

Services such as Google's FeedBurner allow us to monitor our users' usage of RSS feeds, and gather statistics from them.

Search engine optimization

One way to increase traffic to our website is through **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**. This involves ensuring that the content and the structure of our site are well optimized for search engines, making it easier for them to access our sites, and digest the important content. The other aspect is with regards to inbound links to our site.

Therefore, search engine optimization can be broken down into two primary areas:

- On-site search engine optimization, focusing on changes to the actual website itself
- Off-site search engine optimization, focusing on building up a reputation for the website through reputable, high quality, inbound links

Let us take a brief look at these two methods.

On-site SEO

On-site SEO requires us to ensure that the website itself is suitably structured, and the content is appropriate and up to date, encouraging search engines to index the site, and helping them realize which content is most relevant within the site.

Headings

Properly structured pages make use of appropriate headings to break down the content of the document into sections. The content within these headings is also considered highly by search engines. It is important that we don't fill them with too much content – three to seven words should be sufficient, keeping with the feel of a heading. The different levels of headings indicate their importance within the page (heading level one is most important, level two less so, and so on). There is much discussion on the web design community about what a first level heading should contain – either the name of the site, or the name of the page. Personally, I find the name of the page more appropriate and more relevant in terms of optimization too. There should only be one instance of the `h1` tag on a page, however, there can be any number of lower level headings.

Links

Having links to other pages within the site is a very simple and useful way to improve search engine performance. The trick is to make use of relevant sentences, using the relevant keywords as hyperlinks, and also ensuring that the titles of the link are suitably optimized. Take the example of a novelty hat category page. A poorly optimized link would be:

```
To see Dino friendly restaurants our members have  
reviewed <a href="dfr/">click here</a>
```

The link has no context to search engines, and contains no meaningful information. A more meaningful, and therefore, search engine friendly link would be:

```
Why not view our members reviews of <a href="reviews/  
dinosaur-friendly-restaurants/" title="Reviews of Dinosaur  
friendly Restaurants made by our members">Dinosaur  
friendly restaurants</a>
```

All these small changes do make a difference!

Up to date, relevant content

One of the most important things about a website is its content. Visitors like content to be fresh and up to date. By the same token, search engines also like this, as it shows the site is related to the user's search, and that it is relevant because it is regularly updated.

Page metadata

An older method for search engine optimization was to take advantage of the Meta tags within an HTML document. Because this was widely abused, it isn't as effective as it once was; however, it is still a useful technique. Some sites have their description text in search engine results pages showing as the text from their description Meta tags.

The two important Meta tags are `keywords` and `description`. The `keywords` tag allows us to associate a number of keywords with our content, and the `description` tag allows us to associate a friendly, easy-to-read description to the page. Because search engines penalize sites that hide some content from their users (with the purpose of it being shown only to the search engines, to make the search engines think the site was more relevant for certain phrases or keywords), this technique was abused as a legitimate way to have text that was unrelated to the page (or repetitions of related content) to try and boost rankings, and as such the search engines don't put as much emphasis on these now.

The Meta tags are contained within the <head> section of an HTML document. Example of the keywords and description tags in use is as follows:

```
<meta name="description"
      content="Dino Space is a vibrant, buzzing community for keepers of
      Dinosaurs, sharing health-care, breeding and leisure tips" />
< meta name="keywords"
      content="dinosaur, keepers, help, community, health, reviews,
      friendly, leisure, supplies" />
```

While the search engines don't take these into account too much, it is still important not to overuse them, as that indicates to the search engines that the site is trying to abuse the Meta tags and their purpose.

Site speed

One very new edition to the list of factors to a sites ranking in search engines is the speed of the site, as announced by Google in April 2010. Sites that take a while to load are penalized. More information can be found on the Google blog: <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2010/04/using-site-speed-in-web-search-ranking.html>.

There are a number of tools available to help monitor and improve the speed of your website. Some potential tools include:

- YSlow from Yahoo!: <http://developer.yahoo.com/yslow/>
- Page Speed browser plugin: <http://code.google.com/speed/page-speed/>
- Articles on speeding up your site: <http://code.google.com/speed/articles/>

Search engine goodies—sitemaps and tools

Many search engines provide a number of tools to help webmasters improve the performance of their sites in the search engines, and to help webmasters with the best practices. Google has a number of webmaster tools—a collection of tools geared towards helping webmasters manage the errors within their site, and see how Google sees their website—has been developed by Google, and is available for use, freely. Webmasters can also create a sitemap in XML format, to tell Google of all of the pages within our site, their importance within the scheme of the site as a whole, and how frequently they are updated, to help them decide when to return to re-index the updated content.

The webmaster tools in general, outline errors such as duplicate content, duplicate metadata within pages in the same site, as well as broken or forbidden links. More information can be found on the following pages:

- <https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/home?hl=en>
- <http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=40318>

Off-site SEO

Off-site SEO relies on promoting the website on various other websites through inbound links, which is why it is referred to as off-site SEO. This is a particularly large area, and some companies spend very large amounts of money on this, though of course, this is all relative to the amount of return they get on their SEO investment. Off-site SEO is particularly useful for gaining rankings for specific keywords within the search engines.

Inbound links are, as we discussed earlier, an important metric in determining the ranking of websites within the SERPs. One of the easiest ways to generate inbound links, is with existing social networks, or social websites (forums in particular), by adding a link to the website within our personal signatures on discussion forums. This needs to be done carefully and considerately. If we were to sign up just to promote our link, we would be seen as a spammer, and most sites would deactivate our accounts. Posting comments on relevant blog entries or articles with a link back to our site is also useful, provided the comments are appropriate, relevant, and our own site does not compete with the article or blog in question.

Some examples of services which SEO agencies offer as part of an off-site campaign include:

- Writing articles for relevant blogs or article networks with links back to our site
- Guest blog posts on other blogs
- Online distributed press releases
- Link baiting (articles, content, or applications designed to generate many comments, blog trackbacks, forwarding, and linking to; often, this is done by posting on controversial topics within a specific niche, or by viral marketing)
- Link building (building high-quality, relevant inbound links)

What to look for in an SEO company

Search engine optimization is very much an art as opposed to a science. Here are some useful tips to consider if you do wish to use a company to manage SEO strategy:

- Nobody can guarantee results — so watch out for companies that claim they do.
- SEO is a long term investment. However, watch out for minimum terms imposed by the companies; but by the same token you should appreciate that results take time, so small (3-6 month) minimum terms are acceptable.
- SEO and PPC are not the same — some companies claim to offer SEO, when all they do is set up Google Adwords.
- Find out about their link-building campaigns to ensure they build relevant links, which won't have a negative effect in the long term.
- Audit trails — do they provide a log of work they do, links they acquire, webmasters they contact, on-site changes? Most won't give much information, as it is what is paid for, but make sure you get some indication of work performed.
- Reports — ensure you are updated regularly with search engine performance, and the effect their work is having on the rankings.

User retention

Another important aspect of marketing, is marketing with existing users, keeping them coming back to the site to make the site more useful and relevant for other users.

E-mails for the user's action

Regular e-mails can remind users about the site, if they have forgotten about it, or not had time to visit for a while. We don't want to send them lots of emails to nag them into returning; however, we can e-mail them with relevant updates. For example, when someone tries to connect with them on the site, or when they receive a message through the site, we e-mail the user to notify them of this.

This also doubles as a reminder to our users, and if the user connecting with them is of interest to them, it may help members who have lapsed in their interaction with the site, to return.

User feedback

By asking the user for feedback and ideas for improvement, they can feel more engaged and involved in the site. This also gives us feedback to use, ideas to discuss, and new features to implement.

Hello there!

As we discussed earlier, newsletters are a great way to remind a user that our site is still around, without there being a specific reason. Perhaps just to tell them what they have been missing out on, or to ask for feedback on why they haven't participated in a while, or to tell them about new developments and features on the site.

Monetization options

One other important consideration is how to monetize our site. While Dino Space hasn't been designed to make a profit, it may be useful to try and recuperate expenses such as hosting fees. Some simple options to get you started:

- Cafepress.com/Spreadshirt—create merchandise with your site's logo on, and earn a percentage from sales. This can be prominently promoted on the site.
- Google AdSense—Advertisement blocks from Google on the site earn money on a per-click basis; alternatively, integrating a Google search feature provides a less obtrusive form of advertising.
- Affiliate Marketing—Become an affiliate of sites such as Amazon, where relevant products can be promoted on the site and a commission earned.

Final tips: web stats

We can monitor the statistics and performance of our site, using a number of stats tools that are available. One such product is a very powerful statistics and analytics package called Google Analytics, available from Google, completely free of charge. This is useful for us to see which pages our visitors are using, and which pages are being ignored, allowing us to either promote them more heavily, or to focus on the more popular areas of the site.

There are also ways to integrate Google Analytics with e-commerce installations, to try and help us to determine average income per visitor—this is particularly useful when making use of PPC marketing, as it links in with Google's own PPC network, AdWords.

We can sign up for Google Analytics on <http://analytics.google.com/>, where we are supplied some HTML code to insert into our site's footer template, so that it can begin tracking our statistics.

We can also use tools like this to monitor Bounce Rates, to see how and why our users leave our site and from which pages they decide to leave. We can also see where the visitors come from, so we know which advertising sites or sites we have links on are helping us. Statistics on error pages can be useful to help us find links that are broken, or incoming links that are outdated, so we can either correct the broken link, or put a redirect in from an outdated inbound link to the new location of a moved page.

Summary

In this chapter, we looked into effectively marketing and promoting websites and social networking websites with online marketing techniques, search engine optimization, and user retention strategies. We also looked briefly into how we may wish to monetize our site.

Now, not only do we have a great framework to use for our projects, but we are placed to market and promote them effectively, hopefully generating a great return on investment for ourselves with our own projects, and for client projects.