

Website optimisation, a wider view

by John Waddington of Fen Digital

There's a great deal of hype about search engine optimisation (SEO). Most businesses receive spam from companies every week that promise to get them to the top of Google and then fail to deliver.

Here, Fen Digital seeks to clarify expectations about what SEO can and cannot do, and urges companies to look at website optimisation in a wider context.

What is SEO?

SEO is a range of techniques for ensuring that your website is search engine friendly. In other words optimising the website code so that your site will be regarded by the search engines in a favourable light - and will therefore be ranked higher than your competitors' websites for keyword terms that relate to your products and services.

SEO can influence the ranking of your website in what are called the 'natural' or 'organic' search listings. These are the results that appear in main part of the results page of most search engines, as opposed to the sponsored listings which appear at the top of the page and down the right hand side.

Recent research indicates that 90% of all clicks through to websites occur in the top 3 pages of a search engine, and 60% happen on page 1, so if your business moves up onto these pages, it enters the range of consciousness for the majority of web users, and therefore stands a much greater chance of being found.

How is SEO done?

There are two main factors that affect the position of a website in the search engine. The first relates to how search engine friendly your site is and this is termed 'on-site optimisation'.

On-site optimisation

To make your website search engine friendly, you need to keep adding well structured, keyword rich, and original content to it. Equally important you must build the site in a way that enables search engines to read as much of the content as possible and to rate it highly in relation to your selected keywords. This is influenced by a range of factors, including the heading and link structure, the percentage of readable text versus graphics, and the consistency between meta tags and page content.

A good search engine consultant will advise you on how to develop an ongoing, ethical strategy for optimising your on-site content in order to maximise both its ranking to search engines and equally important, its value to users. You should beware that there are many unprofessional companies that go about search engine optimisation in an unethical way, using techniques that, if applied to your site, will actually cause it to be penalised by Google in the long term.

Search engine algorithms have evolved considerably in recent years, so that they are increasingly effective at determining whether a deliberate attempt to manipulate the results has been made. The result of applying unethical SEO techniques is that the ranking of your site could be penalised. Unethical techniques include:

- keyword stuffing (excessive repetition of your keywords in the text or meta tags in order to influence ranking)
- use of keywords in the meta tags that are not reflected in the page content
- creating multiple pages with virtually identical content
- automatically generated doorway pages which contain little user oriented content

The key principle for building and maintaining good search ranking is to keep adding genuine, unique content and to apply it to your site with a well structured information architecture. Fen Digital's guiding principle is 'what is good for users is likely to be well regarded by search engines'.

Off-site optimisation

However, on-site optimisation is only half the equation. Equally important in determining the position of your website in the natural listings is the number, relevance, and rank of links to your site from other websites. This can be illustrated by entering the search term 'miserable failure' into Google. At the top of the listings, you'll find the official website of The White House. Here is an example of how the position of a site can be influenced significantly by a number of other websites linking to it with a specific keyword phrase.

So, another part of your strategy for effective SEO should be building up a series of incoming links in order to increase your 'link popularity'. Many companies try to achieve this by arranging reciprocal links with other websites. If you do this, there are three important things to remember:

- the other websites should be directly related to the keywords for your services
- they need to be highly ranked by Google to make a positive effect on your ranking
- take care not to participate in a link farm, as these are often blacklisted by Google.

Our experience is that relying on reciprocal links to build site rank is time consuming, not always effective, and can have a negative effect. This is because you cannot normally control where in their site the other company puts your link, or what other companies are listed on their links page. You may find that you put a link to their site on a highly ranked page but that the other company puts your link on a hard to find, poorly ranked page. It could damage the way your site is viewed by Google if your site is listed on a page with sites that are irrelevant to your services, or at worst, are unethical. This process is referred to as 'co-citation' because Google effectively regards the other sites as linked in the same basket as yours.

Fen Digital therefore has a policy of not taking part in link exchanges, and we have benefited from this by retaining greater control over our optimisation strategy.

Is there an alternative way of building link popularity?

Well, yes actually there is. It's called a Fen Digital optimised business profile for your company. Each profile page is developed to be unique and content rich, and is structured in line with best practice information architecture. It is linked into our extensive directories to create a rich pool of content that is well regarded by Google. Fen Digital profiles achieve good page ranking and maintain consistent search positions over time. Beware of low quality imitations of this service!

To find out more about profile pages, visit www.fendigital.co.uk/html/optimised_profiles.html

What SEO cannot do

So you've boosted your visibility in the search engines through effective on-site and off-site optimisation. But why aren't your sales rocketing?

What SEO cannot do is encourage customers to buy products or services where there is little demand for them. It is not a substitute for proper research into the marketability of products or services.

Equally, you may be listed high up in the search engines, but for search terms that no one uses! We advise that keyword research is carried out before you embark on your SEO strategy to ensure that you are targeting the optimum keywords.

A successful SEO strategy is not necessarily about targeting the broadest, most popular search terms. It can be far more effective to optimise your site to rank highly in the search engines for more specific terms. You may get fewer overall clicks, but it is likely that those who click on your listing in Google will be more qualified prospects, because they have given more thought to what they are searching for.

Research shows that the average number of keywords that an individual user types into the Google search box is now 3-4 words rather than 2-3, as was the case 4 years ago. In other words, users are getting savvier about searching, they are finding ways to get round the information overload, and they are recognising that adding an extra word to their enquiry will limit the number of results returned and is more likely to take them to a site that is relevant. So for example, an au pair agency may get a higher ratio of conversions by ranking well for 'au pair London' rather than 'au pair' because almost all the people who click on websites listed for the former enquiry are going to be prime customers.

Equally, demand for certain types of products and services fluctuates significantly, for example depending on the seasons, the weather, and business and consumer confidence. We see a clear weekly pattern in terms of what users are searching for, with marked differences between weekdays and weekends.

What guarantees can SEO consultants offer about getting to the top?

No SEO consultant can promise that your website will achieve a specific position after it has been optimised, whether by on-site or off-site techniques. After all, there is a major factor that is firmly outside their control – that is how well optimised the competing sites are, and how good their link popularity is. Tools such as Word Tracker can give an indication of the level of competition for particular keyword search phrases, but should be regarded only as a guide.

What can be said is that, as over 85% of web users find websites via the main search engines, site optimisation is not an optional, but essential marketing activity for all businesses. It should be viewed as an ongoing, long term activity, in which your website acts as your company's mouthpiece for the way it is developing in its products, services, skills, and experience. By continuing to add good, unique content to your site that supports your selected keyword search terms, you are following the safest long term strategy for maintaining good search engine ranking.

Will a Fen Digital optimised profile go straight to page 1 of Google?

Not necessarily. Many do. Some don't. Most get to page 1 given time. Like any web page, a profile's search engine rank is influenced by the level of competition for a particular search phrase from other websites. And we can only estimate before the profile is published how high it will go in the short term.



What we can say is that having a fen digital profile will rapidly increase your website's link popularity, giving your company a greater 'punch' in the search engines than could be expected from optimising your site alone. We can also say that the great majority of our clients with profiles have experienced a significant rise in visitor traffic.

Without a fen digital profile, a small company may find it difficult to compete online in a competitive market. With a profile page pointing to their website, they have increased their chances significantly – at a fraction of the cost of pay per click. To find out more about profile pages, visit www.fendigital.co.uk and click the 'optimised profiles' link.

Looking at website optimisation in the broader sense

Now supposing that you are getting a good proportion of clicks through to your site, and your SEO has helped you appear in the top 3 pages, but people aren't buying. This is where you need to look at website optimisation in its broader sense.

Fen Digital can help by taking an objective view at the online experience and identifying any usability barriers that may be causing potential customers to click away. We will normally recommend installing detailed visitor tracking on your website so that it is possible to study user journeys and understand at which points users are abandoning your site.

Normally, poor website performance is down to a range of linked factors. It may be that the design and branding of your site are failing to match customer expectations, that it is too difficult to find information on products, services, prices, or on your delivery policy. Maybe the photos of your products are too poor in resolution to sell their benefits properly or that the 'buy now' button is not prominent enough. Maybe it's down to a checkout process that often throws out unfriendly error messages that would need the customer to have a computer science degree to understand them.

Any of these factors can have a detrimental effect on visitor confidence and lose their trust in your company to provide the quality of service they are looking for.

How Fen Digital can help you succeed online

John Waddington, website optimisation consultant at Fen Digital has 22 years' experience of assessing the usability of information, and in the last 6 years he has focused entirely on advising companies on how to improve their online strategies.

He has been called in by a wide range of organisations to audit the usability of their websites and propose optimisation fixes. Clients range from high profile organisations such as the European Central Bank, the Cabinet Office, BMW and Renault, to small online stores and limited company websites.

Fen Digital's track record of success speaks for itself. Our integrated approach to website optimisation – stretching from the point a user sees your company listed in Google to the point of sale or enquiry – is, we believe, unique.

For more information

- Visit www.fendigital.com
- Call us on 01638 731547
- Or email us at seo@fendigital.com