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# MARRIOTT

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# WORD OF MOUSE



At some point today you will type a phrase into Google's search engine. A few seconds later, you'll start scrolling through results. Chances are you're going to click on one of the top links. And just like you, millions of people across the globe will be doing the same thing, entering other search terms into Google, Bing, or Yahoo! and clicking on whatever comes up first.

That's today's digital world, where the search engine reigns supreme. Meanwhile, your business and every other business on the planet is clamoring for one of the coveted spots near the top of a results page.

The solution—which you've undoubtedly heard of—is search engine optimization (SEO).

By Todd Hollingshead  
Illustrations by Phil Wrigglesworth



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SEO is the practice of improving the visibility of your company's online presence so that when Joe Consumer does an online search, a link to your business shows up. In other words, SEO is optimizing web sites so search engines can more easily snag them.

Achieving SEO greatness in 2011's congested marketplace is no quick fix. Today's advanced search algorithms demand a much richer, holistic approach than simply placing popular search terms on your site.

"The game is constantly changing, and Google is trying to protect their search results and protect their users," says Marriott School alum Michael New Jr., vice president of marketing for BCS Tech Ventures. "They want to make sure the information they're displaying is truly the best result."

The good news is that the secrets of excellent SEO are out of the bag. And though there isn't a one-size-fits-all model when it comes to online marketing, the foundational SEO steps are a good place to start.

What follows is an abbreviated three-phase trip through SEO basics. Think of it as SEO 101, but remember, like anything in the digital world, what works today will certainly evolve tomorrow.

## ■ PHASE ONE ■

According to experts like New, the SEO launching point should be an evaluation of your most visible online assets, which usually begins with your company web site.

New says that every time someone asks him about SEO basics, he asks the same questions. "Do you have a web site? What's its purpose? Is your web site fulfilling that purpose?" Most customers have a web site, but they don't know how it's doing."

### STEP ONE: Take your web site's pulse

Determining web site performance requires analytics, but for most companies, it doesn't require a lot of money. In many cases, free tools like Google Analytics tell you what kind of traffic you're getting and what you need to do better.

Getting data is critical to assessing how well your web site is accomplishing its purpose, whether it be branding or selling. Digital marketing and PR professional Pete Codella recommends Website Grader to take a quick pulse of your site.

"If you've got a score in the high eighties or nineties, you are in pretty good shape," says Codella, who runs Salt Lake City firm Codella Marketing. "If you've got a sixty, you need to make some improvements."

Improvement starts with nailing down your keywords.

### STEP TWO: Find and place your keywords

Start by researching the most frequently searched keywords in your industry. Google's AdWords keyword tool is a great help here, providing data for how often a particular term is used while also suggesting other popular options.

"Try to target three to four areas on each page to use the optimal keywords," New says.

There are a few areas where keywords should always be used:

- The site's title tag
- Header tags
- Headlines
- Metadata tags
- ALT tags
- First one hundred words of the site
- URL or page file name

For example, a Reno accounting firm looking for local business should have "Reno, Nevada, Accountant" throughout its site—especially in places like headlines and the site's first one hundred words.

Codella advises taking the keyword selection a bit further, recommending companies generate a list of twenty-five words that will guide all online posts, conversations, and social media updates.

### STEP THREE: Don't oversaturate

There is also a science to how many of those keywords should appear on a site. Industry experts say keeping an optimal keyword density—the ratio of keywords to total

words on your site—is paramount. Today's recommended keyword density is about 3 to 5 percent.

Ammie Hickman knows all about getting the right keywords. As general manager of Diamond Glass in Lindon, Utah, she refined her keywords several times before she went from the thirteenth to the first spot in a Google search.

"We adjusted until we got them right," Hickman says. "The learning curve was gargantuan when I started, but now I'm to the point where I can do some of it on my own."

One simple technique is to create a "places page" on Google, Bing, or Yahoo! Places pages are free listings that allow a business to list location, hours, web site links, and phone numbers on one landing page.

In general, web site revamping should include consistent content and focused messages that all relate back to your product or service. BYU alum Glenn Hammer, who runs a background checking company in Colfax, California, says he's surprised by how many sites fail to do this.

"People forget to actually communicate what they are and what they sell," he says. "Search engines can see only what's on the page. They're not like humans, who can make assumptions."

## ■ PHASE TWO ■

Once your site is properly optimized, see how many friends you can make in the digital world.

Offsite SEO is all about getting reputable, influential sites to link back to you with specific anchor text. The specific anchor text is usually the keywords you've identified for your site.

The SEO industry calls it link juice, and it's certainly the drink of the day.

"It counts as kind of a vote in Google's mind," New says. "The power and authority of the sites pointing back to you will be passed to your site."

Says Hammer: "It's like high school. If the most popular three or four girls know

you and think you're great, then you've got it made. If nobody knows who you are and you want to run for student body president, then you've got a challenge."

#### STEP ONE: Build links

A nice way to start building links is having good content. If your site really is well done, useful, and relevant, people will naturally start linking back to it.

But it is also acceptable to speed up the process by building those back links using SEO techniques. Some of the most standard link-building exercises include:

- Getting listed in directories
- Posting on forums
- Producing and distributing news and press releases
- Blogging and guest blogging
- Using article directories

#### STEP TWO: Produce and push usable content

One of the major techniques to building back links is producing content for other site owners. One way to do this is article marketing—writing short Wikipedia-style articles (250 to 500 words) relevant to a specific industry and then making them free for other sites to post. This can be done by submitting articles to web directories, such as ehow.com or ezinearticles.com.

The key to article marketing is making sure you've got a resource box on each submission. This box includes a short description of the author, contact information, and a keyword-friendly link that leads people back to the author's site.

The more content online and the more articles on reputable sites pointing back to your company's site, the higher your page will show up on a search. Or if these techniques are done extremely well, your company can own the entire first page of search results.

Such is the case with Leavitt Partners, the advising firm of Michael Leavitt, former EPA administrator and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services secretary.

"Instead of having a site that serves as a library of information about our firm, we actively push information, news, and what we call 'thought leadership,'" says NAC member Natalie Gochnour, vice president of policy and communications for Leavitt

Partners. "When someone wants to learn about us, we control the introduction to our people and our firm."

#### STEP THREE: Be actively conversant

As suggested by Gochnour, a great way to grab people's attention is to have a strong voice in the conversation around your business or industry.

Start to establish your voice online by locating the forums and blogs that are relevant to your industry—then start talking. There is immense value in getting keywords and knowledge associated with your business out there by way of guest blog posts, forum discussions, or posts on industry association sites.

New says anything that takes time and effort is seen as a positive thing in Google's rankings.

"Technically, what sets you apart in algorithms today are the back links and the quantity and the quality of those links," New says. "The more content you can create manually to make your page more

robust, the better."

Oh, and don't forget about those social media platforms.

#### ■ PHASE THREE ■

Among search engines, Google is the undisputed king. Yet despite being the world's most popular site, Google faces constant competition from the web's number two: social media giant Facebook.

Facebook and its 750 million-plus users, along with social media giants Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, are forcing companies to take social media seriously. Google itself has acknowledged as much with the recent launch of its own social network, Google+.

"Even Google is integrating social media into searches," says BYU alum Carina Wytiaz, who runs social media marketing company Curve 8 Media. "All those social media platforms help your SEO. They're just more avenues to point people back to the site you maintain as your brand."



## STEP ONE:

### Establish a social media presence

Online marketing experts understand there is often trepidation to step into the fast-moving world of social media, so they recommend establishing personal profiles on social media platforms first. As soon as you feel comfortable on a personal level, start a business social media profile.

Set up business pages on LinkedIn and Facebook with as much detail and as many keywords as possible. Start a business handle for Twitter and monitor the conversation about your company and industry. Create an engaging blog filled with keyword-rich content. Always make sure your bio or profile information includes—you guessed it—keywords.

“Then you need to start sharing content that is very valuable to your constituencies,” Codella says. “Start discussions around your keywords, share pertinent information, and let the keywords serve as a guide for your online conversations.”

Wytiaz says at the very least you need to follow the conversations, even if you’re not trying to get your message and brand out there.

“The worst thing that can happen is to spend a lot of time, money, and energy on SEO and, all of the sudden, somebody starts having a conversation about your company on blogs or on Twitter and that conversation is ranked higher than your company’s site,” Wytiaz says.

## STEP TWO:

### Reach out through social media

Building a social media audience takes time and attention, but there are tricks to jump-start the process. If resources allow, one way to quickly build a following is through promotions, New says.

Hickman of Diamond Glass uses promotions, such as autographed sports memorabilia giveaways, on a weekly basis. The approach has increased traffic on her Facebook site, which then translates into traffic on her business site.

At the very minimum, getting traffic to your site assures people are getting the right information about your company.

“When we started doing SEO I was surprised by all of the incorrect information that was out there about our company,” Hickman says. “Wrong telephone numbers, wrong addresses, wrong web sites. One directory was sending people who found our name directly to our competitor’s site. A big fat perk of doing SEO is becoming hands-on with everything about your company on the web.”

## STEP THREE: Keep an eye to the future

Like other businesses trying to stay on the cutting edge of technology and marketing, Hickman has implemented just about every SEO approach. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing how the algorithms will change in the future or what new SEO trend will crop up.

Wytiaz, for one, is willing to venture an educated guess. It’s called the game layer, and if expert forecasts come true, it may change the entire SEO strategy.

“It’s already starting now with social media apps like Foursquare, where people are interacting with companies through games,” Wytiaz says. “And they’re doing it on the run on their cell phones. More and more people are using their smartphones instead of their computers. If you want to be relevant going forward, make sure your site is well represented in mobile form.”

Being mobile-ready today is certainly a way to stay on the forefront of online marketing, but if it seems a bit much right now, don’t worry—computers aren’t going anywhere.

For a solid SEO foundation, make sure the legs of the three-legged SEO stool are first firmly established—onsite optimization, offsite optimization (link building), and social media optimization.

Build your SEO stool right, and before you know it, you’ll be sitting pretty at the top of the search results page. **M**

## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR ■

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# TO PAY OR NOT TO PAY



Pay-per-click refers to the practice of paying for your company’s site to come up at the top of a search results page and then paying for each click on the sponsored (paid) link. In Google these ads appear at the top of a search results page, with a shaded background.

These ads can be uber effective or they can be a waste of money. In general, companies looking for a quick influx of traffic to their sites carry out a pay-per-click campaign for a period of time.

“Generally, pay-per-click and paid searches are for companies selling products directly online,” Wytiaz says. “If you’re a bigger company and you want some presence out there, then it’s valuable to use paid searches just to make sure your brand is represented in a prominent position.”

To do paid searches, one must first determine

which keywords are being targeted for the search. This process is done by bidding on keywords. Google AdWords, Yahoo! Search Marketing, and Microsoft adCenter allow advertisers to compare the most competitive search terms. These programs show users exactly what other people are bidding so they can get a good idea of how much they are going to need to bid for a specific search term.

Pay-per-click ads range from 5 cents to hundreds of dollars per click. For example, a mom-and-pop bakery shop might be paying 15 cents a click for the term “local bakery” while a law firm might pay \$300 a click for “structured settlements.”

“I recommend using pay-per-click when it is an ROI positive venture,” New says. “And it’s not hard to determine whether or not that’s going to be the case.”