SEO Best & Worst Practices

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Introduction

Many consider search engine optimization (SEO) - the process of enhancing your Web site's visibility in the search engines through ways other than paid search ads – as a sort of black box. But once the essential features of a search-engine-optimal Web site are laid out in a concise list, SEO is not nearly as mystifying.

That's where these checklists come in. They are designed for web marketers and web developers so that they can easily understand search engine optimization and start tackling it. You can read a full description of each best and worst practice at the bottom of this document, after the two checklists.

Best Practices

Implementing the 15 best practices below (or at least some of them!) and avoiding the worst practices should offer you a straightforward approach to better visibility in search engines, including Google, Yahoo!, and Bing (formerly Live Search/MSN Search).

Best Practice	Doing now	Will do soon	Won't or N/A
1. Are the keywords you are targeting relevant and popular with searchers?			
2. Do your page titles lead with your targeted keywords?			
3. Is your body copy sufficiently long (e.g. 250 words) and keyword-rich?			
4. Does the link text pointing to various pages within your site include good keywords?			
5. Do you employ text links from your home page to your most important secondary pages?			
6. If you must have graphical navigation, do you use the CSS image replacement technique as a workaround, and do those graphics have descriptive and keyword-rich ALT attributes that are useful for both humans and engines?			
7. Does your Web site have an XML Sitemap, as well as an HTML site map with text links?			
8. Do the URLs of your dynamic (database driven) pages look simple and static?			
9. Does your home page and other key pages of your site have sufficient PageRank?			
10. Does your site have an optimized internal linking structure? And a flat directory structure?			
11. Do your pages have keyword-rich meta descriptions with a compelling call to action?			
12. Does your site have a custom error page that returns the correct "status code"?			
13. Do your filenames and directory names include targeted keywords?			
14. Is your site listed in the Yahoo Directory and the Open Directory, as well as other key, relevant directories?			
15. Does your site employ H1 heading tags for content titles?			

Worst Practices

Partially indexed, poorly ranked, penalized and possibly banned: such is the unpleasant fate of a Web site that's not duly optimized for search engines. Even if you mastered all 15 best practices above, your site may not be safe.

The mission of search engines is to supply their visitors with relevant results, so penalizing or banning sites that appear to interfere with that mission is a necessity. Understanding which practices adversely impact your search engine rankings is a prerequisite to a well-optimized site.

Whether inadvertent or not, any of the following worst practices could doom your site to suboptimal traffic levels. Here are 28 critical "must nots" in SEO:

Worst Practice	N/A	Will Stop	Won't Stop
1. Do you use pull-down boxes for navigation?			
2. Does your primary navigation require Flash, Java or Javascript to function?			
3. Is your web site done in Flash or overly graphical with very little textural content?			
4. Is your home page a "splash page" or otherwise content-less?			
5. Does your site employ frames?			
6. Do the URLs of your pages include "cgi-bin" or numerous ampersands?			
7. Do the URLs of your pages include session IDs or user IDs?			
8. Do you unnecessarily spread your site across multiple domains?			
9. Are your title tags the same on all pages?			
10. Do you have pop-ups on your site?			
11. Do you have error pages in the search results ("session expired", etc.)?			
12. Does your File Not Found error return a 200 status code?			
13. Do you use "click here" or any other superfluous copy for your hyperlink text?			
14. Do you have superfluous text like "Welcome to" at the beginning of your title tags?			

15. Do you unnecessarily employ redirects, or are they the wrong type?			
16. Do you have any hidden or small text meant only for the search engines?			
17. Do you engage in "keyword stuffing"?			
18. Do you have pages targeted to obviously irrelevant keywords?			
19. Do you repeatedly submit your site to the search engines?			
20. Do you incorporate your competitors' brand names in your meta tags?			
21. Do you have duplicate pages with minimal or no changes?			
22. Does your content read like "spamglish"?			
23. Do you have "doorway pages" on your site?			
24. Do you have machine-generated pages on your site?			
25. Are you "pagejacking"?			
26. Are you cloaking?			
27. Are you submitting to FFA ("Free For All") link pages and link farms?			
28. Are you buying expired domains with high PageRank scores to use as link targets?			

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Best and Worst Practice Explanations

Curious about the importance or relevance of some of the questions on the checklists? Read on for full descriptions of the implications of these questions.

Best Practices Explanations

1. Are the keywords that you are targeting not only relevant but also popular with searchers?

There is no point going after high rankings for keywords that no one searches for. Compare relative popularity of keywords using Google's free tools (Google AdWords Keyword Tool and Google Insights for Search) and/or paid tools like KeywordDiscovery.com and WordTracker.com before deciding what keywords to employ on your Web pages.

Despite the popularity of individual words, it's best to target two- or three-word phrases (or even longer). Because of the staggering number of Web pages indexed by the major search engines, competing for a spot on the first or second page of search results on a one-word keyword will be a losing battle. This should go without saying, but the keywords you select should be relevant to your business.

2. Do your page titles lead with your targeted keywords?

The text within your page title (a.k.a. the title tag) is given more weight by the search engines than any other text on the page. The keywords at the beginning of the title tag are given the most weight. Thus, by leading with keywords that you've chosen carefully, you make your page appear more relevant to those keywords in a search.

3. Is your body copy sufficiently long and keyword-rich?

Ideally, incorporate at least several hundred words on each page so there's enough "meat" there for the search engines to sink their teeth into and determine a keyword theme of the page. Include relevant keywords high up in the page, where they will be weighted more heavily by the search engines than keywords mentioned only at the bottom of the page, where it's almost like an afterthought. This is known as keyword prominence. Think in terms of keyword prominence in the HTML, not the rendered page on the screen; Google doesn't realize that something is at the top of the third column if it appears low in the HTML. Be careful not to go overboard to the point that your copy doesn't read well; that's called "keyword stuffing" and is discussed later, under "Worst Practices."

4. Does the link text pointing to various pages within your site include good keywords?

Google, Yahoo, and Bing all associate the anchor text in the hyperlink as highly relevant to the page being linked to. So, use good keywords in the link text to help the engine better ascertain the theme of the page you are linking to. Keep the link text relatively succinct and tightly focused on just one keyword or key phrase. The longer the link text, the more diluted the overall theme conveyed to the engine.

5. Do you employ text links from your home page to your most important secondary pages?

Text links are, by far, the better option over ALT attributes in conveying to the search engine the context of the page to which you are linking. An ALT attribute is the text that appears in a small box when you hover your cursor over an image. ALT attributes can have an effect, but it's small in comparison with that of text links. If you have graphical navigation buttons, switch them to keyword-rich text links; if that's not an option, at least include text link navigation repeated elsewhere on the page, such as in the footer (note however that footer links are partially devalued), or consider the CSS image replacement technique, described below.

6. If you must have graphical navigation, do you use the CSS image replacement technique as a workaround, and do those graphics have descriptive and keyword-rich ALT attributes that are useful for both humans and search engines?

Image Replacement is a technique that employs CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) to substitute in replacement copy and HTML – such as a text link or heading tag – when the stylesheet is not loaded (as is the case when the search engine spiders come to visit). The text-based replacement is weighted more heavily by the engines than the IMG ALT attribute -- thus it is preferable to relying solely on the ALT attribute. Of the many ways to implement the image replacement technique, most use CSS to physically move the text off the screen (text-indent: -9999em; left:-9999em;display:none, etc), which is not ideal because the search engines may in future discount this as hidden text. Resist the temptation to work in additional keywords or text into the text replacement, or your site may be hit with a penalty. A few CSS image replacement methods exist that are preferable because they don't physically move the content off-page and are still accessible, namely The Leahy/Langridge Method, The Gilder/Levin Method and The 'Shea Enhancement'. It is also somewhat useful (more for usability than for SEO) to have ALT attributes on your images. ALT attributes should contain relevant keywords that convey the key information from the image that the user would not receive if she had image loading turned off.

7. Does your Web site have an XML Sitemap, as well as an HTML site map with text links?

An XML Sitemap file provides the search engines with a comprehensive list of all the URLs corresponding to the pages/documents which are contained on your website. This helps ensure all of your pages end up getting indexed by the search engines. But the XML Sitemap is more than just a list of URLs; it can include additional information about each URL, such as the page's last modified date and priority (which can impact how frequently the page is visited by the search engine spiders and thus how quickly it is refreshed). It's best practice to also include the location of your sitemap file(s) in your site's robots.txt, so that the search engines can "autodiscover" the sitemaps on their own without you having to specify the location of the file(s) in each search engine's Webmaster Center.

An HTML site map is a different thing altogether. Simply put, it's a page on your website with links to all your important pages, displayed usually in a hierarchical fashion. A link to the site map is typically present in the footer of every page of the site. An HTML site map is good "spider food" in that it provides the search engine spiders (i.e., the search engine's computers that periodically explore your Web site) with a links to key pages to explore and index. Use text links, since they are more search engine optimal than graphical links, as already mentioned. Bear in mind that you should try to stay within 100 links per page, as a recommended best practice by Google. That may mean breaking up your site map into multiple HTML pages.

8. Do the URLs of your dynamic (database-driven) pages look simple and static?

Pages with URLs that contain a question mark and numerous ampersands and equals signs aren't as palatable to the search engines as simple, static-looking URLs. Either install a server module/plug-in that allows you to "rewrite" your links, or recode your site to embed your variables in the path info instead of the query string; or, if you need to minimize resource requirements by your IT team, you can enlist a "proxy serving" solution such as Covario's [Organic Search Optimizer](#).

9. Does your home page and other key pages of your site have sufficient PageRank?

PageRank is Google's way of quantifying the importance of a Web page, and it's been a foundation for Google's ranking algorithm since the beginning. In very rough terms, PageRank is based on the page's "link popularity" (i.e., the number of links pointing to a given Web page), but with a crucial twist: links from more important (i.e., higher PageRank-endowed) pages are weighted more heavily. That weighted "vote" gets divvied up among all the links on the page and passed on to those pages. Of course this is a massive over-simplification, and the PageRank algorithm has evolved over the years to include such things as trust and authority to stay ahead of the spammers. Nonetheless, a form of PageRank is still in use today by Google.

You can check Google PageRank scores using the Google Toolbar, a free add-on to Microsoft Internet Explorer or Firefox, available for download at http://toolbar.google.com. Mouse over the toolbar's PageRank meter to display the numerical rating, an integer value between 0 and 10.

Yahoo's importance-scoring equivalent to PageRank is currently unnamed, but has been referred to internally as both LinkFlux and Yahoo! Web Rank at various times. You can refer to the PageRank-like algorithms of the three major engines more generally as "link authority," "link equity," or "link juice."

The PageRank scores delivered by Google's toolbar server are on a logarithmic scale; meaning that integer increments are not evenly spaced. Thus, garnering more links and gaining in PageRank score from 3 to 4 is easy, but from 6 to 7 is a lot harder. Also bear in mind that the PageRank displayed in the Google Toolbar is not the same PageRank as what is used by Google's ranking algorithm. In fact, the correlation between the two PageRanks has degraded over time. Potentially a better predictor of your true PageRank score is the "mozRank" score available from SEOmoz's Linkscape tool. "mozRank" approximates Google PageRank using a sophisticated algorithm and an index of 30+ billion pages. mozRank scores are also on a logarithmic scale. A PageRank or mozRank score for your home page of 7 or 8 is a laudable goal.

Note that each page has its own PageRank score. Because most of the inbound links your site has garnered point to the home page, your home page almost invariably ends up being the highest PageRank-endowed page of your site. The PageRank that has accumulated on your home page is passed to your internal pages through your internal linking structure.

10. Does your site have an optimized internal linking structure? And a flat directory structure?

Your site's hierarchical internal linking structure conveys to the search engines how important you consider each page of your site, comparatively. This of course impacts these pages' PageRank scores and ultimately their Google rankings. The deeper down a page is in the site tree (i.e. the more clicks away the page in question is from the home page), the less PageRank with which that page will be endowed. Thus it's critical you think carefully about how you spend that hard-earned PageRank, i.e. where and how you link from your home page and from your site-wide navigation to the rest of your site.

Generally speaking, the deeper in your hierarchy you hide key content, the less important that content appears to the search engines -- if they even find it (which is not a given if it's *very* deep). This concept applies not only to your linking structure but also to your URL structure: too many slashes in the URL (i.e.

too many subdirectories deep) and you convey to the engines that the page is unimportant. A flat directory structure, where you minimize the number of slashes in the URL, helps ensure more pages of your site get indexed.

11. Do your pages have keyword-rich meta descriptions with a compelling call to action?

A meta tag is hidden information tucked away in the HTML of a Web page for the purpose of providing search engine spiders meta-information about that page. One such piece of meta-information is a description of the page (e.g., its content and its purpose), known as a meta description.

Although it won't improve your rankings to define a meta description (or meta keywords or any other meta tag, for that matter), it is useful from the standpoint of influencing what text appears within your listing in the search results (i.e. the "snippet"), in order to better persuade the user to click through to your site.

Yahoo will frequently employ the meta description as the description in your search results listing. Bing is also displaying the meta descriptions in the search listings. Google *may* incorporate some or all of your meta description in to the snippet displayed in your search listing; it's more likely if the searcher's keywords are present in your meta description. The user's search terms -- and related keywords, like those with the same root -- are bolded in the search listing, which improves the clickthrough rate to your page (from the search results).

12. Does your site have a custom error page that returns the correct "status code"?

Don't greet users with the default "File not found" error page when they click through from a search engine results page to a page on your site that no longer exists. Offer a custom error page instead, with your logo and branding, navigation, site map, and search box.

Make sure that "File not found" error page returns in the HTTP header a "status code" of 404 (or potentially a different 400 or 500 level status code depending on the nature of the error), or it 301 redirects to a URL that returns a 404. You can check this with a server header checker, such as [this one](). If you send a mistakenly send a 200 status code instead, this error page will likely end up in the index, and thus the search results. This is discussed further in the "Worst Practices."

No matter what the reason for the page's unavailability (e.g., discontinued product, site redesign, file renamed, server or database issues), you shouldn't be driving visitors away with an ugly error page that doesn't provide a path to your home page and other key areas of your site.

13. Do your filenames and directory names include targeted keywords?

Google engineer Matt Cutts has blogged that this is a useful "signal" to Google, so if it's easy to do, why not? Separate keywords with hyphens, not with underscores. Avoid having more than a few keywords into a filename or directory name, as it could look spammy to the search engines. More on this [here]().

14. Is your site listed in the Yahoo Directory and the Open Directory, as well as other key, relevant directories?

Links from authoritative sites such as the [Yahoo Directory](), [Open Directory](), and [Google Directory]() improve your PageRank score and consequently your rankings; they also drive visitor traffic directly from those directories. If you aren't already listed in the Yahoo Directory or Open Directory then you should identify

the category most relevant to your business and submit your site. A listing in Open Directory also ensures a listing in Google Directory and numerous other directories powered by Open Directory. Submitting to Yahoo's directory costs $299 then $299 per year recurring (it's free for noncommercial sites, though). Submitting to Open Directory is free but it's become practically impossible to get into, at least in the most appropriate category for your site, since the Open Directory's owner (AOL) and its volunteer editors have left the Directory semi-abandoned.

Don't waste your time and money submitting to hundreds of directories, just pick the most critical ones that are relevant to your business/industry and that Google would likely consider authoritative and trustworthy. For example, a business-to-business company may wish to submit to business.com and ThomasNet.com. Directories that primarily target webmasters and SEOs to sell them listings -- rather than end users who would actually browse the directory -- are most likely being devalued by Google and thus would be a waste of your time and money to submit to.

15. Does your site employ H1 heading tags for content titles?

Historically the search engines have considered H1 tags to be more important than the rest of the body copy. Google appears to no longer weigh the H1 more heavily, yet Google engineers [still recommend](#) using H1s as a best practice -- which is why this is still contained in my list here. In HTML, there are six heading tags, H1 through H6; employ whichever of these six heading tag(s) make the most sense given the page's section hierarchy. If there is one major headline to the page with three sections (each with a heading), and one of those sections has a subheading, then one single H1 tag, three H2 tags, and one H3 tag would be most appropriate given this particular scenario.

Some Web developers believe that H1 tags "look ugly"—big, bold text that sticks out like a sore thumb. That doesn't have to be the case. The H1 tag's font, size, color and amount of surrounding white space can all be defined using style sheets (CSS).

Worst Practices Explanations

1. Do you use pull-down boxes for navigation?

Search engine spiders can't fill out forms, even short ones with just one pull-down. Thus, they can't get to the pages that follow. If you're using pull-downs, make sure there is an alternate means of navigating to those pages that the spiders can use. Note this is not the same as a mouseover menu, where sub-choices show up upon hovering over the main navigation bar; that's fine if done using CSS and not Javascript.

2. Does your primary navigation require Flash, Java or Javascript?

If you expect search engine spiders to execute Flash, Java or Javascript code in order to access links to deeper pages within your site, you'll usually be disappointed with the results. Some search engines have a limited ability to deal with Flash, Java and Javascript. So the links may not be accessible to the spiders, or the link text may not get associated with the link. Semantically marked up HTML is always the most search engine friendly way to go.

3. Is your site done in Flash or overly graphical with very little textual content?

Text is always better than graphics or Flash animations for search engine rankings. Page titles and section headings should be text, not graphics. Page content should ideally not be embedded within Flash files.

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4. Is your home page a "splash page" or otherwise content-less?

With most Web sites, as mentioned above, the home page is weighted by the search engines as the most important page on the site (i.e., given the highest PageRank score). Thus, having no keyword-rich content on your home page is a missed opportunity.

5. Does your site employ frames?

Search engines have problems crawling sites that use frames (i.e., where part of the page moves when you scroll but other parts stay stationary). Google advises not using frames: "Frames tend to cause problems with search engines, bookmarks, emailing links and so on, because frames don't fit the conceptual model of the Web (every page corresponds to a single URL)."

Furthermore, if a frame does get indexed, searchers clicking through to it from search results will often find an "orphaned page": a frame without the content it framed, or content without the associated navigation links in the frame it was intended to display with. Often, they will simply find an error page.

What about "iFrames", you ask? iFrames are better than frames for a variety of reasons, but the content within an iframe on a page still won't be indexed as part of that page's content.

6. Do the URLs of your pages Include "cgi-bin" or numerous ampersands?

As discussed, search engines are leery of dynamically generated pages. That's because they can lead the search spider into an infinite loop called a "spider trap." Certain characters (question marks, ampersands, equal signs) and "CGI-bin" in the URL are sure-fire tip-offs to the search engines that the page is dynamic and thus to proceed with caution. If the URLs have long, overly complex "query strings" (the part of the URL after the question mark), with a number of ampersands and equals signs (which signify that there are multiple variables in the query string), then your page is less likely to get included in the search engine's index.

7. Do the URLs of your pages include session IDs or user IDs?

If your answer to this question is yes, then consider this: search engine spiders like Googlebot don't support cookies, and thus Googlebot will be assigned a new session ID or user ID on each page on your site that it visits. This is the proverbial "spider trap" waiting to happen. Search engine spiders may just skip over these pages. If such pages do get indexed, there will be multiple copies of the same pages each taking a share of the PageRank score, resulting in PageRank dilution and lowered rankings.

If you're not quite clear on why your PageRank scores will be diluted, think of it this way: Googlebot will find minimal links pointing to the exact version of a page with a particular session ID in its URL.

8. Do you unnecessarily spread your site across multiple domains?

This is typically done for load balancing purposes. For example, the links on the JCPenney.com home page point off to www2.jcpenney.com, or www3.jcpenney.com, or www4.jcpenney.com and so on, depending on which server is the least busy. This dilutes PageRank score in a way similar to how session IDs in the URL dilute PageRank.

9. Are your title tags the same on all pages?

Far too many Web sites use a single title tag for the entire site. If your site falls into that group, you're missing out on a lot of search engine traffic. Each page of your site should "sing" for one or several unique keyword themes. That "singing" is stifled when the page's title tag doesn't incorporate the particular keyword being targeted.

10. Do you have pop-ups on your site?

Most search engines don't index Javascript-based pop-ups, so the content within the pop-up will not get indexed. If that's not good enough reason to stop using pop-ups, you should know that people hate them - with a passion. Also consider that untold millions of users have pop-up blockers installed. (The Google Toolbar and Yahoo Companion toolbar are pop-up blockers, too, in case you didn't know.)

11. Do you have error pages in the search results ("session expired" etc.)?

First impressions count . . . a lot! So make sure search engine users aren't seeing error messages in your search listings. Hotmail took the cake in this regard, with a Google listing for its home page that, for years, began with: "Sign-In Access Error." Not exactly a useful, compelling or brand-building search result for the user to see. Check to see if you have any error pages by querying Google, Yahoo and Bing for *site:www.yourcompanyurl.com*. Eliminate error pages from the search engine's index by serving up the proper status code in the HTTP header (see below) and/or by including a meta robots noindex tag in the HTML.

12. Does your "file not found" error page return a 200 status code?

This is a corollary to the tip immediately above. Before the content of a page is served up by your Web server, a HTTP header is sent, which includes a status code. A status code of 200 is what's usually sent, meaning that the page is "OK." A status code of 404 means that the requested URL was not found. Obviously, a file not found error page should return a 404 status code, not a 200. You can verify whether this is the case using a server header checker and then into the form input a bogus URL at your domain, such as http://www.yourcompanyurl.com/blahblah.

An additional, and even more serious, consequence of a 200 being returned with URLs that are clearly bogus/non-existent is that your site will look less trustworthy by Google (Google does check for this).

Note that there are other error status codes that may be more appropriate to return than a 404 in certain circumstances, like a 403 if the page is restricted or 500 if the server is overloaded and temporarily unavailable; a 200 (or a 301 or 302 redirect that points to a 200) should never be returned, regardless of the error, to ensure the URL with the error does not end up in the search results.

13. Do you use "click here" or other superfluous copy for your hyperlink text?

Wanting to rank tops for the words "click here," eh? Try some more relevant keywords instead. Remember, Google associates the link text with the page you are linking to, so make that link text count.

14. Do you have superfluous text like "Welcome To" at the beginning of your title tags?

No one wants to be top ranked for the word "welcome" (except maybe the Welcome Inn chain!) so remove those superfluous title tags!

15. Do you unnecessarily employ redirects, or are they the wrong type?

A redirect is where the URL changes automatically while the page is still loading in the user's browser. Temporary (status code of 302) redirects -- as opposed to permanent (301) ones -- can cost you valuable PageRank. That's because temporary redirects don't pass PageRank to the destination URL. Links that go through a click-through tracker first tend to use temporary redirects. Don't redirect visitors when they first enter your site at the home page; but if you must, at least employ a 301 redirect. Whether 301 or 302, if you can easily avoid using a redirect altogether, then do that. If you must have a redirect, avoid having a bunch of redirects in a row; if that's not possible, then ensure that there are only 301s in that chain. Most importantly, avoid selectively redirecting human visitors (but not spiders) immediately as they enter your site from a search engine, as that can be deemed a "sneaky redirect" and can get you penalized or banned.

16. Do you have any hidden or small text meant only for the search engines?

It may be tempting to obscure your keywords from visitors by using tiny text that is too small for humans to see, or as text that is the same color as the page background. However, the search engines are on to that trick.

17. Do you engage in "keyword stuffing"?

Putting the same keyword everywhere, such as in every ALT attribute, is just asking for trouble. Don't go overboard with repeating keywords or adding a meta keywords tag that's hundreds of words long. (Why even have a meta keywords tag? They don't help with SEO, they only help educate your competitors on which keywords you are targeting.) Google warns not to hide keywords in places that aren't rendered, such as comment tags. A good rule of thumb to operate under: if you'd feel uncomfortable showing to a Google employee what you're doing, you shouldn't be doing it.

18. Do you have pages targeted to obviously irrelevant keywords?

Just because "britney spears" is a popular search term doesn't mean it's right for you to be targeting it. Relevancy is the name of the game. Why would you want to be number one for "britney spears" anyway? The bounce rate for such traffic would be terrible.

19. Do you repeatedly submit your site to the engines?

At best this is unnecessary. At worst this could flag your site as spam, since spammers have historically submitted their sites to the engines through the submission form (usually multiple times, using automated tools, and without consideration for whether the site is already indexed). You shouldn't have to submit your site to the engines; their spiders should find you on their own -- assuming you have some links pointing to your site. And if you don't, you have bigger issues: like the fact your site is completely devoid of PageRank, trust and authority. If you're going to submit your site to a search engine, search for your site

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first to make sure it's not already in the search engine's index and only submit it manually if it's not in the index.

Note this warning doesn't apply to participating in the Sitemaps program; it's absolutely fine to provide the engines with a comprehensive Sitemaps XML file on an ongoing basis (learn more about this program at http://sitemaps.org).

20. Do you incorporate your competitors' brand names in your meta tags?

Unless you have their express permission, this is a good way to end up at the wrong end of a lawsuit.

21. Do you have duplicate pages with minimal or no changes?

The search engines won't appreciate you purposefully creating duplicate content to occupy more than your fair share of available positions in the search results. Note that a dynamic (database-driven) website inadvertently offering duplicate versions of pages to the spiders at multiple URLs is not a spam tactic, as it is a common occurrence for dynamic websites (even Google's own Googlestore.com suffers from this), but it is something you would want to minimize due to the link gain (PageRank) dilution effects.

22. Does your content read like "spamglish"?

Crafting pages filled with nonsensical, keyword-rich gibberish is a great way to get penalized or banned by search engines.

23. Do you have "doorway pages" on your site?

Doorway pages are pages designed solely for search engines that aren't useful or interesting to human visitors. Doorway pages typically aren't linked to much from other sites or much from your own site. The search engines strongly discourage the use of this tactic, quite understandably.

24. Do you have machine-generated pages on your site?

Such pages are usually devoid of meaningful content. There are tools that churn out keyword-rich doorway pages for you, automatically. Yuck! Don't do it; the search engines can spot such doorway pages.

25. Are you "pagejacking"?

"Pagejacking" refers to hijacking or stealing high-ranking pages from other sites and placing them on your site with few or no changes. Often, this tactic is combined with cloaking so as to hide the victimized site's content from search engine users. This is a big no-no! Not only is it very unethical, it's illegal; and the consequences can be severe.

26. Are you "cloaking"?

"Cloaking" is the tactic of detecting search engine spiders when they visit and varying the HTML code specifically for the spiders in order to improve rankings. This is only acceptable in a very limited use: namely, as a way of simplifying search engine unfriendly links. If you are in any way selectively modifying

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the page content, this is nothing less than a bait-and-switch. Search engines have undercover spiders that masquerade as regular visitors to detect such unscrupulous behavior.

27. Are you submitting to FFA ("Free For All") links pages and link farms?

Search engines don't think highly of link farms and such, and may penalize you or ban you for participating on them. How can you tell link farms and directories apart from each other? Link farms are poorly organized, have many more links per page, and have minimal editorial control.

28. Are you buying expired domains with high PageRank scores to use as link targets?

Google underwent a major algorithm change a while back to thwart this tactic. Now, when domains expire, their PageRank scores are reset to 0, regardless of how many links point to the site.

Final Thoughts

If you've read this and thought, "Hmm, that was interesting, but I didn't actually tick any marks on the above checklists," then you have extracted only a fraction of the checklists' value. The simple action of printing out the checklists and checking the appropriate boxes one by one is the first step to doing things differently. Remember: if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten.

If you adhere to the advice laid out for you above, you'll be well on your way to a "best practice," search-engine-optimal Web site. Go astray, and your rankings and perhaps even your reputation with the search engines could suffer.

Checklists are just the beginning on the path to SEO success. It's important to engage with an SEO expert to help guide your organization through the changes necessary to optimize your site.

About the Author

Stephan M. Spencer, M.Sc., is VP of SEO Strategies at Covario, an industry leader in paid and organic search software and services for Fortune 500 companies. Covario recently acquired Netconcepts, the company that Stephan founded in 1995. The combined company has nearly 100 customers in key industries such as high tech, financial services, ecommerce, retail, consumer electronics, media, life sciences, and consumer packaged goods. Stephan is also inventor of GravityStream, the patent-pending, performance-based natural search platform that has become Covario's Organic Search Optimizer product.

Stephan is an author of the O'Reilly book *The Art of SEO* with co-authors Rand Fishkin, Jessie Stricchiola, and Eric Enge. Stephan is also a Senior Contributor to MarketingProfs.com and to Practical Ecommerce, a monthly columnist on Search Engine Land, and he's contributed to Multichannel Merchant, DM News, Catalog Age, Catalog Success, Building Online Business, Unlimited, and NZ Marketing magazine among others. He is also co-author of the analyst report "The State of Search Engine Marketing 1.0 - New Strategies for Successful Cataloging" published by Catalog Age.

Stephan is a frequent speaker at Internet conferences around the globe (including Berlin, London, Toronto, Santiago, Auckland, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and places in between) for organizations such as the DMA, the AMA, Shop.org, Internet Retailer, SMX, IncisiveMedia (Search Engine Strategies), IQPC and IIR.

Stephan is an avid blogger. He blogs primarily on his own blog, Stephan Spencer's Scatterings. But his posts can also be found on Searchlight (part of the CNET Blog Network), Shop.org Blog, Natural Search Blog, BusinessBlogConsulting.com, MarketingProfs Daily Fix, Changes For Good, and Google, I Suggest.

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About Covario

Covario, Inc. is the leader in SEM and SEO software and services for the Fortune 500. The Covario portfolio provides global organizations with robust interactive and search marketing analytics solutions for paid search advertising, organic search engine optimization (SEO), and display advertising. Covario enables complex and distributed organizations to control brand integrity, ensure budget transparency and deliver quantifiable results across business units, distribution channels and languages. Headquartered in San Diego, CA, Covario's growing customer list include some of the world's best known brands in high tech manufacturing, retail, ecommerce, financial services, consumer electronics, media, entertainment, publishing and consumer packaged goods. For more information on Covario call 858.397.1500 or visit http://www.covario.com.

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