SEO BASICS

Brought to you by Viaduct Generation

FOR BEGINNERS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO SEO

A complete guide for new players in the SEO game. Learn the basics of SEO and let your digital voice be heard.

SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) is an untapped resource. Think about it like this: 93% of online experiences begin with a search engine, making them the biggest digital discovery tools. Therefore, if growing your branded platform and funneling more traffic to your social channels is your goal, then placing website visibility as a high priority is essential.

In layman's terms, it is the process that brands use to increase their online visibility. This is done by looking at things like: **keywords, website structure, content performance, user experience, device usability**, and so much more.

Who is this guide for?

As mentioned above, this guide is for new players in the SEO game. Our goal is to turn you/your team into independent, knowledgeable Search Engine Optimisers. To do this, we'll skip over the complex jargon and speak to you in the simplest terms, getting you to your finish line as fast as possible.

What can you expect from this SEO Guide?

This guide should serve as your introduction to the world of SEO - it only touches on the basics. Once you read through, you should have knowledge of basic SEO concepts so that you can hit the ground running and progress into more advanced SEO techniques.

2. HOW SEARCH WORKS

Search engines work according to their algorithms. In this section, you will understand basic search engine functionality and how it interprets and interacts with different parts of your website.

68% of web traffic goes to the first <u>five</u> positions on Google SERP* (Search Engine Results Page). As a matter of fact, Google's algorithm combines and analyses a total of 200 factors in its ranking process. Google's tendency to be meticulous captures the necessity of strategic and careful webpage optimisation.

How Do Search Engines Work?
Search engines such as Google, Bing, Baidu or Yahoo work according to very complex algorithms. This ensures that whenever you hit "Search", you are given high-quality and accurate results that answer your questions.

Search engine algorithms work according to three main stages:
1. Information Discovery
2. Information Organisation
3. Ranking

As a whole, this three-step process is referred to as *Crawling, Indexing, and Ranking*.

Step 1: Crawling *(Information Discovery)*
"Crawlers" *(also known as Search Engine Spiders)* are computer programs used by search engines to find publicly available information on the Internet.

This information is found in *servers*. Crawlers identify the number of websites hosted by each server, and work their way down the list. They do this by visiting each website and collecting data. This data includes:

1) How many pages the website has

2) The website's different types of content: Text, video and image content (additional content formats include: CSS, HTML and JavaScript).

Crawlers are smart and meticulous. This data-collecting process is repeated constantly, meaning that the Crawlers can keep track of changes made to a website (for example, adding a webpage or deleting an image).

Picture this: 130 trillion individual pages, each requiring their own set of crawlers to extract and record their information. If you think this looks like a lot of work, you would be right.

Why is crawling important? If the Crawler cannot "read" your website, your website may not rank <u>at all</u>. Your website should be optimised for the Crawlers as they already have a lot of work. Hence, optimising your pages and simplifying their job will help your rankings immensely.

Step 2: Indexing *(Information Organisation)*
With so much information found by the Crawlers, it must be organised, sorted and stored - otherwise, things will get messy, making it harder for potential site visitors to find your page. This clean-up is called *Indexing*.

Search engines must be selective with the information they store. They prioritise information like: **page creation/update dates and times, page titles and descriptions, content types, associated keywords, incoming and outgoing links**, just to name a few examples.

Why is indexing important? If the Crawlers don't store your website's information, it simply won't appear in the SERP — at <u>any</u> position.

However, what this does mean is that the more pages you have in the search engine indexes, the more likely you are to appear in the SERP — *you'll be ahead of the competition*.

Step 3: Ranking
Ranking algorithms determine the order of pages that show up in the SERP once you hit "Search".

Algorithms outline the rules of the game, and the game equipment is what's stored in the index.

How do search engine algorithms work?

Search engine algorithms evolve over time. In fact, Google releases a Core Update at least once annually.

At first (around 2001), all search engines did was pair a search query with the webpage title. But today, Google's algorithm considers about 255 rules, most of which are completely unknown, in order to shape SERP rankings. A simplified overview of how this process works is:

I. Analysing the user's query

The search engine first needs to identify what kind of information the user is looking for. In order to select and present the most meaningful results, search engines identify *keywords* in the search query.

Keyword: A word with a specific meaning and purpose.

Keywords shape the categorisation of searches into three intents: *Informational, Transactional* and *Navigational.*

For instance, if someone searches "How to remove a wine stain", the keywords, "how to", tell the search engine that you are looking for instructions. Hence, *informational* content.

Alternatively, if someone searches for "Buy black Adidas sneakers", the keyword, "buy" guides the search engine to present you with primarily eCommerce websites. Hence, *transactional* content.

Finally, the keywords, "near me", in a search for "Coffee shop near me" implies locational instructions. The search engine will then use your own location, as well as locational information provided by optimised websites to provide *navigational* content.

This process is heavily dependent on Machine Learning. Machine learning allows search engines to combine and associate different related keywords. An example of this is seen in the search queries: "how to change smoke detector batteries" and "how to replace smoke detector batteries". If you put them both into your search bar, you will find that Google will provide you with the same results. This is because Machine Learning knows that "change" and "replace" usually mean the same thing.

Did you know that the highest-volume search query for Amazon is actually "amanzon"? Luckly, Machine Learning also allows search engines to identify typos, and will therefore still provide the user with "amazon.com" as the highest ranking result in the SERP.

More skills include: understanding singulars and plurals, and obtaining meanings from both written and Voice search.

II. Locating matching pages

Secondly, search engines must match webpages to the identified keywords in the search bar.

Users of the search engines expect them to provide the best results in the smallest amount of time. *This is where website owners can use SEO to their advantage the most*.

Some of the most important factors search engines consider when matching pages and search queries are:

- Title and content relevance - how relevant are the page title and content with the search query?
- Content type – is the user asking for images, text, video or something else?
- Content quality – is the content useful, unbiased, and accurate?
- Website quality – is the website made well and free of bugs, pop-ups, and other inconveniences?
    - Remember - the search engine caters to the user. They want the users to have the best possible experience with the provided results so that the users come back again.
- Publication date - particularly for news-related results, search engines will consider publication date to determine content relevance.
- Page popularity – how do other websites perceive this page? Unintuitively, this isn't to do with page traffic, but rather, the credibility of the page as determined by mentions in other websites.
- Page language - users must be able to understand what they are receiving. The language used to do so isn't always English.

- <u>Loading times and page speed</u> - slow-loading pages (> 0.5 seconds) are harmful to user experience, and will therefore not rank as the search engines want the users to have the most enjoyable experience possible.
- <u>Device type</u> - websites that have mobile-friendly versions/set-ups will rank better on mobile-based searches.
- <u>Location</u> - in some cases, users are looking for location-specific information and content. This means that optimised pages must have locational information when possible (you can refer back to the example of navigational content above).

Why are search engine ranking algorithms important? Data reveals that in the large majority of cases, users only click on the first 5 positions of the SERP. Think about it, when was the last time you went to page 2 of your Google results page?

3. WHAT IS SEO?

SEO (or Search Engine Optimisation) is the process by which webpages are optimised to accommodate the algorithms, processes, and requirements of relevant search engines.

This means that there are "rules" for easing (optimising) the Crawling, Indexing, and Ranking processes for the search engine. It's essential to note that algorithms don't have real humans behind them. Crawlers read HTML code in order to crawl and index. Based on the information in the HTML code, algorithms then rank the pages.

SEO is the strategic building of the HTML code to give Crawlers and algorithms easy clues, or bait, in order to simplify their jobs and rank higher in the SERP.

SEO Components

Seeing as search engines have *lots* of information to sift through, and thus, *lots* of factors influencing the ranking process, it's easier to group SEO factors into the following three categories:

i. Technical SEO: Crawling and Indexing

This refers to page optimisation for the first two stages of algorithm functions: Crawling and Indexing. Simply put, technical SEO helps search engines access, crawl, interpret, and index your website smoothly with ease and speed.

ii. On-Page SEO: Page and Content Optimization

On-Page SEO refers to the 'search engine language' - providing Crawlers with the <u>context</u> and <u>meaning</u> of your page. At this stage, keywords, in the title, descriptions, and content of the page, are of utmost importance.

iii. Off-Page SEO: Website Promotion

Off-Page SEO refers to webpage marketing and promotion beyond the boundaries of the web page itself. Although it can be extremely useful, this only becomes relevant *after* Technical and On-Page SEO are dealt with.

Additional SEO Classifications:

       1- Local SEO

       2- Mobile SEO

       3- eCommerce SEO

       4- Content SEO

These classifications specify different *subsets* of SEO for certain types of websites or industries. Remember the different types of intents (informational, transactional, and navigational) - in *some cases*, these additional classifications can impact the search intents, and thus, search results. For instance, eCommerce SEO will most likely refer to primarily transactional search queries, whereas Local SEO may refer to navigational search queries.

4. WHY SEO?

SEO is extremely beneficial for any business with an online presence. This is because higher search engine rankings will automatically lead to higher targeted and organic traffic to your site, which, in turn, should lead to additional revenue!

We have the magic equation: Higher rankings = higher traffic! With SEO focusing on the crawling processes and ranking algorithm, increased traffic is the outcome we strive for. In turn, traffic increases conversions, sales, subscribers, or whichever alternative form of attention your website demands.

Whilst other sources of traffic exist (i.e., traffic from social media, traffic from paid advertising), these traffic sources don't provide organic *traffic*, meaning that this traffic is less likely to result in conversions.

Think about it like this, with organic traffic, your site lands directly in the lap of users already looking for what you offer. With paid traffic, your site is more likely to be seen, but by people who aren't necessarily interested in it. Moreover, as soon as your budget for ads is exhausted, traffic will drop immediately. Although this may be an easy way to achieve particular traffic goals in a shorter space of time, this approach is inherently unsustainable.

Also, users gained from social media have a *wide range of intent*. This type of traffic is usually fleeting, as it often comes as a diversion from the original intent of scrolling or catching up with friends and family. Thus, this usually results in lower conversion rates.

On the other hand, traffic resulting from Google search queries has a much more *specific intent*. This makes it much easier for you to address the needs of the user and reach meaningful, more targeted audiences.

Growing your business with SEO
It's essential to note that efforts to improve SEO do not come alongside a guaranteed set of results. In fact, you should not trust any SEO agency or individual who guarantees specific rankings in X amount of time. Far too many variables and factors affect organic rankings on a daily basis.

What *can* be guaranteed, however, is a comprehensive, holistic SEO and content strategy which can grow organic visibility over time. What's most important is consistency: consistent competitor and algorithm analysis, dedication and patience.

The benefits gained from SEO begin to manifest once you rank in the top 5 positions of the SERP. These positions hold 68% of clicks, and thus have the highest CTR (click-through-rate).

The continuous progression up the SERP rankings can strategically grow your customer base, and thus your business as a whole. For instance, 320 people search for the phrase "wedding venues in Wales" every month (or some variation of it). If you hold the first position on the Google SERP, we could calculate that this would bring approximately 110 people to your website every month. Assuming that 0.5% of the new visitors booked a wedding venue once, this would bring you 6-7 new customers per year.

Other benefits of SEO

Aside from growing your website, business, and revenues, SEO can contribute to a multitude of other business goals:

1) **Brand awareness** - Top-ranking pages are continuously seen by thousands of users. Even if they don't click through, your name will be out there.

2) **Brand trust** - Similar to the awareness mechanism, users continuously seeing your page at the top of the SERP improves perceived credibility.

3) **Increase in social shares** - Top-ranking pages are more likely to get social media attention (via shares, mentions, etc).

4) **More backlinks** - Successful SEO strategies result in increased references and mentions by other websites and webmasters (backlinks). This compounds the effectiveness of SEO as Google and other search engines consider backlinks as a ranking factor.

5. TECHNICAL SEO BASICS

Technical SEO is the first step of any SEO strategy or endeavor.

Issues with technical SEO are extremely counterproductive, and will cancel out any other SEO effort (i.e., keyword optimisation) exerted. This is because technical SEO is what shapes the accessing, crawling, interpretation, and indexing of your site by search engines. If the search engine can't execute those steps successfully, any other optimisation efforts will go unnoticed.

Domain configuration

Specifics are important. In an SEO sense, a domain which has "www" in front is *not* the same as a domain without it.

In short, there is a *massive* difference between the below sites:
- https://www.thisisourexample.com
- https://thisisourexample.com

Additionally - two websites with the exact same content is detrimental to SEO. Technical SEO allows you to decipher which domain would be optimal for your goals.

Which pages should you index?

Automatically, search engine Crawlers will attempt to index all published and publicly available content on the internet.

However, this may not always be the best thing for your SEO goals. For instance, your domain may have pages that are only in the interest of particular people (i.e., "Your Basket" is only of interest to customers already on your site - no one will Google search for their own or someone else's basket).

Technical SEO is what allows you to control the indexing of your website's pages. A file called *robots.txt* (found in the root folder of your websites) is what controls the pages Crawlers have access to, and thus, index.

Website structure and navigation

A hierarchical structure of your pages is essential to helping Crawlers browse your website with ease, thereby improving your rankings. Unfortunately, many web designers overlook site structure and prioritise the visual appearance of the pages. However, site structure and navigation are equally, if not more important.

A simple rule of thumb to follow: Any page of your website should be easily accessible from the homepage with less than 3 clicks.

URL structure

URLs, also known as *slugs* or *permalinks*, are optimised when they accurately and concisely describe what the page is about. "Good" URLs are easy to understand and clearly identify the focus of the page in question. Consider the below URLs:

- https://www.thisisourexample.com/847/jd/page.html

- https://www.thisisourexample.com/technical-seo

Did you see how much simpler it is to glance at the second URL and understand the page content?

Now, imagine you are a Crawler with millions of other URLs to record - which URL would you prefer?

404 Errors

404 Error pages are the blank pages that sometimes have technical terms an ordinary browser wouldn't understand. As unhappy as users are with these pages, Crawlers feel the same. The difference is that the Crawlers will immediately impact your SERP rankings and SEO results.

In these situations, it's best to redirect users to find what they are actually looking for. This way, you can harness more control over your site and SEO standing.

Page Speed

The reason why SEOs must have a lot of patience is to compensate for the lack of patience of users and search engines. Both search engines and users prefer pages that load quickly.

As an SEO, page speed optimisation can be managed through analysing and adjusting server infrastructure, as well as other factors that contribute to site speed (i.e., file size).

Website security

In addition to speed, users and search engines heavily prioritise and depend on security. An SSL ensures security for users, and is therefore no longer an option.

Mobile-friendliness

Over 60% of search queries now take place from mobile phones. This is a crucial statistic seeing as websites must now have a dual-front: desktop *and* mobile-friendliness.

User experience and mobile-friendliness is prioritised by most search engines under the user experience analysis. In fact, Google has created a *mobile-first index* which caters to mobile searches. This means that Google crawlers may exclude your page from the mobile SERP if it's not optimised for mobile-phone usage.

A simple way of ensuring that your website is optimised for all devices is by simply testing and navigating your website from all devices you have available, and focusing on the navigational and experiential issues (i.e., layout, structure, and legibility) you take note of. In today's economy, this *must* be a routine practice in your technical SEO procedures.

Multilingual websites

Websites that are available in multiple languages require special attention from a specific multilingual SEO configuration.

If you have a page or post that is broken down into a number of pages (due to availability of multiple languages), the multilingual SEO configuration must be applied so that Google can understand that one post is separated into multiple versions/parts.

6. ON-PAGE SEO BASICS

The primary aim of on-page SEO is to communicate the contents of your website to search engines and users.

On-page SEO helps search engines understand the *meaning* and *context* of your page. This mechanism can be broken down into 2 stages:

Stage 1: Optimizing page properties

Stage 2: Optimizing page content

Optimizing page properties

- **Page title**

Page titles have *always* been an important factor when considering SEO. As such, each page on your website must have a distinguishable and unique title. This is essential because the page title is the first element that users see after hitting "Search" on a query.

Some questions to remember when crafting page titles include: how interesting does the title seem? How descriptive is the title of the page? How many recognisable and optimised keywords did you use?

- **Page description (meta description)**

The meta description is a concise summary of the page. It isn't seen on the page. However, it's what users read below the page title when they are interested in knowing more about the page.

The meta description and the page title are the two-step process by which you may convince the user to click through to your site. They should work together, and be keyword heavy to be effective.

- **Main heading (H1)**

The main page heading is different from the previously discussed page title. Referring to HTML code language, the main heading is the <h1> tag of the page. Optimised pages only have one <h1> tag, and the following subheadings belong to <h2> or <h3> tags.

Once again, a hierarchical structure is optimal for both users and crawlers. Adhering to such structures in all site organisations would definitely lend a helping hand to your SEO goals.

- **Images, audio and video**

Diverse webpage content keeps user engagement high. When done correctly, user experience is definitely maximised as a result. However, content that isn't text is slightly more complicated for Google and other search engines to interpret and interact with.

It is read by search engine crawlers to better interpret and index your content, and is therefore a great opportunity for SEO and ranking improvements. Also, these descriptions are read aloud to blind users on a screen reader.

<u>Optimizing page content</u>

Google's mission is to "provide users with high-quality results so that they can come back for more searches". In light of this mission, a popular saying in SEO is "Content is King". This implies and illustrates that the way in which information is communicated and presented on your website is your key to ranking in the SERP.

Although content is primarily interpreted by crawlers, and not by humans, very clear-cut distinctions are made between high and low quality content.

17

High-quality content is:

- Unique to the page, and cannot be found elsewhere on the website, or on another domain.
- Detailed and explains the topic accurately, clearly, and concisely.
- Well-formatted.
- Unbiased.
- Authoritative and credible. This can be achieved through reference to direct experience, data, and research.
- SEO-friendly.

7. OFF-PAGE SEO BASICS

Off-page SEO, or in other words, the credibility of your website, is crucial to your performance in search engine ranking algorithms.

Credibility is built through popularity. In the SEO world, popularity refers to backlinks (references or mentions by other well-known, high-ranking and/or credible pages). This system of mentions is referred to as *PageRank*, and was conceived back when Google and it's algorithm was first introduced by Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

What is a backlink?

As previously mentioned, a *backlink* is a link which connects one domain to another. The website which links <u>out</u> is called the *outbound link.* The website which it links <u>to</u> is called the *inbound link.*

Why are backlinks important? Multiple investigations and tests concluded that web pages with a higher amount of inbound links are preferred by users. Thus, backlinks are undoubtedly accurate representations of credibility.

Link Building

The process of acquiring and accumulating backlinks is called *link building,* and is essential to achieving high rankings in Google.

In the past, webmasters tried to "cheat the system" by creating low-quality websites for the sole purpose of generating additional backlinks to their main website. This resulted in many sub-pars and unoptimised websites reaching the top SERP positions. Today, these *PageRanks* are referred to as *link farms* or *article directories.*

Seeing as Google prioritises user experience above all else, measures and barriers are put in place to ensure that users are protected.

Google Penalties

Backlinks are no longer assessed by the algorithm on just their amount, but their quality also comes into consideration when ranking of a website. As such, websites with "spammy" backlinks are penalized with reduced rankings.

What is a "good" link?

A "good" link can be classified as a link that:
- Is generated without monetary compensation.
- Is found on a related website.
- Is coming from a website that Google already deems as credible (thus, with an advanced and credible *PageRank* of its own).
- Provides additional information and value to the users of the website.

In simplest terms, the best and safest way to link-build is naturally (<u>organically</u>). The issue with this is that high-quality content can still exist on low-ranking pages, and therefore goes unseen. Generating backlinks *safely* to effectively boost rankings can be complex. But it's definitely worth the trouble.

Next Steps

SEO algorithms are constantly changing. Thus, as an SEO, it's essential to change, grow and adapt with it. All this means is that you should always continue learning to ensure your website's consistent growth and rank in the SERP.

It's important to note that SEO is not about "cheating the system". Remember that Google caught up with the link-farmers who tried to outsmart it, and presented them with penalties which can take a long time to recover from.

SEO is about easing the job of the algorithm and its crawlers. This process begins with ensuring streamlining and smoothing out all technical SEO aspects, to make sure there are no bumps in the road. Once we ensure your page can be adequately and easily read by crawlers, we can begin working on page content and features to improve its rankings.

Diversifying digital

VIADUCT
GENERATION

www.seo.viaductgen.com