

Search Engine Optimization (SEO): Best Practice Guide

Planning, managing and executing SEO to deliver better results...

E-consultancy.com

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Is this guide for you?

Who is this E-consultancy Best Practice Guide aimed at?

E-consultancy's Best Practice Guides help organizations improve their results from digital marketing through improved planning and execution.

Our guides explain best practice for successfully implementing digital marketing on a large-scale in medium and large organizations, but best practice guidelines also apply for smaller organizations.

The guides are being developed to be the definitive source for best practice on a range of online marketing topics.

Please send feedback and suggestions to chris@e-consultancy.com.

In particular, the reports will help (and are aimed at):

- **Specialists in digital marketing teams** who are actively involved in improving results from online marketing activities.
- **Managers of digital marketing specialists** in a team who plan and control digital marketing.
- **Managers and team members responsible for traditional marketing activities** who want to understand the issues involved with successful planning, implementation and integration of digital marketing activities.
- **Specialists in specific digital marketing activities** such as search engine marketing who need to understand more about integration with other digital marketing activities.

Key features of our guides:

- **Comprehensive** – covers all aspects needed for success in one place but also referencing other in-depth sources in different portals, forums, blogs, whitepapers and books.
- **Accessible** – content will be chunked to help readers navigate to and assimilate relevant content.
- **In-depth** – Cover topics in sufficient depth to successfully implement suggestions.
- **Practical** – explain how to implement techniques and describe success factors that can be applied straightaway.
- **Improvement focused** – will explain how to revise existing approaches through evaluation of current approach, refining strategy and then implementing an improved approach.
- **Leading edge** – incorporating the latest best-practice advice and regularly updated to stay current with new additions clearly highlighted.

Introduction to search engine marketing

Search engine marketing – opportunities and risks

*Search engine marketing (SEM) is **the single biggest opportunity** in online marketing, which is unsurprising given the growing popularity of search engines for researching products, services and organizations. In this section we will set the scene...*

Where are we at?

Search usage is continuing to rise among consumers and professionals, who use search engines like Google and Yahoo to find what they're looking for.

So what's the big challenge?

Tapping into the searching behaviours of your audience and figuring out which keywords you need to focus on requires great tenacity. Not to mention securing top rankings for your chosen keywords. If you have tried SEO you'll know how tricky this can be.

Constant innovations from the rival search engines, coupled with increased activity from your competitors, means that you have to identify the right approaches and deploy the right resources to rank well.

And the risks...?

You are probably aware about the risks of SEM. Since most search engine traffic typically originates from one source (typically 'The big G', aka Google) there is a significant risk that algorithm changes can seriously dent your traffic.

We've all heard the horror stories, about being top one day and nowhere the next, but how do you ensure this doesn't happen to you?

On top of all that you also need to manage the risks of pages *not* being included in the search engine, or of being barred completely for infringing its guidelines.

Where do I start?

You've already started. We created this guide to provide a super-comprehensive, hype-free compilation of best practice in SEM. Digest it in chunks, then act accordingly. And remember to educate agencies and colleagues along the way (no file-sharing though...!).

Most of this guide is aimed at helping you perform well in the organic search results, although there is some crossover with paid-search (which we will deal with in greater detail in a separate report).

By reading this guide you can maximise your opportunities from SEM while minimising your risks. Shall we continue...?

Why is search marketing so important?

Web users love to search. They use the main search engines like Google, Yahoo!, MSN Search and Ask to find one thing only – information.

What sort of information are they looking for?

Clearly this depends on the individual. They might be looking for entertainment¹ news, or hunting for product reviews, or trying to compare vendors and services, or seeking their soulmate, or buying a second-hand car. All these goals can start with a simple search query.

The use of keywords or keyphrases (combining several keywords) helps users find exactly what they want. Modern search engines are generally great at delivering *relevant results* to users.

Relevance (or relevancy if you are in the US) is the mantra of all search engine engineers.

A word from our resident lexicologist...

Understanding **keyphrases** enables marketers at companies to target users showing *intent* or interest in their products.

Notice that we say ‘*keyphrase*’² (short for ‘keyword phrase’) rather than ‘*keyword*’. This is because search engines such as Google attribute more relevance when there is an exact phrase match on a web page (a phrase that matches the user’s search term).

Search engines also assess other occurrences of the keywords and synonyms on the page, and also those websites / pages linking to a page. We’ll get onto that in due course...

So how big is search?

[The number of searches by people trying to find information is still growing dramatically. Nielsen//NetRatings reported that there were 5.7 billion searches in the US in January 2006, a 39% year-on-year increase from 4.1 billion in January 2005³. Furthermore, the number of searches in the US is more than 183 million per day.](#)

¹ Google Zeitgeist (<http://www.google.com/intl/en/press/zeitgeist.html> and <http://www.google.co.uk/press/zeitgeist.html>) shows that the most popular searches in Google are all about entertainment, but with some consumer brands making the top 10 in some countries. Yahoo! Buzz service shows similar results (<http://buzz.yahoo.com/overall/>).

² ‘Key phrase’ is also a term used by some Google scientists such as Krishna Bharat, a principal scientist in Google Labs who is best known as the instigator of Google News. For example, he uses it in his classic paper: Hilltop: A Search Engine based on Expert Documents

<http://www.cs.toronto.edu/~georgem/hilltop/> By Bharat and Mihaila

In the article they say: “For example, the title, headings (e.g., text within a pair of <H1> </H1> tags) and anchor text within the expert page are considered key phrases”.

³ Nielsen Netratings. http://www.nielsen-netratings.com/pr/pr_060302.pdf

Examples, dammit!

Look at the examples in Table 1 to see the volume of monthly searches in the UK for some generic keywords.

The numbers in Table 1 are huge in any country, but it gets better; most users narrow their searches using phrases like *'free online banking'*, *'cuba holidays'* and *'ski jackets'*.

Table 1 Volume of searches for single keywords in a single month

Keyword	Estimated Google Adwords UK daily clicks (Position 1.0)	Total estimated UK searches on Google	Overture UK searches
Online banking	120	72,000	142,324
HSBC	730	438,000	197,577
Holidays	12,000	720,0000	1,041,441 *
Thomas Cook	230	138,000	67,228
Clothing	6,600	3,960,000	327,988
Debenhams	100	60,000	292,839
CRM	79	47,400	17,562
Oracle	270	162,000	6,476

Notes:

1. Google estimates from Google Traffic Estimator available through Google Adwords for UK, January 2006. Total Google searches based on assuming that on average Position 1 ad slot receives 5% clickthrough rate, so total searches 20 times this (actual clickthrough will vary by keyphrase, e.g. highest for brands).

2. Overture UK search advertising network main search sources included Yahoo!, MSN and Wanadoo favoured by consumers rather than business people which results in different values for CRM and Oracle. Includes both singular and plural. * Includes singular version of word.

3. Both include non-human, software generated searches from link tracking, rank checking and click fraud tools so overestimate actual searches by people.

Marketers are increasingly investing in search engine marketing as a result of the changes in consumer behaviour indicated by Table 1, with billions of dollars spent annually on search engine marketing.⁴

⁴ According to SEMPO (Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO), advertisers in the U.S. and Canada spent \$5.75 billion on Search Engine Marketing (SEM) in 2005, a 44 percent increase over 2004 spending.

Exactly what is search engine marketing?

Simply put, search engine marketing (SEM) is about connecting searchers looking for information related to your brand with what they are looking for. It is about making your brand visible within the search engines to attract new visitors to your site(s).

SEM helps site owners meet their various online marketing objectives such as generating leads, sales or simply building awareness and delivering the right message to their audience.

For many marketers SEM is highly effective and highly measurable.

Where do I begin?

Because of the range of keyphrases used by searchers, which form a **long-tail distribution** (Figure 7), a key aspect of search engine marketing is deciding which phrases are used to promote a company.

Once you have a list of keywords and phrases, the next goal is to try to achieve favourable listings within the **search engine results page(s) (aka 'SERPs')**.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show how small differences in the search query entered by the user can deliver completely different listings on the SERPs.

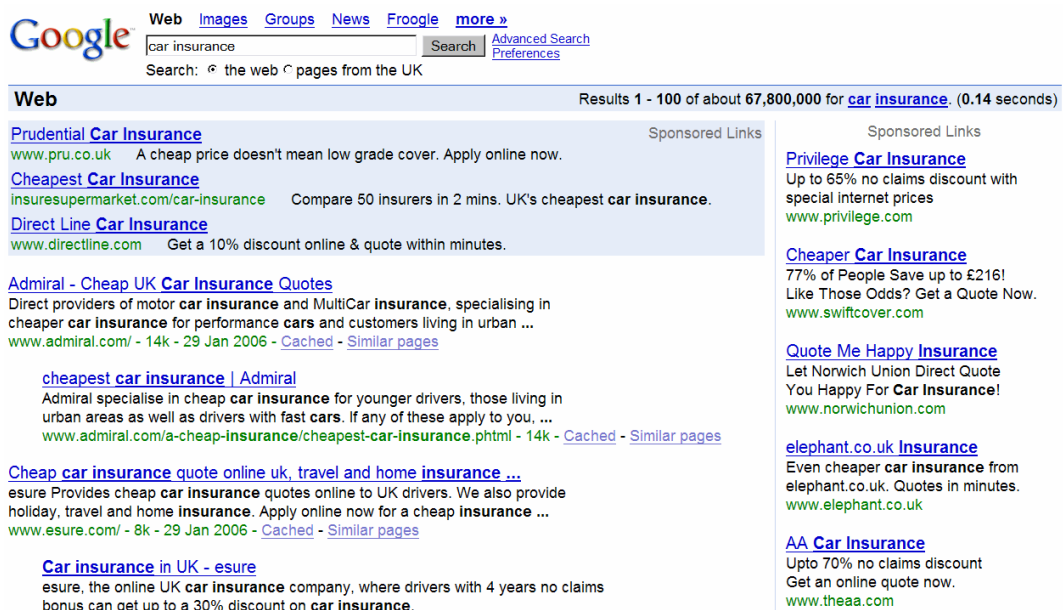


Figure 1 Google search engine results page for keyphrase 'car insurance'

Within SEM, there are **three main opportunities** for organizations to get their message across, to gain visibility and to direct visitors to their sites.

The first two opportunities are via the SERPs and the third is on third-party sites.

1. The natural or organic listings. The part of the pages listing results from a search engine query which are displayed in a sequence according to relevance of match between the keyword phrase typed into a search engine and a web page according to a ranking algorithm used by the search engine.

The method for achieving placement in this part of the page is called search engine optimization (SEO) and is the focus of this best practice guide.

2. The paid or sponsored listings. A relevant ad (typically a text ad) with a link to a destination page is displayed when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. A fee is charged for every click of each link, with the amount bid for the click the main factor determining its position⁵.

Notice from Figure 1 and Figure 2 that the number of brands in the natural listings (2) is much lower than the paid listings (8). This, together with the challenges of obtaining a high natural listing, helps explain why investment into paid search by marketers tends to be much higher than spend on SEO.⁶

The method for achieving placement in this part of the page is called **paid-search** (aka 'pay-per-click' / PPC). E-consultancy will publish a dedicated best practice guide to paid-search marketing, to help you plan, launch and optimize PPC campaigns.

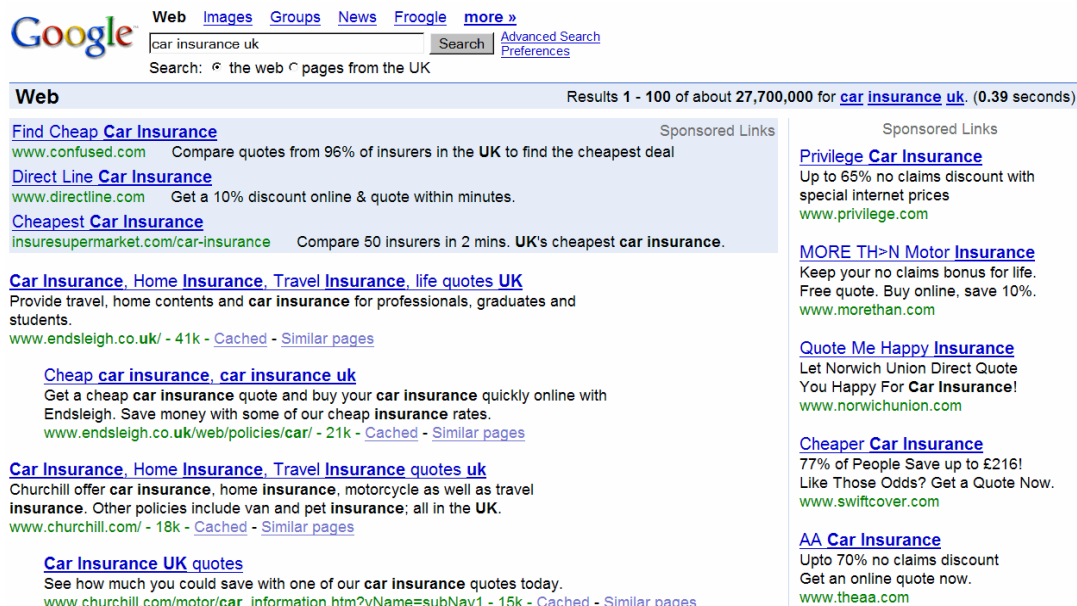


Figure 2 Google search engine results page for keyphrase 'car insurance uk'

3. Content-network listings. These ads are displayed on third party sites that have an AdSense relationship with Google, or which display Yahoo or MIVA listings on their website. These actually account for a sizeable proportion of Google revenue⁷, but tend to have much lower clickthrough rates.

⁵ Google Adwords also uses a **Quality Score** based on ad clickthrough rate and engagement with site.

⁶ According to SEMPO (Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO), advertisers in the U.S. and Canada spent 83% was on paid placements, 11% was on SEO and 4% on paid inclusion.
http://www.sempo.org/news/releases/Search_Engine_Marketers.

⁷ For Fiscal year 2005, Google reported its search revenues as follows:

Google Sites Revenues - Google-owned sites generated revenues of \$1.098 billion, or 57% of total revenues.
Google Network Revenues - Google's partner sites generated revenues, through AdSense programs, of \$799 million, or 42% of total revenues.

<http://investor.google.com/releases/2005Q4.html>

Different types of search engine marketing

Two different SEM disciplines have developed to help organizations achieve visibility...

1. Search engine optimization (SEO)

SEO is aimed at achieving the highest position practically possible in the organic listings on the search engine results pages. To do this you need to define a list of keyphrases to work with.

In Google, Yahoo! and MSN Search, the natural listings are on the left as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, although there may be sponsored links above and below these results (typically differentiated to the consumer by the title '*Sponsored Links*').

There is **no charge for organic listings** to be displayed, nor when a link to your site is clicked on. However, you may need to pay a SEO firm or consultant to manage optimization, and the ongoing work often needed to make your website appear higher in the rankings.

Other reasons to employ SEO expertise include managing security of content, copyright ownership, reputation management and user experience management.

2. Paid search marketing

Within paid-search marketing⁸ there are two main alternatives:

(a) Paid search engine advertising (aka PPC / sponsored listings).

These are highly-relevant text ads with a link to a company page and some ad text, displayed when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. These ads are displayed in the sponsored listings part of the SERPs as is shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

As the name suggests, a fee is charged for every click of each link, with the amount bid for the click determining the position.

Google Adwords factors in a '*quality score*' based on the clickthrough rate for each ad, meaning that an underperforming ad might not make it to the top.

The most important PPC services are:

- Google Adwords (<http://adwords.google.com>)
- Yahoo! Search services (<http://searchmarketing.yahoo.com/>) / Overture (<http://www.overture.com>)
- MIVA (www.miva.com)

(b) Content-network paid-search advertising

Sponsored links are displayed by the search engine on a network of third-party sites. These are typically media-owned sites such as online newspapers or affiliate marketing sites.

Ads may be paid for on the basis of clicks (this is most common) or on the number of ads served (CPM basis).

The most important content network services are:

- Google Adsense (<http://adsense.google.com>) for site owners, provided through Google Adwords for advertisers.
- Yahoo Publisher Network (<http://publisher.yahoo.com/>) for site owners, provided through Content Match for advertisers.

⁸ Note that some marketers and agencies, who are primarily involved in paid-search use 'SEM' to refer to paid-search. Perhaps they seek to present SEO as not marketing, which it most definitely is, but rather a mystical art, which it isn't. In this guide and in keeping with general usage, paid-search and natural search are both part of SEM which refers to all search engine marketing activities.

- MIVA (www.miva.com).

*Paid-search advertising is more similar to conventional advertising than SEO, since you **pay** to advertise in 'sponsored links'.*

But there are big differences...

- With PPC, a relevant text ad with a link to a company page is displayed as one of several 'sponsored links' when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. So, the first difference to conventional advertising is that it is **highly targeted** – the ad is only displayed when a relevant keyword phrase is typed in.
- With the PPC approach, you don't pay for the number of people who see your ad, but you only pay for those who click through to your website (hence Pay Per Click).
- The prominence of the ad is dependent on the price bid for each clickthrough, with the highest bidder placed top (except in Google, where clickthrough rate is also taken into account).

** E-consultancy will publish a best practice guide to paid-search marketing in mid-2006. We will also discuss paid-search further in the section on SEM strategy Success Factor 6.*

Relative expenditure on SEO and paid-search

Expenditure on paid-search is much higher than that on SEO. E-consultancy estimates that paid-search accounts for about 84% of search marketing spend in the UK.

Many organizations adopt a strategy focusing on paid-search since it is more controllable, and immediate results are possible.

There are a number of reasons why you might need to opt for paid-search over natural search; charity appeals, for example, where time is of the essence.

Yeah, but smart marketers are increasing investment in organic SEO!

Why? Well, in the long-term, organic listings will deliver a potentially higher volume of visitors at a lower cost per click. Organic clicks are essentially free.

The flipside is that there is greater competition in paid-search these days. Click costs have increased in many sectors to a point where there is limited scope for profit. Your ability to generate ROI depends on how well you convert traffic to customers, and paid-search traffic costs money.

SEO is very useful for driving visitors through targeting the high volume, low intent generic phrases indicated in Table 1. A broad focus for organic search is good, and you can 'mop up the long tail using PPC'. More on all that in due course...

Do I need to be #1?

It is generally thought that it is essential to be in the top two or three links in the search engine results listings, or *at least on the first page of the results*, but this ain't necessarily so!

Think about it. Users that drill further down into the search engine results may be further along the purchase path, more committed to the buy, and looking for something specific. For this

reason visit-to-conversion rates from the lower results may in fact be higher than your top listings!

Key recommendation 1. Review your relative expenditure on SEO and paid-search. Consider increasing investment in SEO if it is significantly lower than your spend on Paid-search.

The data below shows the importance of results in the natural listings - which gain between 60-80% of the clicks for a given search.

Search marketing firm iProspect conducted research on how we search. The results are instructive:

1. 81.7% of users will start a new search if they can't find what they're looking for in the first 3 pages (typically 30 results).

So, to some extent, it is a myth that if you are not in the top 10 you will receive no visitors - it depends on the quality and relevance of the listing also.

The detail: 22.6% try another search after first few results; a further 18.6% after reviewing the first page (41.2% cumulative); 25% after checking the first two pages (67% cumulative) and 14.6% the first three pages (81.7% cumulative).

2. Users tend to choose the natural search results in preference to the paid-search listings. According to a sample figures for selection of natural search were 60.8% for Yahoo! and 72.3% for Google. This figure increases for experienced users. This suggests that **companies who concentrate on paid listings only are limiting their visibility.**

3. Over half of Internet users search at least once a day, while around half use search toolbars from one of the main providers, eg Google, Yahoo! or MSN.⁹

⁹ Source: Iprospect research, Spring 2004 (www.iprospect.com)

Introducing SEO Ranking Factors

What will make me top? Or more precisely “What are the factors that determine my position in the natural listings for a specific keyphrase and what is their relative importance?”

Wow! Those are the questions that everyone involved in SEO, from clients to agencies, wants and needs to know. So let's work through some answers.

Unfortunately, the number of people who can *definitively* answer these questions by concisely explaining the hundreds of factors, and the way they work with one another, is strictly limited to the engineers who work for the search engines.

However, through combining the experience of the authors, the review team and disclosure from the search engines and expert commentators, we have compiled a comprehensive list of the most important factors which determine position in the listings.

What determines ranking position in the natural listings?

The position or ranking in the natural listings for a particular keyphrase is dependent on a search engine's ranking algorithm.

For the search query entered into the search engine, the algorithm uses rules or heuristics to identify the most relevant pages, based on the page's **text content** and its **context** (which can be indicated by **links** from other pages and sites).

Each search engine has a different set of algorithms created by engineers who strive to produce the best relevance for its users.

However, the ranking of natural listings has evolved as a science over the past ten years, based on an even longer history of document indexing and retrieval history. As with all sciences, there are fundamental principles which apply. So to deliver relevance search engines tend to use common *search engine ranking factors*.

Enough with the science: get with the ranking factors...

We will soon enough. But before we do here's a word to the wise: *understanding some of the most common ranking factors is straightforward*. Keyword: '*straightforward*'.

Over the past few years many bedroom cowboys and unethical agencies have raked in fees by pretending that SEO is about wearing a black hat, doing the search voodoo, etc. But there is no need for any smoke or mirrors. If your agency refuses to reveal its techniques to you then our advice would be to move on. Immediately!

Despite the mystique perpetuated about SEO it really isn't terribly difficult to grasp the concepts. The difficulty lies in managing your keywords and optimization over the long term. Not in understanding the ranking factors.

Who in my organization needs to know about this stuff?

It is essential for your technology team / agencies to understand these ranking factors. It is also imperative that all content owners / authors / stakeholders understand how good quality content can improve search rankings. Authors need to know which keyphrases to use, otherwise you won't have a joined up strategy.

Applying simple ‘house style’ rules can help generate visits from qualified visitors. In fact let’s coin a phrase: ‘house strategy’. You need to develop a ‘house strategy guide’ for your authors and editors. These guidelines are explained in Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers.

So I can ditch my SEO agency, right?

It depends, is the honest answer. You might be able to, but it is more likely that this guide will inform your search strategy, with you making the calls. But you will still need *somebody* to manage it (either in-house or outsourced). Ultimately this guide to search marketing is about increasing ROI and maximising rankings, not about saving costs.

There remains a great need for solid, ethical SEO agencies. Management and optimization is an ongoing task. The bigger your company / market / website, the bigger that task is going to be. High volume search-terms and intense competition means that applying specific optimization techniques is required to rank well. Ethical SEO agencies can help you with this.

The holy grail of SEO is to achieve a high, stable and long-term presence at the top of the SERPs for phrases which have both high volume and which convert well.

Agencies can also help by putting the brakes on your own enthusiasm, as over-optimization is a leading cause of search engine penalties. Equally, after reading this guide, you should be able to determine if your existing agency is over-egging the SEO cake, or feeding you unsound advice.

Remember that search engines also use **ranking penalties** for websites / pages. They employ filters within their algorithms that penalise websites for search engine spamming (such as over-optimization of a phrase or non-natural links from other sites¹⁰).

Now for the six key ranking factors...

- 1. Planning and strategy including setting performance targets.**
- 2. Index inclusion and coverage.**
- 3. On-page optimization.**
- 4. Link-building (internal and external).**
- 5. SEO process.**
- 6. Conversion efficiency.**

The content of each section is explained further in the section: Structure of this guide on SEO Best Practice.

Of these six areas, those at the heart of search engine ranking are success factors 2, 3 and 4. Why? Well, if your pages are not included within the index then you cannot expect to gain any search engine referrals. Once included, results are dependent on the combination of on-page optimization and link-building.

When we talk about link-building we’re mainly considering third party links, but a **solid internal linking** structure should be adopted within your own website/s. There are proven benefits.

¹⁰ <http://www.seochat.com/c/a/Google-Optimization-Help/Google-Filters-and-Avoiding-their-Screens/>

The hundreds of factors used by the search engines to determine relevance can be simplified into **the two most important factors** which are essential for good ranking positions:

1. On-page optimization. Matching between the copy on the page to the search terms entered (the main factors include keyword and synonym matches and density, keyword formatting, keywords in anchor text and page title tags).

- This is **not** about spamming, so be sure not to overdo it.
- Think of it as **labelling content** in the most appropriate way.
- Headline and link text should reflect the editorial content.
- Human readers should not be able to notice optimization.

2. Link-building. This creates links into a page (**inbound or backlinks**). The search engine assesses each link to a page from another page or another site as a vote for this page. Pages and sites with more inbound links will be ranked more highly.

- It is not just number of links which are important to determining the position, but the **quality** of links is vital.
- Quality is determined by context, relevance, and popularity of the linking page, as well as the **link text**.
- Not all links are treated equally. One link from an 'authority' website may be more valuable than 100 links from non-contextual websites.

Maximization for SEO

The concept of maximization is often applied to paid-search, indeed Google has 'maximizers' or advisors for its larger clients.

This concept can also be applied to SEO, if a balanced approach is used across each of the six success factors we review in this report.

Key recommendation 2. Adopt a balanced approach to SEO which creates a long-term plan and an effective process to maximise your performance in the key areas of index inclusion, on-page optimization and link-building.

We believe that successful SEO is all about deploying the right resources to achieving maximization across these six areas (highlighted in bold):

- It's about maximising the **inclusion** and **visibility** of a brand online as users search for the brand and product-related information – is your brand visible in the SERPs.
- It's about maximising the **volume of quality visitors** to destination sites from the search engines through encouraging them to click through to your pages.
- It's about maximising your position in the SERPS pages for both **natural listings** and **sponsored or paid listings**.
- It's about maximising the **return on your investment** to achieve visibility and clickthrough by selecting the right approaches to SEM and the right execution.

An expert in on-page optimization or link-building will not generate the best results without sound planning based on detailed keyphrase analysis.

Similarly, these approaches will be unsuccessful if the company does not overcome the initial technical challenges of index inclusion.

Key challenges of search engine marketing?

To develop an effective plan for SEM requires an understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of SEO and PPC marketing.

Advantages of SEO

Few would argue that SEO is *potentially* the most important search marketing approach for marketers since most searchers click on the natural listings.

Indeed, research shows that some searchers NEVER click on the sponsored listings. Others still don't realise these links are paid-for.

Generally, the 80:20 rule holds true with 80% of the clicks on natural listings and 20%¹¹ of the clicks on the paid listings as suggested by the first Stats box earlier in this section.

A key benefit of SEO is that it is relatively *cost-effective* since there is no payment to the search engines for being placed there. This is particularly important for the 'search head', the high volume, low intent phrases shown in Table 1 which can be expensive in paid-search. But it can also be useful for generating visitors on the long tail of search shown in Figure 7. Many companies bid on these phrases through paid-search, so giving opportunities for those who use an SEO strategy for the tail.

Additionally, the cost of SEO is relatively fixed, independent of click volume. Effectively, the cost per click from SEO declines through time after initial optimization costs and lower ongoing optimization costs. Conversely, paid-search is essentially a variable cost.

So, there are *no media costs*, but resources are necessary for key phrase analysis and to complete optimization on the website pages.

Together with paid-search it can also offer a *highly targeted audience* – visitors referred by SEO will only visit your site only if they are looking for specific information on your products or related content.

Disadvantages of SEO

The challenge of SEO is that there are over 8 billion pages¹² in the search engine indexes with your position in the SERPs dependent on a constantly changing algorithm which is not published. So making your pages visible may require specialist knowledge, constant monitoring and the ability to respond.

As a consequence, the biggest disadvantage of SEO is a lack of control. You are subject to changes in the algorithm.

There are other possible issues. You may be prevented from competing on a level playing field, because competitors and even affiliates may use less ethical **black hat SEO** techniques.

In competitive sectors it may be very difficult to get listed in the top few results for competitive phrases. This is when PPC may have to be used, although this can be expensive in a competitive sector.

¹¹ But remember that this is 20% by volume; the quality of clicks driven by paid-search may be higher since purchase intent is higher and so conversion rates are often higher.

¹² Google is currently trialling an index of 24 billion pages (January 2006) as part of the Big Daddy update: <http://www.directmag.com/searchline/1-25-06-Google-BigDaddy/> and <http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/bigdaddy/>.

This lack of visibility makes it difficult to make a definitive business case for SEO, although it is fairly obvious what a sought-after number one position on Google would do for most companies.

It is nevertheless impossible to predict and guarantee positions and click volumes from SEO, because the impact of future changes to the algorithm is unknown. Ditto competitor activity – you don't know what they'll be doing in future.

So, for a given investment of £1, \$1 or €1 it is difficult to estimate the returns compared to paid-search, or indeed traditional advertising, or direct mail, where more accurate estimates are possible.

However, we will see that estimates of long-term returns from SEO can and should be made.

Key recommendation 3. SEO is a long-term strategy. To identify the correct investment requires a long-term cost/benefit analysis. If this doesn't occur, SEM strategy is often imbalanced in favour of SEO.

Technical disadvantages?

Technical constraints may also limit your SEO capabilities – for example, if there is not the right IT resource, knowledge or technology available to implement the changes to site structure and content mark-up needed for SEO.

For example, websites created entirely using Flash cause readability problems for search engine robots, so onsite optimization is somewhat redundant.

Content disadvantages?

There is a clear need for better education among content authors. They need to know what keyphrases to use, and where to use them, whenever they add and update content.

Balance is required when authors create pages, since they are being created for both search engines and humans.

Copy and language which is effective for SEO can be different to naturally written copy, although the search engines seek to identify and reward natural language. There needs to be a compromise and subtle balance between the two so that pages are intelligible to users, but are also great search engine fodder.

The mantra is to **write for users**, but to label content accurately for Googlebot.

Because of these problem areas many companies focus their online marketing strategy on PPC. Ad buying and planning remains the staple diet of marketers, so buying PPC ads comes naturally. Indeed, PPC is often the first step into the world of search for many 'offline' marketers, the lowest hanging fruit. ROI from paid-search can be excellent, but you mustn't allow these potential problem areas – or the ease of buying PPC ads – to distract you from the joys of organic search optimization.

Key recommendation 4. SEO is not purely a technical discipline to be conducted by a specialist team or agency. It requires a different style to traditional copywriting which requires training of content owners and reviewers.

Paid-search advantages

- *Predictability.* Traffic, rankings, returns and costs tend to be more stable and more predictable than SEO. It is more **immediately accountable**, in terms of ROI, while SEO can take much longer to evaluate.
- More *straightforward* to achieve high rankings – you simply have to bid more than your competitors, although Google also takes the **Quality Score** of your ad into account. SEO requires long-term, technically complex work on page optimization, site restucture and link-building, which can take months to implement and for results to occur.
- *Faster.* PPC listings appear much faster, usually in a few hours (or days if editor review is required).
- *Flexibility.* Creative and bids can also be readily modified or turned off for particular times. The results of SEO can take weeks or months to be achieved. Content modifications to existing pages for SEO are usually included within a few days. PPC budgets can also be reallocated in line with changing marketing goals (eg: a bank can quickly switch paid-search budget from 'loans' to 'savings').
- *Automation.* Bid management systems can help financial predictability through using **rules** to control bidding in line with your conversion rates to reach an appropriate cost per sale. However substantial manual intervention is required for the best results for different search ad networks.
- *Branding effect.* Tests have shown that there is a branding effect with Pay Per Click, even if users do not click on the ad. This can be useful for the launch of products or major campaigns.¹³

Paid-search disadvantages

- *Competition.* Since Pay Per Click has become popular due to its effectiveness, it is competitive and because it is based on competitive bids it can get expensive. CPC/bid inflation has led to some companies reducing PPC activity. Some companies may get involved in bidding wars that drive bids up to an unacceptable-level – some phrases such as 'life insurance' may exceed £10 per click.
- *Higher costs.* If SEO is effective it will almost always deliver a lower CPC.
- *Favours big players.* For companies with a lower budget or a narrower range of products on which to increase lifetime value it may be not possible to compete. Large players can also get deals on their media spend through their agencies.
- *Complexity of managing large campaigns.* PPC requires knowledge of configuration, bidding options of the reporting facilities of different ad networks. To manage a PPC account may require daily or even hourly checks on the bidding to stay competitive – this can amount to a lot of time. **Bid management software** can help here.
- *Missed opportunities.* Sponsored listings are only part of the SEM mix. Many search users do not click on these, so you cannot maximise the effect.
- *Click fraud* is regarded by some as a problem, especially in some sectors. **Click fraud** will be covered in detail in the E-consultancy Best Practice Guide to Paid Search, to be published in the summer, 2006.

¹³ An IAB US/NetRatings study http://www.iab.net/news/pr_2004_7_15.asp.

What you will find in this guide

Structure of this guide on SEO Best Practice

Many factors influence successful SEO. Google states that there are over 100 ranking factors that affect SEO¹⁴. To help simplify our explanation of best practice, E-consultancy has identified **6 key groupings of success factors for SEO** which are summarised for quick reference in Figure 3. Within each of these areas, detailed recommendations of best practice for all significant ranking factors are explained.

Six groupings of success factors are used to structure the recommendations in this best practice guide:

Success factor 1: SEO planning and strategy

How to develop a structured plan to evaluate and improve SEO, covering :

- Setting goals through demand analysis and conversion modelling.
- Auditing current performance including competitor benchmarking.
- Keyphrase analysis and selection.
- SEM strategy – integration between SEO, PPC and other online marketing.
- Evaluation and improvement process.
- Resourcing.

Success factor 2: Index coverage

*How to achieve **index inclusion** in the different search engines covering these topics:*

- **Site submission** – how to get a new site listed in the search engines
- **Google Sitemaps** – an essential tool for evaluating and improving index coverage
- Evaluating **site index inclusion** and **robot** indexing activity
- Site inclusion and **page exclusion** – how to use **Robots.txt** and **Meta tags**
- **Domain strategy** – approaches to distribute content across different **domains** including issues such as top-level domain variants, **sub-domains**, **geolocation** (international domains), **domain hijacking** and **canonicalization**.
- Time-related content issues including the **Google sandbox effect**, content freshness and **link velocity**.
- Indexing of **dynamic content** including problems with **URL rewriting** and **Session IDs**.

¹⁴ Google information for webmasters: <http://www.google.com/webmasters/4.html>

Success factor 3: On-page optimization

In this section we make recommendations on how you should create documents which the search engine will assess as being highly relevant to a particular search term a search user has entered as their query.

The most basic test of relevance is the number of times the search phrase appears on the page. However, there are many factors which are also applied. In this section we will review:

- Within-page keyphrase factors including **keyword density**, synonyms and position
- Page markup keyphrase factors including syntactical accuracy, **<title> tags**, **<meta> tags**, ** hyperlink tags** and ** alt tags**.
- Document-level keyphrase factors such as the inclusion of keyphrases in the domain and document file name.

An additional guide on on-page optimization is provided in Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers.

Success factor 4: Link-building

*In this section we show why the links between pages are at least as important as on-page optimization in determining results from SEO. We will review the principle of **PageRank**, pioneered by Google to assess the relevance of pages based on their **link popularity**. PageRank has many implications for the way sites should be built and pages are linked, and we describe six principles you need to be aware of. Although PageRank is today not given as much weighting in generating search results, many of these principles can still be applied to give better results from SEO.*

We will also recommend approaches on the six main strategies for external link-building from third party sites:

1. **Natural link-building through quality content**
2. **Requesting inbound-only links**
3. **Reciprocal linking**
4. **Buying links**
5. **Creating your own external links**
6. **Generating buzz through PR**

Success factor 5: A structured process for SEO

In this section we bring together all the techniques detailed earlier in the report and recommend the best overall approach to SEO. We have identified 10 classic approaches to SEO which are part of a typical SEO project.

The ten processes or activities are:

- 1. Improve index inclusion.**
- 2. Revise site architecture and linking strategy.**
- 3. Internal linking strategy**
- 4. External link-building.**
- 5. Improve page template effectiveness.**
- 6. Improve SERPS effectiveness.**
- 7. Refine SEO for homepage and other key pages.**
- 8. Creation of themed pages for target keyphrases.**
- 9. Partitioning of existing content between different pages.**
- 10. Optimize other existing pages.**

Success factor 6: Conversion efficiency

The main part of this report has focused on how to attract quality visitors to a website. But of course, to be of value overall, SEO must meet the marketing objectives of a site.

In this final section we review how to best devise landing pages of the site to meet this goal. We also look at the implications of structuring these pages. The principles we will explain for effective landing pages for SEO also support the aims of other e-communications such as paid-search, online advertising, affiliate marketing and e-mail marketing.

The main topics we will cover are:

- Setting balanced objectives for landing pages.
- Understanding different types of landing pages.
- Balancing usability, accessibility and persuasion.
- Measuring landing page effectiveness.
- Ten guidelines to improve landing page efficiency.

Features of this guide

We have incorporated a range of features to help make this guide an effective learning tool:

1. **Key recommendations.** Guidance on issues which an organization should pay attention to in their SEO strategy.
2. **Tips.** Practical recommendations to improve results.
3. **The Stats.** Boxes which summarise research that supports a success factor.
4. **Links.** Links to tools, articles and portals found within the body text, footnotes and in the resources section at the end of the guide.
5. **SEO Ranking success factors boxes.** Designed for *easy reference*, these cover all of the major factors which affect SEO results. These are mainly positive factors which will improve factors, but associated negative factors are also referred to.

Each box often contains several related best practice ranking factors. These boxes have been designed to be consulted at a glance to understand best practice without reading too much text. The ranking success factors are structured based on the experience of the author and the review team, but as part of the review process each factor has been checked against other existing lists of ranking success factors¹⁵.

The E-consultancy best practice guide provides much more depth on each factor as shown in Table 2 including examples, several best practice guidelines and issues to watch for.

The **Importance** rating gives a general indication of the relative importance of each factor. Its main purpose is to highlight ranking factors to really pay attention to. The actual importance of the factors will vary for different search engines, markets and audiences. It also depends on previous SEO efforts. If you have solved an inclusion problem, it is no longer important!

Table 2 Example ranking success factor checklist box

SEO Ranking Success Factor 1	<Name of factor>	Applies to: <Scope:Whole site, each page, which search engine?>	Importance: 
What is it?	<A brief description of the factor and why it is important to ranking>		
Example:	<An example from a real site, search listings or search engine syntax>		
Best practice:	<A series of recommendations, starting with the most important>		
What to watch for?	• <Related factors to consider> • <Possible penalties or negative ranking factors associated with misapplication of factor> • <Tools to apply> • <Links to find out more information>		

¹⁵ Google ranking factors list at: Vaughn's One-Pagers <http://www.vaughns-1-pagers.com/internet/google-ranking-factors.htm> and Rand Fishkin's seomoz (<http://www.seomoz.org/articles/search-ranking-factors.php>)

Search engine optimisation (SEO) success map

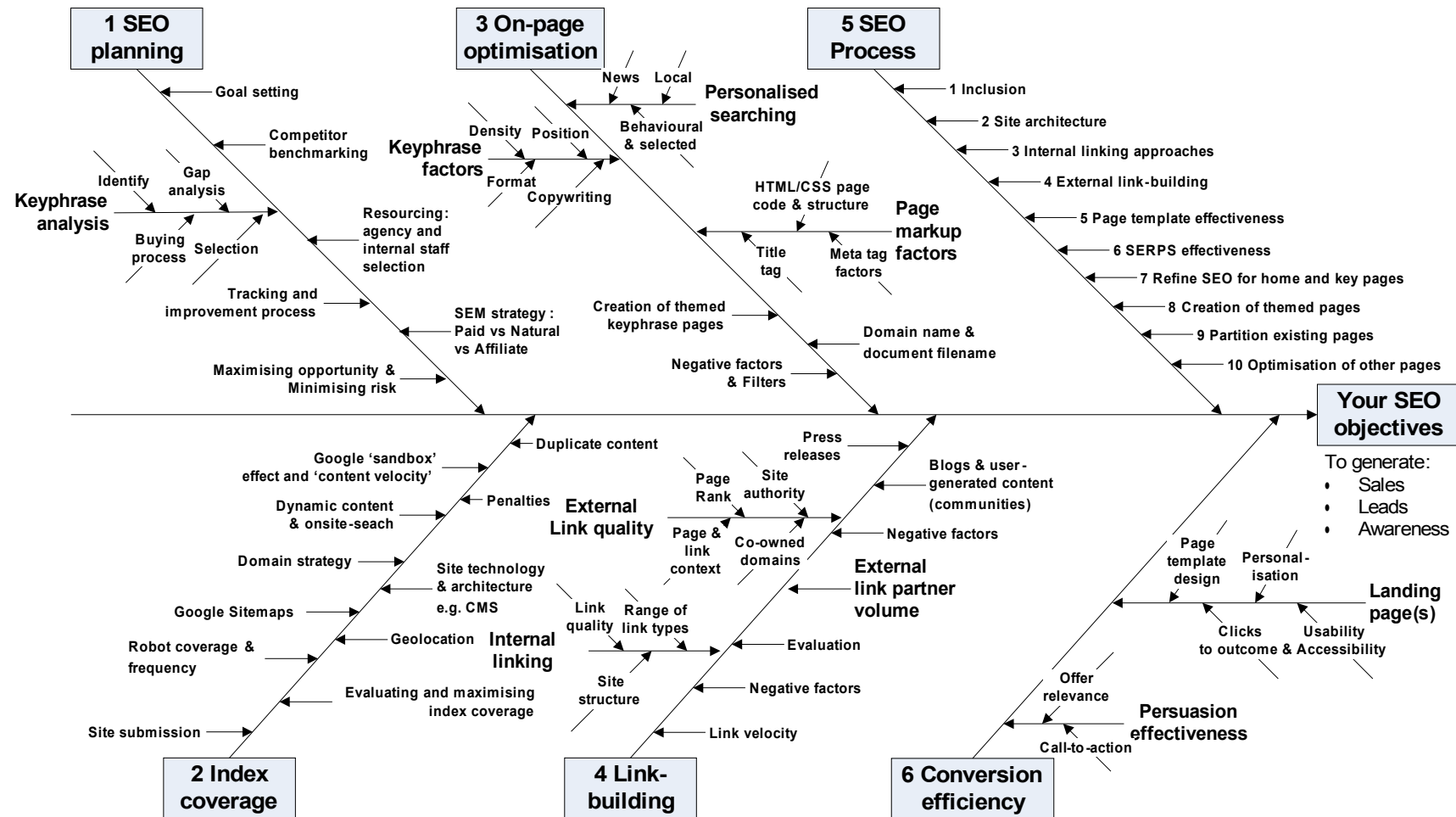


Figure 3 E-consultancy success factor map for SEO

Keeping up-to-date with the latest developments in SEO

*Part of the fascination of being involved with online marketing is the **pace of change**. The rate of change is certainly greatest for SEM and often it has the largest impact. Marketing techniques which are effective today may no longer be effective next year, or even tomorrow...*

Engineers at the likes of Google and Yahoo constantly try to improve the relevance of search results, while staying one step ahead of the spammers. For this reason **algorithms never stay the same for very long**, and marketers must continually be on their toes, to react to changes.

Updates to the algorithms used by search engines change the positions of the listings, so you might be top of Google today and on the third page tomorrow, in theory. This is sometimes referred to as the 'Google Dance'. *It keeps some marketers awake at night.*

Google's 'Florida Update' caused dramatic changes to the natural listings, with some websites dropping out of the rankings altogether. And this is why it pays to **be ethical**, to **think about the future**, and to **avoid any grey areas**.

A big part of managing the opportunity and risk of search engine marketing is keeping informed about the latest developments and, in particular, identifying the developments that matter since there are many changes every week. Some changes are more serious than others.

The effects of these changes are not always immediately understood by search marketers. Given the rate of change, it is important that someone is permanently responsible for monitoring and improving SEO (in-house or outsourced).

Try not to think of SEO as a short-term project. SEO is more aligned to 'Grand Strategy': a series of smart micromoves undertaken to achieve a bigger business goal in the future. Alexander the Great would have been a good search marketer.

Key recommendation 5. Ensure there is ongoing commitment to SEO and responsibility for it within your organization rather than it being treated as an initiative.

Going forward...

To help in keeping up-to-date, E-consultancy is planning to regularly update each of its best practice guides at least once year.

With each new version of the best practice guide, the latest developments will be clearly highlighted.

In the interim period, the most significant changes which affect SEM practice will be posted to the new E-consultancy blog. As well as this, each guide will highlight the best sources to keep up-to-date about a particular topic.

1. SEO Success Factor 1: Planning & Strategy

1.1 An introduction to planning

Ok, pull up a cushion. This marks the beginning of this guide to SEO. Smart marketers never launch any strategy without an appropriate amount of planning, so that's what we'll look at first.

A planned approach to SEM that uses an integrated approach to SEO and paid-search marketing should pay dividends because it:

- Enables the potential for SEM to be quantified through demand analysis and the gap between opportunity and current results assessed.
- Sets the right objectives and puts in place the right tracking systems and review process to improve results.
- Selects the most appropriate combination of SEO, paid-search and affiliate marketing to maximise results at the right cost.
- Can diversify the risks of over-reliance on one approach.
- Achieves integration of SEM with other campaign activity.

In this section we recommend an approach based on these steps:

- 1. Goal setting.**
- 2. Keyword analysis and selection.**
- 3. Auditing current performance.**
- 4. Competitor benchmarking.**
- 5. SEM strategy selection.**
- 6. Resourcing SEM.**

1.2 Setting goals for search engine marketing

*As with all marketing activities it is essential that you set some **realistic goals** for your SEO campaigns. This will help you to get the most out of your budget, and it also gives you benchmarks so you can measure, review and improve performance.*

With SEM we are fortunate that there is reasonable information to set **quantitative objectives** based on the potential market size (such as that in Table 1), as well as existing results from your **web analytics** data (eg *visits to your site from search engines* and *conversion rates*).

Key recommendation 6. Set quantitative goals for search engine marketing based on demand through search volumes for different products and topics and conversion on your site to your marketing outcomes.

Setting goals for SEM can be difficult as *you need to involve the site owner and the team executing the work*. Typically, the site owner won't have sufficient knowledge of *search behaviour* and *conversion rates*, which means that realistic objectives may be difficult to set.

Meanwhile, the *agency or internal search specialist may not want to commit to goals* which will increase their workload or reduce their profitability on the project. This is more of a problem for SEO than PPC marketing since there is less correspondence between cause and immediate effect for SEO.

We need to remember that SEM is not only the preserve of e-retailers and transactional site owners. This section will cover the following common types of websites and search marketing objectives:

- Sales for transactional E-commerce sites such as retail, financial services and travel.
- Lead generation for higher value business-to-consumer and business-to-business sites.
- Branding and awareness for brands such as fast-moving consumer goods which do not typically just sell direct.
- Intermediary sites such as brokers and affiliates.
- Media owned sites or content sites such as online newspapers and magazines.
- Public sector organizations offering information about services and complying with freedom of information legislation.

Regardless of the type of site, these are common types of high-level goals used for search engine marketing:

1. Position-based. This is most commonly used for SEO rather than PPC. It is important that these targets reflect high volume, high intent keyphrases in the major search engines.

Example: To achieve 100 top ten positions, 5,000 top 50 positions, or preferably, more specific goals for specific phrases in a market.

Tip 1. Ensure that you don't only measure SEO success according to positions, it is often meaningless since it is position for important keyphrases such as high volume, low intent phrases or lower volume, high intent phrases that is important.

2. Visitor volume-based. This is best for non-transactional sites without clear outcomes seeking to generate brand awareness and interaction.

Example: To achieve 5,000 clicks across agreed phrases per month.

3. Outcome-based. This should be straightforward to measure for a transactional site, but is less easy for other sites such as a recruitment site (see tip).

Example: To achieve 5,000 leads/registrations or sales from SEO or PPC per month.

Tip 2. For non-transactional sites, we recommend allocating points for different types of outcome, e.g. 1 point for a completed job search, 5 points to register a CV, etc. This is also a method of assessing quality that can be used for transactional sites.

4. Market share-based. With detailed keyphrase analysis or use of tools such as the Google Traffic Estimator or Hitwise, it is possible to calculate a 'share of search' within a product category as explained in the next section.

You can also aim for sales levels from SEM within a particular category to be at least those of other channels. However, care must be taken with these tools since they may be skewed by automatically submitted searches from rank-checking, link-building or click fraud software tools.

Example: To achieve 20% share of search within 12 months for a particular keyphrase.

5. Cost-based. This incorporates costs into the other objectives through specifying limits on Cost Per Click or more usefully Cost Per Sale or Lead. This is traditionally used on PPC, but should also be used on SEO.

Example: Cost per sales must be less than £40 for a credit card

6. Value-based. This defines profit contribution from SEM. Value is typically based on subtracting costs of promotion, cost-of-sale and cost-of-goods sold from revenue generated. More sophisticated lifetime value models also take into account propensity for repeat purchases, referrals and ongoing costs.

Example: Generate £200,000 profit from SEM in Quarter 1.

Historically, SEO has involved objective setting and reporting based on position and volume, while PPC has been based more on outcome, costs and values. Increasingly it is common to control SEO through these measures too.

Key recommendation 7. Use more specific objectives for SEM as your experience increases. Create objectives to achieve a realistic share of search combined with outcome, cost and value-based objectives

Keyphrase analysis and selection

1.1.1 What is keyphrase analysis? Why is it important?

Keyphrase analysis and selection are *core to success* in SEM. Identifying *relevant* key phrases for your marketplace is a crucial starting point for both starting and refining SEO and pay per click marketing.

We often see SEM projects progressing to more interesting technical issues such as assessing index inclusion or on-page optimization for SEO or reviewing existing keyphrases for paid-search, but initial keyphrase analysis is not an area to take any shortcuts on.

Key recommendation 8. Ensure sufficient SEM project time is devoted to keyphrase analysis, demand evaluation and selection.

Detailed keyphrase analysis and selection enables you to:

- Review possible phrases which will enable you to connect with potential customers as they search for products, content or experiences.
- Select keyphrases which indicate intent on the part of your audience which helps qualify which phrases you should prioritise on.
- Set goals for returns on SEM based on the number of relevant searches and the cost of achieving results.
- Select SEM strategy for achieving results for each keyphrase – which combination of SEO, paid-search and affiliate marketing will work best?
- Review progress against these goals.

1.1.2 Why ‘keyphrase’?

In this report we use the term ‘**keyphrase**’ (short for ‘keyword phrase’ or search term) rather than ‘keyword’ since search engines such as Google attribute more relevance when there is a phrase match on a page.

For example if someone is searching for a ‘*low-cost mortgage*’, Google will attribute more relevance (and so higher rankings) to a page that contains the exact keyword phrase ‘*low-cost mortgage*’ than a page that contains *mortgage* at some point on the page but *low-cost* elsewhere on the page.

Furthermore, the whole search strategy is based on deciding on which phrases to optimize for or bid upon. Search term and key term are alternatives.

We’re probably being picky here, but many search companies and commentators talk about optimizing clients ‘keywords’ and in our opinion pay insufficient attention to **keyphrase analysis**.¹⁶

¹⁶ Google Adwords uses ‘keywords’ to refer to phrases, so the use of the terms is unsurprising.

1.1.3 Understanding searcher keyphrase usage behaviour

Keyphrase analysis is also important since it reflects search behaviour – the sequence of phrases known as ‘the search journey’.

Consider if you were searching for a car to rent, it is likely that you will start with a relatively short, generic phrase such as ‘car hire’ and then gradually refine it as shown in Figure 4.

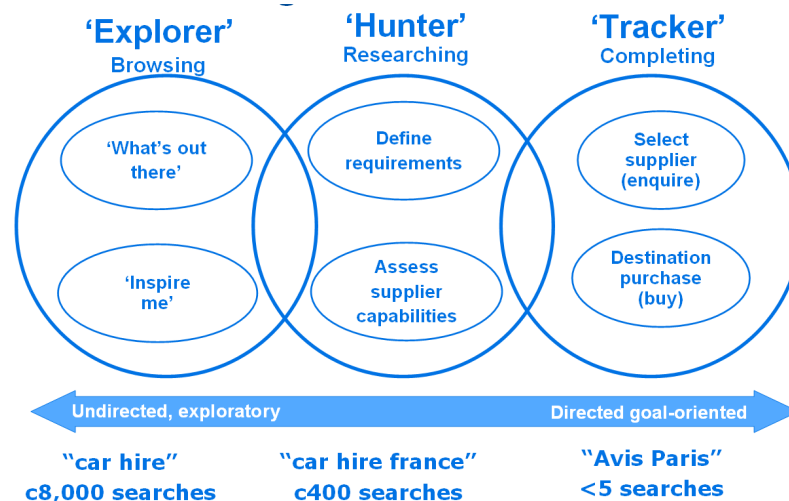


Figure 4 Variation in searcher intent through the buying process

You will see from Figure 4 that as we **refine** our search we are likely to use more specific words and often use **longer phrases**.

As searchers make their searches more specific through the buying process, the number of people using these search terms naturally decreases. This summarises the essential challenge of search engine marketing. Highly-refined phrases indicate **intent to purchase**, yet the search volume on these phrases is much lower, so that if we only targeted these phrases to gain visibility in the search engines, we will often not get the volume of sales we are seeking.

In section [1.16](#) on search strategies we will look at approaches to try to get this balance right.

Savvier searchers

As more users become familiar with online searching there has been a trend towards using longer 3- and 4-word phrases as indicated below in Table 3.

The table also shows that over half of the audience are now using phrases that are 3 words or longer which again indicates the importance of keyphrase analysis.

These figures on number of keyphrases used for targeting SEM indicate companies who take SEM seriously:

- A consumer bank specialising in consumer savings, loans and current accounts uses around 3,000 keyphrases for SEM
- A holiday cottage company offering holidays around Europe uses around 6,000 keyphrases for PPC marketing
- An online intermediary operating across retail and travel categories has developed a system for managing over 1 million keyphrases.

Tip 3. Review your keyphrase list to assess the number of 3 word or longer phrases you are using to promote your site.

Table 3 Variation in number of words used within keyphrase

July 2005			July 2004			
1.	2 word phrases	29.60%	1.	2 word phrases	30.09%	-0.49%
2.	3 word phrase	27.55%	2.	3 word phrase	26.83%	+0.72%
3.	4 word phrases	16.21%	3.	4 word phrases	14.83%	+1.38%
4.	1 word phrases	13.42%	4.	1 word phrases	16.60%	-3.18%
5.	5 word phrases	7.58%	5.	5 word phrases	6.76%	+0.82%
6.	6 word phrases	3.21%	6.	6 word phrases	2.81%	+0.4%
7.	7 word phrases	1.34%	7.	7 word phrases	1.13%	+0.21%

Source: Onestat.com http://www.onestat.com/html/aboutus_pressbox39.html

1.1.4 Time-related variations in keyphrase behaviour

Although interviewees for this report all agree on the importance of keyphrase analysis they also cautioned that it is not a one-off event, particularly for **seasonal markets**. Some of the reasons that **keyphrase analysis needs to be repeated regularly** (or different targets set for different times of the year) include:

- Search volumes have seasonal cycles in many markets whether determined by holidays or seasons in B2C or the end of accounting year in B2B.
- Long-term changes in search growth occur as more users use online for searching.
- Long-term changes in usage of search engines occurs.
- Introduction of new competitors or products into a market can affect search behaviour.
- As search volumes change due to seasonal or long-term effects, there will be different types of searchers with different search and conversion behaviours. This may require different SEM strategies.

Keyphrase behaviour can also vary on shorter time-scales:

- During the day – different searches around lunch time and in evening. Advanced PPC marketers use ‘dayparting’ to take advantage of this.
- During the week – particularly in consumer sectors, some days of the week are more popular for the consideration and purchase of products online.

Understanding variations in time of keyphrase analysis is a good potential source of competitive advantage. PPC is a good way of exploiting these temporal changes.

Tip 4. Consider whether your keyphrase analysis reflects seasonal or long-term changes in search behaviour, i.e. how up-to-date is it? Also make sure major changes that affect SEO are made at less critical times (conspiracy theorists note that most recent major Google algorithm updates have occurred immediately before the main retail season more than once).

Key:										
Volume A >50	Intent 1 - Purchase mode	Notes: When optimising copy, most emphasis should be given to those								
Volume B 10-50	Intent 2 - Consideration mode	phrases combining high volume and high intent.								
Volume C 1-10	Intent 3 - Possible consideration									
Volume D <1	Intent 4 - Unlikely consideration									
Google Paid clicks/day	Keyphrase group	Keyphrase	Volume	Intent	Omit	Paid search	Position	Google		
86.0	Business intelligence	"business intelligence"	A	3						
3.9	Business intelligence	"business intelligence software"	C	2						
1.6	Business intelligence	"business intelligence tools"	C	2						
0.9	Business intelligence	"business intelligence market"	D	2						
0.5	Business intelligence	"business intelligence solutions"	D	2						

Keyphrase	Current position Google	Clicks/Day Posn 1-2 Adwords	Av CPC	Annual PPC cost Posn 1-2	Potential annual PPC volume	Potential annual SEO volume	Annual search volume	Actual search volume	% share of search
1 "CRM software"	1	28	£7.73	£77,918	10,080	40,320	201,600	??	??
2 "Business intelligence solution"	9	0.8	£4.31	£1,241	288	1,152	5,760	??	??
				£79,160	10,368	41,472	207,360		

1.1.5 Understanding different types of keyphrases

We now know that the majority of search queries consist of more than one word. These are usually made up of the principal theme of the search, often a product or type of content and one or more 'keyphrase qualifiers'.

Tip 5. We recommend you select keyphrases and assess performance based on the generic search phrase and 8 common search term qualifiers:

In the example below, the theme or generic search phrase is car insurance:

1. **Adjective (price/product qualifiers)** – 'cheap car insurance' – quality is often poor for these phrases, so the decision may be taken not to target them depending on the brand.
2. **Comparison/quality** – 'compare car insurance' – this phrase may be more difficult to convert on.
3. **Intended use** (application) – 'high mileage car insurance.'
4. **Product type** – 'multi-car insurance' – typically low volume.
5. **Product specification or feature** – 'no claims bonus car insurance'.
6. **Brand** – 'Churchill car insurance' – relatively easy to achieve visibility for SEO. We discuss competition for brand terms in the Best Practice Guide to Pay Per Click marketing.
7. **Location** – 'car insurance UK' – this usage is surprisingly common and a quick win is often to include 'UK in the body copy or **<title> tag** of a page or PPC copy.
8. **Action request** – buy car insurance – these show high intent and are often more competitive.

Tip 6. Include geographical qualifiers such as countries and cities in title tags where these are relevant for your business.

Are you talking the same language as your target market?

Once you put these qualifiers and all their variants together for many different products you are likely to generate a lot of keyphrases. It can be argued that qualifiers aren't important since we can just upload a whole raft of phrases to a PPC programme and see which perform best.

But analysis of the relative importance of qualifiers is useful to assess whether your proposition and messaging on the page is consistent with the way your potential customers/users are thinking.

1.1.6 Grouping and categorising keyphrases

*When performing key phrase analysis and in SEM implementation, it is essential to manage keyphrase volumes and strategies by grouping and **categorising keyphrases** in different ways.*

Groups / categories might reflect:

- **Products:** Credit cards, Online banking, Mortgages
- **Intent:** The phrase qualifier
- **Search behaviour:** Types of searches dependent on the qualifier as above, such as brand, product type, location, product features, etc
- **Phrase complexity:** Number of words
- **Volume:** From high-volume to low-volume of searches or results
- **Competitiveness:** From high-to-low
- **Performance:** Based on natural position, SEO and PPC volume, profitability or share of search
- **Strategy:** Whether you are targeting the keyphrase using SEO, PPC or both

Key recommendation 9. Develop a **keyphrase repository** which enables you to categorise keyphrases in different ways, to help select and refine keyphrases used for SEO and PPC and to assess and improve performance.

1.1.7 Keyphrase variants

*Keyphrase variants are different forms of a given keyphrase, i.e. **plurals and different word sequences**. Careful analysis of these can give better results.*

The following results are from the Google Traffic Estimator, which estimates that we will see around 24 clicks per day from Adwords for a position of 1.0 for these different phrase variants:

- "cuba holidays" – 14 clicks/day
- "cuba holiday" – 5 clicks/day
- "holidays cuba" – 4 clicks per day
- "holiday cuba" – 1 click per day

By doing this analysis we can see that there are a lot more people searching on the plural form. This is often the case, but it is worth checking if plurals are likely for high volume keyphrases.

In the above example we would select 'cuba holidays' as our **primary keyphrase**.

'Cuba holiday' will be our **secondary keyphrase** and 'holidays cuba' as our **tertiary keyphrase**. See *Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers* [for explanation of these terms](#).

It helps to have the exact phrase repeated on the page (= on-page optimization), but if this is not grammatical then **intermediate words** can be introduced, e.g. 'Cuba beach holidays' or 'Holidays in Cuba'.

Tip 7. Assess the relative importance of different keyphrase variants – different word sequences, plurals and synonyms.

1.1.8 Synonyms

Alternative words with similar meaning should also be assessed...

This is particularly important to SEO where the search engines use synonyms to characterise page content. Remember that search engines may issue a penalty if the frequency of a given keyphrase is too high on a page (aka *keyword stuffing*). So instead of writing 'Cuba holiday' 480 times on one page, try using synonyms and keyphrase variants. No stuffing!

E-consultancy expects that synonyms will play a bigger part in search engine algorithms in the future.

1.1.9 Keyphrase identification and selection process

In this section we recommend 4 stages for identifying and selecting keyphrases.

***SEM agencies and internal staff vary in the details of their approach to keyphrase analysis, so it is worth finding out exactly what stages are used, the tools used, and on what basis each keyphrase is identified / selected.*

Stage 1. Scope keyphrases identifying main themes

The aim of this stage is to identify manageable groups of related keyphrase themes which are used to structure all SEM activities such as setting objectives, reviewing performance and ongoing campaign management.

Each theme will typically be made up of one or two words. It is useful to separate brand-related terms from generic terms.

It is best simply to initially determine these groups by the products and services that are available. If the website has been designed in a structured way, with planned information architecture, or if it is based on an existing product catalogue then this should be fine as a starting point.

You need to determine a manageable number of themes, for review and improvement. This could be between 10 to 1,000 different groups depending on the number of products or services offered.

Key recommendation 10. Ensure your keyphrase analysis and performance reporting systems enable you to compare behaviour and performance at different aggregate levels as well as individual keyphrase levels. Key question during supplier selection.

Groovy, now show me some examples!

Okay. The example is for **retail**, since we've done travel already.

- For retailers, search themes are likely to be *product ranges*, *categories* and *subcategories*.
- For example, an own-brand clothing retailer could include the following themes: *Women's Clothing*, *Women's Beauty*, *Lingerie*, *Men's Clothing*, *Kids' Clothing*, *Homeware*, etc.
- **Keyphrase groups** in one area such as *Women's Clothing* will include categories such as: *Coats*, *Jackets*, *Tops and T-Shirts*, *Shirts and Blouses*, *Dresses*, *Skirts*, etc.
- In this case it is probably not necessary to go down to subcategory level since for a category such as coats the main options are variants on the main theme, i.e. *'fleece coats'*, *'leather coats'*, *'dress coats'*.
- So, in the above example we would want **analysis of behaviour** and **reporting of performance** at the *three* levels of (1) *Women's clothing* (2) *Coats* (3) *Individual keyphrases*.
- For a brand-retailer, we would need the addition of a fourth level: *brand name + coats*.
- It is also useful to identify, at this stage, categories that are commonly offered in a sector that are not offered by this retailer, e.g. *Sportswear* or *Skiwear*. This is important for use of **negative matching** in PPC advertising.

Stage 2. Identify full-list of potential keyphrases

This is where we build a full-list of all the potential phrases that someone in our market may search on.

We now move from the one or two-word generic keyphrase to evaluate *all the variants* on this root phrase.

This includes **adding synonyms** for the generic keyphrase and **longer phrases** through the qualifiers we mentioned above such as **adjective**, **comparison**, **location** and **brand**.

The Google Adwords Keyword Tool (*and the tilde (~)*; *Google advanced search syntax*, *see*) are probably the best methods of generating these phrases from a generic phrase.

- For example, for *womens coats*, the first recommendations (including synonyms) are: *womens jackets*, *women's jackets*, *womens winter coats*, *womens leather jackets*, *coat womens*, *jackets women's*, *jackets womens*, *coats womens*, *womens waterproof jackets*, *womens raincoats*, *womens designer coats*, *women's winter coats*, *women's ski jackets*, *women's leather jackets*.

You will notice that this tool is good for **indicating keyphrase variants**:

- **Singular and plural**, e.g. womens coats, womens coat
- **Reverse word order**, e.g. coat womens, womens coat
- **Apostrophes**, e.g. women's coats
- **Hyphens**, e.g. email/e-mail
- **Misspellings**, particularly for brands e.g. Seibel/Siebel
- **US/UK English spelling**, e.g. color/colour, optimize/optimise

You need to consider as many variants as possible to maximise search referrals and visibility on PPC networks.

Note too that **synonyms**, e.g. 'coats = jackets' also need to be identified, as do **homonyms**, for example a jacket is not necessarily a piece of clothing.

Given our comments about search behaviour indicated by Table 3, to make this manageable and avoid the law of diminishing returns, we suggest that **typically we go up to 4- or possibly 5-word phrases** at this stage since the volume of 5 or more word searches is low and these can be potentially picked up by broad match in PPC.

Using synonyms and keyphrase variants is covered in more detail in the section on on-page optimization.

Stage 3. Keyphrase analysis

*Keyphrase analysis can usefully be split down into three separate stages: **demand analysis, performance analysis and gap analysis**.*

By using this structured approach to keyphrase analysis (to determine the potential volume of searches for a phrase), your *current performance* - and the gap between *actual* and *potential* - is a powerful way of driving results from SEO.

Key recommendation 11. Use a structured approach to keyphrase analysis to drive results from SEO. Ensure agencies or internal staff perform quantitative demand analysis, performance analysis and gap analysis.

A. Demand analysis

Demand analysis is where we identify the **popularity** of each search term, its relevance to the products or services offered and competition on it.

When reviewing individual keyphrases, we suggest assessing the following attributes for analysis and categorising each phrase.

As a minimum you need to assess **search volumes**, but some agencies will also assess **relevance** and **competitiveness**:

- **Estimated total search volumes**: from the sources mentioned in Table 6, but subject to the caveat at the foot.

- **Relevance:** an indication of likelihood for conversion based on intent indicated by the words in phrase, e.g. a qualifier 'buy' is high intent, while 'compare' is lower intent.
- **Competitiveness** (from high to low). This can be based on number of pages containing the phrase on the page or in its title (for SEO) or on the number of advertisers.

What tools are out there?

One form of competitiveness for SEO is calculated in **Wordtracker** (see Table 6) by assessing the *number of pages that contain keywords and keyphrases*.

Wordtracker uses a *Keyphrase Effectiveness Index* (KEI) to suggest competitiveness:

$$\text{KEI} = (P^2/C) = (P/C * P) \text{ (Where } P = \text{Popularity (Count) and } C = \text{Competition (Number of pages containing keywords in Wordtracker))}$$

Another form of assessment of competitiveness, this time for PPC is available from the latest version of the **Google Keyword Tool**.

For any phrase, it is possible to export an indication of competition (based on number of advertisers) as shown in Table 4, on the following page. You can see there is quite a variation in competition across these phrases.

Note that we have added a column called '*intent*', which indicates *the likelihood of the searcher to purchase*. This approach is particularly useful to identify which phrases to exclude through negative matching for PPC (or to exclude from SEO since not relevant). Alternatively, it may generate ideas for different types of content or content on a site that *should* be targeted on third party sites through a search content network, in this case '*review*' or '*forum*'.

Keyphrases that have an intent rating of 1 tend to generate low search volumes. Often, as in this category, more often purchasers will simply type the product name / model when they are in purchase or consideration mode.

Table 4 Using the Google Keyword tool for keyphrase selection

Intent 1 - Purchase mode
Intent 2 - Consideration mode
Intent 3 - Possible consideration
Intent 4 - Unlikely consideration

Keyphrase	Competition	Search Volume	Intent
xda	5	3	2
02 xda	4	2	2
xda ii	4	2	2
xda mobile	2	2	2
xda software	3	2	4
uk xda	0	1	2
xda 3	2	1	2
xda phone	3	1	2
xda accessories	3	1	4
xda battery	2	1	4
new xda	1	1	3
xda review	1	1	3
xda forum	0	1	3
buy xda	1	1	1

Note: Scores for competition and search volume available in Google Keyword tool within Adwords management account since Oct 2005. Intent is a judgment on propensity to purchase online (or offline) in this case for a mobile, based on marketers' intuition or known results from SEO/PPC.

B. Performance analysis

This assesses how the company is currently performing for these phrases.

If you are already involved in a programme of SEM you will also be able to integrate the following **performance attributes** into your analysis or report (phrases should be broken down by SEO and PPC):

- **Average position** in natural or paid listings
- **Click volume** referred from search
- **Click quality** (conversion rates and ideally bounce rates to compare landing page effectiveness)
- **Outcomes** (sales, registrations or leads)
- **Costs** (CPC and CPA)
- **Profitability** (based on cost of sale on lifetime value models)

Of course, which of these you actually have visibility of will depend on your **tracking tools**. This is also key area to assess when selecting vendors.

C. Gap analysis

Gap analysis simply identifies where the biggest potential for improvement is, so you can target your resources accordingly. The gap is the difference for each phrase on how you should be performing vs how you are currently performing, indicated by the demand analysis and performance analysis.

For both SEO and PPC, the main purpose for gap analysis is to identify phrases which have **high ratings for search volume and relevance**, but which are not currently delivering *click volume, position or outcomes*.

- You may also want to identify phrases that are underperforming in terms of *conversion, cost or profitability*.

Stage 4. Keyphrase selection

Keyphrase selection involves prioritising the phrases you will be using in terms of resource. We cover this in more detail in the section on SEM strategies.

An increasingly common approach to keyphrase selection for SEO is to **use PPC campaign data to inform keyphrase selection**. This will involve creating a broad PPC campaign based on the phrases identified from Stage 3 for a relatively short period of a few weeks to months.

This strategy is based on *actual customer behaviour* and *whether specific phrases convert* or not.

However, if there are *weaknesses* in the way PPC campaign is executed or in the existing site experience it **could lead to the exclusion of valid phrases**.

Tip 8. Using results of a PPC campaign can be used to inform keyphrase selection for SEO.

Keyphrase selection involves setting additional fields for the above:

- **SEO priority** – this is priority for future work assessed from high to low. If a phrase currently ranks highly, it has a low priority for future work. You can also categorise according to whether existing content is sufficient or whether new content needs to be created.
- **PPC priority** – from high to low.
- **OK** – performance on this phrase is acceptable for SEO and PPC.

To discuss search engine strategy (See [1.17](#)) it is essential to have an appreciation of the relative potential of SEM for a product or service.

An example of a **keyphrase demand estimate** to inform strategy is shown in Table 5, in this case, for Google in a single country:

Table 5 Example keyphrase demand estimate

	Keyphrase	Current natural position Google UK	Clicks/Day Posn 1.0 Adwords	Av CPC	Annual PPC cost Posn 1.0	Potential annual PPC volume	Potential annual SEO volume	Annual search volume	Strategy
1	womens clothes	60	40	£1.03	£14,832	14,400	21,600	36,000	SEO
2	womens clothing	40	30	£0.51	£5,508	10,800	16,200	27,000	SEO
3	womens fashion	5	9	£0.34	£1,102	3,240	4,860	8,100	OK
4	womens jeans	15	1.4	£0.82	£413	504	756	1,260	OK
5	womens jacket	30	0.3	£0.60	£65	108	162	270	PPC
					£21,920	29,052	43,578	72,630	

Notes:

1. Colours denote effectiveness of SEO denoted by position in natural listings: green = effective, top 10, red = underperforming, > 30, orange = intermediate, 10 -30
2. Clicks / day figures for PPC from the Google traffic estimator are subject to error, but show the relative importance of phrases. Values are dependent on the match type used. For this approximate analysis, can use a broad match, but a phrase match is probably best, but then have to take into account different variants e.g. women's, woman, etc.
3. Since the Google traffic estimator doesn't provide impressions or searches, we have to estimate natural or SEO search volume if a position in the top 10 is achieved. Although it is difficult to gain top 10 positions in the natural listings, particularly for competitive phrases, if this is achieved, we should be able to achieve up to 2 or 3 times the volume of the Number 1 paid listing. But, best to be conservative – here we have assumed natural is 1.5 times paid.
4. Columns simplified – can use additional data if available, e.g. current actual visits/sales for these phrases and implications for cost per sale.
5. Strategy column indicates which SEM approach to focus on. OK means existing approach acceptable.

1.1.10 Keyphrase identification tools

These are the main tools we recommend, in order of importance.

1. Search engine keyphrase suggestion tools (including existing paid-search campaigns).

These are the most important tools since they are based on the actual behaviour of customer, eg: *what searchers type into search engines and how popular the phrases are.*

- Table 6 gives our recommendations on keyphrase suggestion tools for identifying keyterm volume.
- The Google tools are given prominence since they tend to be more accurate and reflect the highest volumes.
- Remember that the search engines constantly refine these tools.
- An up-to-date list of these keyphrase identification tools is maintained at:
- <http://www.davechaffey.com/Internet-Marketing/C8-Communications/E-tools/Search-marketing/Search-marketing-keyphrase-tools>

Tip 9. Use the new Google keyword tool and Google Sitemaps for assessing keyphrase popularity and performance.

Table 6 Recommended keyphrase identification tools

Tool	Benefits	Issues
<i>1. Google Adwords campaign reports</i>	Gives an accurate indication of the number of impressions (searches) in period for a particular phrase	Figures only available if you set up keyphrases for advertising. Have to use [exact match] since broad match is inflated. May also include impressions on content network sites.
<i>2. Overture, MSN & MIVA campaign management</i>	Similar to above, but at a lower volume.	Similar to above. Can be more useful for assessing lower volume phrases than Google since aggregated over whole month and country specific. Doesn't require log-in.
<i>3. Google traffic estimator</i>	Does not require ads to be setup to use. Shows relative volumes between keyphrases well.	Have to set up a Google account. Only gives clicks/day for #1 position, so have to multiply this by 10 to 50 times to get an indication of actual search volume. Less accurate, particularly for low-volume phrases. Results <0.1. clicks/day can be significant for SEO in some niche sectors. Results fluctuate.
<i>4. Google Keyword tool</i>	A relatively new tool (updated in Oct '05) which gives an indication of search volume and competition on phrases. Also has a site-specific tool recommending top keyphrases for a specific site - useful to compare to actual visitors from SEO/PPC. Older 'keyword sandbox' can be used for synonyms.	Have to set up Google Account. Gives results as relative bars, but can get on scale of 1-5 by exporting to CSV. Doesn't give control for individual countries?
<i>5. Google sitemaps</i>	Reports top phrases for which your site is returned in the SERPs over the last 3 weeks. This can then be compared with actual visitors since it may show problems with creative in SERPs.	This is useful. This requires registration on Google and verification of a site, but does not require uploading of a sitemap.
<i>6. MSN, MIVA, Alexa/A9 and</i>	Other tools are available, but lower volume than Google.	

<i>equivalents</i>		
7. <i>Wordtracker</i>	Useful set of tools for refining Indicates keyphrase competitiveness (KEI). Used by many SEM professionals. Potentially less polluted by software generated searches (See note below)	Most helpful for US-based markets. Based on meta search engine results rather than actual search engines. Cost of full-service.
8. <i>Audience data such as Hitwise, comScore and Nielsen//NetRatings.</i>	Shows actual search behaviour within sector for significant proportion of audience. Can break down by demographics and competitors.	The cost is the reason why it is bottom of this list – several interviewees commended its value. Don't show actual visitor numbers, just the relative proportions. Also dependent on sample size and sample frame, tends to be skewed towards at home, ISP audience.

Notes

Clients should be made aware that although these tools are valuable in assessing the relative search volumes, they are not accurate for absolute search volumes. In particular, in competitive sectors volumes are increased by automatically submitted searches from rank-checking, link-building or link-fraud software tools.

2. Web analytics tools

Your web analytics tool shows the referrer and, importantly, the referring keywords / keyphrases (if the referrer is a search engine). This is a useful way of identifying which keyword phrases to use with the keyphrase analysis tools.

- Clicktracks (www.clicktracks.com) has a particularly useful tool which presents a matrix of the volume of different phrases across different search engines.
- The big disadvantage with this approach is it *only* shows which phrases you successfully attract visitors for. It does not provide you with information on visitors that typed a search term but went to another site because your site wasn't visible in the results, or it was deemed irrelevant and avoided by the searcher.
- However, this approach is certainly useful for **gap analysis**, i.e. *working out the difference between search terms you should be attracting visitors on and those you actually are.*

3. Internal site search tool.

If your site has an internal (on-site) search engine, then this can be useful since it shows what visitors to the site expect to find, but can't readily find.

- Create new pages and amend content to cater for popular searches that return few or no relevant results. Reverse engineer your online business to help users find what they are looking for. Remember to speak in their language.

4. Competitors' sites.

*If competitors have undertaken keyphrase analysis, you will be able to view some of the main key phrases they have identified in their **meta tags on the homepage and for different category pages and product pages**. See the section on meta description and meta keyword tags for explanation and examples.*

- You can also use tools to identify the most common key phrases on each page of your site or competitor sites. This is a very useful tool that shows the second, third and fourth most popular key phrases.

<http://www.abakus-internet-marketing.de/tools/topword.html>

5. Your knowledge of your market and customer research

You will be able to identify some keyphrases that you think customers will type in as you know from talking with them about your services. As with competitor sites, this may be useful for identifying the main keyphrase groups which are then used to seed the keyphrase suggestion tools.

Different forms of market research such as these could be used and it is useful to think in terms of **keyphrases for personas**, but many would argue this is unnecessary given the existence of key phrase suggestion tools which show actual behaviour.

On the other hand, too much reliance can be placed on keyphrase tools and **lateral thinking** can often identify phrases that those reliant on the tools haven't spotted. Reviewing forums and blogs specific to a market can be used to inform usage.

Auditing current performance

*We have seen how we can use demand analysis and gap analysis to determine the share of search we are receiving. As well as share of search, we also need to understand the **efficiency of a site in converting visitors** to the required outcomes and also how cost effective this is.*

1.1.11 Site inclusion

The starting point for assessing effectiveness is inclusion – assessing how many of your pages are indexed. We will cover this in more detail in Section 2 of this guide (Index Inclusion and Coverage).

1.1.12 Relative performance

This assesses how good your results from search engine marketing are *relative to the market demand for information via search*.

In the section below on **benchmarking** we look at measures like **ranking position**, **number of visitors** and **share of search**.

1.1.13 Conversion efficiency for different keyphrases, site sections / product categories

We need to assess current performance by assessing the *relative* performance for different keyphrases and between different products or areas of the site.

Assessing **volume of visitors** and **conversion rates** to outcome for *different referring phrases* is crucial to successful SEM.

Key recommendation 12. You should assess variation in conversion rates for different keyphrases and seek to understand the reason for this variation – is it due to the level of intent of the phrase, the design of the landing page or customer proposition? You should then focus your search engine marketing on phrases which attract visitors with a high-level of intent which convert to the outcomes you need.

Initially, for a marketing manager reviewing strategy (or an agency embarking on a new client account) it is useful to assess the relative effectiveness of SEM across different site content / product categories. This shows where SEM is underperforming for particular categories or products. It may seem obvious, but is rare in practice because of the **volume of keywords** and **reporting at keyword level**.

Of course other aspects of the marketing mix such as **price**, **product offering** and **promotions** also affect relative category performance. Nevertheless, it is still important to measure conversion efficiency.

Key recommendation 13. Devise a reporting mechanism that enables comparison of relative effectiveness of SEM across different products or services and through different parts of the conversion funnel.

Figure 5 shows a simple traffic volume, quality and cost-based model for assessing the contribution of search for different areas of the site.

In this case, such a model gives us the following insights:

- SEM is making a significant contribution to site section 1.
- SEO has a higher conversion rate for section 1 than the site overall, but is lower than PPC.
- PPC is more effective in terms of conversion and CPC when compared to the site as a whole.

We can use such a model to compare site Section 1 to other areas to understand relative performance, eg *those sections that are under/overperforming in terms of attraction and conversion efficiency*.

We would have to take into account that **some products convert less readily than others** (due to the proposition / pricing), but this should be apparent through *comparing* the conversion efficiency for search-generated opportunities against leads from other media.

The full-version of this spreadsheet breaks out fixed and variable costs and also includes **margin estimates**, so that **full ROI** can be shown.

Figure 5 Model for evaluating SEM effectiveness for different site areas

	Whole site	Section 1 total	Section 1 SEO	Section 1 PPC
REACH of site or section (searches or potential visitors)	1,000,000	100,000	30,000	5,000
Attraction efficiency	20.00%	20.00%	20.00%	20.00%
Actual visitors to site or section	200,000	20,000	6,000	1,000
Site conversion efficiency	1.50%	3.00%	2.00%	4.00%
OPPORTUNITIES (leads) to site or section	3,000	600	120	40
Sales conversion efficiency	10.00%	3.00%	8.00%	12.00%
SALES for site or section	300	18	10	5
Total costs (fixed and variable CPC)	£10,000			£300
PPC Cost per click (CPC) or visit	£0.40			£0.30
PPC cost of customer acquisition (CPA or CPS)	£70.00			£62.50

1.1.14 Cost effectiveness of different referrers

To help understand cost-effectiveness, we need to combine **visualisation of media costs, response rates and conversion rates for different media**.

Figure 3 shows *one* visualisation for this, which again omits value calculations for simplicity.

This is really just an alternative visualisation to Figure 6 with *conversion shown horizontally* rather than vertically, which is the best way to compare performance.

In this example, we are comparing SEM *at a high-level* for an entire site compared with other online marketing campaigns. This could be presented for different site sections also to compare performance in different sections of the site.

Figure 6 Model for assessing cost-effectiveness of different media

	Media costs				Media volume/response					Conversion to Opportunity			Conversion to Sale		
	Fixed / setup costs	CPM	CPC	Total cost	% budget	Impressions	CTR	Clicks	% of response	CRO	nOpportunities	CPO	CRS	nSales	CPS
External online media															
Online ads (CPM)	0	30.0	£18.75	£45,000	51%	1,500,000	0.2%	2,400	12%	5.0%	120	£375.00	30%	36	£1,250
Paid search (CPC)	5000	0.0	£1.00	£12,000	14%	1,500,000	0.8%	12,000	62%	10.0%	1200	£10.00	35%	420	£29
Natural search	£20,000	100.0	£5.00	£20,000	23%	200,000	2.0%	4,000	21%	15.0%	600	£33.33	40%	240	£83
E-mail lists	£500	100.0	£10.50	£10,500	12%	100,000	1.0%	1,000	5%	10.0%	100	£105.00	20%	20	£525
Total/Average	25500	26.5	£4.51	£87,500	100%	3,300,000	0.6%	19,400	100%	10.0%	2020	£43.32	31.3%	716	£122.21

Notes:

We believe it is useful to separate out the opportunity stage which can be identified across all types of sites, particularly non-transactional and is a separate part of the conversion process. For individual keyphrases it is also useful to report bounce rates from SEO and PPC to assess keyphrase selection and landing page effectiveness.

CPM = Cost per thousand

CPC = Cost per click

CTR = Clickthrough rate % on ad or page served

CRO = Conversion rate to opportunity, i.e. start of shopping basket process (B2C) or lead generation on B2B site.

CPO = Cost per opportunity

CRS = Conversion rate from opportunity to sale

CPS = Cost Per Sale

Competitor benchmarking

Comparing your search performance against that of your rivals is a big part of analysis and improvement for SEM. This is a useful method of distinguishing between SEM agencies when they pitch.

Tip 10. When selecting agencies, ask suppliers to describe their approach to competitor benchmarking during setup and in ongoing work.

The first stage of competitor benchmarking is to identify your *online* competitor types for search traffic. *Competitors for particular keyphrases are not necessarily your traditional competitors.*

For example, for a mobile phone retailer, when someone searches for a product, you will be competing for search visibility with these types of websites:

- Retailers.
- Network providers.
- Handset manufacturers.
- Affiliates and partner sites.
- Media-owned sites.
- Blogs and personal sites about mobile phone technology.

To assess the extent that search strategy should focus on SEO and PPC (*and also to be able to compete with these different types of content providers*) it is necessary to assess the relative strength of these sources, as well as the various approaches to SEM they use. Try to identify competitors who have optimized their sites most effectively.

Tip 11. Identify and learn from competitors who are currently effective with SEO. Remember that your competitors for search engine users are not only your traditional competitors but all online content providers related to your market. Select 5-10 of your most important high volume keyphrases and also some niche high intent phrases relevant to individual products. Search on these and identify sites which most commonly occur in the top 10.

Retailers trying to compete on particular product phrases in the organic listings may find that it is very difficult, since handset and network providers will often feature prominently in the natural listings because of their scale (*see also Mike Grehan's 'rich-get-richer' argument, for explanations on why top Google results can become happily entrenched in their positions*).

Meanwhile, many media-owned sites and blogs can feature highly in the natural listings, because **content is king**. This isn't at all surprising, given the search robots' love of text. Retailers tend to display big conversion-friendly images and lists of features / specifications, which may be less-attractive content as far as Googlebot is concerned, if more appealing to visitors.

With all this in mind, it seems obvious that many retail e-commerce managers favour PPC. More likely, it is about *short-term (versus long-term) goals*. Or, maybe it is just a case of *easy versus difficult*.

In future though, with user-defined search types or intent-driven search tools, it may be easier for the retailer (and the consumer). If you look at the Yahoo! Mindset beta (<http://mindset.research.yahoo.com>), you can see that users can choose on a slider between shopping and researching intent, which affects the placement of the organic search results. It will be interesting to see if and when such toolsets are introduced on a wider scale since they have implications for the paid-search revenues of the search engines. Froogle (www.froogle.com) is also a working example of this, as is www.become.com.

The second stage of competitor analysis is to compare their *relative* performance. Competitors can be compared in a number of ways using tools that are freely available within the search engines or using paid for software or services.

So how can I benchmark competitors?

1. Ranking Position report

Compare the relative performance in the natural listings for different keyphrase types, eg generic / qualified.

These reports should focus on the main search engines you are targeting which are defined as part of your search strategy (See 1.26). Examples of well-known tools are given in Table 7.

Table 7 Popular tools for reporting ranking position in natural search results

Ranking position tool	Comments
1 Web Position (www.webposition.com)	Formerly Web Position Gold (WPG), now owned by WebTrends.
2 Advanced Web Ranking (www.advancedwebranking.com)	Supplied by Caphyon. Uses Google API key.
3 Agent Web Ranking (www.agentwebranking.com)	High adoption client and agency side. Uses Google API key.
4 Internet Business Promoter (http://www.axandra-web-site-promotion-software-tool.com)	European tool, useful for international rank checking and includes sponsored listing reporting
5 Digital Point keyword tracking (http://www.digitalpoint.com/tools).	Unlike the others, this is a free service, but can be used for smaller sites.

Notes:

You should think through the following issues when using these tools:

- Some of these services may contravene Google's terms of service (www.google.co.uk/intl/en/webmasters/guidelines.html) although they are widely used
- Minimising the number of ranking queries and using the **Google API Key** are likely to reduce this risk
- These tools are particularly necessary if you have a large keyword portfolio or international sales are important so you can track performance in different countries

- *For some agencies, this is the primary method of reporting success, but of course share of search on a given phrase, number of clicks and whether they convert is a much better measure of effectiveness.*

Ranking position reports for paid-search are less well-known, but may evolve from bid management tools. They could indicate the **number of phrases bid upon**, **average positions**, and **numbers of impressions served**. It is not clear that this data would be actionable – it would just give a *high-level* view of performance.

2. Category benchmarking services

If you can afford it and you operate in B2C areas then consider using audience data from the likes of Hitwise, Nielsen//NetRatings or comScore...

Services such as Hitwise can be useful for competitor benchmarking. They may show phrases which you are underperforming for, as well as phrases which competitors are doing well on.

This sort of data is only available to subscribers to these services, which tends to price many smaller companies out of the market. Note too that the accuracy of the data is *dependent on the auditing technique used and the sample size and frame in each country*.

Such services are arguably *not so good for assessing at-work usage* and search volumes may be less accurate than those reported in the search engines. Accordingly, they are viewed as better for B2C-orientated companies, rather than B2B ones.

3. Site inclusion for natural search

To assess the number of pages that are included within the index of a search engine, the inurl syntax can be used as explained in Table 7.

Some of the syntax can be combined to allow rapid assessment of pages in individual categories, for example to assess this category:

intitle:"car insurance" site:www.norwichunion.com

Google Sitemaps is also very useful for reporting on **site coverage**.

4. Link popularity and domain popularity¹⁷ for natural search

For large web properties, or if you are an agency reporting on multiple client sites it is worthwhile developing (or subscribing to) an automated service to assess links. We will see in the section on link-building that **link quality** is more important than the pure number of links.

Table 8 summarises some of the best known tools. Some SEM agencies have also have created their own services and applications. There are also independent reputation management services that could be used for insight in this area.

¹⁷ A term used by Alan Webb of Abakus Internet (http://www.clickfire.com/viewpoints/articles/searchengine/domain_popularity.php) to indicate unique domains

Table 8 Link reporting and management software

Link reporting and management tool	Comments
1. <i>Advanced Link Manager</i> (http://www.advancedlinkmanager.com)	Capable for external linking, but not for internal linking.
2. <i>Optilink</i> (http://www.optilink.com)	When reviewed, more basic link evaluation tool, but has internal link monitoring capability and assesses competitor affiliate programmes.
3. <i>Arelis</i> (http://www.axandra-link-popularity-tool.com)	From Axandra which also has other toolsets
4. <i>Digital Point keyword tracking</i> (http://www.digitalpoint.com/tools).	Free tools suitable for smaller sites.

- Other alternatives which focus on reciprocal link requests are Zeus (www.cyber-robotics.com) and Link Plus+ (www.trendmx.com).
- All of the above report **Google PageRank**, Alexa and Yahoo WebRank also, which gives an indication of the value in using a partner.
- Some free tools are also available: http://www.seochat.com/?option=com_seotools&tool=10 and <http://www.prchecker.info>.
- The Google Toolbar (<http://toolbar.google.com>) also gives visual reporting on PageRank of pages visited, when enabled. See section on *Understanding Google PageRank* (3.5.4) for discussion of the importance of Google PageRank. Note that the accuracy of some of the PageRank checkers is questionable since the API they use to access the data may use a different data centre to that for the Google Toolbar. Compiling examples for this report showed PageRank reported as 2 by the free tool while the Google Toolbar reported 6.

Tip 12. Take care with the accuracy of tools that report on **PageRank** – compare them to the Google toolbar. Fluctuations occur at the time of **algorithm updates**.

Table 9 also shows how **search syntax** (sometimes known as metawords) such as '*link:*' can be used to find out about link popularity in a category. These are useful for assessing current links on a site or investigating links about a particular search term.

5. Evaluating alternative SEO approaches.

Finally, successful SEO involves understanding the specific optimization approaches of competitors...

To find out which keyphrases competitors are targeting, it is useful to evaluate:

- **Title tags**
- **Meta description** and **meta keywords**
- Phrases with highest **keyword density** for a page
- Main site **content** and product **categories**
- **Site structure** (levels of site)
- Content developed specifically for search/proposition, e.g. buyer's guide
- **Link popularity** of these sections

A manual evaluation of each is possible, and it is useful to ask agencies to do this for one product category when asking them to pitch.

With the Google API it is also possible to *automatically* scan different competitor pages and extract the details above. Such automated services can also alert you to changes in competitor sites from minor changes to a category to a major redesign. Currently, it seems most of these services have been developed within agencies rather than being publicly available.

More generally it requires understanding the **different types of audience** that a competitor is attracting and what the core elements of the proposition are (eg what encourages visitors to convert).

Consequently, a *major* part of SEO is about understanding competitor business models, in order to exploit gaps in the market.

1.1.15 Using advanced search syntax for competitor benchmarking

The advanced search syntax provided by the search engines can be helpful when completing detailed competitor analysis as shown in Table 9. The syntax is particularly useful for smaller sites. For larger sites, specific tools such as link reporting tools are more useful.

Table 9 Applications of advanced search engine syntax for understanding index coverage, linking and competition. Key: G=Google, Y=Yahoo!, M=MSN.

Engine syntax	Example	Application
1. <i>inurl:</i> G,Y,M	inurl:www.e-consultancy.com	Reports number of web pages in index for a site or sub-folder
2. <i>site:</i> G,Y,M	site:www.e-consultancy.com	Similar to inurl, reports different result “phrase” site:site.com useful for finding top competitor page for a particular site/domain
3. “phrase” and “phrase” <i>intitle:</i> G,Y,M	“Internet marketing training” “Internet marketing training” intitle:	Shows competition volume and sites on exact phrase. “intitle:” restricts to sites optimizing on phrase within title
4. <i>link:</i> G,Y,M	link:www.e-consultancy.com	Reports links into a site or page. Useful for identifying potential partners. In Google, doesn’t include all sites, but mainly higher PageRank sites (e.g. tends to exclude directory links), but not a simple case of PR > 4.
5. <i>linkdomain:</i> Y	linkdomain:www.e-consultancy.com	Reports all links into a domain.
5. <i>domain ‘-site:’</i>	www.e-consultancy.com -site:www.e-consultancy.com	Reports all pages containing the hyperlink specified (even if it is not actually hyperlinked). Can be used to request more / higher link quality links from another site.
5. “phrase” <i>link:</i>	“e-marketing” link:www.e-consultancy.com	Indicates pages that link about a particular topic or keyphrase. Works best in Yahoo! and MSN.

Notes:

link: in Google reports site with a higher **PageRank** only. Includes own site. For an indication of all potential link partners, use “www.e-consultancy.com” –site:www.e-consultancy.com which includes all occurrences of the URL on the page but excludes the host site.

The Yahoo! and MSN *link:* syntax is more powerful since it enables you to exclude the site URL and lists all sites. URL needs to fully qualified, e.g. link:http://www.e-consultancy.com/forum –site:www.e-consultancy.com.

Tip 13. Use the Yahoo! and MSN *link:* advanced search syntax to review sites linking to particular locations on your site. Use the Yahoo! *linkdomain:* feature to see all links into your domain or competitors.

1.1.16 Measurement and tracking

Web analytics is an essential building block for any web business. There are many analytics tools available and they differ dramatically in their capability to assist with improving SEM performance. SEO agencies may recommend additional tools to help you measure SEO success.

Key recommendation 14. Ensure you have the appropriate web analytics tool to improve SEM which gives a granular view of your performance partitioned into SEO and paid-search.

What do I need from a web analytics tool?

You will want to see the following...

- Reports on *all* keyphrases referred from search engines, i.e. it isn't limited to 100 phrases.
- Keyphrases are reported separately for different referring search engines, e.g. Google, MSN, Yahoo! and different country versions.
- Keyphrases separated out into those from natural and paid listings.
- Outcomes such as sale or registration can be determined for different phrases and for those generated from SEO or paid-search, i.e. tool should be able to report on bounce rate and conversion rate for different phrases.
- Reports when the site is visited by different **search robots** and the pages they visit.
- A spreadsheet or flat-file export of all search data (not limited to 100 phrases or based on a single report).

There are two main types of site-based web analytics tools. You will probably need both for super-effective SEM:

- *Server log-file based.* The log file which is usually stored on the same server as the web server is added to every time a user downloads a piece of information, whether it is an image or page. This technique records robot visits.
- *Browser-based or tag-based* measurement system that records access to web pages every time a page is loaded into a user's web browser through running a short script or program which is inserted into each web page. The key benefit of the browser-based approach is that potentially it is more accurate than server-based approaches since it is not subject to caching limitation. But this technique doesn't record robot visits.

Tip 14. The team assessing SEO will require both a server-log file based solution and a browser-based solution for complete analysis of SEO effectiveness.

Assessing reporting granularity

Often within paid-search marketing, there is a need to make reporting more granular. This is challenging because of the way ad groups are set up and because of tracking systems.

The ideal scenario would see you tracking through to specific item sold for a specific keyphrase. You have to avoid these common disconnects:

- Disconnect between final search or visit which achieved purchase and earlier parts of the 'search journey'. How important is this? Is it actionable if you know earlier stages?
- Disconnect with specific phrase used.
- Disconnect with sale – due to cookies or URL tracking.
- Disconnect with SOP system – whether returned, profitability of product etc.
- Disconnect with customer database – can you calculate lifetime value.

The challenge is to develop a plan to link up separate systems and make estimates where this is not possible.

Search engine marketing strategy selection

The aims of defining a search marketing strategy are to:

- Maximise **visibility** and **awareness** of your brands, products and services relative to your competitors when prospects search.
- Maximise **share of search** for that category compared to competitors.
- Maximise the **quality of visitors**, i.e. attract those that convert to the outcomes you require when they visit the site.
- Maximise the **value of visitors**, i.e. those with the highest **average order value** or **lifetime value**.
- Minimise the **cost per outcome** such as leads or sale to meet a **target cost per lead or sale**.

To enable these goals to be achieved, SEM strategy involves selecting the right resources. The communications tools that relate to SEM are not only SEO and paid-search, but also affiliate marketing.

Search strategy also relates to other offline and online communications tools that encourage people to search, often on a brand phrase such as print and TV ads.

Search strategy is essentially about how much to invest in these four traffic drivers:

1. **Natural search listings** (SEO) in the main search engines.
2. **Paid listings** (PPC – Google Adwords, Overture/Yahoo! search services, MSN adCenter and MIVA).
3. **Content networks**, i.e. paid listings from main search networks on third party sites.
4. **Affiliates** promoting themselves through natural and paid-search.

There is also the bigger question on how much you invest in search as whole compared to other online media such as advertising and e-mail lists, and how much in traditional media.

1.1.17 What is the right balance of spend between SEO and PPC?

To think about the answer to this question, let's head back to Cuba. We will, as before, use a simple example for a specialist or major travel company promoting its holidays in Cuba.

The Google traffic estimator shows us 24 clicks per day from Adwords for a position of 1.0 for these different phrase variants:

- "cuba holidays" – 14 clicks/day
- "cuba holiday" – 5 clicks/day
- "holidays cuba" – 4 clicks per day
- "holiday cuba" – 1 click per day

If the company is only visible in the paid listings, then the maximum click we can get per day is 1 click for each term. But, if we are also visible near the top of the natural listings, we should get *at least* the same number of clicks again *without* an associated cost per click.

Research by iProspect estimated that in most categories **60-80% of the clicks are referred from the natural listings**. And if we have **affiliates** promoting our holidays we will increase our visibility even further (*although remember that affiliates may also be promoting our rivals' holidays*).

Maybe we will use one URL for our main brand, and another for our overseas holiday brand. This may increase our share of the screen real-estate and with it, our share of search.

This suggests that **a strategy based on SEO is advisable**, but the real lack of control on the natural listings means that companies are increasingly moving towards paid listings.

Another difficulty with SEO, is that increasingly there are few listings available 'above the fold' at average resolution – sometimes only from 2 or 3 companies.

Reasons for this include:

- Many engines now display up to 3 sponsored listings, so pushing the natural listings down
- Google display two alternative pages for the same site for many listings

Accordingly, the obvious opportunity to appear above the fold for many companies is to use paid-search.

1.1.18 Using different forms of search to target different phrase volumes

In Figure 4 we outlined how the volume of searches declines as users are more specific in their keyphrases. So, a key issue in SEM strategy is deciding upon how many phrases it is practical to target.

The **Long Tail concept**¹⁸ can help in assessing this. The Long Tail is simply a form of frequency distribution such as that in Figure 7 which tends to be followed when consumers have a choice from a range of items. You may also know it as 'Zipf's law' which states that if in a large collection ordered or ranked by popularity, the second item will be around half the popularity of the first one and the third item will be about a third of the popularity of the first one. In general, the k th item is $1/k$ the popularity of the first. Chris Anderson described it in the popularity of retail items for a retailer such as Amazon, but evidence from services such as Hitwise shows it is also followed within a given business sector.

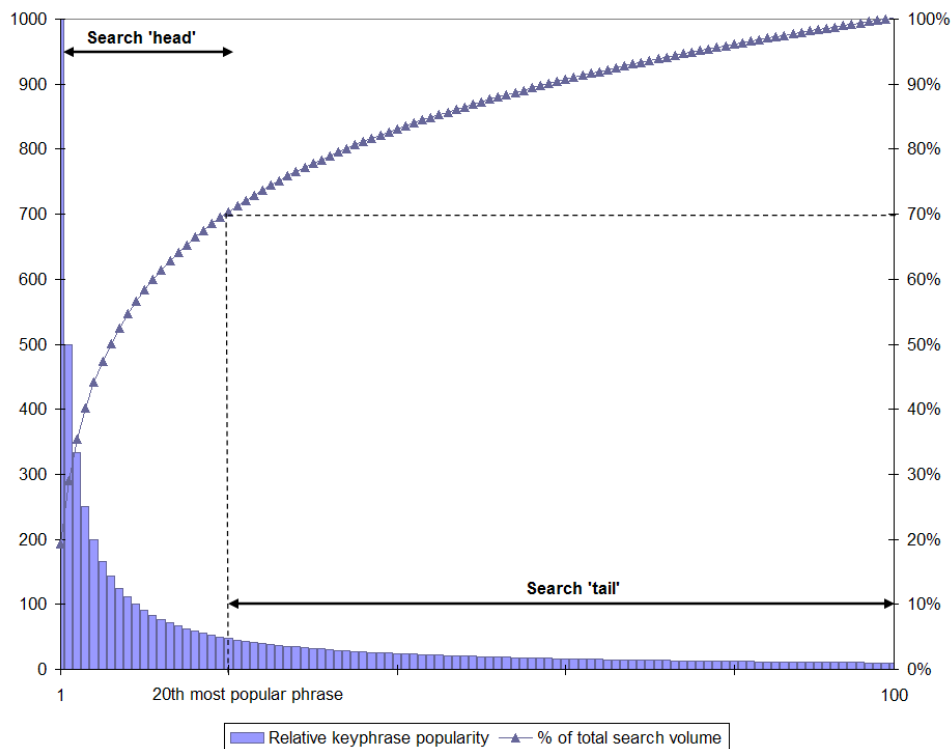
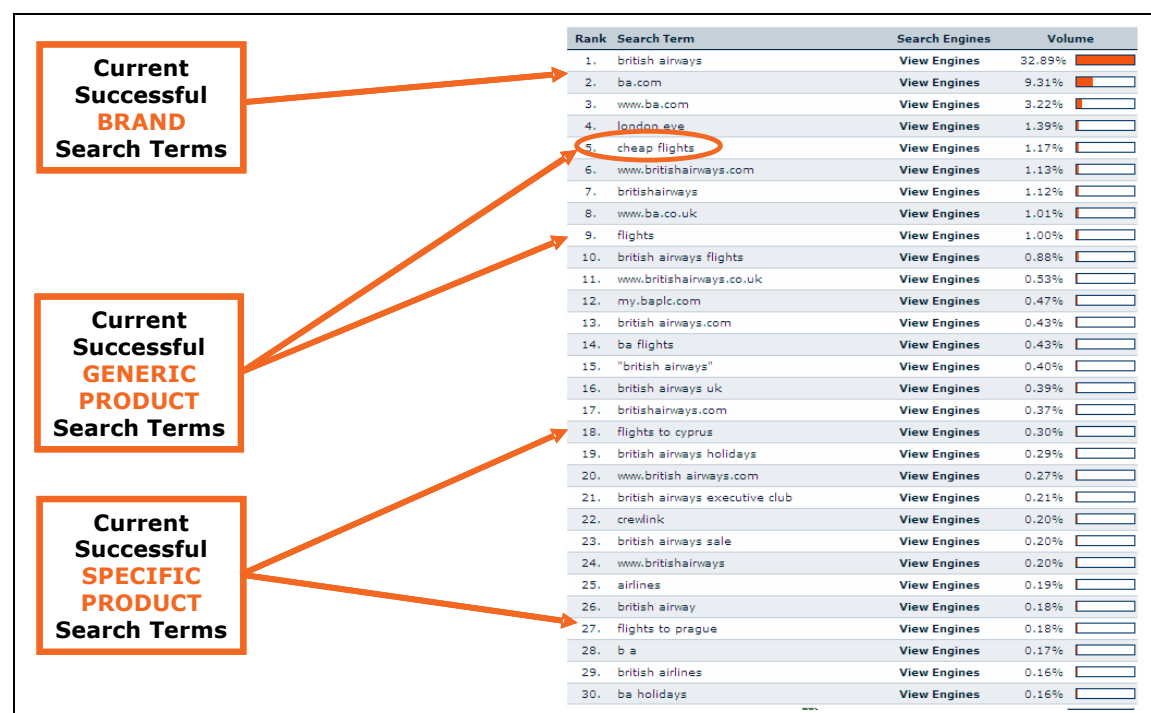


Figure 7 Chart showing typical 'Long Tail' pattern of decline in relative keyphrase popularity

¹⁸ The Long Tail concept was defined by Chris Anderson while editor of Wired Magazine and is described in his book and blog (www.thelongtail.com).

An example of the Long Tail in the context of one site is shown in :

Figure 8 Different key phrase types associated with the flights market that is referred to the BA site (Source: Hitwise.com)



You will find that valuable insight will be available from comparing the Long Tail for your sector, search referred visitors to your site and outcomes such as leads or sales.

Tip 15. Rank your top 50 or 100 phrases by volume of clicks or sales for SEO and PPC and compare to actual searcher information where available. Use this to assess discrepancies in the performance of your strategy for different phrases.

1.1.19 Using search marketing to target customers at different points in the buying process

Closely related to the long tail of search is the behaviour of searchers as they search. Let's take the example of car hire. As someone searches over a period of time, they will gradually refine their search. As they do so, the volume of searches declines as shown in Figure 9 and Table 10.

The expense of continuous advertising on the generic phrase 'car hire' is too high for PPC alone, so a strategy that focuses on SEO plus affiliates is best here.

With smaller volume phrases where searchers are further into the buying process and more likely to convert, paid-search is a better option to supplement SEO.

Figure 9 Example customer journey for search including affiliates

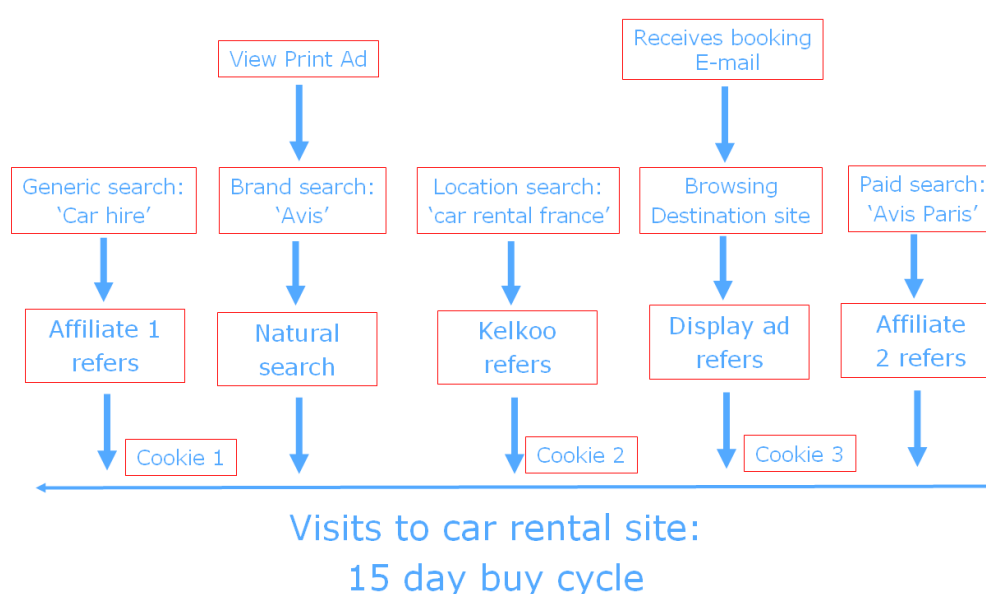


Table 10 Example search strategies for search head and tail

Search phrase	Searches per month	Strategy
Car hire	330,00	SEO
Avis	24,000	SEO (+paid-search)
Cheap car hire France	15,000	Affiliates
Car hire France	10,000	Paid-search
Car hire Paris	500	PPC (+paid-search)

Note: These searches for single month according to Overture (www.overture.com). Car hire and car rental are amalgamated in Overture

Tip 16. Assess how well your analytics provider can discriminate between different referrer sources for the multi-step customer journey

Search strategy targeting head phrases

Figure 7 suggests that an essential search strategy which will help companies generate volume is to concentrate on the 'Search head'. You should work closely with your supplier to make sure you are maximising visits from the search head (*important in generating awareness early in the search journey*). Brand awareness / visibility is also a key goal at this point.

Several interviewees for this guide indeed reported that the 80:20 is also important in search – saying that they had 80% of their sales from 20% of the keywords. Time was spent to actively manage the “head” to reflect that.

Search strategy targets tail

A strategy targeting the tail is based on these phenomena:

- Lower volume, tail phrases are more precise and indicate intent to purchase.
- Consequently, tail phrases tend to have higher conversion rates.
- Tail phrases tend to be less competitive for both SEO and PPC (but this has become less-so in highly competitive sectors), so there tends to be a lower CPA.

1.1.20 Options for targeting phrases with SEO and paid-search

We can select the best mix of SEO and paid-search according to their strengths and weaknesses...

These are the main options:

1. Use SEO to target the head since search volume tends to be higher and conversion lower, so it can be prohibitively expensive. This is a long-term strategy and potentially a higher risk strategy since algorithm changes could impact position and so volume.

2. Use PPC to target the tail because PPC bids tend to be lower and it is often impractical to use SEO for the full range of niche phrases. For example, creating additional pages or tweaking copy for a phrase that only generates 10 clicks per month may not be worthwhile.

Conversely, it is relatively straightforward to automate analysis keyphrases to generate PPC creative and then use **bid management software** to manage these phrases. This is the approach Amazon use to create ads on most books in their inventory. They even can use rules to achieve relevance within the copy, for example: 'All <x> books by <authorname>'.

One technique to decide which keyphrases to target with SEO is to use a **search volume threshold**. Phrases that are above this threshold warrant work on SEO. Where this threshold is fixed will depend on the demand for products and budget available, but here are some examples:

- Use SEO for phrases above a set PPC monthly spend per keyphrase, e.g. £10, £50, £100.

- Use PPC for phrases above a set demand volume per keyphrase, e.g. 1,000, 10,000, 50,000.

Where you draw the line depends on how long you are prepared to wait to see the returns. You can work it out, since *it usually costs several hundred pounds per keyphrase for SEO where new content creation is required*.

1.1.21 Search results and ad network for paid-search

When paid-search ads are displayed on third party sites (eg Google Adsense, MIVA), they tend to have *lower clickthrough and conversion rates*, so it is becoming more common to restrict paid ads on the wider ad network (although network ads can be useful for delivering brand awareness).

1.1.22 Determining your strategic target keyphrases

We have seen that keyphrase analysis and selection is a key part of SEM strategy as a means of generating a list of relevant phrases, but this will return many phrases, some more useful than others. There needs to be real *clarity on the phrases that are most important*, so you can target SEO efforts for the best returns.

As a result of the Long Tail phenomenon, *some phrases are much more popular with searchers at an early stage of the buying process*, so it is important to gain visibility on these, so the brand is added to the consideration list. These strategic target keyphrases will combine:

- High volume.
- High intent for product purchase (or related outcome).
- Low competition (if possible, in many sectors this is unlikely).

A limited number of these should be defined, say 5-20, and tracked closely for each major product or service.

Key recommendation 15. Identify a limited set of strategic keyphrases to target and then use SEO to optimize for these and monitor performance closely.

1.1.23 The impact of affiliate marketing on SEM strategy

The coverage of affiliate marketing is beyond the scope of this report, but affiliate marketing does have a strong influence on SEM strategy, so we will cover the basics.

The main benefit of affiliate marketing to search is that potentially it **increases your reach** or **share of search**. It can also **increase visibility** for a particular search phrase since affiliates may be displayed in the listings when you are not, or they may be alongside your results, giving more opportunity for the searcher to visit your site. Of course you need to balance the *potentially* higher cost of customer acquisition required by affiliate commission compared to direct search to the site.

Marketers assessing affiliate marketing as part of search strategy should ask these questions which are part of affiliate marketing strategy:

1. Do we use affiliates at all?
2. Do we bar affiliates from advertising on our brand?
3. Do we have special relationships/rules with favoured affiliates?
4. Do we use affiliate networks or set up our own campaign?
5. Should we use more than one affiliate network or switch to an alternative supplier?

To answer these questions requires an understanding of the dynamics of the natural and paid-search capabilities of the engines.

Factors affecting the role of affiliates which influence your strategy:

- Major Google algorithm updates such as Florida (2004) and Jagger (2005) have generally promoted destination sites rather affiliate sites, reducing the capability of some affiliates to drive visitors through natural search.
- In early 2005, Google restricted the option for affiliates to drive clickthrough direct to a destination site, when they limited **one ad for each URL**.
- Increasingly brands are barring affiliates from advertising on their brand names in order to reduce the CPA for brand-related terms.
- Unless it uses multiple URLs, **the destination site can only appear once in the paid listings**, which limits its share of search. Through allowing affiliates to compete within paid-search it is possible to grab a larger chunk of the paid-search pie. Different affiliates can be used to deliver different propositions and messages if you work closely with them.
- **Affiliates might use black-hat SEO** to gain good visibility in the natural listings, although the algorithm updates have prevented this.
- **Affiliates may be more responsive** than your in-house or agency terms in terms of algorithm changes for SEO or changes in bidding approaches for PPC. They are also great at identifying gaps in your search strategy. For

example, they may be quicker at advertising on new products, or may use keyphrase variants that you haven't considered.

- Use of affiliates reduces the risk caused by temporary or more fundamental problems with your SEM management.

Given this background, **E-consultancy recommends that controlled affiliate marketing will increase ROI within the mix.** However, you may want to use a selective approach, such that affiliates are not used for brand searches or specific product searches, but are used for generic searches. You may also use different affiliates for different types of phrases or goals.

Key benefits of affiliate marketing to your search strategy:

- Potentially increase your reach or share of search.
- Gain more representation in different slots on the SERPs.
- Use different superaffiliates to target different categories and phrases.
- Enables you to reach customers on generic phrases (e.g. 'clothing') at a relatively low cost if the affiliates secure better positions in natural listings.

Key recommendation 16. Use carefully controlled affiliate marketing to increase your share of search.

You should ideally test the effects of affiliates on search, for instance to switch off affiliate marketing for certain products or types of phrases for a period. This will help you figure out whether affiliates are helping you or hindering you.

1.1.24 Continuous and campaign-based search strategy

Many organizations have a *campaign-based mindset* where budget is allocated to different campaign activities to meet goals for new product launches and promotions.

Online, a *continuous representation is necessary* to make the most of the opportunity provided by potential customers searching all the year around. This can cause difficulty for those responsible for SEM since budgets aren't always available to maximise the potential of search.

To counter this, **you need to make a business case for continuous investment in SEM** using a quantitative approach to demand analysis (as explained earlier in this section - see Table 5 for example). By developing models that incorporate *search volume*, *conversion rates* and *cost per acquisition* you can demonstrate the missed opportunities from underinvestment in search.

Key recommendation 17. Ensure sufficient budget is allocated to maximise results from continuous e-communications activities such as SEM and affiliate marketing.

Another common problem is that of **integrating SEM with offline campaign activity**. Companies investing in above-the-line campaigns to generate sales will naturally drive visitors to the website, with many potential customers using the search engines to look for more information.

However, the *marketers or agencies responsible for offline advertising tend not to factor in SEM to their budget*, which will lead to missed opportunities. A multichannel approach to marketing is the only sensible option for the smart marketer. Guidance on integrating SEM into campaign activity is given in Table 11, on the following page.

Key recommendation 18. Ensure SEM is integrated with traditional campaign executions.

Table 11 Approaches to integrate SEM into marketing campaigns

E-communications tool	Action
SEO	You may want to update the <title> tag or <meta name="description"> tags to reflect the campaign messages. If there are new campaign landing pages or microsites, make sure that the page is indexed sufficiently in advance of the campaign that visitors can find the campaign or brand if searching for it. Since it may take weeks or even months for some new pages to be indexed and displayed, it is often best to use PPC to connect searchers to your campaign. Posting press-releases about the campaign to sites which are spidered more frequently can overcome this problem. Alternatively ...
Pay Per Click search marketing	Include campaign messages within ad headline and body copy. Advertise on phrases specific to the campaign, for example, if the campaign is 'Quote Me Happy' or 'Sleep Tomorrow'.
Affiliate marketing	Update banner and text creative in sufficient time to allow you or the affiliate network manager to communicate to affiliates that banners should be updated (if not completed automatically).
Online sponsorship	Consider changing editorial or messages to reflect the campaign
E-newsletters	Ensure the e-newsletter refers to the campaign with sufficient prominence

1.1.25 Website integration

This is dealt with in SEO Factor 6.

1.1.26 Which engines to target

It is useful to have a clear strategy of which search engines to target, since otherwise there is a danger they may all be treated equally, which would be foolish. Giving equal weighting to search engines like Altavista and Hotbot doesn't make sense, since they no longer have a significant user base compared to Google and Yahoo!

Key recommendation 19. Target a limited subset of the most important engines in each country for inclusion, optimization and reporting on ranking. Techniques used on the main engines will generally be successful on the less widely used tools.

The engines that are most important to check inclusion and rankings for are:

- Google (includes AOL)
- Yahoo!
- MSN
- Ask
- Local ISPs, e.g. Wanadoo/Orange, BT in the UK which will often receive syndicated results from the other search engines

We have listed these *in order of volume or share of searches*, rather than visitors, which may be higher for portals with content and other services such as Yahoo! and MSN.

For each major search engine, *ranking reports should be reviewed in terms of importance related to searcher usage and behaviour*. Different rankings will occur for:

- Local search engine, e.g. .co.uk, .se, .fi (usually the majority of searchers), All the Web
- Local search engine, Pages from country only
- Global search engine

Differences between countries can be significant. For example, the share of search for the US in 2006 was as shown in Figure 10¹⁹ In the UK, a Hitwise survey²⁰ showed that 94% of UK internet searches are powered by the UK and Global versions of Google, Ask, Yahoo! Search, and MSN Search. This equates to 14% of search engines (8 out of 57) powering 94% of searches.

Google was responsible for over 7 in 10 UK internet searches with Google .co.uk being by far the most important. Google's closest competitor, MSN.co.uk Search, powered just 8% of UK internet searches in that same four week period ending 1st October 2005. So in the UK, Google is much more important than MSN and Yahoo! unlike the US.

Table 3. Search Share Rankings (U.S.)

Search Engine	Jan-05 Search Share	Jan-06 Search Share	Change in Percentage Points
Google Search	47.1%	48.2%	1.1%
Yahoo! Search	21.2%	22.2%	0.9%
MSN Search	12.8%	11.0%	-1.8%

Source: Nielsen//NetRatings MegaView Search, March 2006

Figure 10 Share of Search in US market, March 2006

Tip 17. Report success for the main search engines for different search behaviours and monitor how this varies between different countries

To find out the most popular search engines in different countries, you can use (for a fee) online panel data from www.netratings.com, www.comscore.com, ISP analysis from Hitwise (www.hitwise.com) or compilations at SearchEngineWatch (<http://searchenginewatch.com/reports/article.php/2156451>).

An up-to-date indication of the top 10 portals in each country is given here: http://www.netratings.com/news.jsp?section=dat_to.

See also section 2.2. which covers methods of submission to search engines.

¹⁹ <http://biz.yahoo.com/prnews/060303/sff028.html>

²⁰ <http://www.davechaffey.com/Internet-Marketing/C8-Communications/E-tools/Search-marketing/UK-Search-engine-popularity>

Tracking and improving processes

Tracking and improvement is covered elsewhere in the report, particularly in SEO Success Factor 3 where we look at web analytics in more detail.

Resourcing

While it may be appealing (in terms of management) to select a single agency to manage all aspects of online marketing, in practice it is difficult to find a single agency that is competent in the intricacies of natural and paid-search together with other digital marketing activities.

It can be very difficult to find a single agency to maximise your returns from all aspects of online and search marketing. Many full-service agencies now offer SEO, but many clients often select a *specialist* search agency.

Larger organizations often select a media agency to manage both display advertising and paid-search advertising. This is fine if the media agency has competent paid-search professionals, and the client has sufficient knowledge of paid-search to challenge their approach, but often this is not the case.

To summarise the choices, in Table 11, we present some of the advantages and disadvantages for each.

Key recommendation 20. If your search engine marketing is not currently conducted by a specialist search engine marketing company, consider carefully whether the current incumbent has sufficient trained knowledgeable staff to apply the best-practice techniques described in this guide.

Table 12 Alternatives for resourcing search engine marketing

Type of service	Advantages	Disadvantages
SEO-focused agency	Likely to be technically competent at SEO	Danger of no overall search strategy. May not be cost effective to target niche phrases. Tracking will focus on SEO only.
Web design agency offering SEO	Integration of coding with search.	SEO not usually core competence. Less sophisticated keyphrase analysis.
Full-service agency (Formerly SEO)	Can develop an integrated SEM strategy, applying SEO and PPC as appropriate, reporting on both and refining over time	Reliant on single agency, so risk not distributed between SEO and PPC.
PPC-focused agency	Technical competence at PPC	Danger of no overall search strategy.
Formerly online ad agency, now full-service	Often have greater buying power for paid-search – media discounts	Generally less likely to have breadth and depth of expertise in SEO and PPC compared with a specialist SEM agency.
Consultant	May produce a high return on investment if your	Difficult to assess quality. Likely to have poor

	internal team can implement recommendations. Can assist in agency selection process.	understanding of market.
In-house SEO	Good understanding of customer. More flexible.	Does company spend justify FTE responsible for search? Will salaries attract right skill-levels? Maintaining skill levels.
In-house PPC	Good understanding of customer. Greater flexibility in adjusting PPC companies with company goals. Integration of analytics system.	As above, plus risk of insufficient focus on campaign management unless full-time resource. Less buying power compared to specialist.

Of course this is not a straight in-source vs out-source decision! You need to decide which aspects of search engine marketing activity shown above can add value to your organization. Which are more cost-effective in-house, because of knowledge of market or lower-cost?

- For example, *keyphrase strategy might be best handled internally*, while it may be more appropriate to recruit a consultant to manage SEO updates.

1.1.27 Allocating internal resources

SEM can be totally outsourced but for it to be most effective a *substantial commitment to resource* is required since the following tasks are recommended:

- Review of technical IT staff with agency on SEO inclusion and on-page optimization issues.
- Review of marketing staff during analysis and planning, explaining marketplace and customer insights, keyphrase review and goal-setting.
- Review of role of marketing team and content owners in creating and reviewing content for SEO and copy for paid-search marketing. Creating new content, e.g. a buyers guide to a range of consumer products may be a significant cost.
- Ongoing review of marketing staff with agency on results – in competitive sectors clients may meet with agencies at least weekly to review performance and plan new campaigns.
- Training of content owners and reviewers on copywriting for SEO.

One of this report's peer reviewers put it this way: *"Another big issue that is on my mind is staffing resources and implications to effectively manage a search program. No matter how much work you contract out to an agency.*

"An effective search program requires a significant internal staffing resource allocation to interpret reports, do the extensive analysis across all elements of the search program and actively manage the keyword dictionary.

“Even if you have some dedicated resources, the results can be a lot more powerful if search knowledge is taken upstream in the content development process and this requires training and mindshare of people whose time is already over-allocated.”

Key recommendation 21. Clients should budget for sufficient internal resource to collaborate with SEM agencies to make it effective. This includes both project startup and ongoing review and content authoring.

1.1.28 Black, white and grey hats – the importance of ethical SEO

*When selecting an agency it is important to review how they balance ethical SEO with the need to maximise search rankings, particularly for competitive keyphrases, through exploiting understanding of how the search engine ranks position. Some commentators talk about **black-hat** and **white-hat** SEO, but unfortunately it is nowhere near as simple as that.*

Let's be straight: SEO is about reverse engineering the search engine algorithms and using the types of success factors we define in this report to perform better than your competitors. What is acceptable and effective *will* vary over time, so an approach has to be found where the SEO is open with the client about the approaches they are using and the risks.

The client also has to make the time to listen and learn. Many *clients may be prepared to reduce their expectations for SEO to a more realistic level if they understand the risks*. With the risk of a site being barred and the potential loss of visitors and reputation, it is important to assess agencies for their ethical approach.

Some affiliates and some search companies practice push the limits of the terms of service and guidelines of the search engines to gain the best result possible. **Black hat SEO should be avoided on pain of Google Death.**

Black hat techniques are sometimes referred to as **search engine spamming**. One example is repeating an important keyphrase many times on the homepage. Another is using text that it is the same colour as the background of the page, so the keyphrase is visible to the search robots and algorithm, but not to the human reader. Engineering pages for robots is a practice known as '**cloaking**'. Other examples of spamming which are well known are **doorway pages** and **link-farms**.

Black hat techniques can be successful in the short-term, since search engines can't test for all forms of cloaking, but they can be **disastrous** in the long-term. Search engines continually introduce changes to their algorithms to eliminate the success of such practices, and they can potentially block sites which are the worst offenders of spamming or cloaking (as is shown by the BMW.de example below).

Search engines penalties are to be avoided if search traffic is important to you, principally because you might lose placements – and referred traffic - indefinitely. This is not a risk a legitimate business would want to conduct.

You **must** choose a search optimizer who wears a *white hat* rather than a black hat – much easier said than done since there are no definitive definitions of which is which, and many of the best search optimizers wear *grey* hats...

SEO Ranking Success Factor 2	Ensure ethical SEO	Applies to: Each page on site	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Ethical SEO conforms with best practice set out by the search engines and that generally practiced by larger SEO companies. Using cloaking techniques where a different version of a page is presented to search robots than to human visitors is not ethical if intended to specifically boost position in the SERPs. However we will see examples in this report where what is effectively cloaking is used to overcome limitations in the search engine algorithms or the users browser.		
<i>Example:</i>	Matt Cutts of Google showed why Google has barred BMW Germany from its index until it removed cloaking achieved through a Javascript redirect: http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/ramping-up-on-international-webspam/		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Don't contravene the spirit of the search engines webmaster guidelines. 2. Avoid cloaking specifically intended to boost position in the SERPs. 3. Avoid a range of spamming techniques such as keyword stuffing.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• What is white hat or grey hat today may become black hat tomorrow. For example the 2005 Jagger update penalised sites using CSS to hide text from human site visitors. Although this was never white hat, many recognised search engine specialists practiced it. • The penalty for cloaking or spamming that may be identified by the search engine, or reported by competitors (http://www.google.com/contact/spamreport.html) is exclusion from the index. Consider the cost to BMW Germany through complete banning for one month, considering they can also use Adwords... • You may be reinstated after your misdemeanours are removed through a reinclusion request (http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/reinclusion-request-howto/), but you are subject to Google Time. • Agencies need to educate clients about the risks of short-termism – you may get good results in the short-term, but be completely excluded from the results in the longer-term when there is a new algorithm update.		

1.1.29 Briefing agencies or internal teams about your SEM requirements

This section is brief, since a best practice example of an RFP is given in Appendix 2. Search Engine Marketing – Briefing / Request for Proposals template. You will also find the [E-consultancy Buyers Guide to Search Engine Marketing](#) useful.

There are many suppliers of search engine marketing services; the [E-consultancy Supplier Directory](#) suppliers guide lists over 400 specialists and agencies that coordinate SEO for clients.

To assess the most appropriate fit of agency for a given client is challenging for the client, since to best assess the agencies, a degree of knowledge of SEM is required by the client.

1.1.30 Assessing proposals and pitches

We recommend that these issues are considered when reviewing RFPs:

1. Assess the balance of commitment to SEO and PPC – will they look at both or simply which is most profitable for them?
2. Are they committed to just looking at new entry pages or will they analyse improvements throughout the site including optimizing existing content and recommending changes to the site architecture.
3. What is their approach to link-building? As we will see, this is one of the most important aspects of SEO, and the most difficult to get right.
4. Assess balance between technical optimization such as indexing issues, on-page optimization and link-building against skills in understanding business objectives and completing keyphrase analysis.
5. For paid-search, understand the ongoing process and time spent on improving results through managing the portfolio of keyphrases through improving keyphrase selection, creative and bid strategies.
6. Look at fee structure – what is the balance of front-loading for initial analysis/improvement and ongoing fees. What is the average monthly fee. Try to gain an *estimate* of the percentage increase in visitors that will be delivered by the agency after 6 months and one year. Often, in SEO, the cheapest solution, which perhaps creates additional pages optimized for search is not the best. Do they have the flexibility to work on a consultancy basis?
7. Ask for an ROI model across different periods which will need to be based on an overview of demand analysis, current share of search, site average order value and conversion rate (using models similar to those in this section). Some agencies may refuse to do this, others will give a best estimate based on the available information and discussing the constraints.

1.1.31 Different fee structures

Some of the most common options are:

1. Consultancy basis based on day rates up to an agreed maximum, e.g. £3,000 per month. With this approach regular review meetings are required so the client can determine they are getting value for money.

2. Results-based...

- SERPs position.
- Volume (traffic number).
- Volume (traffic costs).
- Sales / Cost (CPC).
- Return on investment.

With a results-based approach there is less onus on the client to determine whether or not they are getting value for money. This paid-on-performance model can work well for paid-search but is less straightforward for SEO, and

agencies selling on the basis of a *'we will get you to the top of Google, guaranteed!'* are to be avoided.

3. No results, no pay is usually based on positions across a range of search engines – remember it is Google (plus a few others) that counts. This is still offered by some agencies, but it is no longer valid in a competitive market. It depends on the phrases selected and will be difficult to deliver for strategic keyphrases. Remember that this sort of approach may lead to seriously unethical SEO as agencies desperately try to boost positions, in order to earn their fee. Avoid!

1.1.32 Selecting the right agency

Big brands may naturally opt for one of the bigger, better known SEO agencies. Large agencies are likely to charge a higher day rate but will have experience of delivering results and their size gives them the capacity to devote time to staff education, development and knowledge-sharing. Change happens constantly in the SEO world, so there are some distinct advantages to this approach.

Large SEO agencies are also more likely to have separate experts in different aspects of SEO, such as index inclusion, on-page optimization and link-building. There will also be separate specialists in paid-search, possibly with Google Advertising Professionals²¹. In smaller agencies, a lot of staff development will simply be learning 'on the job' and their time may be split between several clients.

However, there is also a risk with selecting a larger SEM agency. In particular, if a client is relatively low-value, then they may get less attention from the account managers than larger companies. Smaller clients may not get the best SEO technicians working on their accounts. To reduce this risk it is essential that the client establishes the credentials of the account manager and technical team that will be working with them.

Key recommendation 22. Clients should endeavour to find out the skills and experience of the specific account manager and technical staff who will be working with them and check they can work with them.

In pitches, many agencies will describe a similar process to SEO or paid-search which makes it difficult to distinguish between them. Often the decision may be made on the personalities and cultural fit between agency and client. While this is important, it is also crucial to give the agency a *small-scale* test of how they would tackle a part of the business on which you know you are currently underperforming. Give them a product name and typical phrases used to find the product. Then ask them to explain their process of analysis (including **keyphrase demand, gap analysis and competitor analysis, goal-setting, on-page optimization, new content requirements, link-building**, complementary role of **paid-search and tracking effectiveness**).

²¹ See <https://adwords.google.com/select/professionalwelcome>. Note that this programme was introduced relatively recently, so there may not be that many staff with this qualification at the agency. However, asking about the number of GAP qualified staff is one way of assessing credibility and commitment to quality. Similarly, more experienced digital marketing staff may have one of the Institute of Direct Marketing qualifications in digital marketing which will give them a broader knowledge of planning and execution for digital marketing (http://www.theidm.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=contentDisplay_&chn=6&tpc=235).

Tip 18. Ask the prospective agency to explain how they would SEO or PPC a specific known problem product or phrase for which you are underperforming.

2. SEO Success Factor 2: Index inclusion and coverage

*In this section we look at search engine index inclusion, the first practical stage of SEO. Index inclusion means ensuring that as many as possible of the relevant pages from your domain(s) are included within the search engines you want to be listed in. We will look at selecting search engines, techniques for **site submission**, and how to counter technical problems which may stop your site being indexed correctly.*

Index inclusion is mainly seen as an issue for new sites created for new companies, brands or campaigns. However, internal or external factors may change **index coverage** through time.

For example, pages will be added and removed regularly for most sites, and you should check that old pages / sections are removed from search indexes. Changes to the hardware and software technology used to host or manage content may also alter index inclusion.

Tip 19. Review your strategy for creation of custom 404 error pages for when visitors referred from search engines arrive at a page that is no longer available. The query string from the search engine can be parsed to identify relevant content and give a 'friendly error page'. Customer 404 error pages are also displayed when there are link errors within the site. However, their use may have limitations.²² In some cases, if a page performing well for SEO has to be changed it may be better to use a permanent **301 redirect**.

The search engines themselves also cause problems with exclusion. While it is today rare for a site to be dropped from the index completely unless it has been banned, temporary fluctuations in number of pages indexed are common. Reasons for these include algorithm adjustments where a new index is propagated over several servers and possible conflicts between different versions of robots.

Our coverage of how to achieve **index inclusion** in the different search engines includes these topics:

- **An overview of how search engines work. What is index coverage? Why is it so important?**
- **Site submission to search engines – how to get a new site listed.**
- **Google Sitemaps and how it can increase index coverage.**
- **Evaluating index inclusion and robot indexing activity.**
- **Site inclusion and page exclusion – how to use Robots.txt and meta tags.**

²² One reviewer (Bigmouthmedia) advised caution with use of custom 404's since this can slow or prevent the page from actually being removed from the index. Additionally, excluding the page from the index - wastes all of the history and links that a page may have accumulated over time. So consider redirecting the user to a similar page instead, which will then inherit these properties, whilst still removing the old URL from the index. Since content modifications on most sites are common this is quite an important issue so the approach should be reviewed with the agency or technical team.

- **Domain strategy.** Dealing with issues such as sub-domains, geolocation, top-level domain variants, domain hijacking and canonicalization.
- **Time-related content issues,** including the much-discussed 'Google Sandbox'.
- **Content freshness and link velocity.**
- **Dynamic content,** including problems with URL rewriting and session IDs.

2.1 An overview of how search engines work

The general high-level process for how the search engine compiles its index is straightforward. It is shown below in Figure 11. The crawler module of a search engine uses server-side software known as a **robot** (aka 'bots') or **spider** to compile an index containing every word on every page along with the page address / URL.

The search engine weights its index using a complex algorithm based on a variety of factors, discussed later in this report, and then stores the index as part of a database on a web server. This index is what is searched when searchers type in keywords.

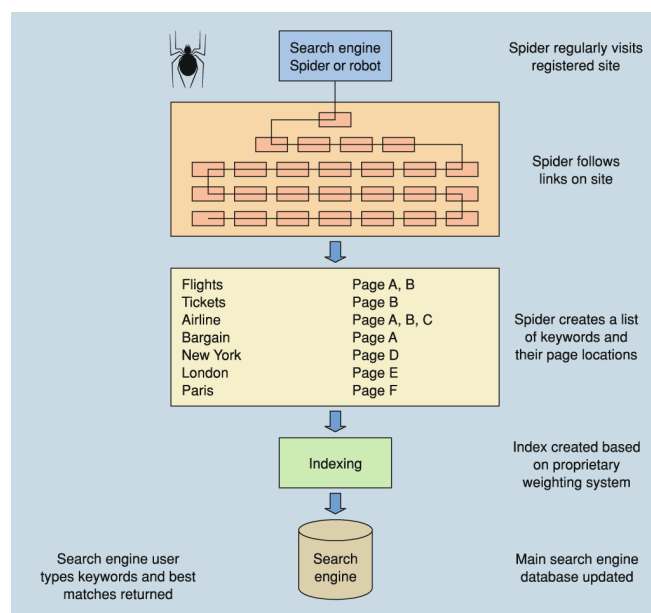


Figure 11 Stages involved in search engine listing

2.1.1 How often do search engines update their index and algorithms?

It is important to understand that the robots are effectively working continually to crawl sites and update the index. For websites that update frequently, eg online publishers, a new page will be included within 1 or 2 days.

On top of these continual minor updates there are bigger updates to the **search engine algorithms**, as well as periodic updates to information about interlinking. These changes – as well as competitor actions - are the main reasons why it is

necessary to retain SEO agencies (to monitor changes to the approaches taken by search engines, and to adjust your SEO strategy if required).

Key recommendation 23. Ensure search engine specialists are retained to monitor and revise the optimization approach based on changes to search engine algorithms and index updates.

The interplay between these factors is complex and is only known by engineers at search engines, so let's turn to Matt Cutts of Google who says:

'What is an update? Google updates its index data, including backlinks and PageRank, continually and continuously. We only export new backlinks, PageRank, or directory data every three months or so though. (We started doing that last year when too many SEOs were suffering from "B.O.", short for backlink obsession.)

"When new backlinks/PageRank appear, we've already factored that into our rankings quite a while ago. So new backlinks/PageRank are fun to see, but it's not an update; it's just already-factored-in data being exported visibly for the first time in a while. Google also crawls and updates its index every day, so different or more index data usually isn't an update either.

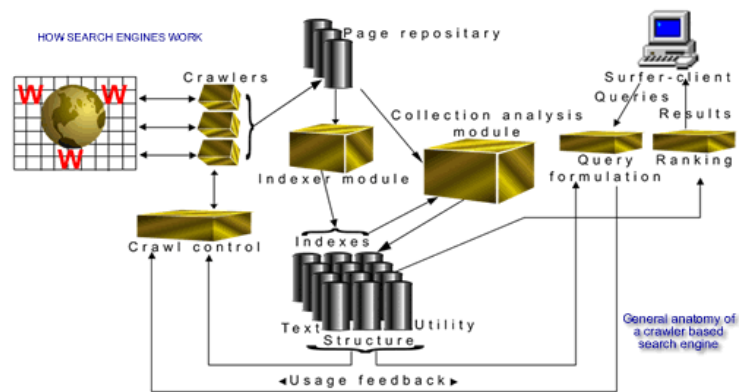
"The term 'everflux' is often used to describe the constant state of low-level changes as we crawl the web and rankings consequently change to a minor degree. That's normal, and that's not an update.

"Usually, what registers with an update to the webmaster community is when we update an algorithm (or its data), change our scoring algorithms, or switch over to a new piece of infrastructure."²³

Find out more: [Introduction to how search engines work from Searchenginewatch](http://www.searchenginewatch.com). For a more detailed description of how search engines operate, see Mike Grehan's Search Engine book (<http://www.search-engine-book.co.uk/>) where he describes these modules in detail:

1. The crawler/spider module
2. The repository/database module
3. The indexer/link analysis module
4. The retrieval/ranking module
5. The user query interface.

²³ <http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/whats-an-update/>



2.2 Site submission to search engines

Search engine submission is the process of notifying search engines about a new site so that it is included in the index.

2.2.1 Which search engines to target?

If you are reviewing index inclusion for an existing site, the first thing that needs to be checked is that you are registered with all the main search engines. This raises the question of which are the main search engines you are targeting in your strategy, which we discuss in section SEO Success Factor 3).

While some unscrupulous search marketing companies offer to register you on the 'Top 1,000 search engines', in reality, registering on the top 10 to 20 search engines in the countries you operate will probably account for more than 99% of the potential visitors.

According to a Hitwise Oct 2005 press release, 94% of internet searches are powered by just 4 search engines. 94% of UK internet searches are powered by the UK and Global versions of Google, Ask, Yahoo! Search, and MSN Search. This equates to 14% of search engines (8 out of 57) powering 94% of searches.

Google powers over 7 in 10 UK internet searches with Google .co.uk being by far the most important. Google's closest competitor, MSN.co.uk Search, powered just 8% of UK internet searches in that same four week period ending 1st October 2005. Google UK (www.Google.co.uk) continues to dominate the search engine market in the UK, powering 63% of all internet searches in the four-week period ending 1st October 2005. Collectively Google UK and Google.com power 70% of UK Internet searches.

In the US, Yahoo! Search is a stronger competitor. Amongst US internet users, Google.com powered 60% of all searches, compared to Yahoo! Search at 27% in the four-week period ending 1st October 2005.

2.2.2 Site submission approach

In the early days of search engines it was necessary to manually submit a site index page using the 'Add URL' feature in an engine such as Altavista. It was also periodically necessary to resubmit sites when pages were changed. This is no longer the case, since search robots such as Googlebot *regularly* revisit sites, adding new or modified pages to the index usually within a day or two for popular site.

Manual submission is also unnecessary since the search robot *will follow links to or from a page to add new content*. This is now seen as best practice for adding a new site.

Tip 20. Do not use the 'Add URL' facilities of the major search engines to add a new site. They will be added automatically since robots follow **backlinks/inbound** and **outbound links** to add new content to the index. So make sure there are at least one or two inbound links on regularly indexed sites, ideally on a different IP address, ready for when your new content goes live.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 3	Take care with site submission	Applies to: Newly registered domains which are not in the index.	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Site submission is a request to a search engine for a new site to be included in its index through sending a search robot to the URL to be spidered.		
<i>Example:</i>	Google Add URL page: http://www.google.com/addurl		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Don't use automated submission services provided by some ISPs. 2. Try to include a site by setting up links to it or through having outbound links. 3. If this doesn't result in the new site being included in the index, use the 'Add URL' feature of the search engine. 4. Resubmission isn't necessary 4. Consider using Google sitemaps for large sites.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• It is thought that manual inclusion is a lesser sign of site relevance than that from a linked site, so try the linking approach first.		

2.3 Google Sitemaps

Google Sitemaps was launched in 2005 to help webmasters with site submission. We believe that it is an essential tool for all organizations looking to improve their results from SEO.

Google sitemaps can potentially help you include a higher proportion of your pages in the index and potentially enable you to notify Google of changes, although Google makes no guarantees in this respect.

Sitemaps may not improve your rankings for existing pages, but it can enable *more pages to be included* and so increase visitors. It can also determine how often Googlebot comes to visit.

Key recommendation 24. Evaluate Google Sitemaps (if you are not using it already) for index inclusion, crawling stats and search performance (it also shows top queries for your site and what it considers common words on your site).

SEO Ranking Success Factor 4	Google sitemaps	Applies to: Whole site	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Google sitemaps is a tool made available from Google in 2005. It enables a webmaster to submit an index of web pages to Google using an XML data exchange standard through posting the sitemap on its server. Benefits include the ability to identify which pages have not been indexed and why (some error messages included). The tool also indicates pages that change regularly and reports on popularity of searches.		
<i>Example:</i>	This is a sample sitemap from Google <pre><?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?> <urlset xmlns="http://www.google.com/schemas/sitemap/0.84"> <url> <loc>http://www.example.com/</loc> <lastmod>2005-01-01</lastmod></pre>		

	<pre> <changefreq>monthly</changefreq> <priority>0.8</priority> </url> <url> <loc>http://www.example.com/catalog? item=12&desc=vacation_hawaii</loc> <changefreq>weekly</changefreq> </url> <url> <loc>http://www.example.com/catalog? item=73&desc=vacation_new_zealand</loc> <lastmod>2004-12-23</lastmod> <changefreq>weekly</changefreq> </url> <url> <loc>http://www.example.com/catalog? item=74&desc=vacation_newfoundland</loc> <lastmod>2004-12-23T18:00:15+00:00</lastmod> <priority>0.3</priority> </url> <url> <loc>http://www.example.com/catalog? item=83&desc=vacation_usa</loc> <lastmod>2004-11-23</lastmod> </url> </urlset>.</pre>
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use Google Sitemaps if you feel there is a gap between what Google reports through inurl: and the actual number of pages you are aware of through your CMS or online database catalogue. 2. The Google Sitemaps tool is useful for all large sites since it reports on pages indexed and ones it is unable to crawl. It also reports on the top queries for particular phrases. 3. You can use Sitemaps to specify the relative precedence of pages within your site on a priority scale of 0 to 1 (0.5 is the default). For example, if you have a more appropriate page that you would prefer to be in the index you could specify this. However, this will not affect your relative ranking in the SERPs compared to competitors. It could even potentially decrease it. See https://www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps/docs/en/protocol.html#xmlTagDefinitions This could be useful in some applications, for example, for a brand search, some sites return a 404 error page as one of the main pages in the SERPs!! Robots.txt could also be used to control this. 4. It is also possible to specify crawl frequency, but the robots will not necessarily follow these instructions.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Google does not guarantee that pages submitted by Sitemaps will be incorporated. • If a URL cannot be accessed normally then the search engine can probably not associate external link factors with it and thus ranking performance will be low. • Review the implications of Sitemaps and potentially statistics being available to competitors (this has happened in earlier implementations). • See https://www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps/ for further information. • Many free and paid-for tools are available to automate site map submission. Check this Google third-party product web page: http://code.google.com/sm_thirdparty.html

2.4 What is index coverage? Why is it important?

Index coverage refers to the proportion of your pages which are included within the index of each search engine.

Because of the effect of the **Long Tail** on search behaviour, in most cases, the more pages from within your site included within the search engine, the more visitors you will achieve. The majority of your visitors will be for the most popular pages, but each page has a probability of matching a search query.

We will see that achieving full index inclusion, where every live page on your site is included within the search engine index is challenging.

There are several reasons why getting complete index inclusion is difficult:

- There may be technical reasons why the search robots do not crawl all your pages which we will discuss in this section.
- When search engines update their ranking algorithms this may result in changes to the number of pages included.
- Search engines do have limited (although huge) storage capacities and recently no longer publicise the size of their indexes, apparently so as not to get involved in 'size wars'.
- Given index size is finite, search engines do not currently aim for 100% inclusion – they just try to do their best to include as much information as they can.
- As you add pages to your site, the search engine robots will always lag a little in keeping its index up-to-date.

2.5 Evaluating index inclusion

Simple reporting of SEO effectiveness often looks at ranking or visitor reports at a micro-level for particular keyphrases. However, it is also important to report at a macro-level the number of pages in the main search indexes for domains in a different brand, and also the percentage of total indexed (comparing the index with figures from your **content management system**).

Key recommendation 25. Report % page inclusion coverage within index for each site to assess any problems with inclusion.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 5	Evaluate and improve index inclusion	Applies to: Server for each brand	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The number and percentage of public pages on your server which are included in each of the main search indexes.		
<i>Example:</i>	Using Google syntax site:domain.com, for example "site:www.e-consultancy.com" returns nearly 500,000 pages.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Report number and % of pages in index regularly. 2. Regularly review Google Sitemaps 'Crawl Stats' which reports on pages crawled,		

	reachable and errors.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Check the accuracy of these commands since they may over-report. Some prefer the “inurl” syntax, e.g. “inurl:www.e-consultancy.com”, although this may return other sites also. • See Table 9 for advanced search syntax to do this in other search engines. • We will see in the next section that Google sitemaps can help with this. • The search indexes do change their methods of crawling sites and ranking algorithm updates can affect this also. In January 2006, Google was compiling a new index at http://64.233.179.104. This reported an index size (based on pages with the letter ‘a’ in them of c24 billion compared to the main Google site of c9 billion. • One reviewer suggested searching on a text string from the footer to check if there is a problem with partial inclusion of a whole page(s).

2.5.1 Duplicate content penalty

Site owners have been known to copy content from other sites. This is often done using ‘screenscrapers’ which then merge several sources in order to increase keyword density and include copy with natural grammar on the offending site.

Search engines *test for the uniqueness of document text*. If a page is similar to another, your page can then be subject to a **duplicate content penalty**, meaning that the search engines could remove your website from the search engines. You can check for copyright infringements using Copyscape / Copysentry (<http://copyscape.com>).

However, **the biggest duplicate content issue comes when your own site accidentally or deliberately duplicates or triplicates its own content**. This can occur when DNS / domain mapping goes awry, or just through poor content management / replication of pages.

There are some instances where pages are legitimately replicated with minor changes, such as **landing pages for PPC campaigns** (where the pages only have small changes, eg to mirror the search query by automatically placing keywords on the landing page). Be sure to use **Robots.txt** to avoid indexing these pages.

Tip 21. Monitor regularly for content duplication both on and off your site.

2.6 Evaluate site indexing activity

Each search engine continuously uses **search robots** (aka webcrawlers and spiders) to traverse the web to add new and updated pages to their index. An understanding of the operation of these robots or spiders is essential to ensuring the site is well ranked.

Here are the key facts on site indexing:

- Each search engine has one or more robots each with a unique identifier (user agent string).
- Although 'crawlers' suggest they physically move from one site to another, each is a programme running on the server of the search engine which requests pages from the web server it is analysing.
- The robot entries for each pages accessed can be found within the **log files** of a site (but not in browser-based analytics tools).
- In the early days of the web each robot visited the homepage of a site and then indexed all the pages on the site it could follow. Today robots traverse the web from site to site by following links between them.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 6	Evaluate robot crawling	Applies to: Individual pages on site	Importance:  2/5
What is it?	Search engine robots should visit your website regularly to add revised versions of pages to their index. You need to check whether this is happening.		
Example:	Example log file entry for Googlebot: 66.249.71.13 www.e-consultancy.com - [19/Jun/2006:04:43:28 +0100] "GET /robots.txt HTTP/1.0" 200 96 "" "Googlebot/2.1 (+http://www.google.com/bot.html)" 39 "" "robots.txt"		
Best practice:	1. Review frequency of crawling of key pages regularly. 2. Periodically review frequency of crawling for less common pages. 3. Identify new / modified user agents to check inclusion. 4. Use Google sitemaps to check robot crawling.		
What to watch for?	• The robots are generally reliable, but it is particularly important to check after a site launch, redesign or update to the search robot. • This can be completed through manual inspection of the server log files, but it is best to extract records which reference the bots or to use an analytic tool. • Web analytics tools vary in their capability to view this data. If you mainly use a hosted web analytics tool this data is not collected and you will need to access your server logs from the hosting provider and then use a web analytics tools that summarises these. • A good reporting capability is available in higher-end versions of Clicktracks which reports recency of visits from the main spiders in relation to the popularity of pages on the site. • Robots.txt can be used to exclude RSS feeds. Currently the top results reported for some sites using HTML are not the HTML files, but the RSS fields which are not rendered correctly in the browser – raw is XML displayed.		

2.7 Excluding pages and links from the site index

There are some occasions when you may not want the search engine to follow links and index pages on your site. For example, you may be hosting a redesigned version of the site which has links to other sites, which may enable the search robot to find it via backlinks. Specifying which files to include/exclude in the **Robots.txt** file on the web server is the preferred method for achieving exclusion.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 7	Excluding pages from the index (robots.txt Robots Exclusion Protocol)	Applies to: Single instance of robots.txt in root directory for domain.	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	It is possible to instruct the robot to exclude page(s) from a site where you don't want them in the index. This is done by adding instructions to a file 'robots.txt' which should be located on the root directory of each domain.		
<i>Example:</i>	In this example all user agents (i.e. different search robots) are instructed to access all files other than the demo and tmp directories. <pre>User-Agent: * Disallow: /demo Disallow: /tmp</pre> ("Allow: /" Is not supported and is ignored - Disallow: is most important for exclusion)		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use robots.txt on each server with the correct syntax. 2. Take care if selectively excluding different robot user-agents as this may be taken as evidence of cloaking. 3. Take care not to exclude user agents or pages through incorrect syntax. 4. Use Google sitemaps to check that Google has correctly incorporated your robots.txt.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• There is just one robots.txt per domain. It needs to go in the root directory '/'. • Make sure the correct syntax for the 'Robot exclusion protocol' is used: See http://www.robotstxt.org/wc/exclusion-admin.html for further details • There's a small difference between the way Googlebot handles the robots.txt file and the way the robots.txt standard says it should. See http://www.google.com/webmasters/bot.html. • You can use Robots.txt to exclude custom 404 pages from the index (See 1.32). • If you have no exclusions place an empty 'robots.txt' file on the server. Common user agents are here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_agent but such lists tend to date, so best to be aware of changes. A definitive list of robots may be available to you if you are a subscriber to IAB or ABCE – see http://home.businesswire.com/portal/site/google/index.jsp?ndmViewId=news_view&newsId=20060207005347&newsLang=en		

Exclusion of robots is also possible using meta tags which apply to all robots or individual search engines. This may be useful if a page owner does not have control over robots.txt.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 8	Instructing robots through meta tags	Applies to: A	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	It is possible to instruct the robot not to follow particular links or to exclude particular content through a meta tag in the <HEAD> section of the page.		
<i>Example:</i>	In general: <code><META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW"></code> In this case, the page will not be indexed and links will not be followed. Specific instructions may be supported by individual robots, e.g. for Google: <code><META NAME="GOOGLEBOT" CONTENT="NOARCHIVE"></code> In this case, the content is not available in the cached pages.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. It is possible to implement exclusion of a page through a meta tag on each page <code><META NAME="ROBOTS" CONTENT="NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW"></code>. This convention is not consistently followed by robots. 2. It is not essential to include this if you DO want particular pages in your index, i.e. the default is to <code>index</code> and to <code>follow</code>.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	In some cases, it may be useful to use engine specific meta tags, for example, to prevent Google from displaying snippets for your page (and so force use of meta tags), place this tag in the <HEAD> section of your page: <code><META NAME="GOOGLEBOT" CONTENT="NOSNIPPET"></code> More details: See http://www.robotstxt.org/wc/meta-user.html for general syntax See http://www.google.com/bot.html for Google syntax See http://www.google.com/webmasters/remove.html for other details about removing from index		

2.8 Domain strategy

In this section, we review approaches for distributing content across different servers with domain names.

2.8.1 Managing domain names

There are potentially many different domain names that can be registered for an organization, particularly where a company has many brand names associated with it. It is important to check that your users can find you regardless of the URL they enter. You should also check that domain names containing your brand are not being misused.

It is also **vital** to check that you are not subject to a **duplicate content penalty**. We will also recommend later in the report that there is often value in creating a small network of separate domains with different **themes** which link to each other).

Key recommendation 26. Maximise registration of domain names related to your brands and check for brand abuse.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 9	Register and monitor multiple domains for brand or company.	Applies to: All potential domain names for your site.	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	A range of global top-level domain names (gTLDs) can be registered for each company / brand name, e.g. .com, .biz, .info, .name, .org, etc. There are also country code domains (ccTLDs) such as .co.uk, .fr, .de, etc.		
<i>Example:</i>	Argos is a well known UK retailer, but other companies use this name, so these may be registered by different companies: www.argos.co.uk , www.argos.info , www.argos.name , www.argos.org . Companies with multipart names such as Marks & Spencer need to check and manage for multiple versions: www.marksandspencers.co.uk , www.marks-and-spencers.co.uk , etc.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Check that you have maximised registration of domains associated with your brands. Register all gTLDs as far as possible. Remember that some gTLDs such as .name have been introduced recently, so may have been not have been registered. Alternately, ownership may have lapsed which gives an opportunity for purchase. 2. Redirect the domain name to your main site using a 301 permanent redirect. 3. Check for brand-abuse on related domains using monitoring tools such as www.googlealert.com. 4. A related phenomenon is brand misspellings.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• When a brand has many sites, there will be an advantage in setting up cross-links between these sites (from an SEO perspective, but not necessarily from a user-experience perspective). But if all the brands sites are all located on the same domain (known as the same IP C block, i.e. xxx.xxx.CCC.xxx then they will be identified as the same company and the links will likely have less link equity than those from different sites. • Use WHOIS (www.whois.sc/domain-explorer) to scan sites and owners • When campaign specific URLs are used on a campaigns, check that the full range of domains are registered. • The use of separate domain names is beneficial since Google will display different domains separately in the natural listings and will permit a separate paid-search ad for each domain, so enabling you to have more representation in		

	the SERPs and so deliver a higher proportion of clicks (and push competitors down). Care has to be taken to minimise confusion of searchers when using this approach. The use of multiple domains can also lead to PageRank becoming split such that some referrers point to one site and others to another.
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Key recommendation 27. Consider using multiple domains to maximise your representation in the natural and paid listings.

2.8.2 Unifying different domain versions including canonicalization

Many sites will have alternative versions of their sites on different domains and these will need to be reviewed to identify duplication.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 10	Different domain versions (canonical domains and sub-domains)	Applies to: All newly updated domains.	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Most sites can be reached by typing the domain with and without the 'www' prefix. Most consumer-facing sites should resolve to the 'www.company.com' preferred primary domain and be listed this way in the search results. Some more technically oriented sites such as Searchenginewatch have a preferred primary domain of http://searchenginedomain.com which is the simplified canonical domain. Problems can be encountered when different brand sites have 302 redirects rather than 301 redirects.		
<i>Example:</i>	'e-consultancy.com' is the canonical form and when typed into the browser it resolves to www.e-consultancy.com as does 'www.e-consultancy.com'. Using a different approach. 'searchenginewatch.com' resolves to 'www.searchenginewatch.com' as does 'www.searchenginewatch.com'.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	- Review your domains listed within the search engines to make sure you are maximising your opportunity for places in the natural listings. For example, Searchenginewatch is also listed for http://blog.searchenginewatch.com/. - Remember that if you use multiple sub-domains, the links in and content volume scores for your sites will be partitioned between them. This is less an issue for a site such as Searchenginewatch. - Ensure 301 redirects (<i>rather than 302 redirects</i>) are used to point to your preferred primary domain, particularly with the canonical form of your main domain.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Other variations of sub-domain may be useful to gain listings slots in the natural SERPs. For example a search on "Marks and Spencers" lists the main domain 'www.marksandspencers.com', but also achieves visibility for the Marks and Spencers Money brand at 'www6.marksandspencer.com'. - This issue was addressed in the Google Jagger update of 2005 and resulted in some changes in listings. It is also impacted by the BigDaddy update in 2006. - This posting from Matt Cutts of Google gives a good summary: http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/seo-advice-url-canonicalization/		

2.8.3 Themes per domain

It is arguably difficult for a site containing information on many topics to compete with a site focused on a single topic...

There are two reasons for this. It initially appears that Google may identify a site theme based on the amount of topic content about one theme. More likely it is simply a consequence of the interplay between a number of ranking factors.

Primarily, it is likely to be a result of more **backlinks** to the themed site with a **link context** related to the theme, and the fact that the homepage which has a higher **PageRank** than the themed pages lower down the hierarchy on other sites is about one topic rather than many.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 11	Number of themes per domain	Applies to: Whole site overall	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Sites which are about a single, focused theme tend to rank more highly than those which cover related or unrelated themes. This is particularly true for generic phrases such as 'SEO'.		
<i>Example:</i>	Sites such as E-consultancy.com (www.e-consultancy.com) and ClickZ.com (www.clickz.com) which cover the full-range of online marketing best practice cannot compete or are at least lower in the SERPs for generic keyphrases such as 'SEO' with sites such as www.searchenginewatch.com or www.highrankings.com. This is one reason why affiliates will set up many separate sites. Howstuffworks has separate sub-domains for different topics which arguably improves the ability to find content and SEO since each domain is more focused on a them. http://www.google.com/search?q=how+stuff+works , Examples: http://science.howstuffworks.com http://electronics.howstuffworks.com http://computer.howstuffworks.com		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. The implications of this are that hosting separate domains for different themed content should be more effective in terms of SEO. This is effectively what happens with internet.com (but mainly for convenience and brand recognition reasons).		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Having separate domains about different themes may be more effective for SEO, but not in terms of resources, cost, user experience and brand positioning. Check the balance is right for you. This observation does not make it impossible for a generic site to rank well on a generic phrase. For example comparison site uSwitch ranks well currently for cheap loans. • If using separate domains, backlinks will be split between two sites, resulting in a lower PageRank for each of the individual sites than a single site. • Having sub-domains on a topic may help with this, but this is not a commonly followed convention, so is perhaps more difficult to get inbound links. Perhaps use a 301 redirect.		

2.8.4 Geolocation

Google and the other search engines give more prominence to the results of the country where the user is located when the user is using a **country-specific version** of the engine, eg a .co.uk domain may receive a boost on Google.co.uk.

This needs to be carefully considered by companies who have a server located in a different country to where the majority of their audience is based, and international companies operating across many countries.

Key recommendation 28. Ensure your Domain geolocation is correct for the geographical markets you operate in. If not already addressed, it is a potential source of many additional visits.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 12	Domain geolocation	Applies to: Whole site or domain	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The physical location of the server and where the domain is registered impacts results when a user uses a country-specific version of a search engine both for the general results and to narrow results to a specific country. The search engines use a variety of techniques to try to determine location, including the IP address of the server, use of sub-directories and language on the site.		
<i>Example:</i>	Use of www.google.co.uk main results and 'pages from the UK' weights listings in SERPS to domains in the UK. This may lead to relatively poor listings for a non-UK domain, compared to competitor websites hosted in the country.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. For companies mainly operating in one territory, host the server in the country where the majority of customers are based. e.g. a .ie domain should be hosted in Ireland, .au in Australia, .ca in Canada not America. 2. For international companies, register the site at country specific country code top-level domains (ccTLDs), e.g. http://www.company.de and then implement a 302 redirect (not a 301 redirect more typically used to form a common domain). 3. Even if you use a .com domain, if you host it in a non US country, the search engine should determine the correct country from the Whois record and IP address of the domain. 4. For .com companies, use sub-directories for each country that use standard ICANN country addresses, e.g. www.company.com/de or www.company.com/german ideally with local language versions. 5. Use of paid-search marketing enables specific targeting of users by their country		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Figures from audience panel data and study of web analytics data suggests that the majority (approximately 70-90%) of users use the search engine for their country. • Check for server location using http://www.whois.sc/domain-explorer/. • Geolocation is a complex topic which differs for different search engines. See this article for further information: http://www.mcanerin.com/EN/articles/301-redirect-geolocation.asp • For international companies, local language versions of web pages (including body copy, title tags and using international meta tags) will help increase the		

	number of visitors since local language pages will be more favourably viewed by users of international search engines, e.g. www.google.de , particularly when searchers restrict pages to that country.
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Tip 22. Creating local language versions of web pages can be very valuable for international companies since this increases the number of pages in the index (without a duplicate content penalty) and these pages become more prominent in local versions of search engines particularly when searchers use their native language.

2.8.5 Domain hijacking

Domain hijacking has several potential meanings, but all of them have the same result: potential search users looking for your site or products go elsewhere. So it is important for those responsible for SEOs to check and counter for this constantly.

Tip 23. When selecting an SEO, ask how they monitor and counter domain hijacking and brand abuse.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 13	Checking for domain hijacking	Applies to: Whole domain	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Potential search visitors are directed elsewhere. The most common situation is where web domains that have expired are claimed by another owner and then used for some other purpose (domain theft). It also refers to where search traffic for a site is hijacked using a server-side 302 redirect or client-side meta-refresh for a redirect.		
<i>Example:</i>	In 2004, eBay Germany was hijacked by scammers for the purpose of phishing. They requested a DNS transfer that was inadvertently authorised. More commonly a 302 redirect is placed on an offending site that redirects to a target site which can result in Google reducing the listing of the target site, particularly if the PageRank of the target site is lower than that of perpetrator. An alternative approach is to use the meta refresh meta tag to point to another domain. <code><meta http-equiv="refresh" content="1;url=http://www.domain.com"></code>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Monitor this by looking daily at visitor volumes against historical levels. Also check if number of pages in index is reduced with <code>allinurl:www.domain.com</code> . 2. Difficult to counter. May be possible to counter with scripts issuing 301 redirects to target site. Google does have a facility for reporting spam and issues such as this, but resources unable to cope with requests when it is a common problem as in this case.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Yahoo! has addressed this problem by treating 301 redirects and 302 redirects in the same way. • Domain hijacks are currently being addressed by Google. Refer to this site for further details and developments: http://clsc.net/research/google-302-page-hijack.htm • This can happen inadvertently through poor domain management, for example, if 302 redirects are wrongly used on a domain.		

2.9 Time-related aspects of search index inclusion

The search engines also consider when content was added to their index and how often it is updated. In this section we look at the well-known Google sandbox effect, content freshness and velocity.

2.9.1 The Google “sandbox effect”

The **Google ‘sandbox effect’** is a much-discussed phenomenon which may result in it being difficult for newly registered sites to be ranked highly within the search listings. It is not an issue for well-established sites, but is said to be a particular issue if a company publishes campaign microsites on different URLs.

Note that **Google denies the existence of this effect** and does not use this term, but we have included it since it is widely discussed. Google say that it is only a perceived effect, the combination of factors in an algorithm may prevent performance of newer sites. However, to the site owner, it appears as if their site has been placed in a sandbox.

***E-consultancy does not believe in sandboxes.**

SEO Ranking Success Factor 14	Google “sandbox effect”	Applies to: Whole site	Importance:  4/5
What is it?	New sites may also take several months to be listed prominently due to the Google “sandbox effect” where they will not be listed prominently until they are established and have an appropriate number of inbound or backlinks. Although the site may be spidered by Googlebot, it can take several months before the site is listed prominently in the rankings.		
Example:	Norwich Union uses a campaign URL www.quotemehappy.com to a microsite within its own site.		
Best practice:	1. Avoid setting up separate domains where possible for campaign sites. Integrate content into main domain or create a subdomain. Use 301 Redirect from campaign specific URLs to equivalent content on main site. 2. Register new sites and campaign microsites as soon as possible in Google, either using ‘Add URL’ or better through linking to these sites or creating backlinks. 3. Effect reputed to be diminished if content velocity or link velocity is high. 4. Use paid-search marketing to drive visitors to site if subject to effect. 5. Consider Google AdSense if appropriate which seems to reduce effect and can be used to achieve rapid inclusion.		
What to watch for?	• Effect not reported in other search engines? • A related effect is that it can take a large site many days to be refreshed in the different versions of the search index, such that it doesn’t even appear for brand terms. • Some deny the existence of this factor including one of the reviewers of this report. However, the majority had encountered it.		

Tip 24. Do not rely on SEO for new sites or campaign sites because of the sandbox effect. Use direct partners such as Pay Per Click, Affiliate marketing, Online advertising or drive visitors from existing sites. Register site and set up minimal content ASAP.

2.9.2 Content freshness

You will have noticed that many blog postings often appear high in the rankings for niche phrases. Partly this is because of the natural linking associated with the blogosphere, but mainly it is to do with **unique, frequent content**. Search engines certainly place some emphasis on freshness / frequency. Keeping your most important content fresh should help boost page weighting.

News publishers and prolific bloggers can attract a different type of Google robot, one that comes to visit much more frequently than Googlebot. It is called **Freshbot**, and can hunt for new content many times per day. There may be some weighting applied to content picked up by Freshbot – news stories often appear high up in the rankings, but may drop off over time.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 15	Content freshness	Applies to: Individual document content	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Pages that have been created more recently tend to rank more highly, then they decline in popularity. Pages that are regularly edited/updated are likely to rank more highly than those that are static for a long time		
<i>Example:</i>	Blog pages tend to rank well when first posted because content is fresh. A search for a keyphrase on a site, e.g. “ SEO ” site:e-consultancy.com lists pages based on their relevance using a range of on-page and link-related factors such as keyphrase density and link popularity . However, the date at which pages are added to the index is also important Table 15 gives a good example of this, with several recent documents ranking highly.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Develop policies to ensure content owners update content regularly (and delete out-of-date content if it is no longer of value for the audience or to attract search engine visitors). 2. Publish an audit of content for each site category, listing page creation date, last edit date and popularity (page views and bounce rate from web analytics) and backlinks to encourage update of key pages. 3. Use techniques to auto-generate content which is fresh (see).		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Google doesn't actually report the most recent content by date of creation (addition to index) or last major modification in its public search tools, so it is unclear whether it uses these factors, but the evidence suggests that it does. It does reports on date of most recent update in its advanced search. The best tool for assessing this is Goofresh (http://www.researchbuzz.org/2003/09/goofresh.shtml) which gives an improved interface on the advanced search tool (http://www.google.co.uk/advanced_search?) which returns the same results for different time periods. • Google often returns two pages for each domain. The homepage often features first, followed by other content that is deemed relevant. Fresh content often features as this second link (dependent on other factors), so the title tag, meta description or body copy can be modified to encourage clickthrough on the homepage). Another view is that if Google finds more than one page from the site that has equal relevance based on all its criteria, it presents two to assist its users). A third, cynical view is that by reporting two links per domain, it increases the need for paid-search advertising since it is more difficult to appear near the top of the natural listings. • Regular editing of critical site pages (with significant changes) and blog trackbacks may help here, because content modifications will be monitored		

	also.
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2.9.3 Content or domain longevity

As a counterpoint to the previous point, some suggest that more established sites are favoured. This is partly a consequence of established sites typically having more links. However more relevance may be attributed to established sites although this is not possible to prove.

We believe that the search engines have a unique content creation date, a sort of time stamp for any new page indexed. Additionally, domains registered in 2002 but not used until 2006 may be viewed favourably, compared with new domains registered in 2006, although any benefit will surely be slight.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 16	Content freshness	Applies to: Individual document content	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	More trust seems to be assigned to established sites and content. The search engines can establish when content is first added to their index.		
<i>Example:</i>	It is more difficult for sites created more recently to rank well (see the Google Sandbox effect).		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Don't switch to a new domain unless essential. 2. Use permanent 301 redirects from content with a link history to more recently created pages or domains. 2. Consider purchase of established domains.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	The Whois (www.whois.sc/domain-explorer) service can be used to establish ownership length for a domain and is reputed to be used by the search engines.		

2.9.4 Content and link velocity

The search engines monitor the rate at which websites change to assess both their quality and whether bad practices may be occurring. Sites that are updated more regularly are favoured.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 17	Content and link velocity	Applies to: Individual pages	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The rate at which pages are added to a domain and links into a domain vary. For example, the number of pages for the domain and the number of links into the site will all be recorded together with the rate at which they change. Care needs to be taken not to change these too dramatically. Relevance is indicated when new pages are added and existing pages are modified.		
<i>Example:</i>	News sites, blogs and retail sites where pages are added or edited frequently will enjoy better ranking than static sites. Regular increases in backlinks to a site will help also.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Develop a site or category publication schedule / editorial calendar to add additional relevant content. 2. Develop an ongoing link-building programme.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	Penalty factor. If velocity is deemed too high compared to the norm, particularly of backlinks, there may be a penalty because of an indication of link-building / link farms. This factor is suggested by the Google patent #125 and would seem a logical way of countering affiliate approaches that involve		

	automated creation of sites through screen-scraping and auto-content generation.
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2.10 Site migration

Since marketing objectives, branding and web technologies all change over time, major upgrades to a site are inevitable every few years.

While the focus is often on the new skin and information architecture, the implications in terms of SEO opportunities and risks should be right up there in terms of importance in the project.

We have spoken to *companies who have lost 25% of their annual traffic through a site redesign* accompanied by adoption of an inappropriate CMS!

Be careful and plan, plan, plan...

Key recommendation 29. Plan to manage the impact of site migration on visitors driven by SEO from the outset of any website redesign project. Take care with major site revisions not to use the historical equity of links and on-page optimization built up through time.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 18	Site migration	Applies to: All newly updated domains.	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Changing sites between servers or changing site architecture.		
<i>Example:</i>	This is an issue for any major site rebuild which needs to be planned for, but often isn't. Implications for results delivered from SEM need to be understood.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Audit the existing indexed content from your original site using site: searches on the main search engines. 2. Prioritise the indexed content (if there are very large numbers of pages) and create a comprehensive mapping of current pages in the indexes and the new locations of the same or equivalent content on the new site. 2. Use 301 redirects to redirect the request for the old content dynamically to the new content locations. And leave these redirects running indefinitely because, although the search engines will update their indexes within a reasonable timeframe, the third-party links around the web are likely to stay as they are forever. These must continue to provide the pages on the site with the context and relevance needed for good performance in the SERPs, and they will only do that if the 301 stays in place. Also, from a user's perspective, they get a much better experience following these links than going via a 404 page. 3. Consider using Google Sitemaps to update Google on the pages indexed. 4. Use Robots.txt to control indexing if running content in parallel. 5. For less important pages use 404 page error pages to explain or attempt to direct users to right source. 6. Use Robots.txt to control indexing if running content in parallel. 7. Have a contingency plan to use paid-search to replace any deficiency in SEO.²⁴		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Use web analytics against your log files to assess indexing of content by new robots. • Assess the impact of duplicate content penalties if you don't use redirects.		

²⁴ Thanks to Google consultant Steve Johnston (www.johnston.co.uk) for input on this topic.

2.11 Dynamic content

Many sites contain pages that are drawn from a database of products or articles in real time. Most large sites also use **content management systems (CMS)** to facilitate the workflow of document creation, review, feedback and modification.

Many sites also generate personalised pages in real-time, based on the current customer session or registered customer profiles. It is well-known that search robots may have difficulty indexing this content.

Key recommendation 30. When selecting a new CMS or E-commerce solution ensure that you review its capabilities for inclusion of pages within the search engine index.

There are two related issues which both involve the search robot being *unable or unwilling* to follow a link from one page to the next because of the type of URL.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 19	Ensure inclusion in index of dynamic pages generated from database or CMS content	Applies to: Dynamically generated pages	Importance:  5/5 (if site contains dynamic pages)
<i>What is it?</i>	Search robots may be unable to fully spider content on a site that is generated from a database.		
<i>Example:</i>	The URL may contain characters as part of the query string (<i>starting with a question mark</i>) after the domain name. These URL suffixes are typically parameters (denoted by &) in a database query. Depending on the technique used there may be many parameters. http://www.example.com/dynamic.asp?query1=abcd&query2=defgquery=hijk		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use URL rewriting to produce a clean URL separated by '/'. On Apache servers this is relatively easily achieved through mod_rewrite as explained here: http://www.devshed.com/c/a/Apache/Search-Engine-Friendly-URLs-with-mod-rewrite/. For sites built with ASP or migrated to ASP.Net, one approach is described here: http://www.codeproject.com/aspnet/urlrewriter.asp. An alternative tool is http://www.isapirewrite.com/. 2. Take great care of this issue when evaluating and implementing a new CMS or E-commerce platform! 3. If you do use parameters, some improvements may be possible through simplification. Google's webmasters guidelines state: "<i>If you decide to use dynamic pages (i.e., the URL contains a "?" character), be aware that not every search engine spider crawls dynamic pages as well as static pages. It helps to keep the parameters short and the number of them few.</i>"		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- This issue has been known for many years, so it has now been solved in many CMS and large corporate sites. However there are some significant CMS vendors who have not solved this problem, which can be disastrous if CMS platforms have been selected on the basis of a review that did <i>not</i> factor in SEO requirements. An all-too-common occurrence. - It is more likely to be encountered on in-house developed CMS or smaller sites developed by PHP or ASP developers who did not consider search engine spidering in their design.		

2.11.1 Avoiding problems with Session IDs

A closely related issue is the use of Session IDs, as explained below...

SEO Ranking Success Factor 20	Ensure session IDs are not contained in URL	Applies to: Dynamically generated pages	Importance:  5/5 (if site contains dynamic pages)
<i>What is it?</i>	Session IDs cause search robots problems since different URLs are generated for different human visitors. As a result many search robots have a rule that they don't crawl these pages since there are many different pages addresses for different sessions. Session IDs are often used on sites that need to identify users as they move between pages such as portals requiring registration or retail sites that track visitor activity through the purchase funnel.		
<i>Example:</i>	The URL may contain characters as part of the query string following the domain name which are used as parameters to specify the session, for example "id=" or: www.domain.com/index.php?sid=457921		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. If session ids are a problem, remove them when a robot starts crawling the site where the visit has a user agent string which matches one of the main robots (Googlebot, MSNbot, Yahoo!, etc). 2. Avoid URL construction that has character strings that have the characteristics of session ids, as this may deter the search engines from indexing the pages. 3. Placing session information in a session cookie is an alternative approach.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• While presenting a different view of a site to search robot and human visitors might be considered cloaking the problem is acknowledged in the Google webmaster guidelines who specifically recommend not using "&id=" or similar in the URL since a normal parameter such as a product id may be interpreted as a session id. http://www.google.com/intl/az/webmasters/guidelines.html		

3. SEO Success Factor 3: On-page optimization

3.1 What is on-page optimization? Why is it important?

*We introduced the importance of on-page optimization at the start of the report. On-page optimization is **vital** to achieving good results through SEO.*

When planning and implementing on-page optimization we seek to **create documents which are deemed highly relevant to a particular search term**.

The most basic test of relevance is the number of times the search phrase appears on the page (headlines that include a search term are particularly powerful).

However, there are many other factors that can also be applied. Here's what Big G says: *"Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page and examines all aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for your query".*²⁵

So in this section we will look at **ranking factors related to the use of different HTML markup tags / page structure**, as well as the **content** of the pages themselves.

The three key segments we'll look at are:

- Occurrence of **keyphrases** in page body copy including keyword density, synonyms and position
- **Page markup factors** including syntactical accuracy, <title> tags, <meta> tags, hyperlink tags and alt tags.
- **Document-level keyphrase factors** such as the inclusion of **keyphrases in the domain** and document file name.

Knowledge of both on-page optimization and link-building techniques are required for the best approach to optimization of a site, so we return to this topic later in the guide.

3.1.1 Who should coordinate on-page optimization?

Organizations that contract agencies to perform SEO are likely to use specialist SEO copywriters for optimization of pages for **strategic keyphrases**, but it is not usually practical (*cost effective*) to optimize every page by updating the content.

Instead, this effort should be shared between content authors and reviewers within the organization. Every time authors create or modify a page they should follow the best practice provided in this section.

Although authors will often be trained in using the CMS or in copywriting for the web, these training courses do not have sufficient reference to the techniques we describe in this section. There are some key rules to follow, and although there is no substitute for experience, even a webwriting newbie can get results by following this advice. They are not mystical, but logical.

²⁵ Google Technology introduction page: <http://www.google.com/technology/>

To help with this education process, refer to Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers, which is a brief overview to web copywriting.

Key recommendation 31. Each content author and reviewer in an organization and agency should be trained in understanding these on-page optimization factors.

3.2 Selecting keyphrases for optimization

*Before you start optimizing pages, or adding new content to your website, you need a plan to highlight those keyphrases which you are targeting for each content section. Authors and editors must be made aware of this plan. We describe approaches to **keyphrase analysis** and **selection** in SEO Success Factor 3.*

It is important to identify **target keyphrases** for each page, and to **identify strategic keyphrases** that are particularly important for a site or content category.

It is also useful to encourage those completing on-page optimization to consider different priorities for optimizing keyphrases on each page. Ask them to identify the most important phrases grouping according to the emphasis or priority they are going to place on them – primary, secondary and tertiary or priority 1, 2 and 3.

An example is given in Table 13. This approach helps force people to think about the most important phrases and gives them more emphasis. With experience, this approach is natural; it doesn't require too much thought.

Table 13 Example of different keyphrase priorities

Keyphrase priority	Purpose of target keyphrase	Example
Primary keyphrase(s)	The main keyphrase the page is targeted for which is searched for most commonly.	Cheap phone bills
Secondary keyphrase(s)	An alternative to the main phrase that is searched upon less often.	Phone bill saving
Tertiary keyphrase(s)	Other alternatives.	Reduce phone bill, Lower phone bill, Cutting phone bill, UK.

The actual primary, secondary and tertiary keyphrases selected for a given page will depend on the volume of searches and intent of searchers against the amount of resource available.

For example, if there are around 100 searches per month on the primary keyphrase in this example, it is probably only worth optimizing all of these phrases on a single page. If there are 1,000 or more, it would be worth *separating out the different keyphrases, with a different page for each*. However, the ease of obtaining theme-specific inbound links to these pages would also have to be considered.

More detailed guidelines on applying these different types of key phrases for different elements of the webpage are given in Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers.

Key recommendation 32. Clearly identify different levels of target keyphrase for each page, for example: primary, secondary and tertiary.

3.3 Occurrence of keyphrase in page body copy

The **frequency**, **position** and **emphasis** of the keyphrase in the **body copy** is very important for optimization. Relevance is also increased by a gamut of legitimate 'tricks' such as including the keyphrase in headings, anchor text in links and with a higher density towards the start of the document.

Over the last five years or so, keyphrase-related factors have been a battleground between search companies, search engine optimizers and spammers. Because of attempts to influence the SERPs results through keyword stuffing and hiding keywords through text colour, scripting or CSS, the algorithms have been revised to avoid such spamming techniques.

Given these changes, sophisticated SEOs need to have a good understanding of the merits of different approaches to on-page optimization. While client sites can be used as a test-bed, an independent test suite of pages is the best approach (*since these can be used to conduct standard control-cell testing to isolate different variables to test their impact*).

In other words, you can attempt to 'reverse-engineer' some elements of the algorithms (obviously reverse-engineering the whole algorithm is impossible). Of course, to test the effect of on-page optimization, it is necessary to isolate the effect of page connectivity aspects of the algorithm. And remember: **be ethical**.

Key recommendation 33. Assess the controlled-testing approaches used by internal/external SEOs to determine their ability to understand the relative importance of different on-page optimization techniques and review changes introduced by algorithm updates.

3.3.1 Keyword frequency, density and document length

The number of times the keyphrase is repeated in the text of the web page (frequency) **was** a key factor in determining the SERPS position for a key phrase. However, this led to spamming and search engines make checks for **spamming**, i.e. that a phrase is not repeated too many times such as '*cheap flights.. cheap flights.. cheap flights.. cheap flights.. cheap flights.. cheap flights..*'.

The search engine algorithms then turned to favouring **keyword density**, but this also resulted in some websites being penalised for trying too hard to work phrases into the page. Achieving a **moderate density** is still a positive factor, but don't overdo it.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 21	Keyword frequency and density	Applies to: Each page in site (particularly important on homepage)	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Keyword density indicates how commonly a word appears in a document as a proportion of its length.		
<i>Example:</i>	A keyword that appears twice in a 200-word document (density = 1%) has a higher density than a word that appears four times in 2000 word document (density = 0.5%).		
<i>Best</i>	1. For pages optimized for a specific phrase aim for a density of 5-10%.		

<i>practice:</i>	2. Penalty warning: Avoid a possible penalty if density too high for particular phrases, i.e. >> 10%. 3. Use synonyms as well as identical keyphrases. 4. Vary use of keywords in target keyphrases; they don't have to be in a consecutive phrase, e.g. for phrase 'uk insurance', variants could be 'insurance for UK drivers', 'UK drivers insurance', etc. The challenge is to use these naturally within the copy.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Reviewers believed that density is no longer a significant factor within the Google algorithm to counter previous 'over-optimization' approaches. Instead, inbound links with an appropriate context for the destination page are more important. - Use this tool which shows the frequency and density of different keyphrases: http://www.abakus-internet-marketing.de/tools/topword.html - Other on-page optimization factors such as formatting, and page connectivity factors such as link popularity and PageRank of a page and its authority are also very important, particularly for competitive phrases.

The page length is clearly closely related to keyword density since *increasing page length typically decreases keyword density*. This has led to an approach of optimizers using relatively **short pages of 200 to 400 words** for pages specifically created for optimization, but this should not be a hard and fast rule.

Many online research papers and articles rank highly, so there are likely to be positive factors in using longer documents that contain keywords throughout, i.e. similar keyword density to a shorter document, but greater length. In this example though, the research papers may be ranking well simply because good content breeds link love.

Additionally, longer pages are more likely to contain a range of keyphrases that may be better at reaching searchers using low-volume search tail keyterms.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 22	Page length	Applies to: Each page on site	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The length of the page in words. Search engines strip out scripts and code markup, <head> sections, and possibly some parts of the navigation.		
<i>Example:</i>	Use this tool to show page length: http://www.abakus-internet-marketing.de/tools/topword.html		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Often recommended to be limited to 200 to 400 words by search engine optimizers to make it easier to achieve density. 2. However, particularly for research topics there is likely to be value in longer documents that may be judged to be of more value to readers. 3. For longer documents / articles, consider including different versions of documents, e.g. (a) 5 page interlinked documents (b) full document (for printing, possibly without main navigation). ClickZ (www.clickz.com/experts) uses this approach and the print version of documents often rank higher, they do not seem to attract a duplicate content penalty since Google will select the page with the highest link equity.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- This factor combines with keyphrase density. - Longer pages are often found to be more successful in converting human visitors since different alternatives for persuasion are possible. - Remember that for keyphrases with high competition, other off-page		

	optimization factors described elsewhere in this report such as link popularity and authority are also very important – success cannot be achieved through on-page factors alone. • Since the homepage tends to have the highest PageRank of a site there is an argument for making this page longer to enable use of a wider range of keyphrases and internal links incorporating keyphrases.
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3.3.2 Keyphrase position on page

The position of the keyphrase on the page seems to have some impact, although is of less importance than frequency and density.

Best practice is to include the phrase towards the top of the document and then regularly through the document. Experimentation is the only real way for you to determine where best to place keyphrases. Think about the [inverted pyramid](#) approach to news writing – this applies to online content too.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 23	Keyword position on page	Applies to: Each page in site (particularly important on homepage)	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	There is much anecdotal evidence that increasing the density of a keyphrase towards the top of the document is an indication to the search engines of relevance for that keyphrase.		
<i>Example:</i>	Siebel (www.siebel.com) has structured its homepage so that the phrase 'Customer Relationship Management' is above the main header incorporated into a hyperlink. The page www.marketing-online.co.uk , which ranks highly for the search "Internet marketing training" (http://www.google.co.uk/search?&q=marketing+online+training) has a higher density of this keyphrase, formatted in various different ways towards the document.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Include target keyphrases near the top of the body copy of the document. 2. Structure the code of documents forming the page templates of sites so that the body copy appears in the document before the main navigation (if practical). 3. Repeat the phrase regularly throughout document and include at end of document, particularly in hyperlinks to sections to find out more.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Sites can be designed so that one or two keyphrases can be included before the main navigation. • This relates closely to page template and code design.		

3.3.3 Keyword synonyms

The consideration of synonyms and phrase variants is a key differentiator between SEO copywriters who really know their stuff and those who simply crank out pages using a core set of keyphrases.

We have seen how the search engines use *keyword density* as one factor in assessing onpage optimization. We have also seen how this is subject to spamming.

So, to reduce the risk of keyword or keyphrase stuffing on a page negatively affecting relevance, search engines now place great emphasis on **related words**. If you think about it, words related to keyphrases should appear naturally in the course of writing a document. Let's coin a term here: '**synonym density**'.

It is hard to determine how much importance search engines allocate to the use of related words but *E-consultancy believes that this is likely to become a key factor in the months and years to come*, as search engines try to improve relevancy.

This factor seems to have increased in importance with the Google purchase of Applied Semantics in 2003 and its ontology of related themes.

Tip 25. Use of the tilde (~) Google advanced search syntax operator is useful for identifying what Google considers as synonyms.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 24	Synonyms of keyword / phrase	Applies to: <title> tag Body copy	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Phrases or words that are commonly used as alternatives for the main target keyphrase. Also remember that singular and plural forms of words are used differently		
<i>Example:</i>	When promoting a marketing training course, relevance might be boosted if you refer to related concepts, such as sales or commerce.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Include a range of synonyms within page copy, meta descriptions and within title tags if possible. 2. Use synonyms when developing copy for product related content in catalogues, or use an attribute table for each catalogue product which describes different features / benefits of a product. 3. An automated approach may be possible where each product has different attributes and these are combined in a table or in sentences with different qualifiers. 4. Publishing search results for a site may help with this since users may enter synonyms naturally.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• With decreased importance of keyword density this is an important factor. • This process shouldn't be left until copywriting; ideally it should be part of keyphrase analysis and selection. • Tools for identifying synonyms include Thesauri and Word synonym suggester • The search engine synonyms are not necessarily the same as those in a thesaurus. Google synonyms are suggested in <titles> of SERPs for this syntax: • Use of the tilde (~) Google advanced search syntax operator is useful for identifying what Google as operators. • ~keyphrase –keyphrase, e.g. ~marketing –marketing shows equivalents such as sales, commerce, etc highlighted in the <title> tag. Remember that this is the call-to-action hyperlink in the SERPs tag, so it also needs to be effective as a		

	call-to-action.
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Tip 26. Also assess homonyms where the meaning of a phrase may conflict with the marketing objectives, e.g. Blackberry fruits and Blackberry handhelds are not the same.

For competitive **strategic keyphrases**, it may be worth a look at how competitors are approaching this. Use a Keyword density tool such as that from Abakus (<http://www.abakus-internet-marketing.de/tools/topword.html>).

Suggested approach:

1. If available, take a look at Hitwise (www.hitwise.co.uk) for sites which are performing poorly; identify top competitors.
2. Identify pages that perform well through googling ["keyphrase" site:www.competitor.com].
3. Assess their keyword density page using the Abakus tool.
4. Assess links in with link tool.
5. Adjust own copy and links to outperform.

A factor related to synonyms is to consider closely related phrase variants such as misspelling, plurals and z spellings.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 25	Ensure visibility for similar phrase variants	Applies to: Each target keyphrase on page.	Importance: 2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Phrase variants are closely related versions of a keyword such as plurals, Z spellings and misspellings, but excluding synonyms.		
<i>Example:</i>	holiday, holidays; siebel, seibel; optimization, optimization.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Include different versions 2. Misspellings don't have to be too common unless they are used widely on other sites. E.g. They can be put at the bottom of your 'About Us' page.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Use of these may avoid spamming penalties, so best to use as far as possible. • Can use in brackets		

3.3.4 Homepage keyphrase relevance

SEO Ranking Success Factor 26	Homepage keyphrase relevance	Applies to: Homepage of each domain	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Google and the other search engines tend to list the homepage in the SERPs listing if it has relevance for this keyphrase i.e. included on page or within backlinks. If there are two listings for a site, it is often the first or second. The reasons for this are related to PageRank as explained in a later section ().		
<i>Example:</i>	Search on your main products and you will often find the homepage is reported first for your site.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Carefully select high volume/high quality keyphrases for homepages. 2. Use a title tag for the homepage that reflects main phrases and that is effective in encouraging clickthrough. 3. Develop an excellent meta description for the homepage that encourages clickthrough since this is often listed.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• This is mainly a consequence of the importance of backlinks which tend to link to the homepage and internal link structure with links pointing back to homepage.		

3.4 Page markup factors

Note that your capacity to implement the recommendations in this section will depend on the capabilities of your content management system (CMS), as well as the education of content owners and copywriters in these techniques.

Sometimes a CMS does not readily support the modification of meta tags or title tags, or more commonly their importance to SEO is not highlighted, so they may be omitted. However, tags are mandatory for every page.

In this section we will cover the most important page-markup factors:

- Standards adoption.
- <title> tags.
- <meta name> tags.
- Headings, eg <H1>, <H2>, <H3>.
- Keyword formatting.
- Hyperlinks.
- Restructuring pages with HTML code.
- Reducing content by removing code to separate files.
- CSS tricks.
- Optimizing Flash sites (stop sniggering).

- **<noscript> tags.**
- **Framed sites.**

When selecting a new CMS ensure that you check its capabilities for achieving the on-page markup techniques described in this section.

3.4.1 Standards adoption

Despite the emergence of many sophisticated content management systems and e-commerce shopping catalogues, the creation of web pages effective for SEO still fundamentally relies on mastery of the HTML coding used to form pages.

Specifically, accurate use of the HTML standards in line with the Worldwide Web Consortium (www.w3.org) is important.

Furthermore, search engines have *specific standards* or approaches for the way they interpret page markup.

SEO Ranking Factor 27	Accurate use of HTML markup standards	Applies to: Each page on site	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Accurate use of the HTML standards in line with the Worldwide Web consortium (W3C) (www.w3.org). Use of markup tags. Furthermore, search engines have specific standards or approaches for the way they interpret page markup, to provide you with extra help with this area.		
<i>Example:</i>	This survey by Google (http://code.google.com/webstats/index.html) highlights some errors in coding such as the meta tag often coded wrongly for different areas of markup.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Follow the markup standards suggested by the W3C 2. Use the latest HTML syntax recommended by search engines where known. 3. Check for quality of page coding through HTML validation tools. Are you using latest coding techniques for different parts of the site? Find out more: http://validator.w3.org/		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Evaluate across different areas of code: <head> including document definition, title and meta tags, • Key <body> elements include markup for table and hyperlinks (<a>, e.g. rel="no follow" and title="") and img attributes.		

3.4.2 <title> tags

The keywords in the title of a web page that appears at the top of a browser window are indicated in the HTML code by the <TITLE></TITLE> keyword.

This is significant in search engine listings since **if a key phrase appears in a title it is more likely to be listed highly**. Certainly it carries more weight than a keyphrase that appears in the body text of a page.

It follows that each page on a site should have a specific title giving the name of a company and the product, service or offer / content featured on a page.

Titles are **labels**: ideally relevant and descriptive labels, so as not to confuse readers or Googlebot. Let them know what to expect. It is that simple.

All the search engines place great emphasis on the title tag for assessing the relevance of the content on the page, so great care should be taken in constructing a unique, relevant title tag for every page.

It is thought that a greater weighting is given to key phrases at the left of the title tag and those with a higher keyphrase density.

*The Title HTML tag is typically the text underlined within the search results page, which forms a hyperlink through to your website on Google. If it is an effective call-to-action that also demonstrates relevance you should receive more clicks, which equals more visits, meaning that your page is *relevant to the search query*, as far as the search engines are concerned.*

However, there is sometimes a **trade-off** between a compelling call-to-action and an accurate headline, as the former might be more eye-catching while the latter might contain a more Google-friendly description. If in doubt we would *opt for descriptive keywords rather than wacky puns*.

Tip 27. Google <phrase> site:www.example.com to review the hyperlinks to evaluate how effective your title tags are as (1) Calls-to-action in the SERPs and (2) Incorporation of keyphrases relevant to the document and consistent with searcher behaviour.

Some believe the role of the title tag is diminishing as it is increasingly spammed. Despite this, we believe **improving the title tag is often the biggest, quickest win, in terms of on-page optimization**. Unless algorithms change massively then surely accurate and descriptive titles will always help robots make sense of your page.

Key recommendation 34. Educate all content owners on the importance of the title tag and agree site-wide rules with the agency how it is constructed.

SEO Ranking Factor 28	Title HTML tag	Applies to: HTML Header	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The title of each web page appears at the top of the browser window and is indicated in the HTML code by the <title></title> keyword. It is also very important since typically the text underlined within the search results page forms a hyperlink through to your website. If it is an effective call-to-action that demonstrates relevance you will receive more clicks which equals more visits. It also helps the search engine determine whether your content is relevant. This is significant in search engine listings since if a key phrase appears in a title it is more likely to be listed highly than if it is only in the body text of a page. It follows that each page on a site should have a specific title giving the name of a company and the product, service or offer featured on a page.		
<i>Example:</i>	<pre><title>E-consultancy.com : Information, training and events on best practice online marketing and e-commerce</title></pre> 		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use target keyphrase(s) and keywords to left of tag, brand / site name on right. For example, the above could become: <title> Internet and online marketing and e-commerce best practice: E-consultancy.com</title> This should balance making the title grammatical and effective in the SERPs. 2. Make unique on each page. 3. Minimise keyword density – typically less than 10 to 15 keywords. 4. Avoid keyword stuffing.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• This is the call-to-action hyperlink in the SERPs. It needs to be effective for this. • There is also a title meta tag, which can replace this. • Poor coding or a CMS feature can lead to duplicate <TITLE tags>, the search engines usually take the first.		

3.4.3 <meta name=" " > tags

Meta-tags are part of the HTML file, typed in by web page creators, which is read and displayed by the browser.

The two most important are the **meta description meta tag** which summarises the content of the page in a short paragraph and the **meta keywords meta tag** which is used to list keywords relevant to the page.

These tags are effectively hidden from users, but are used by some search engines when robots or spiders compile their index. In the early days keyphrases in meta tags were very important in assisting ranking.

However, **keyword stuffing** meant that most search engines don't assign much relevance to them nowadays, certainly compared against page copy unless there is little other text content on the page.

Google engineers have been quoted as saying that they don't use the meta keywords tag at all. However the meta description tag is very important because of its role on the SERPs page. And who knows what the future holds...?

Tip 28. Ensure your meta description is effective in explaining what you offer and encouraging clickthrough since it will often be displayed on the SERPs page.

The Meta description meta tag is used to summarise the content of a document.

SEO Ranking Factor 29	Meta description meta tag	Applies to: Each page on site	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	A meta tag is an attribute of the page within the HTML <head> section which can be set by the content owner. The "description" meta tag denotes the information which will sometimes be displayed in the SERPs when a web page is found if relevant 'snippets' cannot be used from within the body copy. To view meta tags for a site, select View, Source or Page Source in your browser.		
<i>Example:</i>	<meta name="description" content="Different credit cards for different people. Looking for a great rate? Had trouble getting a credit card in the past? Either way we could have the card to suit you! Apply online, service your account online.">		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Create a unique meta description for every page where practical, otherwise Google may display a snippet in the SERPS that at best you have little control over and at worst is gobbledygook. For product catalogues and larger sites, the meta description can be automatically generated to include the product keyword name plus a summary of the value proposition of the site. 2. For your homepage and pages targeting strategic keyphrases, create a powerful meta description that combines a call-to-action and summarises your differential proposition and encourages clickthrough on SERPs as in the example from Capital One above (although this is a little long). Purists may disagree with this and suggest that just a straight description of page content is more in keeping with the spirit of the W3C standard and accessibility guidelines. However, this is a guide on search engine <i>marketing</i> best practice. 3. Remember that just 15-20 words (150 characters) of the meta description are visible within the SERPS of Google – make sure your key message isn't truncated.		

	Often less is more – a succinct description may be more powerful. 4. Limit to 2-4 keyphrases per page. 5. Do not use too many keywords or use too many irrelevant filler words within this meta tag since this will reduce keyword density. 6. Avoid undue repetition – 2 to 3 times maximum, otherwise may be assessed as spamming. 7. Incorporate phrase variants and synonyms within copy. 8. Vary on all pages within site. 9. Make different from <title> tag since this may be a sign of keyword stuffing. It also helps if it is complementary to the title to appear more relevant to the searcher.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• This is particularly important for Flash or image rich sites which have no other indication of page context. • Google engineers have stated they don't use meta tags, but reputedly used for context in other search engines. • This factor is mainly important since the meta description is often displayed on the SERPs and a relevant description encourages clickthrough. Google has been quoted as saying that is isn't important in terms of keyphrase analysis, although it is likely to be important on image rich sites where there is no other contextual information. • Particularly important for Flash or image rich sites. • Consider the number of words from the meta. • Meta description in SERPs may be replaced by the description in directory (www.dmoz.org) if present. • Meta description in SERPS may also be replaced by snippets. Google has reduced its use of snippets but may occur in some cases. In order of precedence, taken from the meta tags, within body copy or the open directory. Snippet displayed depends on match with search term entered. The use of snippets has apparently reduced in the last year. If you want to force snippets to be removed: <META NAME="GOOGLEBOT" CONTENT="NOSNIPPET"> • To force use of snippets, leave the meta description blank. Some advise this, but we advise that control of meta descriptions will generate more clickthroughs resulting in more visitors and a higher clickthrough rate (an off-page factor) which will boost position over time. • Note: removing snippets also removes cached pages. • See http://www.google.com/webmasters/remove.html#remove_snippets • Using competitor brand names in the meta tags is illegal in many countries. • See http://www.w3.org/TR/REC-html40/struct/global.html#h-7.4.4.2 for the standard.

The Meta keywords meta tag is used to summarise the content of a document based on keywords. Some unscrupulous SEOs can still be heard to say to potential clients (“we will optimize your meta tags”). This is partly because that’s what the client wants to hear – a surprising number have heard of the concept way back and still think it is important.

But, as Danny Sullivan of Searchenginewatch.com has said in the past to stress the point:

‘Meta tags are not a magic solution’

‘Meta tags are not a magic solution’

‘Meta tags are not a magic solution’

Today, meta keywords are *relatively unimportant* as a ranking factor. If you test the importance of meta keywords by placing a unique keyword in the meta keywords tag you will find that Google does not identify the page.

However, they are still significant in that they may be used by the search engine to assess the theme or context of a page (particularly where little other text information is available such as for Flash or image rich sites). So it is still best practice to *include a unique version of the meta tags for important content* on the site and select them to fit the context of the page.

SEO Ranking Factor 30	Meta keywords meta tag	Applies to: Each page on site	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The “keywords” meta tag is an attribute of the page within the HTML which can be set by the content owner. It contains keyphrases which refer to the content of the page.		
<i>Example:</i>	<meta name="keywords" content="Capital One, Capital One UK, Capital 1, credit cards, credit card, platinum, uk credit cards, MasterCard, Visa, low apr, 0% , purchase teaser, online banking, internet account servicing, online account servicing, e-banking, sixty second decision, apply online, apply for a card, safe shopping, internet shopping, secure shopping, fraud guarantee, rebuild credit, bad credit, debt consolidation.">		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Select keywords that reflect the theme or context of the page. 2. Separate by commas (or spaces). 3. Use 5 to 8 keyphrases maximum otherwise there will be a dilution effect which will decrease keyword density. There are too many in example above 4. Use keyphrases with high relevance, high volume on homepage. Some of those above are too generic, e.g. Mastercard or too low volume, e.g. e-banking. Use lower volume keyphrases on other pages. 5. Use different phrase variants including plurals, misspellings and synonyms. 6. Don’t spend too much time refining meta keywords since they are relatively unimportant as a ranking factor.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Limited use by Google to assess relevance, inform position in SERPs. • Low weighting for other search engines for assessing page context. • Review competitor meta tags to assess what they optimize upon. • Using competitor brand names in the meta tags is illegal in many countries.		

Other meta-tags are used to give a variety of other information about a web document. Below we indicate the other meta tags which may be relevant to SEO.

SEO Ranking Factor 31	Other meta tags	Applies to: Each page on site	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The META element within the <HEAD> of an HTML system can be used to define any attribute of a document. These may be specific to an organization's standards or the content management system used.		
<i>Example:</i>	The META element can be given the property "author" and value assigned to it as follows: <pre><META name="Author" content="Dave Chaffey" .</pre>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. If managing a localized site, use the 'lang' property to define the language. <pre><META name="keywords" lang="en" content="holiday, Greece, sunshine"> <META name="keywords" lang="fr" content="vacances, Gr&egrave;ce, soleil"></pre> 2. The character set should also be defined : <pre><META http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=ISO-8859-5"></pre> 3. It is not necessary to use the expiration attribution and this has no effect within search engines. <pre><META http-equiv="expires" content="31 Dec 2006"></pre> 4. It is not necessary to use the 'Revisit after' tag since search robots follow their own rules for crawling content. <pre><meta name="revisit-after" content="25 days"></pre>		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• We have referred elsewhere to the main meta tags that are used: • Meta description and Meta keywords (immediately above) • Meta Robots to stop a page being followed • Meta Refresh to redirect to another page. • Find out more: See the W3C definitions for meta tags: http://www.w3.org/TR/REC-html40/struct/global.html#h-7.4.4 • The types of document markup are part of a more general development known as the semantic web (http://www.w3.org/2001/sw/). In the future, new standards for labelling content will emerge. • One related example is the The Dublin Core. In future, search engines will hopefully one-day support the XML/RDF based Dublin Core definitions (http://dublincore.org/) which have been widely adopted on large scale intranets to definitively specify items such as title, publication date and publisher. For now though, <title> tag overrides the meta name="DC.title" as in the example below. So it is important to continue to use both as in this example. <pre><title>DCMI Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)</title> <link rel="schema.DC" href="http://purl.org/dc/elements/1.1/" /> <meta name="DC.title" content="Dublin Core Metadata Initiative Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)" /> <meta name="DC.description" content="Answers to Frequently Asked Questions about the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative and Dublin Core metadata." /> <meta name="DC.date" content="2006-10-31" /> <meta name="DC.format" content="text/html" /> <meta name="DC.language" content="en" /></pre>		

	<pre><meta name="DC.publisher" content="Dublin Core Metadata Initiative" /></pre> A final type of tag (although not a meta tag) is the comment tag which is not used by the search engines: <pre><!-- Main section of document--></pre>
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3.4.4 Headings <h1>,<h2>,<h3>

Usage of prominent headings and sub-headings containing target keyphrases within a document is a 'no-brainer' since it also helps with usability and accessibility and to some extent with SEO. While it is often dismissed as being unimportant for SEO, it is more effective to have a keyphrase in a heading rather than in body copy (combining both is best). Note that some Content Management Systems still do not readily support this.

Tip 29. Ensure in-house content owners and reviewers know the importance of heading styles and they have the capability to add them (some CMS don't support this).

SEO Ranking Success Factor 32	Target keyphrase in headings	Applies to: Each page. Particularly important for homepage.	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Using heading styles <h1>, <h2>, etc containing target keyphrases has some positive effects, but the default sizes are not acceptable for visual design, so the font style is used to produce a smaller, more aesthetic font, often using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to apply across the whole site.		
<i>Example:</i>	This page features 'accessibility' in the headings in conjunction with other target keyphrases, e.g. accessibility events, accessibility research, etc. http://www.e-consultancy.com/topic/accessibility		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Introduce more use of subheadings within document, if this is not the house/copywriting style. 2. Include different keyphrases in different subheadings within document. 3. <h1> is best, use CSS to reduce font weight.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Subheads are important to the accessibility, scannability and utility of a web page for a user, so they should be effective for this also. • It may be more efficient to use headings as links, e.g. see www.bbc.co.uk. • See entry on CSS below which can help display headings consistent with branding guidelines.		

3.4.5 Keyword formatting

The main type of keyword formatting that is used is bold. While widely regarded to be of low importance weighting it can again help make the copy more persuasive, so it is best practice to use it conservatively.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 33	Keyword formatting (bold)	Applies to: Body copy on each page	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is</i>	This is formatting using bold , <i>italic</i> , <u>underline</u> or style. Bold is most		

<i>it?</i>	important.
<i>Example:</i>	This article features best practice in SEO . This report has the details you need on site architecting, on-page optimization, linking strategies .
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use sparingly to help in converting the visitor to take the next action and to assist to some extent with SEO.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Italics or underlined words may not have any real effect, although italics often indicate quotations. - This can be made part of site style to have features in bold. CSS can be used to make bold appear consistent with site, e.g. in primary site colour rather than black.

3.4.6 Hyperlinks

*Hyperlinks are the most powerful page markup feature, both from an SEO point-of-view and since they highlight the calls-to-action to get the user to do more. They are so important to SEO because the **link anchor text** is referenced in the algorithm to assess relevance of the target page and by implication the page they contain. We discuss this in much more detail in the section on PageRank ().*

Tip 30. Content owners should be clear on the importance of hyperlinks and how to format them.

SEO Ranking Factor 34	 Hyperlinks	Applies to: Each and every text (and image) hyperlink on the web	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The hypertext used to form the text of a link, in the HTML.		
<i>Example:</i>	<pre>Anchor text which forms link when viewed in browser e.g. Accessability Channel</pre>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	It is best practice for the anchor text to include a target keyphrase for the destination page rather than something neutral or un-related such as 'click here' or 'more'. <pre><body> Read the E-consultancy Search Engine Marketing best practice guide. </body></pre>		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Adjacent text to the hyperlink is also taken into account for link context. - It is also possible (but not common practice) to include a title attribute for hyperlink. This has two benefits. First from an SEO point-of-view it may be taken into account for link context (to a small degree). Second and perhaps more important it can be used to engage site visitors and improve the user experience. As the mouse rolls over the hyperlink an additional message can be displayed which can persuade the user to click. <pre>Search engine marketing guide .</pre>		

	• Hyperlinks also have a rel='no follow' attribute in HTML which is described below. • Hyperlinks are also attached to images, so see the next success factor entry.
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3.4.7 Image tag ALT attributes

Images are obviously less important for SEO than body text but they do play some role since attributes can be attached to each image to explain its context and that is taken into account, particularly for image searches.

SEO Ranking Factor 35	Alternative text for images ('Alt' text)	Applies to: Each image on each page	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Graphical images that form each page can have 'hidden text' associated with them that is not seen by the user, but will be indexed by the search engine. This is required for accessibility compliance (screen-readers used by the blind and visually impaired, read-out the 'alt' tags), but is also used by the search engines to determine relevance where the image is associated with a hyperlink. Due to search engine spamming this factor is assigned lesser relevance than previously, but is more important if the images are set up as hyperlinks.		
<i>Example:</i>			
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use alt attributes that summarise the content of main images that are relevant on the page for accessibility reasons. 2. Use target keyphrases relevant for the page in linked images. 3. Create links for images that link through a target keyphrase page with 'alt' tags consistent with this keyphrase. 4. Don't overuse 'alt tags', e.g. adding to 'spacer' images used for layout which may be penalised.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Tests suggest this factor is more important if the image is also a hyperlink. • The Alt text is also a key factor in determining accessibility of visually impaired users. • Remember that the 'alt' text is often displayed with a user mouse rollover, so it needs to make sense for human readers and work for this purpose.		

3.4.8 Re-structuring pages with HTML code

Search engines seem to assign more weighting where the words are included towards the top of the document...

SEO Ranking Factor 36	Restructuring page layout	Applies to: Page template for whole site.	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	When assessing the relevance of a document for a particular keyphrase, search engines place more emphasis on where the words are included towards the top of the document. Given the standard design of web pages with global navigation at the top of the page and on the left of the page, body copy is usually pushed down the document.		
<i>Example:</i>	Siebel (www.siebel.com) has structured its homepage so that the phrase 'Customer Relationship Management' is above the main header incorporated into a hyperlink. If you view the source of the web design company Webcredible (http://www.webcredible.co.uk) you can see that CSS are used to position the body copy within the HTML file for the homepage above the navigation. Both these sites use a still relatively rare tableless layout which involves storing the		

	definitions of the layouts units (which use the CSS <code>float</code>) in an external stylesheet and the content elements are referenced using the <code>div</code> tag as shown in this code fragment. <pre> <html> <head> <link rel="stylesheet" href="layout.css" type="text/css" /> </head> <body> <div id="container1"> <div id="container2"> <!--Main content --> <div id="content"> </div> <!--Top nav content --> <div id="topnav"> </div> <!--Left nav content --> <div id="leftnav"> </div> </div> </body> </html> </pre>
	1. Incorporate the primary keyphrases(s) before (above) the main menus, ideally with a link. 2. Structure the HTML page code such that the main body copy occurs as near to the front of the document as practical. 3. Use a CSS-based rather than table-based layout if practical for all browsers.
What to watch for?	• The need for effective SEO needs to be balanced against the aesthetics of the page and its impact on the user experience • The actual restructuring approach will depend on your method of page layout: <i>Find out more (table layouts):</i> http://www.webconfs.com/page-layout-ideas.php (shows how to use HTML tables to include body text above left nav for a simple design) <i>Find out more (CSS layouts):</i> http://www.devarticles.com/c/a/Web-Style-Sheets/DIV-Based-Layout-with-CSS/ (this is an introduction to concept from a developer rather than SEO perspective) • This factor is particularly important for the homepage and other pages targeting competitive strategic keyphrases. • It is likely that search engines can approximate where the start of body copy is through identifying blocks of contiguous text after heading tags (although this may not exist on directory listing type pages) and so it is not clear the benefits this best practice may confer. • Changing from table-based to CSS layouts is a major enterprise for most sites. There are risks in using CSS since it may not render appropriately due to different browser implementations of CSS.

3.4.9 Reducing content by removing code to separate files

Placing commonly referenced page presentation and scripting elements in common files shared throughout the site has many benefits including those for SEO.

SEO Ranking Factor 37	Separating code for presentation from document content copy using Cascading Style Sheet (CSS)	Applies to: Whole site	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Web page content (text body copy) is separated from code used for layout and formatting which is stored in a separate Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) file (.css). This enables the length of the document to be decreased and could arguably increase keyphrase density (although it is likely that most search engines will not include HTML markup code in the calculation of keyphrase density anyway).		
<i>Example:</i>	The E-consultancy site uses a stylesheet included by this <head> command: <link href="/styles/global.asp.css" rel="stylesheet" type="text/css" media="screen">		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Remove CSS to a separate .css file and include it rather than defining styles in the <head> area or use of inline styles.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- This is also widely followed as best practice for web design since it enables restyling / reskinning of a site without modification of formatting within the document. It also reduces page load times. - Find out more: Official W3C guidelines: http://www.w3.org/Style/CSS/. CSS Zengarden (http://www.csszengarden.com). Illustrates how different designs can be implemented through CSS). Owen Briggs, author of Cascading Style Sheets has good resources: http://glish.com/css.		

A similar technique is placing Javascript or other scripting code in a separate file.

SEO Ranking Factor 38	Separating scripting code for from document content copy e.g. Javascript.	Applies to: Whole site	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Web page content (text body copy) is separated from scripting code for various purposes, e.g. As for CCS, this enables the length of the document to be decreased and could arguably increase keyphrase density (although it is likely that most search engines will not include HTML markup code in the calculation of keyphrase density anyway).		
<i>Example:</i>	The E-consultancy site incorporates Javascript included by this <head> command: <script language="JavaScript" src="/js/home.js" type="text/javascript"></script>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Remove script to a separate file and include it rather than using it in full in the <head> area or other parts of the document.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- This is also widely followed as best practice for web design since it enables a unique piece of scripting code to be modified for the whole site rather than modification for each document. It also reduces page load times. - Some scripting techniques, e.g. for menus, may cause difficulty for indexers to spider. - Find out more: http://javascript.internet.com.		

3.4.10 Optimizing Flash sites

Don't waste your time. Just use your budget to build a new, standards-based website, one that can be crawled properly by Googlebot.

Ok, so Flash-based sites are perhaps not as common as in the past, but they are still used to produce high impact, branded visuals, and remain widely used in brand sites. They are also used to develop sophisticated applications and rubbish floating ads (2nd generation pop-ups, despite what the rich media networks think).

But Flash sites are somewhat inept, no matter how pretty they look. They are normally **inaccessible for users and also for search robots**. If search engine traffic is part of your business plan and an agency recommends a Flash site, you need to start asking some killer questions. Or just flee, screaming.

Since the text within the Flash site components cannot be as readily parsed by search engines as HTML-based text, **it is certain that Flash-based sites will not be as effective for SEO.**

Although search engines can now index Flash files, this does not mean it is acceptable best practice to create sites entirely in Flash.

SEO Ranking Factor 39	Use of Flash and other plug-in based applications	Applies to: Entire sites using Flash, Flash Splash pages or Flash components	Importance:  5/5 (if using Flash)
<i>What is it?</i>	Flash is a software component used for producing dynamic, interactive websites or site components. Other plug-ins such as Java may also be used for similar purposes, e.g. software demonstrations.		
<i>Example:</i>	Birds Eye site. This Unilever site might have been completely Flash-based in the past, but now is mainly text-based after the homepage (http://www.birdeye.co.uk) and ranks well for searches on content about healthy eating, for example: http://www.birdseye.co.uk/health-and-nutrition . It makes good use of the <noscript> tag to give context to the search engines although uses a branded message rather than search terms a user might use. The title tag just includes the brand name. <noscript></noscript>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Minimise use of Flash, instead use .gif or .jpeg images to produce a similar effect. 2. Title tags and any body copy text copy there is becomes important on such sites. 3. Use Flash detection scripts. If not found, use this to indicate information about page, or place this information in the no-script area. Along with image Alt text. 4. Use Flash components for part of page rather than using it to deliver the whole page. This approach is common in US B2B sites, e.g. www.siebel.com, www.esri.com, www.microstrategy.com. A consumer example is http://www.guinness.com/gb_en/. 5. If Flash is used for displaying text content, e.g. Macromedia Breeze, then also provide alternate HTML copy.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Flash for a home splash page that redirects to a homepage is heinous from a usability and SEO viewpoint. Flash detection or error scripts are sometimes the first page listed for a site. A well-known drinks brand has this page returned in		

	the SERPS below the homepage for a brand search: “<i>Error Page. We apologize but there were problems rendering the current page. Please contact the system administrator.</i>” • There are many other reasons why Flash is arguably rarely best practice for web design, e.g. printing, bookmarking, measurement, etc. • Find out more: www.macromedia.com.
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3.4.11 <noscript> tags

*These tags are really legacy tags from the days when some browsers didn't support Javascript. However, today **not all browsers support Javascript**, and they may have some benefits for SEO, so their use should be considered and reviewed.*

SEO Ranking Factor 40	Use of <noscript> tags	Applies to: Within <body> part of document.	Importance:  1/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The <noscript> tag was intended to provide visible content to users of browsers which did not support Javascript or other languages or have them switched off. Although use of such browsers is rare today, there are some users of screen readers or mobile browsers which may not support this script so it is best practice to have some alternative content.		
<i>Example:</i>	You have to switch off Javascript in your browser to see what the effect of this is. A typical code fragment is: <pre><noscript> <h1>Main products</h1> Product 1 (etc) <h1>Strategic keyphrase(s)</h1> Keyphrase rich body text contains hyperlinks to key products. </noscript></pre> MyTravel (http://www.mytravel.com/) has a simple page containing its strategic keyphrases and links to main product areas. However it doesn't have a message explaining that scripting is switched off.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Recommended that <noscript> is used for the homepage and key product pages to assist with SEO and to support accessibility. 2. On home or key pages, links are sometimes included within the <noscript> tag e.g. a mini-sitemap or links to pages containing strategic keyphrases that you don't have sufficient room for on the homepage. However, these should be relevant to the context of the page, otherwise this verges on cloaking. 3. Test sites you are responsible for with scripting disabled on different types of browsers (use www.browsercam.com to assess different browser versions). For example, at the time of writing, a banking site has a blank page with hyperlinks hidden within noscript. Rubbish.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Since the <noscript> tag has been subject to spamming it is virtually disregarded by search engines / has a low-weighting factor. In fact many sites now don't this tag at all.		

3.4.12 Framed sites

Framed sites are rare today, although some small business sites use them, or they are used for specialist applications such as information retrieval. For reference, this is best practice for a framed site.

SEO Ranking Factor 41	Framed sites	Applies to: Only framed sites	Importance:  1/5 Unless yours is framed.
<i>What is it?</i>	Frames are a web page layout feature implemented through HTML . Typically, one or more frames has fixed content, used for display of company name, logo and menus. Sometimes one frame is used for a top-level menu, which remains fixed, and other frames are used to give search results, catalogue details or sub-menu options. Traditionally search engines had problems indexing framed sites, though most can cope with them today.		
<i>Example:</i>	Frames are today rare. In the early days of the web, they made it easier to update pages that had separate areas of screen for navigation, titles, etc without a CMS (I remember creating a site in them in 1997 I think). They may still be a good solution for some applications, e.g. Tesco.com shopping basket / catalogue interface uses this approach. A typical frames syntax, in this case to create a two column site with a third of the site on the left, e.g. for navigation, is: <pre><body> <Frameset cols="30%,*"> <FRAME SRC="menu.htm" scrolling="yes" name="menu_area"> <FRAME SRC="main.htm" scrolling="yes" name="main_area"> </Frameset> <noframes> This area can be used for keyword rich text, relevant to your homepage. It can also contain a simple menu system for browsers, e.g. PDA browsers that don't support Frames. </noframes> </body></pre>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Avoid creating a framed site, but if you already have one... 2. Have a clear <title> tag for each sub-frame page. 3. Each framed page to use navigation in its footer in case parent frame isn't loaded when deep-linked to. 4. If your site uses frames you have to force display of the parent page, e.g. containing the menus when someone deep links into your site. Otherwise there is no context for the page such as menus or title. This is possible using a range of approaches summarised well here. 5. Use the <noframes> tag on the homepage for indicating the main content of the site and including menus for browsers which don't support frames. Note though that some search engines may not support <noframes>, e.g. don't follow links, an		

	alternative is to include these in <noscript>
	Find out more: http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/article.php/2167901
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- From an SEO perspective, the main disadvantage of using frames is that framed content can be displayed without its parent frame, so lacks context information, e.g. name of company, this is why special coding is required to force the parent frame to load. - Frames are now rarely used except in simple website implementations or where they deliver functionality that is less easily delivered by a single page format. We will not discuss the many other disadvantages of frames, e.g. difficulties in printing, bookmarking, visual design, etc.

3.5 Document-level keyphrase factors

For the whole document level, there are two keyphrase related issues which are often discussed. These are relatively unimportant, but worth following as best practice guidelines. This is the use of keyphrases within a domain name and within the file name or directory reference to the document.

3.5.1 Keyphrase(s) within domain name

The web address or page URL is not really an aspect of on-page optimization, but we have included it here since it is closely related to the keyphrase used on the page.

There are 2 advantages to placing keyphrases within the domain name or web page name. First, the domain name and page title are displayed as the last part of the SERPs listing. This means that the searcher may assess the URL for relevance and if it contains the right keyphrase, some may be more likely to click on it. Secondly, it is believed that search engines give some weighting to this factor although it is less important than aspects concerned with the body copy. But it all helps...!

The following two factors share much in common, but have different applications.

SEO Ranking Factor 42	Keyphrase(s) within domain name	Applies to: Top-level and sub-domains for a site.	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	If the domain name contains keywords within the keyphrase, then the search engine may place more relevance on this.		
<i>Example:</i>	Dave Chaffey's site "Marketing Online", http://www.marketing-online.co.uk ranks well for the keyphrase "marketing online" although it is optimized for "Internet marketing training". You can identify sites related to your category using the inurl or allinurl syntax, for <example allinurl:marketing online> e.g. http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=allinurl%3Amarketing+online . Sites tend to be returned first which have these in the domain name and then within the directory / filename.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. If possible, for start-ups or new domains, register URLs which comprise high volume, high relevance keywords. 2. For simplicity, best to use concatenated words as domain. Search engines will normally distinguish separate concatenated keywords, e.g. www.marketingonline.co.uk or sites can contain words separated by hyphens, e.g. www.marketing-online.co.uk which denote separate words (underscores not permitted for domain names).		
<i>What to watch</i>	Search engines are likely to identify words within the domain (and filename) even if they are not separated by hyphens – this is not essential. However,		

<i>for?</i>	previous tests have suggested that underscores are not recognised, so hyphens are best practice. - Do not register domains which are too long or contain too many hyphens, since these may be penalised. - May also improve link-context of pages linking to a destination page.
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3.5.3 Keyphrase(s) within document filename

The merits of inclusion of keywords within the filename are often debated, but it is best practice to incorporate target keywords since at the very least the filename will be displayed in the SERPs pages and may denote relevance to some searchers.

SEO Ranking Factor 43	Keyphrase(s) within document filename (and within folders structure)	Applies to: Each page	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	If the page name or the subdirectories (s) contain keywords within the filename, then the search engine may place more relevance on this.		
<i>Example:</i>	This page lists different Internet marketing training courses. http://www.marketing-online.co.uk/internet-marketing-training.htm . An alternative approach is to place the page in a relevant folder: http://www.marketing-online.co.uk/training/internet-marketing-training.htm .		
<i>Best practice:</i>	- Incorporate one or two keywords most relevant for the page into the page title. - Separate keyphrases by hyphens which denote separate words (not underscores).		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Search engines are likely to identify words within the domain (and filename) even if they are not separated by hyphens – this is not essential. - The filename may be displayed within the SERPS, so make it relevant. - The URL will be truncated if too long (although the page name is always shown). - May also improve link-context of pages linking to a destination page.		

3.5.4 Non HTML document types

Today's leading search engines support filtering to display results of other specific document types including Adobe Acrobat (.pdf), Microsoft Word, Excel and Powerpoint. For example, in Google these are accessed through Advanced search (http://www.google.co.uk/advanced_search) or the filetype:.doc syntax.

Today these documents seem to have a lower priority than HTML documents in the listings, so it is not best practice to include them. We mention them since some advanced searches may filter on these document types, so for some business-to-business applications it may be worthwhile enabling indexing of Powerpoint or Excel files.

The principles of on-page optimization should also be considered by companies who use a lot of .pdf documents online (common in some B2B companies), but best practice is to produce optimized HTML versions of all .pdf documents which are likely to help deliver high volume/high intent visitors for the sector involved.

Images are another form of non-HTML document. Again, the proportion of people who search on these while researching products is small, but I have heard some cases where a niche B2B or B2C product has been located this way. As we mentioned in section (3.4.7), best practice is to include an ALT tag for all product related images and caption adjacent to the image.

4. SEO Success Factor 4: Link-building

Introduction

In this section we show why the links between pages are at least as important as on-page optimization in determining results from SEO. We will review the principle of PageRank, pioneered by Google to assess the relevance of pages based on their link popularity.

PageRank has many implications for the way sites should be built and pages are linked, and we describe six principles you need to be aware of. Although PageRank is today not given as much weighting in generating search results, *many of these principles can still be applied to give better results from SEO.*

We will also recommend approaches on the six main strategies for external link-building from third party sites:

1. Natural link-building through quality content.
2. Requesting inbound-only links.
3. Reciprocal linking.
4. Buying links.
5. Creating your own external links.
6. Generating buzz through PR.

What is link-building? Why does it matter to SEO?

One of the reasons for the dramatic growth of the Internet is the ease with which related sites and pages within sites can link to each other. This is a natural process and with good quality content, many sites will naturally receive links from other sites whose owners believe the linked content is a good resource for their visitors.

As we will see, the developers of Google realised that **link popularity** and **link quality** were a great way of determining the relevance of a page, especially once combined with the keyphrases on that page.

Since all major search engines now follow this logic, proactive **link-building** has become a key activity for SEO. While good results can be obtained without proactive link-building through the natural growth of links, to achieve the best position on the SERPs, particularly within competitive sectors, requires proactive link-building to support quality on-page content.

Key recommendation 35. Ensure a proactive link-building programme occurs as part of the SEO process.

To understand why link-building is so important and to know the success factors for link-building we first need to understand the concept of **Google PageRank** method.

But first, a simple illustration:

To see the importance of links to SEO, search on Google for the query '[miserable failure](#)' and take your pick. This practice is known as **Google Bombing**.

Notice how the term 'miserable failure' never appears on these highly-ranked pages? The power of links! We explain more about this in the section on **link context** ().

Understanding PageRank

As is well known, when Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin first developed Google at Stanford University, a key feature in their approach was to use **backlinks** or links into a page from other pages as an assessment of the quality of sites. They called this approach PageRank™, after Larry Page. The original software used for this approach was called 'backrub' after their approach.

E-consultancy believes that understanding the basic principles of the formula on which the PageRank algorithm is based is very important to effective SEO.

In their original paper²⁶, Brin and Page define the formula as

$$PR(A) = (1-d) + d (PR(T1)/C(T1) + \dots + PR(Tn)/C(Tn))$$

A simplified version in equation form for implementation is $PR(A) = (1 - d) + d * \text{SUM} ((PR(I \rightarrow A)/C(I))$

- PR(A) is the PageRank of a page A,
- PR(T_{1-n}) is the PageRank of pages T, between 1 and n pages total which link to the page A
- C(T_{1-n}) is the number of outbound links on of pages T, between 1 and n links total.
- d is a damping factor which can be set between 0 and 1, usually set to 0.85

Simplifying, the PageRank of page A is determined by the PageRank of every page (T_{1-n}) that has a link to page A. For every page (T_{1-n}) that points to page A, the PR of that page is divided by the number of outbound links from page (T_{1-n}). We will return to this equation when explaining PageRank for each of the principles that follow

Which values are assigned to PageRank?

PageRank is presented in the Google toolbar from 0 to 10, but it is not a regular scale. It is widely believed to be a logarithmic scale, similar to the *Richter scale* for earthquakes.

The implication is that within each PageRank unit, there is a fair bit of difference, as is shown by Table 14, i.e. between a site near the minimum bounds of the unit, e.g. 7 and the maximum bounds. It also explains why there are relatively few sites with a pagerank of 9 or 10.

²⁶ Brin, S. and Page, L (1998) The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine, *Computer Networks and ISDN Systems*, Volume 30, Issue 1-7 (April 1998), Pages: 107 – 117, Published at: <http://www-db.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html>.

Table 14 Estimates of absolute values of PageRank from 0 to 10

Toolbar PageRank	Estimate of minimum bounds absolute PageRank	Estimate of maximum bounds absolute PageRank
0/10	0.15	0.9
1/10	0.9	5.4
2/10	5.4	32.4
3/10	32.4	194.4
4/10	194.4	1,166.4
5/10	1,166.4	6,998.4
6/10	6,998.4	41,990.4
7/10	41,990.4	251,942.4
8/10	251,942.4	1,511,654.4
9/10	1,511,654.4	9,069,926.4
10/10	9,069,926.4	$0.85 \times N + 0.15$

Note: Across all sites in a network, Pagerank averages to 1. Source: http://www.pgrank.com/pagerank_articles Estimate based on damping factor of 0.5. Calculator doesn't seem consistent.

Principles of applying PageRank for SEO

For effective optimization, we recommend that our **six key principles of PageRank** are taken into account.

The majority of these principles have implications not only for assessing and requesting links from third party sites, but also for internal links. We will highlight the implications in each section.

Remember that since the concept of Google PageRank was developed in 1996/7, the algorithm has been refined such that some of the principles such as **link popularity** have become much less important, as at April 2006. Things may be different tomorrow.

While it is generally well-known by marketers that having quality links from *external sites* is important, what is less widely known is that *internal links* within a site are very important also. We will highlight both factors at the end of this section.

Key recommendation 36. Include internal site links as well as external links within link-building activity.

PageRank's First Principle: more links from other pages to a page increase PageRank

This is the link popularity principle that many people know. It is evident from the PageRank equation since the PageRank of Page A is the sum of the PageRank of all pages T pointing to it $PR(T_{1-n})$.

Google explains the main principle of PageRank this way: "*PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B.*"²⁷

²⁷ Source: Google (<http://www.google.com/technology>).

SEO Ranking Factor 44	More backlinks (inbound links) increase PageRank	Applies to: Each web page. Concept pioneered by Google, similar principle used by other engines.	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	PageRank of a page is assessed on a logarithmic scale from 0 to 10. It is dependent on the number of links in from other sites. Most commercial destination sites have a PageRank between 4 and 7.		
<i>Example:</i>	Those that are typically media owned sites or portals such the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk) which has a PageRank of 9.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Conduct structured link-building to increase PageRank of a site. 2. Structured link-building should not only target the homepage since the PageRank concept operates at a page level (see our third principle). 3. Do not increase backlinks too rapidly since may be a negative ranking factor.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Reporting on PageRank is possible from the tools listed in Table 8 Link reporting and management software. • Although PageRank is important, it is only one factor used to assess relevance. As we will see, the context of the link for a particular keyphrase is also important. • PageRank can change after algorithm updates as different judgments are applied about the value of a link from a particular type of site. • Other engines such as Yahoo! (Yahoo! WebRank) do not actively publicise the approach probably for trademark and patent reasons but are widely regarded to use such an approach. • An assessment of the overall PageRank for the site containing the page with the backlink is likely also taken into account.		

Tip 31. Be aware that penalty factors may be applied by the search engine if too many links are generated too rapidly or are from undesirable sources. Backlink growth should be at a natural rate not significantly greater than past growth.

PageRank's Second Principle: pages with higher PageRank are more valuable

It is important to remember that *not all links are of equal value*. They vary in **link quality**. Links from pages that themselves have a high popularity as indicated by PageRank are rated as being more important.

This is evident from the PageRank equation since the PageRank of Page A is the sum of the *PageRank* of all pages T pointing to it $PR(T_{1-n})$ (not just the number of pages).

Google explains: “Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves ‘important’ weigh more heavily and help to make other pages important.”

SEO Ranking Factor 45	External link-building implication: Inbound link pages which have a higher PageRank are more valuable.	Applies to: Each web page.	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Links into a site differ in value according to the PageRank of the page on which they are located.		
<i>Example:</i>	Most commercial destination sites have a pagerank between 4 and 7, but there are a few sites with a higher PageRank. Those that are typically media owned sites or portals such as the BBC (www.bbc.co.uk), which has a PageRank of 9.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Structured link-building should target sites with a high PageRank (for their homepage). 2. An attempt should be made to receive an entry on a page with as high a PageRank as possible (often the homepage would be ideal).		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Media sites which tend to have a high PageRank (and volume of unique visitors) are themselves more valuable. • Check the PageRank of the page on which your link will be placed, not just the homepage, if requesting or exchanging links. • Repeated warning: Although PageRank is important, it is only one factor used to assess relevance. The basic formula will have been extensively revised since 1998. As we will see the context of the link for a particular keyphrase is also important.		

When structuring a site for SEO, the PageRank of pages you have optimized for a phrase is important. An indication of the importance of PageRank is provided by Table 15 which shows the top 10 listings restricted to the E-consultancy.com site for the phrase SEO (syntax: <http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=search+engine+optimization+site%3Awww.e-consultancy.com>).

This shows that the top pages returned tend to have a higher PageRank of 5 or 6 than those further down the list. They also tend to have more external links or more internal links.

But if you look closely you will see that other factors that are at play include the *density of occurrence of the phrase* 'SEO' within the *title tag*, and *body copy*, and the *date of publication*, and last *major update*.

Some recent items such as 4, 5 and 6 ranked highly at the time of writing since they had recently been updated. Note that this compilation does not return the homepage for 'SEO' since the decision has been taken to place more strategic priority on the phrase 'search engine marketing' for which the site occurs higher in the Google list.

This type of keyphrase test is a good test to run for your most strategically important keyphrases for yourselves and your competitors.

Tip 32. Test the importance of PageRank in determining your site listings for a phrase by using the search syntax <phrase> site:www.domain.com to review the PageRank of the sites returned.

Table 15 Analysis of PageRank and other ranking factors for phrase 'SEO' on E-consultancy site

1	E-consultancy.com : Search Engine Marketing (<title> tag) www.e-consultancy.com/topic/search-engine-marketing		
	Pagerank:6 12 external inbound links MSN (according to link: syntax, Google shows but will be assessing this) 10,000 internal site links	Key phrase density: One linked occurrence of 'SEO' full phrase	Date added/updated in index: 2002? / 2006
2	Search Engine Marketing: A Buyer's Guide : E-consultancy.com www.e-consultancy.com/publications/search-engine-marketing-buyers-guide		
	Pagerank:5 4 inbound links MSN	Key phrase density: One occurrence of optimization	Date added to index: 2003 / 2005
3	Advanced SEO - Training Workshop : E ... www.e-consultancy.com/knowledge/events/812/advanced-search-engine-optimization-training-workshop.html		
	Pagerank 4: 2 inbound links MSN (external)	Many occurrences of SEO phrase	Date added/updated in index: 2005 / 2006
4	E-consultancy.com : ' search engine marketing ' search results		
	Pagerank:5 6 links MSN (all internal)	Key phrase density: High density 'search engine' One occurrence SEO	Date added/updated in index: 2003/2006
5	Search engine marketing company, Inceptor, expands into Europe : E ... www.e-consultancy.com/newsfeatures/360845/search-engine-marketing-company-inceptor-expands-into-europe.html		
	Pagerank:0 25 inbound links MSN	Key phrase density No occurrences SEO	Date added/updated in index: 2005
6	Jobs Search Engine Halfway to the Million : E-consultancy.com http://www.e-consultancy.com/newsfeatures/360887/jobs-search-engine-halfway-to-the-million.html		
	Pagerank: 0	Key phrase density: No occurrences	Date added/updated in index: 2006
7	SEO Tutorial : E-consultancy.com http://www.e-consultancy.com/knowledge/whitepapers/86332/search-engine-optimization-tutorial.html		
	Pagerank: 3	Key phrase density: None, but includes close match SEO several times and is short page – good density	Date added to index: 2003/2003
8	SEO - researching and buying links : E ... http://www.e-consultancy.com/forum/101022-search-engine-optimization-researching-and-buying-links.html		
	Pagerank: 4	Key phrase density:	Date added to index: 2004/2004
9	SEO - myths and realities : E-consultancy.com (forum posting) http://www.e-consultancy.com/forum/100997-search-engine-optimization-myths-and-		

	realities.html		
	Pagerank: 3 MSN 14 backlinks all internal	Key phrase density: Phrase repeated many times in forum postings	Date added to index: 2004/2004
10	Press Release: SEO (SEO) Case Study released : E-consultancy.com http://www.e-consultancy.com/newsfeatures/360657/search-engine-optimization-seo-case-study-released.html		
	Pagerank: 4 MSN 13 external backlinks, 11 internal	Key phrase density: Repeated twice in headings and twice in body	Date added to index: Mid 2005/2005

The implication of Table 15 15 for the approach to structuring a site are also crucial to SEO since they effect the best site architecture for SEO.

SEO Ranking Factor 46	Internal site architecture implication: Keyphrases contained on site pages with higher PageRank are more likely to be listed favourably	Applies to: Each web page.	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Google tends to naturally list pages for a site (and across sites) in order of PageRank if all other factors such as keyword density and content freshness are equal.		
<i>Example:</i>	For example, for the phrase <SEO> the most popular and arguably most useful site in the SEO (and general SEM) category, www.searchenginewatch.com the site with the highest PageRank (8) is not top of the listings for the search http://www.google.com/search?q=search+engine+optimization . This is simply because on-page optimization does not target this phrase, but agencies and portals that combine a relatively high PageRank (6 or 7) with on-page optimization fare a little better.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	This implies you should: 1. Target location of your strategic keyphrases on pages with high PageRank 2. Strategic keyphrases should be optimized for on your homepage (included in title, body copy and links) in the majority of cases and separate theme pages for different parts of your site. 3. Aim to increase the PageRank of pages optimized for these strategic keyphrases with changes to the internal structure of the site (as well as through external link-building). If you don't combine high PageRank with high on page optimization to achieve relevance then you will not reach the very top.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	Don't try to locate too many keyphrases on your homepage or other pages or a dilution effect will occur.		

PageRank's Third Principle: linking pages with a large number of outbound links tend to be less valuable

The number of links on the page where the link originates is another important implication of the PageRank formula which affects link quality. This is evident from the equation since the $PR(T_{1-n})$ of all linking pages divided by $C(T_{1-n})$, the number of outbound links on of pages T .

This again has important implications for structured link-building campaigns; it is preferable to avoid listing on directory pages which have many links.

SEO Ranking Factor 47	External link-building implication: Linking pages with a large number of outbound links tend to be less valuable	Applies to: Each site page, for all engines.	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The PageRank of any given page containing links transferred to destination pages is distributed or shared between all links on the page.		
<i>Example:</i>	A directory listing on a page containing many links is less valuable than on a page just containing a single or small number of outbound links.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Structured link-building should identify a page for requesting a link on a page which contains fewer links. 2. Avoid reciprocal linking or keyword-purchase schemes where there are many links on the page (or reduce fee accordingly) unless the linking page has a high PageRank and good relevance.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Of course, these are just the pages preferred by reciprocal link schemes and automated link-building software. • Automated page generation by affiliates often involves generation of pages with many links which are not that helpful for PageRank. As mentioned in Table 9 Applications of advanced search engine syntax for understanding index coverage, linking and competition. Key: G=Google, Y=Yahoo!, the Google 'link:www.domain.com' syntax tends to return sites which are not directory sites (or themselves have a high pagerank).		

This aspect of the PageRank formula also has implications for within sites:

SEO Ranking Factor 48	Internal site architecture implication: Linking pages with a large number of outbound links tend to be less valuable	Applies to: Each site page, for all engines.	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The PageRank of any given page containing links transferred to destination pages is distributed or shared between all links on the page. It is probable that the search engines place less weighting on links between pages on a site which are common for different pages on the site because they are shared as part of the navigation.		
<i>Example:</i>	A directory listing on a page containing many links is less valuable than on a page just containing a single or small number of outbound links.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Try to avoid obtaining backlinks where you are in a directory of many other links, especially when > 10. 2. Links within the body copy of a page are more worthwhile to increase the PageRank of pages which contain strategic keyphrases.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• If there are directory style listings of internal links within your own site, it is arguably beneficial to make them shorter to reduce this dilution effect.		

This principle also has implications for how you manage your outbound links.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 49	Manage your outbound links	Applies to: Each page containing links to other sites	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	An outbound link is a link from one site to another site. As explained by Figure 12, these can reduce the PageRank of the linking page (and other pages in the site), so consideration has to be given to the best process for this.		
<i>Example:</i>	DMOZ is a site containing 17 million pages with many links.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Do to continue using external links which benefit your visitors. Remember that the Yahoo! directory and DMOZ both have very high PageRanks despite the spurious notion of PageRank leakage implied by the Pagerank formula (). 2. Minimise external links on high PageRank pages near the site root. 3. Locate links out on a limited number of pages so that PageRank leakage for that page is shared between the external links.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• It is possible to use redirect scripts that mask outbound links from a site. While this may reduce PageRank leakage, it may damage the sites reputation on other basis since it will be seen to be limited in its connectivity to other sites. • Early in 2005, the main search engines introduced a 'no-follow' attribute for the HREF HTML command for coding hyperlinks which were felt not to be of value to the site owner or the search engines (for example link spam posted to forums). The syntax is: <code>Visit external site</code>. This could be used to limit PageRank leakage if required. • The position of links on a page are likely to have some weighting, but it is difficult to generalise as to whether links at the top of a document or the bottom would be better or worse.		

PageRank's Fourth Principle: PageRank varies throughout a site according to site structure

While the importance of PageRank and inbound or backlinks is well known, it is often not appreciated that the structure of a site will affect PageRank.

To understand this effect, it is useful to consider some simple models of alternative site structures. There are some detailed papers on the basis of these models²⁸, but we will review the simple networks in Figure 12 to illustrate the principles of PageRank distribution.

The first point to note from Figure 12 is that PageRank is shared or distributed within a site. By increasing links to a particular area of the site we can focus PageRank.

So in Figure 12 (b) PageRank of the homepage is higher than in Figure 12 (a) since every page links back to the homepage. Figure 12 (c) shows the value of external links since this boosts the PageRank of all pages across the site.

Conversely, Figure 12 (d) shows that an external link can decrease the PageRank of every page in the site (this is sometimes known as a site '*leaking PageRank*'). It also shows how a linking strategy can be used to increase PageRank in part of the site. Here PageRank is focused on the Product Page since all other pages link to it.

²⁸ These papers on modelling PageRank are dated, but principles hold true (although note Principle 6). Source: http://www.pgrank.com/pagerank_articles Estimate based on damping factor of 0.5. Calculator doesn't seem consistent
<http://www.iprcom.com/papers/pagerank>
<http://www.markhorrell.com/seo/pagerank.asp> (used to calculate the examples given here)

Care should be taken in interpreting simple models such as these, since they have been taken to imply that all outbound links are a bad thing, yet for users they are often a very good thing and the actual effect on PageRank of a large scale site is not as marked as suggested by simple models.

Furthermore, Google may have additional weighting factors in identifying **authority sites** which consider outbound links to be a good thing.

E-consultancy believes that outbound linking is a good thing. Better to be part of a bigger chain...

Tip 33. Do not stop all use of outbound links, however they are best located on Pages with low PageRank and with links combined together on a single page where possible.

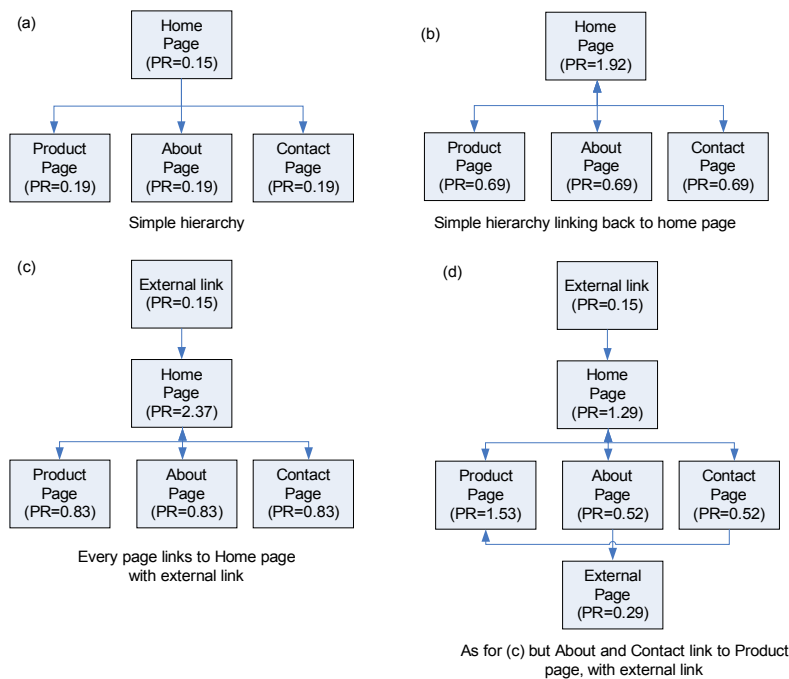


Figure 12 Models of variation in PageRank distribution around a simple page network

PageRank's Fifth Principle: PageRank has been supplemented by other assessments of the value of a link for the keyphrase in question

*Google's **PageRank** formula revolutionized search, but it has a major flaw: it gives each page an absolute measure of importance.*

PageRank is query-independent, meaning that it cannot by itself distinguish between pages that are authoritative in general and pages that are authoritative on the topic in the search term. Given this, the PageRank approach has been refined to assess the **authority** of the linking page for a given search term context. Many SEO specialists would argue that this is the most important principle to remember.

PageRank remains a factor used for determining relevance of a page for each search query, but it has been somewhat *usurped by other approaches* since the mid-1990s, when it was first developed. Also, due to **link spamming**, the search engines have introduced filters which remove links which are considered to be spam.

Since the original Google research paper was written in 1997/8 Google has obviously refined the original PageRank, to incorporate other factors such as the authority about a site on a particular topic. This has led to some commentators stating or implying that PageRank is no longer important. We hope we have showed that it is still important, but needs to be coupled with many other factors, the totality of which will affect the final ranking for a specific keyphrase.

The problem with PageRank for assessing relevance of a document is that it is independent of queries about a particular topic, so it needs to be integrated with other measures of the authority of a site other than the volume.

As a result, achieving **link popularity** for a site is not all that is required – it is necessary to achieve good **link quality**.

10 good quality links which have a high PageRank and are related to the theme of the page they link to are likely to be of more value than 100 links from general directories.

Key recommendation 37. Ensure link-building activities are targeted at building link-quality from themed authority sites, not simply link popularity.

An influential approach to assist with this challenge is the **Hilltop concept** which was described in the early days of Google by Krishna Bharat, a principal scientist in Google Labs who is best known as the instigator of Google News. In his paper²⁹ explaining the Hilltop concept he explains the weaknesses of PageRank as follows:

'This [PageRank] approach involves analyzing the hyperlinks between pages on the web on the assumption that: (a) pages on the topic link to each other, and (b) authoritative pages tend to point to other authoritative pages...It computes a query-independent authority score for every page on the Web and uses this score to rank the result set. Since PageRank is query-independent it cannot by itself distinguish between pages that are authoritative in general and pages that are authoritative on the query topic. In particular a web-site that is authoritative in general may contain a page that matches a certain query but is not an authority on the topic of the query. In

²⁹ Hilltop: A Search Engine based on Expert Documents
<http://www.cs.toronto.edu/~georgem/hilltop/> By Bharat and Mihaila

particular, such a page may not be considered valuable within the community of users who author pages on the topic of the query.'

Hubs and Authorities are referred to in the Hilltop paper. The concept is based on the probability that pages within a community will link to the most topical resources, while other pages in the community will be authorities on particular subjects as indicated by their link popularity within the subject-specific community.

Hilltop is an approach to reduce this described in the Bharat paper 'Hilltop: A Search Engine based on Expert Documents'. The algorithm was developed to identify two types of pages which would be used to refine the rank:

- **Hub pages** (actually referred to as 'Expert page' in the paper)
A page which contains outbound links about a topic. In the original research just 2.5 million of the 140 million pages in the index were judged to be experts. The authors say: *'We define an expert page as a page that is about a certain topic and has links to many non-affiliated pages on that topic.'*
- **Authority pages** (also referred to as a "target" in the paper)
A page which contains many inbound links about a topic. Expert pages (hubs) are given more weighting to identify authority pages.

You can see that the research refers to hub and authority pages and not sites. However, since the majority of connections between websites are likely to be to the homepage of a site, they will effectively be defined as an authority about a particular topic.

Domain popularity

Some argue that **domain popularity** is more important than link popularity as a way of explaining the importance of quality links from major domains.

Domain popularity is an indication of the number of different domains that link to you. It is a useful term since it indicates the number of unique domains linking to you.

Many links linking from different sites may be aggregated together since single links from a domain are more likely to be a sign of **natural link growth**, rather than amassing many single links from a wide range of websites, which might be perceived by the search engines as somewhat unnatural.

To assess domain popularity, use the linkdomain: Yahoo! syntax explained in Table 9.

PageRank's Sixth Principle: links from pages in context for a particular phrase are more valuable

This principle follows on from that of hubs and authorities. For search engines to determine hubs and authorities it requires an assessment of the context of the link for the page based on the phrases it contains.

In the Bharat paper there is a direct indication of the factors the Google team used in the original research to indicate page context.

'For every expert E that points to target T we draw a directed edge (E, T) . Consider the following "qualification" relationship between key phrases and edges:

- *The title phrase qualifies all edges coming out of the expert*
- *A heading qualifies all edges whose corresponding hyperlinks occur in the document after the given heading and before the next heading of equal or greater importance.*
- *A hyperlink's anchor text qualifies the edge corresponding to the hyperlink."*

We can speculate that Google is still likely to use these criteria and may use others also such as keyword density. This partly explains why the pages that the pages listed in Table 15 not regularly decrease in order.

In determining the relevance of a page for a particular keyphrase search, PageRank is combined with another aspect of link-quality based on **link context**.

Google explains link context through the underlined part of the following quote:

*"Of course, important pages mean nothing to you if they don't match your query. So, Google combines PageRank with sophisticated text-matching techniques to find pages that are both important and relevant to your search. Google goes far beyond the number of times a term appears on a page and examines all aspects of the page's content (and the content of the pages linking to it) to determine if it's a good match for your query."*³⁰

³⁰ www.google.com/technology

Key recommendation 38. Maximise backlinks that have good link-context and run link-building campaigns which are aimed at increasing links with good page context that deep-link into relevant content on your site(s).

SEO Ranking Factor 50	External link-building implication and internal link implication: Link page context	Applies to: Each page/site linking to a page when assessed for relevance by the search engine.	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Link context assesses the topical relevance of an inbound link for a particular keyphrase entered by the searcher based on different aspects of the page containing the backlink . Link context includes the occurrence of the keyphrase (or synonyms) in the link anchor text, in the domain name or filename, in keywords adjacent to the link, keyword density and markup in other tags such as Title tag .		
<i>Example:</i>	For a page designed to rank highly on the keyphrase “SEO”, a link which contains the phrase in the title tag, headings and body copy is more valuable than a link that doesn’t.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. For external sites try to identify preferred pages to link from that have context. 2. Create internal links where the linking page has a suitable keyphrase context. The use of different types of internal links for navigation is covered in section 5.5. - Internal linking strategy including creation of link-rich pages.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Don’t stuff too many phrases onto a referring page. • Use of synonyms on internal sites can also assist with this.		

A closely related ranking factor that relates to link-quality and link-context is the **link anchor text** that warrants separate mention.

To see the importance of link context, search on Google for the term [‘click here’](#) and you will find that Adobe Acrobat is top, not because the page contains a high keyphrase density for this page, it doesn’t. It simply has many pages linking to it with the relevant anchor text ‘click here’. Try finding the term ‘click here’ on the Adobe page if you don’t believe it...

SEO Ranking Factor 51	External link-building implication and internal link implication: Link anchor text	Applies to: Each and every text (and image) hyperlink on the web	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The hypertext used to form the text of a link, in the HTML.		
<i>Example:</i>	<code>Anchor text which forms link when viewed in browser</code>		
<i>Best practice:</i>	It is best practice that the anchor text includes a target keyphrase for the destination page rather than something neutral or un-related such as ‘click here’ or ‘more’. <pre><body> Read the E-consultancy Search Engine Marketing best practice guide. </body></pre>		

<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Adjacent text to the hyperlink is also taken into account for link context. • It is also possible (but not common practice) to include a title attribute for hyperlinks. This has two benefits. First from an SEO point-of-view it may be taken into account for link context (to a small degree). Second, and perhaps more importantly, it can be used to engage site visitors and improve the user experience. As the mouse rolls over the hyperlink an additional message can be displayed which can persuade the user to click. <pre>Search engine marketing guide</a.></pre> <pre>.</pre> • Hyperlinks also have a rel='no follow' attribute in HTML which is described below.
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A recommended process for external link-building

Quality inbound links to a site are very important to its performance in the search rankings, but the obvious question is how to gain these links?

Gaining the right links in the right place can also be valuable in referring visitors directly from other sites. So link-building is a major part of modern SEO, but it is often not seen as integral part of SEO, perhaps because it is far tougher to achieve than on-page optimization.

A related part of link-building, again underused is internal link building which we cover in section .

Key recommendation 39. An effective link-building strategy is an essential part of SEO, not an afterthought

Link-building strategies

We have identified six main strategies for external link-building, all of which are tough to make work, and some of which are outmoded (eg link buying):

1. Natural link-building through quality content.
2. Requesting inbound-only links.
3. Reciprocal linking.
4. Buying links.
5. Creating your own external links.
6. Generating buzz through PR.

We will shortly look at each, but firstly remember, as discussed earlier, that search engines monitor content freshness and velocity.

Link freshness and velocity

We mentioned earlier, that the search engines are likely to monitor the rate at which sites change to assess both their quality and whether bad practices may be occurring. It's the same with links. A very rapid increase in links may indicate a highly topical blog posting which will rank well.

Alternatively if a link-farm is created and this can be detected, this will be a negative factor. So take this into account in your link-building activities.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 52	Linking velocity	Applies to: Each backlink	Importance:  3/5
What is it?	The rate at which links are pointed at a site a domain vary. Care needs to be taken not to change these too dramatically in an unnatural way since there may be a penalty for this. By the other token relevance is indicated when new links are added.		

Example:	News sites or blogs which are tagged on Technorati can generate gains in search position since this indicates the article is highly topical.
Best practice:	1. Use online and offline PR to make create a buzz around content, services or experiences on the site and so naturally gain links to the sites. 2. Develop an ongoing link-building programme.
What to watch for?	If velocity is deemed too high compared to the norm, there may be a penalty since it indicates link-building / link farms.

Link freshness is another potential time-related factor.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 53	Link freshness	Applies to: Individual document content	Importance:  2/5
What is it?	If a site fails to continue to gain links, this could have some influence.		
Example:	It may reflect that the site has outdated content so no one is linking to it.		
Best practice:	1. Ensure an online programme of link-building – it is not a one-off effort. 2. Monitor rate at which links are added.		
What to watch for?	We listed tools for tracking addition of new links to a site in tools in Table 8.		

Link building approach 1: Natural link-building using quality content

The first strategy involves producing content that other site owners will naturally link to without you requesting a link, simply because they think it will add to the resource of their site. Online, content is king and always will be.

Ken McGaffin in his excellent 'Linking Matters' resource (www.linkingmatters.com) recommends this approach. He says: "Create great content, link to great content and great content will link to you"

This sounds like an ideal strategy. But what is great content? How much does cost to create?

The applicability of this technique will vary widely according to sector. If you are a B2B service provider, then the statement above is often true, you can provide B2B content to help support professionals in their work and then others will often naturally link to you.

However, for commercial consumer sites it is far less straightforward to gain links simply by having great content since many third-party media sites contain valuable content. True, you may be included in some directories specific to your sector alongside everyone else, but this may not be enough to gain a differential advantage through link-building.

There may be opportunities for creating content that may encourage other sites to link to you, but more often you will have to follow the other strategies below.

For all types of site, probably the best approach for this type of link-building is to create **themed content**.

This approach can be effectively combined with on-page optimization to produce keyword rich areas of the site as described the first part of this guide. Here the site owner becomes a publisher, even if their main site objective is sales.

Examples of this type of content include:

- *Product reviews and comparisons*
- *Buyers guides* to selecting products, e.g. financial services, white-goods, B2B services, etc.
- *Travel guides*
- *Opinion pieces and commentary*, e.g. on fashion trends or marketplace trends for B2B.
- *Tools*, for example, calculators and checklists can be used for both consumer and business sites.
- Up-to-date *information*, views or news about a topic. A blog!

These can also be integrated with e-newsletter content to provide additional value for customers.

Key recommendation 40. Review the opportunities for themed content within your site to combine a valuable resource for visitors (that others may link to) with keyword-rich content optimized for strategic keyphrases.

Another approach isn't based on text-content, but providing destination experiences. Examples include:

- *Communities and forums*: tend to work most effectively for B2B information providers or independent consumer sites rather than existing brands or retailers.
- *Games*: work best for consumer brand sites. These don't have to be short-term viral tactics, but can designed to work for traffic building in the longer-term.
- *Competitions*: Prize draws or competitions offering a challenge.
- *Club membership and rewards*: For example the HuggiesClub example (www.huggiesclub.com).

Site owners have to weigh up the cost of producing this sort of content against the benefits of a long-term increase in site visitors with an interest in this topic, increased conversion rates and improved perception of brand and customer experience.

Link building approach 2: requesting inbound-only links

Here you request links from other site owners, again in the hope that they think the site will be useful for their visitors.

This can be combined with the previous approach of producing quality content and experiences. The difference is that this strategy involves a structured approach to requesting links.

Your agency or internal staff should proactively seek out sites with a similar audience to yours, using existing contacts and search engines to do this. **Relevance is crucial**, and no, your direct competitors may not be the best place to start with your link requests.

Note that random emails seeking links are often perceived as spam (certainly they are at E-consultancy, which gets at least 50 such requests every day). Building relationships is *essential* before asking for favours.

The approach to link-building using this technique has been summarised well by Ken McGaffin of LinkingMatters.com (www.linkingmatters.com) who identifies these 9 logical stages:

1. Who links to you now?

This can be established through the use of tools such as Advanced Link Manager (www.advancedlinkmanager.com) and others shown in Table 8.

Table 9 shows how search syntax (sometimes known as metawords) such as link: can also be used to find out about your link popularity in a category. This is useful for assessing current links on a site or investigating links about a particular search term.

Tip 34. Used specialized Google, MSN and Yahoo! syntax to find out current link popularity.

For example, use 'link:site' in Google to see the number of quality links into a page on your site as judged by Google with a high PageRank. Eg. <http://www.google.com/search?q=link%3Awww.e-consultancy.com>.

Note this also includes internal links. To exclude internal links and include pages with lower pagerank or that do not have a true hyperlink, but contain the URL, Google this:

www.url.com –site:www.url.com . For example
<http://www.google.com/search?q=www.e-consultancy.com+-site%3Awww.e-consultancy.com>

This will show you other potential partners that you can improve your links with, although many will be directories that are of limited value.

2. Who links to your competitors?

The techniques used in the previous section can be used to find out who links to your competitors. If you use one of the more sophisticated tools, then they can more easily identify the quality links with higher PageRank or Alexa scores. Alexa (www.alexa.com) also shows related sites that your visitors go to, so it is worth checking.

3. What other sites could link to you?

This is the gap between sites currently linking to you and those that link to competitors.

You may also be able to identify potential sites through other applications of Google syntax. For example, if you were a viral marketing agency looking to find portal sites about viral marketing you could try the intitle: or inurl:syntax, e.g.

<http://www.google.com/search?q=intitle%3Aviral> or <http://www.google.com/search?q=inurl%3Aviral>.

Alternatively you can use words such as 'directory' or 'portal' in your search. The tools in Table 8 provide facilities to automate this approach.

4. Understand why external sites would want to link to you.

This involves reviewing the types of content and services which would help persuade another site owner link to you. We reviewed different types of content which would be more valuable in the last section.

5. Set objectives for your linking strategy.

Always a good idea for any activity, these could include:

- Increase PageRank of site to x.
- Generate y inbound links of PageRank x.
- Generate z more visitors to your sites from links
- Increase conversion rates for visitors referred from third-party sites.

It is important to try to establish parameters for link-building success when working with third parties.

6. Make sure your site is link friendly.

With sound **information architecture** it will be straightforward to point visitors to a particular type of document within the site which may be more relevant for the third party.

7. What links could you publish on your own site?

It will often be necessary to offer reciprocal linking as described in the next section, so you have to think about how that fits into the overall proposition of you site and where they will physically be positioned within the site structure.

8. Ask for inbound links.

This is the stage where you start asking for inbound links. Best practice is as follows:

SEO Ranking Success Factor 54	Request quality inbound links	Applies to: Homepage and other pages with targeted keyphrases	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Proactive requesting of quality links from other site owners.		
<i>Example:</i>	For example, Business Link have requested a number of links on different topics. As shown by this query: http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=marketing+link%3Awww.businesslink.gov.uk .		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Try to gain inbound links without a corresponding outbound link where possible before reciprocal links. 2. Request links from pages which combine a high PageRank with an appropriate		

	link context for the phrase you are targeting. 3. Request links personally. Templated link spam requesting links which is generated by software is easily identifiable by the recipient. Instead say craft each e-mail personally and use relevant flattery and humour to appeal to the site owner. Refer to specific URLs. A phone call will be worthwhile for high-value sites.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	Remember that links should not necessarily point to the homepage. The temptation is to link through to the homepage. However, linking can be more effective if it is direct to content relevant to the link with the appropriate keyphrase in the text and headlines of the referring page and in the anchor text.

9. Monitor results.

The tools in Table 8 can help you track new inbound links and review performance against your objectives that you set at Stage 5. If you are using them to request links, they will also automatically send out reminders. Tools such as GoogleAlert (www.googlealert.com) are also useful for notifying about new links. You can refer to your web analytics software to assess increases in visitors from external links (excluding search engines).

Link building approach 3: reciprocal linking

Reciprocal links are links which are agreed between the site of one organization and another. From an SEO perspective backlinks or links without a corresponding outbound link are superior, but it may be still worthwhile exchanging links with relevant partner sites, although some experts disagree...

- You can also develop mini banner ads and standard link text or associated copy summarising your Internet Value Proposition that you use for exchange.
- Consider creating a standard footer for incorporation in press releases that not only gives the web address, but summarises the differentiators of the site.
- Automated tools which identify sites and dispatch emails can be used for the process of link-building, but a personal approach is more effective.
- Some SEO experts believe that reciprocal linking is outdated and carries little weight these days, with links 'cancelling each other out'. **E-consultancy agrees with these experts.** But who knows what the future holds...

SEO Ranking Success Factor 55	Manage reciprocal linking carefully	Applies to: Each linking site.	Importance:  2/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Reciprocal links are links which are agreed between the site of one organization and another.		
<i>Example:</i>	For example, Business Link has requested a number of links on different topics. As shown by this query: http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=marketing+link%3Awww.businesslink.gov.uk . Reciprocal links are not shown on the same page, but within separate search results.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Try to gain inbound links without a corresponding outbound link where possible before reciprocal links. 2. Request links from pages which combine a high PageRank with an appropriate link context for the phrase you are targeting. 3. Request links personally. Templated link spam requesting links, generated by software, is easily identifiable by the recipient. You need to craft each e-mail personally and use relevant flattery and humour to appeal to the site owner. Refer to specific URLs. A phone call will be worthwhile for high-value sites.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Remember that links should not necessarily point to the homepage. The temptation is to link through to the homepage. However, linking can be more effective if it is direct to content relevant to the link with the appropriate key phrase in the text and headlines of the referring page and in the anchor text. • E-consultancy believes that reciprocal linking has negligible, if any, effect on SEO.		

A related approach to reciprocal linking is to consider a link exchange network. These have a **much bigger risk** attached, both in terms of reputation and search engine penalties, so are not likely to be an option for corporate sites.

E-consultancy does not recommend the use of link networks, but here's how it works...

SEO Ranking Success Factor 56	Using a free link exchange network	Applies to: Homepage or other key page linked to.	Importance:  3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Free exchange of links from related sites through a third party broker. The referring site has a plain text <a href> link which can't be traced by a search engine to a link exchange directly, but could be traced by linking patterns*. You have to enable links to be placed on your site which you have some control over (e.g. banning domains), but these links on your site may cause reputational damage.		
<i>Example:</i>	Examples: Link Vault (www.link-vault.com) Link Exchanged (www.linkexchanged.com)		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Ensure use of link network can't be traced through HTML code or linking patterns * (no footprints). 2. Ensure it is not possible that your site is linked to through a site with poor reputation, e.g. pornography, gambling. 3. Ensure ads can't be placed on your site that may damage your reputation. 4. Ensure sites that link to you have good link context for your services. 5. Schemes such as Link Vault which offer ads to targeted sites are best. 6. Limit participation to smaller network which is easier to monitor and less likely to be traceable.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• * <i>Search engine penalty:</i> If use of a link network is detected, this could be applied as a penalty, although most modern systems are set up to be untraceable through code, but are potentially traceable via linking patterns. • Ensure links are static, permanent links. • Use options to point to different positions in site. • In-bound or out-bound links that are not run-of-site are more likely to be difficult to detect.		

Link building approach 4: Buying links

This approach does not receive much publicity in the mainstream digital marketing press, indeed it is a well-kept secret. And Google is vehemently against this sort of thing, so it probably works...

Given the difficulties with requesting links and the common need to reciprocate, buying links is a pragmatic solution and (although it is a paid-for option) could be more cost-effective than other approaches since there is no corresponding content creation cost.

However, it is external expenditure. It is difficult to see why it is not discussed much in the mainstream digital trade publications such as Revolution and New Media Age. It is certainly discussed a lot more recently on the online SEO forums such as Webmasterworld (www.webmasterworld.com). Perhaps some SEOs do not want to promote it since it could eat into their potential revenue as it will come from the same budget.

E-consultancy does not recommend buying links, not if you are interested in long-term ROI from search and recognise that these links aren't normally the best. And certainly not if the recent noise being made by Google's Matt Cutts is remotely

accurate. He suggests that Google *can* spot a bought-link and may penalise reputations for the linker and linkee websites! Some experts dismiss this as bluff and bluster on Google's part. How can it possibly know? (Double bluff at your own risk...)

It is easy to dismiss this practice out of hand because of the bad reputation of **link farms**. The risks of penalties from the search engines of being linked to from in 'bad neighbourhoods' have also been well publicised by Mike Grehan (www.search-engine-book.co.uk).

If you do seek out paid-for opportunities of this kind then make sure you manage the risks. Not that it is always risky: most companies are already involved with link-buying if they paid for a listing in the Yahoo! or Business.com directories!

As with all link-building you benefit both from potential increase in PageRank and from visitors. Although the former would not occur if the website linking to you follows Matt Cutts' instructions, which can be summed up this: *"If you sell links make sure you add the nofollow tag..."*.

Key recommendation 41. Assess opportunities for buying links.

In this section we will look at three main methods for buying links:

- 1. Buying links from a directory.**
- 2. Buying links direct from another site.**
- 3. Buying links from a link broker.**

But before we look at these options, remember there is a **risk** attached to buying links. This may be *very low to negligible* in some cases such as placing a directory entry in Yahoo!, but *much higher* if you are in paying for use of a link exchange. Google has publicly denounced this approach³¹. Matt Cutts, the unofficial official voice of Google has reiterated the Google webmaster guidelines where he says:

"Don't participate in link schemes designed to increase your site's ranking or PageRank."

He goes on to outline the risks of link-buying, when he says:

"A natural question is: what is Google's current approach to link buying? Of course our link-weighting algorithms are the first line of defense, but it's difficult to catch every problem case in adversarial information retrieval, so we also look for problems and leaks in different semi-automatic ways. Reputable sites that sell links won't have their search engine rankings or PageRank penalized—a search for [daily cal] would still return dailycal.org. However, link-selling sites can lose their ability to give reputation (e.g. PageRank and anchor text)."

What if a site wants to buy links purely for visitor click traffic, to build buzz, or to support another site? In that situation, I would use the rel="nofollow" attribute. The nofollow tag allows a site to add a link that abstains from being an editorial vote. Using nofollow is a safe way to buy links, because it's a machine-readable way to specify that a link doesn't have to be counted as a vote by a search engine."

³¹ <http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/text-links-and-pagerank/> (Sept 2005)

It is interesting that he uses the phrase ‘*adversarial information retrieval*’. This suggests that Google expects this to happen because of the value of gaining PageRank or reputation. But they do seek to detect this – if your site is detected as selling links, then it won’t have its own rankings penalised, but it will lose its ability to confer reputation, i.e. it defeats the purpose of link-buying in the first place.

Given these conflicts of interests, this is one of the hottest topics in SEO at the moment as this post from the O’Reilly network shows³².

O’Reilly, a reputable publisher was exposed as selling links. The conflict is inevitable given the importance attached to links through the search engine algorithms and the value that site owners can gain from selling them. There’s a marketplace and it’s HUGE! One of the comments on this blog piece explains its importance nicely:

“In 1998, search engine gaming consisted of repeating a word 500 times in white-on-white text in the footer of a site, and putting 50 related words in meta tags.

“In 2005, people pay highly pageranked sites to link to them using very specific keywords they would like associated with their site in searches.

“The method is more subtle, but the goal is the same.”

Despite these quotes, you will see from the examples that follow that link-buying and selling has driven the growth of the commercial Internet and virtually every company buys links in some form. Doesn’t Google sell links, albeit non permanent ones?! Despite our beliefs that some forms of link purchase are ethical and valuable. We have to give this warning before looking at the options:

Key recommendation 42. Carefully assess risks for buying links

Obtaining links from a directory

Some directories will freely include your site if requested. The most significant is DMOZ (www.dmoz.org). Others such as Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) require payment.

When entries are vetted by humans, as in these cases, they have special influence because of the authority this confers. Buying links in paid directories is an established, effective approach to buying links. For an annual fee, a link, often from a site with high **domain popularity**, can be purchased.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 57	Buying links from a directory	Applies to: Homepage or other key page.	Importance:  4/5
What is it?	Purchase of links within a directory in order to assist in increasing PageRank and to gain more visitors.		
Example:	Horizontal portals such as Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com , \$299 annual fee) and Business.com (www.business.com , \$199 annual fee) are widely used for this approach. For example, see http://www.business.com/directory/advertising_and_marketing/online_marketing/site_promotion/search_engine_optimization/ . There are surprisingly few companies in some of these categories! Vertical portals such as E-consultancy (http://www.e-consultancy.com)		

³² http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/08/search_engine_s_2.html

	consultancy.com/providers/add.asp) may offer this opportunity. For example, on E-consultancy, enhanced listings at £99 per year provide a link, enhanced text for context and reporting on number of listing views.
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Seek out horizontal sites used by your audience which offer directory entries. 2. Seek out specialist 'vertical portals' which offer this also. 3. Ensure the category you are in, link anchor text and site description provide good link and page context. 4. Review your existing listing in directories for the correct category and context of link. . Ensure ad-buyers are on the look out for ...
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Directory listings in relevant smaller categories are best in terms of generating clicks and PageRank. • Review PageRank for directory source, although this is less of an issue for large portals. • There are also free directory options such as DMOZ (www.dmoz.org), which is notoriously difficult to get listed in.

Buying links direct from another site

This is perhaps an underutilised option, partly because many media site owners are not set up for it. Instead, they have a revenue model based on the classic trinity of ad views (Cost Per thousand, CPM), paid-search (Cost Per Click, CPC) or affiliate marketing (cost per outcome, lead or sale).

While each of these has its merits, they do not typically help with PageRank since the links are referred through a third-party to measure promotion effectiveness. However, with a bit of digging it may be possible to extract some value for SEO from the following:

Online advertising

Although media site owners are often not set up for this and those selling media placements may not be aware of the value of this, some site owners may have this option if they are asked or the price is right. In particular, permanent sponsorships could be set up such that they help with PageRank. Often these are redirected through an ad server, for example see:

<http://www.wanadoo.co.uk/money> (redirect) and <http://www.wanadoo.co.uk/diet> ('powered by' logo with no link).

Tip 35. Ensure online media buyers are aware of the value of permanent, non-redirected links to a site and try to obtain these as part of the deal.

Cost Per Click ads

Typically clicks these are through the servers of the main PPC ad networks, Google AdSense, Overture/Yahoo! Search services or MIVA, so they don't provide any SEO benefit.

Affiliate marketing

As for PPC ads, clicks tend to be redirected through the affiliate network's server, so don't confer any PageRank benefits. Some affiliate networks do list their 'advertisers', so it is worth checking whether permanent links are possible from the affiliate owner's site, particularly if they are in a directory style listing of related links.

Tip 36. Review affiliate network sites for opportunities for permanent, non-redirected links to destination site.

E-mail marketing

If you purchase an ad in a third party e-newsletter, it will often be archived on the media owner's site. Depending on the form of tracking used, this could give SEO benefits.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 58	Buying ad links direct from another site	Applies to: Homepage or other key page.	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Purchase of links from a third party in order to assist in increasing PageRank and to gain more visitors.		
<i>Example:</i>	Online marketing news site Netimperative (www.netimperative.com) offers site-wide links at £600 per quarter. These may be expensive on the basis of Cost Per Click compared to Google Adwords, but they have the benefit of increasing PageRank and TrustRank and for the digital marketing companies that use it, have the right page and link context for the services they offer.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Seek out portals / information sites used by your audience which offer paid links. 2. Ensure ad-buyers are on the look out for this type of link.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Ensure the link anchor text (or alt-text if it is an image ad) provide good link and page context. • Text links or mixed image/text ads on third party sites will often generate higher clickthrough rates than pure image ads. • It might be thought from the comments of Matt Cutts mentioned earlier that site-wider / run-of-site links would be detected and penalised. However, if you test using link:www.domain.com for some of the advertisers on Netimperative, it appears that it is still conferring PageRank/Authority.		

Buying links from a link broker

The final type of link buying and the highest risk approach is buying links through a broker.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 59	Buying links direct from another site	Applies to: Homepage or other key page.	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Purchase of links from other sites through a third party in order to assist in finding links.		
<i>Example:</i>	Examples (provided by Alan Webb of Abakus Internet Marketing (www.abakus-internet-marketing.de/en), : 1. http://www.text-link-ads.com (recommended) 2. http://www.linkmetro.com 3. http://www.linkworth.com 4. http://www.textlinkbrokerage.com 5. http://www.linkadage.com		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Ensure you buy links without too many links on the page (<15). 2. Make sure links do not have the <a href> 'nofollow' attribute in which case they are ignored by the search engines. 3. Ensure they are direct, static links (don't redirect through another server).		

	4. * Ensure it is unlikely your reputation will be damaged through association with other links in the category. 5. Best to have links from a range of domains, rather than sitewide links since less easy to detect and ensure increase in domain popularity.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• * <i>Search engine penalty</i>: If use of a link network is detected, this could be applied as a penalty, although most modern systems are set up to be untraceable through code, but are potentially traceable via linking patterns. • You can use the syntax referred to earlier, to check the links are included for existing sites using the scheme in your category. • Flat monthly rate fees may be more cost-effective than Pay Per Click arrangements. • Run tests. • Review frequently for problems. • Find out more: See http://www.linkworth.com/blog/ (not independent)

Link building approach 5: Creating your own external links

This technique is arguably unethical and so high-risk. It can vary from small-scale to large scale. On a small-scale, it is possible to include references to a site on third party blogs and blog posting signatures. This is likely to have a minor impact on your ranking and is low risk. As we will see, it can also be good PR on well-trafficked blogs.

Creating a separate blog on a sub-domain or separate domain can be successful in increasing reach through the search engines and creating links between sites. For example Searchenginewatch (<http://searchenginewatch.com>) also has a separate blog site (<http://blog.searchenginewatch.com/>).

Some agencies have created separate sites on a different domain for a client which scrapes content from the main site, places it within strategic keyphrase themes with optimized page templates and then links back to the parent site. We can't give examples of this since it is unethical and against the terms of service, but it does happen. It is also likely to be at risk of a **duplicate content penalty** (check using <http://copyscape.com>).

Link building approach 6: Online PR or SEO PR

The main goal of online Public Relations (PR) is typically about maximising favourable mentions of your company, brands, products or websites on third party websites which are likely to be visited by your target audience.

A secondary goal is achieving links through to a destination website. Such publicity does not usually involve direct payment as for advertising, although "advertorial" on a portal will involve a fee.

Online PR has fantastic potential for SEO, but it is often difficult to influence within large organizations since the person responsible for online PR is located in a different part of the company (and/or they use a traditional PR agency that doesn't 'get' online PR). It may take a long-time to change this, but it is well worth trying to.

Key recommendation 43. Work with the person or agency responsible for PR (in a large organization) to assist with search engine marketing.

A Euro RSCG Magnet study³³ showed that over half of journalists used blogs to inform their stories, with around 25% using them for their day to day work. Of course the figure is higher in tech-sectors. Charles Arthur (www.charlesarthur.com), contributor to the Guardian Online in a posting ‘Why I’m not reading PR emails to get news stories any more’ says:

“I’m not going to read things that are obviously press releases because the possibility of it just being annoying or irrelevant is too great; I’m going to go to my aggregator instead, because I’ve chosen every feed there for its potential interest. I pay more attention to my RSS feeds because they’re sources I’ve chosen, rather than the e-mails I get from PR companies”.

Tip 37. Review options for distributing your online press releases more widely, i.e. don’t just restrict them to your site, use newswire services and give RSS feed options.

“Maximising favourable mentions” also implies minimising unfavourable mentions of your company, brands, products or websites on other third party websites. This online reputation management is an important part of online PR also, but we won’t touch on that here, other than to say it is useful to subscribe to an online reputation management service³⁴ or a simpler alerting service such as GoogleAlert (www.googlealert.com).

SEO Ranking Success Factor 60	Online PR	Applies to: Mentions of a site/brand on third party sites.	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Mentions of your brand or site on other sites are powerful in shaping opinions and driving visitors to your site and of course it can help generate backlinks.		
<i>Example:</i>	E-consultancy illustrates the different forms of PR open to a business-to-business marketer, if they identify a portal relevant to their audience: 1. E-consultancy offers a press-release distribution service: http://www.e-consultancy.com/about/advertising/press-release-distribution.asp for reaching a digital marketing audience, which also delivers backlinks to its customers. 2. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds of press releases are available and journalists often subscribe to these. 2. Digital marketers offering services use free posts on the forum to generate awareness of their brand, share their experiences and advice, indicate their expertise, and to generate backlinks. 3. The weekly E-business Briefing newsletter offers different options for PR such as editorial, links to hot topics and forum comments. 4. Articles and whitepapers useful for the audience can be posted or highlighted by sponsorship of a section. For business-to-consumer organizations, online perhaps relies more on traditional PR approaches for media where editorial is achieved on articles on third party sites with links through to a site. For example Fisher Price (www.playlaughgrow.co.uk) has achieved editorial on Parenting / Female sites such as iVillage³⁵ It can be particularly advantageous to get a link on a large portal such as BBC		

³³ http://www.magnet.com/index.php?s=_thought

³⁴ <http://www.davechaffey.com/Internet-Marketing/C8-Communications/E-tools/Online-PR/Brand-reputation-management-services>

³⁵ http://www.ivillage.co.uk/pregnancyandbaby/promotions/articles/0..643963_673938.00.html

	(www.bbc.co.uk). However online PR is not just about journalists, it is also about new types of influencers whether business or consumers. For example, an independent analyst can post their view on affordable e-mail broadcast packages³⁶ which is valuable if you are one of the companies mentioned. Similarly, consumers can blog about their views on mobile phones, e.g. http://www.mobilewhack.com/. Traditional PR can be used to encourage these influencers to link to feature your brand / link to your site.
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Review the range of options for online PR as described above. An additional option to consider is that links may be generated from a successful viral campaign, although these are less controllable. 2. Use the online press release distribution services, for example: • www.prweb.com • www.pressbox.co.uk • www.prnewswire.com • www.businesswire.com 3. Consider whether there are options to get featured in the online news services through articles placed on online media owner sites, for example: • http://news.google.com • http://news.yahoo.com 4. Use the techniques described below to optimize press releases.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	All the characteristics of on-page optimization we have mentioned in previous sections are important here; press-releases need be written so that they appeal to journalists, customers who may read them online and search engines robots. That means using the language for the different audiences and getting the important on-page optimization criteria we have looked at elsewhere right. Important factors include: • • • <u>Keyword formatting</u> • <u> Hyperlinks</u> • <u>Image tag ALT</u> • Body copy links to related pages containing strategic keyphrases such as themed pages. Don't just include a link to the URL at the end of the release, include it within the article with relevant anchor text. • Keyword density. It is also worthwhile considering linking to a special keyword optimized page on the company site, not simply through to another copy of the press-release. Googling 'seo press releases' will show you that some agencies offer this as a separate service. <i>Find out more:</i> http://www.publicrelationsonline.com/ and http://www.seo-pr.com

³⁶ <http://www.davechaffey.com/Total-E-mail-Marketing/Affordable%20E-mail-management-and-broadcast-packages>

(dated 'how to' content, but good cases on benefits)
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Tip 38. Consider restructuring/rewriting/reformatting your press release style so that they work more effectively for SEO.

We have seen that making use of blogs and RSS is a useful approach, particularly for promoting B2B services, so we will give separate examples and recommendations...

SEO Ranking Success Factor 61	Blogs	Applies to: Mainly to B2B services	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Web logs or ' blogs ' give an easy method of publishing web pages which can be best described as online journals, diaries or news or events listings.		
<i>Examples :</i>	An example of a business blog used to showcase the expertise of its analysts is the Jupiter Research Analyst Weblogs (http://weblogs.jupiterresearch.com). An example of a useful blog which can keep digital marketing professionals up-to-date about online marketing developments is www.marketingvox.com .		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Consider setting up your own company blog(s) on a separate domain or sub-domain. 2. Consider enabling comments to create a community.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Internal opinions need to be carefully monitored for reputational damage. - Internal comments need to be carefully monitored for reputational damage. <i>Find out more:</i> Rick Bruner's http://www.businessblogconsulting.com		

RSS is closely related to blogs:

SEO Ranking Success Factor 62	Really Simple Syndication (RSS)	Applies to: Mainly to B2B services currently	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is an extension of blogging where blog, news or any type of published content is published as a feed. Individual users can subscribe to RSS feeds or site owners can syndicate content from another site and publish it.		
<i>Examples :</i>	RSS feeds are read by different aggregators such as reader software, e.g. RSS reader (www.rssreader.com), a web reader such as Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) and readers built into the web browser i.e. Firefox or Internet Explorer. The BBC publishes feeds of different channels and has a great explanation of RSS: <i>Find out more:</i> http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/help/rss/default.stm		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Offer RSS feeds of press-releases. 2. Consider RSS feeds of other relevant content. 3. Ensure RSS feeds are indexed by the major search engines and RSS aggregators. List of URLs for RSS submission: http://www.rss-specifications.com/rss-submission.htm. 4. Use standard on-page optimization techniques within feed articles (this should be straightforward since they are effectively published pages). <i>Find out more:</i> http://www.rss-specifications.com/rss-seo.htm		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	- Awareness of RSS is high among journalists, but relatively low amongst business people and consumers³⁷. - If syndicating content, be aware of the risk of duplicate content penalties.		

	• RSS feeds sometimes turn up in the SERPs as your main listing, in which case the user won't be able to view the content (unless they know what is happening). • Most RSS doesn't currently have a permission-based model, so the opportunity to capture data is lost unless an opt-in service is used, although this may reduce subscribers. • Find out more: http://www.marketingstudies.net/
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³⁷ <http://www.davechaffey.com/Internet-Marketing/C8-Communications/E-tools/Online-PR/RSS-Adoption-Survey>

5. SEO Success Factor 5: A structured process for SEO

Introduction

In the previous sections of this report, we have recommended best practice for index inclusion, on-page optimization and link building. In this section we unite these areas by making recommendations on the main approaches to SEO.

This section is deliberately shorter than the previous sections since it is intended for managers reviewing current and planned SEO approaches. Links are given to link back to the detailed success factors earlier in the report.

Our starting point is that we are managing SEO for a new or existing site for which we have completed a keyphrase gap analysis (1.9) and identified target keyphrases. How do we approach SEO in a structured way? The first section describes a range of classic approaches to SEO and then more detail on some of these is given in subsequent sections.

Classic approaches to SEO

While it may not be realised by all client-side marketers, it is almost inevitable that effective SEO will involve changes to site structure since new types of content will likely be required to improve results for strategic keyphrases.

We have identified 10 classic approaches to SEO which are part of a typical SEO project. The ten processes or activities are:

- 1. Improve index inclusion.**
- 2. Revise site architecture and linking strategy.**
- 3. Internal linking strategy**
- 4. External link-building.**
- 5. Improve page template effectiveness.**
- 6. Improve SERPs effectiveness.**
- 7. Refine SEO for homepage and other key pages.**
- 8. Creation of themed pages for target keyphrases.**
- 9. Partitioning of existing content between different pages.**
- 10. Optimize other existing pages.**

These approaches are listed in rough order of importance and cost-effectiveness for a competitive sector site. Some modifications to site structure are implied by all of them.

Depending on the degree of competition and current audit of a site, they could well be in a different order. For example, external link-building may be more important in a highly competitive sector, but good results may be obtained through themed pages in a less competitive sector.

Improving index inclusion

This is arguably the most cost-effective approach to SEO and it is where most optimization companies will start. They will check that the index coverage of pages on the site and seek to maximise the number of pages crawled and so included in the index.

With most large organizations having worked on refining their SEO approach and especially index inclusion for several years, it may well be that index inclusion problems have already been solved. Typically there are either very big improvements through this stage of the SEO process or they are relatively limited. Given this, our coverage at this point on this topic is brief and you are referred back to SEO Success Factor 3, which deals with index inclusion and coverage in more detail.

Revise site architecture and linking strategy

In their classic book *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*³⁸, Rosenfeld and Morville (2002) highlight the importance of well-designed **information architecture**.

They say: "It is important to recognise that every information system, be it a book or an intranet, has an information architecture. 'Well-developed' is the key here, as most sites don't have planned information architecture at all. They are analogous to buildings that weren't architected in advance.

"Design decisions reflect the personal biases of designers, the space doesn't scale over time. Technologies drive the design and not the other way around."

The quality of the information architecture of a site has such a tremendous impact - both on the quality of user experience and SEO. It is unbelievable to see analysis / design for information architecture and SEO being treated as separate tasks (this remains common).

With the right partners it *must* be possible for specialists to work together when a new site is created or redesigned, rather than a calling in a SEO company at a later stage (when it will be much more difficult for SEOs to influence the overall architecture).

Key recommendation 44. Ensure that site information architects, site designers and search engine optimizers work together during a new site or redesign.

How does information architecture affect SEO?

The information architecture of the majority of websites is essentially a hierarchy from a homepage to different areas of grouped content on the site. Each area typically has different level of content (refer back to Figure 12 (a) for a simple example).

³⁸ Rosenfeld, L. and Morville, P. (2003) *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*. O'Reilly, Sebastopol, CA. Second edition.

With most sites having a top-level navigation system on every page, and every page linking back to the homepage, this means that *the homepage and pages near the top of the hierarchy tend to have the highest PageRank* and so are favoured in the search engine rankings.

This effect is implied from Table 15, which shows that the *top results tend to be for pages that are closer to the root directory of the site* (although we saw the ranking order depends on a complex interplay for factors such as keyword density and content freshness). As a result of this effect based on the way PageRank is calculated, it is regarded as best practice to *use a relatively flat site hierarchy rather than a deep hierarchy*.

A commonly-observed effect is that each additional layer of a site to a new directory results in a decrease of 1 unit in PageRank and correspondingly less chance of ranking well relative to competitors.

Key recommendation 45. Ensure site directory structure and hierarchy is consistent with SEO.

Figure 13 (a) shows the preferred approach for a product-oriented site. It is best to use a flat structure with the main products immediately under the root directory. More generally, your strategic SEO key phrases or themes should be immediately below the root directory.

Figure 13 (b) shows an approach where an additional product directory has been introduced which effectively pushes the products and sub-products down the hierarchy and so decreases their PageRank.

Figure 13 (a) Flat/shallow structure

Homepage – Root directory http://www.domain.com/index.htm (PR=7)										
Product 1 directory PR=6			Product 2 directory PR=6			Product 2 directory PR=6			Product Guide 1	Other categories
Sub-prod A PR=5	Sub-prod B	Sub-prod C	Sub-prod D	Sub-prod E	Sub-prod F	Sub-prod X	Sub-prod Y	Sub-prod Z	Sub-dir	Sub-dir

Figure 14 (b) Deeper structure

Homepage – Root directory http://www.domain.com/index.htm (PR=7)												
Products directory PR=6									Customer service directory PR=6			Other folders with deep structure
Product 1 PR=5			Product 2 PR=5			Product 3 PR=5			-	-	-	-
A PR=4	B	C	D	E	F	X	Y	X	-	-	-	-

SEO Ranking Factor 63	Create a shallow hierarchical site structure	Applies to: Each site page, for all engines.	Importance: 4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	The PageRank of an individual page depends on the architecture of each site. Shallow hierarchical sites tend to be better than deeply nested site.		
<i>Example:</i>	http://www.domain.com/keyphrase tends to have a higher PageRank than http://www.domain.com/intermediate linked page/keyphrase		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Use a shallow structure to maximise the PageRank of every page on the site. 2. Take particular care when optimizing the homepage since this typically has the highest PageRank and consequently will be listed higher in the SERPs than other pages deeper in the site structure if there is a match with the search term.		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• In terms of information architecture, it is still possible to create deeply nested sub-folders provided that they are <i>linked to</i> from a higher level. For example, E-consultancy has a structure http://www.e-consultancy.com/topic/search-engine-marketing but there is not a physical intermediate linking page at 'level' topic, i.e. there is a direct link from the homepage to directory 'search-engine-marketing'.		

A related approach to producing a flatter directory structure is to create links between pages or subsites with a **mesh structure**. This is shown in Figure 15. You can see that the PageRank is evenly distributed between the different pages which all link to each other. While this isn't practical on a large scale site, the principle can be applied, such that the most important pages link to each other (often through the primary navigation) or in a sub-site all pages link to each (often through secondary navigation). *Linking within body copy can also help achieve this.*

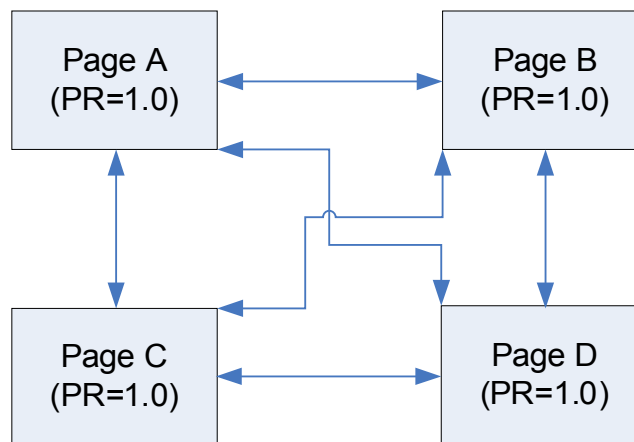


Figure 15 Mesh structure showing distribution of PageRank

SEO Ranking Success Factor 64	<i>Internal site architecture implication:</i> Mesh structures can help optimization	Applies to: Groups of related pages in site	Importance: 3/5
<i>What is it?</i>	In a perfect mesh, every page links to every other page, so PageRank is shared between them.		
<i>Example:</i>	This is shown in Figure 15.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Create interlinks between pages in different sections within the site through standard navigation, secondary navigation or links within body copy.		
<i>What to watch</i>	• The approach is most effective when pages have related themed content.		

for?

Internal linking strategy including creation of link-rich pages

The creation of internal links is an important element of search engine marketing. Unlike external linking the site owner has complete control over internal links, so make the most of it.

Tip 39. Create a process to regularly validate links on a site to check all internal (and external) links point through to pages that are still available. Produce a custom 404 error page for where links are invalid. For important pages for which you wish to retain **link equity**, use a **301 permanent redirect**.

In this section we will review how to improve SEO by improving these types of links:

- **Links from standard navigation.**
- **Links from ancillary navigation.**
- **Links from document listings.**
- **Sitemaps.**
- **Body copy and image links.**

Key recommendation 46. Don't underestimate the importance of internal linking. Ensure your internal link strategy includes all the above factors and in particular review text links in body copy and footer links to entry pages.

SEO Ranking Factor 65	Internal linking	Applies to: Page level	Importance:  5/5
<i>What is it?</i>	A structured approach for creating links between pages within a site for SEO. This includes both standard navigation features and links within the page as text links in body copy or image links.		
<i>Example:</i>	The E-consultancy site (www.e-consultancy.com) makes extensive use of these techniques.		
<i>Best practice:</i>	Review and refine your approach to these four different techniques of using internal linking for SEO: 1. Links from standard navigation. 2. Links from ancillary navigation (footers). 3. Links documents listings. 4. Sitemaps. 5. Body copy and image links. Across all of the following the anchor text of the hyperlink or adjacent text should contain the target keyphrase the destination page is optimized for, as we saw in the section on hyperlinks (3.4.6) and will see in the section on PageRank (.).		
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Body copy links are the technique that is used least often since content owners are unaware of it. • There are also implications from the search engine algorithms for how the whole		

site is structured, but these are covered in the next section as <u>Ensure site directory structure and hierarchy is consistent with SEO.</u>

Tip 40. Create a process to regularly validate links on a site to check all internal (and external) links point through to pages that are still available. Produce a custom 404 error page for where links are invalid.

Links from standard navigation

Standard navigation links to review include:

- **Primary navigation** (site-wide menus). Primary navigation links are particularly important for SEO since they occur on every page on the site and so help increase **backlinks** to the pages they point at. They should contain primary key phrases for destination page where not constrained by size. Should be text-based unless image-based navigation is essential for site objectives in which case alternative text should be used.

Tip 41. While sub-optimal from a usability point-of-view, the use of drop-down menus or use of list-box controls can be used to generate more links within the primary navigation

- **Secondary navigation** (navigation specific to homepage, certain category pages or product pages). They should contain the primary keyphrase for destination page. Secondary navigation on the homepage is particularly important since it has a high PageRank.

Tip 42. Consider a different homepage for returning visitors which can act as a mini-site map for and is effective for SEO. See, for example, www.eurooffice.co.uk.

- **Breadcrumbs** – used to indicate where the visitor is on the site. For an example see: www.davechaffey.com/Total-E-mail-Marketing. As you navigate around this site you will see, just below the top menu, a list of pages showing where you are and allowing you to easily visit a higher point in the structure. These are so named from the trail of breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel left in the forest to go back to their house.

Links from ancillary navigation (footers)

This is an increasingly common approach and it can also help with usability, since it is effectively a mini site-map at the foot of every page.

The site footers enable longer keyphrases to be included and, as they are part of the footer, they naturally occur on every page of the site.

Examples of sites that successfully use this approach include:

- Direct Line (www.directline.com) – just includes main products and a link to site map for more products.

- Talk Talk (www.talktalk.co.uk) – interesting example which corresponds with consumer search behaviour, e.g. options include: ‘Cheaper telephone call’, ‘Cheaper phone bill’, ‘Compare phone prices’, ‘Reduce my phone bill’. Each has a dedicated themed, optimized landing page.
- BBC (www.bbc.co.uk) – doesn’t use them on homepage, but they are found on other pages (mainly for usability): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport>.
- E-consultancy (www.e-consultancy.com) – ranks well on phrases within footers such ‘rate card survey’, ‘Internet statistics’, etc.

It currently appears there isn’t a penalty from this approach, although it would be easy for the search engines to identify site-wide navigation, but not necessarily where they are located on page.

Links from document listings

*These again work on the principle that more internal backlinks to a page will increase its **PageRank**, and so its competitiveness within the search engine. These are most efficient to create if they are automated listings based on other documents.*

Examples include:

- Listings of previous on-site search results.
- Listings of search results for strategic keyphrases. These work especially well since they include a link to a topic containing the keyphrase which is repeated several times. They also work well since they are typically fresh content.
- Listings of forum postings.
- Automated listings of documents within a folder (an auto-generated local site map).
- Listings of products within a category or sub-category.
- Listings of links to related product pages.

They are perhaps more suited to informational sites like E-consultancy (www.e-consultancy.com), but there is scope for using them within transactional sites too and they can offer different search modes.

Sitemaps

Sitemaps often don't get much thought from site owners or designers. A surprising number of websites use sitemaps that aren't designed from a search perspective, or don't have them at all. Spending time creating an effective sitemap is important for both SEO and usability – they are often amongst the most popular pages on a site.

SEO Ranking Success Factor 66	Sitemaps	Applies to: Single page or group of pages.	Importance:  3/5
What is it?	Page(s) containing links to main areas of site.		
Example:	http://www.directline.com/sitemap/map.htm		
Best practice:	1. Always include a sitemap based on text links, not images. 2. Anchor text to reflect searcher behaviour and your keyphrase analysis – not just product names but your primary keyphrase for a given page. 3. Consider a more advanced approach with a main site map and then a themed site map for each main area of the site with search optimized copy next to link explaining the benefits of the section.		
What to watch for?	• Often these are just straight listings of products names, but these should be amended to take into account user searcher behaviour. • Sitemaps need to be usable, so don't let copywriting for SEO destroy this usability. • We have seen above that mini sitemaps can be incorporated into different pages such as site footers and within product pages.		

Body copy and image links

As we stress elsewhere, content owners and reviewers should be encouraged to include links within body copy since they help engage the visitor and are useful for SEO. Indeed, these are the best kind of links. However, content owners may not know about this, or they may be limited by the **CMS** they are using.

It is also possible to **auto-generate links** within body-copy based on a list of strategic keyphrases. For example, for each forum posting, E-consultancy adds internal links to the relevant section of the site within the page for phrases such as 'web analytics'.

Links between different sites owned by a brand

Where a brand owns multiple sites on different domains, the principles of internal linking and external linking apply...

When a brand has many sites, there will be an advantage in setting up cross-links between these sites (from an SEO perspective, but not necessarily from a user-experience perspective). Note that if all the brands sites are all located on the same domain (known as the same IP C block, i.e. xxx.xxx.CCC.xxx then they will be identified as the same company and the links will likely have less **link equity** than those from different sites.

Key recommendation 47. Where a site owner has many different sites, inter-linking between these sites should be optimized using the principles explained in this section and the previous section.

External link-building

We explained earlier that it is very important to gain external links, particularly in competitive sectors. We have included this after internal link-building since we believe internal link-building is more controllable and often neglected. However, external link-building has the greatest role in increasing a site's PageRank and authority.

The topics that are covered are the six main strategies for external link-building are:

- 1. Natural link-building through quality content**
- 2. Requesting inbound-only links**
- 3. Reciprocal linking**
- 4. Buying links**
- 5. Creating your own external links**
- 6. Generating buzz through PR**

Improve page template effectiveness

Each site redesign involves changing the layout and style of different pages on a website. So for a retailer, separate template layouts will be created for the *homepage*, *category pages*, *product pages*, *search pages* and a general template for other content types.

These templates will be united through a common look and feel of page colour and typography, using cascading style sheets (aka '**CSS**') for best practice.

Pages will also have a common **primary and secondary navigation scheme** and as we have seen from the section on internal link-building, this will have *major* implications for the effectiveness of SEO.

Our same recommendation holds as for our comment on site architecture: *the SEO implications of changing the look and feel of the whole site and page layouts for different content types should be well considered before agreeing to changes.*

Importance aspects of the page template which relate to SEO which we have referenced in more detail elsewhere in this report are:

- Navigation links (part of internal linking,).
- Position of body copy relative to start of HTML page (earlier is better, see restructuring page code through HTML, [3.4.8](#))
- Use of Cascading Style Sheets to reduce page weight.
- Use of Cascading Style Sheets to enable aesthetic use of links and headings which can improve weighting.

Improve SERPS effectiveness

This is an often neglected aspect of SEO and website design, so we wanted to emphasise it.

SERPS effectiveness is based on the quality of the summary of your site within the results listings of the search engines. There are two reasons why this is important – one obvious, one less so.

First, what the entry in the search engine listing says about you is a **call-to-action** which, if effective, will encourage searchers to clickthrough to your site.

Second, it is widely predicted that Google and other engines use analysis of the click behaviour of searchers to help assess the relevance of the content and so use it as a positive ranking factor.

Let's look at these separately.

What determines the effectiveness of your call-to-action within the SERPs?

To run a quick check on the effectiveness of your SERPS effectiveness, Google: `site:<domain name>`, e.g. <http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=site%3Awww.hsbc.co.uk>.

**This listing tends to start with the homepage and pages high up in the directory structure and then appears random.*

Alternatively, consider the effectiveness of the listings for a particular phrase, Google: `<phrase> site:<domain.com>`, e.g. <http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=mortgages+site%3Awww.hsbc.co.uk>.

**This is useful since it shows the pages in the order they will be returned for that phrase as shown in .*

[Email Marketing Secrets: How to use e-mail to promote your ...](#)

E-consultancy's latest research, reports, case studies, guides, benchmarks and statistics.

www.e-consultancy.com/publications/email_marketing_secrets/ - 19k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[E-consultancy.com : E-mail Marketing](#)

Information, training and events on best practice online marketing and e-commerce.

E-consultancy.com has digital marketing case studies, e-marketing ...

www.e-consultancy.com/topic/e-mail-marketing/ - 24k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[E-mail Marketing - London training Seminar - Training : E ...](#)

In this course, an e-mail marketing expert will show you how to improve results by

... Multichannel marketing - integrating e-mail with offline marketing ...

www.e-consultancy.com/knowledge/events/1081/e-mail-marketing-london-training-seminar.html - 23k -

[Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Relevance tops email marketing most wanted : E-consultancy.com](#)

The latest UK online marketing and e-commerce news.

www.e-consultancy.com/newsfeatures/360903/relevance-tops-email-marketing-most-wanted.html - 21k -

[Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Email Marketing Buyer's Guide : E-consultancy.com](#)

Top experts discuss the latest thinking and best practice on e-commerce and

internet marketing topics including search marketing, affiliate marketing, ...

www.e-consultancy.com/forum/100468-email-marketing-buyer-s-guide.html - 23k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

[Advanced Retention E-Mail Marketing - Training Workshop - Training ...](#)

In this course, an e-mail marketing expert will show you how to improve results by

... Dave specialises in E-mail marketing and has delivered many practical ...

www.e-consultancy.com/knowledge/events/816/advanced-retention-e-mail-marketing-training-workshop.html -

22k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

Figure 16 SERPS effectiveness for E-consultancy site for phrase “E-mail Marketing”

Our best practice for controlling your listings in the SERPs is as follows:

SEO Ranking Success Factor 67	Improve clickthrough rate on listings within SERPS	Applies to: Each entry in SERPS	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	For each listing you have within the SERPS, the relevance of the words within the listing to the searchers needs will determine what proportion click through. By controlling more carefully what appears in the listing and through improved copywriting you can improve clickthrough rate.		
<i>Example:</i>	There are four main parts of your listing that determine its effectiveness. These are: 1. Hyperlink call to action , e.g. Email Marketing Secrets: How to use e-mail to promote your ... Determined by <title> tag		

	2. Description of page, e.g. E-consultancy's latest research, reports, case studies, etc. Determined by <meta name="description" content="phrase">. This can also be determined by entry in www.dmoz.org or snippets from the site. Snippets are often displayed where the meta description have been omitted because of the half-truth that '<i>meta tags aren't important anymore</i>'. 3. Page address or URL, e.g. www.e-consultancy.com/publications/email_marketing_secrets/ Determined by page address. Best practice is to use hyphens rather than underscores as discussed in section 3.5.1. 4. Other information. This may include stock prices or a recent innovation is a mini-directory of links taken from links on homepage. It is very difficult to control this since it is based on a combination of factors that cannot be readily isolated³⁹.
<i>Best practice:</i>	To summarise what we have said in previous sections, to be effective the SERPS listing should: • Use a strong call-to-action in hyperlink. • Include the target keyphrases for each page in the title, description and URL since this increases relevance to reader and they will be highlighted, which helps achieve clickthrough (as for PPC marketing). • Set expectations – explain the site value proposition, i.e. benefit of clicking in the description. • Use plain language URLs with keyphrases separated by hyphens. Since these will also be scanned for relevance also. • Take into account the effect of truncation – don't leave the best until last. This can be a problem if the brand name is truncated since it is on the right of the <title>, so best to include it in description.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• Often the <title> tag and meta description have high keyword density for SEO purposes, but the messages are not effective for the searchers reading the SERPS, so you need to make the title work for searchers also.

Often the consequences of entries in the SERPS are not controlled or even considered as part of SEO, so it is worthwhile to **develop a policy for content owners** to make sure they are well understood. They can also be highlighted or controlled through messages in the CMS.

Key recommendation 48. Create a site-wide policy for site <title> tags and <meta> tags, so that the search results are effective.

Influencing click behaviour

Since the search engines use analysis of the click behaviour of searchers to assess the relevance of the content and use it as a positive ranking factor, is there anything we can do to influence this?

Well yes, but is it unethical?

³⁹ For discussion, see <http://www.e-consultancy.com/forum/103131-google-top-results-have-added-extras.html>

If you can persuade visitors to click on links that are strategic keyphrases then it may help boost search engine rankings for these terms. Although there is much discussion of click-fraud for PPC, we have not heard about this practice for SEO. Perhaps people are keeping quiet about it. Perhaps it is a relatively unimportant factor?

It is likely that Google and the other engines use a similar check to that for click-fraud on sponsored links, so too many clicks from one IP address may be flagged up. Whether there can ever be any penalty imposed for this sort of action is surely doubtful, and there remains uncertainty on how much of a big deal this is for SEO.

Within Google, it is probable that a similar approach is used to determine the quality of a resource as the quality score⁴⁰ approach used for Google Adwords, i.e. *the clickthrough rate and the length of time someone stays on a page*.

If it is a similar algorithm to Adwords it would discriminate against listings lower in the SERPS since they will naturally get fewer clicks, and there is no equivalent of increasing bid price to boost position. Perhaps the calculation takes into account the position in the listings?

E-consultancy's view is that while 'they' may be watching, the search engines would not be able to sensibly determine relevance by clickthrough rates alone. Used in conjunction with time spent on a website, it could make more sense, but this too throws up all kinds of questions. As a ranking factor, **this cannot be too much of a big deal**, as at April 2006.

Refine SEO for homepage and other key pages

Typically, the homepage is very important to optimization since it typically has the highest PageRank of any page on a website. Consequently it will be listed more highly in the SERPs than other pages deeper in the site structure (*but only if there is a match with the search term on the page or in suitable amounts of pages that link to it*).

This implies that it is best practice to *target a range of strategic keyphrases for the on-page optimization of the homepage*.

Although this seems to go against the advice of ensuring that web pages have a good level of keyphrase density, this rule is less true for the homepage since we rely on its high PageRank to be listed highly.

That said, optimization of the homepage should still preferentially target the most important phrases for the site in the <title> tag, <body> pages and in the anchor text of links.

Tip 43. Ensure the homepage references a range of strategic keyphrases.

When optimizing, special attention should also be given to other pages high in the site hierarchy which share some or all of these characteristics:

- Have a high PageRank so should be naturally favoured in the listings.

⁴⁰ See <http://adwords.blogspot.com/2005/12/new-addition-to-quality-score.html>.

- Already work well – they attract visitors with high volume / high intent phrases and/or are one of the top entry pages to site. They can be made to perform better or adjusted to cover a wider range of keyphrase variants.
- Pages which should work well, but don't - gap analysis suggests that there is a high potential volume of searchers, but **share of search** is low. Creating new themed pages as described in the next sub-section may also be a valid approach for these pages.
- Are referred to from the homepage using the different linking methods described later in this section.

For example, an often neglected page for optimization is the 'About Us' page, which is an established, standard page high within the site structure. The About Us page can therefore be used to link to product-pages and other key areas of the website.

Tip 44. Use the About Us page as a method of linking to product pages

Creation of themed pages for target keyphrases

*The creation of themed pages, optimized for **target keyphrases** is a core part of SEO. The concept is based on creating pages which use all the on-page optimization approaches for two or three keyphrases. Best practice is to have a minimum length of 250 to 300 words, but can be more if it is appropriate to the format of document, e.g. for a guide.*

Tip 45. Best practice is to limit each themed page to 2-3 target keyphrases related to a theme.

This form of SEO often takes a period of weeks or months to plan, implement and refine, so it is a long-term play compared to paid-search marketing, or revising existing pages for SEO.

This strategy can also be justified by **its role of supporting the buying decision** and so increasing site engagement and conversion rates. It also **improves the online brand** as it adds to the value proposition of the site, while differentiating your site from competitors that do not have this type of content.

SEO Ranking Factor 68	Creation of themed content	Applies to: Related content on a site	Importance:  4/5
<i>What is it?</i>	Content related to a target keyphrase which is grouped together on a page or series of phrases.		
<i>Example:</i>	Bradford and Bingley (www.bradford-bingley.co.uk) have an information and guides section which includes this content which is used to support SEO and the buying decision: • Learn about Home Buying • Learn about Mortgages • Learn about Buy to Let • What Mortgage Suits You?		

	• Glossary • FAQ's
<i>Best practice:</i>	1. Create themed content for high volume, high intent keyphrases (if insufficient share of search for these terms is currently being generated). 2. Themed content often works well for generic searches which are not directly to look for a product, but used to inform buying decision, e.g. compare mobile phones, guide to mortgages, cheap phone calls.
<i>What to watch for?</i>	• The cost of these pages can be difficult to justify since guides, for instance, may need content commissioning for them and this will need revising. However, theme pages can simply be optimized, single pages costing £100 to £300 depending on complexity. • Not all interviewed believed in themed pages since some felt they are higher risk and would result in content being split between pages (a regular category or product page and a themed page). • <i>Penalty factor:</i> Doorway pages.

Doorway pages

*Doorway or bridge pages were traditionally thought of as old-school mid-1990s SEO. However, the approach was brought to prominence again in a very public way in early 2006 when Matt Cutts of Google⁴¹ showed why Google had barred BMW Germany from its index until it removed **cloaking** (definition: 'presenting a different view to search engine robots through a Javascript redirect compared to those accessing through robots'). BMW was reinstated within a few days once it had rectified the problem. This may be less easy if you are not BMW, although you can post a request for re-inclusion.*

The principles of doorway pages and different technical approaches to building them are described at <http://searchenginewatch.com/webmasters/bridge.html>. Often they would be machine-generated and would not be readable by a human audience, so would redirect to actual site pages.

Although this practice was widespread, it is now used less often since it is against the terms of service of the search engines and they now detect this approach and may penalise sites that use it.

Typically, doorway pages can be distinguished from other types of pages since they have links to homepage (or a relevant content page), but not in the reverse direction.

They were traditionally submitted separately to the search engines. *Best practice today as described earlier is to create themed content pages that are part of the regular site structure.*

For an example of this approach, see the pages referenced at the footer of this site (<http://www.talktalk.co.uk>) which are themed according to commonly typed keyphrases.

It could be argued though, that strictly these are doorway pages into a site created specifically for SEO. However, they are there to **reinforce the offer** to users and should be focused on **conversion**, and on one topic / theme / product. The by-product can be better search engine listings.

⁴¹ <http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/ramping-up-on-international-webspam/>

E-consultancy's view of doorway pages is that they are heinous and unnecessary, and to be avoided unless you *want* a Google ban.

Other types of content which may help SEO

Of relatively minor importance, but worth considering, are other content types which may exist in the organization, such as archived newsletters that might not have been displayed on the website. Often these will be useful for SEO, and for site visitors too.

Examples include:

- **Archived e-newsletters.** Often newsletters are broadcast, but the content not placed on site. As well as the content in the newsletter, internal links to elsewhere on the site can be helpful for optimization. Of course, some content may be time sensitive, so care needs to be taken to make sure this is removed.
- **Glossary.** A glossary of terms will often appear in Google searches using the 'define:' syntax. This is particular useful for informational or B2B sites. For example, <http://www.google.com/search?&q=define%3Aseo>
- **Technical guides or briefings.** Sometimes content that is used to explain various concepts to customers in printed form, perhaps as .PDFs may be useful for generating visitors, particular for exploiting the long-tail of less common search terms. Of course, there are issues of maintaining this content.

Tip 46. Review other offline or newsletter content that may provide useful resources for visitors and may generate visitors through SEO.

Partitioning of existing content between different pages

This technique simply involves looking at existing content to see whether it is worthwhile splitting it up differently. For example, a lengthy article can be broken up into smaller chunks. This may increase the keyword density for words in different parts of the document.

See <http://computer.howstuffworks.com/search-engine.htm> for an example. Since this site is based on ad revenue, it can generate more ad impressions if it separates out the content to different pages. Another alternative is to have a separate page for printing. *Note that this is not necessarily the best user experience.*

Optimization of other existing pages

The final approach to SEO is simply to apply the principles of Success Factor 3.3. SEO Success Factor 3: On-page optimization to less critical pages in the site, i.e. those which are at a lower level in the site hierarchy and do not contain strategic keyphrases.

This could involve reviewing the well known on-page optimization factors for each page including:

- <title> tags.
- <meta name=" "> tags.
- Headings <H1> etc.
- Keyword formatting.
- Hyperlinks.
- Image ALT tag.
- Body copy links and themed pages.

The on page markup factors are the main ones indicated in Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers.

Pages to be prioritised for this activity could be those that are already attracting visitors through search, or those which simply require an update.

Deciding which existing pages to optimize

For large sites it is **probably not worthwhile** updating these pages because of their volume – the cost/benefit would not match. But for smaller sites the time taken per page would certainly be less than one hour per page, while restricting changes to the headings (such as changing tags in <head> section) could limit it to minutes.

If established content owners for site content exist, they could be asked to review and optimize selected pages. Pages that would benefit the most following improvements can be identified in a variety of ways:

- Pages older than a certain date which require a check.
- Most important pages by number of page views (or site entries).
- Most important pages according to content owners.

6. SEO Success Factor 6: Conversion efficiency of landing pages

6.1 Introduction

The main part of this report has focused on how to attract quality visitors to a website. But of course, to be of value overall, SEO must meet the marketing objectives of a site.

In this final section we review **how to best devise landing pages** of the site to meet this goal. We also look at the implications of structuring these pages.

The principles we will explain for effective landing pages for SEO also support the aims of other e-communications such as *paid-search*, *online advertising*, *affiliate marketing* and *e-mail marketing*.

The main topics we will cover are:

- Setting balanced objectives for landing pages.
- Understanding different types of landing pages.
- Balancing usability, accessibility and persuasion.
- Measuring landing page effectiveness.
- Twelve guidelines to improve landing page efficiency.

6.2 What is conversion efficiency? Why it matters?

Conversion efficiency is a measure of how well a website or website page converts visitors to achieve the different outcomes or objectives required by marketers.

We will look at different forms of objective in a moment, but typically they involve conversion to a **lead** or **sale** or a **change in perception** about a brand or its products.

In some cases, the outcome is simply connecting the site visitor with the information they need. For example, a consumer might want to research a holiday online, but prefer to book it in store or over the telephone.

Conversion efficiency is a challenge, because we see on many websites that **conversion rates** are low (*typically less than 10% for new site visitors*).⁴²

We also see that **bounce rates** are often high for individual pages > 50% indicating that page content, site proposition or the product offering isn't suitable for the visitor, or that the visitor is in the wrong place, i.e. it is poorly targeted traffic.

Most discussion of web design naturally tends to focus on the homepage. But, for companies who are running a lot of online marketing campaigns and in particular SEM, improving the effectiveness of the different pages deeper within the site is vital

⁴² <http://www.davechaffey.com/Internet-Marketing/C7-Service-Quality/Conversion-rates-E-commerce>

to getting returns from these campaigns. So this prompts the question, which factors make for the most effective landing page?

This section first reviews **different types of landing pages** most appropriate for online marketing campaigns and then gives our summary of the **top 12 landing page optimization tips**.

6.3 What is a landing page?

Not everyone knows this jargon and actually, there's no simple answer. Our definition is that landing page or microsites are: "Specific page(s) on a website created for visitors referred from marketing campaigns which are designed to achieve a marketing outcome".

Anything referred to as a landing page is **intended to maximise conversion rates**, whether that's a sale, lead or change in brand metrics. Most typically, the outcome is **conversion to action**, typically **data capture** where a site visitor fills in an online form to generate a marketing lead.

Landing pages can be a series of related pages within an existing site structure as with [this example of online travel insurance](#), or they can be a microsite, which is specifically set up for a campaign, typically with its own campaign URL or 'CURL' (an example is Norwich Union www.quotemehappy.com).

6.4 Defining landing page objectives

It might be thought the objectives are simple – to convert to lead or sale. But this ignores the majority who don't respond.

Typical marketing communications objectives in order of importance are:

- Achieve registration typically to generate a lead (such as a quote for insurance in our example) which leads ultimately to sale.
- Profile and qualify the site visitor in order to deliver more relevant follow-up marketing communications.
- Explain the value proposition offered by the company to differentiate from other sites the visitor may visit during the buying process i.e. '*answer the visitor's questions*'.
- Communicate the brand values of the organization running the campaign.
- If the visitor doesn't want to disclose their details right now, provide contact details for traditional sales channels such as a phone number, or give the visitor reasons to return to the site or engage them through other relevant content or offers.

It is important to run through these objectives since sometimes it is just the two primary objectives related to data capture that mainly determine landing page design, and not the secondary objectives which are also important.

The majority of the visitors to the landing page won't actually convert, so it is important to give them a favourable experience of your brand also.

6.5 Measuring landing page effectiveness

*Most capable web analytics systems will report on site conversion rates and page bounce rates. To improve performance you also need to **break down these metrics for different keyphrases**, then **see if visitors were referred by SEO or PPC**, and then **look at the referring search engine**.*

Key recommendation 49. Ensure your web analytics software can report bounce rates and conversion rates at a granular level, i.e. by keyphrase, by SEM tactic and by search engine.

As a minimum, your web analytics system should readily allow you to view data on **bounce rates** (*the proportion of visitors who leave the page without visiting more pages*) and **conversion rates** (*the proportion of visitors who complete the intended outcome*) for different **referral sources** (e.g. *paid vs natural search vs online ads*).

Ideally, it should also enable you to complete **A/B testing** where different visitors are served different pages, so differences in bounce and conversion rates can be assessed.

6.5.1 The zero defect approach to improving landing pages

Aiming to achieve zero defects is an established approach in manufacturing and is used in different improvement methodologies such as Total Quality Management, Kaizen and more recently Six Sigma.

Technically Six Sigma means 3.4 defects per million opportunities (opportunities for failure, DPMO). Most marketers who look at this figure seem to throw up their hands in horror and say *‘that’s totally inappropriate, we’re communicating with customers with a wide range of behaviours, not widgets coming off a production line’*.

But we believe that although we may never be able to reach Six Sigma in marketing, **the analytical approach applies well to online marketing**, as it enables us to pinpoint where our communications are failing.

This is particularly challenging with the scale of online marketing where we may be advertising against tens of thousands of different keyphrases and driving visitors to tens of thousands of landing pages in a catalogue. Sam Decker of Dell (<http://decker.typepad.com/>) is one marketer who has seen the Six Sigma light and evangelises about it.

The approach prevalent in most web analytics software is inappropriate for analysing defects because it typically involves a report of 50 or 100 pages based on a single metric such as page views, entry pages, exit pages, referrers, etc.

A more analytical approach would enable us to identify page defects by reporting at a product page level, on metrics including: *bounce rates and exit rates by external and internal referrer type, conversion rate to outcome, and volume compared to other categories*.

Through such a multi-variate analysis of website pages, we can find the pages with the highest defect rates and greatest potential for improving results so we can focus on them.

Tip 47. Report bounce rates and conversion rates for all pages sorted from low to high to identify problem landing pages.

6.6 Different types of landing page

We have to bear in mind that there are different types of landing pages that work best depending on the campaign objectives and whether it is a short-term or long-term campaign.

There are two basic choices:

1. The first is a landing page *integrated into the site structure and consistent with standard page templates and navigation.*
2. The second is a landing page *specifically created for the campaign with a different look and feel.*

Here are some of the pros and cons...

1. Landing page(s) integrated into site architecture and style

It is most efficient in terms of effort in content creation to make landing pages part of the main site information architecture.

The downside is that these pages might not work so well in terms of converting both direct referrers and browsers navigating from elsewhere on the site. They also need to be search optimized, which may add to costs of the campaign.

This is an example of integrated pages for [annual travel insurance](http://www.norwichunion.com/travel-insurance/annual-travel-insurance) (<http://www.norwichunion.com/travel-insurance/annual-travel-insurance>).

Such landing pages in particular category or product pages use what is known as [deep linking](#).

An example of this approach for a branding campaign is that for the [BP Carbon Footprint campaign](#).

2. Bespoke landing pages that are additional to the main site structure or style

These are often used where visitors are referred from paid-search or e-mail campaigns where a more "stripped down" page than standard content is required. The focus here is very much about **converting visitors from an online ad campaign**.

Alternatively, if it is a **short-term branding campaign** then it may be more straightforward to create a **microsite** separate from the main site, with a different look and feel. This often happens where resource cannot be found to create a microsite within the main site, or it is felt that the existing site look and feel cannot deliver the brand impact required.⁴³

⁴³ Note that we are not recommending the use of 'doorway pages'

So this approach is used since it can potentially produce **higher conversion rates** or produce a microsite more consistent with the campaign goals and style.

The disadvantages are that this approach requires **more effort and maintenance** and often results in a **poorer user experience** since the page may look and work very differently to the main website.

If it is a completely separate site with a separate domain, a big disadvantage of this approach is that due to the **Google sandbox effect**, it is not likely to be included in the search results for several months. Given this it is really essential that the site is incorporated within the same domain - for example www.quotemehappy.com redirects to the main Norwich Union site.

So, you need to work out whether the cost of producing this type of page is offset by the potentially higher conversion rates and better campaign results.

Although this approach is surprisingly quite common, it is often taken for reasons related to convenience, even though **it is more expensive in the longer term**. I know of one e-commerce manager for a multi-national technology vendor who tries to educate their hundreds of web and traditional marketing specialists not to use the bespoke landing page approach, but to always try to integrate into existing site structure.

Often though, there is not one right or wrong approach and **a hybrid approach can be used**, i.e. you create tailored landing pages only for high volume/high expenditure generic Adwords pages or for major offline ad campaigns.

Note that **a landing page could potentially be the homepage** although this is not typically best practice. But, if a company has a limited range of products or the main campaign objective is to generate awareness rather than response. For example, online CRM vendor Salesforce.com directs visitors from Google Adwords to a [country homepage](#) since it thinks this is more likely to meet its objectives.

You may have more than one 'homepage'. For many companies with diverse product category pages which may have different audiences and are promoted through offline category URLs, it is often useful to think of each product category page as the homepage.

6.7 Different referrer types

To make the landing page effective, we also need to think through the full range of places the visitor may originate. There are 3 main origins we need to design a landing page to accommodate visitors from:

- 1. Online media placement.** Visitors can be referred by clickthrough from any online referrer such as a search engine, online ad, affiliate site or e-mail campaign.
- 2. Offline media placement.** Offline ads or direct mail may have a specific campaign URL (CURL) such as www.quotemehappy.com. This is the landing page for these offline referrers.
- 3. Visitors that navigate from elsewhere on the site.** Such visitors are not using the page(s) as a "landing page", but still need to be accommodated if you are using a deep linking strategy.

6.8 12 Landing page success factors

To be effective, landing pages need to combine the following to improve the user experience and increase conversion rates:

- Usability
- Accessibility
- Persuasion
- Develop trust in the brand

Coverage of these concepts is beyond the scope of this report and warrants its own best-practice guide. However, it is possible to distill best practice from these disciplines into the heuristics which form our guidelines - experienced search engine marketers apply these concepts all the time.

Before we run through our best practice guidelines, a particular constraint related to **accessibility** is the platform used to access the landing page. The guidelines that follow are dependent on a user's typical viewable area of screen. While many still design for a minimum of 800 by 600, the [latest data on screen resolutions](#) shows that 1024 by 768 is now most popular.

However, if browsers open a new window, for example from search results page, the new window may be smaller than full-screen. It also important to test your website using different browsers, such as Mozilla Firefox (now used by about 10% of users).

Your own web analytics tools will tell you what percentage of **your users** use Firefox, the most popular screen resolutions, their connectivity speeds and so on. Go see.

6.8.1 Guideline ONE: Deliver RELEVANCE

Relevance is key to successful marketing communications in all media, but especially online where we decide how relevant a website is to us in the blink of an eye (or in **50 milliseconds** to be precise, if you believe the research referenced in *Nature* recently on website interactions)⁴⁴.

Where the communication is not relevant we ignore it or filter it out, whether it is a result in the natural search listings or Google Adwords. We need to *not only* measure visitor volumes and conversion rates but to really understand **where and why we are failing to deliver relevance**. That can be indicated by **low clickthrough rates** on an Adwords ad, **high bounce rates** from a site landing page or **high abandonment rates** from the shopping basket funnel.

Unlike casual visits by browsers, visitors arrive on a landing page with a directed goal or intention in mind. So the first thing you have to do is instantly show relevance to help visitors achieve that goal. Manage expectations accordingly.

Clear headlines quickly show relevance and also **engage the visitor** to scan down the page. You need to show the visitor they have selected the right place to find the *brand, product, deal, information or experience* they are looking for, so the headline must clearly indicate this.

Other key "*relevance messages*" should be readily-scannable by choosing the right headlines and with different panels drawing the eye to the different areas. Tests tend to show that **larger fonts generate higher response rates**.

Since hitting the landing page is often the *first experience* of a company, we have to answer basic questions that the customer has about the company. These include: "*Who are you?*", "*What do you do?*", "*Where are you based?*", "*Do I trust you?*", and so on.

Questions might be somewhat obviously answered on the homepage, but **does the navigation on the landing page allow these questions to be answered?** Standard menu options such as "About Us" or "Contact Us" can achieve these, even though best practice suggests that the only link you *really* want on a landing page is a big '**Buy Now**' button!

6.8.2 Guideline TWO: INTEGRATE with referral source(s)

The customer journey to your website started elsewhere. To deliver relevance also requires consistency with what they have already read elsewhere and the content must meet the expectation raised by other communications.

So in terms of **message, branding and creative**, the landing page needs to deliver an integrated communication. This applies particularly to offline ads, interactive ads and e-mails.

The key message on the landing page needs to be consistent with the key message of the referral source. So again, you need to show the visitor they have selected the right place to find the brand, product, deal, information or experience they are looking for, so the headline must clearly indicate this.

⁴⁴ <http://www.nature.com/news/2006/060109/full/060109-13.html>

Think about it. You pay £2.50 for a consumer to click through from Google Adwords. Let's imagine you're advertising 'iPod deals'. If you clicked on the same ad wouldn't you expect to see a big picture of an iPod, a headline that matches the 'iPod deals' call-to-action, and so on? (Answer = **yes**)

However many landing pages are generic category pages, perhaps featuring a range of MP3 players. Which isn't what the consumer wants: they want an iPod. Only now, they need to cut through lots of non-iPod noise to find what they're looking for ('iPod deals'). Many will simply hit the **Back Button** when faced with page clutter not related to the call-to-action on the Google Adwords ad. Avoid! Especially when you're paying for this traffic.

6.8.3 Guideline THREE: Provide sufficient **DETAIL** to support the response decision

*One of the most obvious aspects of landing pages, and one that is often not right, is that there isn't enough detailed information for the visitor to commit to a decision. [Huggies do this well over several pages](#). At the same time, **we don't want to make the page too cluttered**. Getting this balance right is the key to successful landing page design...*

Tips and tricks for landing page design:

- To help determine the right-level of information, best practice is to use [design personas](#) to identify typical information required and the gap relative to what you deliver.
- Also think about the level of knowledge the user has - do your technical product descriptions make sense?
- Think about "tool knowledge". Where your landing page requires using additional tools, what knowledge is required to use them effectively and are you providing the right explanations?

More generally as well as providing detail, the whole experience needs to be right to generate response, which brings us to...

6.8.4 Guideline FOUR: Start the user on their journey

*The design should make the next step clear and **minimise the number of clicks required during sign-up**, since every extra click required in response will generally reduce response by 10%.*

It is best practice to include the initial data capture on the first page, so encourage engagement as in [this example of annual travel insurance](http://www.norwichunion.com/travel-insurance/annual-travel-insurance) (<http://www.norwichunion.com/travel-insurance/annual-travel-insurance>).

If the response mechanism is on another page then use **multiple calls-to action** to gain response, since **some visitors will respond to images** and **others will respond to text hyperlinks**.

Make all images clearly clickable, for example by making them look like buttons.

This [Marketing Sherpa case of E-Loan](#) suggests these form-related approaches to improve the journey:

- Limiting the options on each page is an effective technique.
- Grabbing attention in first 30 seconds through a headline and lead that reflects ad copy and "isn't too clever", i.e. be direct.
- If it is a multi-page form, then draw users in with easier initial questions.
- Allow the form to be saved part way through the quotation.
- Use dynamic headlines related to referrer including search keyphrase to help deliver relevance.
- Use focus groups to decide what to test - marketers who are too close to the problem may disregard factors that are important to customers.

The words used to form calls-to-action are critical to create a **scent trail** that users of the site follow. An effective scent is delivered where the words match what the user is thinking – or what they want to know or achieve.

For more on personas and scent trails, there is a great book by Bryan and Jeffrey Eisenberg, called [Call To Action: Secret Formulas to Improve Online Results](#). Add it to your reading list.

6.8.5 Guideline FIVE: Use the right PAGE LENGTH

This is a difficult one to give guidelines on. The right copy / page length is one that minimises the knowledge gap between what the users want to know and what you tell them.

Some designers would suggest that content must fit on one page that doesn't require scrolling at 800 x 600 resolution. But short copy is often inconsistent with Guideline 1.

Also tests have shown that pages can be scrollable - users will scroll if they appear scrollable. However, it is best if key information (and the response mechanism, eg the **Buy Now** button) are positioned **above-the-fold**.

To summarise, we would say, keep it short (for impulsive readers) AND long (for readers who want to read more). The rule of thumb is to provide '**just enough information**' for them to take the next step. B2B websites might need to provide a lot more information than a B2C website.

Of course, the only way to get the length right is to test. This [Marketing Experiments test](#) suggested that **long-copy outperformed when driving visitors to a product page** from Google Adwords.

6.8.6 Guideline SIX: Use meaningful graphics

Graphics must be consistent with the campaign and generate empathy for the audience. Don't underestimate the importance of quality graphics. Stock graphics rarely work. It is difficult to assess how graphics influence conversion rate, so the implication is test, test, test. Tweak. Test, test, test...

6.8.7 Guideline SEVEN: Remove menu options

Another guideline which tends to cause disagreement. **Removing menu options will often increase conversion rate** since less choice of where to click is offered.

However, those visitors who don't respond may be left with a poor impression. This tactic will certainly prevent them browsing other parts of the site. Often a compromise is best with a reduction in menu options to top-level options only.

6.8.8 Guideline EIGHT: Consider using a 'flowable' or liquid layout design

This maximises 'page real estate' at a given resolution. [Amazon](#) does this, while [Orange doesn't](#).

Although this can work well for a retailer to show more products above-the-fold in a category, this is achieved with a **loss of control of design**.

For landing pages, **a controlled, fixed design will often work best** and is most common.

6.8.9 Guideline NINE: Remember search marketing

There are *two* aspects of this. First, an offline campaign such as TV advertising will lead to people searching on your brand or the campaign strapline. So, make sure you are using paid search to direct visitors to the relevant pages particularly during the campaign. Be visible.

Second, if the page is integrated into the website and will be used in the long-term, optimize it for relevant search keyphrases using the SEO techniques covered earlier in this report.

6.8.10 Guideline TEN: Remember the non-responders

Provide a **choice** for those who don't respond despite your carefully crafted landing pages. Provide a reasonably prominent (and very *trackable*) phone number or perhaps a call-back/live chat option.

Also provide some options for them to browse or search elsewhere on the site.

6.8.11 Guideline ELEVEN: "TIMITI"

TIMITI is a term coined by Jim Sterne, author of [Web Metrics](#). It stands for **Try It! Measure It! Tweak It!**

In other words, Jim is saying that *online content effectiveness should be reviewed and improved continuously* (rather than as a periodic or ad-hoc process). Because the web is a comparatively new medium and the access platforms, user behaviour and competitor approach change continuously. What works at the start of the year may not work as well by the end of the year.

Although 'TIMITI' may suggest **ad-hoc testing**, which is certainly better than no testing, **structured testing** is better still.

The only way to be sure of what works for your audience and your market is to conduct structured tests such as **usability studies**, **A/B testing** or **multivariate testing**.

If you are managing a large site, more sophisticated testing tools may be required. [Offermatica](#) and [Optimost](#) are two of the best known tools.

At the top-end you may want to use automated real-time content targeting as provided by tools such as [Touch Clarity](#). These display the best message and offer for the audience within a panel in real-time.

And, with Jim in mind, let us reiterate one small point:

Having the right web analytics tool is vital to testing.

Having the right web analytics tool is vital to testing.

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Having the right web analytics tool is vital to testing.

6.8.12 Guideline TWELVE: Consider landing page longevity

Landing pages are often used for short-term campaigns. If so, you need to carefully manage when the campaign expires, so as to remove any links from the main navigation in due course. Consumers hate seeing out-of-date offers. Visitors loathe typing in URLs which are no longer valid.

Use of a **custom 404 error page** is essential to manage these problems gracefully.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Copywriting for SEO – a guide for content owners and reviewers

A step-by-step training guide for content owners and reviewers

In this example, we are creating a themed page about saving money on phone bills for landline phones.

Step1. Aims

What type of visitors do you want to attract to the page:

Example: People concerned about their phone bill

Which messages do you want them to achieve when they reach this page

Example: Best value. Establish credibility of supplier.

What do you want to achieve when they visit this page.

Example: Engage with site, go through to sign-up page.

Step 2. Identify keyphrases

These may have been identified in a structured keyphrase analysis for site.

If not, think about the phrases users are likely to type into search engines when looking for this content or service.

If you have time, use these tools for your country, to find the most important phrases:

- Overture (<http://inventory.uk.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/>). Doesn't require log-in, has searches for whole month, best for low volume searches. May contain automatically submitted searches.
- Google traffic estimator (<https://adwords.google.com/select/TrafficEstimatorSandbox>). Requires log-in to Adwords, clicks per day in Adwords, best for higher volume searches.

Checking Overture for 'phone bill' shows these phrases:

4393	phone bills
401	bt phone bill
314	cheap phone bill
240	cheaper phone bill
140	phone bill on line
127	phone bill saving
114	bt online phone bill
108	reduce phone bill
79	cheapest phone bills
61	lower my phone bill
60	cutting phone bill

Write down the most important phrases, grouping according to the emphasis you are going to place on them – **primary**, **secondary** and **tertiary** or **priority 1, 2 and 3**.

An example is given in Table 16. This approach helps you think about the most important phrases and gives them more emphasis. With experience, this approach becomes somewhat natural, it doesn't require too much thought.

Table 16 Example of different keyphrase priorities

Keyphrase priority	Narrow scope	Broad scope
Primary keyphrase(s)	Cheap phone bill	Cheap phone bills, Cheaper phone bills, Cheapest phone bill.
Secondary keyphrase(s)	Cheaper phone bills	Phone bill saving
Tertiary keyphrase(s)	Cheapest phone bills	Reduce phone bill, Lower phone bill, Cutting phone bill, uk.

The phrases you select will depend on the time/money you have to create different pages and the volume of searches.

Ideally we would take a **narrow scope** for each page. However, **for low-volume phrases, a broad scope can be more cost-effective**.

If we have a page with an occurrence of 3 or 4 different words such as 'saving', 'reduce' and 'lower' then it will be more effective than a page that doesn't contain any such keywords.

We also need to think about **synonyms**. If you Google the phrases above in the narrow scope you will see they are treated as synonyms, since they are highlighted in the results.

Quick guide for using different keyphrase emphasis:

1. Primary Key phrases

These are main key phrase theme(s) which we want to optimize the page for. They should be used within the <title tag>, headings and should be repeated a few times on the pages (2-3 times maximum) on the page with the emphasis on content towards the top of the page.

As well as using the **exact phrase**, you should **use the words in different order**. They can be worked into the copy so they are not adjacent to each other.

Synonyms, plurals and variations on the keywords should also be used.

Search engines identify whether the phrases are being repeated too often – this is known as 'keyword stuffing'.

2. Secondary Key phrases

These phrases are also important – their main difference from primary key phrases is that they do not feature in the title tags and are slightly less frequent.

Secondary keyphrases should also feature in the main page body copy between 1-2 times without compromising content readability.

The key with SEO copywriting is that it should never be apparent to the user.

3. Tertiary Key phrases

Are less important and so do not have to be repeated too much, maybe 1-2 times. It may not always be possible to incorporate these into meaningful phrases, e.g. 'buy to let home'.

In this example **it is still helpful to work the word 'home' into the page copy** on its own as much as possible.

Further guidelines on applying different types of keyphrases for different elements of the webpage are provided below.

Step 3. Choosing a document name and location.

If the page name or the subdirectories (s) contain keywords within the **filename**, then the search engine may place more relevance on this.

The **document name** and **directory** is also shown in the search engine results page, so may indicate relevance to the searcher as they scan this page.

You should:

- Include the primary keyphrase (or part of) in the filename.
- Separate keywords with hyphens ('-'), not underscores ('_') since this is more intelligible for search engines and human readers.
- Ensure the document name is not too long < 25 characters, ideally less than 15.
- Create sub-directories or folder names which include keyphrases, separated by hyphens.

Step 4. Title tags <title>

Title tags are important since the search engines place *strong* emphasis on the keyphrase they contain. They are also **displayed as hyperlinks** (blue highlighted links through to the website) on the search engine results page, so they should appear **relevant** and **encourage clickthroughs**.

You should:

- Ensure title tags should have the most important keywords at the beginning of the tag (to the left of the tag).
- Not contain too many words (10-15 maximum, <80 characters) because it will be truncated on the SERPS pages and relevance is higher for higher "density" of keywords.
- It is best to place the brand name to the right.
- Work in brand messages as appropriate.

In your content management system, the page title may be labelled 'page description'.

Example:

<title>Cheap phone bills - reduce your phone bill. Big savings with <brand name>, UK.</title>

Step 5. Meta tags

Google places little or no emphasis on these in determining the position of your page in the listings, but other search engines do read them to check the relevance of content, so it is best practice to **create unique tags for every page**.

The **meta description tag is important** for your audience since it is often **displayed on the search results page** and may encourage people to click through.

The two most important meta tags for SEO are **keyword meta tags** and **description meta tags**.

For the meta description tag, you should:

- Make sure that it differs for each page.
- The description meta tag should be similar to the <title> tag as shown in the example above and should vary for each page.
- It should not be identical to the <title> tag.
- It should contain less than 30 words (200 characters). Remember that only the first 15-20 words are given in the search results page, so you should explain your proposition and call-to-action in this space.
- It should not just be a list of keywords.

For the meta keywords tag, you should:

- Make sure it contains the primary, secondary and tertiary keyphrases comma-separated, in that order. Include synonyms and phrase variants as appropriate.
- Use up to 30 words maximum, since otherwise the density of phrases is too high.

Example – description meta tag:

<meta name= "description" content="Reduce your phone bills with <brand> for cheap home, international and business landline phone calls.">

Example – keywords meta tag:

<meta name="keywords" content="Cheap phone bills, Cheaper phone bills, Cheapest phone bill, Phone bill saving, Reduce phone my bill, Lower phone bill, Cutting phone bills">

Step 6. Body copy

The number of times that key phrases appear in the body copy is an important test of relevance by a search engine algorithm.

You should:

- Make sure the length of the body copy is a minimum of 300 words.
- Repeat primary key phrases 2 to 3 times as phrases, but keywords from the phrase are repeated more times, up to 2 to 3 times.
- Phrases and keywords should be used more towards the top of the page as this indicates greater relevance to the search engines.
- Repeat secondary key phrases 1 to 2 times and 1 to 2 times more as separate keywords.

- Use tertiary key phrases used once and the keywords repeated once more as separate keywords.
- Consider using tertiary keyphrases in bullet lists where a product has an attribute.

In general, longer pages give higher results for relevance although the keyphrase needs to be repeated more since this depends on the density, i.e. the number of times the key phrase occurs divided by the total number of words.

Plurals

Generally not much precedence is given to plurals, i.e. *phone bill* and *phone bills* are effectively equivalent.

It is best practice to **use a mix of plural and non-plural forms** but give precedence to the form you think will be used most often by searchers. You will see that different results are returned for plural and non plural forms.

Hyphens

In general, the search engine ignores hyphens (it sees them as a 'space'), however different results are returned for [e-mail marketing] and [email marketing].

It is best practice to **use a mix of hyphenated and non-hyphenated forms**.

Give precedence to the form you think will be used most often by searchers. You will see that different results are returned for hyphenated and non hyphenated forms.

Formatting

This has a **very minor effect** on the ranking today. The primary phrase could be weighted bold if appropriate.

Step 7. Heading styles

Using heading styles <h1>, <h2>, for headings and subheadings, etc containing target keyphrases has some positive effects for SEO and also helps with accessibility and scannability of the page.

You should:

- Introduce more use of subheadings within document, if this is not the house/copywriting style.
- Include the primary keyphrase in the main page heading <h1>
- Use the secondary and tertiary keyphrases in subheadings <h2>

Example:

<h1>Cheaper phone bills from <brand></h1>

<h2>Reduce your phone calls today</h2>

Step 8. Hyperlinks (3.4.6)

Don't forget to use **hyperlinks in the body copy**. Hyperlinks are the most powerful page markup feature, both from an SEO point-of-view and since **they highlight the calls-to-action** to get the user to engage with page and site.

Search engines place additional relevance on keyphrases that occur within or adjacent to hyperlinks. This helps the ranking of the page they contain, but mainly the page they point to.

You should:

- Include at least one hyperlink in the body copy with the primary keyphrase in the anchor text.
- Include secondary and tertiary keyphrases next to the hyperlink or in separate hyperlinks if appropriate.
- Include hyperlinks near the start, middle and end of a longer document. This gives a call-to-action in three places and also helps with search engine ranking.
- Don't leave thinking about where the hyperlinks fit within your page layout until the end of the document.

Example:

Click here to Reduce your phone bills today.

Find out more in section [3.4.6](#).

Step 9. Images

Graphical images on each page can have '**alt text**' associated with them that is not seen by the user, but will be indexed by the search engine.

This is **required for accessibility compliance** (screen-readers used by the blind and visually impaired, read-out the 'alt' tags), but is also used by the search engines to determine relevance. It helps **label images**.

You should:

- Link images to other documents.
- Include alternative text for linked or relevant images.
- Alternative text for images should contain the primary or possibly secondary key phrases where possible.
- Consider using an alternative link adjacent to (below) an image, if this fits page aesthetics.

Appendix 2. Search Engine Marketing – Briefing / Request for Proposals template

Background to company

- Main site URL.
- Main markets, brands and products with associated URLs.
- Target market and typical audience characteristics.
- Company and site URLs excluded?
- Geographical scope: Mainly UK audience or other key geographical markets targeting.

Background to tender

- Current situation: Need for review of SEM capabilities.
- Scope: SEO and/or PPC. If only one of these, who is responsible for the other?
- Organizational structure and responsibilities for online presence, e.g. IT, E-commerce, brand marketing, direct channel, product marketing, brand marketing.
- Examples of keyphrase categories targeted (or list if niche sector).

Aims

- Summary of current performance of keyphrases for different product categories.
- The more detail you can give about your company (under an NDA), the better able you will be able to judge the capability of the agency to pitch.
- Indication of current level of leads and improvement sought, or request for evaluation of potential.
- Outcome or action targets – conversion points on site.
- Targets for number of new visitors/sales to be generated.
- Current conversion rates.
- Cost per sale or action goals.

Target audience

- Give demographics.
- Give design personas if available.
- Give typical user journeys.

Positioning

- How is your brand positioned in the marketplace relative to competitors.

Previous search engine marketing activity

Current/historical performance

- Current performance (with NDA).
- Historical application of structured SEO techniques.
- Evaluation of current contribution of SEO and PPC to business.
- Current challenges.
- Areas of opportunity.
- Business priorities in next FY.

Reporting and tracking

Current web analytics tool(s). Any specialist search reporting tools for tracking, position reporting or link analysis.

6.9 Requirements, timescales and the pitching process

Our requirements from a search engine marketing agency

<Example>

We are using this tendering process to select an agency which...

- Has a **transparent approach** to search engine marketing. We see search engine marketing as being important to our business going forward and we want to understand and discuss the approaches our agency uses to help us work together to generate more business via the website. Our agency must be open about the approach they use and must be **proactive in making recommendations or improvements**.
- Can demonstrate a **structured approach to keyword analysis** to identify and select relevant keywords and groups of related keywords for our markets and are able to identify the potential volume of visitors for each keyword.
- Has an approach to search strategy which identifies the **best combination of SEO and PPC** for our different products to maximise our returns rather than increasing their management fee on PPC.
- Uses industry **best practice**. Has the right technical skills and can **provide examples of previous success** for clients in both SEO and PPC.
- Will provide clear **guidelines on how our copywriters can optimize copy** on our web pages and/or provide copy writing services.
- Will **openly describe the strategies and techniques they will use** to approach SEO and PPC and why they believe they are better in their capabilities than rivals.
- Has a **performance-based approach to SEM** with the reporting to readily show the volume and quality of traffic generated through this activity.
- Will ideally work with us as a **long-term strategic partner**, possibly on an exclusive basis for <market area> in the UK.

Our objectives

Our specific objectives from Search Engine Marketing are:

- To identify the total potential opportunity for promoting our products through search engine marketing
- To exploit this potential to significantly increase the volume of visitors from the search engines to our <home, category, product> pages within a <x> month period
- To attract quality visitors who convert to outcomes and have high lifetime value
- To minimise the cost of visitor acquisition and lead generation

6.10 The pitching process

We have pre-selected a <x> agencies to invite to tender. After submission of written proposals we will select up to <y> agencies to present their proposals to us directly.

Timescales

- <Date>:Deadline for questions
- <Date>:Proposals required
- <Date>:Notification of progression to next phase and agree date to pitch
- <Date>:Appointment made

6.11 Developing your proposal

To compare different providers, we would like you to describe your approach to a “test case” which is one product category within site.

Structuring your proposal

Please structure your proposal in the following sections:

- Summary of your company background.
- Your approach to keyword analysis.
- Your approach to keyword selection and search strategy.
- Your approach to tracking and reporting.
- A costed approach to SEO.
- A costed approach to pay per click sponsored listings.
- A costed approach to reviewing and improving performance.
- Summary of overall costs and identification of returns⁴⁵.

Summary of your company background

A brief section covering:

- Length of time your company has provided SEO and separately, PPC services
- Number of full-time staff involved in account management and implementation for SEO and separately PPC
- Relevant experience in <market> and possible conflicts of interest with related sectors
- Seniority / experience of our account manager and team
- Your strengths in Search Engine Marketing and working with clients

⁴⁵ While accurate estimating of returns is not possible with SEO, an indication, possibly made for a defined product or keyphrase groupings will highlight different approaches to SEO.

Summary of your approach

- What are the core aspects of your approach? Particularly those you feel are unique/lead to better results for client.
- Recent results from relevant clients.

Summary of your staff expertise

Prove the extent of skills:

- How do your staff keep up-to-date with the latest success factors / changes to algorithm?
- Do you have any test-bed facilities?
- Do to you have Google Advertising Professional (for Adwords)?

Your approach to keyword analysis

Your proposal should describe how you will identify relevant keywords which will attract quality visitors to our site.

You should:

- Describe your overall approach to keyword analysis you will use by auditing our products/site.
- Explain how you would estimate the potential opportunity for our business of SEM in terms of volume, quality and cost.
- Give a preliminary indication of the total potential volume of visitors from the search engines in <product area>. Describe the basis of your estimate.
- Illustrate your approach with respect to <product area:URL>.

Your approach to keyword selection and search strategy

Please describe how you will select and prioritise relevant keywords to promote our products and attract visitors via the search engines. Explain to us how will you group phrases, how will you decide whether we promote them through SEO, PPC or both.

You should:

- Describe your overall approach to keyword selection across our product range.
- Discuss your approach to selecting SEO or PPC for particular products/keywords.
- Present your costs for this activity for Option 1 and Option 2.
- Illustrate your approach with respect to <product area:URL>.

Your approach to tracking and reporting AND IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

Please describe and give examples of your reporting capabilities.

Reporting requirements:

1. At different levels of site, e.g. for each brand, main product categories, sub-products and individual product level. Ideally, it should be possible to drill-down to see performance for each.
2. Breakdown of performance between SEO / PPC / other (non-search) traffic.
3. Breakdown of performance across the different engines and PPC ad networks.
4. Reporting of performance by different aggregation of keywords for SEO and PPC.

Main measures:

- Visitor volume (potential click volume or targets, actual volume).
- Competitive performance (For SEO, relative position compared to competitors in natural listings in main engines).
- Quality (Bounce rates, conversion rate of visit to leads, End-to-end tracking through to lead and then sale).
- Cost (Cost Per Click, Cost Per Lead and Cost Per Sale).

Define availability and format of reports:

- Real-time log-in to web-based reporting?
- Standard reports presented /exported in spreadsheet or Word?
- Periodic (ideally monthly) summary of performance and recommendations (manual)?

Technical approach to tracking. Explain requirement of cookies, page tagging, tracking URLs (PPC) and any other techniques which will require IT input.

Please state if it is a white-labelled version of a more widely-available web analytics or search marketing measurement tool, or an in-house tool.

- How would you propose working with us to review and improve performance?

Your approach to brand abuse and site hijacking

Outline the potential threats, how you monitor for them and how you counter them.

A costed approach to SEO

Please describe your approach to SEO.

You should:

- Outline your technical approach to SEO including on-page optimization and link-building stressing techniques which deliver competitive advantage. Describe optimization of existing pages and the need for developing new content.
- Review our current pages for : <product area> for improvement.
- How would you assess our current SEO against a sample of our competitors (direct and indirect competitors for searchers) for <product area>.
- Explain how you will brief our copywriters to create or amend copy and meta data.
- Present your costs for this activity.
- Give an indication of the amount of time and costs to implement SEO – break this down into optimization of existing pages and creation of new optimized pages at a cost per page. If necessary identify a lower cost and higher-cost option.
- Explain how we will assess the cost-effectiveness of your SEO in terms of results (e.g. Volume, Cost Per Click, Leads generated).
- Illustrate your approach with respect to <product area>.

6.12 A costed approach to pay per click sponsored listings

Please describe your approach to managing Pay Per Click marketing on a long-term basis.

You should:

- Describe the range of PPC ad networks you think are relevant for us and whether trusted feed may be relevant
- Search term research
- Describe the techniques you will use to maximise return on investment. For example:
 - Ad group structuring
 - Match types
 - Creative
 - Bidding approaches and management (automated against manual)
 - Keyword review
 - etc
- Indicate agency management fees (typically as a proportion of media spend)
- Indicate tracking/bid management fees (typically fixed depending on media spend bands)
- Show how you will review and minimise click fraud
- Give an indication of the amount of time to implement this
- Explain the breakdown between setup costs, media costs and your costs for managing the service (for different levels of spend/visitors)
- Illustrate your approach with respect to keywords related to <Product area>

6.13 A costed approach to reviewing and improving performance

After the initial evaluation, and once the strategy has been implemented, please estimate ongoing costs for SEO and Pay Per Click and explain the process for how you think we could best work together to improve performance.

Glossary

301 Redirect (permanent redirect)

Interpreted by search engine **robot** that the current domain is no longer valid. All links to the domain (and pagerank) are typically assigned to the site which is pointed to by the redirect. Used to amalgamate pagerank and give a single URL for a company or group of products. This redirect is implemented on the server (server-side).

302 Redirect (temporary redirect)

Interpreted by search engine **robot** that both the target domain and the current domain are temporarily valid. Use for geolocation to point country specific domains (ccTLDs) as separate listings. But note this is used for domain hijacking and as a consequence can result in sites getting penalised. This redirect is implemented on the server (server-side).

Accessibility

An approach to site design intended to accommodate site usage using different browsers and settings particularly required by the visually impaired.

'Alt' image tags

Graphical images that form each page can have 'hidden text' associated with them that is not seen by the user, but will be indexed by the search engine. This is required for accessibility compliance (screen-readers used by the blind and visually impaired, read-out the 'alt' tags), but is also used by the search engines to determine relevance.

Affiliate marketing

Typically, a commission-based arrangement where referring sites (publishers) receive a commission on sales or leads by merchants (retailers). A lead may be based on data captured during an enquiry, or it could be simply a visitor to the site (a click), in which case it overlaps with paid-search marketing.

Authority pages

A concept related to **Hilltop**. A page which contains many inbound links about a topic. 'Expert pages' (**hubs**) are given more weighting to identify authority pages.

Backlinks

Hyperlinks which link to a particular web page (or website). Also known as inbound-links. Google PageRank and Yahoo! WebRank are methods of enumerating this.

Outbound links are the origination point of backlinks.

Bid management software

Software used for automated management and reporting of **managing paid-search marketing** across several search engines. Control rules are set to determine bidding strategy and the bids are adjusted to optimize for different goals such as ROI or volume.

Black-hat SEO

An approach to SEO that pushes the boundaries of ethical practice. Potentially contravenes the search engine's terms of service. High risk, high-reward approach. May gain more visitors if techniques are more effective than those of companies following an ethical, **white-hat SEO** approach. However, may be subject to algorithm

changes. For example, the 2005 Jagger update penalised sites using Cascading Style Sheets for **cloaking** to effectively hide keyword rich text.

Blog

A commentary on particular topics which is updated daily, weekly or monthly by an individual or a group of people.

Bounce rates

Proportion of visitors to a page or site that exit after visiting a single page only, usually expressed as a percentage.

Brand misspellings

A user mistypes a brand into the search box or into the URL address box. Best practice is to ensure the brand is visible.

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)

Web page content (text body copy) is separated from code used for presentation (layout and formatting), which is stored in a separate Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) file (.css).

Canonical domain

The simplified version of a domain: <http://domain.com> without the www subdomain prefix <http://www.domain.com>.

Click fraud

Clicking on sponsored links, typically arranged through competitors, for the sole purpose of costing the advertiser money.

Clickthrough rate (CTR)

The number of clicks on ad or link as a proportion of ads or pages served. Usually expressed as a percentage.

Cloaking

Showing a different version from of search engines to **search robots** and human visitors according to the **user agent** of the site visitor. Generally consider as spamming except when used to improve index inclusion, e.g. through permitting **Session ids**.

Content management system (CMS)

Software to manage the addition, review and modification of web pages on a server. Includes tools for editing and workflow.

Content network listings

Sponsored links are displayed by the search engine on third-party sites

Content network paid-search marketing

Sponsored links are displayed by the search engine on third-party sites. Ads are paid for on a **PPC** basis or on a **CPM** basis.

Conversion rates

Proportion of visitors to a page or site that convert to the outcome required, such as lead or sale, usually expressed as a percentage. Conversion rates can be measured as a proportion of visits or visitors.

CPM (Cost per thousand or CPT)

A payment model for online advertising where the advertiser is charged for every 1000 views of the page containing the ad (page views or impressions) or more accurately, the ad itself (the ad is served 1,000) times.

Deep linking

The search engines (or another site) take a visitor straight through to page within the site rather than the homepage.

Domain

A label indicated by the domain naming system (DNS) to denote the Internet address (IP address) of a server. Global Top-level domains (gTLDs) include countries such as .co.uk, .fr, .de as well as .com etc

Domain popularity

The number of different domains that link to you. Term not as widely used as link popularity, but useful since indicates the number of unique domains (many links from the same domain may be counted together).

Domain hijacking

Potential search visitors are directed elsewhere. The most common situation is where web domains that have expired are claimed by another owner and then used for some other purpose. It also means where the search traffic for a site is hijacked using a **302 redirect**.

Doorway or bridge pages

An approach to SEO no longer widely used and no longer recommended due to search engine penalties. Doorway pages not connected to the remainder of the site and are optimized for a particular key phrase to entice site visitors and sometimes a specific search engine. Often used **cloaking** and redirected to other content.

Duplicate content penalty

Search engines make an assessment of duplicate content within a site or on different domains and may penalise for this if they judge duplication. Alternatively, they may simply give a higher relevance and ranking to the page with the highest **link equity**. Limited duplication such as print and screen versions of content should not cause a problem. You should check for duplication of your site.

Gap analysis

Assessing the difference between the potential search volume on a phrase with the volume you actually receive (separated into SEO and PPC).

Generic search phrase

A simple keyphrase without any qualifiers such as 'car insurance'

Google APIs

Google APIs are an 'Application Programming Interface' which enables any third party to develop software which call Google functions to perform queries with specific keyphrases. It requires the use of a **Google API key**. Google has different APIs, e.g. for Web (search engine), Mapping, Adwords and Desktop. Developing programmes which interface with the API can help agencies or clients gain competitive advantage through performing more sophisticated analysis.

Google API Key

Effectively a username issued by Google to control access to the different Google APIs⁴⁶.

To see the importance of links to SEO, Google 'miserable failure' - <http://www.google.com/search?q=miserable+failure> and take your pick.

Google Bombing.

The practice of denigrating someone or an organization by creating many pages which link to a site based on a theme (high **link context**). The best known is the 'miserable failure' example. The site does not contain this phrase, but contain links into the site with pages or links referencing this phrase.

Google "sandbox effect"

Sites which are added to the index do not perform well in terms of ranking for a period of several months. Although the existence of this effect is debated, it is evident in many cases and is clearly intended to prevent unscrupulous sites gaming the index by frequently creating new sites in order to game the index.

Google quality score

An assessment of the quality of a Google Adwords ad based on its historical **clickthrough rates** and from late 2005, the conversion on the ,

Google sitemaps

A facility to submit an index of a site's pages to Google to assist its robots with spidering the site. Also contains reporting tools.

Hill top

An algorithmic approach to assessing the quality of links between pages based on the identification of **hub** and **authority** pages. Pioneered by Krishna Bharat, an engineer at Google. Sites with pages identified as hubs and authorities are given more weighting in determining the relevance of a target page.

Hub pages (actually referred to as 'Expert page' in the paper)

A concept related to **Hilltop**. A page which contains many outbound links about a particular topic'

Inbound links

See **backlinks**.

Index

A database created by search engine **robots** which contains information on the URL of each page crawled, the keyphrases it contains together with other information which determines weighting in **SERPs** such as **keyword density**, formatting and **PageRank**.

Index inclusion

Ensuring that as many of the relevant pages from your domain(s) are included within the search engine indexes you are targeting to be listed in. See **search engine submission**.

⁴⁶ Information on Google APIs: <http://www.google.com/apis/>

Index coverage

The number and proportion of all the pages on a domain which are included within the index of each search engine.

Information architecture

The combination of organization, labelling, and navigation schemes comprising an information system.

IP address

The unique numerical address of a computer.

Keywords

The **keyphrase** or search query which is typed into the search engine.

Keyword density

The proportion of a page taken by a **keyword** or **keyphrase**. Usually expressed as a percentage.

Keyword stuffing

The repeated use of a keyphrase within a page or within a **meta keyword** tag. Penalties may be applied for keyword stuffing.

Keyphrase (keyword phrase)

The combination of words users of search engines type into a search box which form a search query.

Keyphrase analysis

A structured approach to identification of key phrases used to attract visitors to your site through search marketing

Keyphrase qualifiers

These are added to the **generic keyphrase** (e.g. car insurance) to narrow the search, e.g. 'car insurance uk'.

Keyphrase variants

Different forms of a given keyphrase, i.e. plurals and different word sequence. Careful analysis of these can give better results.

Link anchor text

The hypertext used to form the text of a link, in the HTML <a href=<http://www.domain.com>>Anchor text which forms link when viewed in browser</a.>

Link-building

A structured activity to include good quality hyperlinks to your site from relevant sites with a good PageRank and **Link context**.

Link context

The relevance of a link for a particular keyphrase based on different aspects of the page where the link originates. Context includes link anchor text, keywords adjacent to the link, keyword density and markup in other tags such as title tag.

Link equity

A page that is rated by the search engine as having higher relevance based on its **link popularity** and **link content**.

Link farm

A network of sites that link to other sites for the sole purpose of increasing **link popularity**. Tend to contain links to totally unrelated sites. Search engines can identify and penalise most forms of link farms.

Link popularity

An assessment of page quality based on the number of inbound or **backlinks**

Link quality

An assessment of the importance of a link in indicating relevance for a particular keyphrase based on the link context, the **PageRank** of the page and the dilution effect of **outbound links**. Alternatively, an assessment of the link popularity for a range of backlinks for a page or site.

Long-tail concept A frequency distribution showing the typical decline in popularity of items within a sector when a consumer has a choice in selecting these items. In search, the most common search terms for a site or market sector have much higher volumes than the less common phrases, which together are important in generating qualified visitors.

Mesh structure

An approach to SEO where a group of pages link to each other to distribute PageRank more evenly.

Meta description meta tag

A **meta tag** which summarises the content of the page in a short paragraph

Example: `<meta name="description" content="Buy from the worlds largest bookshop">`

Meta keywords meta tag

A **meta tag** which used to list keywords relevant to the page.

Example: `<meta name="keywords" content="book, books, shop, store, book shop, bookstore, publisher, bookshop, general, interest, departments,">`

Meta-tags

Markup which is part of the HTML file, typed in by web page creators, which are read and displayed by the browser.

Natural or organic listings

The pages listing results from a search engine query which are displayed in a sequence according to relevance of match between the keyword phrase typed into a search engine and a web page according to a ranking algorithm used by the search engine.

On-page optimization

Devising page content, structure and HTML markup to prove relevance of a search keyphrase to the search engines.

Outbound links

Links from a page to another page. The origination point of backlinks or inbound links.

PageRank

Google's trademarked approach to assess the value of a web page based on the number of inbound links or **backlinks**.

Paid-search marketing

There are two types of paid-search marketing: **Pay Per Click paid-search engine marketing** and **Content-network paid-search marketing** (which may be on a **PPC** basis or on a **CPM** basis).

A relevant text ad with a link to a company page is displayed when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. A fee is charged for every click of each link, with the amount bid for the click mainly determining its position.

Paid listings of a search engine

A relevant ad with a link to a company page is displayed when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. A fee is charged for every click of each link, with the amount bid for the click mainly determining its position.

Pay Per Click (PPC) paid-search marketing

A relevant text ad with a link to a company page is displayed on the **SERPs** when the user of a search engine types in a specific phrase. A fee is charged for every click of each link, with the amount bid for the click mainly determining its position.

Persuasion

An approach to website design which involves maximising returns from web investments based on web analytics, heuristics and usability.

Quality Score

A measure of relevance for Google Adwords based on the ad clickthrough rate and user engagement with destination website.

Ranking factors

The criteria used by the search engine in their algorithms to determine how high a website / page is displayed in the natural listings for a particular phrase.

Really Simple Syndication (RSS)

An XML-based content distribution format commonly used for accessing blog information and other feeds of information that are regularly updated. Accessed by different forms of RSS reader.

Reciprocal linking

Links are exchanged between sites. The effectiveness of this will depend on the **link quality** and whether links are direct or not.

Robots

Automated software agents located on a search engine server that collect page data from different sites by following links between pages and sites. Robots follow policies which determine how often they visit a site. Search engine robots collect data about each page which is added into the **search engine index**.

Robots.txt

Robots.txt is text file located on the root directory of each domain used to instruct a robot to include or exclude page(s) from a site. <http://www.robotstxt.org/wc/exclusion-admin.html>

Search engine filters

Elements of the algorithm which may penalize pages or sites for **search engine spamming**.

Search engine ranking algorithm

The search engine uses a complex evaluation of different **ranking factors** occurs to assess the order of relevance of results returned on the SERPs for a given search phrase.

Search engine index

A database containing details of pages crawled by search engine **robots**. Includes assessments of keyphrases and information need to determine ranking factors.

Search engine marketing (SEM)

Promoting an organization through search engines to meet its objectives by delivering relevant content in the search listings when they search and encouraging them to click through to a destination site. The two key techniques of SEM are **Search Engine Optimization (SEO)** to improve results from the natural listings and **Paid-search marketing** to deliver results from the sponsored listings within the search engines through **Pay Per Click (PPC) paid-search engine marketing** and through **Content-network paid-search marketing** (which may be on a **PPC** basis or on a **CPM** basis).

SEM is about connecting the searchers with information which will help them find what they are looking for and will help site owners generate revenue or disseminate information.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

A structured approach used to increase the position of a company or its products in search engine **natural or organic results listings** for selected **keyphrases**.

Search journey

The sequence of searches a user will type in and the different types of sites they will visit from when they start searching until they find what they are looking for

Search engine results page (SERP)

The page(s) containing the results after a user types in a **keyphrase** into a search engine. SERPS contain both **natural or organic listings** and **paid or sponsored listings**.

Search engine submission (registration)

A search engine is notified of a URL (usually the homepage) for indexing either directly or indirectly.

Server log files**Session IDs**

Included as part of the URL as a parameter for tracking visitors between different pages. May cause difficulty in the **robot** indexing the site.

Snippets

Occur in the **SERPs** below the hyperlink to the site. In order of precedence, this text is taken from the meta tags, snippets within body copy or the open directory. Which is displayed depends on match with search term entered.

Strategic keyphrases

Important **target keyphrases** that are targeted for SEO since they combine high volume and intent to purchase or other required site outcome, consistent with usage by the site's target audience.

Target keyphrases

The phrase(s) that a particular page is being optimized for or that a landing page has Google Adwords or other paid-search as the destination URL.

<TITLE> tag

Part of the markup in the <HEAD> section of an HTML document which is used as the hyperlink in the SERPs and appears at the top of browser window. It is also important since phrases within it are a major factor in determining the relevance of a page by the search engine.

Usability

An approach to website design intended to enable the completion of user tasks and to improve the user experience. Typically measured by increasing task completion rates and decreasing completion time (or number of clicks).

URL (uniform or universal resource locator)

A web address used to locate a web page on a web server.

User agent

The client application or software service which initiates a request for a web page. Examples include web browsers and spiders.

Viral marketing

Online viral marketing involves generating word-of-mouth – sometimes called 'word of mouse' – using e-mail to circulate links through to a website which includes a viral agent such as a video clip, game, competition or other content. Traditional word-of-mouth too helps spread the news about the content.

Web analytics

Techniques used to assess and improve the contribution of E-marketing to a business including reviewing traffic volume, referrals, clickstreams, online reach data, customer satisfaction surveys, leads and sales. Web analytics tools used in SEM include browser-based using Javascript and image tags and server-based transaction file log methodologies.

White-hat SEO

An approach to SEO which follows an ethical approach of what is generally agreed as acceptable best-practice within the industry. cf **Black-hat SEO**.

WHOIS record.

A record of the geolocation and owner of a **domain**. The WHOIS server (www.whois.sc) can be queried manually and is also queried by search engines to determine the country where a server is registered.

About E-consultancy

E-consultancy is the UK's leading online publisher of best practice [internet marketing reports](#), research and how-to guides. It also publishes buyer's guides and has a directory of 100,000+ third party [internet marketing white papers](#).

Since moving to a paid-content model in 2003 E-consultancy has amassed thousands of paying subscribers, more than 36,000 registered users and 150,000+ unique users sessions per month. Its [weekly newsletter](#) is sent to 20,000 users.

[Subscribers](#) pay from £149 per year to access the exclusive and highly practical content, which helps internet marketers get the most out of their websites.

E-consultancy has more than 100 [events](#) lined up for 2006, including roundtables and monthly [Supplier Showcases](#), where six suppliers pitch to an audience of pre-qualified buyers (typically between 100-150) in a Central London venue. E-consultancy also provides a range of public and in-house [training](#) programmes, such as seminars and workshops.

Contact Chris Lake, editor, on 0207 681 4052 or by email: chris@e-consultancy.com.

About the lead author and expert review team

Dr Dave Chaffey (www.davechaffey.com) is a specialist Internet marketing trainer and consultant. Dave is proud to have been recognised by the Chartered Institute of Marketing as one of 50 marketing "gurus" worldwide who "have shaped the future of Marketing". Dave works for E-consultancy as an analyst and trainer. His previous reports include: *Managing an E-commerce team: Integrating Digital Marketing into your Organization* (<http://www.e-consultancy.com/publications/managing-ecommerce-team/>).



Over the last 10 years, Dave has trained or consulted on the full-range of online marketing approaches with a range of B2C and B2B companies from well-known brands to smaller businesses. Companies he has worked with include 3M, Actel, Bank of Scotland Corporate, BP, CIPD, CMP Information, Eurooffice, HSBC, Siebel Systems and Tektronix. He is a prolific E-business author whose books include *'Internet marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice'*, *E-marketing Excellence*, *Total E-mail Marketing*, and *E-business and E-commerce Management*.

Internet marketing pioneer, Jim Sterne, chairman of the Web Analytics Association (www.webanalyticsassociation.org) and organiser of the annual E-metrics summits (www.emetrics.org) comments:

'Dave layers a keen understanding of marketing with in-depth technical and heuristic knowledge about doing business on the Internet. Top down or bottom up, Dave has an astonishing grasp of strategy as well as tactics'.

The expert reviewers

Dave compiled this report with the aid of an expert team of contributors and reviewers ranging from clients, search agencies, consultants and digital marketing agencies to ensure the recommendations reflect current best practice. Dave and E-consultancy are very grateful for the detailed input provided by many contributors. The expert reviewers are:

Name	Company	Company background/Experience
Mario Muttenthaler	Net-a-porter www.netaporter.com	Online Clothing retail Mario is online marketing manager
Tony Barker	MobileShop.com www.mobileshop.com	Tony is marketing manager
Edward Cowell	Neutralize (**) www.neutralize.com	Full-service search engine marketing agency Teddie is technical director.
Vince Coyle	Eurooffice www.eurooffice.co.uk	Vince is online customer acquisition manager
Joe Friedlein	BrowserMedia www.browsermedia.co.uk	BrowserMedia offer SEO and paid-search advertising services
Nilhan Jayasinghe	Spannerworks www.spannerworks.com	Full-service search engine marketing agency Nilhan is Head of Search
Rand Fishkin	SEOMoz www.seomoz.org	Rand Fishkin is a well-known US-based commentator on SEO
Steve Johnston	Google Consultant – www.johnston.co.uk	Four years specialising in Google optimization. Ten years in online marketing roles in web agencies.
Ken McGaffin	Linking Matters www.linkingmatters.com	Specialist on link-building and online copywriting.
Caroline McGuckian	Wheel www.wheel.co.uk	Wheel is a full-service online marketing agency Caroline is Media Director
Phil Robinson	Clickthrough Marketing www.clickthrough-marketing.com	Full-service search engine marketing agency Phil is Director
Tim Peck	Tektronix www.tektronix.com	Business-to-business test and measurement equipment Tim is Online Marketing Manager
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