ROCKABLE*

Getting to Know
SEO

Andre Kibbe

Getting to Know
SEO

ROCKABLE *

Rockablepress.com
Envato.com

© Rockable Press 2012

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Why Learn SEO?

Search Engine Optimization, or *SEO*, is a set of best practices for getting a website or page ranked as highly as possible in one of the top search engines. SEOs (people who do search engine optimization) like to refer to "search engines" in the generic sense to be democratic, but in reality, Google is the search engine that is targeted most often. If a web page is ranked as the top result in Google, a similar ranking will very likely follow in Yahoo and Bing. Throughout this book, we'll use "Google" and "search engine(s)" synonymously, since Google's indexing algorithm sets the agenda for all other general purpose search engines.

SEO is a constantly moving target. Many tips and concepts that worked famously two or three years ago have either diminished in effectiveness, or are even counterproductive to implement at this point. Unfortunately, no one in the SEO world has the last word on what works and what doesn't with 100% authority. The reason is simple: search engines use proprietary algorithms (computational rules and procedures) for deciding which pages command higher rankings in search results. If everyone knew how Google's algorithm worked, everyone would game the system. All we can do from the outside is draw from years of experience, looking at different properties of high ranking websites and trying to find commonalities.

One of the most consistent features of pages on the first page of Google is a

ROCK✱ TIP

Yahoo doesn't have a search engine of its own. It began as a directory, where "search" results came from sites hand-picked by Yahoo's own staff. Yahoo now uses Bing's search technology behind the scenes. Between the Bing website and Yahoo, Bing-powered search is 26.1% of the US search market, while Google is 65.6%.

!

relatively large number of inbound links. Suppose you wrote the world's greatest blog post on container gardening. Theoretically, outstanding content gets circulated more than average or mediocre content. So, when other home and garden sites address the topic of container gardening, they might reference your article in the form of a *link*, and your post could wind up with thousands of links pointing to it. When you look up "iPhone" in Google, the top result is almost always Apple, since the vast majority of iPhone-related content has links to Apple's website.

Some webmasters and Internet marketers take the reductionist view that links are the only factor that really matters in SEO. On the opposite extreme, some blogging gurus insist that all that matters is writing good content, implying that Google's search results are a meritocracy. Both arguments have serious flaws which will be addressed throughout the book.

The Benefits of SEO

Search engine optimization isn't the only way to increase a website's traffic and income, but it's arguably the most important. This goes against the grain of popular sites that put social media on a pedestal, insisting that bloggers and marketers should focus their attention primarily on Facebook, Twitter and Google+ for driving pageviews. For many websites, social media is indeed necessary, but not sufficient. Search traffic has its own unique advantages.

Search traffic is, relatively speaking, sustainable traffic. A #1 result in Google, maintained over time, will deliver consistent traffic to a site day in and day out. If the term "container gardening" gets around 300 searches a day in Google, the #1 result will be clicked on about 40% of the time, meaning that your top ranked post on container gardening would receive about 120 visits today, 120 visits tomorrow, and so on. Search rankings aren't static—they can be overtaken by new pages that gain authority—but they require

far less maintenance to maintain their positions that social media updates.

Search Traffic vs. Social Traffic

Sustaining social traffic from networks like Facebook and Twitter requires constantly updating those accounts with new content. Stop tweeting, and you stop getting traffic from your followers on Twitter. Social networks have to be maintained more aggressively than search engine results to sustain user visits. Unlike a search result, updates on social networks provide almost no residual traffic. Every new tweet is pushed further down the timeline by a newer tweet until it fades into history. A good search ranking, on the other hand, maintains its place for as long as it's perceived to be a quality result in the eyes of Google.

> ## ROCK*
> ## TIP
>
> *An analysis of traffic distribution based on a leaked AOL study found that the #1 result gets 42.1% of the clicks in all of Google's search results. The click distribution for results #2 through #9 on page one: 11.9%, 8.5%, 6.1%, 4.9%, 4.1%, 3.1%, 3.0%, 2.9%, and 3.0%. So the #1 result gets 3.5 times more traffic than the #2 result.*
>
> !

Blogging has the same problem as social media. Bloggers are sometimes referred to as "pageview slaves" due to their need to blog regularly to maintain their traffic. Any sharp decline in posting (taking a day off from a blog that averages four posts a day, for instance) often engenders a sharp decline in traffic. To increase their pageviews, many bloggers feel obliged to increase their posting frequency at the risk of burning themselves out; or worse—they're compelled to write "linkbait" topics that succeed at attracting short-term traffic at the risk of lowering long-term credibility.

If you're trying to make money online, social traffic is notorious for providing poor conversion rates (see the sidebar on the next page). Social bookmarking platforms like Digg and StumbleUpon

bring in plenty of readers, but few buyers. Social sites are used primarily for recreation. When readers click on a "fishing rods" link in a blog post that's on Digg, it's usually because their curiosity has been piqued. This is fundamentally different from users who type 'fishing rods' into a search engine—these are people who probably want to actually *buy* fishing rods. So a visitor on your site that comes from a search engine is generally more likely to convert to a sale than a visitor from a social bookmark or status update.

Search Traffic vs. PPC Traffic

ROCK* TIP

Conversion rate refers to the percentage of viewers who respond to a specific call to action on a page relative to the number of times the page is viewed. Actions can range from entering an email address to clicking on a "Buy Now" button, depending on the conversion goal. If "Buy Now" button clicks are the conversion goal, then three clicks between 100 visitors would mean a 3% conversion rate.

Another competing form of traffic is "pay per click," or PPC traffic. Ads in the Google Search Network appear above and to the right of the regular "organic" Google search results, and can therefore be thought of as "instant" SEO: you buy search terms and show up immediately on the first page of Google without having to build inbound links or spend time editing your pages for keyword relevancy. For years, the Google AdWords program has been the go-to PPC network for advertisers, though Facebook has a strong PPC program of its own.

AdWords is Google's primary business. Google's business model, in a nutshell, is to be the eBay of keywords. Advertisers bid a certain amount for a certain keyword, which is more valuable than some keywords and less valuable than others; and prices fluctuate on a daily basis like stocks. Bidding for keywords has only become more competitive over time. A keyword that might have cost $0.25 per click five years ago might be $3.00 today.

If you can buy traffic now rather than toil away at search engine optimization for months, why do anything else? Among other disadvantages, PPC offers considerably less room for failure than SEO. If you're running your own SEO campaign without outsourcing parts of the process, the worst that can happen is that your pages don't get any traction in Google, and you'll lose a few months that could arguably have been put to more productive use.

If you're running a PPC campaign, on the other hand, you can easily lose your shirt. Suppose you're selling a video on "how to play harmonica." Let's imagine, for the sake of round numbers, that the keyword "how to play harmonica" costs $1.00 per click. If 100 people click on a Google ad that points to your sales page for the harmonica video, only a tiny fraction of them will actually buy the video—historically, 1-2% is the norm. If your video cost $50, you would have to sell three copies to break even at a 1.5% conversion rate, and anything less is a loss. So it's just as easy to wipe out your advertising budget overnight as it is to make a quick profit.

SEO Complements Any Traffic Building Strategy

SEO and other forms of traffic building aren't mutually exclusive. An effective social media strategy can help you attract any number of natural links that are great for SEO. For instance, if you're followed by an A-list blogger on Facebook, and you post a status update mentioning some article that you just wrote on your blog, she might check out the article and link to it from her blog. That has may have considerable SEO value. One link from a blog that Google highly respects can be worth dozens of links from smaller sites in the same niche.

Ranking well in the search engines can also lower the cost and reduce the risk of buying traffic. Sites that rank well in Google for a particular keyword can often get away with lower bids in AdWords for that keyword. Furthermore, if you can get on the first page of Google, buying a Google ad gives you two spots on the same page: one in the organic search results, and another in the paid results. This might seem redundant, but having a second result on the page can increase the number of visitors to your site via search by 20%. Try doing a search on a highly popular brand name like Apple or Microsoft, and you'll often see them the organic and paid results simultaneously.

SEO Helps You Make Money Online

All site owners want more traffic, but traffic for its own sake is useless. Traffic needs to be converted into something more meaningful, like clicks on ads, sales of products, or procurement of email addresses. Some web publishers use SEO to build traffic to articles which they monetize with Google AdSense ads (which don't earn much money for bloggers who aren't savvy with SEO), others promote affiliate products for a commission, while still others have ecommerce sites, selling their own products.

SEO allows these publishers to maintain recurring traffic—some of which will convert to revenue—with much less effort than writing multiple blog posts every day, or depending exclusively on ad spending. You can use AdWords to test your conversion rates for profitability. If you find that you're earning more than you spend, you know that it's worth your time to start an SEO campaign. You won't waste months trying to promote pages to the top of Google only to find out that they aren't earning well.

But not everyone has the money to do PPC testing ahead of time. For a statistically relevant sample, you would need to run an ad for a couple of weeks, which can cost hundreds of dollars. In later

chapters, you'll learn ways to find less competitive keywords in your niche that allow you to rank for a few terms relatively quickly.

How This Book Is Organized

1. **Content + Links = SEO.** The particulars of SEO might change from moment to moment, but the two pillars of SEO—content and links—remain unchanged. The content on your web pages needs to closely match what is being typed into a search engine, meaning that it needs to have "relevancy". More importantly, it needs to have links from other websites to be recognized as an authority source, which give the content "authority". Authority depends on the number of links received and the text used in those links.

2. **The Importance of Keywords.** The biggest flaw in the "just write good content" argument from an SEO perspective is writers' frequent misunderstanding of how search engines recognize content, which often requires more literal wording to be indexed under a particular search term. You'll learn how a few simple changes in the wording of your page copy to focus on keywords (the phrases people type into search engines) can have dramatic effects on search engine rankings.

3. **Keyword Research Explained.** Once the effects of keywords choices are understood, you need a strategy for picking out better keywords. We'll take a look at the Google AdWords Keyword Tool, used to generate and compare hundreds of keyword ideas by showing you their search frequency and cost-per-click (CPC).

4. **On-Page Optimization.** By learning a handful of simple HTML concepts, you'll understand how to optimize your web pages for search engines. On-page SEO involves placement of keywords in certain HTML elements: the title

tag, the meta description tag, the anchor text used in links, the alt-text used in photos, and so on.

5. **Understanding Backlinks.** Due to Google's revolutionary PageRank algorithm, links unquestionably play the most important role in a web page's position in search engines. You'll learn the main factors that determine the quantity and quality of the links you can attract naturally and the ones that can be built...less naturally.

6. **Getting Links.** Link building is the hardest part of SEO. We'll take a look at some of the safest and most reliable techniques for getting links.

7. **Understanding Competition.** Some market niches are more competitive than others, and within a particular niche, some keywords are more competitive than others. Evaluating the competitiveness of the keywords you're planning to target is critical. Competitive analysis will show you how to find keywords that you can rank for in a couple of weeks rather than several months. You'll find other keywords that, however seductive, are simply too competitive to spend time targeting.

8. **Sharpening the Saw.** As mentioned, SEO is a rapidly changing field due to Google's frequent algorithm updates. We'll take a look at a handful of highly respected websites that provide great information on current best practices.

1

Content + Links = SEO

More than 200 factors are said to contribute to a page's ranking in search engines, but we can reduce the complex to the simple by focusing on the important. While SEO professionals argue over how much certain factors matter, and whether some even matter at all, all would agree that the two most import aspects of search engine optimization are content and links: "on-page" and "off-page" factors.

What's in a Page?

Throughout this book you'll notice greater use of the term "web *page*" rather than "*web*site". The concept of "page" needs to be clarified. In regular conversation, people use the two terms more or less interchangeably. For SEO purposes, it's important to understand that search engines rank individual *pages*, not sites. Each of the ten results listed within Google's Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) points to a particular URL (Uniform Resource Locator, or web address). Even when the URL is a site's home page, only the home page has the ranking shown for that specific search.

Failing to understand the distinction between pages and site can lead to unfortunate results. It's common, for instance, for people to try to get links from a high-PageRank "site" to boost their own website's ranking. You'll frequently hear people refer to certain sites by their assumed PageRank: e.g. "a PageRank 5 site," or "a PR 6 website". What's really happening is that the site's home page has the high PageRank (we'll discuss PageRank in

> ## ROCK*
> ## TIP
>
> **PageRank** *is a measure of the authority Google assigns to a page (which will be discussed in Chapter 5). It should not be confused with a page's position in the search engines—e.g., the third result on page one of Google is not "PageRank 3".*
>
> **!**

the "Understanding Backlinks" chapter), not necessarily the page where the link would reside.

Each page on your site has its own identity, and its own opportunity to rank well for certain keywords. One page on a fitness site might be optimized to rank for "running shoes," while another has content that Google has indexed for "low carb recipes." Your home page might have a PageRank of 4, while an old blog post in the site's archives might have a PageRank of 2, and another post might have a PageRank of 1.

Good Content

Content—everything that goes into your web pages—needs to be developed with two audiences in mind: humans and search engines. Most people recognize good content when they see it, and issues of quality are easy to appreciate or criticize. What's far less obvious is the need to write for search engines.

In the "eyes" of a search engine, good content is keyword relevant content. A search engine needs to be able to classify the topic of a web page in its index. Computers are powerful, but dumb. The only way they can determine whether a page is relevant to a particular topic is to scan for keywords. Some of these keywords will be on the page being indexed. Other keywords will be in the text of the links pointing to the page from a different page on the same website. Still others will be in the text of links pointing to the page from a page on a different website. Links from other websites are called *backlinks*.

Keywords and Tags: The Elements of On-Page SEO

Ranking well in a search engine means ranking well for a particular search term, or *keyword*, like "running shoes" or "low carb recipes." Determine your keyword, and on-page optimization becomes a step-by-step process of making sure that keyword and its variations are strategically placed in a few HTML elements of the web page, such as:

1. **Title tags.** The title of an individual web page, in HTML terms, is called a *title* tag (or sometimes an *HTML* title). It not only shows up with a larger font at the top of the article, but also appears as the blue underlined link you click on in search engines. This is the most important on-page factor to manage.

2. **Meta descriptions.** This is considered an "on-page" element because it's in the page's HTML, but it's not visible to the person reading the website; it's metadata that describes the page in summary form. The meta description is usually one or two sentences long. While keywords placed in a meta description tag aren't indexed like the keywords in the title or article, the text that appears in this description shows up in the SERPs, right after the HTML title.

3. **Headers.** Keywords in the post title and subheadings are given slightly more weight by search bots than keywords in article paragraphs. It would be hard to write a blog post about a topic without putting a few keywords about that topic in the title and subheadings, so the bots pick up on these elements to determine how the post should be indexed.

4. **Alt text.** Alternate text is used to embed the text equivalent of an image on a web page for the visually impaired (text-to-speech software can read it aloud) and for search engines. Some webmasters have reported sizeable boosts in their search traffic after making their alt text more specific, such as "Vegetarian low carb recipe" instead of just "Vegetarian dish."

We'll cover these and other on-page factors in the "On-Page Optimization" chapter.

Links: The Elements off Off-Page SEO

Optimizing keywords and tags on your web pages is helpful, and it would be foolish not to pay attention to on-page factors. But the real meat and potatoes of SEO (sorry, vegetarians) is in links—particularly backlinks from other sites.

When a modern search bot crawls (or "spiders") a page on the Web that hasn't yet been indexed, it looks for keywords on the page to index it, then looks for any hyperlink pointing to another web page. The bot then follows the URL in the hyperlink to crawl the new page. If that page hasn't been indexed, the cycle is repeated: it looks for keywords on the page to index it, then looks for hyperlinks pointing to other pages, and follows them.

Some links carry more weight than others. Internal links (links from one page on a site to another page on the

ROCK* TIP

Links and backlinks are two terms that are often used interchangeably. When people say that they "need more links," they're almost always referring to backlinks; but be aware that some links are internal to one website, while others are outbound, pointing to pages on another website.

!

same site) generally have less weight, or "link juice," than external links (links from a different site). Links with relevant keywords in their text will have more weight than generic text like, "click here." Links from three different websites will have more weight than three links from the same website. Links from pages with higher PageRank will have more weight than links from pages with lower PageRank.

Keys to an SEO-Friendly Site

A site that complies with the principles in this chapter will be more likely to attract attention from search engines (by getting indexed) than sites that focus on "good" content. When you're starting a niche site, keep the following in mind:

- Whenever possible, give your site a name that includes words that people would use in a search engine to find your site. For a fitness site, a domain name like FitnessScope. com, which contains the word "fitness", immediately tells search engines what your site is about.

- The same principle applies to individual web pages. For a blog post reviewing the latest Amazon Kindle, a post title like, "What's Not to Love about the Amazon Kindle?" contains the search term while looking natural. Each blog post is its own web page, and the blog title is the page title; so putting the keyword in the page title is important.

- Start engaging with bloggers and webmasters in your niche, either through blog comments, social media or email. The more you get on their radar, assuming you take genuine interest in what they produce, the easier it will be for you to get many of the links you need when you create a post of high value.

- Remember to use internal links to help search engines index your pages. If you had a post titled "My 10 Favorite Books of 2012", for instance, you can incorporate a sentence describing how you read most of your books on the "Amazon Kindle", linking the keyword to your Amazon Kindle review page.

There's a lot more to say about good links, mediocre links, and bad links. We'll get to all of them in due course. Since much of what makes some links better than others are the keywords contained in them, this is probably a good time to examine keywords in greater detail.

2

The Importance of Keywords

When it comes to understanding language, computers are much more literal than we humans. We can see a title like "How to Rock Your Resume," and immediately understand that "rock" is slang for "improve," and "resume" (even without accents) means "CV" rather than "start again." Computers would have a harder time parsing that string of words and grouping an article with such a title with other résumé writing articles in its index.

Since most humans write for other humans, it doesn't naturally occur to us to make parts of our writing more literal to help search engines do their job. Even small changes can make a big difference. "How to Rock Your Resume Writing" still contains a figurative use of "rock," but it also contains the term "resume writing," which is a frequently searched term. "Resume writing" is searched in Google over 600 times a day. Even if Google's computers don't understand resume writing semantically, they've grouped similar pages in their index.

Keywords

To classify different pages under their respective topics, search engines need to be able to pick out frequently searched terms, which we call *keywords*. A keyword may consist of a single word or several. "Debt" and "how to get out of debt" are two different keywords. Keywords comprised of fewer words tend to be searched more frequently than those comprised of more words.

Keyword	Local Monthly Searches ⓘ	Approximate CPC ⓘ
☆ [debt]	27,100	$11.68
☆ [how to get out of debt]	8,100	$13.74

Fig. 2-1. The word "debt" is searched over three times more often than the words "how to get out of debt".

Shorter keywords are called "head" or "primary" keywords, while longer keywords are known as "long tail" keywords. A frequently used hypothetical example of a primary keyword is "blue widgets"; a few long tails would be "cheap blue widgets," "used blue widgets," and "blue widgets for sale."

Most primary keywords have many, many long tails. The Google AdWords Keyword Tool, which we'll explore in the next chapter, will generate up to 800 long tail variations of a primary keyword in a single query.

The Long Tail

Long tail keywords get fewer searches, but their intent is more specific, so they tend to have higher conversion rates. Someone who types "iPod" into a search engine can be looking for any type of information related to the iPod: pictures, descriptions of different models, or reviews. Someone who types "32GB white iPod Touch" into a search engine is more likely looking to actually buy the product.

Whether it's in your better interest to pursue a primary keyword or long tail is a judgment call, but in most cases, you'll at least want to *start* your SEO campaigns with long tail keywords,

ROCK* TIP

In the abstract, "the long tail" refers to a theoretical distribution curve in consumer demand. The most popular goods and services in a niche make up the smallest percentage, or the "head" of the curve, while the remaining goods and services that make up "the long tail" of the curve are more numerous with lower demand.

Along the same lines, long tail keywords have low search volume and high diversity, while head (primary) keywords have high search volume and low diversity.

then work your way toward the head terms. Long tails are not only more specific, but usually have less competition in search engines. Once Google starts ranking pages on your website for a certain set of related keywords, the site begins to build *keyword authority*, making it easier for newer pages to rank for keywords in the same niche. With increased keyword authority over time, you'll begin to rank for some keywords without any proactive link building.

Fig. 2-1. A list of long tail keywords for "how to get out of debt." Long tail keywords are less competitive and more specific, making them a good start for your SEO efforts.

No matter how competitive or saturated a particular market seems, you can always find a side door into it with diligent keyword research. If you have an affiliate site for iPod and iPhone accessories, it's unrealistic to spend the bulk of your time targeting the main keywords "iPod accessories" and "iPhone accessories"— they're too competitive.

A better strategy is to go after keywords on the frontier of the niche: brand new iPod and iPhone accessories that haven't yet received much coverage on other sites. If "StealthAudio Earbuds" are a new product on the scene, you can publish a news announcement or review of it before your competitors, then

start building links. Do this with enough similar accessories, and you'll eventually have an authority site in the niche. Virtually all successful SEO comes down to an ongoing cycle of publishing content and building links.

Keys to Leveraging Keywords

Keywords are - to Google - what your site is about, what an article is about, or what a product listing is about. For keywords to be useful, you need a heuristic (a set of rules and criteria) for determining which keywords to incorporate. Whether you're planning a new site or revising your existing site to be more discoverable by search engines, make note of the following:

- Before using a keyword tool, brainstorm a list of what you believe to be the primary keywords for your site or page. The keywords you start with carry assumptions that a tool may not help you reexamine. You might discover, for instance, a list of keyword suggestions using "burning fat" as your primary keyword that you wouldn't have found with a more obvious keyword like "losing weight."

- Long tail keywords, despite typically having lower search volumes, are often more commercially significant, since they express search intent more clearly. A keyword like "get out of debt calculator" is more informative than "get out of debt," because the searcher has indicated that he or she is looking for a *tool*, not just general advice. There are fewer pages in Google to compete with for the former than the latter. Always look for opportunities to provide unique information.

- When writing titles and copy, it's better to risk sounding bland than appearing irrelevant for your keyword. A title like, "The Polyglot's Guide to Language Mastery" has no high-volume keywords ("language mastery" has 12 searches a

month) compared to "Learn a New Language in 3 Months" ("learn a new language" gets 1000 searches a month).

- Pick half a dozen sites in your niche and take notes on what appear to be the main keywords being used. It's likely that you'll find at least a few keywords that had not occurred to you.

Up until now, we've only looked at keywords on a conceptual level, where there isn't much to be said that's actionable. Doing actual keyword research will clarify what to look for in the keywords you want to work into your websites.

3

Keyword Research Basics

What people need to know doesn't always coincide with what they're looking for. We've all been in the position of trying to search for something, like performing a certain task in Excel, without knowing the right terminology. To find a solution, we need to state the problem in recognizable terms. For experts, providing a solution to as many people as possible means anticipating how people will search for it. One way to anticipate what people are looking for is drawing on your own experience and intuition. A more systematic way is through keyword research.

For years, the airline industry used online advertising to tout "low fares" to prospective travellers. After all, who wouldn't want low fares? There were actually many searches for "low fares," but they pale compared to the number of searches for a term that didn't occur to advertisers: "cheap tickets." At the time of this writing, "low fares" gets about 4,400 searches a month in the U.S., while "cheap tickets" gets around 1,000,000. Semantically, the two keywords express the same search intent, but again, what people wanted and what they asked for were different by three orders of magnitude. Assumption and intuition could have never discerned the difference in search volume.

The Google AdWords Keyword Tool

The importance of keyword discovery tools like the Google AdWords Keyword Tool can't be overestimated. The tools lets you see a large list of keyword suggestions. including long tails and synonyms for any primary keyword you enter. It also displays a number of keyword attributes, most notably their search volume and cost per click.
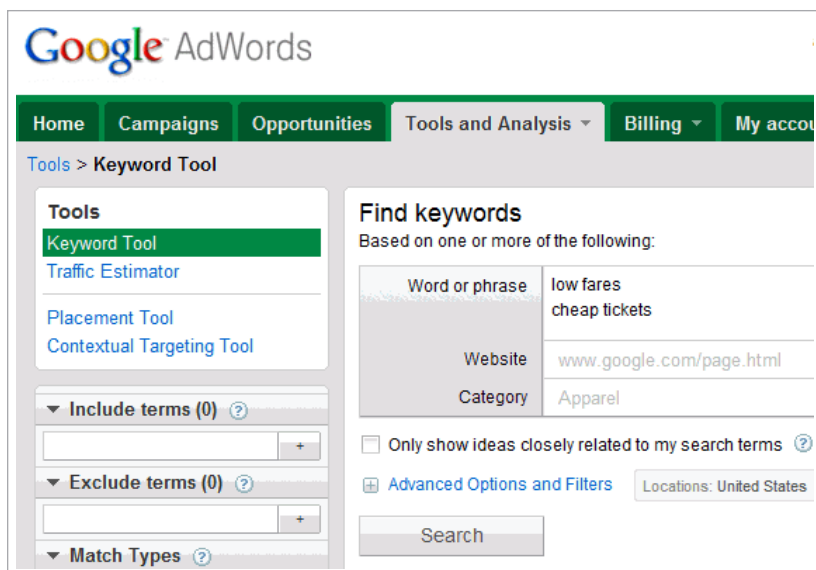
Fig. 3-1. TThe Google AdWords Keyword Tool can help you discover viable long tail keyword suggestions and synonyms.

You can find the Google AdWords Keyword Tool (usually just called the Google Keyword Tool) at http://adwords.google.com. Under the *Tools and Analysis* tab, select *Keyword Tool*. The Keyword Tool is free to use, even without signing up for an AdWords account, but you should definitely sign up. The account is free, but more importantly, Google no longer displays CPC data to users without an account. You can sign up from the AdWords homepage. Though the whole point of encouraging users to get an AdWords account is to purchase advertising, you won't need to do this.

Let's put the two keywords mentioned above in the Keyword Tool; but first, we need to change a few settings. In the left sidebar, you'll see a section labeled, "Match Types." Uncheck the default setting of "Broad" and check the "Exact" setting. Now we want to hide the columns that are irrelevant for our purposes. On the far right, directly opposite the Match Types section, you'll see a dropdown menu button labeled, "Columns." Click on this and uncheck all columns except for "Local Monthly Searches" and

"Approximate CPC." Note that you won't see the Approximate CPC column unless you have an AdWords account and are signed into it.

Search terms (2)		
Keyword	Local Monthly Searches ⑦	Approximate CPC ⑦
☆ [low fares]	4,400	$0.75
☆ [cheap tickets]	1,000,000	$1.01

Fig. 3-2. Comparing search volume and cost-per-click values of two similar keywords.

Now, in the top field captioned, "Word or phrase", type, "low fares" on the first line, press *Enter*; then type "cheap tickets" on the second line and click the Search button. This query generates two sections of keywords lists: your original search terms in the top section, and a much more extensive list of keyword ideas derived from those original terms. By default, the Keyword Tool displays the first 50 of up to 800 suggestions in the keyword ideas section. Without an AdWords account, you would get up to 100 suggestions.

ROCK✲ TIP

It's worth mentioning for the record that the Google Keyword Tool is hardly the only keyword discovery tool available. Most aftermarket keyword tools have many more features than Google's, such as the number of search results for a certain keyword, the ability to check backlink profiles of the top pages ranking for the keyword, the PageRank of those pages, and more. They often come with a one-time or monthly price tag that arguably reflects the added value. In Chapter 7, we'll use the free portion of one such tool, Market Samurai, for competitive analysis.

Global vs. Local Search Volume

Those who have some background in keyword research might find the suggestion to use Local Monthly Searches instead of Global Monthly Searches unusual. The appropriate search volume type needs to be chosen based on the application. For web pages designed to be monetized with ad clicks (Google AdSense) or a

regionalized affiliate programs (Amazon Associates), local search volume is a better choice.

Local idioms also play a significant factor. A keyword like "room to let" gets 3,600 global searches a month in a U.S. based query in the Google Keyword Tool. Yet the local (U.S.) search volume is only 91. Americans don't use "let" as a synonym for "rent". So an American Internet marketer expecting to get dozens of search visitors a day from Google (3,600 x .4 ÷ 30 = 48) will be in for a rude shock when he finds that only one visitor a day actually comes from Google search traffic (91 x .4 ÷ 30 = 1.21).

If, on the other hand, the scope of your market and your marketing has no regional constraints, the global search volume is the way to go. Suppose you're selling an ebook titled *How to Lose 10 Pounds in a Month*, targeting the primary keyword "how to lose 10 pounds." The global and local (U.S.) monthly search volumes on this keyword are 5,400 and 4,400 respectively—a difference of less than 20%. Even though most of the search traffic comes from the United States, the point is that as long as the *local* search traffic comes close to the *global* search traffic numbers ("local" being the country in which the Keyword Tool is being used), then it makes sense to use global search numbers.

ROCK✱ TIP

Despite what the above example seems to imply, it's neither necessary nor desirable to limit your SEO campaign to one keyword. You just need a set of related keywords whose total *search volume meets your traffic needs. It's often easier to find six long tail keywords that each get approximately 600 searches a month than one highly competitive keyword that gets 3,600 searches.*
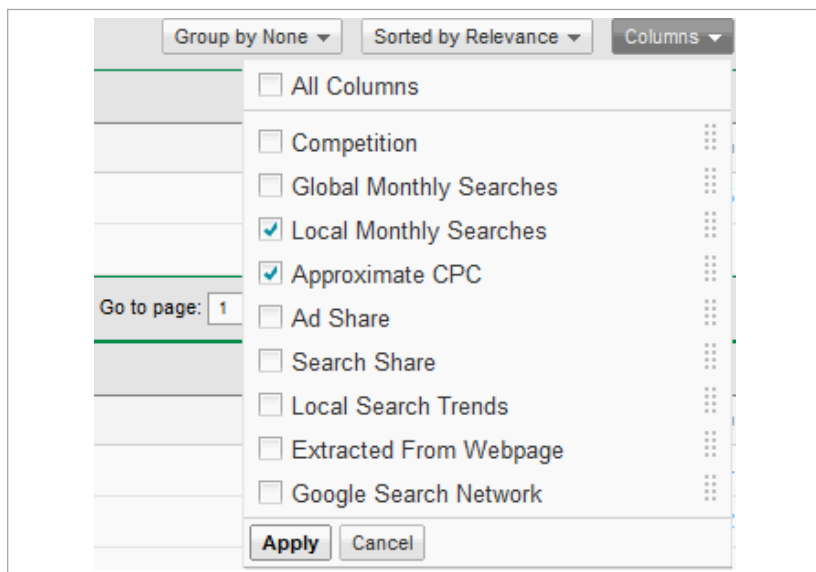
!

Fig. 3-3. Deselect all columns except Local Monthly Searches and Approximate CPC to eliminate clutter.

Choosing the Right Match Type

One of the biggest pitfalls in keyword research is choosing the wrong match type in a keyword discovery tool. Many novice keyword researchers are unaware of the implications of choosing broad match or phrase match instead of exact match. Even if you don't understand the explanation that follows, the rule to follow is simple: If you're doing keyword research for SEO purposes, always use exact match.
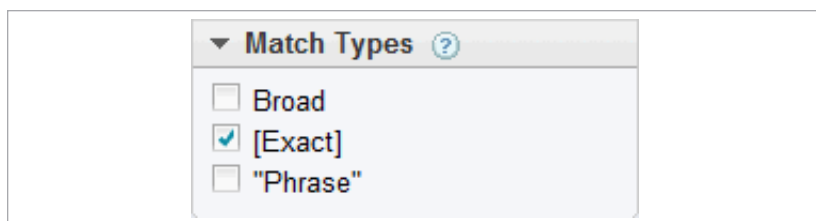

Fig. 3-4. Choosing the exact match type will keep your keyword research based on precise information. The other two types are mainly for ad buyers, not keyword researchers.

In the Match Type section of the Google Keyword Tool, you've already set the type to Exact once. If you were to change it back to Broad and then do a search for "hybrid cars," you would see around 201,000 local searches a month. If you were then to change the match type back to Broad, the number plummets to 49,500. Any time someone enters a search containing the words "hybrid" and "cars" (or "car") into Google, that search gets tallied as a match for "hybrid cars".

Different match types aren't valuable for SEO, but they can be for PPC advertising. Advertisers bidding in AdWords for "hybrid cars" on a broad match basis will have their ads displayed on Google when someone does any search containing those two constituent words, allowing them to reach a broader audience. They might want to advertise to someone searching for "hybrid vs. diesel cars".

Phrase match is a little more stringent. The words entered in the search must contain the exact keyword, but may

ROCK* TIP

Keywords listed in the Keyword Tool that have been set to Exact match will be surrounded by brackets ([hybrid cars]*) Broad match results will be surrounded by quotation marks (*"hybrid cars"*). Broad match results, on the other hand, will have no delimiters surrounding them.*

!

contain words before or after it: e.g. "diesel vs. hybrid cars". The phrase match volume on "hybrid cars" is 135,000, which is almost three times the exact match volume. Exact match, as you might expect, only shows ads when someone does a search using the keyword itself with no alterations or embellishments. Some Internet marketers treat phrase and exact match as equal, but this assumption should be avoided. The search intent of someone specifically searching for hybrid cars can be very different than that of someone just comparing different fuel technologies.

Even experienced keyword researchers find it *very* easy to forget to change the Keyword Tool's match default from Broad

to Exact, and the consequences can be ugly. Even the 75% disparity between broad and exact match results for "hybrid car" pale in comparison to some keywords. "Diet and exercise" gets 90,500 monthly searches based on a broad match, but only 1,900 on an exact match. Once Keyword Tool data is exported to a spreadsheet (using the "Download" dropdown menu button), there's absolutely no way to tell which match type was used, so be sure to double check the match type before you export your data or draw any conclusions from it.

Cost Per Click

Theoretically, a keyword's cost per click has nothing to do with SEO *per se*, since the goal of SEO is to get organic search traffic rather than paying for traffic. But it's not always obvious, even by looking at search volume, that certain keywords are more worthwhile to target than others. A keyword like "song lyrics" gets over 300,000 monthly searches, but the cost per click is a paltry $0.23. Indeed, most keywords suggestions based on "song lyrics" have an even lower CPC.

A keyword's CPC is a good gauge of its commercial potential. The more money advertisers are willing to bid for a keyword, especially on a recurring basis, the easier it is to assume that the keyword in question is a valuable one.

Like search volume, there are no strict upper and lower thresholds for good CPC values. Some Internet marketers won't consider a keyword with a CPC under $1.00. For certain niches, like weight loss, the $1.00 lower limit might be valid. If you're trying to promote an iPhone app that finds song lyrics, a low CPC might be $0.10.

Cost per click is extremely relevant if you're monetizing with Google AdSense, and even if you're not, the formula used to estimate the revenue potential for a keyword is a good way to factor in traffic and CPC data into a single metric. We'll revisit

this concept in more detail later, when we start working with spreadsheets, but the basic formula is: **Search Volume x CPC x .4 x .25 x 0.05**, which we can shorten to **Search Volume x CPC x .005**. According to this formula, a page ranked #1 in Google for "song lyrics" would earn about $345 a month in AdSense revenue.

**ROCK*
TIP**

The "formula" listed above isn't hard science; it's observational. It comes from analyzing AdSense payouts and CTR averages over time. Your own clickthrough rate could be 2% or 7%, and the ".4" figure (40% of all clicks on Google search results) assumes a #1 position. If you have a page in the #4 spot, you would multiply by ".06" instead of ".4".

!

A Few Disclaimers

It's entirely possible that you put in the exact same keywords used in the previous examples, but got different search volumes than were shown here. That's fine. The Google SERPs and the Google Keyword Tool get their information from different data centers, so someone in Dublin searching for "hybrid cars" will very likely get different search volumes and CPC prices in the Keyword Tool, and see different rankings in the SERPs than someone searching from Chicago would.

While it's hard to know it in advance, the accuracy of the Keyword Tool is questionable. Once you have a website that gets significant search traffic, and you have a stats tool like Google Analytics to show you the referring keywords making up that search traffic, you might notice that you get lots of searches for a keyword for which the Google Keyword Tool shows far less search volume. Some keywords that are responsible for some of your search traffic might not show up in the Google Keyword Tool at all. None of this is a reason to abandon the Keyword Tool. Accuracy is relative: the tool

might over- or under-report the actual search volume, but it's the best tool we have and the only whose information comes straight from Mothership Google.

Some keywords are seasonal, and their search volume waxes and wanes based on the time of year. Many retail products see a rise in searches during the Christmas season. In the U.S., you'll see a spike in wedding related searches between April and May. So the search volume you see on a keyword right now might not be representative of its overall trend. If you hover your cursor over a keyword in the Tool, you'll see a magnifying glass icon appear to the right of the keyword. If you click on this icon, it will open up a tab for Google Insights, which will show you the month-by-month search trends for the keyword, as well as a geographical heat map showing where the bulk of searches for the keyword were made.

Core Principles of Keyword Research

Keyword research is rarely easy since it can be such an open-ended activity, but it can be simple if you allow it to be. What you learn in this chapter and in Chapter 7—search volumes, commercial potential, and competitiveness—are all that you really need. We'll save competitive analysis for later, but let's review basic keyword tool usage:

- Whenever you log into the Google Keyword Tool, be sure to configure it to the following settings: Match Types: "Exact" (uncheck Broad and Phrase); Columns: "Local Monthly Searches" and "Approximate CPC" (uncheck all other columns).

- The list of keywords that you actually plan to target and develop content for should have a least the total search volume based on your traffic goals. For instance, if you

had a modest goal of getting 400 search visitors a day to estimate a dozen daily clicks, you would need 100 keywords that generated an average of 32,400 searches a month (i.e. for 432 search visits—monthly search volume x .4 ÷ 30). The corollary is that you need to focus on many keywords rather than being obsessed with one.

- Calculating Google AdSense revenues is a good way to compare the commercial potential of various keywords, using the Search Volume x CPC x .005 formula described. Two long tail variations ("get out of debt fast" and "get out of debt quick") might seem semantically identical, yet one may have a much higher potential.

- Consider whether a keyword is navigational, transactional, or informational. A navigational keyword like "microsoft" probably represents someone looking for the Microsoft.com site, and there's no point in targeting a keyword with a navigational intent unless you own the site being searched for. A transactional keyword is a keyword, like "steak knives," suggesting that the searcher is shopping for steak knives. Informational keywords, like "get rid of bed bugs") may or may not have commercial intent, and it's up to you to make that judgment call. The searcher might be looking for free advice, or she might be looking for an exterminator—in which case the keyword is actually *transactional*.

Now that we know how to find keywords, let's take a look at where to put them on the page.

4

On-Page Optimization

Almost no web page gets indexed in Google for a single keyword exclusively, even if there's one particular keyword that seems to be the road to fame and fortune. Certain keywords, using the formula mentioned in the previous chapter, are worth well over $1000 a month in AdSense revenue alone, and often worth several times more on an affiliate or ecommerce site.

If you have a website about cheap tires, you'll probably get traffic from Google on searches that you didn't optimize for. The site might have a page for the more obvious keywords like "cheap tires online" or "cheap tires for sale"; but when you look at the referral keywords in Google Analytics, you see that 12 people in the last month visited your site through a Google search on "cheap tire and wheel packages," a phrase that appears nowhere on your site. This happens because Google's algorithm sees a wide enough set of related keywords on a certain page that it's assumed to be relevant. The page has keyword relevance because the site has developed keyword authority in the domain of cheap tires.

While each page should be optimized for a primary keyword, it should cast a wider net of related and relevant keywords: the long tails. These long tails shouldn't be chosen for their CPC values, search volumes, or the competitiveness that we'll analyze later; they're only included for keyword variation. A normal web page wouldn't have "cheap tires" appear 20 times. It would include variations like "discount tires," "used tires," "cheap offroad tires," "cheap auto tires" and so on.

Incorporating primary and long tail keywords into article copy is actually much easier than it might seem from the description above. Writers overschooled in SEO theory feel compelled to use keywords in every sentence due to concerns about *keyword density*. The idea behind keyword density is that a keyword has to appear a certain number of times relative to the number of total

words on the page. SEO gurus disagree on good and bad density percentages, but a 1% to 3% range is generally considered acceptable; anything above this risks appearing spammy to search engines.

Don't overthink what needs to go into an article. Just make sure that your primary keyword appears at least once or twice, and get a couple of long tails in if possible.

HTML for On-Page Factors

Most people who read content on the web aren't aware that they're actually looking at *code*. A word on web page will appear differently if it's in a post title instead of a paragraph, or it might be in italics or boldface, or perhaps in a different color in a pullquote. The word might not even be visible on the page, but it may be hidden from view in a "meta tag" for a search engine to read.

Formatting code is handled with HTML, or *Hypertext Markup Language*. If you were building a website from scratch, you would need to know a lot of HTML. If you're using a blogging platform like WordPress, Movable Type, Blogger or Tumblr, you just need to know enough HTML tagging to make you dangerous with SEO.

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html lang="en">
<head>
        <meta charset="UTF-8" />
        <title>Daring Fireball</title>
        <meta name="viewport" content="width=600, initial-scale=0.5, minimum-scale=0.45" />
```

Fig. 4-1. A title tag within HTML code. This code is interpreted by a browser to render a web page.

A *tag* is a formatting description enclosed in a pair of angle brackets—the greater-than and less-than signs. The content being formatted gets enclosed in a pair of tags: an opening and closing tag. The HTML for the word "boldface" in boldface would look like: boldface. When a browser sees this code, it knows to render the word in boldface. The closing tag always has

a forward slash between the first angle bracket and the formatting description. The first tag on a page is almost always the <head>. The <head> section contains all of the meta tags. You can view the HTML source for a page by right-clicking it and selecting "View page source".
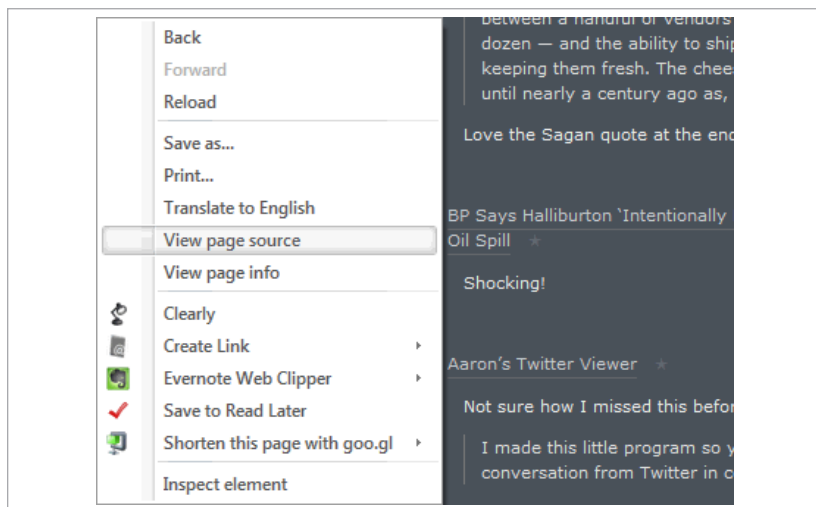

Fig. 4-2. Right-click to View Page Source in Firefox, Chrome and Safari.

Meta Tags

There are three key types of meta tags that need to be addressed for SEO: the title, meta description, and meta keywords tags. The title tag is by far the most critical.

Title Tags

A web page titled "The Truth about Aardvarks" will have a title tag that looks like: <title>The Truth about Aardvarks</title>. This title won't necessarily be the same as the post title, since the post title is an H2 header tag, but it's often the same. WordPress and other content management systems tend to assign whatever's in the H2 to the title tag as well.

```
<!DOCTYPE HTML PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD HTML 4.01 Tran
<html>
<head>
<title>How to Replace a Lighting Fixture</title>
```

Fig. 4-3. The first few lines of HTML for a web page titled "How to Replace a Lighting Fixture."

You should always try to find a way to work your primary keyword in the title tag. If you found that a certain page was getting traffic for "cheap tire and wheel packages," you could embed the keyword in a title like, "Where to Find Cheap Tire and Wheel Packages" or "What to Look for in Cheap Tire and Wheel Packages," or whatever is congruent with the content of the post.

Fig. 4-4. In browsers, contents of title tag appear in tabs.

The content of the title tag doesn't appear on the web page. It appears in the browser's title bar (Firefox and Internet Explorer), or in the tab containing the page (Opera and Chrome). More importantly, it appears in the SERPs as the blue link you click to get to the page. For this reason, your title should be as appealing as possible.
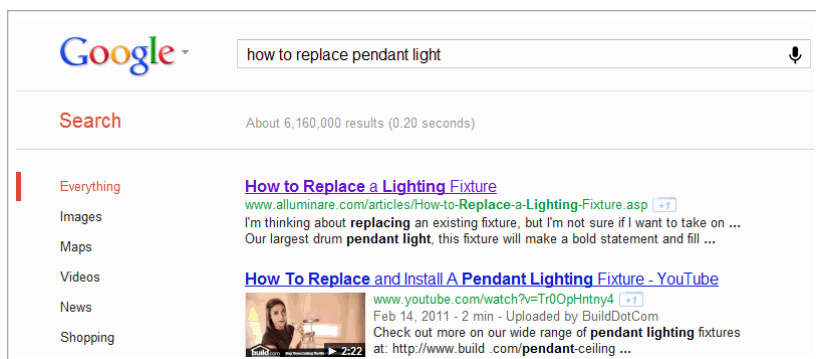
Fig. 4-5. In search engines, contents of title tag appears as blue links (or alternate color if visited).

Technically, search engines recognize up to 120 characters, but Google only displays the first 65. If a title overruns the visible 65-character limit, the title is truncated with ellipses ("...") at the end. Titles cut off in this manner have historically had a 20% lower clickthrough rate on average, and they're subliminally perceived as incomplete. Always count the number of characters that go into your title tag, and edit them to 65 characters or less.
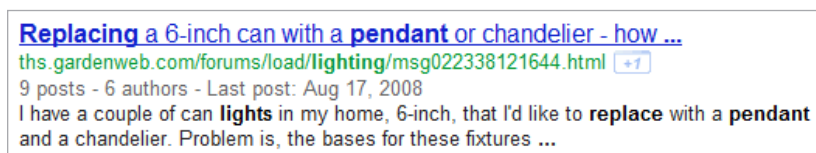

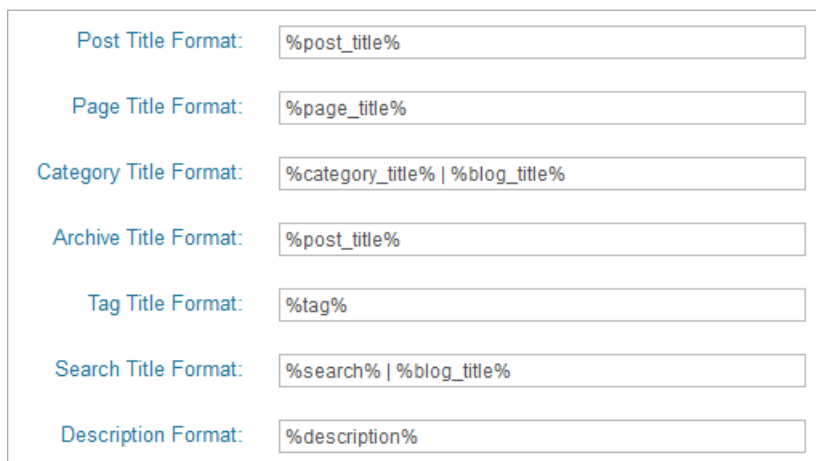*Fig. 4-6. Title tags greater than 65 characters appear chopped off in search results.*

If you're using WordPress as your content management system, you can install the popular plugin All-In-One SEO Pack, which allows you to edit the contents of title and meta description tags directly in a visual editor.

Fig. 4-7. The All-In-One SEO Pack provides fields for editing title and meta description tags visually.

Once installed, go to the plugin's options configuration panel, and set the Post Title Format so that **%post_title%** is the only option displayed in this field. It shouldn't contain other options like **%blog title%**, which is a "branding" flourish that weakens your SEO by making each page on your site less unique.

Fig. 4-8. The All-In-One SEO Pack also lets you choose the formatting of meta data across your site. Use the settings above for best SEO.

Whatever you do, avoid using figurative language in a title tag, regardless of how catchy it seems. If a post about cheap tires is titled, "I Love the Smell of Burnt Rubber in the Morning," the literal nature of a search engine is unlikely to pick up on your wit. Get your keyword in your title tag. If you must use a more "creative"

title for some reason (your editor might insist on it), you can always keep the creative version as your H2-tagged post title and use the keyword optimized version for the title tag.

Meta Description Tags

The meta description tag usually doesn't show up on the page, but it does show up in the SERPs underneath the blue link created by the title tag. In Google, the meta description is essentially summary text that expands

> ### ROCK*
> ### TIP
>
> *Some WordPress themes, like Thesis, have admin panels that already include customization fields for meta tag formatting. Some lack a live character counting function, in which case you should install the All-In-One SEO Pack anyway.*
>
> **!**

on your title, with a maximum of 153 visible characters. If you're using WordPress and the All-In-One SEO Pack, you have the chance to write the meta description for each post. Otherwise you can use good old HTML code: `<meta name="description" content="This is a short description of what you'll be reading about if you click me.">`. The meta description tag is self-contained, and doesn't have a closing tag.

Like the title tag, keeping your meta description down to the visible character length is recommended, since excessive characters are also delimited with ellipses. Unlike the title tag, search engines don't actually use keywords in the meta description for indexing purposes. But since you still want to influence the highest clickthrough rate possible, it's a good idea to work your primary keyword into the tag to reinforce the search result's relevance.

Meta Keywords Tags

Google doesn't pay much attention to the meta keywords tag for a good reason. If SEO were as simple as inserting a long list of keywords in a tag, everyone would be doing it. This is a pretty

unimportant element for SEO, but it needs to be clarified since it's often described as "the meta tag". Since meta tags actually refer to whole set of title, meta description and keywords tags, some people erroneously conclude that "meta tags" don't matter anymore, when what they're really referring to are meta keywords.

If you're motivated to tweak the meta keywords, you can edit them in the All-In-One SEO Plugin's Keyword field, or use the HTML code: `<meta name="keywords" content="tires, cheap tires, used tires, cheap offroad tires, cheap auto tires">`.

Header Tags

The three header tags you'll need to manage are the H1 post title and H2 and H3 subheaders. Obviously, the post title appears above the content, the main sections of a post are denoted by H2 subheadings, subdivided with H3 subsections. All use the code format `<H1>This Is a Title or Heading</H1>`, substituting the appropriate `<H2>` or `<H3>` tag. Try to get the primary keyword in the post title and one of the subheaders, and try to get one or two long tails in the subheaders. These aren't make-or-break SEO factors, but they should be taken advantage of whenever possible.

Bold and Italic Tags

Up until a couple of years ago, SEO copywriters insisted that using `<strong>` and `<em>` tags for bold and italic emphasis respectively would help boost a page in search engines. The hallmark of keyword articles churned out by so-called "content farms" was the boldfaced keyword that invariably appeared in the first sentence: "The Internet makes searching for **cheap tires** easier than ever." The evidence that these tags helped at all was always slim, and after Google's "Panda update"—an algorithm change designed to

marginalize content farms—even keyword article writers now only add emphasis tags to words that actually need emphasis.

Image Tags

The `<img>` tag definitely improves search traffic if edited properly. It's hard to recommend one plugin that's universally loved, so we'll stick to the HTML code: `<img src="used_tire.jpg" alt="Cheap used tire">`. Note the use of a keyword in the image file name. You should rename any image file name to incorporate a keyword. With some keywords, like celebrity names, there is substantial

> **ROCK***
> **TIP**
>
> *In addition to keyword optimizing an image's file name and alt text, you can also add an optimized caption.*
>
> **!**

search volume on the "picture" long tail: e.g. "brad pitt picture." If this turns out to be the case in your keyword research, use the "picture"-appended version in the file name: "brad_pitt_picture.jpg."

24-inch Drum Penc
Shown in Cocoa

AVAILABLE

Our largest drum pend;
make a bold statement
It features a two-bulb s
emission (100 watts e;
shade length between
commended for over
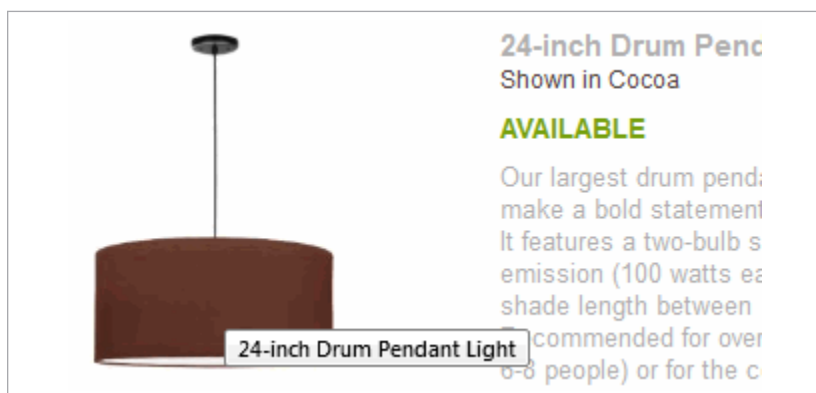6-8 people) or for the c

24-inch Drum Pendant Light

Fig. 4-9. Mousing over an image displays the contents of the alt attribute in a tooltip.

Similar principles apply to the `alt` attribute, which is designed to make images identifiable for the visually impaired with special text-to-speech software. Whatever you would use for the image's

caption, you can use for the alternate text. Image tag optimizations should also be used for GIF logos and banners.

The Domain Name

If you don't already have a domain name for your website (www. domainname.com), you're going to have to think about whether SEO considerations matter more than branding. If SEO is the most important factor, the Holy Grail is the exact match domain (EMD).

As the term suggests, an exact match domain is a *.com*, *.net* or *.org* name that matches a keyword exactly in spelling and word order. Cheaptires.com would be the EMD of "cheap tires." The .org and .net versions would also be EMDs. Unfortunately, any other domain extensions (known as *top-level domains*), like Cheaptires. info or Cheaptires.biz, do *not* count as exact matches for SEO purposes. Furthermore, any constituent words in the domain name cannot be separated by a hyphen—so Cheap-tires.com would be out of the running as an EMD.

Exact match domains can rank highly in search engines with far fewer links than other domains. For less competitive keywords, it's sometimes possible to get a #1 ranking in Google with a dozen links, while competing pages have hundreds of links.

EMDs are fine if you can get them, but there's no reason to get obsessed with them. Most keywords with any commercial significance have already had their corresponding domain names picked over, and if they're already owned by a private party, they're probably going to be expensive to buy. More importantly, unless you're already getting traffic for a keyword, you can't assume that it will perform as well as the Google Keyword Tools suggest—and once you've built a site around a domain name, changing it can get complicated.

Jump Starting Your On-Page Optimization

For a small site, optimizing on-page factors for search engines is something that can be done in an evening. If your site has dozens of pages, you'll obviously have more work, but an even greater improvement opportunity. For Google, the index count of your site (the number of pages in Google's index) is an SEO factor, since more pages can hold more "Google juice." Regardless of your site's size, you'll need to do the following:

- For each page on your site, review the title tag to ensure that it contains the keyword you want the page to rank for.

- To maximize the readability of your page's listings in the search engines, keep your title tag to 65 characters or less, and your meta description tag to 152 characters or less. A plugin like All In One SEO Pack can be used to edit these tags without having to muck around with the HTML.

- Edit each image's alt text and file name to be keyword relevant.

- If you have yet to pick a domain name for your site, incorporating the main keyword is extremely helpful from an SEO perspective. An exact match domain will give your site a huge SEO boost for its main keyword, but lacking an EMD isn't the massive SEO liability that some Internet marketers make it out to be. You might even decide that a keyword focused domain name is less important than branding, in which case it's still possible to have strong SEO based on other factors.

It would be nice if optimizing on-page factors was enough to get a good ranking in the SERPs. On-page SEO is necessary, but not sufficient. The main purpose of Google's PageRank algorithm is

to discourage keyword stuffing by using the quantity and quality of incoming links as its primary metric. Let's get into the heart and heavy lifting of SEO: backlinks.

5

Understanding Backlinks

There are two types of links: internal links and backlinks. Internal links point to other pages within the same website. Backlinks are incoming links from external websites. Backlinks have far more authority as a ranking factor than internal links. If your site targets a set of keywords that have an unusually low threshold of competition, you can get it to high ranks with relatively few backlinks with strategic internal linking.

Link Nets

Suppose you have page on "cheap tire and wheel packages." In addition to making sure that the keyword appears in the title tag ("Where to Find Cheap Tire and Wheel Packages"), one of the headers ("Finding Cheap Tire and Wheel Packages Online") and a couple of times in the article text, it's a good idea to reinforce it with links from additional pages: e.g., two to five topically related pages to link to the page using your primary keyword. This structure of having one page with a primary keyword and several pages supporting it with links is called a *link net*.

In the above example, the "Where to Find Cheap Tire and Wheel Packages" post would get links from pages like "Should You Buy Cheap Tires Online?" and "Safe but Cheap Motorcycle Tires," Each of these articles would contain a link to the primary keyword post, using the primary keyword as the *anchor text*—the text used in the hyperlink.

The HTML Structure of Links

A link is just an HTML tag. Specifically, it's an *anchor* (`<a>`) with an `href` *attribute*. To link to a web page, you would use the following code: `<a href="http://www.url.com/">Anchor Text`

. As you can see, the page being linked to is the URL defined in the href attribute, and the anchor text is what the reader sees and clicks on to get to the page. Unless the referring page contains code that overrides the browser's default, links will have blue underlined text, just like the search results in Google.

```
<a href="http://sweetmarias.com">Sweet Maria's</a>.
```

Fig. 5-1. The complete HTML code for a typical anchor tag. When interpreted by a browser, this code will display the words "Sweet Maria's" in blue, underlined, clickable text.

WordPress, Moveable Type, Blogger and other content management systems make link formatting easy with their visual editors. You simply highlight the word or phrase you want hyperlinked, then click on the Add Hyperlink button (usually illustrated with a chain-link icon), then type or paste in the appropriate URL.

Personally, I like to buy from Sweet Maria's.

Fig. 5-2. The HTML code from Fig. 5-1 rendered by a browser. "Sweet Maria's" is a simple hyperlink for humans and an SEO booster for search engines.

Why Backlinks Matter

The ranking of any page is primarily determined by the quantity and quality of backlinks. In theory, links form a meritocracy as the online equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising. Great content gets more mentions from other websites than average content. In this context, a "mention" is a link to the content.

Some links matter more than others. A link from an authority site (an A-list blog or the website of a national news magazine) can literally be worth dozens or hundreds of links from less respected sites due to a combination of higher PageRank, keyword authority and backlink count. As you might expect, it's harder to influence

authority sites to link to yours unless your site has a high enough profile of its own. You need to have content worth linking to. Fortunately, that doesn't mean that getting links from low-profile sites is worthless. You just need to find keywords whose competitiveness is low enough for the building of weaker backlinks to have a compounding effect.

PageRank

PageRank is the measure of authority Google assigns to a web page, based on an algorithm developed by Stanford grad student and Google co-founder Larry Page. Pages on the web are crawled, and their contents are indexed by a taxonomy of keywords. Some pages are considered more relevant for certain keywords than others, partially based on word frequency, but chiefly based on referring links from other pages.

ROCK✱ TIP

Page's original paper describing PageRank, "The PageRank Citation Ranking: Bringing Order to the Web", is actually a worthwhile read, even if you gloss over a couple of math-heavy passages.

!

A page with links from 100 pages would have a higher PageRank than a page with links from only 10 pages—but only if all the linking pages had equal PageRank. Some of those link pages will, themselves, have more links than others; and some of the links to the linking pages will also have their own backlinks.

Let's take the page that only has links from 10 pages. If some of those 10 pages have multiple links from still other pages, the original page with "only" 10 links could be assigned more PageRank than a page with 100 links from pages which have zero links from other pages. Those 100 pages would be considered less authoritative than a small group of pages that have actually received links.

Actual PageRank vs. Toolbar PageRank

When people talk about PageRank, they're usually talking about its visible artifact: what's sometimes called "toolbar PageRank." Actual PageRank is a score from 0 to 100, and changes from moment to moment as links are published and new pages are indexed and de-indexed, all of which happens behind the scenes.

The PageRank that most people are familiar with is a score of 0 to 10, which gets updated on irregular intervals ranging from a few weeks to a few months. One of the first utilities that allowed users to look at the PageRank of a page was the Google Toolbar, which is no longer being developed. But there are many browser extensions that can be used for measure PageRank, such as SearchStatus for Firefox and plainly titled PageRank for Chrome.
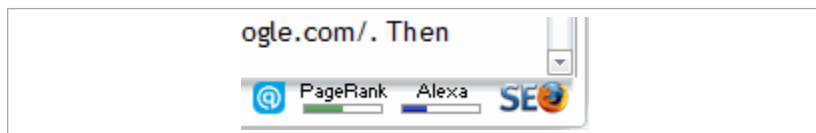

Fig. 5-3. SearchStatus for Firefox allows you to quickly see the PageRank of the current page.

If you install one of these extensions, the PageRank (PR) of the current page you're on will be displayed as a small green bar graph. As you move from one page to another, you'll see the PR change accordingly. This graphically illustrates a previously mentioned point that's worth reiterating. PageRank measures pages, not sites. When people refer to a so-called "PageRank 7 site," they're actually talking about the site's home page, which has received the majority of the site's links. You can test this yourself using the extensions: go to any site's home page, then go to some post in the site's archives, then go to the site's About or Contact page. The home page will almost always have the highest PR.
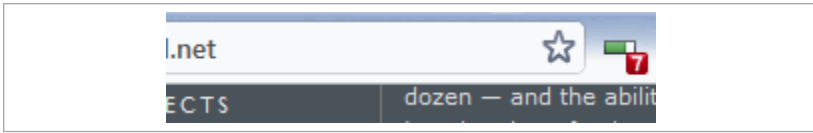
Fig. 5-4. The PageRank extension is the equivalent of SearchStatus in Chrome.

This is one reason why getting links from "high PR sites" is somewhat overrated. A blog article that posts a link to your site from its PR 7 home page will soon fall into the archive and settle in as a PR 0, 1 or 2 page. Those are still good links, but they don't have the same "link juice" as links from PR 7 pages.

In addition to gaining some PageRank from backlinks, pages lose a little PageRank with each link they give to another website. This makes some webmasters unwilling to link out to other sites. However, sites that never link out to other sites look suspicious to Google, and the amount of link juice lost from an individual link is negligible. The problem comes when you have dozens of links on a page: long blogrolls, crowded headers and footers, social link buttons, and non-essential links. Some writers will add a link to Wikipedia every time they use an uncommon word. This is not only bad SEO, but it's bad user experience that disrupts the flow of text.

Anchor Text Variation

Too many links with the same anchor text is like excessive keyword density: it looks spammy to search engines, just as it would to humans. Most links on the Internet are poorly chosen, and most people publishing content aren't savvy about keywords. If you had a web page with 100 backlinks, and every last one of those backlinks had the anchor text "cheap tires," it would seem highly unusual to say the least. A natural backlink profile would have a wider diversity of anchor text. If you use a link building network, a good rule of thumb is to use your primary keyword no more

than 50% of the time, and use the remainder for long tails and an occasional link to the home page.

Natural vs. Manufactured Links

The best link you could possibly hope for is from a high-PR page on an authority site in your niche, using the exact anchor text of your keyword. Anytime you can build a profile of natural backlinks from relatively authoritative sites and peers in your niche, you'll develop the keyword authority you need to rank well in the SERPs.

Links can be acquired "naturally," through a combination of outreach and premium content, or they can be manufactured through more systematic means. Ideally, you could just publish premium content and expect to attract quality links naturally, but there are a few limitations with this approach.

The first is talent. Even experts in a topic may not have the ability to write content compelling enough to attract the right links. The second is control. You can't control the number of sites that link to you're, and more importantly, you can't control how or where they link. The choice of anchor text and relevant pages is entirely up to the linker. Many bloggers write without keywords in mind, and their links will often point to a site's home page instead of a specific post, or they'll use arbitrary anchor text, such as "what Fred wrote last week" for a post on where to buy cheap tires.

There are also some niches that are inherently devoid of the social traction needed to attract links. Tires are less

ROCK* TIP

There are bloggers who've excelled at SEO with minimal or no link building. They just publish one article for every keyword that gets at least a certain number of searches (typically, 140 or more a month), then rely solely on the strength of their content to attract links. While this avoids the labor intensiveness of link building, it makes getting links with the right anchor text (or getting links at all, for that matter) far less reliable.

provocative subject matter than gadgets and celebrity gossip. Ecommerce sites are only linkbait when they're running 80%-off promotional offers.

Key Points on Internal Links and Backlinks

It's been suggested that SEO can be reduced to backlinks. That's not quite true, since Google needs to crawl pages for keywords to ensure that a page linked on the basis of anchor text is, in fact, congruent with that anchor text. In many cases, the anchor text in the backlink has no keyword relevancy in itself ("Fred wrote a post"), so on-page factors do matter. But links have greater weight in the long run, so you'll need to pay careful attention to certain linking practices:

- Internal links between pages within your site should be forged with the relevant anchor text whenever possible. Internal links aren't as important as backlinks, but once your site starts getting link juice flowing in from other sites, the keyword authority you develop can help you rank for less competitive keywords with few or no backlinks. You can supplement a post on your main keyword with several smaller posts on long tail variations with links pointing back to the post representing your primary keyword. This support structure is called a link net.

- The quantity and quality of links matter, "quality" being measured by PageRank and other signals used to classify authority sites. For instance, a link from WebMD might be worth dozens or even hundreds of links from more nondescript health sites.

- Since the "toolbar" PageRank that gets published is being updated more irregularly and less frequently than in years past, it's unwise to avoid getting links from certain sites

based on PageRank. What appears to be a PR 0 page may actually be a PR 3 page whose current PR status hasn't been made available to PageRank metering tools yet. It's always better to get a link from a site than not to get one.

- A backlink profile with an unrealistically high percentage of identical anchor text is a red flag to Google. Links that occur naturally almost always have some degree of anchor text variation. If you use a link building network, which will be discussed in the next chapter, you'll definitely want to throttle the percentage of anchor text that contains your exact keyword

The link building practice we will advocate in the next chapter will use a small amount of outreach for "base links," and a much larger proportion using established link building networks.

6

Getting Links

As mentioned, our link building strategy will be to get a few "base links" by getting in touch with other webmasters and bloggers, then using a link building network for the majority of the links we need.

Base Links

Base links are links from medium- to high-profile sites with relative authority in their niche. It would be possible, and moderately effective, to use a link building network right from the start. However much Google would like everyone to think otherwise, its algorithm is essentially mathematical; so link building can always be systematized to a large extent, even if the details of the process and the resources needed change over time.

Base links act as your site's foundation, offering credibility signals to Google. When your site first goes live, it literally doesn't exist in Google's index. The signal that puts it on the map is a link from a site that is in Google's index, and each new link from another site provides more information to Google about the complexion of your site. If the first links come from higher-profile, higher-quality sites, your site becomes graced by association, and any subsequent links from lower profile sites provide additional credibility.

If, on the other hand, your site gets its first links from low-profile or low-quality websites, the rule of association works against it. Subsequent links from authority sites will definitely lift your site's profile, but it's an uphill battle. Starting with base links lowers the number of systematic links you need to build.

Beginning to Build Links

Once you have 10 or more pages of content on your site, it's time to start building base links. This is done by guest posting on other authority sites. Again, authority is relative. The sites you're looking for don't have to be the equivalent of The Huffington Post, but they should be higher in profile than your immediate peers.

It's tempting to shy away from doing the outreach necessary to get base links, but it's a low-risk, high-reward activity that will probably require less effort than relying on link building networks exclusively—and unlike posting through a link network, guest posting through authority sites is free.

If the name of the sites you want to target don't immediately come to mind, don't worry. Let Google do the job of qualifying websites. Suppose you wanted to promote your site on bicycle maintenance. You can enter the following search: **"submit * guest post" ~bicycle maintenance OR ~bike repair OR ~fixing bicycles**
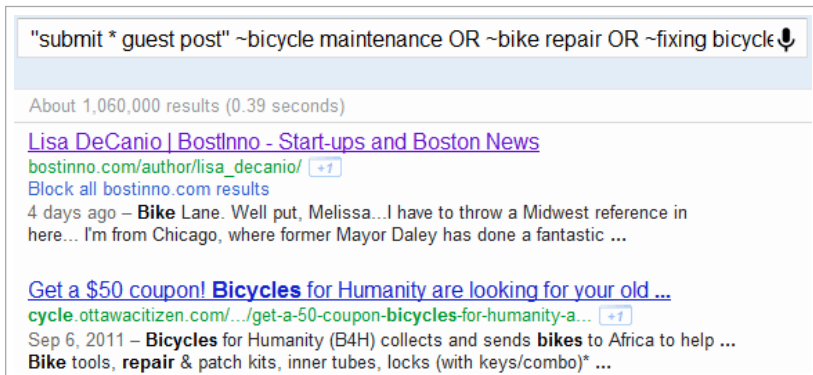

Fig. 6-1. Use search operators to learn which site both rank for your target keywords and accept guest posts.

This will search Google for any phrase containing "submit" and "guest post," in addition to any of the keywords in the query or their synonyms. The tilde character ("~") is a search operator instructing

Google to include the synonyms of the keyword in the search. Start contacting the webmasters whose sites are at the top of the list.

Fig. 6-2. A site that makes it clear that guest posts are welcome.

If you're an extrovert, you can just email them with a straightforward request to guest post. There's really no reason to hesitate. They're getting free content, and have to write one less blog post, in exchange for a link in your article pointing back to your website. This allows you to control the specific anchor text and page to which the link is directed. Sometimes you won't be afforded the luxury of specifying the anchor text or the page; they'll want you to limit your link to your site's home page. That's less than optimal, but it's fine considering the relative strength of the link.

And, yes—you should expect a high rejection rate, despite the logic of the offer. Most webmasters and bloggers get dozens of requests a day for links, book reviews, affiliate offers, etc. Even if 80% to 90% of your offers are turned down, you'll still get more opportunities to guest post than you can write for if you're contacting a decent number of sites.

ROCK✴ TIP

Some very high profile blogs use contributors who have their own personal blogs. While their A-list blog email address may be saturated, you'll often have an easier time contacting them through the email address on their personal blog.

If you would rather take a more oblique approach to soliciting guest post gigs, you can leave an informative comment on their latest one or two posts. The key word is *informative*, not "Great post!" comments. Blog comments are your opportunity to demonstrate

your expertise. Some bloggers (or employees of professional link building services) add perfunctory "Nice post!" comments with a link to the site they're trying to promote.

Once you've put yourself on the webmasters' radar, you can email them with your guest post request, or simply inform them that you have a related site that they should visit. When emailing a guest post request, it's a good idea to actually include the post in the email. A well-written post is more persuasive than a standalone request.

ROCK* TIP

Some webmasters and bloggers are simply allergic to email on general principle. You might find them more responsive on Facebook or Twitter. If you can get them to follow you, you can write your "on spec" guest post as a Google Document, then link to it in a private message to them.

The Importance of One-Way Links

Wouldn't it make more sense to simply offer a link exchange rather than going to the trouble of actually creating content that could be used on your own site instead?

No. Reciprocal links, where Joe.com links to Fred.com and vice versa, are too easy to arrange, which would defeat the purpose of the PageRank algorithm. Reciprocal links aren't necessarily counterproductive, since many sites in the same niche will link to each other naturally, but they're not going to give your site a net gain in rankings either. Google follows the common sense assumption that a one-way link looks more unsolicited than two-way and three-way links.

Link Diversity

Get links from as many related sites as possible, rather than trying to get multiple links from the same site. The first link from a site carries the most link juice, and subsequent links yield diminishing

returns. Here, Google is using the same social dynamics we see in the real world. A restaurant recommended by five different people is more influential than one person recommending the same restaurant on five different occasions.

Guest Posting Networks

A guest posting network is a more formal and organized version of the niche network you've been leveraging through outreach. Asking bloggers to publish your guest posts is slow and labor intensive legwork. Guest posting networks take the legwork out of the process. The two main networks are BuildMyRank and Postrunner.

Blogs within these networks are all independently owned by individual webmasters, and have their own Class C IP addresses, but are connected with a single WordPress editing panel. The editing and submission process is nearly identical to editing and submitting an article to your own site. However, before you hit the Submit button, you get to pick the site where you would like your article to be published. This means that you can have a unique site hosting each guest post you create, so five posts would yield a minimum of five links from five completely different sites *without* having to contact the individual site owners in advance.

The business model of these networks is twofold:

1. It provides links for SEO in exchange for content that site owners can monetize with advertising

2. The network owners—BMR and Postrunner—get a subscription fee

At this writing, BuildMyRank charges $59 a month to build links to up to five domains. Postrunner charges $33 a month to build links to an unlimited number of domains. Despite the higher

price, BuildMyRank is the more popular of the two. BMR has a lower word count requirement for post submissions: 150 words compared to Postrunner's 300. This makes posts easier to write or cheaper to outsource. If you choose to outsource the writing, BMR has its own staff of in-house writers who can write a post for $0.02 per word. BMR also curates their member sites with PageRank in mind, so it's generally believed that links from the BMR network have more leverage than Postrunner's.
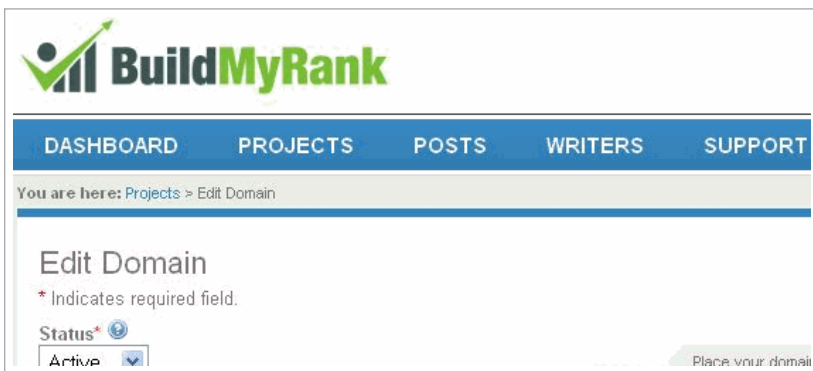

Fig. 6-3. BuildMyRank integrates many blogs for guest posting into a single dashboard.

Postrunner, on the other hand, is not a standalone network, but part of an Internet marketing instruction network called The Keyword Academy. TKA has a highly engaged forum, and an extensive backlog of core instruction videos and webinar recordings.

However, even ardent TKA supporters will assert that Postrunner is why they continue to pay their monthly subscription. It's true that the average PageRank of Postrunner sites is lower than BMR's, but recall that what matters is the PageRank of the page where your guest post is archived—not on the home page where the post sits for a day or two at most. Many Postrunner site owners are pickier than BMR site owners, but this can work to your advantage. Sites that reject bad content more aggressively tend to have more

credibility with Google, and their links consequently have more relevance than those from mediocre sites.

In addition to Postrunner's default 300-word minimum for all sites, the network also features an "Extra Requirements" section with additional stipulations ranging from "At least 400 words" to "Keyword must be in the title." Some members find extra requirements to be a hassle, but they also allow you to get links from higher quality sites with more exclusive content.
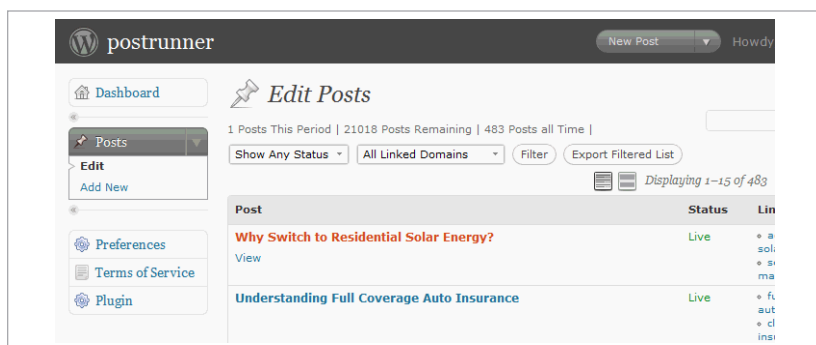

Fig. 6-4. Postrunner uses one WordPress dashboard to allow writers to choose from hundreds of blogs.

It should be noted that while all Postrunner sites require posts of at least 300 words, this generally means that you get *two* links per article rather than BuildMyRank's *one* link. So even though the word count is the same on a words-per-link basis, 300-word posts tend to have an easier time ranking in Google than 150 word posts. In general, higher word counts allow posts to have more keywords, which is why some Internet marketers write (or have written) very long articles that incorporate a wide variety of long tails.

With two links per article, you can link to two different related posts. Remember to track your use of anchor text: 50% of your links to a page should use your primary keyword, and the other 50% should use up to three long tail variations. The keywords used in your links should be the same ones used in the pages you're linking to.

Key Points on Getting Backlinks

On the Internet, you'll find hundreds of tips for getting backlinks, so it might seem odd that this chapter only advocates guest posting and link networks. For instance, there are "article spinners" that "write" any number of variations of an original article, then post them to dozens of article directories. Solutions like this are just as efficient at getting your site de-indexed as they theoretically would be at increasing your search rankings. Focus on equally systematic, though more labor intensive, methods that are safe as they are effective:

ROCK* TIP

To avoid a Google penalty, and to avoid excessive article writing, throttle your link building initially. For the first 90 days, links should be built at a rate of one link per day for each site (one Postrunner article yields one link for each of two sites). During the second 90 days, the rate can increase to two links per day. After the first six months of consistent link building, you can increase the link rate if desired.

- Instead of submitting your site to Google to get into its index, you need to get links from external sites that get crawled to your site.

- Before trying to systematize link building, you need to get links from living, breathing authority sites in your niche to confer keyword authority. It's much easier to benefit from many links from smaller sites if they come *after* a few initial links from bigger sites.

- Regardless of the size, PageRank, or community standing of sites, always strive to get links from as many sites as possible to maximize link diversity. Multiple links from the same site have diminishing returns in terms of link juice.

- Use the *"submit * guest post" + [keywords]* method to determine the sites that rank highest for your keywords and offer the opportunity to guest post.

- For the first 90 days, limit your link building on each of your sites to one link per day; then double the rate to two per day; then you can build links at any rate you desire. This link building timeline helps your sites avoid the so-called "Google sandbox", where sites disappear from the index for an indefinite period.

- While two-way links don't need to be entirely avoided, they don't count as part of your link building campaign. A "link," for our purposes, is a one-way backlink to a particular page, ideally with the appropriate anchor text.

- Use link building networks like Postrunner or BuildMyRank for higher-volume link building, but only after you have some base links.

Accounting for Competition

The main reason that link building can be systematized is that the keywords being targeted are highly vetted. So far, we've looked at keywords in terms of their search volume, commerciality, and linking considerations. We now have to look at finding the subset of keywords that will respond to our linking efforts. Unfortunately, we can't just pick any keyword with a high search volume and CPC; in fact, we can't pick *most* of them. But it would be impractical to build links to hundreds of keywords anyway. We need to be more tactical in selecting our keywords. To do this, we need to analyze for competition.

7

Understanding Competition

For search engine rankings, there are two main levels of competition: the niche level and the keyword level. It's easy to give up on a niche prematurely if it's perceived as too competitive, but for the resourceful Internet marketer, there is almost always a back door into any niche. The trick is to look at the whole family of keywords within a niche, and find some subset of terms that are relatively uncompetitive.

Narrowing Your Niche

Ignoring search engines for a moment, imagine that you were trying to become recognized as a personal trainer. Your city might be flooded with fliers for personal trainers, many of whom already have considerable experience and reputation. Instead of trying to compete with every "personal trainer," you'll probably have more success trying to corner a narrower niche like "pilates personal trainer" or "online personal trainer." Let's take the latter.

According to a Keyword Tool analysis of "personal trainer" as a root keyword, "online personal trainer" gets 5400 global searches a month and 2900 local searches (United States in this context). While local search volumes are often more relevant than global search volumes, especially if you're selling a product, being able to deliver fitness coaching over the Internet via video chat allows you to tap into a broader market.

If we click on the mouseover button that appears when we hover over the "online personal trainer" keyword that allows us to view the keyword in Google Insights, we find two significant pieces of information:

- The relative interest in the keyword has slowly increased over the last 12 months

- The regional interest heat map shows that the top four search audiences are relatively affluent, English speaking countries: Australia, US, Canada, and UK

These facts are important, since we wouldn't necessarily want to target a keyword whose interest was waning, and we want some assurance that the searching population has disposable income.

Finding Long Tail Keywords

Let's refine our Keyword Tool search using "online personal trainer" as the root keyword instead of "personal trainer." Ideally, we'd like to find at least several dozen keywords that make up the constellation of online personal trainer keywords. We can speed up our search a little by using the "Include terms" field in the left sidebar to filter by some unique keyword—we'll use "online." Once you've run a search on "online personal trainer" in the Keyword Tool, place the word "online" in the "Include terms" field.

Many of the remaining terms won't be usable for someone trying to sell his or her services online. Long tails like "online personal trainer certification" and "online personal trainer jobs" are obviously irrelevant if the goal is to attract search traffic from individuals who are actually looking for a personal trainer. There are still plenty of relevant long tails to grab: "online personal trainers," "online personal fitness trainer," etc.

Fig. 7-1. Searching for more long tails.

When you use the "Include terms" filter tool, it's important to remember that you've used it. It's very easy to forget the filters you've set when performing subsequent searches. Let's delete the filter by mousing over the "online" term underneath the filter field and clicking the "x" to the right of it. We want to find synonyms that don't include the word "online." One way to do this is by adding the word to the "Exclude terms" field, but that might get less relevant results.

Let's look at the keywords that include "personal trainer" by placing that term in the "Include terms" field. This reveals another relevant set of keywords, such as "finding a personal trainer" and "virtual personal trainer."

Each time you run a search in the Keyword Tool that yields relevant results, export the list to a spreadsheet. Don't worry if the list contains some irrelevant terms as long as there is a significant portion of keywords that show some promise. So far, we've only broken down a niche within "personal trainer" that has low competition—but we haven't verified the competitiveness yet.

Analyzing Keyword Competition

Competitive analysis for keywords involves assessing the *amount* of competition for each keyword and the *strength* of the competition.

While the amount of competition for a given niche is hard to quantify except in broad, subjective terms like "somewhat competitive" or "extremely competitive," the amount of competition for a given *keyword* is easy to quantify. We define the amount of competition for a keyword by the number of pages that are indexed for the term in Google. This number is sometimes referred to as the *index count*.

The keyword "personal trainer" entered into Google, surrounded by quotes, shows 38.5 million results in Google index. This figure is shown directly under the search field in the Google search result page: "About 38,500,000 results (0.44 seconds)." The exact number of search results will naturally depend on which data center Google accesses, but will be roughly the same. When "online personal trainer" is searched, "only" 372,000 results were found. You'll find lower result numbers for longer tail keywords to be a fairly consistent pattern: the more terms a keyword has for the same root term, the fewer pages will be indexed. "Red toasters" will have fewer results than "toasters."

Be sure to put quotes around the phrase being checked. For counting search results indexed, quotation marks are necessary to distinguish variations between keywords. For instance, "red toasters" shows 92,300 results, while "toasters red" shows 53,600 results. Just like looking up a term in the Keyword Tool without setting it to Exact Match, looking up the index count in Google will yield misleading information if you forget the quotes.

Take 10 of the good keywords from your spreadsheets, and enter each of them with quotes into Google, e.g.:

- "online personal trainer": 775,000 results

- "online personal fitness trainer": 387,000 results

- "virtual personal trainer": 53,000 results

Fewer results mean lower competition. All things being equal, it takes less time to outrank 53,000 other pages for a keyword that it would to outrank 775,000 pages. Depending on the strength of the competing pages, a keyword that needs to beat out fewer than 60,000 pages can get a top ten ranking in one to three months.

What exactly does "strength" mean? There are a couple of ways to assess the strength of the competition: one that works in conjunction with index count, and one that ignores index count. The first method is a little more labor intensive, but provides a slightly more reliable time frame for when to expect a good ranking. The second method is just simpler. It should be pointed out that no known method of competition analysis provides a magic formula for knowing exactly how long or how many links is required to get to the top of Google for a given keyword. The main objective of analyzing competition is to distinguish keywords that are worth pursuing from keywords that are time sinks that are unlikely to give a good return on investment.

Whole-Page PageRank Assessment

The competitive strength of a keyword is measured by the PageRank of its page one search results. Each of the 10 listings on the first page of Google has a PageRank associated with it. The first method we'll be examining for evaluating competition counts

the PageRank of all 10 results on the page, then factors in the total number of pages for the keyword in Google's index.

Setting up Extensions

While the Google Toolbar has been deprecated, a number of browser extensions can be used in its place. The extensions most relevant for our purposes are SEO for Firefox and SeoQuake for Chrome. SearchStatus, the Chrome PageRank extension and the Google Toolbar only show the PageRank of one page at a time, while SEO for Firefox and SEOQuake show the PageRank for each search result listed on a Google search result page. If you're using Firefox, you can either install the SEO for Firefox extension or SeoQuake. SeoQuake is also available for Chrome.

Fig. 7-2. SEO for Firefox displays, among other information, the PageRank for each search result immediately under each result.

I prefer the uncluttered layout of SEO for Firefox, especially when its parameters are set to only show the PageRank (PR), the number of links to the site (Y! Links), and the number of links to the page (Y! Page Links). To match this configuration, go into the extensions Options and set *PR*, *Y! Links* and *Y! Page Links* to "Automatic" in

the Mode column; then set all other parameters to (such as *Age* or *Google Cache Date*) to "Hidden."

For SeoQuake, you'll need to uncheck every parameter in the Parameters tab except for three in the Google column: *Google PageRank*, *Yahoo links*, and *Yahoo linkdomain* should be checked.

Counting PageRank

Getting onto the first page of Google, and possibly even the top three spots, for a particular keyword can be done under the following conditions:

- The index count is less than 100,000

- The PageRank is 35 or less

- None of the top three results have an exact match domain

ROCK* TIP

The link counts used in these extensions use captions that make reference to Yahoo!, such as Y! Links *and* Y! Page Links*. These are misnomers. Until 2011, link count data was retrieved from Yahoo Site Explorer, a service that has been decommissioned. Since then, sources of link data have changed several times, often resulting in erroneous counts. Avoid taking link counts too seriously. For the method in this chapter, we only need the extensions for PageRank.*

Since "virtual personal trainer" has an index count of 53,000, we can count the total PageRank on the first page of Google to see if it meets the second condition. The current results are, in order from result #1 to #10: 5, 0, 1, 0, 2, 3, 1, 3, 2, 2. Since the total is 19, the answer is yes. So far, so good.

Exact Match Domains

As previously mentioned, an exact match domain, or EMD, is a domain name that matches the keyword exactly, and ends in a .com, .net or .org extension. An exact match domain for the keyword "virtual personal trainer" would be virtualpersonaltrainer.

com, virtualpersonaltrainer.net or virtualpersonaltrainer.org. These are the only variations that would qualify.

The domain name must match the keyword character for character, spaces notwithstanding. The #4 result, virtualpersonaltrainer.org, is a PR0 page with only 29 links to the page and the entire domain. The #5 result is a PR2 page with over 267 million links to the domain, which would ordinarily offset the low number of links to the page (only three links).

Time Frames

Using the criteria mentioned earlier—an index count of less than 100,000, a total PageRank of 35 or under, and no exact match domain in the first three results—there is a very good chance of obtaining one of the first three results within three months with consistent link building. Consistent link building means an average of one link per day from unique websites. Two or more links from the same site would only provide a marginal benefit over the first link.

What if the index count or the PageRank are lower? If you're lucky enough to find a keyword whose index count is under 10,000, and the PageRank is less than 25, you might make the top three results in less than a week. There aren't many keywords that only have a few hundred or a few thousand results in Google, but they're definitely out there. It's possible for a brand new product announced today to have only a handful of pages referring to it—at least for now. One trick some Internet marketers use to attract search traffic in their niche is to look for related news items on Google News containing new keywords that haven't yet been written on extensively, then publish an article targeting the keyword on their own site.

What if the index count or the PageRank are higher? If a keyword has an index count above 100,000 or a total PageRank of 35 or

higher, there's still a good chance of getting a top 3 ranking within six months, given the same link building methods. Unfortunately, there are a *lot* of keywords with over 100,000 results. The reality is that most keywords that have any commercial value are highly competitive. If you can see the value in a keyword, so can thousands of other SEOs and Internet marketers. This is one of the reasons why SEO campaigns trend toward the long tail over time— they're less trafficked versions of more popular keywords. More people are searching for "get out of debt" than "best ways to get out of debt."

To recap, to get a top level ranking in Google requires that the following conditions be met for their corresponding time frames, all based on an average of one backlink per day from a unique domain:

- **1 week:** Index count less than 10,000, PageRank 25 or less, no EMD in results 1-3

- **3 months:** Index count less than 60,000, PageRank 35 or less, no EMD in results 1-3

- **6 months:** Index count less than 100,000, PageRank 35 or less, no EMD in results 1-3

ROCK✱ TIP

A smart way to build keyword authority is by "snowballing" it: target the least competitive keywords with a modicum of traffic to get into Google's index, then go after progressively more competitive keywords.

The Pure PageRank Method

Let's take a look at a simpler method of competitive analysis that evaluates PageRank without looking at the index count. We'll also take a more strategic approach to building a keyword set that's diverse enough to keep your site from surrendering its search placement if you lose rankings for one or two keywords. It's not

a good practice to spend too much time and energy on a single keyword as the magic bullet for your SEO campaigns. It's better to have good rankings for a number of long tails clustered around "cell phone reviews" than to *only* have a number 1 ranking of "cell phone reviews," which would risk a single point of failure. Never put all of your eggs in one basket.

An easier but less popular method for evaluating keyword competitiveness is to ignore the number of results indexed and focus purely on the PageRank of the top four results—as opposed to the top 10 results. In contrast to the previous method, we do *not* put quotes around the keyword when entering it into Google; we want to see the results for the unoptimized keyword as it will be entered naturally by 90% of searchers. A keyword is considered "green" (uncompetitve enough to be worth targeting) if:

- None of the top four results have a PageRank higher than 4

- No results with a PageRank of 4 contain the exact match keyword in the title tag

- No results with a PageRank of 3 or higher are an exact match domain

When we used the Whole-Page method to check the competitiveness of the "virtual personal trainer" keyword, it was disqualified on the basis of its index count: 120,000 pages in Google's index. We can get further confirmation of this by just using the three rules listed above. When the term is entered without quotes, the top result has a PageRank of 5. Moreover, the second result is a triple-whammy: (1) it's a PR4, (2) has the exact keyword in the title tag, and (3) is an exact match domain.

We could simply give up at this point, but it's important to always remember that our goal is to get traffic for prospects in our niche—not just for a particular keyword. "Weight loss supplements" and "diet supplements" are both in the same niche. What if there

is something similar for "virtual personal trainer"? The Google Keyword Tool might provide plenty of options, but we'll just use common sense and go with "online personal trainer." The top four results:

- PR3, no intitle match, no EMD

- PR4, no intitle match, no EMD

- PR3, no intitle match, no EMD

- PR2, intitle match, no EMD

An "intitle match" means that the keyword is in the title tag. If you wanted to do a Google search and only see results with the keyword in the page title (i.e. the title tag), you would type **intitle:[keyword]**—as in **intitle:trainer** or **intitle:'online personal trainer'**. There is an intitle match in the top four results listed above, but on a PR2 page, it doesn't matter. You don't have to worry about PageRank 1 and 2 pages being too competitive, even if they have intitle matches or exact match domains.

Let's see how our evaluation of this keyword squares with the Whole Page assessment:

- 76,300 results for "online personal trainer" in quotes

- The top 10 results have the PageRanks 3, 3, 2, 4, 5, 1, 4, 3, 3 and 2—for a total of 30

Both methods of evaluation point to "online personal trainer" as a green keyword.

Getting More Keywords

There are no secret keywords. If you find a keyword that has high search volume and/or low competition, you can be guaranteed that there are plenty of people trying to rank for it. Ultimately, you're going to have to build more links and/or better links than the competition. But you'll also need to diversify your keywords. While you can build a page with "online personal trainer" in the title tag, at least a third of the links that point to it will need to use anchor text that isn't an exact match. If every backlink had "online personal trainer," it would be a red flag to Google that the links are likely to be manufactured. You also want to refrain from excessive keyword density—i.e. putting the same keyword in a page more times than would appear naturally. Excessive keyword density is often described more bluntly as *keyword stuffing*.

We want to build a keyword list for three reasons:

- To have commercially valuable keywords that we can target directly

- To have related keywords that reinforce the keyword relevancy of each page

- To use for anchor text variation

Consider "online personal trainer." It currently gets 2,900 local searches per month and has a $3.64 CPC, which demonstrates satisfactory search traffic and commercial interest. We can draw search traffic for this keyword by posting an article on our website that includes the keyword in the title tag, such as "What to Look for in an Online Personal Trainer." The article would consist of a few hundred words or

ROCK✱ TIP

The longer your articles, the easier it is to unobtrusively work long tail keyword variations into them for additional keyword authority.

!

more, and would be sure to include at least one or two instances of the exact keyword, such as the sentence, "A typical online personal trainer works with the client over Skype."

The article would also include related keywords, including the competitive ones like "virtual personal trainer" or "online fitness coach" to help Google's algorithm classify the page semantically. We can lower our standards for related keywords when it comes to competitiveness. They just need to be on the page and in the anchor text of some of the backlinks to the page.

Building a Keyword List

The keyword lists we'll be building have two types of keywords: green keywords that we wish to target, and "cousin" keywords that we can incorporate. The green keywords are the ones that we make sure are in the title tag and somewhere on the page itself; and they have to meet our CPC and search volume criteria. The "cousin" keywords (or "long tail" or "related" keywords) are sprinkled in for support.

To build a keyword list, go to the Google Keyword Tool (make sure you're signed in to your account), enter your main keyword; then check Exact in the Match Types section of the sidebar. Click the Columns button on the far left and uncheck every option except Local Monthly Searches and Approximate CPC (there are times when Global Monthly Searches will be preferable, but let's skip that discussion for the moment).

For this demonstration, we'll actually enter two keywords: "virtual personal trainer" and "online personal trainer." When the list populates, click the Download button above the list. Then click the Download button of the popup that shows a default selection of "CSV for Excel." Open the downloaded file. If Google hasn't reconfigured the Keyword Tool since this has been written, you

should see three columns of data: *Keyword*, *Monthly Searches*, and *Approximate CPC*.

Calculating Keyword Potentials

Click in cell D1, just to the right of the *Approximate CPC* header, and type in *Potential*. In D2, you're going to enter a keyword valuation formula, but you'll need to look carefully at the column headers to make sure that the formula is computing the right values—more on that in a minute. Here's the formula: **=B2*C2*0.4*0.25*0.05**.

Fig. 7-3. Adding the keyword valuation formula to Excel.

This is the Excel version of the AdSense revenue formula you saw in "The Importance of Keywords." To recap, it multiplies:

Monthly Local Searches x Approximate CPC x 40% (the rounded percentage of search traffic a #1 result would get) x 25% (the publisher's share of AdSense revenue) x 5% (an estimated clickthrough rate)

Some Internet marketers try to build traffic to a page with the sole purpose of monetizing it with AdSense, in which case the formula is reasonably accurate. The exact amount of AdSense revenue (Potential) to expect from a #1 result is less important than the keyword's overall commercial value, regardless of how it's monetized. We just want some metric that indicates which keywords are generally more valuable than others.

If you're good at arithmetic, you may have noticed that you can simplify the formula: **=E2*F2*.005**

However you choose to enter the formula, it's crucial that the columns it specifies correspond with the right headers: *Monthly Local Searches* and *Approximate CPC* (currently in the E and F columns respectively). Since late 2010, Google has not only changed the header positions multiple times, but also the wording of the headers—not long ago, these headers were "Local Monthly Search Volume" and "Avg. CPC." Small changes in the Keyword Tool from time to time keep third party keyword research tools from easily scraping it.

> ### ROCK* TIP
>
> *If you're using a spreadsheet application other than Excel, or even an earlier version of Excel, the simplified formula might compute to three decimal places for a result like "$36.487". This is why the longer version of the formula was given first— the result always ends in two decimal places.*

Formatting the Keyword Value

If the cell with the formula isn't selected, click it now. If the value has three digits after the decimal point, right-click the cell and select *Format Cells*. In the Number tab in the Category section, click Number and make sure that the number of Decimal places is "2"; then click Currency and select the appropriate currency symbol (I'm using "$" in these examples). Click OK, and you should see the cost per click formatted correctly. Double-click the bottom right corner of the cell to expand the selection down to the last populated row.

Sorting and Editing the Spreadsheet

With the values in the Potential column highlighted, right-click somewhere in the selection and select *Sort* from the context menu, then "Sort Largest to Smallest." A Sort Warning dialog will appear with a default of "Expand the Selection" selected—click

OK to accept this default. All of the other rows in the worksheet will now be sorted in descending order by Potential. If the top rows underneath the Potential header have "#VALUE!" errors due to nonexistent data in Monthly Local Searches or Approximate CPC, delete these rows by right-clicking their row numbers on the far left, then selecting *Delete*.

	A	B	C	D
1	Keyword	Local Monthly Searches	Approximate CPC ($)	Potential
2	la fitness	368000	$2.54	$4,673.60
3	online classes	14800	$38.16	$2,823.84
4	online courses	9900	$31.65	$1,566.68
5	gyms	90500	$3.23	$1,461.58
6	elliptical machine	40500	$4.23	$856.58
7	personal trainer	27100	$5.87	$795.39
8	personal trainer certification	18100	$7.16	$647.98
9	bootcamp	27100	$4.59	$621.95
10	weight loss programs	18100	$6.64	$600.92

Fig. 7-4. A keyword list sorted by monthly potential, making it easy to rank the overall values of any number of keywords.

To make the spreadsheet more readable, we can make a few more configurations and edits. It's nice to see the keywords in the Keyword column unobstructed by the vertical rule on the right. You can expand the column by double-clicking the partition line in the header between the first and second column. You can expand the other columns in the same manner if you wish. I also like to bold the headers by selecting them and pressing Ctrl-B.

You can also get rid of the brackets around the keywords that are produced when Exact Match is chosen. Select the whole column by clicking on the column header, then press Ctrl-F to bring up the Find and Replace dialog. Click the Replace tab and enter "[" (without quotes) in the Find What field, then click Replace All without entering anything into the *Replace with* field. Then enter "]" in the *Find What* field and click Replace All.

Once everything is formatted properly, go to *File->Save As* and save the spreadsheet as an Excel workbook (it will be a .csv by

default—you can leave it this way, but I prefer to change it to an .xls) with the filename "Virtual Personal Trainer."

Looking for Usable Keywords

Many of the 800 keywords in this spreadsheet are of little relevance. Many are skewed towards becoming a personal trainer rather than finding a personal trainer. We need to look down the list, starting from the most valuable keywords, to find as many keywords as we can that are worth checking for competitiveness. The higher the search volume for a long tail keyword, the better; but it's best to set a lower limit of 140 searches per month, which would provide two visits per day (140 ÷ 30 * .4 = 1.87) given #1 ranking. Long tail keywords on the page can often rank for close equivalents. For instance, you might have "online personal trainers" on the page, but end up getting search traffic for "online personal fitness trainer"—even if it doesn't appear on the page.

Let's start at the top of the list and work our way down to find a few keywords, checking their competitiveness along the way using the Pure PageRank method. Skipping the ones that are too broad ("online classes") or have the wrong emphasis ("personal trainer certification"), the first three I find are: "online personal training", "personal trainer online" and "online fitness trainer." So let's drop each of these into Google.

- **online personal training:** PR2, PR4, PR3, PR3; green due to no intitle match on PR4; no EMDs

- **personal trainer online:** PR3, PR5, PR4; PR2; disqualified ("red") due to PR5 result

- **online fitness trainer:** PR2, PR5, PR2; PR4; red due to PR5 result

One out of three isn't a bad start. I had to scan the first 163 keywords in the list to find the first three to try, but that's par for

the course. That seems like a lot of work to find one keyword, but let's stop for a moment and look at what this keyword has to offer.

There are 590 monthly searches and a CPC of $3.33 for an AdSense potential of $9.82 a month. Keep in mind that our goal with this project is not to make money from advertising revenue, but to attract clients for online personal training. An About.com article says that rates for online personal training range from $12 to $30 per month. Suppose you offer online personal training for $20 per month, and you can drive 40% of 590 search visits a month to your site. Instead of a 5% ad clickthrough rate, let's assume a more conservative 2% conversion rate, since continuity programs are tougher sells than most products.

590 x .4 x .02 = 4.72 new clients per month @ $20 each = $100

That's $100 in *new* signups each month, paying on a recurring basis (if your training can deliver the goods). There are a lot of assumptions in the above. We're not guaranteed a #1 ranking, but with enough links, we can get there. We don't know if the 2% conversion rate is accurate given your price point and the persuasiveness of your marketing (the copywriting on the sales page). It's entirely possible, given the dodgy search volume numbers of the Keyword Tool, that the actual number of searches is *greater* than what's being reported. The multitude of variables and caveats is all the more reason to keep looking for keywords.

So the main point to stress is that using the AdSense potential is one of the more useful metrics for determining the value of a keyword—not (necessarily) for the revenue we would receive in AdSense clicks, but as a congealed representation of search traffic and commercial significance to advertisers.

If you're skeptical of the AdSense potential calculations, you can use the SEO Value metric incorporated by one of the most popular keyword research tools on the market: Market Samurai. Market

Samurai is one of many third party keyword research tools that scrapes data from the Google Keyword Tool. Unlike the Keyword Tool, Market Samurai isn't free; it's currently $149 after a 12-day trial period (the exact length of the trial has changed over time). However, the tool's Keyword Research module remains free, even after the trial period.
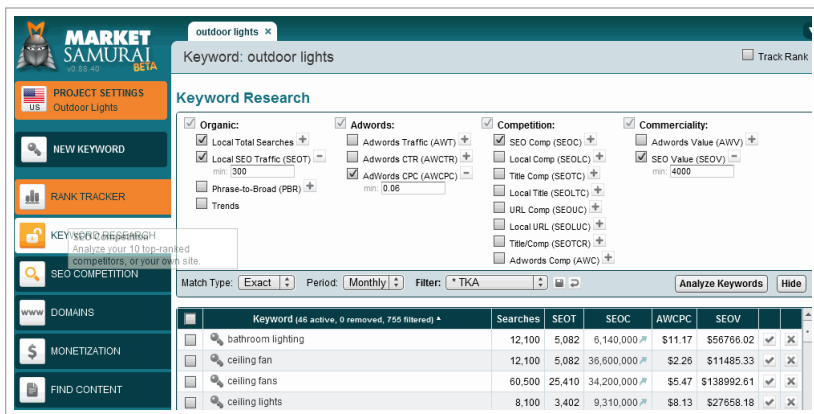

Fig. 7-5. Market Samurai's Keyword Research module.

After downloading and installing Market Samurai, click the New Project link under the Create a New Project heading. This will take you to a Project Settings form. Enter the primary keyword, the press the Tab key, which will auto-populate the Title field with then same keyword. You have the option of overriding this default, but it's just as easy to leave the keyword as the project title. Under the Language/Region heading, change the "All Countries and Territories" to the country you're targeting (I've chosen United States), click the Create button. Then click the Keyword Research button. You are now in the Keyword Research module.

Under the Keyword Source heading, make sure that the Google Keyword Tool option is checked and the "Include Additional" option is selected. Under the Phrase Length heading, change the "min" value to the number of words included in the keyword—e.g. 3 for "virtual personal trainer." Click the Generate Keywords button

on the right. You will be asked to enter a Captcha before the list will be generated. When the list is completed, click the Keyword Analysis button in the lower right.

As a sidebar, it's worth examining why I've recommended looking at local values over global values—which is contrary to the instructions and examples that many internet marketing tutorials give. The reality is a little more nuanced than I've treated it so far, mostly because the English language itself is nuanced. Take a keyword like "personal injury solicitor," which get 2,400 global searches per month, but only 260 local searches. As Google Insights will show, virtually all of the search traffic for this keyword comes from the UK. The preferred term in the US is "personal injury lawyer." English is a particularly regional language, so going by global search numbers can be as misleading as going by broad match numbers. Of course, if Google Insights or similar tools show a more even worldwide distribution of search traffic, than global search is fair game; but it's better to err on the side of caution.

Getting a Handle on Competition

Competitive analysis is more complex than any other aspect of keyword research, and there are many different theories on the One Best Way to go about it. One of the reasons for including two methods was to give equal time to two of the largest factions on competitive analysis. Let's review the key points in assessing competition with both schools of thought:

- Whole-Page PageRank assessment involves adding up the total PageRank of the first 10 search results in Google, checking the index count in Google, and weighing these metrics against each other. This is the more frequently used competitive analysis model, but it's more labor-intensive without necessarily proving to be more accurate with higher index counts (e.g. above 100,000 results in Google).

- Pure PageRank assessment only looks at PageRank of the top four results in Google, and ignores the index count entirely. The results must either be PR 3 or lower, or PR 4 with no intitle match.

- Unfortunately, most of the keywords that initially looked like good prospects due to their search volume or CPC values will be disqualified once they're passed through the competition filters from the methods cited above. Your only recourse is to keep looking for more commercially viable keywords until you have a keyword list big enough to bring in sufficient search volume.

- One of the best third-party keyword tools available is Market Samurai. While its Competition module stops functioning after the trial period, the Keyword Research module is all that's needed for the methods mentioned in this chapter; and the Keyword Research module remains free after the trial period.

- One advantage of using Whole-Page PageRank assessment is that Market Samurai can filter for keywords that meet maximum thresholds for SEO Competition (what this book has been calling "index count) and minimum thresholds for SEO Traffic—the number of searches a keyword receives in a day. This means that you can look for a set of keywords that each get 100 searches a day, and have less than 100,000 results in Google.

- Since the Google Keyword Tool doesn't sort keywords by a single metric combining search volume and CPC, you have two main options: export the Keyword Tools results to a spreadsheet and use the AdSense potential formula, or use Market Samurai's SEO Value, which is similar to the AdSense number, but doesn't factor in commissions or clickthrough rates (the ".25 x .05").

As more websites target more keywords, the number of low-competition keywords seems to get smaller and smaller. It "seems" that way because new keywords are also entering the language, giving newcomers the opportunity to come in and corner a new market. A new product that didn't exist a year ago might suddenly become all the rage. 30% to 50% of the keywords being typed into Google *every day* have, in their exact wording, never been typed into Google before. There are always new opportunities on the horizon.

8

Sharpening the Saw

For better or worse, SEO is an ongoing project. As long as you continue to publish new content to your site, you'll have to edit it with keyword considerations in mind, and you'll have to build new links. If you can see that a keyword is valuable, you can be guaranteed that hundreds of other people on the Internet have seen the value of that same keyword, and you can be sure that someone is publishing and building links to target that keyword right now. Your only competitive advantage is your work ethic: you can hold back any number of competitors if you're willing to build more links.

Dealing with Setbacks

It often takes years for webmasters to develop thick skin when it comes to seeing pages drop a few places in the SERPs. While rank fluctuations aren't insignificant, they're inevitable—even for authority sites. However, some drops in rankings are pronounced enough to merit serious concern. For instance, a blog post that was regularly on page 1 in Google suddenly disappears, not to be found on the next few pages. How can you get to the bottom of this?

- **Check to see if your site has been de-indexed.** Since Google makes many minor, unpublicized updates to its algorithm, many pages temporarily get hit with big ranking drops as collateral damage until Google notices the unforeseen effects. But there's a big difference between dropping *in* Google's index and dropping *from* Google's index. Do a search for your site using the site: operator, as in **site:yoursite.com**. If your site comes up in the results, you're in the clear. In the unlikely case that your site has been de-indexed, you have problems.

- **Review the quality of your content.** Make an honest assessment of any pages that have lost significant rankings—or better yet, show them to someone else for a critique. Are they top-heavy with ads? Are they keyword stuffed? Are they well-written, unique, and insightful? Some webmasters outsource all of their content development, but must take responsibility for it all the same. If you don't do your own writing, be a diligent editor.

- **Build more links.** Using link building networks before getting base links creates an unstable foundation. The only solution is to get and build more and better links using the techniques in Chapter 5 for getting base links.

- **Check for duplicate content.** When two pages on the Internet contain a significant amount of the exact same text, Google identifies one of them, accurately or not, as duplicate content. It doesn't make sense for a search engine to show two search results with the same text, so one of them is discarded. It's easier than you might think to inadvertently post the same content on two different pages of your site.

- **Check for broken links.** Links that originally pointed to the appropriate page may no longer point to a valid address. In WordPress, you can install a plug-in like Broken Links Checker to list any out-of-date links, or use Google Webmaster Tools for more comprehensive diagnostics using Google's Getting Started with GWT.

Regular Reading

It would be nice if this or any other book could provide the last word on SEO, but two realities prevent this from happening. First, Google is constantly updating its algorithm to include new criteria to determine which content deserves the highest placement. Second, SEOs, webmasters and Internet marketers are constantly

trying to figure out chinks in Google's armor. There is always some temporary shortcut to be found that works until Google finally gets around to closing it off.

Since Google's mysterious ways are anything but evergreen, you'll occasionally need to check in with the latest and best practices for SEO. Since it's easy to consume too much information on SEO, the following list of resources will intentionally be kept short:

- **SEOmoz.** The main business of Rand Fishkin's SEOmoz is providing SEO and social media management tools for businesses, but its blog is an invaluable resource, featuring posts from many heavyweights in SEO and SEM (Search Engine Marketing).

- **Search Engine Land.** Danny Sullivan's Search Engine Land is one of the oldest and most respected blogs on search engine developments. It emphasizes news in the world of search engines instead of specific SEO tactics.

- **Matt Cuts.** MattCutts.com is the personal blog of Google's Distinguished Engineer in charge of Search Quality (getting rid of spammy search results). While not an SEO blogger *per se*, Cutts' role at Google means that everything he writes or says is dissected by SEO pundits for implications of any changes in the Holy Algorithm.

- **Search Engine Journal.** Search Engine Journal falls somewhere in between SEOmoz tactical focus and Search Engine Land's journalistic focus. Their staff is especially good at testing controversial SEO theories and strategies and following up with updated results.

Fortunately, no matter how complicated SEO strategies and Google conspiracy theories get over time, your SEO strategy will always consist primarily of publishing new content on your site and publishing off-site for backlinks. It's fun to stay up to date with

SEO developments, but it can also be confusing and discouraging. Resist the temptation to get too deep into special tips and tricks. Stay focused on developing new content and links, and your SEO will almost take care of itself.

About The Author

Since 2009, Andre Kibbe has been a Content Analyst at Internet Brands in El Segundo, California. During 2010, he was in charge of the SEO for FreelanceSwitch, a 68,000-member community, in addition to WorkAwesome and The Netsetter. After The Netsetter was integrated into FreelanceSwitch as a column, Andre became its columnist, writing about SEO and Internet Marketing.

Andre is currently working on a series of products related to self-tracking. "I'm fascinated by the Quantified Self movement, where people conduct experiments on themselves with gadgets like the Fitbit. The methods are just like the analytics I do every day to track web traffic, but applied to humans." He lives in Santa Monica, USA, and can be found on Twitter at @andrekibbe.

Getting to Know SEO

Search Engine Optimization, or **SEO**, is one of the most powerful tools you can use to get traffic to your (or your client's) websites.
In **Getting to Know SEO**, content analyst and SEO expert **Andre Kibbe** gives you a solid grasp of what SEO is all about, and how it can help you generate steady and sustainable traffic to your site or product.

As you progress through the book, you'll learn about structuring a website for SEO, the importance of keywords, research and strategy, link building, and understanding backlinks.

By the time you reach the final page, you'll be equipped to use SEO personally and professionally to give your websites an edge against the competition.

Get Good

ROCKABLE✳