

Insider Tips:

10 Essential Steps to SEO Success

Search engine optimization is the process of improving the ranking of a website or a web page within a search engine's results page (SERP). In this white paper we share generally accepted best practices that are used to improve web page rankings.

Typically SEO is considered a marketing function that strives to acquire site visitors and ultimately customers. To do SEO well requires a blend of skills, roles and tenacity. Search engine optimization is an iterative process. Whether you're ready to embark on SEO or enhance your current plan, these steps will assist you along the way.



Step 1: Define the Objective of Your Website

In order to develop an effective website plan, one needs to start with the end in mind. In order to accomplish a goal, the goal needs to be defined. Ask yourself, "What is the purpose of my website"? What are you trying to achieve?

Understanding the objective(s) of your website allows you to develop your overall strategy. SEO is a key component of that strategy. It's vital to identify what it is you want people to be able to do once they find your site, and to make sure the site allows them to accomplish these tasks easily. In addition to driving qualified traffic from search engines your SEO efforts must also include your conversion strategy in order to be effective.

Having a clear understanding of what you want your target audience to do will help you determine what and how to promote your content, and what areas of your site to focus your SEO efforts on to drive traffic and convert.

Ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of your website?
- Who are your audiences?
- What do you want these users to do:
 - Fill out a form/request info
 - Contact you via email or phone?
 - Purchase products and cross-sell?
 - Educate and position yourself as an authority in your market?
- What keywords and natural phrases might someone use to find your content?
- Who are your top online competitors, and how are they set up to drive traffic?
- How might online promotional efforts complement offline/traditional tactics?

Step 2: Write for Users & Search Engines

SEO requires research, analytics, quality content and measurement. Of the things you can control, your on-page content and copy is the most important. Make an effort to understand what search engines value and how to write for the web. This includes your copywriting, your meta data, your imagery and your message. Each page you plan to optimize should be well thought out and include keyword phrases that are relevant and natural to the search process.

Search engines reward sites that have meaningful, quality copy that other sites are compelled to link to. It's no longer a matter of duplicating content from your print ma-

terials – the web is a different medium. People scan, and if they perceive you have content of value, they will read. Be an authority. Develop a tone of voice. And be prepared to modify your content based on how well your message is resonating with your target audience. Quality content is the DNA of a successful website. Further, it is just that kind of quality content and in-depth authority that earns you relevance with search engines. Plan on fresh and updated content often, not only on your website, but your blog, social channels and video.



Step 3: Perform an In-Depth Keyword Analysis

There has been a lot of commentary and speculation regarding Google's algorithm update about the importance, or lack of importance, of keyword research. While certainly not the primary driver of sound SEO preparation, keyword analysis and the process of improving website content continues to play an important role in SEO strategy. The following steps are foundational to the process of identifying sound keyword and content strategies. Keep in mind that this is an iterative process, not a project that is completed after one pass.

Generate a List of Keywords for Evaluation

Keeping in mind your website objective(s), assemble a list of keywords to begin your research. The following sources provide a starting point for keyword identification:

- Develop a list from a previous SEO campaign
- Scan your competitors – how do they structure their content. Is it topical and relevant?
- Leverage the experience your SEO vendor brings to the table
- Survey your clients and customers
- Brainstorm with your internal team

Evaluate and Validate a Revised Keyword List

Once you are satisfied with your list of seed keywords, validate your keyword list against Google Webmaster Tools and other resources. There are many free and inexpensive tools on the market to assist you in your validation. Ultimately your goal should be to uncover what keywords and content your prospects are expecting to find on your site.

Evaluate the Relevance of Keywords

If your content and keywords are relevant and informative, your search results will be more targeted. Looking at your website's architecture, ask yourself, "do I have the pages and/or copy to support my list of recommended keywords?" You may find that your pages don't support the keywords being used to drive traffic to your landing pages and conversion opportunities. It may be necessary to create new pages to support appropriate content and keywords.

In-depth analysis of keywords and calls to action on other sites can provide insights about what competitors are doing to achieve high rankings, to drive traffic and potentially convert users. It also informs information architecture, navigation labeling, the site map, page locations, and the direction for creating new pages.

Search engines continue to evolve; thus the keyword analysis is not an endpoint but instead a start from which we can measure and continually iterate and improve content. By understanding how people search, you can improve your statistical outcomes.

In summary, keyword research remains important for understanding:

- How people search online
- What people are looking for
- How to build and improve your content strategy



Step 4: Add Social Media to Your Mix

Social media channel strategies continue to grow and evolve, and content marketers understand that social channel content most definitely plays a role in search. Therefore it is important to optimize content in these channels as you would optimize web pages.

An additional benefit of keyword research is the opportunity to identify primary, secondary and tertiary keyword groups for both your website and other content channels. While it is true that not all social channels are appropriate for all markets and industries, it's also true that companies need to create profiles with relevant content. Blogs, Pinterest, YouTube and other popular social touch points all play a role in Google, Bing and Yahoo evaluating content relevance from authority domains. Positioning your content in these channels and linking back to your website is a great way to start the process of effective link building and establishing content consistency.

Bottom line, social media is a verifiable marketing opportunity to be considered an authority within your industry. While communicating through these channels presents abundant SEO opportunities, creating profiles that are optimized with great, relevant content is a good place to start.

Keep these social media tips in mind:

- Do not place the same content in each channel. They are different and unique. Use secondary and tertiary keywords in your social channels. Relevant, consistent and appropriate content should be your focus across all user touch points.
- Regardless of whether you actively participate in the most popular social hubs, at the very least refresh your profiles as you would your website.

Step 5: Develop a Great Blog

The best way to underscore your authority on a topic is to write about it and do so on a regular basis. A blog that provides valuable information on a consistent basis serves as an authoritative resource for like-minded users to reference and contribute to. Ensure your message is focused and uses relevant content that an astute and trusted source like your business would use. Some blogs are good, most are not, but a great blog that provides thoughtful and unbiased dialog consistently will eventually emerge as a hub for

value added content. Done correctly and informatively a well written, objective blog should lead to inbound links. These are backlinks from other subject matter experts and domains that have found you an engaging expert on your topic. The result: Quality dialog on topics relevant to your organization, thus creating the authority and content relevance your industry seeks and search engines reward. There are several tools such as BlogSpot and Wordpress to assist with developing a quality blog that can exist outside of your primary website.



Step 6: Build Your Community of Backlinks

Backlinks, or inbound links, are incoming links from one web page to a web page on a different website. Backlinks establish your website as a credible and relevant destination. Strong backlinking can affect how you're ranked in search engines. How do you do this? By creating relevant content, sharing through social media, blogging, and getting your website added to relevant industry directories. Start with basic backlink sources such as press releases, trade associations and directories.

Search engines place significant weighting on the number of websites that are referencing your site. If other sites are referencing your site, then you're likely a source of relevant, quality content. Your in-depth authoritative content earns you relevance. Here are some popular backlinking strategies:

- Offer a useful tool (i.e. a rate calculator)
- Share an infographic, whitepaper, cheatsheet
- Create a "How To" article for your niche with link to instructions
- Create a tips page or a top 10 list
- Write humorous articles, cartoons
- Get ideas from the competition

Step 7: Take Time for On-Site Optimization

Content matters, but there are important "techie" details that can't fall by the wayside. Meta descriptions, meta keywords, SEO-friendly URLs, image alt tags, H1s and H2s are imperative for each page of your website. A good content management system (CMS) will take care of some of this for you, and make the rest easy. Without a CMS, you'll have to depend on your IT department or prepare to dive into your HTML.

1. Create a relevant page title

- Make each page title unique
- Use primary keyword in the title
- Keep it to a max of 70 characters

2. Create a unique page description

Maximum: 140 characters

- Unique for each page in site

3. Use friendly URL's

- Shorter URL's increase click-through
- Use keyword separators (dashes)

5. Optimize your hyperlinks and anchor tags

- Link to your target landing pages
- Use keyword rich anchor text
- Anchor text should describe destination

4. Put captions on images

- Set alt & title tags on all functional images
- Don't place quality keyword rich text in images
- Use keywords in image file names

4. Use heading tags <H1>, <H2>...

The H1 - H6 heading tags are used to format the page and differentiate the heading of a page from the rest of the content. The H1 tag is the most important tag and should never be skipped. Search engines pay attention to the text used in the H1 tag as it contains a basic description of the page.

- Only one <H1> per page
- Only a few <H2>'s
- Outline Structure = Easy to Read and Interpret



Step 8: Develop Meaningful Landing Pages

What is the most important page on your website? Is it your home page? Generally speaking, no. It's an interior destination page that has relevant information your visitor is looking for. Often this page can be buried deep within your site. Appropriately named as landing pages, these pages are where your visitors likely land directly from a search engine results page, or SERP, a linkback from another site, an email or online promotion, a social media post, etc..

Some things to keep in mind when optimizing your landing pages:

- Have a specific purpose or message
- Limit your content to one topic or group of related topics
- Use your keywords and phrases
- Plan a good conversion on-page or provide a funnel to your conversion page
- Think about your visitor and give them exactly what they're looking for. Do this and you'll likely improve your search engine ranking for this page.

Step 9: Don't Forget to Optimize Your Assets

Search engine optimization is similar to P.R. in that it can be considered earned media. Unlike advertising or Pay-Per-Click (PPC) campaigns where you can guarantee placement if you're willing to pay for it, SEO is about doing everything you can to earn incremental results. This includes optimizing digital assets, such as PDF's and video.

Optimizing Your PDFs

In addition to providing keywords in the file name and separating words with hyphens (Northwoods-SEO-Whitepaper.pdf), here are 5 ways to optimize your PDF's for SEO:

- Create your PDF in a text-based program, such as MS Word so crawlers can read and index the content
- Follow SEO best practices when writing your content: Use H1 and H2 tags in copy, use alt-tags in images and keywords in your content
- Crawlers can read links in a PDF, so include links back to your site in case users come across the PDF via email or social channels
- Save the PDF file with a relevant file name (with keyword(s) if possible) so that users can readily identify the subject matter
- Remember to complete the document properties, such as the document Title, Author, Subject, and Keyword fields. The Title field will appear in search results. If left empty, search engines will auto-fill it with content from the PDF, which will likely be less relevant. The subject field is similar to the meta description, which if written for your users can help drive conversions.
- PDF's should not replace content on the page.
- Make sure to identify the link to the document with the standard PDF icon.



Optimizing Video

There are a multitude of tips to consider. Here are a few tips that will provide you incremental but important value in planning your video strategy:

- Provide compelling and quality content. This sounds obvious, and it is. However, quality also pertains to high production value. Video quality can be directly associated with viewership, or lack thereof.
- Have a delivery strategy. Depending on the number of video clips, make sure to consider how your video will be served and consumed. For instance, currently Flash based video cannot be easily viewed on numerous devices, such as tablets and smartphones.

Step 10: Measure, Analyze & Refine

There are a variety of free and licensed tools to assist you in understanding the performance of your content marketing efforts. Google Analytics and Webmaster Tools are free tools available for anyone intending to build and operate an effective, content rich website. Understanding how to use the data provided by these tools is vital for sustaining and improving your SEO campaigns. Analysis of this data will provide insight into your visitors' behavior and the ongoing variables you need to moderate and adjust your website for continued success.

Google Analytics

Understand how your pages are positioned:

- Identify which pages on your site your visitors are entering on.
- Measure the length of time visitors are spending on a page and on your site.
- Identify where your visitors come from.
- Determine what devices are being used to access your content.
- A host of other evaluations, such as conversions, user funneling, goal tracking, and much more.

Google Webmaster Tools

Google Webmaster Tools is an extension of Google Analytics and is useful for advanced analysis and monitoring of site performance. Features of Webmaster Tools include:

- Track the number of impressions and their position in Google.
- View the number of links to your site.
- Receive diagnostic information regarding broken links and URL errors.
- Have your site verified; submit your XML sitemaps for Google to index.
- If you are redesigning and relaunching, redirect your old pages to the new URLs.

Google offers a variety of additional services that can help you with conversions and user behavior, such as A/B testing, heat maps and more.



Conclusion

Today's consumers and businesses turn to search engines for research and purchasing decisions. Providing the relevant content your prospects are seeking within the structure that search engines require is an essential part of any online strategy.

Take the steps discussed to boost your SEO rankings:

- know your objective
- use the right keywords
- provide authoritative content
- reach out and join the online conversation through social media
- get others talking about you
- optimize your site and assets
- market & measure

It's not a sprint, it's a marathon.

Remember, your SEO efforts take time and tenacity. There's no instant gratification, but taking the right steps can improve your rankings over time.

Can we help you? Northwoods provides complete SEO services and consultation.

Contact us for a review or analysis.

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