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Search engine optimisation: can I do it myself?

The rapidly-changing world of SEO can feel elusive, but knowing the latest developments can help you take the task in-house

Mark Smith

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As Google gets more advanced there simply are fewer shortcuts... the benefits of SEO take time to come to fruition and won't impact your site overnight'. Photograph: Michael Gottschalk/Photothek via Getty Images

If a week is a long time in politics, then a year is an eternity in the world of SEO.

If your business operates anywhere near the web, then you will have heard of search engine optimisation – a catch-all phrase for a range of techniques designed to make certain pages appear higher up Google's rankings.

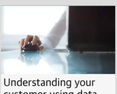
But what you may not know is that these techniques change so rapidly that if you don't keep your finger on the pulse and adapt your strategy, you could be putting your business at a significant disadvantage.

The good and bad old days

There was a time when SEO included a range of practices – some of them dubious at best – designed to trick Google into ranking pages more highly. This included things like keyword stuffing, where popular words were haphazardly thrown onto a page purely so they showed up in a search, even though they often made no sense to a human reader.

From there emerged a game of cat and mouse which saw Google's engineers deploy updates to their ranking algorithms on a daily basis, making them smarter and more able to sniff out the tricks and punish the websites that used them. Severe penalties could include dropping down the search rankings, and even blacklisting, where Google refuses to list your website at all.

Google updates such as RankBrain – its machine-learning artificial intelligence algorithm – as well as Panda, Penguin, and a recent overhaul of how it ranks mobile-friendly sites, have transformed the science and the art of SEO. To keep your site fighting fit in the digital world, you'll now need a new range of techniques.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Time to go mobile

Last year mobile overtook desktop as the preferred way to access the web, and 2017 will be the year mobile SEO comes into its own.

According to Ofcom, 66% of people in the UK use their smartphone to access the Internet, and Google knows that.

Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) project is designed to make mobile pages load even quicker. You can give yourself a huge SEO boost by ensuring your site has a mobile-first design that's responsive, uncluttered and easy to view and navigate.

Voice search and natural language

The rise of digital assistants such as Siri, Alexa and Cortana means more people are now asking questions to Google directly rather than typing them into a search bar. This has given rise to a more natural and longer style of question.

Words such as "what", "when" and "how" now appear more often in search terms. So, rather than keywords such as "Swiss watch", a search might now look like "where can I buy a Swiss watch near me?" or "how much is a Swiss watch?". As a result, long tail keywords (highly specific phrases containing at least three words) have become more important.

To adapt to this, try writing more long tail keywords into your copy, as well as headlines that contain these type of natural language questions rather than simply focussing on a keyword. Developing an FAQs section for your site to answer these specific questions is also a great idea.

Top class content

The importance of original and well-crafted content simply can't be overstated. Google's algorithms are now so sophisticated that even poor grammar could see your site penalised, as Google assumes your copy has been thrown together just to get you up the rankings. Duplicated content pasted from other sites is also a black mark against you.

The key is to write how you'd want to read. Eulogise about your business and your products and produce long, well-written copy that's informative and engaging. To quote a phrase, "write for the human, not for the machine", and you won't go far wrong. If your main site doesn't provide much scope for copy, consider adding a blog. Also ensure this content is sharable on multiple platforms, such as your business' social media accounts.

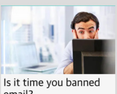
The key is in the word(s)

While keyword stuffing may be frowned upon (and useless these days), keywords are still a big thing with Google.

Think about how you use Google yourself. Usually you're looking for a specific place or a person or an item to purchase. If you have it, then you want to let people know you do – so that word, that "keyword", needs to appear in your copy.

Take care here though, as stuffing too many in and repeating them too often will attract the attention of Penguin – not the Batman villain, but a Google algorithm designed to sniff out words that look like they've been jammed in there just for SEO effect.

As well as keywords, Google also examines the semantics of your sentences – or its "latent semantic indexing" – through its Hummingbird update. With this added focus on the whole context and "conversational" aspect of your copy rather than just the keywords, ensure those keywords are written in sentences that make sense or you'll fall foul.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The beauty of rich content

Google loves videos and images, but it's important to use them correctly. If you're uploading images make sure they're named correctly so Google can read them (pic25.jpg isn't much use), and include keywords if necessary too.

Video makes content hugely shareable and gives you another avenue to foster interest from would-be customers via YouTube.

Forge links

If a respected and reputable website links to yours, such as by quoting some of your copy, a product or your blog, this will be viewed as an endorsement of quality and reliability by Google which will then rank you more favourably.

Once again, getting someone to link to your site is all about the quality of your content. Writing an authoritative blog about your area of expertise is a great way to do this.

Play the long game

As Google gets more advanced there simply are fewer shortcuts. For business owners who are time-poor, this creates the challenge of simply not having the man-hours to devote to it. The benefits of SEO take time to come to fruition and won't impact your site overnight, but building a commercial web presence is like building a home – the time and effort you devote to its foundations now will produce dividends further down the road.

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