IS YOUR WEBSITE "SEARCH ENGINE FRIENDLY"?

CHAPTER 3 OF FIVE STEPS TO A MORE SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

Peter Cornish December 2010

This is the third in a series of five articles providing practical information about how to make your website more successful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of five articles providing practical information about how to make your website more successful.

A Glossary of terms is provided on page 8

This information is provided in good faith by Succinct Ideas. This document does not provide warranties or guarantees of improved ranking. Please be aware that some activities described require specialist skills and knowledge. We strongly suggest any changes to your website be facilitated by professionals with appropriate skills, and we would be happy to quote to provide SEO services for your business website.

Before making any changes always ensure a backup has been secured and can be reinstated if required.

If you would like to access other articles in this series please visit www.succinctideas.com.au

WHAT IS 'SEARCH ENGINE FRIENDLY' (SEF) ?

'Search engine friendly' refers to how compatible your website is with search engines. Addressing any poor SEF characteristics in your website is a critically important phase in the process of improving your site's ability to rank successfully for natural or 'organic' search results.

Google state they consider over 200 factors when calculating where a page ranks in search results. These factors are a closely guarded commercial secret but this document tables significant SEF factors based on suggestions published by Google from time to time, as well as Succinct Ideas' own research and outcomes in the field.

In the following sections we explore major SEF factors and suggest how these can be measured and corrected if found to be inadequate.

"CRAWLABILITY"

This is a term I've invented to describe a search engine's ability to discover all of the pages within your website. If your website prevents the search engine from 'crawling' or exploring all of its pages then only part of the site will be featured in search results.

'Spider blocking' is a term to describe when search engine 'spiders' are unable to navigate through all pages in your site due to an incompatibility or defect.

Many people are surprised to know that just because you can visit all pages in your site with an internet browser like Internet Explorer or Firefox, this does not necessarily guarantee that search engine spiders can also access those same pages.

TYPICAL CULPRITS

Typical spider blockers are old or defective menu systems which do work OK for a browser but not for a visiting search engine spider. As a result the search engine might spider your home page, but is blocked from all other pages in your site.

Flash and DHTML menus systems are notorious spider blockers if not carefully designed and implemented.

Consequently the site is perceived by search engines as a trivial one page website. None of the content on the other pages is known to search engines so won't be found in searches.

TESTING FOR CRAWABILITY

Crawlability is one of the more insidious SEF Factors as it is generally not detected.

The simplest technique is to use a special form of Google search that displays all pages in a site using the site operator viz:

In Google type   site:<your website>

This will display all the pages for your site that Google knows about. Check to see that all pages in the site are listed. If there is a discrepancy between the site: display and the actual pages in your site it may have some spider blocking menus or defects and should be investigated further.

Note that if your site has pages only recently created, Google may not already be aware of all pages hence they would not be listed.

CRAWABILITY WORKAROUNDS

Replacing a website's menu systems is a non-trivial undertaking (i.e. expensive) so here are some practical workarounds:

- Link to other pages from within the text especially from the home page

- Provide an XML Sitemap and register this with all relevant search engines Refer http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Site_map

TEXT AND HEADINGS

Search engines work primarily with text. Text is typed in a search query and search engines display results with websites that they determined have that text within them.

It is important to have a critical mass of text in your site focused on your target terms for a search engine to recognize what your websites target terms are for a successful SEO outcome.

Text headings are also important to search engines, and particularly if they are formatted with the traditional HTML page heading H1 (ie Heading number 1)

Be aware that the H1 tags should be used sparingly; typically only once on each page and should be carefully composed to be *keyword rich*.

TESTING FOR H1 HEADINGS

The best way to determine if the page headings in your site use H1 is to inspect the HTML source code eg *View Source* on Internet Explorer and FireFox.

H1 formatted headings will appear surrounded by <h1> and </H1> tags like this:

```
<h1>Internet Marketing | Search marketing in Adelaide</h1>
```

ADDRESSING H1 HEADINGS

Adding H1 to Headings

If your site does not currently use H1 headings then it is important to correct this. On flat HTML and CMS sites this may be a very technical undertaking and compounded by the fact that 'native' H1 text is visually unappealing; typically a very large sized basic font in bolded black and rarely fits well with layout or look and feel.

Fortunately this can be corrected by using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to redefine the look of H1, but CSS coding can be complex and we recommend using the services of a competent web developer to redefine H1.

Editing H1 Headings

If your site uses H1 but your target keywords are not present in H1 headings then new keyword rich headings need to be composed and the headings updated.

If your site over-uses H1 headings i.e. more than once or twice per page, then the pages should also be edited to reduce the duplication.

CUSTOMISABLE META TAGS

Meta tags are spaces within your website's software which allow additional information to be stored about the page.

The Keyword metatags is irrelevant and has not been used by Google since 2002 despite continued use by the mis-informed. Unfortunately many CMS update the keyword metatag.

The important SEO meta tags are Title and Description, so your ability to change them to unique keyword rich phrases on a page by page basis is very important for keyword targeting.

Typically this is a matter of working through all pages a fine tuning these meta tags in a 'flat HTML website' Note that often the Description meta tag is omitted and has to be added.

CMS META TAGS

Unfortunately many Content Management Systems (CMS) and Shopping Cart systems provide limited meta tags configurability.

Fortunately CMS plugins providing SEO features often including meta tag refinement capability. Once installed (typically requiring a CMS or Shopping Cart specialist), they allow the meta tags to be individually set.

TESTING FOR CUSTOMISABLE META TAGS

Use Internet Explorer or Firefox and inspect the title bar or view the source code for each page in your site the see that they contain target meta tags; that they are composed using keyword rich text and that they are unique for each page.

CUSTOMISABLE META TAGS WORKAROUNDS

For CMS & Shopping cart systems investigate SEO plugins that allow page specific meta tag refinement.

TARGET TERMS IN URLS

Arranging for target terms to appear in the website's internet address or URL is a very effective SEO strategy; for example if your target term is "blue widgets" then an ideal website address is *www.bluewidgets.com.au*

CHANGING DOMAINS

If you are fortunate enough to secure a keyword rich domain then I encourage you to migrate your site to it. We strongly recommend you use a technical specialist to facilitate for domain migration. Google's Web Master Tools www.google.com/webmasters provides instructions and tools to ensure the migration process does not compromise your sites 'authority'.

DOMAIN REDIRECTION

If you are considering sourcing a keyword rich domain and redirect this to your 'normal' domain, be aware that our research shows this is likely to provide little if any value. We recommend migrating your site to the keyword rich domain and then arrange to redirect your 'normal' domain to it.

PAGE NAMES

It is also useful for the *page name* in your site to contain its target terms eg www.thisismysite.com.au/*bluewidgets*.html

Changing page names

It is relative easy to change the name of an individual page in a flat HTML site, although care should be taken to ensure navigation links are preserved. Unfortunately some CMS sites do not allow individual page names to be nominated or changed.

OTHER FACTORS

These are some additional factors that while important are not as critical as the items mentioned above

PAGE LOAD SPEED

Google has announced that page load speed is a ranking factor, so image size, server performance and other factors that impact the time a page takes to load are important

considerations. Google's Web Masters Tools provides page load performance tracking for your site.

DEFECTS

We have observed that website defects such as broken links and some W3C non-compliance issues do impact ranking. This is consistent with Google's assertions that your website should provide a 'good visitor experience.'

W3C can be easily tested at http://validator.w3.org/ however correction of some W3C issues may require specialist knowledge so we suggest you contact your web developer.

Google's Web Masters Tools provides defect reports for your site.

Glossary

Search engine 'Spiders'

Search engines utilize programs called 'spiders' or 'robots' to scan or 'index' websites and then save information in the search engine's database(s). It is these databases that we search when we use Google, not the live internet.

If a spider has never visited your site, it will not appear in search results.

Submitting to a search engine is literally a request for a spider to a visit your site.

Inside a Website

Websites are made up of various types of software including HTML, Scripts and often other forms of software. When we visit a website, our browser shows the combined *output* from that software. To view the website's software or 'source code' use View Source from your browser's menu.

Flat HTML site

Flat HTML refers to a website that simply consists of the pages of website software. These sites are usually created using website developer software like Adobe Dreamweaver using specialist skills and knowledge.

CMS Website

A CMS is a website *container* that allows pages to be created and edited without specialist web developer skills. Some CMS provide additional functionality such as contact forms etc built-in or with installable plugins.

Shopping Cart

Shopping carts are a special purpose CMS designed to provide the facilities that an online shop requires.

Keywords

Target terms

'Keywords' refers to the terms entered into a search engine by a potential client, with target keywords indicating the optimal terms for your business.

Online sales relies on tapping into searches for your target keywords, so understanding what they are is absolutely fundamental to your online success.

Succinct Ideas' white paper *Discovering your Target Keywords* discusses this important subject in detail.

Keyword rich

Refers to a phrase or short sentence optimised to concentrate on target terms.

Why Google

Google has permeated our culture to the point where it is a commonly used adjective describing search on the internet. Google's domination of English speaking internet search is absolute representing over 90% of searches in most countries around the world. In Australian, the next nearest competitor is Bing with only 3% of searches and Yahoo with just 1%.

Webmasters Tools

Google provides an array of tools that can be used for website analysis and SEO activities but the best for diagnosing and fine tuning Google's relationship with your website is Google's WebMasters Tools at www.google.com/webmasters

MAINTENANCE

Monitoring and addressing SEF Factors is an ongoing process influenced over time by factors such as:

- Website content modifications
- Search engine ranking algorithm updates
- New web development technologies
- Website design 'fashion'
- Online competition for your target terms.

We recommend that you review your website's compatibility with SEF Factors by routinely inspecting:

- Google's WebMasters Tools
- Tracking search rank for your target terms across the relevant search engines for your market
- Monitoring traffic and visitor activity in your website

SUMMARY

This document has introduced some of the more important SEF factors.

If you discover that your website is deficient in one or more SEF factors then we recommend that this be actioned so your site is more likely to feature in searches that represent sales opportunities for your business.

We trust you have found this white paper useful and we invite you contact us to see if there are other whitepapers that might also be helpful for marketing your website online

Peter Cornish
December 2010