most vital step in the SEO process. Keywords are the foundation for your campaign and can make or break it.

You will want a company that is thorough in it's research, a company that asks your input, researches your competitors and gives you final approval on their recommended list.

TARGETED keywords are the only way to go. Your keywords must be RELEVANT to your content and should attract the kind of traffic you can actually convert into customers. Let this example illustrate for you the benefit in targeted keywords.

If you sell diesel, and you select the following keywords: diesel, cars, (name of specific) _____ diesel, and maintenance – what would you expect from those keywords? People often think that (in this example) the keywords cars and maintenance are a big coup. Think of all that traffic. Now let's look at this way, what good is traffic if it isn't targeted? Sure you may catch the attention of a few people that accidentally wander onto your site – but what are the chances that someone who types cars into an engine are actually looking to purchase diesel. Can you see that you have essentially wasted a keyword here? Whereas, if you select (name of specific) _____ diesel as a keyword – can you see where, yes you may get less traffic but that traffic would actually be looking for exactly what you offer – therefore that traffic is automatically more valuable to you.

The point of our little tangent is simply that the keywords you select are key (no pun intended) and the proper energy, time and experience needs to be used to select these words.

Body Text

Body text is an important component in the your SEO strategy. Your text **MUST** include the keywords and phrases that tell about your business, products and services. Be sure your SEO Company will analyze your body text for keyword ratio and relevancy. Without this very important correct ratio of keyword rich text, you will not see the results you are hoping for and could be achieving, no matter how talented the SEO Company is.

Title Tag

The title tag is one of the most important components of SEO since it is given great consideration by all search engines. The title is also important because it is usually the hyper linked sentence that leads to the site from the search engine results pages and users must be enticed to click on it. It is crucial to include your company's top key terms within the title tag.

Hidden Text

Hidden text is another spamming technique that is easily detectable. Often people change the font color to the same as the background, and then SEO companies can fill the pages with enormous amounts of key term text that some believe is appealing to the search engine spiders. This will result in you being banned from the engines – do not allow your SEO company to employ this method.

Cloaking

Cloaking is a spamming technique that uses specific software programs to send search engine spiders to alternative pages that are not seen by the user. These pages mislead the spider, allowing it to deliver the results based on these pages rather than the actual pages the public sees on the site. Spamming/cloaking is a very serious offense in the eyes of search engines, and may result in your site being permanently banned.

Site Maps

Site Maps are highly effective when created properly. They are a keyword rich static page that lists all the pages and topics on your site, with links for your visitors and the engines to follow through out your site.

Meta Tags

Meta tags are the descriptive terms used within the HTML code of a web page. Your meta tags act as a summary of the content a search engine spider might find on that page and were once one of the main factors behind great placements.

As SEO has evolved, some algorithmic studies have shown that the Meta tag is no longer such an important part of your optimizations. In spite of this, they are a good guide for the engines, telling them what keywords the page is focusing on and what the page is about. And, although most engines don't use Meta tags in their ranking algorithms anymore, they do display them in the results which can help with getting people to click onto your site. Overall, search engines are unpredictable and criteria changes, so keeping the Meta tags strong, relevant and descriptive of your content is too important to forego.

SEO Firms – An Overview

There are hundreds of SEO firms out there today, all varying in skill level as well as experience. Our goal is to help you learn what is important in an SEO company and to know what questions to ask to compare services and benefits to you.

There are SEO companies that focus only on SEO, and some say that targeted focus will deliver the most benefit to you. We respectfully disagree with that opinion and feel that your best bet is with a SEO company that can look at your big picture and help in other important areas, such as web design and maintenance, other marketing techniques and technical help. The company must have experience in all areas and should be able to provide references, case studies and samples of their work to earn your trust and respect. The main fact to remember here is just because other people in the company have the ability to help you in other areas, does not mean that your SEO consultant will be any less focused on their task at hand. A company that has staff experienced in other areas can only maximize your potential online and also work with you on various other projects.

A lot of SEO companies have a cookie cutter method, and don't supply you with hands on support and customer service. We feel if you are going to entrust a company with that type of investment, they must be available to answer questions, and give you personalized service.

Be very wary of companies that promise results that seem too good to be true, they usually are. Companies that assure you they can gain numerous top 5 or top 10 rankings within days are most likely using less than ethical techniques that can actually harm your site and result in you being banned from the engines in the future. It is realistic to expect numerous top 20 rankings within a period of a

few weeks to 4 months (depending on past ranking history, site SEO readiness and various other factors).

Below are some questions you should ask any SEO firm before you proceed with their services.

1. Do you have any initial or set up fees? How much and what are they for?
2. Are there ongoing fees and how much are they?
3. Is a monthly follow up necessary?
4. How long is my term of service?
5. Do you offer a Guarantee?
6. Are there any services you provide over and above your packages?
7. Do I own the work you do for me? Where does it sit?
8. Do you provide regular reports and how often are they provided?
9. When will I start seeing results?
10. What engines do you submit to?
11. What about foreign search engines?
12. Do you assist in converting traffic into buyers or solid leads?
13. What about past results? Do you provide references and testimonials?
14. What techniques do you use to optimize my site?
15. Do I have access to anyone on your staff, so I receive personalized service and can ask questions at anytime?
16. How do I know my site will be kept up to date and current with the latest criteria and technologies?

Keyword Research

Use of competitive customer analysis to identify the best keyword phrases for your business. Unfortunately, there is a widespread misconception that you need highly competitive keyword phrases that get the most traffic, but this could not be farther from the truth.

Simply trying to get top search engine placement based upon "quantity" (in other words, those keyword phrases being searched on most) may totally miss the mark of your ultimate goal -- more sales. Getting targeted web site traffic, meaning people who are literally searching for a product or service to solve their need, is really what SEO is all about.

FAQs

How Important is Content?

Content is King. This has never been more true. Focus on solid content that is keyword rich and has a strong marketing messages for your site visitors. Make your site the source for information in your industry.

Who has a bigger Index, Yahoo or Google?

The truth is, it doesn't really matter. It isn't about size, it is about relevance. The engine that can deliver the most relevant results to a search query is truly the winning engine. So, it's not the size of the index that matters, it is what they do with the information in the index and how it is delivered.

The real question behind this question is: "which engine should I use when I do my searches and which engine should I focus on in my marketing."

The answer to those questions are; use the engine that you feel delivers the best results. Don't buy into the hype stating which engine people think is best. Use many engines and then find the one you like the best. You never know, a new leader may emerge. The more people try engines and demand better results from them, the more the industry as a whole benefits.

As far as marketing goes, you can't afford to focus on just one. Your goal is to get exposure and traffic. Why limit it? Focus on all of the top engines and achieve maximum exposure for your site.

Can Google Follow Links in Flash?

While Google can read and index Flash, it cannot follow links in Flash. Make sure all links are plain text.

Do You Need to Use the Google Sitemap Tool?

If your site is already getting crawled by Google and pages are being added to their index, you do not need to use the Google sitemap submission tool. The sitemap submission tool was created to provide a way for sites which normally do not get crawled to gain the attention of Google and be crawled and indexed.

Is it Really Important to Remove Javascript, Define CSS Off-page And Keep my Code Clean?

Yes. By placing your CSS and javascript in external files you remove excess code from the page, which makes it easier and faster for the spiders to find your wonderful keyword rich content.

Minimizing the use of tables also helps reduce the HTML to text ratio, making the text stand out to the engines.

Clean, error-free code is also essential. It ensures the engines won't get stuck or lost – they can simply and easily spider through your site and eat up your content.

Your keyword rich text should appear as close to the top of your code as possible. Sometimes this is difficult, when top or side (left) navigation appear first in the code. You can always try a different page layout or even consider using CSS to reposition the text for the engines.

Do Too Many Keywords in the Domain Name Harm You?

Too many keywords in a domain, all separated by dashes is a red alert for the spiders.

How Many Links Should You Have on Your Sitemap?

Google recommends 100 links per page.

Are Dynamic URLs Bad?

Google says that a dynamic URL with 2 parameters "should" get indexed.

How long will it take to get on the search engines?

This varies depending upon the search engine. Each of the sites has different indexing periods, which means that there are different lengths of time for submissions to take effect. Here is some of the current waiting periods:

MSN	up to 2 months
Google	up to 4 months
AltaVista	up to 1 week
Excite	up to 6 weeks
Northern Light	up to 4 weeks
AOL	up to 2 months
HotBot	up to 2 months

Remember, these are estimates of worst-case scenario situations in which you may have submitted right after the search engine indexed. If you pass the length of time listed above for a specific engine, you may want to check and make sure your submission was done properly.

What are Header tags?

Header tags (<H1>, <H2>, <H3>, etc.) are a quick way to format text. They make something you want to stand out as a headline bigger, and in bold. <H1> being the biggest header, and decreasing in size as the number goes up. You can also use them to define your structure and simplify page navigation. Well-written header text informs visitors and helps them navigate your page. Header tags will also increase your site ranking on some search engines.

Why was my site not built search engine ready by my web designer?

Good question. Unfortunately the answer will vary from situation to situation. It really depends upon who you're using as a designer. Some web designers are just that: designers. They've been trained in aesthetics and making online and

print media look fantastic, but they're not necessarily familiar with all of the latest languages and standards.

How do I get into DMOZ?

While it's completely free to submit your site to DMOZ, the submission itself can get a little tricky. DMOZ is built and edited by humans, not indexed by blind search engines, and those who work on the site are striving to make it a high-quality directory.

Above all, make sure your site is in top shape before you even *think* about submitting to DMOZ. When you think you're finished, double and triple-check all of the tags and information on the site, then have friends and colleagues proofread your content to avoid spelling and grammatical errors.

Once all of that is in place, take a few days to get acquainted with DMOZ. Browse through the site and figure out which category would work best for you. When you're sure you've found it, click "Suggest URL" at the top of the page and follow the instructions to submit your link.

I am getting lots of placements for keywords but not making sales. Why?

This could be due to several reasons. First, look at your site. Is it professional? Is it a site *you'd* visit to purchase something? Also look at the text being returned by the search engines. It's great that you're getting good rankings, but what if the text returned with those rankings has three grammatical errors and two misspellings... in only two sentences? Make sure you're projecting the right business image.

If all of that looks in order, then you may be targeting the wrong keywords. Test a few variations on the keywords and phrases you're using and see if they result in more sales. When you notice one making more of a difference than another, shift your focus in that direction and build from there.

What are alt tags?

Any image on a webpage may have a text description attached to it. The text will be shown in browsers which are incapable of displaying images, or if the user has chosen not to view images. It is displayed in a little box when the mouse hovers over the image. Some search engines also use this text to derive keywords for the web-page.

Why do I need a static sitemap?

Well, you don't *need* one, but it's a simple way to boost the keyword content on your site. Add a quick summary of each section under a header, and then also include a link to that section. You can include additional keywords, products, and service information. It's both user-friendly and effective in bumping up your appeal to the engines.

I do not want to change my Flash design, how can you make the site SEO friendly?

Make sure all of your Meta tags and page descriptions are as robust as possible. If your entire site is based in Flash and you're completely committed to that design, one of your only options for increasing your SEO appeal is something called Z Order.

My site is made with CFM, how do I make the site readable by all engines?

ColdFusion is readable to most search engines, so you shouldn't have too much work ahead of you. To make sure it's completely ready for indexing, go through and check the functioning of your site and any links. Substitute static links for dynamic URLs where possible, then submit each dynamically generated page to the search engines individually.

Why should I not use a single word as a keyword, why are phrases better?

Say you want to find a great Tex-Mex joint in your area. Would you search Google for "Tex-Mex?" "Tex-Mex restaurant?" "Tex-Mex food?" Of course not! You'd search for something more along the lines of "good Tex-Mex restaurant Omaha, Nebraska." Studies have shown over and over that people online conduct specific searches. That works to your benefit, because think of all of the other people in the world with businesses similar to yours. If your keyword is "exterminator," you'll end up fighting for rank with millions of other sites. If your keyword phrases include "quality exterminator southern Florida," you'll probably get a far higher ranking.

My site is indexed but I have no rankings. Why?

Is your site optimized? Just because your site is indexed doesn't mean you've done all you can to get quality rankings. Check your site and all of its Meta tags for optimization, and then turn your focus to your keywords. Make sure you're using keyword phrases with the best impact. Done? Turn your attention to links. Have you gotten all of the reciprocal links you can? Get out there and network! Really hit the SEO trail hard for a few weeks, give it some time to be re-indexed, then check out your rankings again. If you're still having trouble, you may want to consult SEO professionals.

Why can I not hide text and links? My competitors do, and they use other tricks as well!

First, when Google or another search engine finds the hidden text and links (and it *will* find them), it will negatively affect your ranking and placement within the engines. These are loopholes that have been used recently by those who would rather exploit SEO practices than go about things properly. If you're interested in conveying a professional, quality appearance to the engines and anyone you solicit for links, you won't engage in these practices.

Do I need to update my site with new information often?

In some industries and sectors, sites are updated daily – even hourly. For smaller businesses, constant tending to a website would detract from the attention they can give to the rest of their business and may only be updated when new products or services are available. Ideally, you want to update your site as often as is sensible for your industry, to keep customers coming back. Remember, more traffic means higher rankings. Try and post news or other fresh information on a weekly basis, at least, but make sure it's relevant to your customers. If it's something they'll want to read, they'll come back to read it!

Why is my frame site a problem?

When the engines index your site, and post search results, they will find only one orphan page, rather than your full site.

What are orphan pages?

When spiders crawl through your pages, they index each page and display them as a standalone (or orphan) page in search results. What does this mean? Think about most framed sites you've seen. They display a navigation bar in a narrow frame on the page's left side or on top of the page, and display the content in a larger frame on the right or below. So, the orphan page is your page with content, and no navigation. Your site visitors have no where else to go. What is the solution? There is java script that can be used to keep your pages together, as well as many other tricks. However, if best practices are what you are after – you may want to eliminate frames from your site.

Glossary of Terms

Anchor Text

Anchor text is commonly called 'link text', "hotspot" or the "clickable part of a link." It is the visible text of a hyperlink. In search engine algorithms, anchor text is important when it comes to ranking pages. Anchor text must be relevant to the respective landing pages. It also helps if anchor text varies; in other words, don't always have the same anchor text in links leading to a page.

Backlink

Commonly called "inbound links" or referred to as your "link popularity." A back link is a link from another site to yours.

Directory

A server or a collection of servers dedicated to indexing Internet web pages and returning lists of pages, which match particular queries. Directories are normally compiled manually, by user submission and often involve an editorial selection and/or categorization process (such as at LookSmart and Yahoo).

Dynamic Content

Information on web pages that change or are changed automatically, (e.g., based on database content or user information). Sometimes it's possible to spot that

this technique is being used,(e.g., if the URL ends with .asp, .cfm, .cgi or .shtml). It is possible to serve dynamic content using standard (normally static) .htm or .html type pages, though.

Hand Submission

The manual delivery of a site to the major search engines to help increase site position. The submission process is handled by a technician rather than through an automated software system.

Index

Refers to the database of web pages maintained by a search engine or directory.

Keyword

A word or 2-3 word phrase that forms (part of) a search engine query.

Keyword Consultation

A thorough analysis of your best possible keywords. As well as research into your competitors to help select the keywords for your campaign.

Keyword Density

An indication of how often a keyword appears. Some search engines use this property for positioning. Pages can then be produced with the similar keyword densities to those found in high-ranking pages.

Link Popularity

A measure of the number and quality of inbound links to a particular site. Many search engines are increasingly using this number as part of their ranking algorithm. The number and quality of inbound links is becoming as important as the optimization of page content.

Link Farm

Link Farms are websites that have an excessive list of links to other sites. Basically, they have an infinite number of reciprocal links with other irrelevant sites to improve their search engine optimization.

Optimization

Changes made to a web page that improves the positioning of that page with one or more search engines.

Placement / Positioning

The process of ordering web sites or web pages by a search engine or a directory so that the most relevant sites appear first in the search results for a particular query.

Relevancy Algorithm

The method a search engine or directory uses to match the keywords in a query

with the content of each web page, so that the web pages found can be ordered suitably in the query results. Each search engine or directory is likely to use a different algorithm, and to change or improve its algorithm from time to time.

SEO Friendliness and Site analysis

Site analysis is a report outlining problems with your site and suggesting changes in order to meet search engines' basic criteria. It may involve suggestions in the following areas: design/layout changes, new text for the title-tags, meta-tags, alt-attributes, headings, and changes to the body text.

Spamming

Spamming is the term used to refer to the manipulation of the search engine submission and indexing process in order to maliciously control the outcome of a query entry.

Spider

That part of a search engine which surfs the web, storing the URLs and indexing the keywords and text of each page it finds.

You've Learned the Basics. What's Next?

Now that you have a basic understanding of SEO, you have two choices:

1. You can continue your education and learn to handle your own SEO.
2. You can also hire a professional to attain the top rankings you are looking for.

No matter which option you choose, taking action now is the important part. Delaying will only help your competitors, as they horde the rankings and the traffic that could be yours.

For questions about EcomBuffet and how our big-picture SEO services can improve your rankings, contact Jennifer Horowitz at 562-592-5347 or jennifer@ecombuffet.com. Mention this whitepaper and receive a Free Search Engine Friendliness Evaluation.