kleidonwhitepaper #5

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Search Engines: How Do You Rank?

Search Engine Marketing Begins with Getting on the Radar

Millions search but how many find your company? Search, or SEO (Search Engine Optimization), is no longer optional. People expect to Google you. SEO is also no longer a one-time activity best relegated to your favorite geek. Today, search needs to be part of your overall marketing strategy. That's why you'll see a new acronym, SEM, or Search Engine Marketing.

Five Ways to Optimize Your Web Site

The steps listed below describe the process we use at Kleidon for organic search. These steps have been very successful in pulling sites out of obscurity and achieving high rankings. Use them as a checklist whether you manage SEM in-house or through consultants.

While SEO research is always informative, it is crucial when you are redeveloping a site. It will guide that redevelopment. If you are always tweaking your site, you can begin improving its search performance anytime. Each of the steps below is identified as best done before site development, during it, or on an ongoing basis.

1. Do Research. Optimizing a site begins with researching keywords. Analytics can tell us what words users actually key in when they search for services or products like yours. There are often surprises in the words searched and sometimes critical insight into the best keywords and even into consumer thinking.

A skilled researcher can look at your competitors' sites, noting which companies are achieving the best ranking, and then "go behind" the search results to see what keywords those sites use. This is best done before your new or revised site is developed.

2. Shape a Search-Engine-Friendly Site. Armed with keyword research, we embed keywords in the copy, use the keywords in page titles, alt tags and meta tags, and write meta descriptions for each page of the site. This step is done during the development of the site.

It is also important to avoid "invisible" elements. Search engines cannot "read" certain things, such as graphic elements or embedded Flash. We advise you on elements to avoid

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and design sites with this in mind. For example we generally use HTML to make navigation links visible to search engines. Be sure that anyone working on your site is well versed in ways to make the text in a site available to search engines.

3. Use Information and Links to Upgrade the Site. Search engines operate on the idea that useful sites should rank higher. Among the factors that determine usefulness are

- Incoming links
- Outgoing links
- Information of general use, rather than strictly sales information
- Regularly updated information

Adding valuable general information is a good strategy, as is making changes often and adding news whenever possible. Search engines assume that other sites link to your site because your site has value to users. Your outgoing links also show that you are connected. We advise you of ways to add information and maximize linking. This is done during and after development.

4. Alert Search Engines. When the site is complete and has gone live, it has to be submitted to search engines. Some SEO firms miss this critical last step. It's like doing your taxes, then not sending them in to the IRS.

5. Alert Online Directories. Depending on your industry, there may be 20, 30 or even more free, online directories that can link to your site and feed traffic to it. We locate appropriate online directories and submit the site to these.

The Test/Optimize Cycle

The steps listed above can make a site search-engine friendly, but search results are ultimately the province of the search engines themselves. If your first efforts are not adequate, we can suggest more aggressive steps in enhancing the site.

Great, Good, Gone. Even if your site achieves spectacular success, your results will not be permanent. Your ranking could slowly erode as new sites emerge, or it could change dramatically if your competitors actively try to seize your position. To avoid or combat this, consider a monthly, quarterly or semi-annual program of optimization monitoring and maintenance.

Market Research at Your Fingertips. Whether or not your ranking is "attacked," the analytics in optimization maintenance reports provide essential information about who is visiting your site, which pages they visit, when they visit, etc. Pairing analytics with content management allows you to test offers, messages, visuals and response mechanisms as never before. This combination eclipsed focus groups, A/B advertisements or direct mail and other older methods of testing, and at costs that make an active test/optimize cycle available to almost any company.

Beyond Organics: Paid Search. Among the more aggressive methods of enhancing search is paying for position. In some highly competitive fields or for faster results, you will want to start with paid search right out of the gate. The possibilities for paid search include, but are not limited to the following:

- Pay-per-click listings
- Paid online directories. Think of these like paying for yellow-page listings. There are endless permutations with prices to match. In many fields, there are also some that are quite reasonably priced – in the $20 - $50 /year range.
- Banner ads
- Third-party feeder sites
- Your own micro sites and/or landing pages

Optimize, Optimize, Optimize

Almost all changes to content, including event calendar updates and employee news, offer opportunities for optimizing. You will need writers skilled in optimizing to generate updates with writing, photography uploads and any design changes required to accommodate these. At Kleidon, we also initiate blogs and post entries on an ongoing basis, write or edit articles and write press releases for web only. We optimize all of these with embedded keywords and alt tags. We also are aware of how search engines "read" text to optimize the position of keywords.

The Care and Feeding of Online Traffic

Another useful strategy on several levels is to develop separate, microsite(s) that drive traffic to your site. These can focus on key products or tie to events and thus capture additional searches. They can be useful for geotargeting, by putting the location right in the URL. Blogs and micro sites can be packed with keywords and can drive traffic to the main site. Think of social media as third party referrals, another source of web traffic.

Regardless of your need for an active program of changes or feeder sites, your site will need some changes. These can be done in-house with much greater ease than ever before with one of today's Content Management Systems. If you do not wish to manage such changes in-house, look for a consulting firm like Kleidon with strong writing and online skills. The firm can provide everything you need or act as a back-up only when changes are needed at more complex levels.

Staying on Top

The steps listed above can make a site search engine friendly and can help your company maintain healthy search engine ranking. Now consider how this fits into your overall marketing strategy. Integrating your online and offline marketing can open doors, keep you in touch as customers shift their communications and buying patterns, and give you more customer information than ever available before.

Kurt Kleidon tweets about breaking news in marketing. Follow him at www.twitter.com/kleidon.. Meet him and others at Kleidon on LinkedIn.com or at our new website, www.kleidon.com. This is one of a series of white papers from Kleidon. To comment or access a previous issue, contact us at 330.666.5984, write info@kleidon.com or visit our website.