4 Core Areas of Web Page Optimization

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Well-designed and fully optimized websites are the key to online marketing success for direct marketers. Analytics software can help measure a website's ROI, as well as determine where changes are needed, what content isn't effective, and whether the organization and navigation of the site are optimal. But to fully optimize your Web pages to increase traffic, maximize leads and boost sales, there is more for the marketer to do than log into his analytics application and generate reports.

AREA #1: SEO COPYWRITING

One of the key things about successful SEO copywriting is that the marketer must write for his audience, not search engines. "Too many times we see B2B marketers happy with the fact that they have first-page placement on the SERPs," says David Underwood, president of TopSpot Internet Marketing, in Business.com's white paper titled B2B Search Marketing Strategy Guide: Advice From the Pros. "The problem is that the phrases they are achieving first-page placement with will not deliver the audience they are looking for, thus the ROI will not be there. B-to-B [and all] marketers must realize that more clicks will not necessarily equal success."

Good SEO copywriting places the appropriate keywords throughout the body copy, with the most important also being placed in the front of the page title and headline— but do not stuff in keywords or make what was once well-written content suddenly come across as suspicious and spammy.

"Over the years, the tactic I found that works best is to have the most targeted keywords towards the top of the page and work your way down, like a reverse pyramid," says Internet marketing consultant Wendy Montes de Oca. "The entire page should be keyword-dense, and there can be some repetition, but from my understanding of search engine spiders, they like more organic content. So, what I found that works is to make a list of the top 10-15 keywords and use that naturally, organically and reader-friendly in the content. And, of course, use your top five keywords in the alt, meta and title tags."

Do you want your Web pages to address your audience and attract the attention of search engine spiders all at the same time? Here, from a past issue of *Target Marketing*, freelance copywriter and author Bob Bly shares a simple four-step SEO copywriting process:

1. Keyword research. Come up with a list of keywords and phrases for which you want to optimize the page you are writing. These should be the keywords and phrases people use when searching for your product or service on the Internet.

You can brainstorm what these words might be, then use any number of online tools to find which ones are the most popular. Consider www.wordtracker.com and www.spacky.com.

2. Write the best copy you can. Don't even think about keywords as you write. Concentrate 100 percent on sounding like one human being talking to another about a subject he is enthusiastic about and wants to share.

3. Insert keywords from your list. Do this wherever and as frequently as you can, without disturbing the style, tone, meaning and persuasiveness of the copy. If forcing a keyword disrupts the flow of the copy, don't do it.

For example, on Bly's website, www.bly.com, one line of the original homepage copy read: "Call on freelance copywriter and Internet marketing strategist Bob Bly." Though Bly liked the sound of "strategist," keyword research showed that people search for Internet marketing consultants, not strategists. So he changed the copy to read "Internet marketing consultant."

4. Write keyword-rich meta tags for each Web page. The most important meta tags are the title and description tags. The title tag is what your visitors see at the top of their browser windows when they visit your site, as well as what they see in their bookmark lists. Failure to put strategic keywords in the title tag can result in pages being poorly ranked.

When your website comes up in a Google search, the description tag is what the user sees on the search engine results page. It should incorporate strategic keywords and clearly communicate what you offer, who it is for and the key benefit. Your major keywords also should be placed in the keywords meta tag, though Google pays less attention to the keyword meta tag than to the title and description tags.

If you need a little extra help with step No. 1, you can use paid search to find the best converting keywords for your site. Most marketers have a large number of possible keywords—product names, brands, model numbers, etc.—but good SEO optimizes for a limited set of keywords that deliver the best conversions. Jump-start SEO keyword selection by running paid search campaigns across a broad range of keywords, advises the B2B Search Marketing Strategy Guide: Advice From the Pros white paper.

AREA #2: OPTIMIZING PAGE TITLES

While the creation of website page titles traditionally falls under the umbrella of SEO copywriting, it is an optimization practice that requires its own section to do it justice. Page titles, though sometimes forgotten at the very top of the browser window, are a workhorse for marketers. Not only are they visible in the Web page's title bar, but they are also the headline for the search engine result, giving spiders an idea of what the page is all about. When marketers write their page titles well, they're rewarded with good search engine rankings.

Here are seven best practices from a recent issue of Tipline that breaks down how to improve page titles and thereby optimize your Web pages.

1. Describe. "Think of a page title like the title of a book chapter," says Nick Roshon, natural search analyst for Scottsdale, Ariz.-based digital marketing agency iCrossing. "Your titles should be descriptive of the page's content and communicate to users what the page is all about."

But there's no need to make the page title and content identical. "When writing a blog post or article, your page title does not have to match your article/post headline exactly; however, both should contain the keywords or phrases you are optimizing for," he says. "If you are writing a post on 'Tips for Writing SEO Friendly Page Titles,' you will want to reuse those keywords you are targeting in the page title, such as: 'SEO Optimized Page Titles|How to Write SEO Friendly Page Titles' for your page title.

2. Keep it unique. If marketers create duplicate titles, "basically, you're competing with yourself" for search ranking, says Jeff Jones, senior product manager for search engine optimization firm gShift Labs, based in Barrie, Ont.

3. Put the most important words/phrases in front, in order of importance. "Google will only index up to 80 characters," Roshon says. "So if you have multiple keywords you are targeting on a page and they can't all fit within 80 characters, give some consideration to which keywords are most important to you and which keywords need the most help to rank better, and insert the keywords that best align with your objectives."

4. Keep it short. Because Google indexes up to 80 characters, Jones says page titles that length will be truncated on the search engine results page (SERP). "Google will only display up to 64 characters of your page title in the search engine results page," Roshon says. Marketers should only add characters if they "have a compelling reason to do so," he says.

5. Leave brand words at the end. Jones says marketers are always going to rank OK for their brand names and company names. Roshon agrees, but adds: "A notable exception would be if your brand name is competitive or you have reputation management issues. So be aware of any downsides of this tactic before implementing."

6. Keep formatting consistent. "If you capitalize every word on one page, and separate keywords with a 'l' symbol, then be sure your other page titles also capitalize every word and use a 'l' to separate keyword phrases," Roshon says. "Consider creating a style guide with preferred formatting and tone for page titles if multiple people are writing titles, or you have a lot of titles to write."

7. Pay attention to the analytics. Search ranking is great, but what if no one clicks through? "While it's tempting to stuff your title with as many keywords as possible, users may be turned off when they see your page title returned in the search results if it is too keyword-rich and spammy sounding," Roshon says. "Having nicely formatted, well-presented page titles with your keywords gently and appropriately placed will provide both SEO benefits (better rankings) as well as increased visitors (users actually [wanting] to click on your high rankings)."

AREA #3: OPTIMIZING IMAGES AND RICH MEDIA

Now that your content and page titles have been optimized, don't stop there. It's likely you have images and rich media throughout your website, and they too have opportunities for optimization.

When tagging and optimizing image content such as photos, logos, charts and graphs, Eric Papczun, vice president of SEO and Feeds at Chicago-based search engine marketing company Performics, states in a past issue of *Target Marketing* that using the JPEG format for any images you want included in image search is an essential best practice. The JPEG format is more effective because the search engines have an expectation that GIF images will be used for vector and/or line art, such as graphs and company logos. "JPEG images, on the other hand, are ordinarily used for photographs" and are more effectively picked up by the search engines, he says.

Whether tagging content or images, Papczun says, "Always be focused and pithy with your title tags; never have keyword greed." Remember to lead with the primary keyword whenever possible. He also says it is essential to provide alternate attributes, using text that fulfills the same function of the image, for each image, "so that 'everyone' can 'see' your content, including the search engines." In addition, it's important to remember the algorithmic weight of your title tags; they are just as important as the images and text on your site because they allow the search engines to find those images and boost traffic.

Along with images, Papczun adds that when optimizing video files, marketers should encode them with meta data and surround them with keyword- rich HTML to help ensure they are picked up by the search engines.

In that same *TM* article, Lee Odden, CEO of Spring Park, Minn.-based SEO firm TopRank Online Marketing, explains that when used incorrectly, Flash, Java and AJAX can present an obstacle for search engines. To avoid SEO glitches when using these programs, never create the entire website, including navigation and content, entirely within Flash or AJAX. These tools can work to boost your brand image, he notes, it's just a matter of formatting them correctly when building the website so

they don't damage your natural search efforts. For example, Odden says, "Navigation should be external to any Flash movies. If navigation is handled with Flash, JavaScript or AJAX, then alternative text links to important pages should be published so search engines can find and follow those links."

To effectively design pages that use interactive and rich media elements, always include text content that search engine spiders can find and understand. Odden says, "None of these types of code are bad for SEO per se; it is the absence of text and crawlable links that makes it difficult for search engines to find content and understand what it means for ranking."
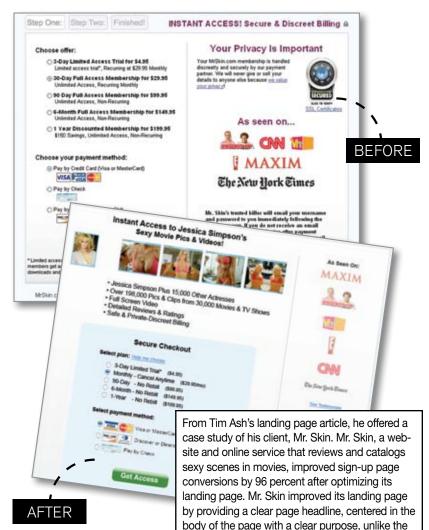
AREA #4: OPTIMIZING LANDING PAGES

Marketers are always looking for a way to increase conversion rates on their Web pages, and one way to do this is to improve the layout of landing pages. Tim Ash, CEO of San Diego-based landing page optimization firm SiteTuners and author of "Landing Page Optimization," noted in an article for *Target Marketing* that there are a number of best practices surrounding registration/sign-up landing pages that marketers can begin to apply immediately.

• **Clear page headline:** Each page on a website (and each standalone landing page) must have a clear purpose, and the purpose must be spelled out in a headline that spans the top of the page.

• **Well-defined "action block":** There should be a single place for the visitor to interact with your page, and that place should be visually called out with a subtle background color. This action block should draw the eye toward the desired activity on the page. The rest of the page should be plain and visually restrained.

BEFORE

AFTER

From Tim Ash's landing page article, he offered a case study of his client, Mr. Skin. Mr. Skin, a website and online service that reviews and catalogs sexy scenes in movies, improved sign-up page conversions by 96 percent after optimizing its landing page. Mr. Skin improved its landing page by providing a clear page headline, centered in the body of the page with a clear purpose, unlike the previous landing page design which simply read "INSTANT ACCESS! Secure and Discreet Billing."

• **Subheadline in your action block:** The purpose of the action block must be clearly stated. What are you asking the visitor to do in the action block?

• **Clear call to action:** Within your action block, you must have a single, clear call to action with wording that is from your visitor's viewpoint, not your company's. Consider, using button text that completes the following sentence: "I want to …" The call to action must describe what happens next and what the visitor can expect when he is done interacting with the action block. It should not be general or generic like the "Continue" or "Submit" text that is commonly used on websites.

• **Well-designed forms:** The form information should be grouped into clear, high-level sections to help the visitor understand his purpose and information flow. Unnecessary fields should be removed from the form. For every field ask yourself, "Is this information absolutely necessary to complete the current transaction?" If you cannot answer "yes" to this question, the field should not be on the form. Don't leave a "nice to have" field on your form or collect information that can be gathered later in your interactions with visitors (perhaps even on subsequent visits).

• **Page purpose tied to user intent:** Your visitor did not materialize out of thin air. He came from somewhere. This "somewhere" could have been another page on your site, a search engine result, a link in a blog post or a banner ad. Regardless of the origin, some expectation had been set. It is critical to match the visitor's upstream experience and intent in order to maximize the conversion rate. To do this, align your page with the messaging and promises made upstream, and create a clear information scent trail that makes the visitor feel that he is making progress toward his ultimate goal.

• **Proper use of credibility and trust symbols:** Unless you have a trusted, worldwide brand, you must overcome the fears and anxieties that the visitor brings with him. Before he will transact with you, he must know that you are trustworthy and credible. Several techniques can be used to do this—testimonials and other "social proof," client or partner company logos, media mentions, and trust seals, such as safe shopping indicators or guarantees that you offer. Although trust symbols are important, their role is supporting, and they should not become an unnecessary distraction that competes with the primary call to action.