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TECHNOLOGY

Optimizing Sites For Search A Tricky Mix Of Science, Art

By PETE BARLAS, INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

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If a company depends on Web traffic for sales, you can bet it's using search-engine optimization, or SEO, to boost its search ranking.

In theory, the technique is easy to grasp: Tweak your Web site to help Web search engines such as Google ([GOOG](#)) find your content. The higher your site appears in search results, the more traffic you get.

In practice, things get more complicated. SEO requires technical and Web-design savvy — and a touch of hocus-pocus.

Because search engines' site-ranking algorithms remain heavily guarded secrets, SEO involves a bit of mind reading: How would the average customer search for your product or service?

Here are some of the biggest elements of effective SEO.

• Choice of words

Selecting the right words to describe a product or company makes all the difference in where the business ranks in search results, or whether it shows up at all.

It's a painstaking process that requires constant re-evaluation, says Drew Metherd, senior marketing manager for Morningstar.com, which has increased its use of SEO to promote its financial services online over the past 12 months.

"There was a lot of opportunity to take a look at how we are labeling things," Metherd said. "Instead of using our own internal jargon, we use the language that the customer is using."

• Navigation

If users have trouble finding content on a site, so will search engines. That's why well-organized navigation tools and a clear site layout are so important.

Many SEO experts even recommend old-fashioned site maps — a single-page guide to all of a Web site's content.

"A lot of sites don't have intelligent site maps," said Andrew Lovasz, vice president for search marketing at Moxie Interactive, an interactive ad agency. "That is to some users a way to navigate around your site, but in most cases it's really a road map for search engines to see what pages are on your site."

• Fresh content

Posting new content regularly attracts bloggers, Twitterers and Facebook users, who will in turn link to the site — signaling to search engines that the content is useful.

Updates also spur Google and other search engines to re-evaluate the site. Web sites can move up in rank if new content and inbound links increase, says Andrew Wetzler, CEO of MoreVisibility, which helps firms advertise online.

The best way to rank high is to have good content, Lovasz says, likening the process to the movie "Field of Dreams."

"If you build it, they will come," he said. "If you build the right content, the search engines will find it and rank you."