

Handout 4: Search Engine Optimization

Every day, more and more businesses fight for an ever-smaller slice of the search results pie – that top fraction of a percent of the results that search engine visitors see in the first few pages of search results. But one thing hasn't changed: businesses small and large continue to play games with search engines to improve their rankings. Which means, of course, that search engine providers continue to respond by attempting to neutralize these tactics.

Before we get to the reasonably legitimate ways of improving your search engine rankings, let's discuss all the not-so-legitimate methods out there, from the most evil to the merely questionable:

1. Tactic: Comment Spamming; **Level:** Very Evil – Search engines base a substantial portion of a site's ranking on how many actual links on the web point to the site, and you'll notice quickly that tactics to increase the number of these links dominate this list. Some of these tactics are borderline legitimate while others are truly evil; this one may be the most evil of all.

Unfortunately, the popularity of blogs has made them easy marks for all sorts of abuse. Because most blogs by default allow anyone to comment on the articles that are posted there, spammers and quite a few disreputable search engine optimization outfits watch for new blogs and then immediately fill the comments sections with advertisements – some blatant, some subtle – that link to their sites.

Why not just create pages and pages of links on their own sites and click them to generate more search hits? Well, they may do that as well, but spamming through a variety of different websites actually creates the impression to the search engine that the links may be of higher quality because they come from so many different places. All search engines are built to ignore many links from the same places – that's old school. But in analyzing a huge variety of clicks from many different places, a search engine has to work much harder to determine what's legitimate.

Why is this tactic so evil? First, it creates a ton of bogus links on the web, and thus just adds noise to whole system. It's deceptive to the point of being fraudulent. Worst of all, it treads on someone's

personal space – like mom's needlepoint weblog – to help someone else's commercial enterprise. If you come across a search engine optimization company that promises a huge variety of quality links to elevate your listings, ask them how they are doing it, in detail – it's possible that comment spamming will be illegal one of these days, so you don't want to have your business' name associated with it.

Sidebar: The criteria for judging these tactics

- 1. Is it illegal?** If it's currently illegal or reasonably in danger of being declared so, I'm going to award it a very evil score.
- 2. Is it blatantly deceptive?** One could argue that some form of deception lies at the heart of many marketing and advertising endeavors, but if the tactic itself relies solely on deceiving search engines, it's going to get some evil thrown at it. If it deceives users as well, I'm piling on the evil score.
- 3. Does it create "noise"?** Some tactics may not be deceptive or evil on the surface, but if they create massive amounts of noise on the internet – say, for instance, through complex linking schemes or hundreds of unnecessary pages – they move up on the scale
- 4. Does it hinder usability?** Writing 10 paragraphs about your products at the bottom of every product page may be an effective way to boost your rankings, but once that coveted new user is there, what does it do for them? If you have to dump paragraphs of boilerplate text on every page to improve your rankings, think about what that does to your users every time they scroll through a page.

2. Tactic: Redirection; **Level:** Moderately evil – You may have seen this one in the news if you follow geeky tech news like I do. BMW Europe's entire web site was banned from Google's search engine for engaging in this tactic. What is redirection? It's actually a combination of a non-evil tactic and evil one. Let me explain.

First, it's a common and more or less accepted tactic to put lots and lots of very specific text, repeatedly but not in a repetitive pattern, on your web pages in

order to increase the perceived quality of your page. This makes for some very odd looking pages, and it's why you'll often see pages that sell something very simple appear to say way more than they need to about the product. The more times those keywords are mentioned in a page in the context of normal writing – that is, not just mindlessly repeated all over the page, but actually used in intelligible ways – the more likely that page will be found for those keywords.

This is what's called keyword "quality" – it means that you are actually talking about the keywords on your page, rather than just listing them to elevate your search rankings. Listing tons of words is another old school tactic and search engines get around this by looking for quality. The problem with creating this kind of quality for a commercial site is that it can create (as I mentioned before) some odd looking pages, especially if you are trying to sell a high-dollar, exclusive product like a luxury car.

The redirection trick works like this: A web site operator (in this case, BMW Europe) sets up one of these pages loaded with quality keywords (BMW, car, luxury, etc., all in quality sentences or context) to pull a higher ranking in the search listing. The unwitting Google user clicks on that link and is magically taken to BMW Europe's homepage, which happens to have very little wording on it – just lots of pictures and other stuff you'd expect on a normal auto manufacturer site. The trick here is that the user is actually taken to the keyword-loaded page and then redirected to BMW's homepage without ever noticing that they actually went through this hidden "gateway." Since this is against Google's terms of service, BMW Europe got banned from Google's listings until they changed their pages.

3. Tactic: Invisible text; **Level:** Moderately evil – Invisible text is the search engine gaming equivalent of that cheesy pickup line that never works. Using invisible text (formatting the text as the same color as the page or other methods) to trick search engines is actually quite evil (it's complete deception), but since most search engines check for this tactic now, I list this in the moderately evil section since it's often ineffective – not to mention cheesy.

4. Tactic: Splogs; **Level:** Moderately evil to not evil – Also known as spam blogs, this particular specimen falls down on the scale because it's sometimes difficult to determine the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the blog. However, as we discussed in the Comment

Spamming topic, blogs are a popular place to dump lots of links to manufacture quality. Certainly, there are perfectly legitimate commercial blogs touting products, and there's nothing inherently wrong with that. But, when a company sets up dozens of different blogs that have no purpose other than to create links to their site (again, to increase perceived quality), you've got an evil tactic on your hands.

5. Tactic: Landing pages; **Level:** Somewhat evil – Another tactic that Google and other engines specifically frown upon, yet extremely popular. A landing page is a page created specifically to catch a given search term, then linked to as much as possible to create the impression that the page is popular and of high quality. You've probably run across these during a normal web search – you search for a term, click the link, then wind up on a page that really does nothing but link to yet more sites. Note that this page quite likely has advertising on it, and thus the publisher of the page may get a dime or two if you click on one of those ads in the interim.

Landing pages are also often created to direct users to a specific site or a page on a site. Because someone may not want to plaster every page on their site with the kind of lengthy verbiage required to get a good hit for "promotional products shirt," they will create a page that is full of these search terms but exists solely to redirect users to a page on their regular website. This is actually a variation on the "Redirection" tactic; it can be less pernicious, especially if the landing page is actually a useful page. But most of the time, landing pages exist solely to attract search engines, and in that sense they meet the "deceptive" requirement. In addition, since they often exist solely for search engines, they create noise by polluting the search world with unnecessary links.

6. Tactic: Excessive Keywording; **Level:** Not evil, but annoying – The final specimen in this part of the series is so popular it's unavoidable, and it often comes packaged up with some of our other tactics. If you've noticed in the last few years a lot of sites suddenly sprouting loads of keywords in sentences on the page – often at the bottom of the page – you're not alone. What savvy marketers have discovered is that search engines tend to perceive higher quality if the keywords are in context – it makes sense, since seeing the word "mug" in the context of a story about mugs probably means mug is more relevant to that search than a page that just repeats the word "mug"

over and over in a list of keywords. What this results in, however, is sites posting often absurdly overlong descriptions about their business that happen to be loaded with relevant keywords.

This isn't really evil, although it does create noise. But it does point to a larger problem: How do users – the people you are looking for anyway – sift through all this junk to find what they need from your site? Many sites solve this problem by dumping these long stories “below the fold” – that is, underneath the normal viewing area of the site's content. But that's deceptive, and should result in some evil points. Really, there's no simple rule of thumb with this tactic although, like any other tactic, as more and more sites do it, it by definition becomes less effective. So, use it at your discretion, but realize that manufactured quality will catch up with you sooner or later.

Doing it right

I believe it's important to exercise a little moral restraint of your own if you do business on the internet. Just because you can get away with a better search ranking by spamming innocent people's blogs doesn't mean you should. If you try to run your business ethically and treat customers and employees fairly, you should consider the same for the way you do business online, even if there isn't a regulating authority telling you to do so.

If all this makes sense to you, then let's dig into some tips for legitimate search engine optimization:

1. Create Unique Content: Some of these are going to seem like no-brainers and others may be more esoteric; this is somewhere in between. It's reasonably self-evident that unique content is going to get you better results for queries by users looking for that content; it may be a little less obvious, though, that even common content can commingle with unique words to create a mix that many search engines will find more favorable. Why is this? Because users find unique content more favorable, and more user clicks from different places result in better quality – and thus better rankings. The more information you have about a product – whether it be additional description or just relevant information like user reviews or related products – the better the perceived quality of your content.

Beware of taking this too far – you don't want to write a novel, nor do you want to engage in the practice of excessive keywording we discussed last month. But you do want to have good content – it's not a trick; it's just common sense.

Sidebar: Search engine quality

Remember that a search engine is ultimately concerned about “quality”; if you deserve a high ranking because your site is truly popular or relevant to the given search term, then your ranking is high quality; if, on the other hand, your ranking is manufactured from a variety of tactics to fool the search engine, it is lower quality. It may have a high ranking for now, but the ultimate goal of all these search engine providers is to only show high-quality rankings in their natural (free) listings, and charge for advertising space for everything else.

But don't take my word for it: Check out Google's own guidelines at <http://www.google.com/webmasters/guidelines.html> – and keep in mind that even if questionable tactics currently work at fooling Google or other search engines, the very mention of them in Google's Quality Guidelines means that, sooner or later, the search engine companies will likely find a way to neutralize them. (Most of these tactics exist solely to artificially boost “quality.”)

2. Use built-in tools: A long time ago, some smart people built a number of tags into HTML – that's the language our web browsers read to render a web page – explicitly for the purpose of making it easier for users to find a particular page among millions. Now there are billions of pages, of course, and the previous columns detailed all the wonderful strategies to more or less bypass these built-in tags. However, these tags (and the page content itself) remain the only real legitimate method of search engine “enhancement,” and all those other tricks may or may not work down the road.

What are these lowly, under appreciated tags? The “title” tag and the “meta” tags. The title tag is what tells the web browser to display at the top off the window (the “title bar”) when it shows you a page. It also happens to be what a number of search engines

will show as the primary title of a given search result. Title tags should be of reasonable length (5-15 words) and be as compact a description of your site or page as you can muster. If you have a dynamic, database-driven site that is able to create unique title tags for each product, all for the better.

Meta tags are built specifically for helping search engines and any other device get a quick view of what's on your page. The most important meta tags are "Description" and "Keywords" which do just what you'd expect. As with title tags, you should be as accurate as possible without creating an unwieldy mess; you should also avoid too much repetition.

3. Use the search engine's own tools: Search engine companies like Google want you to use the tools they provide to submit and optimize your site. This means less work for their search tools (or "robots") and more accurate results. Of course, they also want to sell you their services, so don't be surprised to get a push for advertising or other services when you make your free submission. A search engine should never charge you for a basic submission to their engine, so be careful of third-party services that charge you to do this – if you want to save yourself the hassle of multiple submissions, these services are fine, but check them out thoroughly to make sure they do everything legitimately.

Google and Yahoo! also offer additional tools to help their engines more efficiently index your site, and if you can support the technical requirements of these tools, you should use them. A great example is Google's site map tool which actually allows you to notify Google automatically when pages have changed on your site. That way, you get indexed only when you need to be.

4. Avoid excessive images and Flash: Flash has come a long way in accessibility and indexing, but you should still be careful of using too many images or Flash content if you want to do well in search engines. Search engines are primarily text-search tools, so even though it is possible to successfully optimize for search engine placement with lots of images and Flash, it can be more difficult and time-consuming.

5. Get links! One of the best things you can do is to get real, honest-to-gosh people linking to your site. A search engine bases a good part of its "quality" rating on how many legitimate links there are from various sites on the web to your site. The more people click

on these links, obviously, the better, but having the same total amount of links from five different sites will actually result in better quality than having all those links from just one site.

Now, what you may notice about these tactics is that most of them are, in one way or another, a moderate version of some of the tactics that made our previous months' bad lists. That's true. Much of what is questionable or just plain bad on the web is the result of excess; too many unsolicited emails, too much noise that adds no value to content, and so on. Moderation may not get you the number one listing on that search engine – and for those of you who got up there using excess or other means, look out, because it may not last – but it will let you sleep better at night.