



# The ABCs of Web Design

*This column explores trends in Web design, describes techniques, and offers advice on how to design successful and valuable Web sites. If you have feedback, please contact Theresa Leonard-Wilkinson at [theresaw@columbus.rr.com](mailto:theresaw@columbus.rr.com).*

Theresa A. Leonard-Wilkinson, Column Editor

## Search Engine Optimization: Keywords That Work

By Theresa A. Leonard-Wilkinson, Senior Member, Central Ohio Chapter

*This article is the first of several on search engine optimization, a business marketing strategy that manipulates Internet search engines. To read general tips for Web site marketing, read Leonard-Wilkinson's article, "Marketing Your Web Business," in the January 2002 issue of Intercom. To find out how search engines work, see her article, "The Scoop on Search Engines," in the January 2001 issue of Intercom.*

Making your Web site attractive to search engines (a process called search engine optimization, or SEO) is one of the most cost-effective marketing tools available. How do consumers find products online? According to a September 2001 report issued by Jupiter Media Metrix, a company that analyzes Internet business, 23 percent of consumers go directly to the distributor's Web page, but more than 45 percent find products through a search engine. Case studies show that companies can land big clients through their Web sites alone.

Since a good chunk of business can come from search engines, it pays to know how they work and how they can improve your bottom line. You can learn to optimize your Web site yourself, but there are also companies that can do it for you.

### Why Invest in SEO?

Search engine traffic is very targeted. Consumers who find your site via a

search engine are actively looking for your products and services. And they're looking a lot. The software company Welocalize ([www.welocalize.com](http://www.welocalize.com)) reported that 90 percent of site traffic is driven by search engines, with traffic patterns ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 user sessions per month.

SEO is cost-effective compared to other marketing strategies. A banner ad campaign can run from \$2,500 to \$35,000 per month. A professional SEO campaign will cost anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000 per month.

A study by NPD Group ([www.npd.com](http://www.npd.com)), an organization that tracks consumer behavior and attitudes, reported that SEO campaigns outperformed banner ads three to one. More than twice as many respondents recognized companies listed in the top three search positions than recognized companies featured in banner ads.

Case studies based on client-server file logs show that consumer traffic via search engines also outperforms e-mail marketing campaigns, producing more purchases, form or catalog requests, newsletter subscriptions, and software downloads.

### What Is an SEO Marketing Strategy?

A search engine works by trawling the Web landscape looking for matches to keywords the user types in. Developing a good SEO strategy includes a little psychology (How do your users think?

What words would they be most likely to use?), as well as logical thinking and good code and design. Placement of searchable terms is also very important. An SEO strategy consists of the following components:

- Generating effective keywords
- Developing text for your <TITLE> tags that will appear in your browser, and site description text, which describes your Web page. Your site description will not appear in your browser window.
- Writing site text
- Placing <META> tags (<META> tags embed meta-information about your site that search engines use to return sites in response to a query. <META> tags include both a site description and keywords.)
- Considering site design issues (I will discuss this element in a future article.)
- Page optimization (organizing the meta-information and design for best searchability)
- Monitoring and resubmitting keywords to search engines on a monthly or quarterly basis

### Generating Effective Keywords

A successful SEO strategy depends on the keywords you choose. A keyword is the word or phrase (called a keyword phrase) that the user types into the search engine query to find a Web site.

For your SEO program to be successful, you must choose keywords that not only accurately describe your site, but that are used by those who want to find sites with content and products like yours.

When selecting keywords, check out your competition. Review the terms they use to lure customers. As you begin to select keywords, run them through search engines to see what Web sites they pull up.

#### *Get Specific*

One keyword, like “automobile” or “car,” may seem like a good choice for a site about Porsches. But on AltaVista, a search using “automobile” produced 2,322,158 results. I know I would not sift through 2,322,158 Web pages looking for a Web site on Porsches. So you may want to add modifiers for clarification. The good news is that users increasingly understand the need to search under multiple keywords. The keywords “German automobile” produced 12,662,253 results—still too broad. “German luxury automobiles” produced 14,748,669 results. That’s a lot of sites, but I saw BMW and Mercedes in the rankings. (For a site to be “ranked,” it must fall on the first three pages of a search’s results or within the top thirty results. Studies have shown that most searchers do not click past the third page.) “German luxury sports car” finally pulled up my Porsche site among the rankings.

When brainstorming keywords, the task is to find which multiple keyword combinations most clearly match your site’s intent (purpose) and yield few enough documents (sites) in searches that you will be able to attain rankings. Be creative. It’s all about thinking like your customer. If you get into your customer’s shoes, it will be easy for you to find a keyword combination that will work for you. What does your site do? What does it sell? What’s your theme?

Start by developing a list of pretty general keywords. (For my site, I wanted to promote my site development and search engine optimization skills, so my list included words like “search engine

optimization,” “Web site development,” “Web site design,” and “freelance writing.”) You can then run these words through a service like Wordtracker ([www.wordtracker.com](http://www.wordtracker.com)), which mines a database of terms that people have actually used in Web searches. I heard about this tool on RankWrite Roundtable ([www.rankwrite.com](http://www.rankwrite.com)), a site about search engine optimization.

Services like Wordtracker help you find all keyword combinations that relate to your business or service—even some that you never considered. After you enter each potential keyword from your list, Wordtracker returns a number of related keywords. By clicking on a keyword, you can see how often people search for this term. Collect the most popular keywords into a list (mine are usually in the hundreds). From this list, Wordtracker allows you to perform a “competition search” on each keyword that will show you how many Web sites are using it. Wordtracker ranks each keyword. The higher the number, the less competition for the word—and the better the chance the search engines will give it a good ranking.

There are no set rules for how many keywords you should generate. I usually find that I get great results with around twenty keywords, so I’ll make lists of hundreds of keywords and keyword phrases and trim them down to about twenty. If I think I can get good results on more, then I will add more. Don’t forget to include common misspellings of keywords. (Don’t laugh, they work!)

#### *Keyword Examples*

For one recent assignment, I developed a site for Guerrilla Recruitment Strategies, an employment recruiting firm that concentrates in IT placement. For this site, I collaborated with the owner to develop a list of keywords we thought people would use to find her site. With Wordtracker’s help, my list included several hundred keywords, such as “job search,” “computer animation jobs,” “IT jobs,” “job search sites,” “computer engineering careers,” “jobs,” “career search,” “civil engineering jobs,” “accounting jobs,” “computer tech jobs,”

and “executive recruitment.”

After using Wordtracker’s Competition Search feature, which helped me find keywords for specific search engines, my final keywords were “job search,” “job headhunter,” “job search sites,” “jobs,” “accounting jobs,” “electrical engineering jobs,” “computer jobs,” “career search,” “computer engineering jobs,” “computer engineering careers,” “mechanical engineering jobs,” “headhunters,” “employment,” “careers,” “accounting,” “websphere,” “weblogic,” “marketing,” “occupations,” “job listings,” “employment agencies,” “executive job search,” “computer careers,” “logistics jobs,” “project management,” “electrical engineering jobs,” “computer tech jobs,” “executive jobs,” “civil engineering jobs,” “transportation jobs,” “project management jobs,” “computer programmer jobs,” and “computer programming jobs.” These keywords relate directly to Guerrilla Recruitment Strategies’ business, so it should be easy for potential customers to find her site.

For my own site, W-edge design, I went through four iterations of keywords until I found some that worked. W-edge design is included in the rankings regularly, even snagging some number one spots. Even if you use tools like Wordtracker, a lot of this process involves trial and error. I tweak my keywords a lot to find out what works.

Currently, my keywords include the following: “search engines,” “search engine ranking,” “search engine submission,” “search engine placement,” “search engine registration,” “submission,” “placement,” “registration,” “search,” “engines,” “internet marketing seo,” “freelance writing jobs,” “how to design a Web page,” “tag metatag description keywords position engine,” “affordable search engine ranking,” “Web page design tips,” “Web design prices,” “good Web design,” “Internet keywords,” “meta keywords,” “w-edge design,” and “W-edge design.” (Most people use lowercase letters in searches, but many search engines are case-sensitive, so you may want to include both capitalized and non-capitalized versions of a word.)

Since I want to really promote my SEO skills, you will notice a lot about search

engines in my keywords. According to Wordtracker, these words should not have too much competition for top spots on search engines, but you do have to check your rankings every so often to be sure. When I check my rankings, I have many number one spots with a lot of my keywords, but not all, so I am still tweaking. To keep track of what's successful, I keep a list of when I submit what keywords and what rankings they produce. This way, I can reproduce the same effects on similar sites. Several prospective clients contacted me because they found my site through search engines—clearly, my efforts are working.

Selecting keywords is by far the most important part of your SEO strategy. If you do not select the keywords your customers will be searching on, all your efforts will be in vain. So choose those keywords with care! In my next article, I

will cover what to do once you have your keywords and more ways to get your site pages to rank higher in search engines.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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*Editor's Note: Theresa A. Leonard-Wilkinson has posted her past Intercom columns on her Web site at [www.w-edge.com](http://www.w-edge.com).*