

Are you in the Driver's Seat?

The 5 Key Aspects of Search Engine Optimization on Today's Top Three Engines

By Meghan Wier

Search Engine Optimization was not something I thought about much before 5 years ago—in fact not many people even knew what SEO was. But today, Search Engine Optimization is a hot topic in businesses around the world, and a critical element for online success.

The World Wide Web is now a multi-layered, multi-use, and multi-media environment used by an estimated 450 million users around the world. Many new and exciting technologies can spice up a website, from sound and graphics to flash animation, but these enhancements and the other subtle nuances of how a site functions can have a serious effect on the bottom line.

Search Engines' spiders only index the text of a website. All the bells and whistles used by many web designers to increase the “wow factor” of a site can negatively affect their Search Engine rankings. And without good rankings, many businesses cannot succeed, no matter how pretty their website is!

When looking at Search Engine Optimization for your own site, it is important to consider the value of all of the design and development factors and how to marry them into a **Search Engine friendly** site, even before you go about the process of **tuning** your site.

If you were going to build the “ideal” high-ranking website it would contain nothing but text. But for human beings searching the Web, this kind of site would drive us to distraction, bore us, and cause us to click away faster than you can say “SEO”. As a site owner, it is your job to educate yourself on how the Search Engines handle the elements of your site, and how to modify your site to get the most out of your website investment.

Since there are many factors in every website: the content, the links into and within the site, the domain name, the headings and much, much more, every Search Engine uses a unique formula, called an algorithm to determine a site's ranking. Search Engines' algorithm weighs the different factors, and by constantly refining and improving their algorithms, the Search Engines work towards giving their visitors the most relevant results—and making my job more difficult!

For most sites, in order to achieve a top 10 – or “first page” position on the major Search Engines, Search Engine optimization experts like myself are hired and these experts must invest a lot of time learning about the different algorithms, and studying up on the frequent changes to the engines’ formulas.

So, how can **you** put together and optimize a site that will be found in the top ranking positions and drive prospects and customers to your virtual door—and keep them there?

The answer is amazingly easy. **The basics of SEO are just that—basic.** There are many things that you can do to increase your ranking, without needing to be an SEO guru. But it does take a little planning, a bit of knowledge and a lot of patience to optimize your site. Initial Search Engine Optimization can be done by nearly anyone willing to take the time to learn about their site, the Web and the engines. Honestly, the hardest part is just doing it.

Today, there are thousands of companies with websites, and you can be sure that many if not all of your competitors are online. However, with some work, it is still possible to optimize your site, become an e-force in your industry, and capture the online market.

Being a successful internet presence involves much more than designing a beautiful website or even having the “perfect” product. Since the majority of Web traffic comes from the Search Engines, it is imperative to have a strong Search Engine optimization strategy, and the ability to carry it out. Unless your site is ranked high enough to be found—within the first or second page—none of the traffic will come to you, and instead it will go to your competition.

And no one wants that!

There are 5 basics in the SEO process:

1. Keyphrases
2. Code
3. Content
4. Links
5. Measurement

These basics may change over time, and their importance varies from Engine to Engine, but the principles stay the same. A well-optimized site will contain these elements, and in most cases, proper attention to just these factors will give you the edge you need to succeed.

I am going to walk through these steps and ways for anyone to do the initial tuning on their site. These **key basics** are just some of what an optimization

professional would do; however, they are currently the most valuable elements, and the easiest for the average person to implement in their own site.

Keyphrases

Research: Your first SEO step should be to start with a brainstorming session. Just write down the **10-20 Keyphrases** on which you think that you would like your site to rank highly. Don't over think this step too much—this should be a rough list to start—just get it down.

Then you should begin the **research phase** to find out how many searches were actually performed on the top Search Engines for these phrases. This will help you to determine if your Keyphrases are too broad or too narrow to reach your audience.

While doing Keyword research, you can start with any of a number of free online applications to make Keyphrase suggestions, and get search counts. I like starting with [Good Keywords](#). A program like this will help you begin to build your Keyphrase list, showing what is searched on, and what terms are related to your initial entries.

Targeting the Qualified Phrases:

In order to get the **most valuable** traffic to your website, you will need to not only determine if the phrases you choose have enough traffic to be meaningful, but if they have too much, indicating that they are not targeted enough to deliver the right people to your site. Furthermore, should you decide to target a broad term such as “insurance”, be prepared to compete with the financial resources of companies such as *Allstate*, *State Farm* and *Progressive*. The major players for the broad phrases in your industry may have full time optimization departments finding new ways to keep their sites on top. Your best opportunity to capture the most market share is to choose the best phrases—those with a high amount of searches, which are targeted and have competition that you can out perform.

I use several ways to determine what Keyphrases to target but after choosing my 10-20 initial phrases, and researching variations of these phrases, I find it easiest to cut and paste these into a spreadsheet with the amount of monthly searches.

After going through and creating this longer list, I eliminate all of the phrases that are inappropriate, or do not have enough searches to drive sufficient traffic. I especially look for phrases that are targeted enough to give me **high conversion**. If I get the right people to my site—the ones looking for exactly what my client provides—I have the best chance of making these visitors, customers.

My long Keyphrase list will can be hundreds of words long, so I have to narrow this list down to a manageable amount. I do this by eliminating the *obviously* bad phrases, and then I look at the competition for the remaining good phrases. I will see who has the top positions, and why.

- Do they have a huge Google PageRank?
- How often do they use the Keyphrase in their content, Metas, and other aspects of their site?
- Do they have hundreds of pages of content?
- Are they a major national company?
- Most importantly: Do I have the ability to beat them with the resources that I have?

Most importantly, be sure these phrases are **right** for you to focus on because of the number of searches they receive and the competition vying for these words. You must keep in mind their appropriateness for your business. While it might be easy to come up high on the search term “last minute travel for left-handed, short-haired twenty-seven year-olds” it may not be valuable for you to get the traffic to your site, because there either aren’t enough searches for this term—or because you don’t specifically handle this target demographic.

After this process is complete, I have usually weeded out all but about **25 Keyphrases**. Twenty-five is a manageable number of Keyphrases for most sites, but more or less may be appropriate depending on the industry, competition and product.

With these new “chosen” targeted Keyphrases, a site can be tuned by adding these phrases into the **content, tags, and headers** and the Search Engines can begin to drive qualified traffic to your site. This new traffic should increase conversion and ROI for the site—making your site into a valuable tool for your business.

Code

The **code** is what makes a website function. There are several simple ways to modify the code in a site to make it more Search Engine friendly. The TITLE, Description, Keywords, Heading and Alt Text are just a few.

The TITLE: The TITLE describes the contents of a web page in one sentence. It's likely to appear in the results generated by the Search Engines and in surfer's "bookmarks". This TITLE can be seen in the top of the browser window, and it is the first thing that a Search Engine spider sees on your page. Since this part of the code can be seen by both visitors and by the Search Engines, it is particularly important to get it right—make it **Keyword rich** and easy for your human visitor to read and understand.

To write a good page TITLE, describe the page including Keyphrases that relate to and appear on the page. Each page should have a **unique** TITLE describing the **unique** information that page contains. TITLE length should be about 12 words long, and it is important that your page TITLE be as descriptive as possible. It is a fact that listings that include the dominant search terms in the Meta TITLE and Meta description tags have a higher click-through rate than those that don't—sometimes up to double the traffic.

Review the content while working on your TITLES to add the Keyphrases, especially the two- and three word phrases. Make sure to add these into the content without losing the message of the page. This is especially important for a Search Engine that does not look at **Meta tags**. You will want to use these phrases frequently without going overboard and spamming the Search Engines.

Be aware that some of the Search Engines will take the site descriptions that they display on the results page from the page itself, **not** the Meta description fields. So be sure to keep the page content as targeted as possible. Such engines will exclude some appropriate Keywords unless they are used throughout the content as well. It is also important to try to keep the TITLE and description fields as short as possible to prevent you from diluting the impact of the Keyphrases you do use. Not all of your **Keyphrases** need to or should be on each page. A few of your chosen words on the right pages, and well-tuned for will do you well.

The Meta Description: The Meta description tag is a snippet of HTML that belongs in the HEAD section of a webpage. The Description is used to describe the page's content, giving the Search Engine's spiders a correct summary, filled with your targeted Keyphrases. This description will sometimes show up on the engine's results page—although sometimes the engines will pull a selection of text to display under the URL, and ignore your Description entirely. So, although this is an easy step, it may not have a dramatic effect in and of itself.

However, **every little bit helps**, and if you choose to take the time to write a good Description, it should contain between 12 and 24 words and incorporate all of the words in the page's TITLE.

Something to note is that this tag is currently **not** given any weight in Google's algorithm, but it is in Yahoo's, and also some of the "lesser" engines. So while it may not be of great importance in your overall SEO strategy, remember that the Description will sometimes be read by a **real-live actual human person**. An easy to read, comprehensive and understandable description will draw people to your site once they get to the results page—and that is, after all, what you are looking to do!

Meta Keywords: There is still a fair amount of debate on Meta Keywords and if they are looked at if all by the Search Engines anymore.

In fact many of you in this room may know enough about current SEO trends to want to disregard this advice—and if you really feel strongly, go ahead—you won't hurt my feelings.

However, just like the Description **my** belief is that it only takes a few minutes to add your phrases into your code. After all, you have already done the research to determine what phrases to use. Listing them, even if they are completely ignored will only take a few minutes of your time. I have even seen some evidence that these tags are in fact sometimes **not** always ignored and can still affect the results of a page for certain Search Engines.

Meta Keywords certainly do not hold the same importance that they once did, but adding them in **will not** penalize you, (unless, of course you spam). And if the major engines aren't weighing these Meta Keywords heavily now, or at all, the algorithms are always changing—and you never know when the Keyword tag may become more important.

So I say: you will never go wrong by using Meta tags, only potentially hurt yourself by not using them.

Headers: Proper headers, specifically <H1> and <H2> Tags are another way to optimize your site with code. Now, to those of you familiar with these tags, they are admittedly not all that attractive, but it is still important to Google, and **what is important to Google should be important to you**.

Google weighs headers heavily and assesses your site based on this tag along with your TITLE and then all of the other characteristics to rank your site.

“But...” you may still be thinking, “<H1> tags are really really ugly!” and I agree. However, you can always style your <H1> and <H2> tags to get the best look. This is another simple, but vitally important aspect of optimizing your site.

Use the Header Tags to highlight your target Keyphrases, and you will find that this extra step is worth your time.

Alt Text: Alt text is "Alternative text" that is placed in the code for an image in an HTML page. If the image is not displayed, the ALT text can be presented instead. ALT text is especially useful to users of speaking browsers, and should be a brief representation of the **purpose** of the image, not a **description** of the image. ALT text is frequently seen when users move the mouse over images and is read by the browsers and can increase the PageRanking for targeted Keyphrases.

Now, a word of caution. It can be easy to go overboard. **Do not** abuse Alt Text. **Do not** write a book. **Do not** say a picture is something it isn't. Always make sure the Alt text relates to the site, and specifically the page. Use words in the Alt text that are also used within the site. **Do not...** I repeat, **do not** use Alt Text to list **all the possible Keyphrases** you want to be found on, ("book, big book, best book, yellow book, my book, books, bookity book, misspelled booke, Billy's book", etc). **This is very naughty!** Do this and you will suffer the wrath of the Google Gods. They will eventually catch on, and knock you down a notch—if they are even that nice about it.

Alt text is just one of many tools I use when tuning a site, but it is one of the easiest for the site owner to do as well. Take a look at your site and see if you have missed an opportunity to pack in some Keywords in your Alt Text in a **reasonable** and **meaningful** way.

Content

The text on your website **has** to be fine tuned to get the best results from your Search Engine Optimization. Hardly ever can the content written by a non-SEO obsessed person (like myself) attract enough attention from the Search Engines. The content needs to be massaged, reworded, worked, tweaked and modified to make the most of the available space and garner good SEO results.

Often times the content for a site is written by an admin, or a marketing person who has no understanding of how to write for the Web. Even scarier to me is when a company goes and hires a regular copywriter to write website content. It is very important that if an investment in a copywriter is made, that they are looking to develop copy not only for readability and interest of the human reader, but for the Search Engines as well.

So remember when hiring a copywriter, to make sure they have experience writing for the Web visitor, as well as specifically for the Search Engines. There are some very skilled SEO-focused copywriters out there, and they are worth every penny.

I recommend that you include at least 400 words of grammatically correct sentence structure throughout your body section on **every page** of your site.

Now this is what I recommend—but I have rarely seen it done.

Since a long block of content is sometimes difficult to read, or distracting for the main points of a site, I suggest designing the layout in such a way that you can include **as much** content as possible, and maintain readability.

There are ways to do this that will work well whatever your page format, and an experienced website designer can make suggestions on the best way to accomplish this, and customize it to the look-and-feel and nature of the site.

There are some simple design considerations when constructing “search-engine-friendly” Web pages. Content is important, but also is the page layout and design. Search Engines usually “hate” frames, so it is preferable to use tables instead. Newer technologies like dynamic page generation or flash animation actually might harm your ranking so much, that it becomes a wise thing to use them only if it is unavoidable!

It is important to keep in mind that it won't matter how attractive a site is, or even how well written it is, if it can't be found. Never forget about how the factors work together.

When writing the website content the relevant Keywords have to be placed throughout the page, and preferably the most frequently used closest to the top.

Currently, many of the Search Engines are giving more importance to the text that is read first. Also be sure to use headings wherever appropriate, and don't forget to include Keyphrases within these headings.

Keyword Density: Keyword Density is the number of times your Keyphrase appears in the visible text on your Website. The important thing to note here is that your site must contain the phrases for which you would like to be ranked well on the Search Engines.

Duh! You Say? Maybe, but you would be surprised at how many people come to me in dismay with a list of Keyphrases they want to show up for, baffled at why they have, as of yet been unable to rank anywhere on any Search Engine, and when we take a look at their site for the first time I have to gently point out that they don't mention their Keyphrases a single time on their homepage.

I do suggest using these Keyphrases on the homepage, as well as devoting a decent section or page to each phrase as well. However, most important, is that the page continue to **read** well to the visitor, and maintain the overall message of the site. Generally, I find that if the site is well written and focused, (**and the phrases are appropriate**), Keyphrase density will happen (**almost**) automatically.

That said, here are some guidelines I like to follow:

- 1) Use the Keyphrase at least 3 times on the page devoted to that topic.
- 2) Use the Keyphrase at least once on the homepage.
- 3) Make sure that the Keyphrase is in the Metas and the TITLE where appropriate.
- 4) Utilize links throughout the site to direct people to that page.
- 5) Look for opportunities for getting the Keyphrases into the headers.
- 6) Use the Keyphrase one more time than the current highest ranking site does in their content.

So go boost your **Keyphrase density** – I promise it will make a big difference!

Linking

Inbound Links: The quality and quantity of inbound links is one of the factors that Google uses in its ranking algorithms. Google calculates the **quality** and **quantity** of these links separately from the other factors of SEO and calls them “PageRank.”

PageRank is a numeric value from 1-10 that represents how important a page is. Essentially, PageRank is a vote of how important Google thinks you are based on the “friends you keep”—or the pages that link to your pages. Google figures that when one page links to another, it is effectively “voting,” showing that it supports the page it links to.

Think about high school. The “popular kids” have “popular” friends—and these friends are popular because they have popular friends. To Google, the more “popular” a site, the more popular its “linked friends”.

Google’s PageRank algorithm is one of the few aspects of SEO that is officially on record and published by the Search Engine—and **if you can understand it on first glance...you are doing pretty well.**

Quoting from the original Google paper, PageRank is defined like this:

We <Google> assume page A has pages T1...Tn which point to it (i.e., are citations). The parameter d is a damping factor which can be set between 0 and 1. We usually set d to 0.85. ... Also C(A) is defined as the number of links going out of page A. The PageRank of a page A is given as follows:

$$PR(A) = (1-d) + d (PR(T1)/C(T1) + \dots + PR(Tn)/C(Tn))$$

Note that the PageRanks form a probability distribution over web pages, so the sum of all web pages' PageRanks will be one.

PageRank or PR(A) can be calculated using a simple iterative algorithm, and corresponds to the principal eigenvector of the normalized link matrix of the web.

“Whoa” you say? **Yes, it is complicated.** But that is the cool part, and the point. Google has no desire to make it easy for you—only measurable and consistent. The thing I find most interesting is not how the PR is calculated, but rather, how PR is distributed from a site to a site. A site will “gift” PageRank (while not losing any of their own) to a recipient site. If there is more than one link on the page, the recipients will share the amount of PR that the original site can give. That means that many links from one Website page do not help the recipients of the link as much as links from a page that does not link out frequently.

It is also important to note that sometimes Google “guesses” at what the PageRank should be, and will then change it after the site is indexed. So watch out for an **artificial** high ranking. It appears that the Google ToolBar looks at the URL of the page and just looks at the parent (or home) page. If Google has a PR for that parent page, it takes that and just subtracts 1. If the Home or parent page does not have PageRank, it will go to the parent’s parent page and subtract 2. The real PR of that new page is really still a “0” until the Google spider first sees it, and sometimes this takes a month or two.

PageRank is displayed on the Google Toolbar (<http://toolbar.google.com/>). However, the Toolbar PageRank only goes from 0 – 10 and there can be a big difference in two sites with the same PageRank.

So if the PageRank of my Homepage is a 4, and the PageRank of your Homepage is a 4, In reality, my site is beating your site because my PageRank is really a 4.999997, and yours is only a 4.8.

On the Toolbar, it looks like we are equal, but in fact I have a higher PR, and if all other factors are equal, I will out rank you on Google.

Toolbar PageRank (log base 10)	Real PageRank
0	0 - 100
1	100 - 1,000
2	1,000 - 10,000
3	10,000 - 100,000
4	and so on...

You should also know that the PageRank scales go up exponentially, so it is easy to go from a 1 to a 2, but very difficult to go from an 8 to a 9.

One of the more **common** ways of gaining links is through link exchanges. It is thought that Google is now trying to eliminate link exchanges as a form of SEO, by degrading the value of ‘reciprocal links’ or, links which link to a site which links back to the origin site. Some Search Engine optimization experts have moved on to doing ‘three way link exchanges’, where site A links to site B, site B to site C, and site C back to site A.

This is currently a **viable SEO option**, although Google may decide that this too is less valuable than links that do not reciprocate, and so I use both reciprocal and non-reciprocal links, always making sure that the links relate in some way to the page content.

PageRank does not factor in the content or size of a page, or even the language it is written in. It is about **who** links to **whom** and how the sites connect.

Internal Links: In addition to developing and implementing your link strategy; you will also need to link the pages of your site together using the Keywords of the landing page in the anchor text of the sending page. Use the text links within the paragraphs when possible, especially when linking related pages. If not related, you can use image links to accomplish this. PageRank can be gained from one page to another within a site, so make sure to take full advantage of this.

Additionally, these internal links should help with ease of navigation, making the traffic flow through your site easier for your visitors to find the information they are looking for. Your site was built for the **actual real-live human**, so any chance you can both optimize and make the visit to your site better; it is a win-win that will result in ROI for you.

Measurement

The importance of regular reporting and measurement of ranking is something that I can not stress enough. Checking on where your site ranks for your selected Keyphrases will tell you how successful you are with your tuning and what you will need to focus on to be more successful.

You should measure your rankings on the various Search Engines as well as your traffic, and your conversion. Careful attention should be taken throughout your ongoing SEO process as to how your site is performing.

Changes to the other **Basics** will need to be done regularly based on the results gathering in the measurement phase. If a keyphrase is under-performing, look at all of your instances again, check your competition, research the actual searches done on the phrase and determine if more work needs to be done, or if another phrase is more valuable moving forward.

The Top Three Engines and How They are Different

Google: Google is the largest Search Engine and the currently the industry leader—in fact no one ever say to “Yahoo” something or “MSN” it. The will say “Google it.” The word “**Google**” is now a verb—who would have thought?!

Google is the most difficult Search Engine to optimize for at this time; however, it is also the most rewarding. With this one Search Engine showing **over 50%** of all U.S.-originating web searches, Google provides the most traffic to your Keyword.

For you to get, and uphold a high ranking in Google, you should be focusing on steadily gaining links from quality, related websites. Links and therefore PageRank is one of Google’s heaviest weighed factors.

Targeted, relevant, high-quality links are the kind you want to be acquiring, links from low-quality or irrelevant sites will not affect your ranking to nearly the extent a high-quality rank will. However Google is **not** just about PageRank. Google has a very sophisticated algorithm including many levels of ranking.

Other Google Facts:

- PageRank **is** transferred through local links, and those links are of equal value as remote (cross-domain) links.
- DMOZ is the basis of Google’s directory, however, it does not provide anything more towards Google’s search ranking than any other site.
- Linking to Google will not increase your ranking, in fact, outbound links will not increase your ranking at all.
- Linking to a Google competitor will not affect your ranking, however, linking to a ‘bad’ neighborhood, or a site that has been flagged by Google as a spamming site, could result in your site being banned.
- Showing AdSense on your page will not increase your ranking, and showing an AdSense competitor will not decrease your ranking.

MSN SEO Basics

For **ease of optimization**, MSN is probably your best choice. Of the three major Search Engines, MSN sends the least traffic overall, however, especially for less-competitive Keywords, MSN is very easy to optimize for.

MSN relies very heavily on on-page factors, Keyword density, TITLE tag, Meta tags, header tags, and Keywords showing up in links and other tags.

Simply by modifying your page, you should be able to increase MSN rankings dramatically.

Yahoo! SEO Basics

If you are an SEO novice, Yahoo! is probably a good choice for you to target. It is one of the easier Search Engines to manipulate, and it is a good traffic source: You will see your work pay off fast and easily.

Yahoo! cares about everything including on-page factors such as Meta-tags, Keyword density, readability based on various algorithms. When optimizing for Yahoo! you also have to concentrate on the off-page factors, such as links. Just like Google, Yahoo! cares about links for their quality, as well as their quantity.

Some Yahoo! Facts:

- Yahoo! does care about Meta tags, it is not a significant part of the algorithm, however, they are used.
- Keyword spamming, unfortunately, does still have an effect on Yahoo! ranking.
- Linking to Yahoo! has no influence on your ranking.

Conclusion

Probably the most important advice that I can give you today is “don’t try to cheat the Search Engines.”

Some webmasters and so called “black-hat SEO experts” succeed in taking advantage of the ranking algorithms of the Search Engine and getting results by using various **unethical** techniques, but it’s not worth it in the long run.

Many Search Engines have employed automatic filters that will ban a site doing something it deems inappropriate. Search Engines’ algorithms are also getting “smarter” every day, and if your site will be found cheating, it might get banned from the search listings. While some of the “lesser” evils will not currently get you banned, you may be negatively affected in your rankings, or completely removed when an engine decides a minor infraction today is something more objectionable tomorrow.

Here are a just a few things that could cause you problems with the Search Engines: cloaking, hidden text, bad link farming, duplication and phony affiliate sites. If someone suggests you do any of these... think seriously about the negative ramifications.

In summary, basic Search Engine Optimization is **not** an unobtainable goal for the average computer-savvy business person. But it is like most things in life—hard work—and that is why I have a job. Many people choose to outsource this work, because the engines are always changing, the competition will always be fighting for their piece of the traffic, and optimization is a continual and sometimes arduous project.

However with that hard work comes great rewards in the form of traffic to your site, client satisfaction, and conversion of prospects. Good SEO is worth it, whether you spend the time or pay someone else to do it. Good SEO pays for itself. And good SEO will make the difference—driving a continuous flow of visitors to **your** virtual doorstep.