

Search Engine Optimization

By Lee Carter-Godfrey
Managing Director
internet : intelligence

Search engine optimization – or “SEO” – has changed as quickly as many of the other aspects of the web. There’s a real art to being able to create a site with optimal SEO, and the criteria are constantly shifting!

It used to be that you could insert basic “meta tags” into your pages, and that would tell a search engine how to categorize your site in searches. For the most part, this is no longer the case – there are almost no search engines left that still use meta-tags as the primary means to categorize a site. However – and this is where it gets confusing – meta data is still very relevant to good SEO.

Most recently, the trend has been for most of the major search engines to relay on Google's method, and more and more search engines are being powered by Google itself. Google uses a number of ranked criteria to categorize your site. So, when users search for something that may be part of your webpages, Google returns your URL in their SERP (search engine results page) in the following ways:

1) Based on the actual text of your site, Google will return your site in a SERP - based on a count of the actual occurrence of the keyword searched for, by the user. Google does not rely on meta-tags any more to do this. Instead, it first counts the text embodied within the site. When you do a search on Google, notice that it brings a cached version of a paragraph that is relevant or contains the words that you have searched. This is part of the problem if a site index page is mostly graphics – which diminishes your return rankings in “keyword” searches.

Speaking of images - if you must use them instead of text, make sure to also use an ALT tag to describe the image. In other words, if you have used an image in place of a word, for example a "HOME" button, use alt tag coding to represent the file name for that button. You may also code the image so that the ALT tag will appear when a user positions the mouse over it. This will get picked up by most search crawlers, and it's a good general practice for usability standards.

Some sites that rely heavily on graphics will place relevant keyword text at the bottom of the page in the same background color as the page itself - this is not visible to a user, but a search engine can see it, and uses this to categorize the site. **THIS IS BAD NEWS!!** (Editor’s note: Google’s new algorithms are being used to discriminate between this type of “keyword text loading”, and legitimate criteria.)

Of course, if you have a Flash-based site – and more and more sites are moving to Flash – you have to use “code behind” to work around this requirement. Your developer/programmer can show you how to do this.

2) Google also relies on human volunteers to manually help categorize submissions within the “DMOZ.org” – which is their ‘Open Directory Project’.

Some major search engines used to require that webmasters register their sites manually – but this became largely unnecessary some time ago. Relevant content will show up as each search engine spider works its way across the web. Of course, this is a huge and ongoing process, so it may take some time before your site ranks higher, post-changes. Calling on an international roster of volunteers does speed things up a little.

