

Search Engine Optimization Best Practices

by Eric Petersen, Founder/President

We believe in being generous with good advice. That's why we've compiled this free list of best practices to help your website succeed. The goal here is to help your website rank better in the search engine arena. We're confident that if you follow these guidelines, your search engine rankings will improve dramatically and you'll experience more traffic and business as a result. We wish you the best of luck!

1) Integrate your Key Phrases into your Domain Name

Having your most popular phrases in your domain name greatly improves your chances of success with the search engines. If your website is about vacation rentals, a domain name such as www.vacationrentals.com would be ideal.

2) Integrate your Most Popular Phrases into your URLs

If you already have an established domain name that does not include your most popular phrases, include your key phrases as closely as possible to the domain name. Be sure this key phrase occurs frequently throughout your site. For example, a vacation rental site featuring many locations might have URLs such as <http://www.crazycribs.com/vacation-rentals/san-diego.html> or <http://www.crazycribs.com/vacation-rentals/santa-barbara.html>.

Notes:

- **Use your key phrases in as many URLs as possible.** The search engine crawlers are looking for a consistent theme throughout your site, so you want to one or two pages just won't cut it.
- **Don't overdo it!** For example, having URL and domain name combinations such as <http://www.vacationrentals.com/vacation-rentals/vacation-rentals.html> could get you flagged as a spammer, which of course you're not 😊. Start slowly with just one instance in the URL and escalate over time if needed.
- **Use dashes (-) instead of underscores (_) to separate words.** Dashes inserted after the domain name in your URLs are typically viewed as a space between words by the search engines. Underscores are typically ignored (example: [vacationrentals](http://www.vacationrentals.com)). Separating the two words with a dash will work better with the search engines than having them mashed together.
- **Do not use dashes in the domain name itself.** Although it's advisable to separate the words after the domain name with hyphens, it's considered a best practice to keep the domain as one whole word. For example, <http://www.vacationrentals.com> will most likely work better for you than <http://www.vacation-rentals.com>.

3) Integrate your Most Popular Phrases into All Page Titles

An example title tag for the vacation rental site might be:

<title>Vacation Rentals – Holiday Vacations – Vacation Homes – VacationRentals.com</title>

Notes:

- **Use, but don't overuse your popular phrases.** In the above page title, notice the word "vacation" or "vacations" is being used four times. "Rental" or "Rentals" is being used twice. Using the key phrases more than once will increase your keyword density and will increase the odds of you ranking well with the search engines, if you use your keywords too many times, you may be penalized for spamming.
- **Use unique page titles on all pages throughout your website.** Avoid duplicate page titles. Change the order of words and use spelling variations to present variations in the text while maintaining a consistent theme throughout your site. For example, one page title might say "About Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals". Another page title might say "Find Vacation Rentals at Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals".
- **Keep your page titles down to 7-9 words.**
- **Put your most popular phrases at the beginning of the page titles.** This is especially important on the homepage.
- **Use dynamically generated page titles for database-driven websites.** If you're creating a dynamic website with dozens or hundreds of pages, make sure your web developer can dynamically write out unique, keyword-rich page titles for every page on your website. Example:

Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals | USA | Santa Barbara | Killer Beachfront Vacation Rental

- For dynamic websites ask your web developer if they can include Page Title and Meta tag inputs in the admin tool too. This way you can add custom page titles and Meta tags to various pages when time and resources become available.

4) Integrate your Most Popular Phrases into your Body Copy

Every page on your website should have your most important phrases on it. This is especially important on the homepage, so if you want to be found for "vacation rentals" you absolutely must say "vacation rentals" on your homepage, preferably 3-5 times for starters.

Notes:

- You typically want your most important phrases to exist in the body copy at the beginning of the page and again at the bottom. Strive to have key phrases three times in the actual body

copy on each page for starters.

- An easy way to integrate keywords into every page is to include your company name, text-only navigation, and copyright information in the footer of every page. With dynamic or template websites, this can usually be done in just a few minutes by editing a single includes or footer file.

A sample website footer might look like this:

----- Page Bottom -----

Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals ~ 1234 Beach Way, San Diego, California ~ (800) 123-4567

[Vacation Rentals](#) | [List Your Vacation Rental](#) | [Find a Vacation Rental](#)

[About Us](#) | [FAQs](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Home](#)

Copyright 2008, Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals. All Rights Reserved.

5) **Make your Website a Content-rich Resource**

Continually add keyword-rich content to your website to make it an authority on a particular topic. As you add more and more content to your website it will become more attractive to people seeking out information on your topic and people will be more likely to tell others about your great site. As search engine crawlers visit your site, they will keep encountering new material, which will encourage them to visit more frequently. The more frequently the search engine crawlers visit, the better.

6) **Get Links from Relevant, Quality Websites**

Generally speaking, the more websites that link to you, the better. More website links bring more traffic, and that helps boost your web traffic. More importantly, Google counts every link to your website as a vote of sorts. If you get a lot of good votes from Google, your website will get a higher Page Rank, elevating it on the list when people search Google for your particular product or service. Google generates far more traffic than any of the other search engines, including Yahoo, Bing(Microsoft), and all the other search engines combined, so being high on the Google search engine results is what it's all about!

Notes:

- **Stay away from link farms.** Be wary of promises to get you links from dozens or hundreds of websites. Many such links are considered "bad neighborhood" links by the search engines and you can get penalized for associating with them. Although it's pretty slow-going, it's best to hand-select quality, high Page Rank websites and approach them one-by-one.

- **Download the Google Toolbar.** You can do this for free at toolbar.google.com. This allows you to see a website's Page Rank at the top of your web browser when you're visiting their site.
- **Approach sites with Page Rank of 3 or higher.** The higher the better. Ten is the highest Page Rank and is reserved for mega sites like Google and Yahoo.
- **Link to sites in related industries.** Besides links from popular websites with high Page Ranks, you want links from sites in related industries. For example, if you're a travel company, you want links from various travel-related sites. When you have links from like-businesses, Google can more easily identify you as being of a particular theme and can boost your page rank accordingly.
- **Create a Links page.** You may want to do this on your site so you can reciprocate and offer a link to the person whom you're asking for a link. If you scratch their back, they'll be more likely to scratch yours.
- **Make sure other sites use your keywords in their links and descriptions.** The ideal link would look something like this:

[Click Here to Visit Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals](#)

7) Use Keyword-Rich Meta Description Tags on your Main Pages

Meta tags are pieces of HTML code that can be added to the <head> section of your web pages. The two most popular Meta tags are **Meta Description** tags and **Meta Keyword** tags. There are some conflicting views about whether or not to use Meta tags and whether they actually help your search engine positioning. Regardless of whether or not it helps with your search engine positioning, you should use the Meta Description tag because this is what frequently appears below your website URL in the search engine results pages (SERPS). Using the Meta Description tag gives you a chance to include your keywords, it *may* help boost your ranking, and can help sell your product or service. It's a good best practice.

Notes:

- A Meta Description tag should be a well written, straightforward sentence that contains your keywords and the major feature/function/benefit of your business and the page that's being featured. For example, a Meta Description tag might read as follows:

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<meta name="Description" content="Crazy Cribs Vacation Rentals offers the world's largest selection of FREE vacation rental listings, villas and beachfront properties.">
```

- **Don't bother with Meta keywords.** This is the general consensus these days, because Meta Keywords provide little or no value. Some people still use them, but we don't and we get great results without them.
- **With Meta tags, focus on the top, most important pages first.** The homepage is always most important. As you get into dozens or hundreds of pages, this can quickly become a daunting task that provides questionable value, so don't get too hung up on it. Just focus on the top pages and then move on to the second and third-tier pages as time permits.
- **Include Meta tag and Page title inputs in the admin tool.** If you're building a dynamic website, you should ask your web developer if they can include Meta tag inputs, along with the Page Title inputs, so you can add custom page titles and Meta tags to various pages when time and resources become available.

8) Rewrite Dynamic URLs

With dynamic (database-driven) websites that have dozens or hundreds of pages, your web developers or programmers can/should rewrite the dynamic URLs into something that's keyword-rich. By default, your website URLs may look like:

http://www.crazycribs.com/?osc_id=4319&src=QB0408&ID=0043567. Such URLs don't include your keywords and are not considered search engine-friendly. Using some rewrite technology such as Mod_Rewrite (Apache), you can make the above dynamic URL look like this instead. <http://www.crazycribs.com/vacation-rentals/beaches/santa-barbara.html> Using rewrite technology will have a huge impact on the search engine effectiveness of dynamic websites.

9) Reduce "Code Bloat" on your Pages

The cleaner the code on your website, the faster your pages will load and the actual html text on the page will be given greater emphasis. In other words, if you say "vacation rentals" five times in 100 lines of code, those phrases will stand out much more than if you use 10,000 lines of code. As you use more programming code, you dilute the value of the actual verbiage on the page.

Notes:

- **Move as much programming code as possible to external files.** Having 200 lines of JavaScript code embedded on a web page, slows download times and dilutes keyword emphasis. This code should be moved to an external .js file. This leaves you with a single line of code calling that file from within the HTML document.
- **Use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS).** Cascading style sheets are external files that control various type and formatting attributes of elements on a web page. Some people include all of the font, table, and color-type formatting right inside the web page, which can add

hundreds of lines of extraneous code, which dilutes keyword emphasis and slow down page load times. Moving all of the formatting attributes to an external .css file can also speed up load times and make your website much more search-friendly.

10) Use Keyword-rich Alt tags

All main images on your website should have alt tags that include variations of your keyword. All page headers, featured products, and various prominent images should have alt tags, whenever possible.

Notes:

- **Mix it up.** Don't just say "Vacation Rentals" for every single Alt tag because you could get flagged as a spammer and get penalized for many months. The alt tag for the header graphic might say "Vacation Rentals Header Graphic". The main or featured image on the homepage might read "Vacation Rental of the Month".
- **Alt tags, three times per page.** As a general rule, shoot for including your key phrases in your alt tags 3 times per page.

11) Use a Reputable Web Host and Measure performance Often

You should use a reputable service provider who can offer you 99%+ uptime. This ensures that when people visit your website, they will see your website instead of a 404 Page Not Found Error. And, if search engine crawlers visit your website and it happens to be down, you can be penalized and your search engine rankings can drop substantially for weeks or more. The bottom line is, you want your website to be up 100% of the time.

Notes:

- **Talk to your hosting company about a dedicated web server.** Most websites are hosted on a shared server. In fact, your website may be hosted along with dozens of others on a single computer. Smaller web hosting companies may overload their servers, resulting in poor performance and unreliability. If your website is critical to the operation of your business and you get a substantial amount of traffic every day, you should speak with your hosting company about a dedicated—or virtual dedicated-- web server. Although more expensive, these types of hosting arrangements are typically much faster and more reliable. You'll sleep better at night too.
- **Invest in a third-party monitoring service.** For about \$20/month you can have your website's "ping, power, and pipe" monitored once every fifteen minutes. A monitoring service routinely checks your website's uptime, download speeds, DNS resolution and more. They'll also alert you if there are any website issues and let you know if your site goes down.

12) Use Google Webmaster Tools

Google Webmaster Tools offers a free suite of diagnostic tools that provide you with detailed reports about your pages' visibility on Google. You can see how Google crawls and indexes your site and learn about specific problems such as broken pages or problems with redirects. Go to <http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools>

13) Have a Site Map and Text-only Navigation

Some search crawlers have a hard time indexing all of the pages on a website because of the way the site has been coded. So it's a good best practice to have a simple Site Map included in the text-only navigation at the bottom of all your pages. (See the Page Bottom example in tip #4.) The text-only navigation and Site Map act as doorways that allow search engine crawlers to more easily find your website content.

Notes:

- Use Google's Webmaster Tools for guidelines on Site Map creation. Once your Site Map has been created according to the Google guidelines, you should submit it to Google via Webmaster Tools. This helps Google know more about your web pages, and gives you more control over how your URLs appear in the search engine ranking pages.

14) Use 301 Redirects when Launching a New-and-Improved Website

When launching a new website that replaces a previous version, use 301 Redirects to tell the search engines that your pages have moved. Doing so will retain your hard-earned Google Page Rank and your search engine positioning should stay more or less intact. If you do not use 301 Redirects when launching a new/replacement site, search engines will still have your old pages contained in their index, and both search engines and visitors seeking out your content will encounter broken pages when they try to visit your site. This will result in lots of 404 Page Not Found errors. When this happens, your search engine rankings will most likely drop.

Well, I'd say that's certainly enough to keep you busy for awhile. There are several other things you can do to help with search engine optimization, but the main things that will have the biggest impact on your search engine ranking results are outlined above. I'm confident that if you follow these guidelines, your search engine rankings will improve dramatically and you'll experience more traffic and business as a result.

Disclaimer:

With the above said, there is no silver bullet and there are no guarantees that you'll be listed at the top of Google. Depending upon demand and the amount of competition you have, it could take anywhere from a month to a year or more to achieve decent search engine ranking results. Search Engine Optimization does not happen overnight and should be considered an ongoing process of tweaking your website over time to make it more attractive to the search engines.

The keys to search engine success are to 1) follow-best practices outlined above; 2) do not participate in any unethical “Black Hat” search engine optimization methods, which could get you banned from Google; and 3) stay at it over time.

Bonus Tip: Buying Your Way To the Top

Finally, **you can get instant visibility** at the top of Google with a search engine marketing(not the same as search engine optimization) campaign using Google Adwords. Going this route allows you to bid on various phrases and your advertisements will be displayed at the top of the Google search results. This is a great way to get immediate visibility on Google, but it can be rather expensive and isn’t for everyone. Furthermore, if you don’t know what you’re doing, you can burn through a lot of money very quickly on extremely unqualified traffic. If you’d like to know more about Google Adwords or need assistance setting up a search engine marketing campaign, we encourage you to contact us today.

If you have any questions or comments or need help with anything, feel free to contact me directly any time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.

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