

DIGITAL BOOST

power up your business

SEO

(SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION)

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The visibility of your business when a customer is looking for services that you offer is important. The first port of call for most people when they want to find a product or service and aren't sure where to look is to use a search engine. After a customer enters their keywords and hits search what they see on the first page of results will often define which business they will end up buying from – so, as much as possible, it's important to make your business visible when a customer goes looking for your services in this way. The practice of making your website visible in these scenarios is what's referred to as Search Engine Optimisation, or SEO.

In this guide we'll cover the basics of how search engines work, some simple principles you can apply to your site to improve its performance in search results and some more advanced techniques that you can use to analyse and optimise your site.

SECTION 1

HOW SEARCH ENGINES WORK

Before you kick off any SEO activity, it is important to understand how search engines read and rank the billions of files that are available online.

CRAWLING & INDEXING

Search engines try to make sense of the millions of websites that offer information, goods and services and to present those in a manner that's easily intelligible to users based on the keywords, known as 'search terms', that are entered by a user. To do this first they need to read and analyse all of the available content on the internet. They do this by using automated programs that are known as 'crawlers' or 'spiders'. These programs visit a site, follow all the links they can find on that site, and process and categorise all of the information they can find. Search engines use incredibly complex algorithms to then rate and rank all of these billions of files to ensure that only the most relevant and useful results are delivered for any search query. There are a huge number of ranking factors within these algorithms to evaluate the relevance and importance of each file. Understanding the key ranking factors helps us to understand how best to optimise a site.

RANKING AND SUCCESS FACTORS

Once the search engine has all of the available information on a site it tries to work out what the site is about, how good it thinks the site is and how much 'authority' it thinks it has. Authority is a slightly difficult quality to pin down so here's a simple example. Imagine a lecture hall full of students all studying the same subject. If you were to walk into that room and ask these students who has the most authority to talk about their subject – they would all point to the lecturer. Search engines do a similar thing by looking at links across

the internet. If lots of sites link to one site, they will decide that that site has the most authority to talk on its given subject.

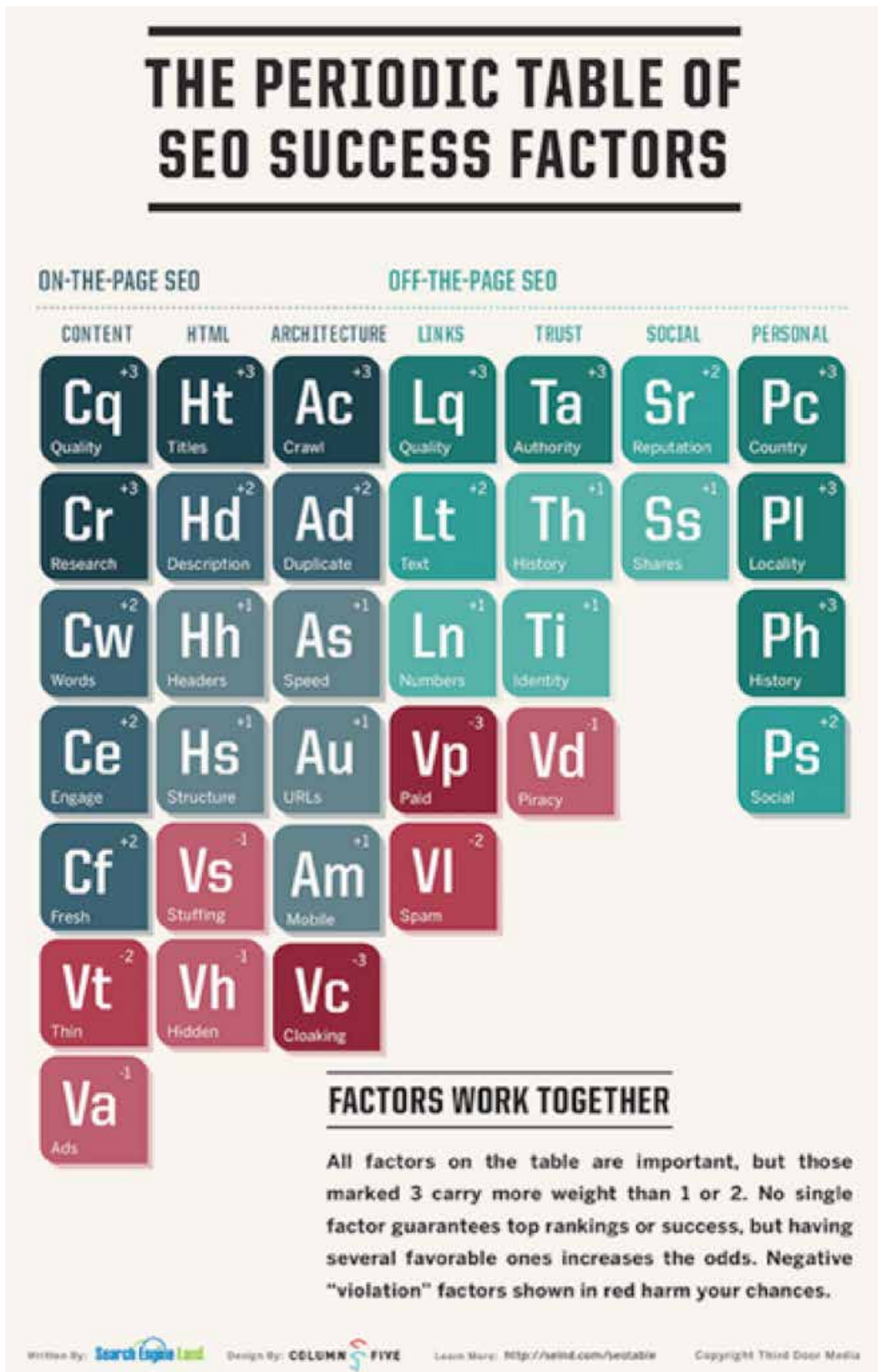
When all these factors are taken into account the search engine can offer suggestions matching a user's search term ranked by which they think is most relevant, most authoritative and the best quality.

There are a number of key ranking factors used by search engine algorithms to determine the quality of a web page or file. These can be split into three groups: on-site factors, off-site factors and violations.

Search Engine Land have created an incredibly useful 'Periodic Table' of search engine success factors which lays out the key ranking and success factors, split by group and weighted in terms of importance.

Figure 1. SearchEngineLand.com’s Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors

<http://searchengineland.com/seotable>



KEY ON-PAGE FACTORS

The on-page factors are the key success factors that a site owner has control over. Search engines look to these factors to judge the relevance of the site.

The key on-page ranking factors are:

- Content quality
 - Unique, useful content that provides real value
- Content research/keyword research
 - Content that contains the keywords that people use
 - Relevant content that gives users what they are looking for
- HTML title tags
 - Title tags are the key HTML factor that search engines use to determine the subject of a page
 - They must be unique and descriptive and relevant to keywords
- Site Crawlability
 - Crawlers must be able to crawl a site in order to index all pages
 - Remove any roadblocks
 - Robots.txt, XML sitemaps and internal linking structure help crawlers access and index each page
- Site security status (New)
 - Moving from HTTP to HTTPS will have a light-weight positive impact on site rankings

KEY OFF-PAGE FACTORS

The off-page factors are the factors that site owners do not control. Search engines look to these factors to judge the popularity of the site.

The key off-page factors are:

- Link Quality
 - More weight given to links from sites perceived to be high quality
 - Quality and relevance over quantity
- Site Authority
 - SEs consider sites that are 'authorities' to be more trustworthy and of a higher quality than other sites
 - SEs look at multiple pointers to determine whether a site is an authority (such as link quality, social reputation, traffic levels and interaction, etc)
- Country
 - People see results that are relevant to the country they are in
 - SEs look at relevance of results to the searchers country when ranking
- Locality
 - SE results are also personalised to city for location specific searches
- Searcher history
 - Search results are also personalised to a users search history
 - Preference is given to sites that the user frequents or has liked socially, if applicable

KEY VIOLATIONS

In their periodic table, SearchEngineLand.com have also laid out the key violations that adversely affect search engine rankings.

The most severe violations are:

- Cloaking
 - 'Cloaking' is the process of deliberately hiding content from search engines, showing them a different version of your site to boost your search rankings
 - Cloaking will lead to your site being banned
- Paid links
 - Buying links to boost your search rankings is severely penalised by SEs
 - Links must be natural, relevant and high quality
- Link Spam
 - SEs have very complex algorithms in place to identify unnatural link activities
 - Placing links in forums, blog comments, etc is considered spam and will be penalised

SECTION 2

STEPS TO OPTIMISING YOUR SITE - THE BASICS OF SEO

STEP 1 - KEYWORD RESEARCH

One of the most important steps in optimising any site is to consider what words customers might use when they are looking for the information or services provided on your site – this is called 'keyword research'. Identifying the most appropriate keywords to target for a given site is key to a successful SEO campaign as the words that you use on your site will determine what terms you rank for. Therefore using the keywords that you know your audience use to describe your products or services will help improve your rankings.

To carry out keyword research:

- Brainstorm an initial keyword list
 - What words would you search for to find your products/service? What other terms might someone use? What keywords do your competitors use on their homepage and key pages?
- Run these keywords through a keyword research tool
 - The Adwords Keyword Planner is the best free tool and gives search volumes but you must have a PPC account to get access
 - <https://ubersuggest.io/> Ubersuggest uses Google suggest results and other suggest services to suggest keywords related to your original term
 - <http://answerthepublic.com/> taps into Search Engines' suggested results and provides user's queries based on a given keyword

- Review the competitive landscape of your selected keywords
 - How competitive are your selected keywords? If there are a lot of sponsored results in your search and if the results are dominated by obviously high quality sites then you may find it very difficult to rank. This either means a greater level of SEO effort or you should drill down into more niche keywords
- Select most appropriate keywords
 - Draw up your final list of target keywords
- Create a keyword sitemap for your site
 - Map out all of your target keywords against the pages of your site. Focus on one keyword topic per page

STEP 2 - OPTIMISE SITE STRUCTURE

SEO should be considered from the first stages of site creation. This will provide a solid foundation for future SEO efforts and will help the site achieve better rankings.

When optimising your site structure, ensure that you follow the below steps:

- Clean HTML build
- Optimise site navigation
 - Include Keywords in page labels
 - Create Site sections for main keyword themes
 - Create optimised content pages within each relevant site section targeting specific terms
- Optimise URLs
 - Keywords in url
 - Page hierarchy within the site
 - Don't bury key content too far down site
www.site.com/xxx/xxx/x.html
- Avoid Duplicate Content
 - 301 redirect any duplicate pages (for example www. version and non-www.)

STEP 3. ON-PAGE OPTIMISATION

On-page factors, particularly visible on-page factors, are critical to SEO success. Search Engine algorithms are fundamentally concerned with the content within a website. Content is king in SEO. The on-page factors are important to SEO as they define the content within the site. However, It is important to note that search engines also look at engagement figures to gauge the quality of content on a page (such as how long a user spends on a site before returning to the search results), therefore creating content that is genuinely engaging as well as properly optimised is vital.

Top optimise the on-page elements, ensure that you:

- Add primary keywords to start of Page titles – creating unique titles per page
- Add descriptive meta descriptions to prompt click-through
- Add keyword to H1 headings
- Write naturally and add keywords to on-page copy where relevant
- Use bulleted lists where possible
- Add rich elements to the page, such as infographics, videos, tools, etc
- Link to relevant pages within your copy
- Add alt attributes to images, including keywords where appropriate
- If using PDFs, Use text based pdfs and add keywords to title property and filename

STEP 4 - USING GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

After optimising a site, it is useful to first let the search engines know your site exists, and secondly to help direct how the search engines crawl and rank your site. Google Search Console has a range of tools to achieve this.

Google Search Console is a free service that provides a range of useful, actionable reports on a site's performance, any issues, visibility in the search engines and recent crawl data, including crawl errors.

XML SITEMAP

A key action that you can complete within Search Console is to upload an 'xml sitemap'. XML Sitemaps are a way to provide Google with information about your site. Submitting a sitemap will inform Google about the list of pages on your site, which pages are most important, and how often the data on these pages is updated.

Generating and uploading an XML Sitemap is highly recommended for every site.

To create a Sitemap.xml:

- If possible, create one through your CMS
- If not, use a free tool such as www.xml-sitemaps.com, (for more tools see <https://code.google.com/archive/p/sitemap-generators/wikis/SitemapGenerators.wiki>)
- Upload to your Google Search Console

ROBOTS.TXT

Robots.txt is a text file located in the root directory of a website, that helps you inform search engine spiders which content they should crawl and what they should index, and what content not to index. A robots.txt file is predominantly used to prevent search engines from indexing any content within a site that is not intended for the search engine results – for example necessary duplicate content or generic content such as competition Ts & Cs. The Robots.txt does not block pages from human users.

- There should be only one robots.txt per site
- It should be located in the root directory of the site
- Within the robots.txt, list all of the pages or directories that are not to be crawled or indexed as below:
- User-agent: *
Disallow: /directory
Disallow: /page.html
- You can generate a robots.txt via a number of online tools or your web developers can generate one for you
- There is no need to allow search engines in your robots.txt – this is the default setting

STEP 5 - LINK-BUILDING CONSIDERATIONS

Although this guide focuses on on-site SEO techniques, in-bound links are a key ranking factor and are integral to search engines' perception of a site's authority. Good quality inbound links build domain authority, drive traffic and boost rankings.

However, spammy link-building - by contacting people and asking for links - is no longer a recommended practice. With the advent of Google's algorithm updates (such as 'Penguin' and 'Hummingbird'), the practice of actively seeking links for links' sake – link-building - is largely outdated and could be a violation. Search engines have a very specific behaviour pattern for assessing whether links are natural or not - any links perceived to be 'unnatural' can lead to site penalties. Furthermore, traditional link-building techniques are very time consuming and can offer little in way of return.

To build the volume and quality of in-bound links, your focus should be placed on 'link-earning' - earning natural, genuine links through creating high quality, engaging content that your site visitors are naturally going to want to share and that other sites will want to link to. The focus here is on the quality of your content and its value to your user. If you want links you will have to give people a reason to link.

This will not only help your rankings but will also positively impact your brand warmth, on-site traffic behaviour and potentially also your on-site conversions!

ANALYSING AND OPTIMISING

Once you've followed the above steps and optimised your site, you should begin analysing the effect these efforts have had on your traffic and rankings. The simplest way to do this is to use Google Analytics to assess inbound traffic volumes to your site. This allows you to see how many people have landed on your site from 'organic search', which page they landed on and - in conjunction with Search Console - will give you an idea of which keywords this traffic came from. You should keep an eye on Organic Search traffic volume over time.

You should also review your search rankings. There are a number of paid tools to help you track your search rankings but - if you do not want to invest - a quick 'incognito' search will help you see where your site ranks for your key terms. You should also keep a note of this on an on-going basis. Over time, you will start to see how your SEO efforts impact your rankings and your traffic volumes.

Search engine optimisation is an on-going process of improvement. There are literally hundreds of factors that can impact your site's place in the search rankings and the importance of these factors can change over time as search engines tweak their ranking calculations. However, by implementing the basics, optimising your site over time and analysing its performance, you can help ensure that when potential customers are looking for your products your site and your business are easy to find.

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