Chapter 5
Search Engine Optimization: Getting to Google's First Page

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5.1   Google's First Page

You've got an established business, or perhaps, are just starting one. Or you're a professional with highly sought-after talents and you produce successful outcomes for your clients. In either of these scenarios, to market you or your business (they could be the same thing) effectively, in 2015 you're going to have to build a great website. It's pretty much expected—if your customer base/clients can't find you online either using their desktop computer or their mobile device, they're going to assume you don't know what you're doing, and they'll search out someone else.

With the more than 1 billion websites now available (as of August 2016 according to internetlivestats.com), it's critical, downright crucial, to get found if you want your venture to grow, or even survive. And you're going to have to be found on Google's first page at the optimum, or on page two at the least—the very least as you'll see shortly.

In the current environment, people just aren't going to search much past page one. If they don't see you there, they're going to assume they searched using the wrong phrase, and they'll go back to the search bar and try again. But they're not too likely to venture onto page two. If you're on page 3 or beyond, you could just as well be on page 300 for all the good it'll do.

According to recent research, 94 % of searchers do not go past page one—that leaves an incredibly dismal 6 % who dare to explore page two. And it's equally frightening how searching drops off even on the Holy Grail first page. The number one position gets more than 34 % of the impressions, position 10… only 2.7 %. OUCH! And position 20, that dark and lonely place on the bottom of page two… only 0.29 %!

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Position Number One on Google's First page not only gets 34 % of the impressions, but more importantly, it also gets more than a third of all the clicks. That's why it's vital to be on Google's first page, and above the fold, that part of the screen that's visible without scrolling.

In a recent blog post, a gentleman wrote: I use "Google suggest, then top 3 listings. That's how I search, mostly. Sometimes down to result number 5 or 6, depending on the size of the screen. I've heard it said, though, that Page 1 is for information seekers, mostly. Wonder if this has any credence. Either way I don't really care. If a site is not on Page 1, result 1–7, then it has failed. Period."

Pretty sobering, don't you think?

5.2   Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

The new marketing paradigm, marketing your business online, has at its core, visibility. And as illustrated above, pages one and two of a Google Search result is where you need to be seen.

So just how do we get to that digital hallowed ground? Through a process called Search Engine Optimization, more commonly known as SEO. What we want to do is "optimize" our website so that Google will favor us over other similar websites and put ours at, or near, the top of the page when someone does a search. This is also known as SERP—search engine results page.

Google is quite open about what it expects from a website to get it to rank well; in fact, they spell it out simply and clearly in their Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide. By following their Best Practices suggestions, you'll make it easier for the search engine software (fondly referred to as Googlebot or spider) to crawl, index and make sense of your website's content.

The primary goal of the Google search engine is to provide the best possible experience for the user, that person who just made a search or query. And it's pretty easy to understand why Google would want that.

Google wants to be your first, and perhaps only, choice for online searches because when you use them for your searching, you're more likely to see and then click on one of the myriad ads populating those search results pages. That's where Google makes the bulk of their revenue. Each ad placement, whether at the top of the page, bottom of the page, or running down the side, is paid for by the advertiser (yup, each time you click on one of those ads that advertiser just paid Google for that opportunity).

Now that you understand Google's objective, you can see that they want to display those websites that they believe will give the user/searcher the best possible experience. They want websites that best answer the user's query and provide recent and relevant information. They want to display websites with good and useful content, including text, graphics, images and videos. As is commonly said about marketing online, "Content is King."

The process that helps Google determine where your website should rank involves Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Google uses approximately 200 variables/factors in their proprietary algorithm to determine where a website should rank. Obviously, they keep those 200 variables a closely guarded secret, but through testing and observing, the SEO community has been able to discover the most important factors. Let's explore those factors.

5.3 Keywords

Simply put, keywords, and keyword phrases, are those words and phrases a searcher types into the Google Search bar. It may be a single word, though unless it's extremely unique, the search will return results that are much too general. Typically, a searcher will type in compound keywords such as "red leather purse" or "off road tires" when looking for something. Or they may even type in entire sentences or questions seeking results, such as "What do I do if I find out I'm diabetic?" In this example, I'd say the keywords are "find out I'm diabetic."

When marketing online, keywords are THE most important elements for everything you'll do because those keywords/phrases are going to be those words people are typing into the search bar. And you'll want your website to be in the search results they see. Those keywords will drive all of your marketing efforts—websites, blogs, social media posts, image names, link text (also known as anchor text), press releases, forum content and so on.

One of the first and most important tasks you'll need to do is determine the best keywords to use—what are the terms your potential visitor is typing into their search bar. It may not always be what YOU think is best. This is especially true if you use industry jargon and terms not used by the general public.

For example, while the phrase "professional hair-cutting shears" may accurately describe that tool your hair stylist uses when cutting your hair, through keyword research you'll discover that "professional hair-cutting scissors" is searched considerably more often. Using keyword research software, we see that "professional hair-cutting shears" was searched 468 times in a month, while "professional hair-cutting scissors" was searched 1920 times. It's pretty easy to see which keyword/phrase will likely generate the most traffic to a website. That's not to say we won't use "professional hair-cutting shears" but rather we'll concentrate and put more of our efforts on "professional hair-cutting scissors."

You'll want to perform this same exercise for all those keywords and phrases relevant to you, your products and/or services. It's helpful to use a spreadsheet to keep track of your results because you'll be using these throughout your marketing/SEO efforts. Once you've collected your list of keywords, the work begins.

5.4   SEO Ranking Factors

Let's look at some of the more important SEO ranking factors that we have control over.

5.4.1   Site Speed

We are seeing the search engines giving more and more importance to how quickly a website loads—in fact, it's becoming one of the top ranking factors. Be sure to keep images no larger than necessary (they take longer to load than text), and keep ads and content from third-party sites to a minimum. You are often at their mercy for how quickly something may load from their site or server. The slower your site loads, the lower Google will rank your site, all other things being equal.

5.4.2   Title Tag

One of the most important ranking factors is the title tag. Think of it as the title of a book and you can see how important it is. It helps the visitor understand what the page is about, and also helps the search engines index and rank your page. Be sure to write a unique title tag for every page of your website. Again, if you think of it as the title of a book, you'd want a unique and different title for each book to reduce any confusion for your visitor, as well as for the search engines.

The title tag is already familiar to most people—it's that blue line of text you see for each listing on a search results page. That title tag is written behind the scenes in the html coding of a web page. It is highly recommended to have a least one of your major keywords in your title tag, and if possible have it as early as possible. If our keyword/phrase is "dog training" you should write a title tag like this:

DOG TRAINING | Dog Obedience Training | Train Your Dog

Using variations of your keyword phrase is quite effective. You see that we used "Dog Training" and "Train Your Dog," plus a similar phrase "Dog Obedience Training." By using title tags like this, there is no doubt what this page is about. It is recommended to use the pipe (horizontal line) to separate your keywords/phrases, and to keep them in the 65–70 character range.

5.4.3   Meta Description

The meta description is that text displayed below the Title tag and website url in a search result. This presents an opportunity in 160 characters or less to add

information that supports or continues the idea presented in the title tag. Write meta descriptions that inform and interest users. Each page of your website should have its own unique meta description. This text is part of the behind-the-scenes html code in the header of a page and is used by Google to display in their search results.

The meta description is a great place to include even more keyword phrase variations and synonyms. It's a fantastic opportunity (missed by most people) to write compelling copy and offer a call-to-action to get a potential visitor to click on your search result link. If you have space and can't think of anything to add, at least add your phone number to make it easy for people to contact you.

5.4.4 Heading Tags

Heading tags can be thought of as the sub-headings on a web page. They start with H1 and can run up to H6. Each page should only have one H1 tag, but may have several succeeding smaller heading tags. You could have several H2 tags, followed by several H3 tags and so on. Here again, if possible, include a keyword/phrase or variation of it.

One important idea to keep in mind when writing the content for your website is to make it read well.

Resist the temptation to overdo it with keywords and phrases. Your writing should read the way people speak. People are pretty sharp—they'll catch on pretty quick if your writing is too focused on stuffing your content with keywords with the hope of gaining favor with the search engines. And the search engine software is quite smart as well—it is able to determine if you're trying too hard to stuff your content with keywords. If it catches you doing this, you could be penalized rather than rewarded.

If all this sounds challenging—it is. A good and talented Search Engine Optimization expert (also known as an SEO) will work very hard to get your major keyword phrases included in all the necessary places as well as the content on your page, and make it read well all while pleasing the search engines. A good SEO is like a master chef—they have access to the same ingredients you do but are able to put together just the right combinations of ingredients in just the right proportions to make a beautiful presentation. They definitely bring a little bit of artistic talent to the project.

5.4.5 Keyword in URL/Keyword in Domain Name

When possible, it's recommended to include your keyword in a web page's url, especially if you are not able to get a domain name that includes your keyword. Most simple and common (and many not-so-simple or common) domain names are taken—DOGTRAINING.COM for example. But ABCKENNELDOGTRAINING.

COM may be available. Don't go too crazy to try to get your keyword in your domain name, and don't make it too long or cumbersome.

While you may not be able to get a domain name that includes your major keyword, you should include your major keywords in the url of sub-pages, those pages that are not the home page.

Your dog training page's url could be: ABCKENNEL.com/dog-training for example. Follow this example for the remaining pages, such as: ABCKENNEL. COM/obedience-training-school.

5.4.6 Keywords in Body Text

When writing the body text for each page of your site include your keywords and variations throughout the text. Include your keywords early in the text, in the first one or two sentences, and try to finish the page with a keyword phrase or variation. Sprinkle those keywords in following paragraphs, but remember to keep it readable —don't stuff your content with keywords.

Another useful tool is modifying the attributes of the text for those keywords by making the text **bold** or *italicized*. This helps those keywords stand out from the surrounding text making it easier for your users to see what this page is about. The search engines also like those emphasized keywords for indexing your content.

5.4.7 Media

When planning the content for your pages, including images, graphics and videos are useful tools not only for your user, but for the search engines as well.

Images, graphics, and videos are an often overlooked opportunity to make use of your keywords. First, use your keywords when naming your media. For example, an image titled "dog-training-in-park.jpg" is much better than "image1.jpg." The same idea applies when naming graphics used on your site, as well as videos inserted into a page.

Additionally, and especially for images and graphics, be sure to make use of the ALT attribute. This is often overlooked and is a valuable SEO opportunity. The "ALT" attribute allows you to write alternative keyword-rich text for an image or graphic if for some reason it cannot be displayed. You'll see ALT text display when you hover over an image or graphic.

The "ALT" attribute was originally developed for sight-challenged people who would use a screen reader to describe the contents of a web page. The search engines use the ALT text of an image similarly to the anchor text of a text link.

Optimizing your image and graphic filenames and ALT text makes it easier for Google Image Search to understand and index your images. Google will often display images in their first page of search results and you increase your chances of

being displayed when making use of the ALT attribute and keyword-rich image and filenames. This functionality comes and goes as Google sees fit.

5.4.8 Sitemaps

A simple HTML sitemap listing the all the pages of your website can be useful. Think of a sitemap as being similar to a Table of Contents or Index for your user. Include all the important pages of your website and their links. Be sure to organize them properly by subject or category.

You should also create and include an XML sitemap to ensure that the search engines can find and index the pages of your site. Once you've created the XML sitemap, upload it through your Google Webmaster Tools account to inform the search engines. Be aware that the search engines may not indicate that they have indexed every single page listed in your sitemap. For example, you may upload 250 pages/links and the Google may only show that it has indexed 220 pages. Google does not guarantee that they will index all the pages/urls from your website.

5.4.9 Anchor Text

Write anchor text that is useful for your users and the search engines.

Anchor text is that clickable text that is used for links that direct a user to other content or to another page. Well-written anchor text tells your user and the search engines something about the content or page that you are linking to. Here is an example of a well-written anchor tag:

You can see that this is much clearer and more accurately describes the content rather than:

Click Here

"Click Here" offers no value for the user, nor for the search engines.

Make it easy for users and search engines to distinguish anchor text from regular text—typically anchor text links are a different color from the surrounding text, and/or is underlined. This has become the standard for indicating link text.

5.4.10 Social Media

Social media and "social signals" are becoming increasingly important as an SEO ranking factor. Google continues to consider social signals as indicators of the

importance of a website. The different social media platforms Google considers important are:

Google+
Facebook
Pinterest
Twitter
YouTube

Content from these platforms that link to a website improve its SEO rankings.

5.4.11 Backlinking

Links from relevant websites have long been an important SEO ranking factor. Links should be from high-quality sites and the more you have the better.

Google views links from another website as a vote for your site, and considers them a trust factor. You should work to getting links from "authority" websites—websites that are considered reputable and trustworthy.

Google may penalize you for having too many backlinks from completely unrelated websites. Many lazy SEO companies try to game the system by flooding a website with unrelated links. Google may even penalize those sites by deleting all of a website's indexed pages. Links to a website typically come gradually, not all at once, and come from people who have discovered your site through natural processes such as blog posts, press releases, Facebook and Twitter posts, and related articles. Unnatural linking could actually be detrimental to the reputation of your website.

5.5 SEO Done Properly

While not terribly difficult (though not much is terribly difficult when you know all the proper techniques and processes—being a master chef, for example, as alluded to earlier), SEO done properly is a lengthy, complex process. Research can be time-consuming. Creating interesting content for your user that compels them to stay on your website long enough to decide whether they want to develop a relationship with you is time-consuming and may require the talents of a real copywriter. Promoting your website through blogs, press releases, and social media and article sites is also time-consuming. Producing images, graphics and videos to increase the value of your site for both the user and the search engines takes special skills, talents, and possibly large budgets. Developing relationships with other people and websites that like your content and want to share it with THEIR followers takes time, diligence and fortitude. The good thing is that when done

intelligently, methodically, and effectively, getting to Google's first page can be within your reach.

5.6   SEO Case Study

One of my first SEO clients was Eileen Koch who owns a self-named Los Angeles-based Public Relations firm—in fact, she is still a client nearly 10 years later.

Eileen contacted me when the business directory website she was listed with suddenly vanished from Google's indexed pages. We learned later that the owner/developer of the site had tried to "game the system" and that is definitely something Google won't stand for. So Google simply removed that site from its index.

The sad thing is, there really is no reason to break, nor bend, the rules Google lays out. When you follow Google's rules (what they call their Best Practices), a properly optimized website can show up on Google's first page. I know—I've done it more than 60 times.

Eileen needed a new strategy—the business directory had been her major lead generator and had been responsible for many phone calls from prospective clients. Now it was crickets—the phone stopped ringing.

She contacted me, told me of her debacle, and I recommended that we perform an audit of her website. Unfortunately for her, we discovered that there was virtually no optimization done on her website—almost no on-page optimization, and no off-page optimization at all.

Her site couldn't be found in the first 50 Google search results pages. Of this I'm certain—I sat one evening in front of my muted TV with my laptop and literally went through each and every of the first 50 pages and didn't see ANY mention of her nor her website.

In a sense this wasn't a terrible starting point—at least there was nothing we would have to undo. We were working with a fresh website which allowed us to perform a complete optimization. We of course started with an extensive Keyword Research program. Once we compiled our list, we discussed it with Eileen and agreed on which keywords were best, and most relevant, for her business and website. Not only would these keywords/phrases be used as the basis of the optimization campaign, it would be the foundation of all future marketing efforts.

These keywords were uploaded to the meta Title, meta Description, and meta Keyword fields for each page of her site. We made sure to include variations, combinations, and synonyms. We also made sure to include these terms within the 300+ words on each page, and made certain terms bold and/or italicized. Using our major keywords spreadsheet made easy work of developing anchor text intra-site links, as well as inter-site links.

For the next few months we continued to optimize the site until five months later I searched for one of our major keyword phrases, and lo and behold, there we were on the bottom of page one! I couldn't wait to call Eileen to share the good news.

I called her up and asked her to perform a Google Search, expecting her to scream in delight to see her website on the first page. However, she promptly and disappointedly told me she could not see her site listed there. Yes, I said, it's right there at the bottom of page one—I'm looking at it, I see it on my screen.

No, she said, it's not there. I sat there dumbfounded. How could I see it on my screen, yet she couldn't see it on hers? It was then that I learned that a Mac computer running Safari displays different results than a PC running Firefox. We learned why she couldn't see her website on page one, and it wasn't until another few agonizing/confusing/frustrating days that her Mac running Safari displayed her site on page one. EUREKA!

And after a few more weeks, Eileen's site was ultimately #1 for her major keyword phrase, "Los Angeles Public Relations firm."

As of August 2016, Eileen's site is on Google's first page in the fourth position. The number one spot goes to Odwyer's business directory of PR firms. (Directories are very, very difficult to beat. They rank well typically because of their abundance of content, multiple pages and near-continuous addition of fresh, relevant content.)

Eileen's site has remained on Google's first page for over 10 years. A steady trickle of relevant content, intermittent modifications to meta data, and a strategic back-linking campaign can keep a website ranking well, high up in Google's search results.

I hope that your optimization efforts bring you similar results.

Good luck.