



David C. Dalton

Web application & database development, interface design, programming and SEO

What's Organic Search Engine Optimization

One of the first questions I am always asked about my search engine optimization services is "What do you mean by organic SEO" Well before I answer that we have to take a step back and define the term "organic search". Wikipedia defines organic search as:

An organic search is a process by which World Wide Web users find web sites having unpaid search engine listings, as opposed to using the pay per click advertisement listings displayed among the search results.

The field of search engine optimization, (SEO), is concerned with maximizing the visibility of a web site by making its listings appear more frequently and more prominently in organic search results. Some businesses base their SEO strategies on the successful insertion of their web site listing(s) into organic search results for various popular keywords.

OK, that being said we can move on to the other side of the coin, organic search engine optimization. As mentioned above organic search is the placement of a website without unpaid listings (IE: Google's Adwords etc.) so the when you use a search engine any of the listings that are not in the colored boxes at the top or the paid listings on the side of the page are sites that, to some extent, have achieved an organic ranking (maybe). Getting a website into these listings, ranked as high as possible, without any dirty tricks and on it's own merits is what I consider organic SEO. My definition of Organic SEO would be:

The process of using every legal technical advantage in the construction of a website to ensure the highest possible rankings without the use of illegal (black hat) SEO methods and without the need for paid placement services.

I will also be the first to admit it's not always easy to do but I just can't see why anyone would spend thousand of dollars on advertising when they haven't even attempted to clean up their site and try it the "natural" way. Then, and only then, you look at your rankings and decide what (if any) paid advertising needs to be done. As far as I'm concerned 90% of the SEO and development companies are missing the easiest and most effective way to get rankings and save YOU money, but then again they don't care because it's your money they are spending isn't it?

Getting the basics right first

Organic search engine optimization starts before the first line of code is written in your website. Actually it starts during the design process. Creating a design that is pleasing to the eye and functional for your clients is extremely important but a design that leads to a very lightweight code structure is just as important. Basically the layouts we call "slice and dice" layouts (a image heavy layout that is sliced up in a graphic application and put back together with a massive table structure) put your SEO efforts 10 steps behind the minute you launch your website.

Now this does NOT mean you have to sacrifice a good looking website just for SEO, just that you and your designer have to understand the best way to lay out a website and still keep the code down to a minimum. There are plenty of great looking websites out there (including quite a few in my projects section) that are super lightweight on code, super user friendly and look terrific!

So what does this have to do with organic search engine optimization? Plain and simple it has been proven over and over that the less code a search engine spider has to fight its way through to get to your content the better your chances of getting decent rankings! Again, giving the search engine spiders the closest thing possible to what they consider the "perfect" page. I know I start sounding like a broken record but I am absolutely convinced a tableless CSS Driven site is the key to that perfect page, blending a perfect balance of design, structure and search engine happiness.

Once the design has been finalized and the programmer starts coding there are some other giant pitfalls to avoid. Having things like Javascript or large chunks of CSS within the page is one of them. Again, to a search engine spider this is useless junk that just clutters up what it is really looking for, namely content. The absolute kiss of death in this stage is when someone decides they need menus built in Javascript. Drop downs are usually the big one here but folks I have to tell you this is the fastest way to get ignored by the search engines going today! Remember, the search engine spiders can't read Javascript so what happens when the links to the rest of your site are embedded within Javascript? You guessed it, they are absolutely ignored

What many developer don't understand is that these drop down menus can be built using normal HTML elements and driven via external Javascript, giving the user the exact same effect but leaving the menus open to the search spiders! Why don't they get it? Well actually a lot of them do but they don't understand how to code them! I've even heard "it's too hard" from many a "coder".

While I'm on the topic of menus there is another "spider killer" that really needs to be mentioned here, Flash. Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy a little bit of Flash animation on a page (as long as it's not overdone) and I can surely see why site owners would want to use it, but just like Javascript, Flash is completely ignored by the search engine spiders! If your menu is within the Flash you have literally closed the toll booth to the spiders! This too can be overcome with some interesting scripting and the use of a `<noscript>` tag, but that's one of my little tricks!

The truth of the matter is the search engine spiders aren't very smart when it comes to looking at your website but when you think about it, with all the possible combinations of code, languages, images and animation it is a daunting task indeed. Knowing what the spiders can and can't see is absolutely vital to your site's rankings and success!

HTML Tags

So we've decided to eliminate all the unneeded HTML code in the site, we have ripped all the Javascript and CSS out and put them in separate files to get them out of the search engine spider's way so what more can there be? Actually we aren't even close to being optimized!

Even though we know the spiders don't read much code there are quite a few HTML tags they look at and some of these tags, if used properly, can mean the difference between decent rankings and great rankings! So let's get started using the tags we already have at our disposal and use them to our advantage!

Your web site's title and the title tag

Take a look up at the title bar of your browser, as you probably know most websites have their own words or their site's name in that bar. This is done via the HTML <title> tag. This is one of the top three places the search engine spiders look for your keywords. The closer you place your keywords for that page to the beginning of the title the more relevant they become to the spider. Titles that are too short rob you of the chance to get your keywords to the spiders. Titles that are too long or diluted with non keywords will also hurt your rankings. Personally I usually try to keep the title between 80 and 100 characters, but I do slip up once in a while.

Now, this tag alone will do nothing unless your page's keywords can be found elsewhere, but we will get to that soon enough. Without a doubt the worst thing you can do is just have your URL or something like "New Document" in your title! You should also make sure the title for EACH PAGE of your site has keywords that reflect that page's content. Do NOT use a generic title throughout the entire site!

Heading (or header) Tags

Second on our hit list of important HTML tags is the lowly heading tag. For many years these tags have been overlooked by most web developers for the simple fact that they were rudely large and had massive amounts of margin and padding. Starting with the <h1> tag and running down to the <h6> tag the text size was reflected by the "level" of the heading with the <h1> tag being the largest. What a lot of these developers didn't understand is that the search engine spiders also looked at these tags as a very short synopsis of the page or paragraph and placing keywords within them added another level of relevancy to your page. Just as the heading tags become smaller the larger the number given to them, the spiders consider the <h1> tag most important. Thankfully these unruly, over sized tags can be styled to any size, color or font you wish with very minor CSS.

The alt & title attributes, hyper links, the abbr and acronym tag

The alt attribute has been around since just about the the beginning of the web (well ever since the web could handle images). I'm sure you have seen them as they are what shows up when the image can't be displayed. This tag is meant for one reason, to display text when images can not be displayed or are turned off. So, can a spider see images? Nope, it is basically a text only browser (sort of). Now, let's say you have an image of the widget you are trying to sell. Along with your description of the widget you also should include a short, keyword rich alt attribute in your image tag. Not only do you help those out who don't see images you have added a couple of instances of your widgets keywords to the page!

The title attribute, not to be confused with the title tag, is without a doubt one of the most overlooked and misunderstood HTML tags around today. The title attribute is placed within hyper links and should contain a brief, keyword rich, explanation of the page the link points to. If you hover over any of the links on this site you will see a small "pop up" with some text in it. This is generated from the title attribute. Not only does this wonderful little attribute give your users this pop up it gives yet another place to add in a short keyword rich description. What you have to understand though is that the title tag reflects the page the link points to, not the page the link is on, so make it reflect the content and keywords for that page!

While we are on the subject of hyper links let's talk about the actual link text, otherwise known as the anchor text. The anchor text is the part of the link your users see and click on. It is absolutely essential this text contain keywords that reflect the content of the page the link points too! One of the worst mistakes around today is the practice of using words like "Click Here" as the anchor text. The combination of the anchor text and the title attribute can give a page a wonderful boost

in the relevancy ratings! This is 100 times more important when the link to your page comes in from another website but that's a whole different subject.

The <abbr> (abbreviation tag) and the <acronym> tag are by far the most ignored tags in all of the HTML language. As you would expect these tags are to be used to wrap around abbreviations or acronyms you use within the content of your website. Within the tag you can then use a title attribute (versatile little bugger isn't it?) that contains the spelled out version of the abbreviation or acronym. A wonderful way to add keywords for technical sites or other sites that use these types of content but don't get out of hand with them. I like to follow the accessibility guidelines and only use one abbr tag per abbreviation used on a page and for heaven's sake don't use them to "stuff" keywords in that don't belong there. You will also notice when I use them around this site I like to style them with the question mark pointer so there are other neat things they can add to customer usability.

Meta Tags - Do we still need them?

The subject of meta tags is one of the most hotly argued points in SEO today. Do we still need them or can we just save the time (wow a whole 5 minutes) and ignore them? If you aren't familiar with meta tags there are two that have been used forever to provide information to the search engine spiders, the description tag and the keyword tag. They were a great idea gone horribly wrong years ago. Originally they were used to give a brief description of the page and a short list of keywords that were relevant to the content to the spiders. Of course within a short period of time our friends the "black hat SEO people" and the porn sites ruined it for everyone by literally stuffing thousands of keywords into them, usually having nothing to do with the site. I remember a TV ad some years back that had some people sitting in a room (supposed to be web pages) and one stood up and said "Welcome to my house of pain", the others looked at each other in confusion until one said "He comes up for everything". This is exactly what the commercial was about.

Thanks to the lowlifes the description and keyword meta tags are pretty much overlooked by the major search engines these days. I still use them though for a few simple reasons. The first reason is the fact that many minor search engines still rely upon these tags. Yes, they aren't Google, Yahoo or MSN but I still feel a listing is a listing and if I get a client in from "Joe's Search Engine" I'm just as happy as if they came from the big boys. Secondly, a lot of the directories use their own spiders to grab your description and keywords when you submit to them. I'm a big believer in directories so I still do, and always will, take the 5 minutes to make sure I put meta tags in.

URLs and File Names

Before we get to the "meat and potatoes" of your website (the content) there are two other things we must look at that will, without fail, get your rankings up. They are both within the URL of your page. Just in case you aren't familiar with the term the URL is what shows up in the location bar of the browser. The URL consists of your domain name and the name of the file that is loaded in to the browser. Both pieces of the URL are big time important to search engine rankings and should never be overlooked!

Your Domain Name

Usually by the time a client has contacted me about optimization picking a domain is old news. I'm hoping some of the readers here will file this information away for the next time they decide on a domain because it can really make a difference! I know choosing a domain name can be a pain to begin with but I'm going to make it just a bit more painful. If there is any way possible to get one or two of your primary keywords into the domain for heaven's sake do it!

I guess the best example of this I've ever seen is my dear friend Theresa over at permanentcosmeticsbytheresa.com. Yes that domain is a mouthful and I usually end up misspelling it but it has lead her to some of the best rankings I've ever seen, with about half the amount of work I normally have to put into a site! Of course I helped in many other ways and yes I griped every time I had to type that thing out but for the simple fact that the words permanent and cosmetics are in her domain name (her primary keywords) has significantly helped. Now you may say, "But it's too long and people won't remember it". Actually Theresa has told me about 75% of her new clients come in from search engines so in that way they don't need to remember it! And if you have a great service like Theresa has customers will be darn sure to remember it once they have found you.

I have also been asked many times about using hyphens (-) in domain names. Time was when I hated them but I have really come around 180 on this one. I now use them all the time to find good keyword rich domains. Do you have to use them to get the keywords in? Nope, there is literally no difference between www.keyword-rich-domain.com and www.keywordrichdomain.com. The spiders are smart enough to find the keywords within your domain. So why use them? Simple, lets say keywordrichdomain.com has been taken (pretty common actually) but you really want those keywords, try these combos: keyword-richdomain.com, keywordrich-domain.com and keyword-rich-domain.com. Chances are you will find something.

Using hyphens in the domain does have some disadvantages if you are planning to market your site via anything besides the Internet though. It is one giant pain to tell someone your domain is keyword [hyphen] rich [hyphen] domain.com. I personally use these in sites where 99% of my marketing is aimed at, and most of the traffic comes in from, the search engines just for this reason. I do think you will be seeing more and more domains like this though as it has become next to impossible to find great keyword rich domains that are available or not being sold for some stupid amount of money.

Your Page - file names

The names some developers use to name each page on a website never ceases to amaze me. Things like about.html or s.html make me want to track down the developer and break their computer! Seriously now, is it THAT hard to give the file a descriptive name? No it's not, it is sheer laziness on the developers part and if your developer or coder is doing this tell them to stop NOW!

The file name you give to each page should reflect that page's content (and keywords) in every way, hence it should contain a FEW of the primary keywords for that page! So how do we name them? How about keyword-rich-pagename.html? You will notice I use hyphens between the keywords, again this is not mandatory. I do that because in my server side application I strip out the hyphens and use the words in my page titles, meta tags and sometimes heading tags. Just a habit I got into and never broke. That being said though you should NEVER use underscores (_) to separate words in your files. Many search engine spiders do not recognize an underscore as a word separator!

One final word of warning on the use of hyphens in file names and domains. Don't get crazy with the amount of hyphens you use as this can (and will) set off spam alarms with the spiders! I usually try to keep the total amount of hyphens down to a maximum of 6, including the domain name, any folder name and the page name. And before anyone comments on this site and its file name I know I'm pushing it but I am doing so much server side manipulation of files I really can't help it. Hopefully the spiders will take pity on me and overlook my minor infraction of my own rule!

Dynamic URLs

Since next to no one uses plain old HTML files any more I would be amiss if the subject of dynamic URLs was overlooked. The use of special characters within a URL can indeed cause some major problems with some of the search engines. It has been rumored that if a spider feels it may get into a recursive loop of URLs it will run for the hills. The type of URL I am referring to is something like this:

<http://www.davidcdalton.com/index.jsp?folderName=seo-articles&pageName=whats-organic-search-engine-optimization-3>

That URL in fact is the exact URL of that page but when you look at the location bar in a browser you will say "Wait one minute here, that's not in the location bar" and you would be right. To eliminate special characters such as ?, & and to remove unwanted variable names (like folderName and pageName) which we don't want cluttering up our URL and diluting our keyword density I use what is known as an Apache mod_rewrite script. This is how you eliminate those nasty dynamic URLs, turning them into static appearing URLs and soothing the spiders nerves! Using this mod_rewrite my URLs look like this:

<http://www.davidcdalton.com/seo-articles/whats-organic-search-engine-optimization-3>

Much better! The mod_rewrite works behind the scenes to convert that pretty, spider friendly URL into the mess you see above and then feeds the "messy" URL to my application, all automatically. As long as your server runs Apache as the web server (90% of the servers out there do) you more than likely have access to this module. There are also other scripts out there for use on Windows machines that work almost exactly the same. Now, I'm not here to give you a lesson in Apache scripting so I will stop there. If you or your developer don't know how to use it I suggest a good Apache book, but then again you could always just hire me too!

Content is King!

So by this point you know the search engine spiders are looking for readable content and keywords. In honesty your potential users are looking for the same thing, well at least the content that is. Content (information) is what has driven the web since its initial conception and it isn't going to change anytime soon. What I find quite interesting is that most site owners find well written, descriptive content a secondary thought. I've actually worked with people who find creating their content a pain worse than death and will do just about anything to get out of doing it. When I told one client the pages needed more content (he had given me four sentences per page) he literally told me "Can't you just make the text bigger to fill the page".

If you rate writing content for your site somewhere between and all day root canal and cleaning the toilet might I recommend hiring a professional copy writer? No matter how you get it done your content has to be descriptive, professional, easy to read for your users and have just the right amount of keywords. There are several factors you need to consider with your content:

1. Does it accurately describe your product or services to your users?
2. Does it have your primary keywords in the heading and the content body several times?
3. Does the content read "naturally" (in other words not so loaded with keywords you seem to be stuttering)
4. Does the article use HTML tags to emphasize important words

There really is no giant trick to writing content. All you have to do is think about what you want to see when you are trying to find something on the Internet. Just enough content to give the customer what they want, but not enough to bore them to death. Sprinkled within this information you should make sure your keywords show up. The first instance of your keyword should be as close to the beginning of the content as possible and then scattered through the rest.

SEO people argue about how often the keywords should show constantly but a good base amount is about 3-5% of the word count. Again it all depends on what the content is about. Personally I feel if I got the keywords in 5 or 6 times in a 10 paragraph page I'm doing fine.

Spelling, Spelling, Spelling!

One thing that makes me crazy (and I do all the time) is forget to spell check a page only to get indexed in the search engines for a misspelling! Many years ago I had the number one position for e-commerce, nice except I meant it to be e-commerce. To make matters worse even after I found the mistake and corrected it I couldn't get rid of that stupid misspelled listing! Please folks, take the time to spell check your articles and content!

Fresh Content as often as possible

Another "deadly sin" many people commit with their sites is to put up some great content and never change, update or add to it. If your site sits long enough with the same content the spiders will slow down the intervals between crawls. If your content sits too long they just might forget you exist completely. Do yourself a big favor and try to add or update your content as often as possible. Good rule of thumb is at least one new article or page per month, minimum. Most SEO people will tell you to add a new article once a week and I do agree with them. Unfortunately that isn't always possible. But you have to remember that search engines love fresh new original content, that's one giant reason why blogs usually get such great rankings. Try and update as often as possible!

Again I am no professional copy writer. Yes, I seem to be able to write articles but trust me I get the same brain block when I have to write normal content as the next person. My suggestion is seek professional help! Not only will it help out your search engine rankings it will almost always help you conversion rate!

SEO No Nos

Ah where to start when discussing all the dirty tricks some SEO companies pull to get rankings. These companies suck in new customers every day with promises that are hard not to resist but if you value your long term existence on the Internet make sure you don't get sucked in by them.

The first thing I should mention are some of the warning signs of a "black hat" SEO company. I may miss one or two but here is the "hit list":

1. They promise top 10 rankings for keywords.
2. They promise better rankings in a very short time
3. They refuse to tell you how they intend to get you better rankings
4. They promise everything that needs to be done can be done in a very short period of time

These are just a few of the telltale signs to watch out for. This is definitely a case of "if it seems too good to be true it probably is". So anyway, let's get into some of the gory details about what these little tricks are. None is worse or better than the other and just about every one will get you into some deep trouble with the search engines.

Hiding keywords on the page in one of several ways:

- Setting the font color the same as the page background
- Hiding keywords in a container and setting the display to none with CSS
- Floating" large sections of keywords off the page using CSS positioning

Creating illegal doorway pages to your site

Spaming Blogs to get you back links

Enrolling your site in "link farms"

Serving up different keyword rich pages to the spiders

Hiding keywords in HTML comments in your pages

Adding 1px transparent images to our pages with keyword stuffed alt tags

Using CSS styled heading tags to surround your page text (they look like normal text)

Using bold or strong tags around every instance of your keywords (style to look normal)

Using hidden form elements to stuff in keywords

Paying for links from unrelated sites

Well I think you get the idea here. There is always someone coming up with a new way to cheat the search engines and they will work for a very short period of time. You may in fact get some great rankings for a month or two but as soon as the search engines find you (or your competition reports you) your listings will be stripped out of the search results. You may be able to get listed again (not in the same positions of course) after completely re-doing your pages and begging mercy from the search engines or then again you may not. So you have to ask yourself, is a couple of months of good listings worth the pain and agony of starting all over again once you're caught?

Final thoughts

I hope this little venture through the nuts and bolts of organic search engine optimization has opened your eyes to the ways you can get better rankings without all sorts of money or stupid tricks. Likewise I hope you now think twice when you look at an SEO company that just seems too good to be true! Search engine optimization can seem like a lot of voodoo to many people but if you start of with a great site, built properly your optimization problems will be few!