



# MARKETING TOOLBOX

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## WHAT IS GOOD SEO ANYWAY?

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of ensuring a website is not only visible to search engines, but appears as high in the resulting ranked list of results as possible when users input a search term. Good SEO results in more potential customers finding your website.

Over the past few years, Google has been advancing its search algorithms in favour of good, 'white hat' SEO. It has also applied rules that specifically penalise 'black hat' SEO; deceptive techniques to improve rankings, such as hidden text and link spamming across the web.

White hat developers and content producers should aim for a well-built website with high quality, original content, social integration and good links to other relevant sites. Recent search engine developments have demonstrated that any black hat methods for artificially raising

search engine ranking will quickly backfire, resulting in a site ban.

### RULE ONE

**If your users love your site, so will the search engines.**

### CREATING A WEBSITE OPTIMISED FOR SEARCH ENGINES

Search engines send out small programmes, called spiders or crawlers, which constantly search the web and index its content. New websites can be registered with the main search engines; Google, Bing, and Yahoo! to ensure they are found and indexed quickly.

When building a website and creating content for it, developers should focus on several factors to ensure good SEO is supported from the outset. A search engine assesses each website for usability and usefulness using sophisticated algorithms that function by checking for specifics, which include:

- ✓ **Structure;** search engines do not crawl pages more than three 'deep' from the site's root directory. Good use of navigation will ensure all pages are indexed and can be found by both real users and crawlers. Page size and structure is also relevant. Content higher up each page has more weight than content further down.
- ✓ **Technical accuracy;** good quality coding is essential, and 301 redirect pages and a site map are required to ensure visitors always reach their intended destination on content pages. Broken links and overuse of frames are penalised. Server downtime and the page response time also have high SEO impact, so a reliable web host is important.
- ✓ **Meta Tags;** these hidden text elements provide important information to search engines. Both the site itself and each web page should include a title, a description and keywords.
- ✓ **Keywords;** a set of words or phrases that are most likely to be input by users into a search engine to find the specific content on each page. The more specific these are, the better SEO they will deliver. It is important to ensure that keywords in meta data do indeed match the content on the page or the site will be considered spam. Using keywords in the headings and page URL also adds to positive SEO.
- ✓ **Headings and highlighted text;** search engines seek out terms of emphasis that give weight to the words within them. Including an H1 header, sub headers and bolded text helps readers make sense of a piece of copy more rapidly. Headings should use keywords where possible and faithfully describe the content.
- ✓ **Content;** the content must be original and discuss the subject which the page and the web site claims to be about. Search engine crawlers assess keyword density, proximity and placement and have the ability to recognise and penalise unnatural or irrelevant copy.
- ✓ **Inbound links;** links on a page pointing to other pages or external content should use descriptive anchor text. So, rather than using a word such as 'Link', describe what that link leads to, preferably using keywords, then stretch the link across the phrase.
- ✓ **Back links;** the number and quality of links on other websites pointing to your site add positive SEO. However, spam linking is a well-known 'black hat' method that is heavily penalised by Google. Make sure any links back to your site are from legitimate, relevant or popular websites and, if at all possible, create reciprocal links.
- ✓ **Accessibility;** to ensure a site is accessible to blind readers it is important to include descriptive 'Alt' text to all images. This also allows Google's Image Search to find and catalogue each image.
- ✓ **Freshness;** recently updated pages and links add positive SEO to a site. So, the more often you add new content, the better. Social

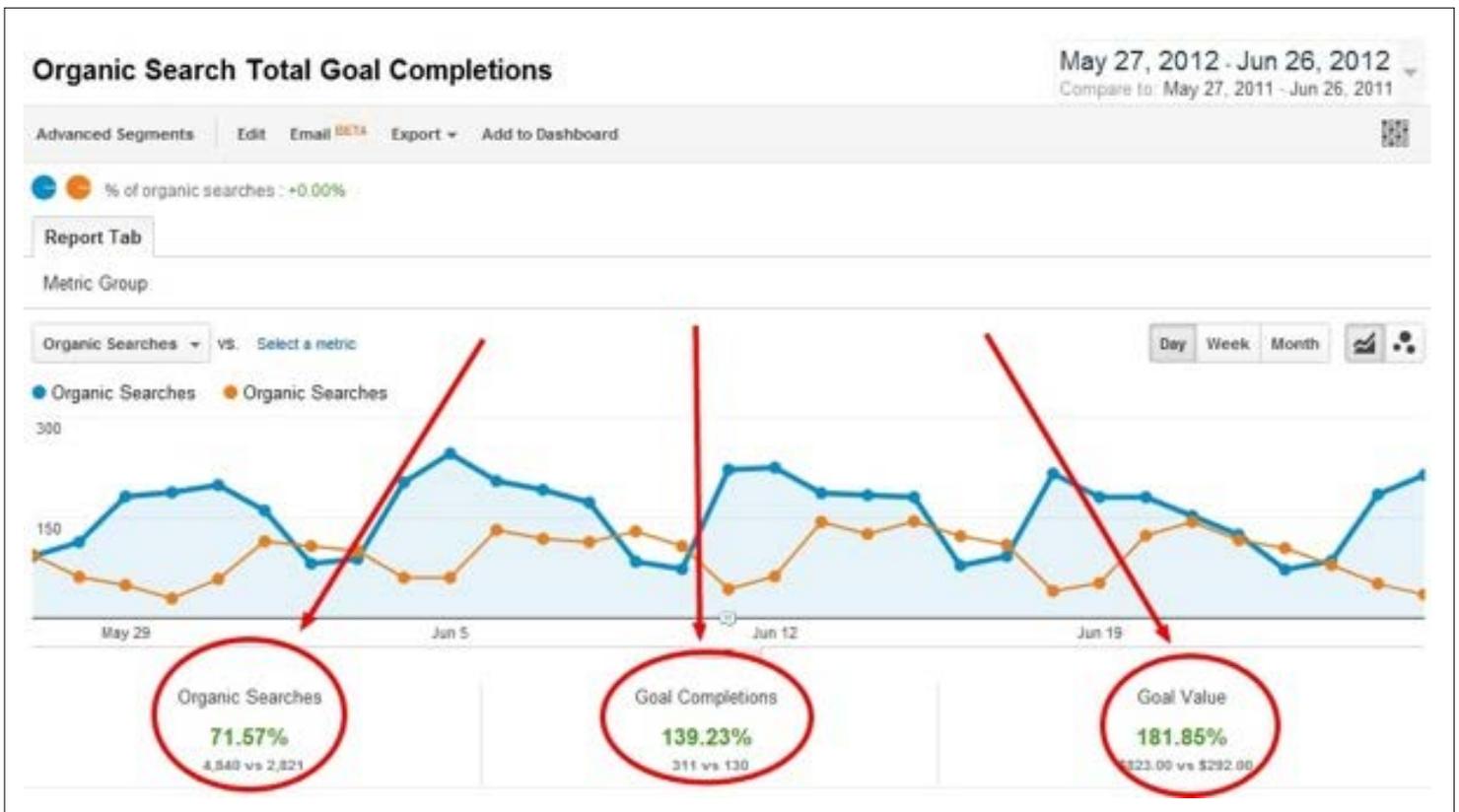
content such as blogs and twitter feeds are a popular method for ensuring a regular flow of both new content and fresh links.

- ✓ **Popularity;** increasing the number of visitors to your site, how long they stay, and how many links they click, will also improve your search engine ranking.
- ✓ **Location and contact information;** Google maps looks for place names in headers, keywords and site descriptions so including geographical details can increase your search engine visibility. Email details included on a web page should be domain specific or they may be considered by search engine crawlers to be spam. For example, my website is www.for-content.com so it is important that my email address uses the same domain; sarah@for-content.com

## MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF SEO

Attempting to track page ranks to assess SEO success is rather futile. Ultimately, you are not interested in how well your page ranks. You are looking for increased traffic to your site. You are hoping that visitors are interested in your products or services. You want their buy in. Site traffic and sales leads are therefore key performance indicators for good SEO.

Use Google Analytics and Webmaster Tools to measure, record and analyse site traffic. Segment incoming traffic using the built-in advanced segmenting reports, then compare non-paid search traffic with another time period (year on year, or month on month). Filter out branded phrases, such as company and product names, using Webmaster Tools as these are unique, so searches based around brand names have no





reflection on SEO. You are looking to measure organic visits.

## UNDERSTANDING GOOGLE ZOOLOGY

As Google evolved, new updates were released which have changed the landscape of search engine performance. In February 2011, Google introduced the Panda update penalising sites with content copied from other sites. April 2012 saw the launch of Penguin, which penalised sites using black hat ranking techniques. More recently, in September 2013,

Google Hummingbird improved Google's natural language processing and semantic understanding. This also gave social signals greater impact on search results.

## QUALITY CONTENT AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION FOR CUSTOMER CONTENTMENT

These updates mean that Google is now sophisticated enough to be difficult to fool. As a search engine's ultimate aim is to find the best quality content that most accurately matches the search terms input by users, it is now simple common sense to aim to produce just that.

Priority number one should be to write content that people, and in particular your customers, want to read. By making content easy to find, quick to assess, enjoyable to read, visually pleasing and within an environment that offers both additional information (in the form of quality links) and social context and commentary, you will automatically be increasing your search engine ranking. More to the point, your reputation for providing useful or interesting information will increase return visits and enhance site popularity, which will not just increase your SEO, but will ultimately bring you more customers. ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sarah Lawton** is a UK based content marketer and social media expert. With a passion for communication, new technologies and top quality content, Sarah encourages SMEs to make the best use of both traditional and online solutions. For further information or advice, please contact: [sarah@for-content.com](mailto:sarah@for-content.com) and see [www.for-content.com](http://www.for-content.com)