Search Engine Optimization

Best Practices, Bad Practices, and Audits

ADAM DOE

MIC | 1515 N. MARION ST. TAMPA, FL 33602

Contents

Four Main Guidelines of SEO

1. ## Technical Structure

   Depending on how the site is structured can potentially throw crawlers in the wrong direction. The comprehensive audit section of this document shares some of the most recent best practices for technical SEO.

   Best Practices: Include robots.txt, sitemap.xml, exclude CSS/JS files in robots.txt, use different titles per page, over 30 char in titles, under 65 char in titles, alt tags on images, structured data in google search console, google webmaster tools, bing webmaster tools, no keyword/spammy tactics, create quality content, link to quality content.

   Tools: Google Search Console, Bing Webmaster Tools , PageSpeed Insights, Structured Data Tester, **Screaming Frog SEO Spider**

2. ## Content

   It's not all about quantity. Quality matters, and the quality of links to your site matters.

   Tools: Google Search Console, Bing Webmaster Tools, Screaming Frog SEO Spider Keyword Planner (Spammy Tactics), SiteLiner, SEM Rush

3. ## Offsite Visibility

   Off-site SEO is concerned with all the things that can be done on other websites to help your site or blog home page rank well in all the search engines, with the focus as always on Google. Involves driving traffic to the website; however, some involve enhancing a website's overall visibility in search results, while others involve enhancing its index-ability by search engine crawlers. Common examples of off-site strategies include backlinking and email marketing, social media campaigns, etc.

   Best Practices: backlinking, incorporating keywords into branded content on social media channels, Content distribution and off-site content publishing: regularly publishing articles.

   Tools: Moz, SEMRush

4. ## Competitive Research

   Know The Competition: Conduct Audits using similar tools above, with the additional 'premium' features of SEMRush.

Two Types of SEO

On -PageSEO

On-page SEO is rather straightforward and involves programming the markup properly. Please follow the recommendations for on-page SEO in the official [Google SEO Book](#) and throughout this document.

Off-Page SEO

Off-page SEO is slightly more abstract dealing with social networks and how traffic gets to your site. Here is where we recommend starting social profiles to drive traffic to your site. Additionally we want to create an analytics account for the site to measure the traffic. Create solid content, no spelling mistakes!

Remember that SEO is not something we can set and forget about.

Single Page SEO

Uniquely Valuable
→ Page provides authentic, obvious value beyond self-promotion of the host site/author
→ Content quality stands apart from the crowd by a significant margin
→ Text, images, & multimedia are remarkable
→ Page would be described by 80%+ of visitors as useful, high quality, & unique
→ Searchers who visit would be unlikely to go "back" from the page to choose a different result

Provides Phenomenal UX
→ Content and navigation elements are easily consumed/understood by users
→ Design is aesthetically polished, high quality, and fit authenticly with the brand
→ Page layout makes scanning easy & important content elements obvious
→ Page renders fast (<0.5 secs to first response; <4 secs to primary content loaded)
→ A minimal number of browser requests are required to fully load the page
→ Page is browser & device responsive (or specifically optimized to each as appropriate)

Elements of an Optimized Page

Uniquely Valuable

Meta Data Inclusive

Bot Accessible

Multi-Device Ready

Phenomenal UX

Keyword Targeted

Built to be Shared

Created by Rand Fishkin

MOZ

Crawler/Bot Accessible
→ URL is static (contains no dynamic parameters)
→ Content is unique to this URL (all duplicates canonicalize to it)
→ Content loads in page's HTML (not via post-load JS/AJAX/iFrames/etc)
→ No more than 4 clicks are required from any page on the site to reach the URL
→ Redirects from other/older versions use 301s or rel=canonical (not 302s)
→ Redirects from other/older versions come direct (no redirect chains)
→ If the page is temporarily unavailable, status code 503 is returned by the server
→ As appropriate, page is included in an RSS feed; RSS URL is canonicalized/redirects to original
→ Meta robots tag allows crawling & indexing
→ Robots.txt file does not block crawler access
→ Host server does not restrict search crawler IPs
→ Key page elements are character length limited:
  - Title <75 characters
  - URL <90 characters
  - Meta Description <160 characters
→ URL is included in site's XML Sitemaps file

Keyword-Targeted
→ Page targets a single searcher intent (and associated keyword phrases)
→ Primary keyword phrase is the first words of the title element
→ Primary keyword phrase appears in page URL
→ Content is logical & comprehensive, employing related terms/phrases
→ Keyword phrases are highlighted with bold/italic/sizing/etc as appropriate

→ Primary keywords are used prominently in the page headline
→ Primary keyword is found in the body content 2X+
→ Secondary keywords appear in headline(s)/title/body as appropriate
→ Images on the page employ descriptive, keyword-rich alt attributes
→ Descriptive anchor text is used in links pointing to the page

Built to be Shared through Social Networks
→ URL is descriptive and makes the page's topic obvious
→ Includes sharing options to the optimal social networks for the page's audience
→ Page has inherent sharing value (i.e. those who share it will be praised by their audiences, and additional amplification is likely)
→ As appropriate, employ tags for Facebook Open Graph, Twitter Cards, etc

Multi-Device Ready
→ Renders in every (popular) browser properly
→ Optimized to render legibly & elegantly on every screen size
→ Employs the same URL when requested/loaded on every device

Authorship, Meta Data, Schema & Rich Snippets
→ Page content is associated with the author/publisher in the markup via Google+ rel="author" or rel="publisher" attribution
→ As appropriate to the content/topic/vertical, page includes schema.org microdata markup options
→ As appropriate to the content/topic/vertical, page includes Google's rich snippets markup options
→ Employs primary & secondary keywords in the meta description
→ Meta description inspires interest & click-through from SERPs/social
→ Generally avoids meta keywords (unless used for internal search)
→ As appropriate to country/language, page employs hreflang
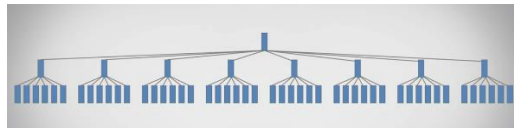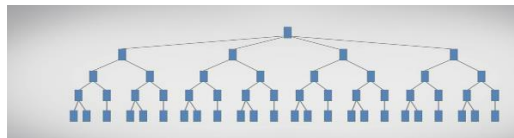
[More Details on MOZ](#)

Good/BadPractices

General SEO Best Practices

☐ Have at least one regular, text-based hyperlink to every page on your site. So, if a link is embedded in JavaScript…we'll need a way around this.

☐ Build a flat site hierarchy vs a deep site hierarchy. The further Google has to go into a site, the lower its value is determined by Google.
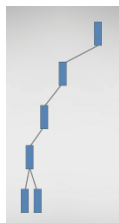
Good:

Bad:

Silo Content is really bad as it suggests to Google that it's not important to you.

☐ Use Natural language in URLs (ie. clothingsite.com/mens/pants/denim)
☐ Each page should have meaningful meta description
☐ Heading tags should appear in order.
☐ Every image should have a name and alt-tag description, don't worry about keyword stuffing
☐ Include XML & HTML sitemaps as well as robots.txt (correctly formatted)
☐ Setup a Google my business account and Bing my places. Review citation and get listed (Name, Address, phone) This should all be exact wherever displayed (Citations).
☐ Submit sitemaps to Search Engines
☐ Branding should be at the end of meta titles

Yoast Best Practices

- ☐ Edit Permalink Structures (Making Links Look Pretty)
- ☐ Decide on 'www' or example.com verify with search engines and have matching settings in Webmaster Tools (Google, Bing, etc)
- ☐ Avoid stop words (a, the, and) Yoast should remove these
- ☐ Small benefit for sites with SSL (Google has a slight bias for this)
- ☐ Branding should be at the end of the post because we want keywords first and the focus keyword should always be in the title.

Keyword Best Practices

Note: Keyword 'Stuffing' and the use of keywords in Meta tags/descriptions is considered bad practice and can actually hurt SEO. Keywords should be used to increase the natural quality of the content because Google is considered to still have a slight bias with keywords.

1. Use Keywords in the heading tag and once or twice above the fold. Then write the supporting content.

2. Keywords should fit naturally/strategically into the content so that the searcher will want to click and improve click through rates.

3. Remember to watch character limits. In an ideal world:

   Title: 30-55 characters (Google displays 50-60) At 55 characters 95% of titles will display properly. Below 30 characters tells the search engine its low importance.

   Meta Description: Typically truncated above 160 characters.

Finding Keywords:

1. Brainstorming – Simply list all words you think of with the client's needs in mind.
2. AdWords Keyword Planner – Free tool for narrowing in on words that are being searched.
3. SEMRush – Needs more research, but I believe they have a version of a keyword tool as well.
4. Keyword Finder (www.kwfinder.com)
5. Keyword IO (www.keyword.io)

Bad Practices

Article Spinning:

Tactic where a single piece of content is posted multiple times, often stuffing each piece with keywords. The rewrites allow the SEO professional the opportunity to fool the crawler and users into believing the site is frequently updated, in addition to increasing overall keyword density.

Hidden Text

- Is there text on pages in the same font color as the background?
- Is there text on pages hidden through an offset div?
- Is there a large amount of text on pages in small iframes or CSS scrolling overflows
- Is there text in a font color that matches the font color as the page background that might be mistaken as hidden text?

Cloaking

- Does the site use cloaking to show search engines one thing and visitors something else?

Meta Refresh

- Are meta refreshes used instead of redirects, and if so might they be used in a way which might deceive search engines?

JavaScript Redirection

- Is JavaScript redirection being used so that search engines see one thing, and visitors see something else?

Outward Links/Link Exchanges

- Is the site using link directory pages that promise being listed in exchange for a link?

Quick SEO Audit

Conducting a Quick SEO Audit

Conducting a Quick SEO Audit

- ☐ Check for robots.txt
- ☐ Check for sitemap.xml
- ☐ Run a mobile friendly test
    - o Mobile-Friendly Test (Google)
    - o Google Page Insights
- ☐ Run the site in Google Search Console for Errors
- ☐ Structured Data Testing
- ☐ Screaming Frog
    - o Make sure CSS/JS files are hidden in robots.txt
    - o Check that titles are different
- ☐ Siteliner
    - o Check for duplicate content on pages

Comprehensive SEO Audit

Technical - Site Architecture

Site URLS:
- ☐ Canonical URL's (www vs non-www)
- ☐ Internal Redirects Avoided
- ☐ No 404s
- ☐ No follows where needed (research more on this)

Robots.txt
- ☐ Correctly Formatted
- ☐ Includes Link to sitemap

Meta Robots noindex/nofollow
- ☐ Use appropriately
- ☐ Used on pages that a deep crawler might try to index (like form and search results pages)

Site Structure
- ☐ Unique/User Friendly
- ☐ Appropriate hierarchy
- ☐ Accessible
- ☐ Client Oriented vs. Feature Oriented

File Names
- ☐ Hyphens as word separators
- ☐ Avoid keyword stuffing

Custom 404 Page
- ☐ Send proper 404 code status
- ☐ No soft 404s
- ☐ Provide navigation, search, etc.

HTML Sitemap
- ☐ Organized into user friendly and user oriented categories
- ☐ Provides links to most important pages
- ☐ Avoids using too many links
- ☐ Doesn't include 404s or links that redirect internally

XML Sitemap
- ☐ Properly formatted (XML proper encoding)
- ☐ Uses only canonicals
- ☐ No 404s and no internally redirected pages
- ☐ Submitted to GWT and Bing Tools

Technical – Server Misc. Considerations

Server Considerations:
- ☐ Server Status: Messages 200, 300, 400, 500

Secure Server | HTTPS Protocol:
- ☐ No error messages
- ☐ No https bleed-over to pages that aren't supposed to be https
- ☐ No certificate authority errors

Search Friendly Links
- ☐ All links to be indexed reachable by text-based links or "href" and "src".

Broken and Redirected Links
- ☐ Broken links identify, links removed or replaced
- ☐ All 301 redirected links replaced with direct links

External Links
- ☐ Checked for broken links and redirects and replaced where appropriate
- ☐ Pages linked to checked for repurposed content

Duplicated Content
- ☐ Test with Siteliner, remove unnecessary content

JavaScript
- ☐ Can pages be navigated with javascript disabled? If not, are URLs for pages accessible in HTML code with "href" and "src"?
- ☐ If Ajax is necessary, is Google's hashbang approach used?

Dynamic Pages
- ☐ Avoid session IDs in URLs
- ☐ Keep boilerplate (disclaimers, copyright notices, other text that appears on most pages) that exists on templates light.
- ☐ Label page segments semantically well (the div class for those could be things such as header, footer, sidebar, advertisement, or whichever is most appropriate.)

Page Load Times
- ☐ Images compressed for right dimensions and for file sizes?
- ☐ External CSS and Javascript used and minimized?
- ☐ CDN in use where appropriate?
- ☐ Other Page Speed considerations

Technical – Google Search Console

- ☐ Has the site been setup for Google Search Console?
- ☐ Has the site canonical URL been set?
- ☐ Has a targeted country/location been selected? (Doesn't have to be)
- ☐ Check and resolve errors. See Google Search Console Vocabulary for more information.

Technical - HTML Use/Analysis

Deprecated HTML/HTML Validation
- ☐ If invalid, are errors the type that will harm SEO?

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)
- ☐ If invalid, are errors the type that will harm SEO?

Title Elements
- ☐ Relevant to the content of the page and be keyword-rich.
- ☐ Meaningful and able to stand on its own as a description of the page it titles.
- ☐ Persuasive and Engaging to those who see it out of context
- ☐ As unique as possible compared to other titles on the site
- ☐ If the name of the site appears in the title, it should be at the end of the title, and not at the beginning, unless it is the home page.
- ☐ More than 30 characters less than 55 characters

Meta Description Elements
- ☐ Descriptive of the content of the page
- ☐ Includes the main keyword phrase the page is optimized for
- ☐ Engaging and persuasive to viewers who see it out of context (search snippets or social shares)
- ☐ Around 25 words or 150 characters in length
- ☐ Well written sentences, using good punctuation
- ☐ One sentence preferable, but two alright if keywords are in the longer sentence
- ☐ Preferable to have keywords as close to the start as appropriate

Heading Elements
- ☐ Top level heading should describe the content of the page
- ☐ Lower level headings should effectively describe the content they head
- ☐ One top level heading preferable per page
- ☐ Headings should be used like headings in an outline, in proper order
- ☐ Main and subheadings can, and should contain targeted keywords if possible and appropriate.
- ☐ A heading element should not be used for the page logo
- ☐ Headings for lists and sections in page navigation should use CSS to style them rather than heading elements.

Strong/Em Elements
- ☐ For bold text, use the "strong" HTML element.
- ☐ For Italics text, use the "em" HTML element
- ☐ Use Strong and Em to highlight the use of keywords and related words
- ☐ When bolding or italicizing other text on a page, use CSS to style how it looks
- ☐ Don't over use bold or italics – emphasizing too much means emphasizing nothing.

Technical - HTML Use/Analysis Continued

Image Optimization
- ☐ Use alt text for images on a page that are meaningful
- ☐ Use captions for images on a page that are meaningful
- ☐ A caption for an image should be contained within the same HTML element as the image (like a div)
- ☐ Select images that are meaningful that are related to the keywords optimized for
- ☐ Use the chosen optimized keywords in the alt text and captions where appropriate
- ☐ Use file names that reflect those keywords where appropriate.
- ☐ Use hyphens to separate words in image file names.
- ☐ Use alt="" for images that aren't meaningful like decorations or bullet points
- ☐ Use alt text for logos that are descriptive of the business or organization
- ☐ Larger images with better resolution might be ranked a little better than smaller and lower resolution images.
- ☐ Alt text should not be a list of keywords, but can contain a keyword phrase.
- ☐ Alt text shouldn't be more than 10 words or so.
- ☐ Avoid keyword stuffing alt text, captions, and image file names.

Anchor Text
- ☐ Keywords should be used in anchor text (no stuffing)
- ☐ If the keywords for a page being pointed to are not used, related terms should be
- ☐ Anchor text used in navigation should be descriptive of what is on the page linked to
- ☐ Anchor text should not use generic terms such as "click here."
- ☐ Anchor text shouldn't be longer than 10 words or so if possible
- ☐ Anchor text shouldn't be stuffed with multiple keywords

Meta Data optimization
- ☐ Search engines do not use Dublin core meta tags (ie. <meta name="DC.Title"…>
- ☐ Search engines do not use the revisit meta tag. Was used to tell when the spider should come back to the website.
- ☐ A robots index, follow tag is unnecessary and redundant. Only use tags that prevent the spider from crawling. Spiders will automatically crawl sites.

Technical - Use Structured Data When Necessary

Structured data is the standard way to tell engines like Google what the content on your site is. This markup helps Google understand if content is a breadcrumb, an address to a local business, a map to a place, a review on a product, or even a sale price on an item.

To add this information developers can use the schema resources:

https://developers.google.com/structured-data/

An example of Structured Data on Google that displays ratings, title, showtimes, etc.:

We can see how to add this structured data into our websites by using the structured data testing tool where we can compare competitors structured data to our own.

https://developers.google.com/structured-data/testing-tool/

Content - Copyright Review

Amount of Text
- ☐ Having some minimum amount of text on a page (200 words?) gives search spiders something to index.

Spelling Errors
- ☐ Possible quality signal
- ☐ Important to credibility

Keyword Use in Copy
- ☐ Are keywords chosen for a page being used in page titles, meta descriptions, headings, and content

Keyword Prominence/Visual Segmentation
- ☐ Are keywords used in the different sections, and especially in the main content area of pages?

Use of Related Words/Phrases
- ☐ Some words tend to co-occur on pages ranked highly for a certain query (or categories of results for queries), and it can help in the rankings for a page to use some of those phrases.

Penguin/Panda Analysis
- ☐ Is there a loss in traffic that corresponds to one of the updates in a Google Algorithm change?
  - o https://moz.com/google-algorithm-change

Content – Social Media, Engagement, Analytics

Social Media
- ☐ Sharing Buttons Where Needed
- ☐ Links to Social Profiles

Engagement
- ☐ Commenting Enabled
- ☐ Contact 'Message Us' form
- ☐ User generated content on the site (ratings, reviews) with rich snippets

Analytics
- ☐ Applied to every page

Appendix

Google Search Terminology
General SEO Terminology
Bibliography

Google Search Console Terminology

Blocked Resources: Shows where Google will penalize you for not being able to 'see' the webpage as a normal human would. Typically robots.txt disallowing resources. Not an absolute penalize. Select into pages affected to get more information on the page that might be blocked.

Content Keywords: Provides an impression of how Google indexes sites by keywords. Looking for relevant keywords to where we want our audience to be. If we click in we can get more information such as related keywords and top urls.

Country Targeting: Search Traffic>International Targeting>Country>Target Country

If site uses multiple languages target using hreflang tags.

Crawl Errors: Top 3 errors are on top (DNS, Server Connectivity, Robots.txt), can click into these.

Crawl Rate: Not necessary unless Google is causing an issue with server.

Data Highlighter: Allows you to highlight code on your page to add structured data

Index Status: This shows all of the content that is indexed by Google. Can be lower (ie. Robots.txt file, logged in pages, http, https, etc.) We want an up and to the right line -> to show that Google is continuing to index pages.

Manual Action: This can be a serious hit to SEO. These should always be fixed. No Keyword stuffing, spammy linking, spammy structuring, etc.

Not Found (Inside of Crawl Reports): Links that are pointing to non-existent pages according to Google.

Preferred domain: your canonical domain (What you want displayed when google indexes your site). Won't impact SEO at all. More for users. To verify need to add another property.

Remove URL's: Update pages using the removal request. Not a permanent tool to use. A last resort to remove content from cache, broken links from google, etc.

Sitelinks: If you want to demote a sitelink on Google you can simply type in the URL and hit demote to change the default link displayed underneath the title.

Structured Data: Displays any errors with how Google is processing Tags

URL Errors (Inside of Crawl Reports): Specific errors google encounters when crawling. When you drill in you only see errors that occur on that device (exclusive errors).

General SEO Terminology

Citations: any reference to name, address, or phone number (NAP)

SERP's (Search Engine Results Pages)

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