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Our Top Ten Search engine optimisation (SEO) tips

1 Start at the start

The title **tag** of a page is the most important, in SEO terms. The title appears as the first line in the search engine results, is shown at the top of the browser window and tells the search engine: "This is what this page is about".

In SEO terms, the title is where we start, and everything else is subservient to it. All other things being equal, the better the match between the words in the title and the words which people are searching on, the better will be the search engine results.

So, in a theoretical situation where there were 10 identical pages, all on the subject of, let's say, 'MTV awards', it is the one with that exact phrase in the title which will appear the highest in the search engine listings, when people search on 'MTV Awards' ... but, of course, there are never 10 identical pages, and all things are never equal!

2 Branding?

Look at these four title tags:

1. MTV Awards
2. MTV Awards – USTVinsider.com
3. USTVinsider.com | MTV Awards
4. USTVInsider.com, bringing you all the best and latest news about what's on US television - MTV Awards

They all contain the correct keyword phrase and three of them are branded. Branding and SEO are normally a trade-off, so you will need to ask yourself these two questions:

1. Is my brand well known and respected in my sector?
2. Will mentioning my brand in the title tag (and therefore in the search engine listings) gain me more visitors?

If the answer to (1) is yes, you might feel that you should always include your branding in the title tag of every page on your site. But if the answer to (2) is no, you might decide to sacrifice branding for traffic.

3 Is this your home page ... well I never knew that!

When people see the home page of your site in the search engine listings, or when they are looking at in their browser, do they really need to be told that it's your home page?

Look at 'USTVinsider.com | Home' and think whether people are searching on the word 'home' and whether that word serves any useful purpose to anybody (except your web designer, who told you that every page has to say what it is and that you have to have that vertical line between the name of your company and the name of the page).

Unless, of course, you're running a site about home improvements, home decoration, etc – 'Home Improvements Magazine | Home' ... when it looks even more ridiculous, but might help with SEO!

4 Forget the rest ... we're the best

'Andrew Green Associates – forget the rest ... we're the best | Home'

Of course you love your strapline, but do you really need it there? Where are the keywords?

5 will-extremely-long-hyphenated-page-names-help-me-with-seo

The **url** of a page can help enormously with SEO, but you must be very careful, particularly with urls like this one -

www.visualsolutions.com/picture-framing-solutions/picture-framing-dorset/traditional-picture-framing/products.html

Keywords in urls are treated very favourably by all the major search engines, but there is always the danger that overuse of keywords will flag up your page as potentially trying to falsely manipulate the results. The worst case is that your site will disappear from the listings entirely, with disastrous consequences for your site traffic and profitability.

As always, take advice from someone who knows what they're talking about.

6 A picture tells a thousand words ... except in this case

As far as page content is concerned, search engines are concerned with only one thing – text. They can't read images and that includes your logo, which clearly states 'the best picture framers in Dorset' to your site visitors, but to a search engine says only one thing - "this is an image".

This includes the (perceived) requirement to have headings in a special font, which then have to be created and displayed as images. To reiterate, the original text in such headings will NOT be read by search engines. For SEO purposes, the image might as well be of your pet cat.

However, I frequently use a method to get round this problem – having headings as text in the HTML on the page, but converting them, when the page has loaded, into an image showing the text in the desired font.

You can include an 'alt **attribute**' so that, when you hover over the logo with your mouse, will say 'Visual Solutions - the best picture framers in Dorset' and this will be registered by search engines as being slightly (but only slightly) relevant to the page content.

And this tip applies particularly to Flash movies. If your web designer tells you that the first thing your visitors should see is a Flash movie (visually stunning, I'm sure), you can ask them if this will mean that the whole of the rest of your site - including all your nicely optimised page content - will be invisible to search engines?

7 Less is more?

Obviously, aesthetics is vitally important for your website but a fashionably-sparse virtually text-free look can kill sites in ranking terms. As with many aspects of this subject, SEO needs to be balanced against other considerations.

And, if your web design company tells you that it's a good idea to include a lot of keyword-optimised text on the page in the same colour as the background (eg white text on a white background), which will therefore maintain the fashionably-sparse look ... the answer is NO. Search engines cottoned on to that nifty little trick in about 1952.

8 Two pages are (not) better than one

Some website owners have the idea that a really clever way to get good search engine results is to produce loads of pages with essentially (or even exactly) the same content. This is one of those bright ideas which turns out to be really stupid.

Search engines like to see a site with a lot of pages, all on broadly the same theme – this can get your site recognised as an ‘authority site’ (think Amazon and Wikipedia), with corresponding improvements in rankings. But the search engines’ programs are now way too sophisticated to fall for this type of blatant attempt at falsely manipulating their results.

One of my clients had gone even further – getting himself into a mess with three sites, all with substantially similar content and with duplicate pages all over the place. He found himself languishing between 300 and 400 in the Google results and had only one option, on my advice – to start all over again, with a completely new **domain name**.

9 But isn’t it all about links?

Many years ago, Google decided that one of the best ways to determine the credibility of a website was to look at how many other websites linked to it. They still do this and still have the concept of ‘PageRank’. This is nothing to do with pages on their results and nothing to do with rankings in them. It is named after Larry Page, one of the founders of Google and is the method which their programs use to rank any webpage, in terms of how many pages link to it, how many pages link to those pages, etc, etc.

PageRank is a number from 0-10 - Google.com has a PageRank (‘PR’) of 10, Google.co.uk has a PR of 9, my own site, www.andrewgreen.biz, has a PR of 3.

A site with thousands of inbound links from other well-linked sites will always win out in the rankings. But a site with well-optimised text content and with HTML designed specifically for SEO will win over sites which haven’t had any SEO techniques applied to them - and don’t forget that these sites will be in the vast majority.

As the SEO industry cliché goes – ‘Content is the King and Links are the Queen’

On-page SEO is predominantly about the internal **HTML** of the page, which is why it’s important to use a web designer who can write their own HTML, as against an off-the-shelf content management system (CMS) or a design using a high-level tool such as Dreamweaver.

But any SEO project also must look at links in to the site and how they can be increased and improved.

10 Finally ... use someone who knows what they’re talking about

Many so-called search engine optimisation ‘experts’ (who might well have approached you offering “guaranteed 1st page positions on Google”), use a hotchpotch of - highly dubious - techniques: ‘gateway pages’, hidden page redirects, web address ‘cloaking’, and many other methods which produce short-term results and then always result in the websites which they have ‘optimised’ being completely banned from search engines.

And genuine SEO consultants will NEVER EVER guarantee positioning. I could only do this if I knew the exact details of Google, Yahoo and Bing’s search ‘algorithms’ - and if I had that information to hand I would be a very rich man indeed!

In contrast to this type of spurious, so-called ‘optimisation’, my expertise has been painstakingly built up over the past 11 years, working on real business websites, I keep up to date with current search engine trends on a daily basis and I have the results to back up my advice.

As part of the search engine optimisation process, I am also able to provide invaluable advice on site design and the user ‘conversation’, utilising my considerable experience of the internet, online and offline marketing, copywriting and proofreading.

Despite being a predominantly technical skill, I believe - very strongly - that SEO needs to be undertaken as an integral part of site design and textual/visual content. And I also believe that if your SEO consultant cannot do that, he or she is not going to give you what you want: results to suit your budget and improve your profitability.

It is these additional skills - built up over 30 years in the computer industry - which provide that vital 'added value' to my clients and ensure that top-class search engine optimisation work by me provides top-class results for you.

Glossary

HTML

The internal programming language for all web pages. HTML ('hypertext mark-up language') defines the structure and layout of a web page by using a variety of 'tags' and 'attributes'.

Tag

Each element in the HTML for any page is called a 'tag'. A tag is a command inserted in the HTML for the page which specifies how the page should be shown on the screen, together with other information which may not be visible to the viewer.

Attribute

Each tag can have a number of 'attributes', which specify, for example, the text which will appear to the viewer when they hover the mouse over a link on the page. This attribute, in particular, is called the 'title attribute'.

Browser

The program which is used to display web pages, the most common being Internet Explorer (often abbreviated 'IE'), Firefox, Chrome, Opera and Safari.

url

Universal resource locator, ie the actual name of a webpage, as used on the internet – eg www.andrewgreenassociates.com/index.html or www.ustvinsider.com/mtv-awards.php

Domain name

The actual internet name of your website, eg amazon.com, google.co.uk, etc

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