

Boost your Search Engine Rankings *in ten easy steps*

Search Engine Optimisation – the art of convincing search engines to list your e-commerce site above others in the same category – is in high demand. In the current market, most site owners would sell their left leg in exchange for the elusive top spot on Google. And yet SEO remains a mysterious science.

But it isn't. There are plenty of things you can do to start improving your search engine rankings, and make sure your team is on track. Have your designer adding ALT tags and your copywriter incorporating the right keywords, and your rankings will naturally begin to climb. Still trembling? Stay with me...

Ask a panel of experts for their best SEO tips and you can't expect to surface for weeks. But in the name of e-commerce success I've spent the last month ploughing through it to bring you hot tips from our country's finest. Here are ten simple ways to start improving your search engine rankings.

1. Images and flash

"As far as the search engines are concerned, graphics and flash animations are just eye candy. Where you have images, make sure that the ALT tag is always completed," says Gary Dickenson from Creospace Web Consultants. The ALT tag is the text displayed when you hover over an image, and it can be read by search engines exploring your website, which means it's a great place for a couple of keywords. "But it's not the place for an essay!" adds Gary.

2. Don't click here!

Make sure your links have meaning. "Use descriptive text for all your internal links - i.e. don't say 'click here for the latest fashions' (with the link on 'click here') - say 'view our latest fashions' with the link on 'latest fashions'," recommends David Horn, creative director at Tick Tock Design in Ireland. "That way the destination page benefits not only from having a link pointed towards it, but from having keywords associated with that link."

3. Links to your site

Whenever you can, ask related sites to post your URL on their pages – it will improve your rankings dramatically. “You can also insert a text link at the footer of your website template,” suggests Dean Cosson of C2 Web Design. “Link it to your home page with your chosen keywords as the clickable text. We’ve achieved a no.1 ranking for a family website using this trick.”

4. Get listed

Many search engines are now suspicious of software-produced submissions, due to unethical usage. So submit your site to engines manually, and don’t forget directories such as Yahoo! and DMOZ Open Directory Project. “Google derives much of its data from DMOZ,” says Jon White of IT Magic in Wiltshire. “But before submitting your site to the directory, read their guidelines and explore the directory to understand the process. Choose the most relevant category, or risk being rejected. The directory will take a few weeks to list you so don’t be tempted to re-submit, or you’ll be bumped to the back of the queue!”

5. Product Pages

“SEO is most effective when the page is targeted to one or two keywords,” says Ray Field of Tin Soldier Design (who designed the successful ecommerce site www.the-unusual-gift-shop.com). The trick isn’t cramming in ALL your keywords, ALL of the time, but choosing a couple for each page or section. “This has the clear advantage of feeding to any visitor the ‘exact’ referral page they were looking for.

“When designing an e-commerce site, you should focus the structure on product groups. A product group would be called Wedding Gifts (for example) with sub-categories below it like Wedding stationery, Wedding albums, Wedding flowers, etc.”

6. Relevant titles and headers

“Create a H1 tag for every page,” says Jon White of IT Magic. “These are the top headings on each page. They’re an important part of your website and should include key phrases. But keep it to a maximum of 10 words – it has to be reader-friendly too.”

7. Finding keywords

Two great places to find keywords:

- Google. To use Google's Keyword Tool you'll need an Adwords account. Google can supply reliable statistics (since it gets 36% of search engine traffic every day), and it can also tell you what position you could buy in the right-hand rankings.
- Wordtracker.co.uk. This is exceptionally easy to use; it offers unlimited free trials, with full access starting at £4.20 for a day. In plain English, the site will guide you through the process, and even emails you the results at the end.

8. Homepage copy...

Whether you're a writer or not, homepage copy is everyone's worst nightmare. The best advice I can offer is to keep it simple. 150-200 words is generally agreed to be the optimum length, but this text can (and should) be broken into manageable chunks. After an engaging welcome, you can get away with listing a few of your key products or services, but keep it light.

9. Keep it fresh

"Review your keywords and site content regularly," says Gary Dickenson from Creospace. "Add and amend where required. Content is king when it comes to website rankings – and new content makes the search engines visit your site more frequently."

10. One final thing

Don't get bogged down with SEO and underestimate the danger of Wandering Mouse Syndrome. If your site starts to look like a keyword catalogue, your customers will lose the will to live – and that's when mice start to wander. We're humans. Happy, engaging copy keeps customers on-screen and prompts them to purchase. After all, the purpose of SEO is to attract customers – don't let them fall at the final hurdle.

WITH THANKS TO OUR PANEL OF EXPERTS!

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