NHA Guide to
Search Engine Optimisation

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) should be an integral part of your web design from the very beginning as it affects every aspect of the site: design, structure, planning and even the folder structure.

Each page needs to be considered within the SEO context. Headline, content, the structure of the mark up on the page, the name of the page/file, etc – are all factors that can influence your search engine rankings

Keywords and Key Phrases

These represent what you think are the most likely search terms someone is likely to use when looking for your site. The way you implement keywords and phrases represents one of the single most important factors in your search engine rankings.

Before creating any pages you need to research the best ones for your business. Current thinking suggests that unless you can target very unique keywords, key phrases can be more effective. Single words are more often entered into searches than key phrases so they are much harder to target. It's also worth noting that if you use plural versions you will get results from both singular and plural searches.

Content Planning

Having identified the most suitable key phrases for each page of your site you should write 250-300 words of "key phrase rich" text. Titles and headings are weighted by some search engines and are considered more important than other text so write with this in mind. Repeating specific key phrases in different elements of the HTML will improve your chances of ranking well (see below)

HTML and Web Site Structure

The position that key phrases appear within the structure of your pages directly affects the relative importance a search engine attributes to them. You should ensure the most important key phrases appear within a page's <HEADING><TITLE> and <H1> elements. The <TITLE> tag is most important as the majority of search engines give it extra weight. It is also good practice to keep the <H1> and <BODY> tags close together as some search engines add a "proximity" weighting.

Use keywords and phrases in your navigation links as well.

META Tags

These used to be very important but are largely ignored by search engines these days. The <META DESCRIPTION> tag is still used by some search engines as descriptive text when displaying results but is ignored when it comes to rankings. But! You should still include properly focused Meta Tags as they won't do any harm and can improve your rankings.

Key Phrase Links

When linking to other pages or stories DON'T use "Click here" or its variants. Use descriptive text based on your key phrases.

Image and ALT Tags

Another important area – again, use your key phrases in the <ALT> tag.

Avoid Flash Splash Pages

Don't use a graphic-heavy home page. Flash animations are very pretty but give search engines indigestion. Without the "key phrase rich" text we've been discussing there's nothing for a search engine to index. The redirects they use are also treated with suspicion by search engines as artificial redirects are used by unscrupulous sites to achieve higher rankings and can lead to a site being banned.

Text Alternatives to Flash

If you use Flash for your pages, search engines cannot index the content. You will need to offer text alternatives.

Avoid dynamic URLs with odd characters

Search engine crawlers don't like characters such as $, ?, =, +, & and % characters. Created by dynamic pages these characters can put the crawler into an endless loop and overload the system so pages may not be indexed

CSS and Javascript

Search engines read HTML and any embedded CSS or JavaScript. Bearing in mind what we said earlier about "proximity weighting" and the increased relevance given to the first 200ish words it makes sense to keep CSS and Jscript in external, referenced files to avoid them muddying the issue.

Sitemap

A sitemap will make it easier for search engines to crawl and index your content. Create one that links to all your main pages.

In Conclusion

Compelling content that is relevant to your target audience will enhance your chances of ranking well with the search engines but to really fly, you need to use appropriate keywords and phrases, and use them in ways that search engines understand and can weight accordingly.