

What the Heck is Hotel Web Site SEO, Anyway? A Hotel Marketer's Guide to Search Engine Optimization - By Neil Salerno

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I often wonder how many people truly understand the process of search engine optimization and what it means to have a search engine friendly web site.

It seems to me, by the number of clients I've inherited in the last few years, that there are many 'SEO experts' out there with a fuzzy understanding of the process. As a result, they produced many disenchanted hotel operators, who spent a fortune, only to receive poor or mediocre results.

Ironically, among the many clients seeking better results from SEO, we found no success relationship to the size or popularity of the company that they hired to do the SEO work. This is troubling and only emphasizes the depth of confusion about SEO even among the so-called experts, we found many of the same errors made by SEO companies large and small.

Even more disturbing, we also found no success relationship within the huge disparity of fees charged to perform SEO. This emphasizes the need for caution when selecting an SEO partner. Spending more money for SEO does not insure success.

An important point to consider is that search engine technology has changed considerably in the last few years. Search engine algorithms have evolved and have become more sophisticated, thereby changing acceptable working guidelines. Let's look at how search engine optimization evolved during its short life-span.

How It All Began

Webmasters began optimizing sites for search engines in the mid-1990s. Initially, all a webmaster needed to do was to submit a page or URL to the various search engines which would then send a spider or searchbot to 'crawl' that page, extract links to other pages, and collect information found on the page to be indexed.

The process involves a search engine spider downloading a page and storing it on the search engine's own server, where a second program, known as an indexer, extracts various information about the page, such as the words it contains and where they are located, as well as all links the page contains, which are then placed into a scheduler for crawling at a later date.

Early versions of search algorithms relied solely upon webmaster-provided information such as keyword Meta tags, or index files. Meta-tags provided a guide to each page's content. But using Meta data to index pages was found to be less than reliable because the webmaster's account of key words in the Meta tag were not truly relevant to the site's actual key words which were found within the site's content.

That all changed in 1998 when Page and Brin founded Google. Internet users liked Google's simple design, off-page factors such as PageRank, its hyperlink analysis as well as on-page analysis of content factors. This enabled Google to avoid the kind of manipulation seen in search engines that only considered Meta tags for their rankings.

Since 2007, search engines consider a wide range of undisclosed factors for their ranking algorithms. Google says it ranks sites using more than 200 different signals.

Today's SEO Reality

Search engine optimization, today, is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a web site from search engines via 'natural' or 'organic' search results for targeted keywords. Usually, the earlier the site is presented in the search results, or the higher it 'ranks', the more searchers will visit that site.

As a marketing strategy for increasing a site's relevance, SEO considers how search algorithms work and what people search for, SEO efforts should involve a site's coding, overall design, navigation scheme, text-rich content, and structure, as well as fixing problems that could prevent search engines from indexing and fully spidering a site.

More noticeable efforts may include adding unique content to a site, such as searchable photo galleries, quick facts pages, travel resources, etc. and ensuring that content is easily indexed by search robots, and designing the site to have the necessary sales elements to generate online reservations.

Search engine optimization actually begins with the conceptual design of a web site. A search engine friendly web site incorporates the necessary elements into the design and content of the site. Applying SEO to a poorly designed and dysfunctional web site is futile. The site's design, navigation scheme, and richness of its text content are essential to SEO success.

Search spiders can only read text, therefore, creating and writing the text content of a hotel web site is of paramount importance. The key is to provide the necessary information to serve the site visitor's needs, while at the same time reflecting the site's key word search relevance.

White Hat versus Black Hat SEO

We strongly suggest some caution when selecting an SEO partner for your site, making the wrong selection could have some severe repercussions. Although there are some great rewards which often result from a well conceived SEO program, there are also some severe search engine penalties for those bold enough to intentionally, or unknowingly, violate search engine accepted guidelines.

SEO techniques are classified by some into two broad categories, techniques that search engines recommend as part of good design, and those techniques that search engines don't approve of, referred to as spamdexing. Industry commentators classify these methods, and the practitioners who employ them, as either white hat SEO or black hat SEO. Many sites have had their site ranking reduced or even banned as a result of black hat spamdexing.

Spamdexing is generally a result of unscrupulous or unknowing webmasters attempting to circumvent search engine guidelines by using hidden text or producing a different page if requested by a search engine and, another if requested by a human, this is known as 'cloaking'.

Your Site's Marketing Strategy

A successful search engine optimization campaign will drive organic search results to your site's pages. A good campaign may also include the use of paid advertising or pay-per-click promotion to boost site visibility, search engine giant, Google, considers popularity a huge asset in the indexing of a site.

A well conceived and implemented search engine optimization program can dramatically improve the popularity and thus, the productivity, of your web site, but, the very best of marketing strategies are those which are diversified and attack the market from various directions. SEO should be supplemented with a link strategy to drive traffic from other web sites.

It's important to understand that search engines consider the number of relevant in-bound links when indexing a site. The key here is relevance, beware of unknowing companies wishing to link your site with 'link-farms' containing dubious non-travel, irrelevant links. These can do more harm than good.

Your web site's marketing strategy should include search engine optimization, a well conceived link strategy, and understanding that your SEO partner should correct any technical issues that may keep search engines from fully crawling and indexing your site. It's not rocket science, but caution there are many web site design and SEO pretenders out there.

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