

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION IN 2014

What You Need to Know



Kenny Eliason

Search Engine Optimization in 2014: What You Need to Know

By: Kenny Eliason

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Why Should You Care About SEO?

In 2013, Google drastically changed the way its search engine works. There were 13 major changes throughout the year, as well as numerous small tweaks. All of this served to make old search engine optimization tactics obsolete. 2014 will see further adjustments in search algorithms, but you can start improving your website based on last year's changes. We already know a great deal about search tactics this year.

More and more websites are seeing their rankings in Google drop with each algorithm tweak. Unless your site is properly updated, you will find it very difficult to maintain a good position in the search results.

The Focus in 2014

Several years ago, simply driving large amounts of traffic to your website was enough to make money and get you ranked high in the search results. Today, the focus for webmasters is highly relevant traffic. While this may mean fewer visitors, it tends to result in more sales as visitors reach your site because they are looking for precisely what you offer.

To this end, the changes that Google makes are beneficial. If you optimize for the specific products and services that you offer, you can help your site become one of the most relevant for those searching for that type of product. Your ranking will increase as search engines strive to keep their users happy. Everyone wins.

Those business owners with websites that are already focused on high quality content will find that there is relatively little they need to do to their sites. While you can always improve on link building and social media, having a strong base site is the first step to successful search engine optimization.

In addition to ensuring that your business appears high in the list of search results, SEO helps you stay ahead of rival sites. Every day, more websites and blogs are created, giving you more competitors. Proper optimization is essential for beating out the competition.

Understanding Semantic Search

One of the terms that is used often these days is “semantic search.” This simply means that Google tries to figure out what the intention of the searcher is. For example, if you look for diabetic recipes, the search engine may also return low carb recipes, which would be relevant for someone needing to cook for a diabetic.

You Need More Keywords

When optimizing your site for search, you need to keep in mind that just using the main keyword is no longer enough. You need to include related words and phrases to better define your content’s purpose. This allows the search engines to match your site with visitors who actually need what you have to offer.

LSI (Latent Semantic Indexing) has been on the rise for a while, but it is increasingly important in 2014. The search engines are seeking to eliminate spam and move the best and most relevant sites to the top of the search results and LSI is one of the simplest ways to improve your rankings.

Rather than use the same keyword, such as “New York restaurants” over and over in your content, you will want to use keywords that relate to this. These could include phrases like:

- Eating out in New York
- Manhattan restaurants

- Fast food in Hoboken
- Where to eat in Times Square
- Union City seafood

The keywords should be related to your actual topic. Avoid adding random keyword phrases just to increase rankings, as this is likely to backfire on you. Search engines are cracking down on cheating these days.

Use a range of related words to help search engines decide whether your content is appropriate for specific searches. It also makes your website copy easier for humans to read. No one is interested in seeing the same phrases over and over in an article. However, optimizing for semantic search is far more complicated than just adapting your content and keywords.

How Semantic Markup Affects Your Site

Google and Bing have been using Schema.org's semantic markup for over a year. This method requires using standardized schemas or HTML on your site to make it more readable for search engine spiders.

Search engines use the information in schemas to provide answer cards and Knowledge Graph results that have become commonplace in search results. These show up in some searches now, but will be far more prevalent shortly.

Searchers can see the answers to their questions in seconds, without having to click through to a website, which has both pros and cons. Many website owners are worried that no one

will click through to their site with the information readily available on Google. However, it could boost your ranking and may be worth doing anyway.

It takes time to add schemas to your content, but it can drastically increase your rankings. Some platforms already offer plug-ins to make the switch easier, but you can also hand code everything.

While semantic search has been developing for a few years now, 2014 is the year that it really comes into its own. You can expect single keyword sites to start dropping out of the first page results while more relevant sites rise to the top.

Mobile Optimization: Changing the Face of Internet

Mobile phones and tablets sales are exploding and 2014 will see considerably more mobile users. As of the end of 2013, 91% of adults in the US own a cell phone. 63% of those regularly use their phones to access websites. This will only rise as phones become faster and networks offer better Internet speeds.

To ensure that you are reaching as many of your future clients as possible, it is essential to offer a website that is optimized for phone and tablet screens. In fact, it's a good idea to start with a responsive, mobile friendly website and then adapt it to desktop and laptop screens.

Mobile optimization is an area that is in rapid growth and more and more brands are struggling to stay up in the search results when mobile owners do searches. Unless you optimize your site for these users, you will miss out on a number of potential clients.

How to Optimize Your Site

Keep your website relatively simple when planning for mobile users. Those screens are small and can't handle too many design elements without frustrating the user. You can maximize usability by choosing a responsive theme for your site. This will shift to work with the screen it is being viewed on.

An alternative to a responsive theme is to have an app made for your site. Many large sites use this option. People simply download the app and can easily view your site on the device they use most. Unfortunately, this doesn't help with those first-time visitors who are coming in from search engines. They will need to see your site before they can decide whether or not to use the app, so an optimized site is a must have.

Make sure you place contact information at the bottom of each page. Loading a new page just to find this information can be frustrating for a visitor and having it right there will make it easy for them to reach you.

Page-Centric Search: Is Your Site Ready?

With the Hummingbird update, Google made keyword data for sites secure. This means that webmasters can no longer see what people are searching to get to their website. The change greatly alters search engine optimization techniques, but also forces sites to produce quality content in order to rank well.

To adjust to this change, websites must now focus on pages. Page-centric search optimization requires optimizing pages for more than one keyword.

Optimize Your Pages

Each page on your website will need to be optimized for search engines. This is more than just adding keywords, though your content should be using the previously mentioned LSI method of SEO.

Don't just focus your efforts on your homepage. Every single page on your site should be getting attention. There are several areas to focus on.

Internal links. Linking between pages is good SEO strategy. It's also very easy to do, so there is no excuse to skip this step in optimization. Use anchor text to help search engines recognize what your site is about, so they can rank it appropriately. One quick way of adding numerous Internal Links to your website is by adding Breadcrumbs to your pages. These provide an additional feature of helping the search engines understand the page structure of your site.

External links. Social media is ideal for linking to your individual pages. Remember to include social media buttons on your pages so everyone can share your links. You can also do guest posts and interact with the general community to help build backlinks that are high quality. Do be careful, since poor quality links can actually harm your site.

Eliminate errors. Make sure that any links you have on your site are live. This is something that should be checked at least every quarter to prevent dead links from appearing on the pages.

Use multiple keywords. The days of using just one keyword per page are long gone. Now, to stay ahead, you need to optimize for several on each page. See the section on Semantic Search for more information on this method. While multiple keyword phrases are a good idea, one should be chosen as the primary keyword.

Don't forget images. Google's image search has improved in leaps and bounds over the past year. Take advantage of this by including relevant images on your site. If you can use originals, this will get you better rankings. The file name and the alt text should include your keywords, as well, to ensure the pictures show up in the right searches.

Content Matters

Content has long been a vital part of Internet marketing, but it is now much more important than ever before. The best content will not only boost rankings, but engage your readers. It can be difficult to find the perfect combination, but opting for high quality copy is a good start. The level of content on your website helps search engines determine the value of the site.

Optimize Every Type of Content

When it comes to content, words are not the only thing to consider. Photos and other images are also content, as are videos. Of course, articles and blog posts are the most common type of content referred to in SEO circles. This doesn't mean that other media isn't important, though.

The type of content will determine how you use it in your optimization process. Text is fairly simple, since you can use keywords in it. However, you will find that videos and photos are more likely to be shared on social media.

Text. Text should also include headings and subheadings. These are important to break up the text for human readers and make it easier on the eyes. When you use heading markers (h1, h2, etc.) this is a signal to the search engines that these are important words and a good indication of what your site is about. For this reason, your headings should always include at least one keyword phrase.

Images. To optimize your photos, add a description and alt text. The alt text will help search engines decide if the picture is something relevant for searchers. You can also use a caption to increase SEO by including your top keyword in it. One additional tip is to optimize the file name of the image to include your keyword as well. Imagine the difference these two file names would make when trying to interpret what an image contains: stock2934902593.jpg and Girl-Riding-A-Bicycle.jpg.

Video and Audio. Most videos are embedded from YouTube or a similar site. This is actually a useful way to increase exposure and makes it simple for people to share your site and video. Video networking sites are well designed to help people find interesting and useful content. If they like it, your video could increase in views and rank well on its own, with links back to the website.

When it comes to optimizing this type of content, you will need to use the description area of the video. This can be keyword optimized, but don't overdo it. One rule I like to follow is to put the website URL on the first line of the description field. That line is often the only part of your description that is visible to the viewer without having to click the "read more" button. Having your URL on that line increases the likelihood of getting a click to your site for more information.

Audio is much the same as video, and can become highly popular if broadcast through the appropriate channels such as a podcast.

Use a mix of different media types to grab visitors' attention. Many people enjoy watching an information packed video more than they like to read an article. Others will prefer to read a tutorial with photos over watching a video. By creating a blend of different types of content, you can appeal to a wider audience.

Quality is High Priority

Anyone who has been online within the past few years has seen a spam site, one where all the content is obviously cheap or generated by spinners. Awkward phrases, poor wording and terrible grammar can wreak havoc on a website. While the copy may cost less, it won't hold up to the high standards of Google and other search engines.

Your articles and blog posts should be informative and engaging. When a post is entertaining or valuable, it can easily go viral. More and more people will share it and you end up with plenty of links back to your site.

When publishing copy, consider the following:

- Is it useful to your visitors?
- Does it have a call to action?
- Does it solve a problem for your visitor?

The most useful content will fit all three criteria. Whether you write your own copy or hire someone to do it for you, quality is what really counts.

How Long Should Your Content Be?

One of the more common questions is what length is best for website copy. Is an 800 word article likely to get better rankings than a 300 word blog post? The answer is simple, it all depends on the information you are trying to convey.

If every article on your site is exactly the same length, it starts to look rather cookie cutter. Most successful sites use a variety of content lengths. Look at how much information you have to convey and decide what an appropriate length would be. That being said, a minimum of 300 words is best in order to give Google's robots something to sink their teeth into. While longer content seems to rank better, it is not always appropriate for every niche. More words mean more keywords and this makes it easier for Google to rank your pages appropriately, so consider this when working on your content.

Overall, the amount of promotion and the number of backlinks to your pages is what will determine their ranking. While content length does matter to some extent, a well optimized, 400 word blog post with multiple backlinks will rank better than a rambling 2,000 word article without any optimization.

Since quality matters, it's usually a good idea to stick to an article that is long enough to cover the information, rather than repeating the same thing over and over. The same goes for videos.

Guest Posting for Extra Credit

Content on your own website is useful, but you can also boost your rankings by providing content on other people's blogs to get backlinks. Guest posting is a very common content marketing technique and one that works.

Guest posting is relatively simple, once you have a place to publish your work.

1. Find quality blogs that are related to your topics. Check to see if the blog already has a guest posting policy. Some will charge a fee to post your article.
2. Prepare a few article ideas that would fit with the content on the blogs you are considering.
3. Contact the blogs with your article ideas. It's usually best to create titles for each one.
4. When you get a positive response (be prepared for a few negative ones), write the article and submit it. The article should have a link back to your website or a specific page on your site.

Keep in mind that you do not necessarily have to write the guest post yourself. You can hire a freelance writer or content company to handle this aspect of marketing for you. The main thing is to remember to submit only highly relevant, top quality articles. Not only will you increase your chances of having the content accepted, it will also rank better in the search engines.

Social Media: More Important Than Ever

Social media is definitely coming into its own. A large number of people just use them for fun, but social sites can also be very good marketing tools. In 2014, it is even more vital that you establish a presence online through sites like Twitter, Facebook and Google+.

Google's Hummingbird update revamped the way search works. As a result of the upheaval, social network activity now counts toward search engine rankings. This is a whole new world of optimization and one that will take many sites a while to implement. You can get ahead of the competition by adding social sites to your optimization strategy now.

There are dozens of social media websites available to business owners. It can be a little confusing to sift through them all and find the best option for your needs. Google+ and Twitter have both proven to affect site rankings and should be high on your list of sites to use. However, you will need to go where your audience is.

Choosing the Perfect Social Media Site

It can be very difficult to maintain a regular presence on more than two or three social media sites, so you will need to choose the right ones for your business. If you are handling the entire marketing campaign on your own, it's best to start with one site and build from there once you have the hang of it. Another option is to outsource this part of the process.

The first thing to consider is whether or not your audience frequents the site. If your audience is teen males, for example, they probably won't be on Pinterest. Likewise, you are less likely to find senior citizens on Twitter. Know your audience and find the places they enjoy hanging out.

Other things to consider include:

Format. Does your product or service lend itself best to photos, video or text? This will help determine where you choose to promote your company. Some networks, such as Facebook, are ideal for multiple formats.

SEO. Not all social networks are identical in the impact they have on search engine rankings. Google+, Facebook and YouTube tend to have the biggest effect, but many other sites are also good for SEO.

Learning curve. Most sites have something of a learning curve. You can avoid this completely by hiring a social manager, but if you intend to handle the networking yourself, be aware that some sites are more complicated than others.

Choose the site you feel would have the most benefit for your business and begin there. Once you have built up a following and are comfortable using the site, you can branch out to others. It's important not to overwhelm yourself . . . SEO includes a variety of factors and you will need to spread your time out over all of them.

How to Get the Most from Online Social Interactions

Using social media can be time consuming. It is not a set and forget type strategy. You will need to regularly update your accounts and interact with your potential customers and followers. It can be useful to schedule a specific amount of time each day to spend on social media.

In order to get the most out of your accounts, you should do the following:

- Ensure that your profile is up to date and optimized for your main keywords.
- Add new followers regularly. Choose these people carefully and look for those who are already active on the site and have plenty of followers themselves.
- Interact with followers. Ask questions, comment on other people's status updates or tweets and generally be part of the group. This builds trust and makes it more likely that others will share your links.
- Check for messages daily. You should really respond as quickly as possible to private and public messages.
- Don't spam. No one cares to see ads over and over again and you will rapidly lose followers if you only post ads and links to your own site. Instead, post useful information, tips, and links to other quality sites in between your own links.

- Make it easy for people to share your content on social networks. Add icons to your site so it only takes one click to share photos or articles.
- Take your cues from trending topics. What people talk about on social media is often a good indicator of what will be popular if you write about it. This can gain you new followers and help you stay on top of top trends.
- Stay active. An account that doesn't post anything for several weeks or months and then suddenly springs to life for a short time, only to go dormant again, will not help your cause. Slow and steady wins the race.

Social sites are far more important now than they have been in the past. With a little planning, you can boost your rankings through this method alone.

SEO 2014: What Now?

SEO is constantly changing and search engine optimization in 2014 is no exception. The best way to ensure that your site ranks well on the search engines is to stay on top of the changes and make sure that you adapt to them.

Search engine optimization is not just about keywords these days. While using latent semantic indexing techniques throughout your content can help your site get better rankings, you also need to consider other SEO techniques. High quality, optimized content that uses semantic marking will tend to rank higher, but you should also be building quality links and using social media.

With so many changes being made and ongoing adjustments to Google's algorithms, it's not surprising that many business owners feel overwhelmed. Semantic search requires a fairly steep learning curve. It is certainly possible to learn how to optimize your own site, but more and more people are turning to SEO companies to create the best website possible and to increase rankings. This frees business owners up to work on other aspects of their business.

Sites that are flexible enough to adjust to the upcoming changes and tweaks in algorithms will do best in the search engine rankings. Adopt a broad optimization strategy which includes on page optimization, great content, link building and social media for the best results.

SEO is not dead, as some have proclaimed. In fact, that is as far from the truth as you can get. This year, search engine

optimization is more necessary than ever, particularly for sites that have not updated their SEO recently.

Stay abreast of any upcoming changes in the search engine algorithms and optimize any and all content on your site to stay ahead in the rankings. Top quality content, both on your site and on social media sites will also give your pages a boost. Use an overall approach this year, to catch Google's attention and improve your rankings.