Why information professionals should care about web search optimization

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Abstract:
The essence of web search optimization is getting noticed, having your web site
show up at the top of web search engine results. As web information has grown
and changed, search engine optimization (SEO) has had to keep pace.
Information professionals looking at web site optimization should keep several
things in mind. To effectively promote information web sites, you must
understand how SEOs operate, what search engine marketing (SEM) entails,
and how search engines rank results. On the other side of the coin, it is important
to know how optimization efforts affect web search results. You may want to
research an industry, but the SEOs want you to buy products that that industry
manufactures. Two different agendas masquerading as web search. In the past
decade, the notion of web search as research has, in fact, been subsumed into
web search as advertising and marketing channel. Web search engines, rather
than acting as research tools, have become advertising vehicles.

Web search optimization

Getting your site to the top of the charts so that you get more traffic—that's what
search optimization is all about. A well-optimized site will be readable to search
engines and emphasize relevant content. Search engine optimization is a new
field—the first articles began showing up in the literature only in late 1998.
ONLINE magazine, for instance, published an article by Chris Sherman in its
November/December 1998 issue that touched on the concept, deeming it an
innovation. Since the web itself is not all that old, and web search engines even
younger, it is unlikely that any of today's information professionals decided, as
children, that their future job prospects lay with web search optimization.
Because it is such a young discipline, it is constantly evolving and changing. Tips
on how best to optimize your site can quickly go out of date, as the algorithms
search engines use to determine relevance are tweaked and fundamentally
altered.

To understand SEO, it is first necessary to define a few of the basic terms and
concepts.

Paid inclusion or Pay for inclusion (PFI): You pay for your site to be included in a search engine's index. This doesn't necessarily improve your ranking, although many critics claim it does for certain search engines. It definitely guarantees that your pages will be spidered.

Paid placement or Pay for placement (PFP): You pay for a link to your site to be included in a results page. These usually show up as a Sponsored Link rather than in the results listing.

Cost per click (CPC): You pay for sponsored links or for paid inclusion links based upon the number of times searchers click on the link.

Bidding: You bid on keywords, either through an automatic process or a fixed bid, stating either your highest limit on payment for a keyword or the exact amount you will pay. The placement of your ad in conjunction with the keyword goes to you if you are the highest bidder.

Submission: You use a form, or hire a company, to submit your web site to search engines for spidering. It is important to ask which search engines your site is being submitted to—it could be a selection of minor, small engines that few searchers use, in which case, it is not a productive exercise.

Organic optimization
It's also important to distinguish between paying for placement and simply designing a site that is optimized for recognition by the search engines. A newer term for this is organic optimization. Organic optimization is what most educational and non-profit institutions will opt for. It's unlikely, for example, that a university library would pay for placement or bid on a keyword such as "economics" to buy advertising space for their economics collection. Organic optimization looks at design elements, information architecture, site structure, metatags, keyword placement and frequency, headings, and the actual text on the pages. No money goes to the search engines from the optimizer. This is much more in line with what information professionals are accustomed to doing.

Looking at language, particularly for international optimization, includes thinking about alternative terms and languages that would appeal to searchers. Check your log files to see what keywords searchers are using to end up at your site. Add those words as metadata if they aren't already there. It is best to avoid acronyms, since they can have multiple meanings that confuse rather than edify. At the very least, metatags and titles should be translated into the most likely languages to drive traffic to your site.

Usability and SEO
Many of the techniques of organic optimization are identical to those advocated by web site usability experts. If a web site is easy to navigate for your users, it stands a better chance of being spidered by search engines. Text is important.

Content should be concise and easy to scan through quickly. People don't expect to read entire doctoral dissertations on web pages—and spiders don't like long blocks of text either. Proofread your text. Misspellings not only destroy your site's credibility with users, they are a danger signal to search engines. Consistency with fonts, color patterns, and navigation elements not only please search engines, your users will thank you. Both Darlene Fichter's INTRANET LIBRARIAN and Kim Guenther's WEB SITE MANAGEMENT columns in *ONLINE* have many helpful hints regarding usability. Make sure you become familiar with the guru of usability, Jacob Nielsen, whose web site [www.useit.com] is filled with helpful hints.

A few usability elements are unique to computers. Java script and splash pages may annoy your viewers, but humans can understand what's going on. Computer can't—a spider confronted with moving, colorful images will not index your page. The same holds true for pages that require password access. Anything that would consign your site to the realm of the hidden, invisible web will also destroy its optimization chances. Not only won't it show up at the top of the charts, it won't show up even 10,000 down in the results list. If you're aiming for optimization, make your site visible.

Search engines' determination of importance and relevance, excluding the paid placement sites, is largely a matter of popularity. Most well known is Google's Page Rank technology, which combines a reckoning of how many other sites link to a site and the quality of those sites linking to the site, to decide on its importance. Added to Page Rank are matching algorithms that scrutinize another 100 or so elements on web pages to further streamline the process. Optimization strives to enhance link popularity to raise rankings.

Internal SEO
When it comes to internal access and optimizing search engines, slightly different principles and practices prevail. You can use some of the payment techniques without actually paying any money. Internally, the university library wants to optimize its pages for students; the corporate information center wants employees to see its pages before they turn to an external web search engine. Tweaking the search engine to move library and information pages to the top of an internal search requires breaking some of the rules implicit in external search. Popularity is frequently not the best gauge of relevancy for internal search.

It helps to befriend the IT department. It's the IT staff who can modify search engine algorithms, essentially biasing internal search results in favor of the library and information department. Although we deplore advertisers and marketers preventing us from seeing clean results when we search externally, within an organization, the rules are different.

Don't, however, jump to the conclusion that your site is not properly optimized before you use common sense. Take the story of the university where the word

"library" was so frequently searched, the search engine decided to make it a stop word. Any search for "library" inevitable failed. When the Webmaster removed "library" from the stop word list, the library's home page achieved optimization.

Search engine optimization and relevant research results
From the researchers' perspective, it's important to recognize how SEO activities affect external search results. As search engine companies look for ways to monetize searching, researchers must be careful that relevancy of results is not twisted by advertising concerns. A *Business Week* article ("Web Searches: The Fix Is In" by Ben Elgin, October 6, 2003) found that paid inclusion can radically improve rankings. This research indicates that search engines are not dispassionate, disinterested, or unbiased. A search on Yahoo or MSN is not synonymous with a search on Dialog or a library catalog.

Google takes the high ground on this issue, carefully labeling its paid inclusion and pay for placement sites as Sponsored Links. This begs the question of whether ordinary searchers know that Sponsored Links translates to Advertisement. Many don't. Most search engines today use similar language to identify PFI and PFP sites. Yahoo calls them Sponsor Results; AllTheWeb uses Sponsor Results, and AltaVista Sponsored Matches. Wisenut highlights them in tan and notes that they are "sponsored listings," although that phrase is in a very small font. Observers critical of SEM, however, point to results not listed as sponsored that very likely paid to rank where they do. Since no one outside the search engine companies can authoritatively know this, the accusation remains in the anecdotal realm.

For information professionals, the process of web search optimization has two distinct, but related, implications. First, information professionals should be able to apply SEO techniques to their own web sites, keeping in mind the most basic of questions—for whom should these pages be optimized? Is it for general web search engines or for internal prominence? Second, information professionals should be prepared to explain to their constituencies, whether those are students, colleagues, or management, how search results can be influenced by SEM manipulation and what implications that has for obtaining honest, unbiased, and believable search results. Either way, SEO presents information professionals with unprecedented opportunities to garnish respect both individually and for the profession.