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Raising the Visibility of Extension Web Sites

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Raising the Visibility of Extension Web Sites

Abstract

Extension Web sites are not as visible to search engines as they could be. In fact, many are nearly invisible. The search engine optimization techniques described in this article can help bring Extension Web sites--and their content--to millions of searchers. Increased Extension productivity will result.

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A teacher searches the Internet for information relating to youth programming. A young married couple searches for financial management information. A food service worker searches for continuing education classes. A County Commissioner's aide searches for water conservation programs offered to the public. A newly retired couple search for opportunities to volunteer their time. None of these searchers are aware of Extension. Yet they need information that Extension offers. In spite of the fact that Extension has created numerous Web sites, somehow the searchers have trouble finding them.

Why can't our clientele find our information and programs? Is it because so many Web sites exist? What can we do to help our clientele find our information?

The solution is called "search engine optimization." This technique involves optimizing, or "tuning," our Web pages to make them more visible to search engines. Increasing Extension's Web site visibility hinges on understanding our clientele. We need to understand what information they're searching for and we need to understand *exactly* what terminology they use to search for it. The terms used by our clientele to find the information they're looking for are referred to as "keywords."

What's a Keyword?

Keywords are the single words or multi-word phrases that are used most often by a specific audience to find information on a specific topic. These keywords must be both highly relevant to the contents of your Web page and the first words your target audience uses to search for the information you offer.

For example, suppose a homeowner has decided to maintain his own landscape. He's looking for a landscape maintenance class for homeowners. What key words or phrases might he use? Some of the possibilities include: landscape maintenance, yard care, lawn care, gardening, turf care, yard maintenance, lawn maintenance, etc. If he were to include a term describing the activity itself, would it be called a class, a workshop, a seminar, or something else?

Getting the Keywords Right

How do you determine the best keywords? Talk to your clientele. Ask them about your topic. What words come to their minds first? Ask your advisory committee. Search the Internet for Web pages similar to yours. What keywords are they using? Make a list of all the words you come up with, then add all the synonyms you can find. Work the list down to four or five of the most important keywords. One Web page can be optimized for only four or five keywords. More keywords dilute the effect and reduce the effectiveness of the optimization. The success or failure of Web page

optimization depends on taking the time to make the best keyword choices possible.

Web Page Titles

If you're unfamiliar with HTML coding, you may have to enlist the help of your Webmaster or another HTML-savvy person for the next several steps.

Web page titles are contained in the header portion of the HTML coding. Search engines see everything between the <title> </title> tags as the title of the Web page. Be sure to use important keywords in your page titles. Search engines consider both keywords and Web page titles to be very important. Used together, their importance multiplies. Also consider that the page title is what the search engine usually lists when your page is displayed as one of many search engine results. That means the Web page title is the first (and possibly only) chance to appeal to your audience. The opportunity to influence both the search engines and the audience makes it critical to get the Web page titles right. Here's an example of a title.

```
<title>
Amazon.com: Online shopping for electronics, apparel, music, books, DVDs & more
</title>
```

Meta Tags

Meta tags are another part of the HTML coding. In the past, the purpose of meta tags was to describe the contents of the Web page to the search engine. The search engines have changed, however, and now rely less on meta tags to determine the content of the Web page. Two meta tags are useful to search engines. The "description" tag and the "keywords" tag. Here are examples.

```
<meta name="description" content="Online shopping from the earth's biggest selection of
books, magazines, music, DVDs, videos, electronics, computers, software, apparel &
accessories, shoes, jewelry, tools & hardware, housewares, furniture, sporting goods, beauty
& personal care, gourmet food & just about anything else." />

<meta name="keywords" content="Amazon, Amazon.com, Books, Online Shopping, Book Store,
Magazine, Subscription, Music, CDs, DVDs, Videos, Electronics, Video Games, Computers, Cell
Phones, Toys, Games, Apparel, Accessories, Shoes, Jewelry, Watches, Office Products, Sports
& Outdoors, Sporting Goods, Baby Products, Health, Personal Care, Beauty, Home, Garden, Bed
& Bath, Furniture, Tools, Hardware, Vacuums, Outdoor Living, Automotive Parts, Pet Supplies"
/>
```

The description tag is typically used by search engines as a summary of your site and appears in the search results that will be viewed by your audience. As with the title tag, the description tag is important because you have the opportunity to describe your site to your audience.

The keywords tag is ignored by some search engines. Others search engines index it if they find it relevant to your Web page. Be careful to use only relevant keywords, and don't repeat them.

Search engines will typically read about 250 characters of each meta tag, including spaces and punctuation, and ignore the rest, but different search engines follow different rules. The best strategy is to put your most important keywords first within the meta tag in case one of the search engines has a tighter limit.

Headline Tags

Headline tags are contained in the body portion of the HTML coding. Use the headline tags <h1> </h1>, <h2> </h2>, etc. to create headings and subheadings within your page, and be sure to use your keywords in these areas. Search engines pay special attention to text that has been emphasized in some way.


Keywords and Content

Even though we can tune a Web page to be more search engine friendly, the real star of the Web page must be the content. If you write for your audience and can build credibility with them, that's half the battle.

Within the content of the Web page, it's important to use your keywords in the text of your Web page with reasonable frequency while maintaining good readability. Keyword density is one factor that helps search engines determine how relevant a Web page is to a specific topic.

Conclusion

The use of search engine optimization techniques can help raise Extension Web sites from relative obscurity to become highly visible on the various search engines. By reaching more potential clientele, you can realize a significant increase in productivity with little extra effort.

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