Notanant and Search Engine Optimisation

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is something with is a major concern of all commercial websites. Unfortunately SEO of is also something a black art with a large number of myths and conflicting advice. Of the search engines currently in use Google is the most widely used search engine. Yahoo, MSN, AOL are used but to a lesser extent. Most of what follows relates primarily to Google as getting rankings on Google generally means that you also get rankings on the others, but it's not guaranteed.

How search engines work

All the search engines collect data in a similar way. An automated program called a search bot tracks and follows links around the web collecting copies of the pages it finds. These bots are a little like automated web-browsers, but they work in text only. They don't understand images, javascript or flash (one reason why Flash only sites are not recommended commercially and also why most sites don't rely on drop-down menus or other navigation that relies on Javascript).

The data the bot collects is analysed to identify it's subject matter and keywords that it contains. Different engines have different ways of analysing page content. The way they check the page content also changes over time as many 'simplistic' methods for understanding what was on the page were liable to abuse. The second thing is that for sites like Google, it is not necessarily the content on your page that gives you the top rank, but links to your page. This is the basis of Google's famous page-rank algorithm.

How to work with search engines

The first thing is that everyone claims to have a secret key or a secret answer. The second thing is that **Google in particular adjusts its algorithms every 4-6 months** to beat the SEO merchants trying to beat the algorithms.

Examples of Google changes in the past few years include less reliance on URL rewriting, better handling of query data (&page=…) in the URL, reduction in listing of blog sites and content aggregators (eg Myspace), removal of 'fake' directories, reduction in page duplication in searches (this is still on-going and makes tracking SEO effectiveness increasingly difficult).

So things that worked one year ago may not work at all this year, and possibly worse, may mark your site down. These later items include hidden content (white text on a white background or text so small it can't be seen), use of link farms, fake directories and so on. Google itself just recommends good content with good links in. Our experience is that this simple advice is often overlooked.

How do we know? We continually monitor a range of test sites to see what their position is on Google against similar sites with similar content and titles. Google at one stage had all of our sites at the top rank. Then it relegated them to a low position. Now they seem to be at a fair position (high, and close to the real parallel sites that exist). This is all without changing content or seeking external links into the sites we are monitoring. Consequently your Google ranking can change, sometimes dramatically, just because of the way that Google does things, not because of what you do on your pages.

Consequently, SEO advice and techniques for increasing rankings quickly go out of date, are superceded and are often just plain wrong. **Google's advice on getting a good ranking is have**

good content and to have lots of reputable links linking into your site. Anything else is blowing in the wind, it may have worked in the past, it may or may not work now, it might or might not work in the future.

Note that because Google has a policy of continuous improvement there are often test search engines around, Typically you will be using a main engine that most people use but occasionally you may find Google routing you through one of the development versions, so always check rankings over a couple of days. There is a chance you are being unwittingly directed to a test system, not the current mainstream engine.

How does Google work

So how does Google do things? The first thing is that Google prioritises your site based on the sites linking in. This is the basis of page rank. If you have lots of links from highly ranked pages linking in to your site, then Google will give you a higher rank.

The second thing is that Google works out what your page is about based on the words that you put in the page. But it also downgrades anything with 'unnatural' word densities, unusual structures or items that seem to be set to beat the engine.

Google itself says it doesn't worry about **meta tags** (hidden tags at in the HTML at the top of the page that label the page and the content which used to be relied on by early search engines), but it does use the <title> tag and the <meta type='description'> tag to label your page on the listing. So while a title and description may not relate to page rank directly, when your site is listed these elements should contain content that will encourage people to click to your site over the competing list of found results.

Notanant automatically generates the title and description based on the page name and the summary paragraph of the page. Normally the first paragraph of any page will be the lead to get people to read the rest of the article and so is the best text to have in the description too. These can be overridden for those on an appropriate service contract.

In terms of actual page content SEO forums talk about keyword density. That is the relative frequency of the keywords you want to be classified on. If you want to be ranked on 'horse troughs' you at least need the words 'horse troughs' in the content you want people to find. Secondly, things like link text, text in headings and occasionally text in bold are reported to help Google understand the content subject. Google manages to work out plurals and verb endings and split words so you don't need to have all forms of the words (eg trough, troughs, horse-trough and horse trough) in the text.

Through the automatic dynamic linking that Notanant uses, links reflect page titles, breadcrumbs contain keywords in heading text and key paragraphs are marked first. Of course the text has to be well-written and interesting and properly reflect the content, but many SEO type operations happen automatically on Notanant sites because of the way the system works.

The third thing is that getting good rankings is competitive. Other people are doing the same thing. Your page ranking may drop not because of anything you are doing, but because your competitors are doing things better. It is important to keep monitoring your own sites, and your competitors' sites. There is a sense that Google appreciates content which is refreshed reasonably regularly – not a complete rewrite, but some indications to the engine that the content has been reviewed.

Strategies

The most successful long term search engine strategy is to build a set of reputable links to your site from other highly ranked sites. To counteract 'link-farms', sites ranking lower than yours that link to your site have much less weight in the ranking so empty page links and fake or dummy domains is not a successful strategy (any more), unless you can build links to these pages too.

You can check the number of pages linking to you by searching for your domain name (eg www.notanant.com) on Google. This will give a list of links. Unfortunately Google's last update meant that quite a number of links are now hidden from the listing. If you search for "www.notanant.com Jacob" for instance, you can often find links that you would have expected the wider first search to show, but which didn't appear, so don't quite take this as gospel. Google increasingly hides all the links it finds so do use the 'show omitted results' link at the bottom of the search to see what Google sees about your pages.

What is a good number of links? A small site of specialist interest should have at least 40-50 links. Established sites with a lot of content can easily have several thousand links in (eg Google: dobney.com to see we have 2500+ links)

Most of important in this is therefore having **content that people want to link to** (this is actually what Google wants you to do). This is typically different from plain advertising or marketing copy. Obviously you want people to buy when they are on your pages, but also if you have information that is informative, helpful and answers visitors questions in an interesting way then you are more likely to get links.

Building links – free directory listings

The first and easiest place to get your site linked is to get yourself added to reputable directories and content providers. A simple starting place is often the local directories that exist – for instance local business websites, town and city sites, directories from appropriate national and local associations for your business area. Many provide free listings for local or relevant companies.

Note that there are also plenty of free listing directories around which will happily include your site. If you are in a technical area you might consider Applegate for instance. Often these free directories share content with other directories to make themselves seem bigger, so you will see the number of sites linking to you increase over time. Also don't forget international directories. This will sound odd if you only sell locally, but for Google and other search engines a good link is a good link.

At this stage avoid buying or paying for links unless you get some additional business benefits other than just the link.
We don't place much trust in paid-for listings unless they are a prime source of content about your subject and you would get additional benefits for example we would pay for listings in the Market Research Society, or a proper national business association. There are still a few fringe companies that will take money for pointless or valueless listings.

To find out where else to get your site listed, use the search engines to search for competitor websites and see who is linking to them. Chances are the linking pages they are on would also be appropriate for you too.

Using traditional PR to build links

The next thing is to get copy on to other people's websites, preferably with your links. This is essentially old fashioned PR, but in an on-line world. So if you can get articles written about you with a link to your pages in local papers (business sections are normally crying out for business), nationals, in specialist magazines or in trade press these typically carry through into Google and are normally highly regarded. Note that it even though it is the local press and so may not seem relevant to your markets Google will still treat it as an good quality link.

You may also consider things like competitions, draws and other traditional PR techniques for raising awareness in publications and so get links here too (free photos for your customers websites…?)

On-line articles and content farming

In addition to PR, you can also try to place your own articles or provide syndicated content for many of the content aggregators. Sites such as GoArticles allow anyone to upload an article on any subject. E-zines and the like suck up good content from these articles exchanges and thereby spread your domain name across the web. The key is to make it something that someone would want to read.

Next you should consider forums and newsgroups (eg Usenet on Google groups). These are typically general discussion areas, but if you add comments to the boards, you can also add your signature. Just be careful about not spamming the group – reply appropriately to something someone else has asked and then have your details in your signature. Note that newsgroups (Usenet) answers are often also copied onto other bulletin boards, so you can increase your presence this way too.

There are also areas such as YouTube, Google video, MySpace, blogsites etc. These highly aggregated content sites seem to be downgraded in Google rankings (that is you don't see them much in higher listings themselves), but obviously they are potentially free advertising. You can also use things like Digg and De.li-cio.us as more places to add links to your sites.

Finally, you have friends, customers, colleagues, suppliers all of whom may be happy to link to you perhaps with a recommendation, or a photo, or a press release. These also build good reputable links. When you ask for a customer commendation to put on your site, you can always ask if they would put a link to you on their site.

More general purpose link exchanges and link reciprocation may or may not work, but my feeling is that they tend to benefit the exchange rather than the site owner. Many of these link exchanges use spam emails to try to build links, and in the long run potentially will look to charge you for services. If you want to try link reciprocation try and find the sites you want to reciprocate with and go direct.

Search engine timescales

Don't expect instant results. Google cycles through sites about every two weeks. It may take another two weeks to count. If you make new changes Google likes to let them settle – typically about 6-8 weeks. For brand new sites it's actually best to get something up quickly so that Google can register the site exists – it can take 3-4 months to register. Initially Google will just check the site is there, then once it feels you are permanent, you'll move up the rankings, so rough holding pages and prototype pages help reduce timescales when the content is actually finished and live.

All search engines are developing and improving so you may find that the rank bounces around, particularly at the early stages of the site's development.

If your site has pages linking in to it, then in general it is not worth paying for search engine submission as the big search engines willl pick the link up automatically (one reason for having early pages up quickly). However new sites looking to get established fast may consider paying to get on search engines. Note that in reality there are a maximum of 10-12 worthwhile search engines (and the top 4-5 will be 95% of the market), Ignore claims of people submitting to 100+ sites.

Tracking

One mechanism for monitoring your search engine effectiveness is to monitor the traffic to your site. For customers on the appropriate service level we can provide logfiles for your site and access to the site statistics pages. You can also monitor traffic from the site map page (off site settings) which provides counts of visitors to your site.

Of key importance in search engine monitoring are the 'referrer' links. These are the pages the users browser was looking at before they reached your site. Consequently if they clicked on horse troughs in Google to get to your site you will see as a referrer `www.google.co.uk?search=horse%20troughs`. From this you can work out which keywords are bringing people to your site and perhaps which are not working. Sometimes this can be surprising as sometimes unexpected keywords have high rankings.

Google ad words and click words

If you are committed to putting time (and so money) into SEO, then you should also consider using some form of on-line advertising such as Google Adwords. Even if you get the highest search ranking, your competitor may have paid to be on the same page as you and may still get your click. Like all advertising you have to be able to justify costs against the rate for conversion but it may be an effective adjunct to SEO efforts and may be faster in the short term for newer sites.

Spam – or the better known you are the more spam you will receive

One caution. The better you are linked, particularly if you use newsgroups and forums, the more spam email you will receive. On Notanant no one can see your email address and has to use the contact form which has a number of devices to reduce form-spam as it is now being called (people submitting junk to forms such as contact forms in sites, rather than just junk email). If you do leave your email address – even if it is the catch all sales@domain.com, you will get spam and having a successful site you will get spam directed to a range of possibly non-existent email addresses (eg atdh@domain.com).

If we do see form spam, then we will take more steps to reduce it. At the moment it seems to be under control with the measures we currently have in place.

Names – related considerations

This is probably too late for established businesses, but to make effective use of the Internet, it is important to have a name of your business and domain name that are easy to remember, but unique in their area. If you are looking for "Bath water treatment services limited" for instance, the name for the search engines will be confused with searches for baths, water treatment, spa treatments, water services etc. It therefore becomes difficult for customers to find you even if they only know part of your name or can only remember. The more unique the name, the easier it is for customers to find you and not competitors and the easier it is to monitor for search engine optimisation.

Secondly the domain name that you choose may overlap and conflict with other sites. In particular if you choose a name like www.smiths-iron.co.uk then there may already be www.smith-irons.co.uk or www.smiths-irons.co.uk or www.smithsirons.co.uk, not to mention the .com and .net versions of the name.

If you can it is worth trying to find a business name with free internet names available for it then to buy the name plus the alternatives to make it easy for your customers to guess what to type in. Things like use of hyphens (is your name place dash seekers or place seekers), use of plural or singular, alternate spellings, how the name sounds over the phone (and so how easy it is to transcribe) are all very important in helping potential customers find out where you are and what you do. A well thought out name can have good search engine benefits.

Useful tools

These are a selection of useful tools. You will find directories and other useful link building sites by using the following search techniques. These change over time and there are continually new ventures that may or may not be helpful.

1. Google

This may sound obvious, but you should get familiar with Google. You should use Google in a number of ways to help understand how Google sees your site and where it links.

- If you don't use it yet – set preferences in Google to show 100 results per page and open pages in a new window – it just helps checking things out more quickly (included because many people don't know you can do this).

- Use Ctrl-F on a webpage to find your link quickly and so save time looking through everything (using this to find your ranking too)

- Firstly search for your domain directly ie "www.domain.com" to see who is listing your page on their pages.

- Use the "include omitted sites" option when there are similar sites omitted – you get a better view of what Google has in the system

- In addition check searching for "www.domain.com keyword" in Google to see if there are links Google isn't showing you as Google is now hiding a lot of search results now.

- In addition search for "domain" in Google as some links will not be referenced by the www part.

- Use **link:**www.domain.com to see who Google thinks is linking to you. This is often very incomplete by the way.

- Use **related:**www.domain.com to see who Google thinks most match you as competitors

- Check the *cached* version of pages you have as this will show the record that Google has of the page and will show you when the search bot last looked at that page. On cached pages, Google will highlight the words you are searching for. The cache will also show pages that were linking to you when the bot last visited that page, but perhaps are not linking to you now.

- Search for the keyword alone, then add a word one at a time to see if you can be found. Mark the sites leading on your keywords and mark these as competitor domains (in addition to any normal competitors you know about).

- If you want to restrict your competitor search to the uk use +site:uk to just get sites with a .co.uk or .ac.uk or .org.uk.

- Now **do the same thing for your competitors domains** (eg for the domain at the top of the keyword set you would like to be known under) and use the results to tune your links – where can you get free links, what are they doing to build links. Why is their content more favoured?

- Finally make sure you add yourself to Google maps (maps.google.co.uk). This is their on-line directory a bit like yellow pages but with a live map. It helps Google locate you.

- groups.google.com to find relevant discussion groups that might be appropriate to post information and advice too with links.

2. Alexa

Alexa (www.alexa.com) is an imperfect monitor of site traffic. Lots of people have Alexa toolbars which monitor the sites they visit and report the results back to Alexa. Alexa therefore can give you a **traffic rank** (a traffic rank is an estimate of site visitors for each site) but it can also give the traffic rank of sites linking into you, or sites linking in to competitors. This helps prioritise link building.

(Note that it is not accurate with regard to traffic rank. We know because high traffic sites we have get lower traffic ranks than low traffic sites we have, but it helps provide clues as to whether things are moving in the right direction as a separate indicator to Google).

3. Yahoo, MSN and AOL

Obviously you occasionally need to check the rank on these pages. Most offer the same type of services as listed for google (eg Yahoo groups).

4. Wikipedia

Wikipedia is starting to get to the top rank of most technical categories for many search categories.

Although you cannot directly place blatant copy and links to your site on Wikipedia (this will get you banned), if you can write a useful encyclopaedic like entry that includes references or links to your site (eg The oldest horse troughs are found in… See this link), then you get the benefit of a high value link to your site.

5. Goarticles

Place to add articles for free which may help build links to your pages. In Google use related:www.goarticles.com to see a range of other such services out there.

6. Yahoo directory, Google directory

You can ask for your site to be included in the Google or Yahoo directories. There was once something called DMOZ which was an open directory of sites. This was copied by lots of sites and also forms the basis of directories for Yahoo and Google. It has been closed to new entries for the last three years, but is still very important in rankings.

7. URLtrends

This is a trend aggregator which brings together analysis of page ranks across various sites. Relatively new to us so not entirely sure what its value is longer term.

Notanant sites and SEO

Notanant automatically builds meta tags, titles and keywords from the content you have on the page and the site details. These are taken from the page summary section, so it is useful to include things in the summary of each page you have. This actually seems to be what Google likes you to do and increases your keyword density on the page in a natural fashion.

Note that we can also change tags and titles on the front page of sites to custom text. This is part of the Level 2 service upwards. We can also set up URL rewriting if you wish to give key pages a specific name. This does not necessarily give you a better ranking than the standard Notanant page URL – we're monitoring this at the moment.

We can provide site logs and access to lists of referring sites to clients on the appropriate service level