

Random Thoughts

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September 2010

TECHNOLOGY • MARKETING • COMMUNICATIONS

Part 2: 5 Steps to Profitable Search Engine Optimization (And 2 Things to Avoid)

This is the second of a 2-part article that explains the basics of search engine optimization. In developing a search engine optimization strategy, it's essential that you balance the needs of human

visitors with those of the search engine. That balancing is what we'll consider today.

The first 3 steps described in the previous article dealt mainly with identifying the most powerful terms to meet your site's needs. So now you have what is probably a long list of terms, maybe hundreds.

You might be tempted to select the terms with the largest number of searches, but that's exactly the wrong approach.

4. Find the Winners

Google's Keyword Tool returns a number with each search term. The number represents the quantity of searches conducted monthly for each term. You might be tempted to select the terms with the largest number of searches, but that's exactly the wrong approach.

What you need to know, beyond the number of monthly searches, is how many websites have been optimized for each term. One powerful clue about the terms a site has been optimized for is whether or not the website uses the term in one or more of its page titles.

This is where the real drudgery comes in. You'll perform a Google search for each of your prospective terms by using a special Google instruction "allintitle".

Google may interpret your searches as "automated" and stop offering results after you've entered 15 or 20 terms to search. All you can do is come back later and continue. This process could easily take days or even weeks.

In the end, you'll have a list of possible search terms, how many times the term is searched for each month, and how many sites have been optimized for the term.

The key is to establish a ratio between the number of times a search is conducted for the term and the number of pages that have been optimized for that term.

The point of this exercise is to identify terms that are popular as search terms but are not used on a lot of sites. So the perfect search term would be one that has 1,000,000

searches per month but occurs on only 5 sites. Don't expect to find one of these.

My formula: $10(\text{Monthly Searches}/\text{Websites})$

The higher the number, the more promising the search term. For example, "auto industry data" has only 73 searches per month, but only 30 websites are optimized for the term, so that yields 24.33.

On the other hand, Google says there are 15 thousand searches per month for "data collection", but those 15 thousand searches are chasing 276,000 pages, so that term yields a paltry 0.54 using my formula.

Keyword	Searches	Pages	Ratio	Notes
[reynolds dms]	36	41	8.78	
[auto dealership accounting]	58	80	7.25	
[auto dealer parts]	140	237	5.51	
[dealer specialties]	1900	3,550	5.35	
[auto advertising]	2400	4,940	4.86	
[data normalization]	1900	4,370	4.35	
[automotive data]	480	1,440	3.33	
[dealer track]	2900	16,600	1.75	
[auto industry information]	58	334	1.74	"auto industry data" - 22 sites
[automotive data services]	110	775	1.42	
[automotive management]	4400	34,500	1.28	
[ro data]	1000	7,860	1.27	
[dealertrack]	12100	102,000	1.19	
[auto soft]	1900	20,300	0.94	
[reynolds and reynolds]	9900	145,000	0.68	
[automotive industry analysis]	880	14,200	0.62	
[automotive advertising]	1600	28,600	0.56	

You'll want to review the terms and select the ones that are most applicable to the business you're promoting on the site and have the highest numbers.

When you've identified the most promising candidates, it will be time to put on your creative-writer hat.

Step 5: Modify the Website

This step involves the most critical balancing acts.

Although the search terms need to be used on various website pages, it's equally important not to overuse them. And although it's important that the words be used in a way that helps the search engine, it's equally important to use them in a way that help site visitors.

Each page in a website can be optimized individually and it should be. Generic optimization, an attempt to optimize every page in the website for the terms that seem most promising, won't work for the search engine or site visitors.

Here's why: The search engine will treat each page of your site the same, so it won't know that the page on which you discuss *repair order data* differs in any way from your page on *dealership accounting data*.

That's equally bad for visitors, who may be directed to the accounting data page instead of the repair order page. Ultimately, it's bad for you, too, because visitors won't stick around searching through your site for the right page. We expect to be directed to the right page the first time.

Google pays a lot of attention to what's in the page title, so each page should have words in the title that reflect clearly what's on the page.

Google also pays some attention to the actual name of the file, so instead of naming the page that holds information about your ability to provide repair order data "data3.html", it would be wise to consider naming the page "repair_order_data.html".

Did you know that Google's search engine ignores punctuation? This is important because you can use periods, colons, and dashes to separate terms knowing that Google will combine them for a search. Being clever and creative can effectively yield 2 or more search terms in a single string.

Take care not to repeat search terms too much. Some people create hidden text and repeat the search term dozens of times in the mistaken belief that this will make the page more visible to the search engines. Wrong! When Google's search algorithm notices, and it will notice, your page will be ranked lower or removed entirely from the results.

Two Things to Avoid

If you've researched search engine optimization, you've probably encountered a recommendation to include the meta_tag "keywords" in your Web pages and to fill this with your important words. That might have been good advice years ago, but not today.

No current search engine pays any attention whatsoever to the keywords meta tag. Sites that I developed a decade or more ago contained keywords, but sites that I've created recently omit them.

This warning doesn't apply to the *description* meta tag, though. The 200 to 500 words you write here won't be seen by visitors, but they will be used by many search engines. So be sure to create a description for each major page.

The second thing to avoid, as I mentioned in the first article in this series is anyone who offers to get you into "Google's Top Ten". The people who make these offers are almost always spammers, which should tell you something about their business ethics.

Beyond that, what they will do—assuming they do anything at all after taking your money—is this: They will create a search term so hopelessly convoluted that nobody will ever use the term. They'll then salt your pages with this unusable search term and, because your site is the only one with pages that use this term, they'll prove to you that your site will be on the first page when somebody searches for that term.

The problem is that nobody will ever search for that term. **β**

Delete Doesn't

Most people know that deleting a file doesn't really remove it from the computer. The file is simply "moved" to the Recycle Bin. And that's not quite entirely true, either. The file stays where it was and its location is noted as the Recycle Bin.

Many people think that when you empty the Recycle Bin, the file is actually removed from the computer, but that's not the case, either. It's still there. The file is marked as deleted, but recovering it is a relatively trivial exercise. That's why the military specification for securely eliminating data calls for the physical destruction of the disk drive. But you probably don't need measures quite that extreme.

There are times when you should be sure that data is actually gone from the computer, though. Before you sell, donate, or give away any computer or device that can store data, you should use a secure-erase tool because even formatting the drive doesn't eliminate the old data.

Eraser is a security tool for Windows that obliterates sensitive data when you delete it, not by moving the file to the Recycle Bin but by writing selected patterns to the areas of the disk where the file resided. It works with any version of Windows from XP (with service pack 3) through Windows 7, both 32-bit and 64-bit versions.

And it's free. The open-source code is released under GNU General Public License.

You probably have some files on your computer that you would prefer not to share with others. If you bring files home from the office to work on, would the remnants on your computer's hard drive be a problem? Have you ever written passwords to a plain-text file? Are you planning to sell your old computer or donate it to someone? There are people who buy old hardware from anyone who's selling it just to see what they can find.

Eraser eliminates this security problem and it does so with ease. After you install Eraser, you'll notice two changes: First, a new icon will appear in the Tray. That's because Eraser is always running so that it's available whenever you need it. Second, you'll have an Eraser option from the context menu when you right-click any drive, file, or directory.

Eraser uses an algorithm devised by Peter Gutmann and Colin Plumb that writes a series of 35 patterns over the region to be erased. When it's finished with the file, directory, or drive you told it to erase, the data will be gone. Use with care!

You can download Eraser from <http://eraser.heidi.ie/>. **β**

