

Click Me With Your Best Shot!: Search Engine Optimization

Mary Taylor

CMP 220: Internet Design

Wor-Wic Community College

In a world full of web sites, owners can find their sites eclipsed by ones that are more popular. One method that a site owner can use to gain notice, PPC, or pay-per-click, is a form of advertising. PPC can turn out to be expensive, however, and sometimes the users overlook the advertisements if they are suspicious of it. On the other hand, with the help of a search engine, a web site could gain notice and save money. Large companies, such as Google or Yahoo!, are consistently making changes to their search engine's programming to better serve the users. Through the use of a ranking system and software called "spiders," web sites are displayed in a list in the order of relevance or the site's ranking (Malaga, 2007, Literature Review, para. 1). A report written by Ross Malaga (2007) of Montclair State University found that "62% of search engine users click on results appearing on the first results page and 90% click on results on the first three pages"(Introduction, para.2). If a web site does not make the ranking for the first three pages of hyperlinks for a search engine, the page is not likely to be visited. Through a method called search engine optimization, a web site owner can advance their site in a search engine's standing.

Search engine optimization is a collection of methods used to build a web site to attract the attention of search engines like Google or Yahoo! The first method an author should consider is indexing the website. After all, search engines are "a database of Web pages (called an index); a method for finding Web pages and indexing them; and a way to search the database." (Malaga, 2007, Literature Review, para. 1). Search engines will send out "spider" software to search popular web sites, like MySpace or Facebook, for relevant links and discover new web sites. The idea is to "[get] indexed (and hopefully ranked well) by the search engine[s] quickly" (Malaga, 2009, p. 134).

One method called back linking involves finding ways to get other websites to link to another site. According to Ross Malaga (2009), “All of the major search engines consider back links in their ranking algorithms” ( p. 134). When a user likes a particular web site, most of the time they will share a link to the site with friends, family or the general populous. In some cases the author of a web site will submit the link to other websites to attract attention to the site. When the user is drawn in, the hope is that the user will spread the word and increase site traffic. Numerous links to a specific page generally indicates that the page in question is important or popular. Usually, the more links the user distributes to other web sites, the higher the ranking of the web site in question. Often, the reputation of the site holding the links to another page is taken into consideration as well (Malaga, 2007, Search Engine Optimization, para. 1). If all the links on one site lead to the same site in a repetitive fashion, the site could lose points in its ranking.

However, relying on the user to increase search engine ranking can be tricky and hard to control. Usually, the site’s content and setup is what attracts the user. Even if the user is attracted to the page, they could be careless in how they distribute links. As a result, search engines often take more direct factors into consideration. One method called “On-Site Optimization” can help an author influence the site’s ranking directly (Malaga, 2009, p 134). On-site optimization is one of the first methods an author will use to increase traffic to the site. Using this method to increase a site’s ranking is as easy as adding descriptions to the web site’s code through the meta element or through the repetition of key words in the page being scanned. Generally a search engine displays the title and the meta description when listing the site as a result (Malaga, 2009, p 134). In conjunction with the meta elements, a site may be searched for relevant keywords within the body of the page. Keywords play an important role in a user’s search, so ideally, the author of

the web site should want to make the content of their site meaningful rather than have a paragraph made up of one word to attract attention. The more of one keyword a site has, the higher the ranking of a website can be.

Search engine optimization provides multiple free ways to attract the attention of search engines and its users. However, not all authors of web sites using search engine optimization work for legitimate businesses or good willed people. Some may use search engine optimization in any way that will gain their site notice. In 2009, one politician, Kay Hutchison, hired a company to utilize search engine optimization to gain her campaign site notice. In a November 2009 article about the incident, author Shane D'Aprile (2009) explained:

Standbykay.com was removed from Google's search index after more than 2,000 phrases were found hidden in the site's source code. Among them was the phrase 'Rick Perry gay,' a reference to Hutchison's primary opponent, Gov. Rick Perry. Tech experts say the hidden code was likely an ill conceived attempt to cheat the campaign's website to search engine relevance. Yahoo quickly followed suit and blacklisted the website the day after Google took action. (p.15)

The use of improper techniques to attract the attention of a search engine is called black hat search engine optimization (2010, para. 3). In Hutchison's case, there was a lot of finger pointing and controversy over who made the mistake. However, someone did use black hat techniques to gain her site notice. While the use of these techniques were considered unethical and caused problems with her campaign, the result was relatively harmless.

There are other web site authors that use search engine optimization to harm helpless victims. A user may click on a link on the first page of the search engine and find that their computer is infected by a computer virus. Black hat authors use methods, like cloaking, to trick search engines into placing their sites into places of importance. Cloaking involves content that is, “created specifically for search engine crawlers and is hidden from normal view”(2010, para. 3). A black hat web site author could repeat a keyword repeatedly in white font on white background. As a result the search engine could place the link to the page on its first page of results about sports when in reality the site is a scam designed to steal a user’s financial information. Search engine companies have acknowledged the presence of such sites and most of today’s search engines have algorithms written to discover faulty websites. Companies like Google and Yahoo! keep their methods quiet in order to avoid fake websites trying to work around their algorithms.

While a web site author may not use search engine optimization for legitimate purposes, search engine optimization does advance a web site in a search engine’s ranking. As a result, a web site can gain more attention from the general public. The use of search engine optimization requires creativity and cunning. A web site author has to be cautious when using search engine optimization. A misuse of any of the mentioned methods and the web site could be black listed by a search engine. Regardless, search engine optimization can be beneficial to new websites and new businesses.

## References

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