A Practical Guide to Search Engine Success

Improve Your Rankings

and

Increase Your Website Traffic

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Contents

Introduction

If you're like most website owners, you're interested in bringing more visitors to your site. Search engines play an important role because they help Internet users find and visit your site. You want searches performed by potential site visitors to find and list your pages on the search results. Good search engine rankings — the appearance of your pages when relevant searches are performed — are important for generating traffic to your site.

There's a tremendous amount of information available in print and online about optimizing search engine rankings and boosting website traffic. It's easy to be overwhelmed by all the available advice about search engines, selecting keywords, using meta tags, submitting pages, and more.

This guide distills the available information to a manageable size and mixes it with first-hand experience to give you a straightforward, practical guide that you can use right away without becoming expert and knowing everything there is to know about getting better search engine results.

This guide is written for web marketers, webmasters and others; anyone who is interested in using search engines to increase their site traffic, but doesn't have a lot of time to make it happen.

Before You Start

The first thing to understand about improving your search engine rankings is that, like many things in life, there's no big secret or silver bullet. It just takes focus and some work. The two biggest ingredients are patience and persistence. *It's a process*. If you are both patient and persistent, you can achieve the results you want and increase the visibility of your website. The key is understanding the process and being consistent in your actions.

Why Search Engines are Important

Millions of web users, representing potential visitors or customers, use search engines on a daily basis. Marketing managers and web marketers want more site traffic and see better search engine results as a way to get there. Depending on the nature of your site, 20–80 percent of traffic will find and visit your site via search engines.

A survey released in September 1999 by ActivMedia Research found search engine positioning ranked as the leading website promotional method by Web site owners.

Web Site Promotional Methods Rated as Excellent / Very Good

Search Engine Positioning	66%
E-mail	54%
Print Brochures / Collateral	42%
Print Catalogs	40%
Trade Shows	37%

Strong search engine rankings are obviously critical to the success of any business that is heavily web-based, particularly little-known startups. Larger, commercial sites with strong branding and a large customer base get a smaller percentage of their traffic from search engines. Smaller, more obscure sites get the majority of their traffic via search engines.

This guide presents proven strategies for improving search engine rankings and boosting website traffic. The step-by-step strategy presented here has been proven at seven websites over the last two years. *It works*. And while good search engine rankings are important, they are just one component of a successful traffic building strategy. Other methods of increasing the visibility of your website are also presented.

Your Goal

Your goal is to have at least *one page* on your website appear on the *first page of results* returned by *each search engine* when one of your *selected keywords* is searched upon. For example:
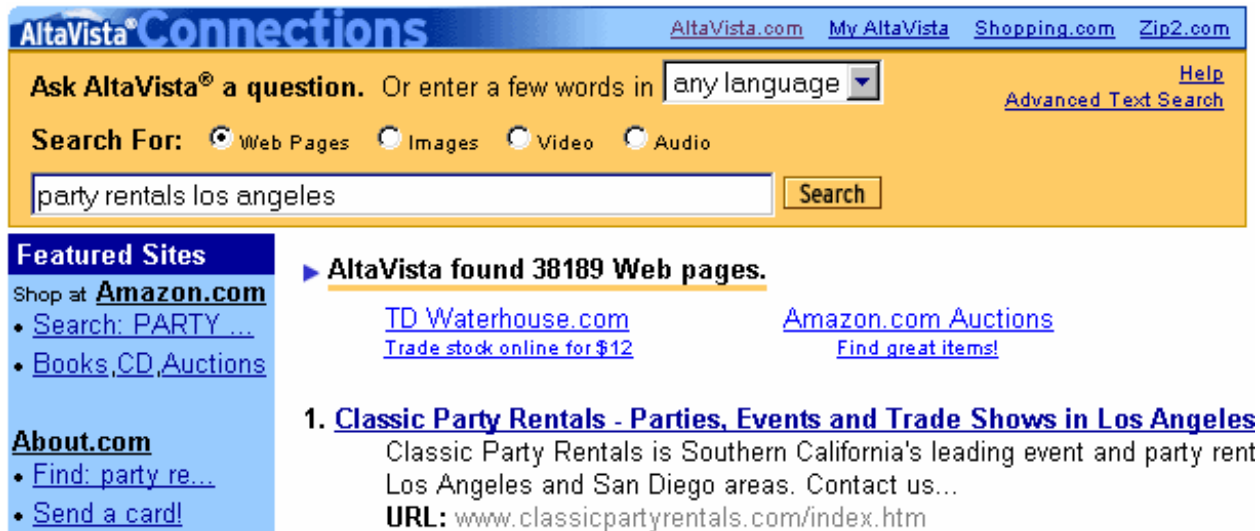
Search Engines

What They Are

Search engines are designed to help Internet users find relevant information amidst the vastness of the Web. Most web users use search engines *daily* to quickly locate relevant web pages or sites by entering keywords and running a search. Search engines return results based on the keywords or phrases users provide for the search.

Search engines use automated tools called "robots" or "spiders" to crawl the Web, scan web pages, follow links, and build databases, often called indexes. Queries using keywords that users enter at search engine sites are then checked against the index and the most relevant results are returned to the user.

How They Work

Search engines determine the relevancy or "ranking factors" of pages using a combination of:

- keyword placement
- keyword frequency
- the total number of words (not keywords) on a page
- the popularity of a site, and
- other criteria

The page elements that are most important to search engines are page title, meta tags, and body content. It has been estimated that only a third of all pages on the Web even contain meta tags. So if you do nothing else, simply add some keywords to your titles and meta tags.

Each search engine uses different criteria and works differently. Some sites index every word on every page. Others index only parts of a page. Some rely heavily on meta tags when building their index; others don't use them at all. This is why your rankings will differ from engine to engine. This fact also makes it difficult to achieve top rankings on every search engine.

Understanding what's important to search engines, then using that knowledge can improve the ranking of your pages, and therefore increase the number of visitors to your site.

Because a typical search engine query returns hundreds or thousands of pages, it's important that your pages rank near the top. Because most people only look at and use the first page of results returned, *it is critical that your pages appear on this page*, ideally towards the top:

A recent trend in the evolution of search engines is their consideration of the popularity of your pages in determining page relevancy. In other words, a large number of incoming links to your site will make it rank better than an equivalent site with less traffic.

First-Tier Engines

The following engines receive the most traffic and should be focused on:

AltaVista	http://www.altavista.com
Excite	http://www.excite.com
Infoseek	http://www.infoseek.com
Lycos	http://www.lycos.com
MSN	http://search.msn.com
Yahoo!	http://www.yahoo.com

TIP: Focus on the first tier of engines presented above. Focus your attention on the second tier if appropriate and if resources permit.

TIP: Bookmark these sites when you visit them. Organize them into a folder in your Favorites or Bookmarks. Call the folder "Search."

Yahoo and Snap are not search engines which automatically "spider" pages on the Web, but directories which are built and maintained by other means. Still they are an important source of website traffic.

Second-Tier Engines

Give these search engines attention if you have time:

AOL Netfind	http://www.aol.com/netfind/
Euroseek	http://www.euroseek.com
Google	http://www.google.com
HotBot	http://www.hotbot.com
Northern Light	http://www.northernlight.com
PlanetSearch	http://www.planetsearch.com
Snap	http://www.snap.com
WebCrawler	http://www.webcrawler.com

Additional information on search engines is found at http://www.searchenginewatch.com.

Your Strategy

The strategy and plan of action described here has been proven at seven websites over the last two years. As the search engines evolve and improve, these techniques will remain valid, or become more important, in the foreseeable future.

Choose Your Keywords

↓

Tune Your Pages ⟵ **Check Your Rankings**

↓ ↑

Submit Your Pages ⟶ **Wait Two Weeks**
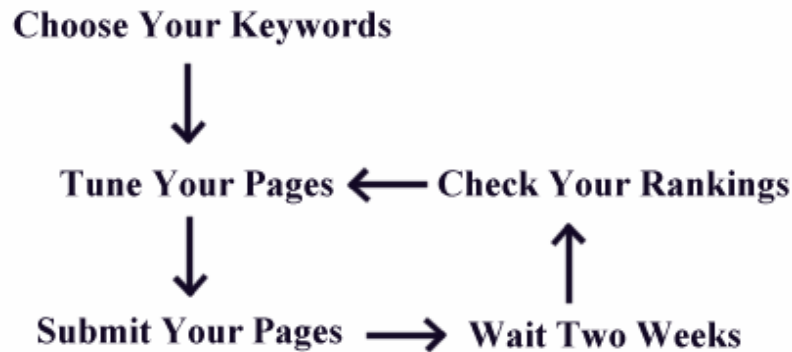
Certain steps, such as checking your rankings, can be automated. Automating other steps, such as page submissions, is possible, but not recommended.

TIP: Re ... ill be seeing your pages. I...

Choose Your Keywords

↓

TIP: Fc ...

Tune Your Pages ⟶ **Submit Your Pages**

TIP: D ... what you did two weeks l...

↑ ↓
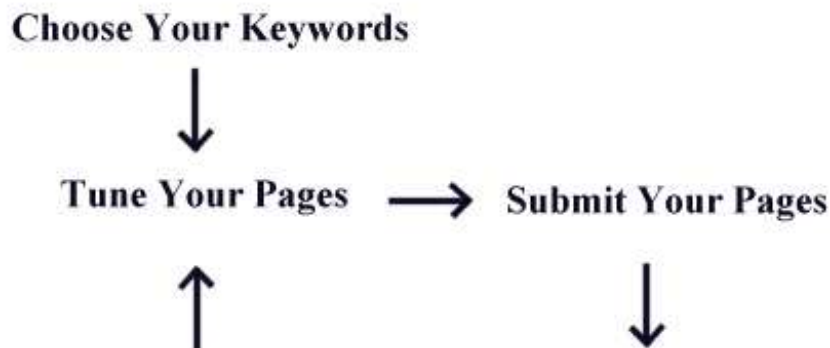
Step 1: **Check Your Rankings** ⟵ **Wait Two Weeks**

Start by ...mpiling a list of between 5 and 10 keywords to focus on. The number of keywords you select should depend on the nature of your products and services, and the amount of time you're willing to spend on optimizing your pages.

A "keyword" can also be a short phrase of 2-3 words, such as "apple cider maker." Select your keywords carefully. They are the foundation that you will revisit and examine later.

TIP: Include your company or organization name as a keyword, as a benchmark. Doing so will help you determine if your pages are being indexed at all by each search engine.

How do you select the most appropriate keywords to target?

- Select keywords from your brochures or other marketing materials.
- Look at your competitor pages and view their HTML source to see which words they are using.
- Brainstorm with your colleagues.
- Try some searches using potential keywords and check the results. If your competitor's pages appear, you should consider targeting the same keyword.
- Consider using alternate spellings, if appropriate, or combinations of words (applespice, apple spice), even if only one is the correct spelling.
- Check your log files to see the keywords visitors are currently using to find your site. This is only possible if the "referrer" variable is being collected in your log files — check with your system administrator. Some log file analysis software packages will analyze the "referrer" data and report keywords that are being searched upon to find your pages. Some of these keywords may surprise you.

TIP: Don't be case-sensitive. Search engine indexes are not, and your keywords don't need to be.

TIP: Consider using plurals (cherry, cherries) or variations of your keywords (apple, apple pie).

TIP: Don't use words like "the," "web," or other commonly used words, as some search engines automatically ignore them and don't add them to their index.

Step 2: Establish a Baseline

Measure your existing website traffic in terms of page views and visits. See the Log File Analysis section if you're not already doing this.

Check your existing rankings by searching on your selected keywords and recording the results. Use the Search Engine Analysis worksheet provided in the Appendix.

Review your results to compare and understand how different search engines work. You'll discover *if* your pages are currently ranked for your selected keywords. You will also see which pages are ranked above yours. Visit those pages and try to understand why they are ranking higher than yours.

Step 3: Match Keywords with Pages

Apply one keyword (or phrase) to one page. Establish one-to-one relationships between keywords and pages. Although it's very difficult to make a single page rank well with every search engine for every keyword someone might use, *you can* make at least one page on your site rank on the first page of results for each engine.

The content of the target page you select is critical. Because page content is often an important factor in rankings, closely examine page content when deciding which page to target for each keyword. The content of the selected page should reflect the nature of the keyword, and contain it at least three times in the body of content. When keywords are similar, two keywords may be applied to a single page (apple, apple pie).

TIP: Put keywords in the body of your text three to six times. The earlier they appear, the better.

Step 4: Apply Your Keywords

Insert your keywords in your page titles, meta tags, body, and as alt attributes of image tags. Use the Search Engine Boosting Worksheet found in the Appendix to organize your strategy and simplify your work before you get started.

Consider using a freeware or shareware clipboard utility (such as Clipboard Magic) to facilitate copy/paste operations when adding keywords from the worksheet to your pages. Or save the worksheet as a .txt file and open it in your HTML authoring tool, to keep your working documents close at hand.

TIP: Make your best effort before you submit your pages for the first time. It can be easier to get pages re-indexed than it is to improve rankings.

Titles

Title tags are the *single most important page element* you can utilize. Take the time to review and edit page titles throughout your site. Example:

```
<TITLE>Apple Central - Apples and Apple Pie</TITLE>
```

Be creative and arrange your keywords differently on various pages, while still having a sensible-looking title. Just remember that titles appear in the top of the browser window.

TIP: Don't go wild. The recommended maximum number of characters for titles is 64. Browsers will show more characters, but you'll be diluting the relevance of your keywords. Make some titles short and sweet, others longer.

Meta Tags

Meta tags are used to embed information in HTML documents that doesn't appear in the browser window. Similar to comments that programmers use to document their work, meta tags may be used to store information about the page — who authored it, when it was updated, and more. There are over 30 types of meta tags. The meta tags that are relevant to search engines are "description" and "keywords."

Description

Include your keywords or phrases in a description that is about 200-300 characters long. Some search engines will use some or all of this information *when displaying results*. So don't just string together a bunch of keywords. Compose a message that's meaningful and attractive to potential visitors. Consider it free advertising and take some time to construct a description of your site that will appeal to people scanning a page of search results.

Keywords

Use a total of around 20 words or 100 characters. Use your keywords 3-6 times. An example:

```
<HTML>
<HEAD>
<TITLE>Put A Relevant Page Title (including your keywords) Here</TITLE>
<META name="Description" content="Put your carefully worded page
description of 200-300 characters here.  Include your keywords three to
six times.">
<META name="Keywords" content="Your selected keywords go here.">
</HEAD>
<BODY>
<H1>Use Keyword Here</H1>
Your content goes here and should include your selected keyword in the
first sentence. Then include your keyword 3-5 more times in the
following body text.
</BODY>
</HTML>
```

TIP: Don't repeat your keywords (apple, apple, apple). Some engines consider this as "spamming" or "keyword stuffing" and will not index your page.

TIP: Don't use another company's trademarks in your meta tags. It's unethical and may constitute copyright infringement.

Example 2:
```
<HTML>
<HEAD>
<TITLE>Apple, Banana, Cherry, Dried Fruit</TITLE>
<META name="Description" content="We offer you a quality selection of
apple, banana and cherry pies, and dried fruit.  Now you can order
apples, bananas, cherries, and other fruit online.">
<META name="Keywords" content="apple, banana, cherry, dried fruit,
apples, bananas, cherries, fruits, apple pie, banana split, cherry
cobbler, fruit, pie">
</HEAD>
<BODY>
```

```
We say "apple, banana, cherry" instead of "A, B, C..."  That's our
business:  dried fruit.
</BODY>
</HTML>
```

Free services are available that will generate meta tags for you in the proper format:

http://www.actionsearch.com/metatagsearchengines.htm

http://www.websitepromote.com/resources/meta/

You can use one of these free services to ensure that your meta tags are in the proper format, then edit the results to your liking.

Body

Your keywords should appear in the first sentence of the text, and 3-6 times thereafter. Again, the sooner your keywords appear in the body, the better. Also, place keywords within HTML header tags (H1, H2, H3), because they are given more weight by some search engines:

```
<H1>Apple Pie</H1>
```

Alt attributes of image tags

Alt attributes are a brief text description of a graphic or image. They appear prior to graphics on a page loading, and then subsequently when the cursor is held over a graphic on a web page. Use them where practical, including placeholders and small graphics. Include your keywords as attributes of your image tags on each target page:

```
<IMG SRC = "/graphics/apple.gif" width=50 height=30 alt="Apple">
```

Step 5: Submit Your Pages

All search engines accept submissions of pages to be added to their index. Submission pages are linked from search engines' main page, often at the bottom.

Search Engine Submission Pages - First Tier

http://www.altavista.digital.com/av/content/addurl.htm

http://www.excite.com/Info/add_url.html

http://www.infoseek.com/AddUrl?pg=DCaddurl.html

http://www.lycos.com/addasite.html

http://search.msn.com/addurl.asp

Search Engine Submission Pages - Second Tier

http://search.aol.com/add.adp

http://addsite.euroseek.net/page.cfm?page=start&ifl=uk

http://www.google.com/addurl.html

http://www.hotbot.com/addurl.asp

http://www.northernlight.com/docs/register.htm

http://www.planetsearch.com/?a=19&flags=3&count=10

http://www.snap.com/main/help/item/0,11,home-8450,00.html?st.sn.ft.0.surl

http://www.webcrawler.com/Help/GetListed/AddURLS.html

TIP: Bookmark these pages to streamline future submissions.

TIP: Submit your target pages to your preferred engines yourself, rather than use automated submission methods. Why? Not all auto-submission software or services work the way they're intended to. Spending the few minutes required assures you that this important step is executed properly.

Submitting to Yahoo and Snap

Yahoo and Snap are not actually search engines; they are searchable directories. They don't spider the web; rather they base their content solely on submissions. To submit your site to Yahoo, navigate to the proper category for your site, select Suggest a Site link at the bottom of the page, and submit your site. You can submit your site in two different categories. The ranking factors are Category, Title, Description, and URL. Read the guidelines at:

http://docs.yahoo.com/info/suggest/

The submission process for Snap is similar.

Because only your home page will be added to the directory, don't submit each of your target pages. Only submit your home page.

Submissions to Yahoo take anywhere from two weeks to two months to appear. It may be necessary to resubmit the page if it is not added in a timely fashion (within a month). Do not resubmit more often than once every two weeks. Be sure to include a comment that you are resubmitting in the "Final Comments" form field. Before resubmitting, be sure to check to see if your URL has been added in a different category, by searching for the complete URL (http://www.yourdomain.here).

If you continue to have problems getting listed in Yahoo, you can e-mail the details about your site to url-support@yahoo-inc.com to request help. In your e-mail, include your URL, title, description, and categories to be listed under in your message, along with the date of your first submission.

DO: Submit a carefully worded site title and description to Yahoo and Snap. Include your keywords, since they will be used to find your site. These can be the same as your meta tags, but may need to be edited. The maximum number of characters allowed for site titles is 40 characters; up to 200 characters or 25 words are allowed for site descriptions.

Yahoo offers Standard Submissions (free) and Business Express service, where you pay to get faster service and "guaranteed consideration" for your submission.

Step 6: Wait
Search engines claim to index pages "within two days" or "within two weeks". Experience shows that updates to the indexes often take much longer — up to two months. Why? Some engines operate in two phases — first by scheduling a page that has been submitted for spidering, then later, visiting it and adding it to the index.

Delays in updating indexes or failed submissions are also due to system downtime, hardware and software upgrades, personnel changes, and all the other types of change or disruption that any business is subject to. So, it's important to verify that your submissions get indexed, and to resubmit if necessary.

Step 7: Check Your Rankings (same as in Step 2)
You can check your rankings manually, by using free web services, or by using an automated program. Following up your work is the key to achieving good rankings. A little effort once or twice a month is all it takes.

Even if you use an automated checker such as http://www.rankthis.com or WebPosition software from

http://www.firstplacesoftware.com, you should still verify a few results manually. This will also help you see the pages that are ranking ahead of yours. You can study these pages to understand *why* they are ranking well.

Step 8: Tune Your Pages (similar to Step 4)

If your pages are appearing, but not ranking well, adjust your keywords and page content as follows:

- Rearrange the order of your keywords, particularly in page titles.
- Add another instance of a keyword in meta tags or titles.
- Review and edit the page content between the <BODY> tags. Rewrite the content to include keywords sooner and more often.
- Apply secondary measures as described in Tricks of the Trade below, such as inserting comments and using alt attributes of image tags more extensively.

Step 9: Repeat Steps 4-8 as Needed

When getting started, monitor your rankings, adjust your pages, and resubmit them every two weeks or so. Then once you get your rankings where you want them, monitoring results and, if necessary, adjusting pages once a month is enough. Resubmit pages that rank poorly or get dropped from search engine indexes.

TIP: Don't overdo it, and submit pages too often, at the risk of "spamming" the engine and being banned.

Step 10: Don't Mess with Success

Be satisfied with appearing on the first page of results, which usually shows the top-ranked 10-30 pages. Once you have good results for a keyword on a particular engine, don't submit *that* page to *that* engine again. Just document the results, be happy, and monitor your rankings. Only resubmit a page if your results have dropped dramatically.

Keep your expectations realistic. It's very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve 100 percent success (all target pages appearing in first page of rankings on all search engines). Consulting for a commercial client, the best I could do was 69 percent top rankings for 10 different keywords on eight engines. Each search engine works differently, continually changes, and adds new pages daily — affecting your rankings over time, and sometimes very quickly.

Submission Services

Dozens of services are available on the Web that will submit your pages to boost your overall site traffic. Two of the more popular services are http://www.submitit.com and http://www.registerit.com. These services use automated methods to submit a limited number of your pages to hundreds of search engines and directories.

My experience with three different submission services is that you get what you pay for. Depending on your budget and business, paying $50–$200 to a submission service is probably a good value. Payback occurs when you get a couple more sales. Just don't expect miracles and don't believe the marketing hype.

You should expect to receive a record of submissions. Still, you'll have no assurance that your pages actually made it into the indexes to which submissions were made.

Here are a few tips if you choose to use a submission service:

TIP: Don't allow the service to submit your pages to the first-tier search engines. Submitting your pages to the first-tier engines is important enough that you'll want to handle this yourself. Not all major engines accept automated submissions from every submission service and, given the changing nature of search engines, you'll want to be assured your pages are submitted properly.

TIP: Do perform all the other steps described here. Despite their marketing messages, submission services are not a magic bullet that will bring millions of visitors to your site. They just automate one step in the process.

TIP: To test their responsiveness, call or e-mail the company before you engage their services. Ask a question or two. Remember, you're depending on them to provide a service that's valuable to your business. You won't be happy if you can't reach them.

Though not highly recommended, submission services *can* play a role in your traffic-building strategy. But they are not a good substitute for the strategy presented here.

Tricks of the Trade

It's easy to find suggestions on adjusting your pages for better rankings. Many of these suggestions are arcane or too time-consuming to implement. Some may even backfire and reduce your rankings.

Following are some basic "tricks," or secondary measures, that you can safely apply to your pages.

The Name Game

Some engines consider the file names of pages when determining what's relevant and building their indexes. Others consider the hyperlinked text. Where appropriate, include a keyword as the file name of pages, as well as your actual hyperlink:

```
<A HREF="/fruits/apple.htm">apple</A>
```

Comments

Adding comments within the body of your page can't hurt, unless you repeat your keywords too often.

```
<!-- apple, banana, cherry, dried fruit --!>
```

This technique is not recommended on your first pass, but can be used as a secondary measure.

"Gateway" Pages

Also called "doorway" pages, these pages are copies of existing pages on your site that are tuned to specific engines or keywords. Some companies have been known to host gateway pages for *each* keyword on *each* search engine, in order to maximize the chances of their site being found. Gateway pages extend the strategies described here and focus them to the most granular level: one page per engine per keyword.

While quite possible and proven to work, the effort required to maintain copies, tune, submit and track rankings for each page is beyond the resource commitment than most organizations are willing to make and is not a recommended strategy for most sites.

TIP: Don't resort to tricks such as using white text on white backgrounds to create content that is invisible to visitors, but indexed by search engines. Most engines are onto this trick, as well as most others. Instead, concentrate on the fundamentals described here.

Tools and Resources

If you'd like to extend your knowledge about search engine positioning, see these free resources:

http://www.webposition.com – software that automatically checks your rankings.

http://www.searchenginewatch.com – in-depth information on search engines and techniques.

http://www.websitegarage.com – page checking utilities.

http://www.rankthis.com – returns rankings for keywords.

These e-mail newsletters provide information, ideas, and tips on web marketing and increasing traffic:

MarketPosition Monthly – http://www.webposition.com

WebPromote Weekly Online – http://www.webpromote.com

The Search Engine Report – http://www.searchenginewatch.com

Frames

Frames and the way they are implemented are usually detrimental to good search engine results. By their nature, framesets reduce the number of uniquely named pages on a site, giving you fewer opportunities to apply unique titles and meta tags to pages. Framed pages also cannot be bookmarked — detrimental to generating repeat traffic.

Also, some search engine spiders don't navigate frames very well. This is often a disadvantage to sites using frames. However, the <NOFRAMES> tag when used properly, can be a useful tool. You can use the <NOFRAMES> tags to contain content that is visible to browsers that don't recognize frames, *and* search engine spiders. All engines will recognize the <NOFRAMES></NOFRAMES> tags and the content that's enclosed within.

TIP: If your site design requires the use of frames, take full advantage of the <NOFRAMES> tag.

Because the majority of web users today have frames-capable browsers, and therefore will never see the content placed between the <NOFRAMES> tags, this is an opportunity to maximize the use of your keywords. Provide simple sentences that describe your products or services:

```
<HTML>

<HEAD>

<TITLE>Apples, Apple Pie and More</TITLE>

<META NAME="description" CONTENT="Apples, apple pie and apple juice - that's
what we're about.  Now you can order apples, bananas, cherries, and other
fruit online. Download a sample today.">

<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="apple, apple pie, apple juice, apples">

</HEAD>

<FRAMESET ROWS="15%,*">

<FRAME SRC="appleframe.htm" NAME=TITLE>

<FRAMESET COLS="20%,*">

<FRAME SRC="applesidebar.htm" NAME=SIDEBAR>

<FRAME SRC="apple.htm" NAME=apple>

</FRAMESET>

<NOFRAMES>

<H1>Apples and Apple Pie</H1>

All about apples and apple pie.  Don't have frames?  Take a look at our

<A HREF="apple.htm">no-frames</A>

version.  We offer the best apple pie online.

</NOFRAMES>

</FRAMESET>

</HTML>
```

TIP: Create one, uniquely named frameset for each keyword. This defeats the purpose of frames, but is required to get good search results. Doing so will also allow these pages to be bookmarked.

Tech Talk

Log File Analysis

Log files generated by web server software collect information on which pages have been served, how many visits have occurred, and how many pages were viewed during each visit. They can get quite large. If your log files capture the "referrer" variable, you can determine which sites people came from and the keywords they entered into an engine to find and visit your site.

Analyzing log files and website traffic is your primary measure of success when attempting to increase site traffic. Several software packages are available to analyze your log files and produce reports. The most popular packages are:

- Hit List – http://www.marketwave.com

- Webtrends – http://www.webtrends.com

- net.reporter – http://www.netgenesis.com

Most log file analysis software can be set up to run reports at scheduled times.

If your website is hosted by an ISP, it should be able to provide basic traffic reports. If not, get the server log files from your ISP on a regular basis, and analyze the data yourself.

You may also be able to track improvements resulting from other web-based sales and marketing activities: increased customer inquiries, more sales leads, more downloads, or more online sales. Again, it's assumed that site visitors will find useful and compelling content when they visit your site.

Robots.txt Files

Based on a de facto standard, robots.txt files are simple text files that reside on your web server and provide instructions to search engine robots or spiders. You can determine if your web server has one simply by typing:

http://www.yourdomain.here/robots.txt

in your browser and seeing if the file content appears. A sample:

```
# This is a robots.txt for yourdomainhere.com web server
# This is a file retrieved by spiders or robots that
# conform to a de facto standard.
# See http://info.webcrawler.com/mak/projects/robots/norobots.html
# for more.
# Format is:
# User-agent: <name of spider>
# Disallow: <nothing> | <path>
# The following prevents access to /directory name here/ for spiders
User-agent: *
Disallow: /directoryname1/
Disallow: /directoryname2/
```

Make sure your server hosts a robots.txt file. If it doesn't, post one yourself using this example or ask your web server administrator to post one. The "Disallow" line is used to prevent spiders from visiting parts of your website, by disallowing them to visit certain directories, such as cgi-bin.

A free utility is available that analyzes your robots.txt file and reports any syntax errors:
http://www.tardis.ed.ac.uk/~sxw/robots/check/

Will the Effort Pay Off?

Yes! Experience shows that even small changes in page design, combined with the proper follow-up, can noticeably improve your site traffic. The hardest part is having the discipline to roll up your sleeves and focus on this every two weeks. This is why documenting your work is important — so you'll be able to pick up where you left off, and identify changes that have occurred.

Following are actual results achieved recently at a high-tech company in Seattle:

Progress Report

Date	First Page Search Engine Rankings	Success Rate
October 2	34 out of 132 possible	26%
October 22	63 out of 132 possible	48%
November 18	77 out of 132 possible	58%

There's also no other more cost-effective way to increase your site traffic. Even better, the new traffic coming to your site will represent quality visitors — because they found your site *specifically by using keyword*s that are relevant to what you offer.

If search engines are properly indexing the keywords that describe your products or services, you should see site traffic, sales leads, or other customer data collection traffic (such as information requests) increase noticeably. Again, it's assumed that you're presenting all these new site visitors with an effective site containing solid content that is easy to navigate.

Other Methods to Boost Site Traffic

Focusing on search engine results is important, but should be seen as just ONE component of your overall traffic-building strategy. Several other methods exist to increase your site traffic, starting with simple things such as ensuring that your URL is on your business cards and marketing materials. Other ideas that are cheap and easy:

E-mail

Start an e-mail newsletter for your customers. Or contribute content to an existing industry newsletter and add your URL to the content.

Add your URL to your e-mail signatures. Create different versions of signatures and encourage everyone in your organization to use one that includes your URL:

> Your Name Here
> Your Organization Name Here
> http://www.yourdomain.here

TIP: Add the "http://" text so that the URL becomes an live, clickable link in most e-mail clients.

Newsgroups

Participate in newsgroups that are relevant to your business. Thousands of people read newsgroups every day, and a well-placed, intelligently worded message may get you a few hundred visits each month. Include your URL in your signature or in your message.

Exchange Links

Leverage the web by exchanging links with your business partners or customers. Make it easy for them to link to your site by providing a graphic button, perhaps in different sizes, that their webmasters can use to dress up their pages and link to your site.
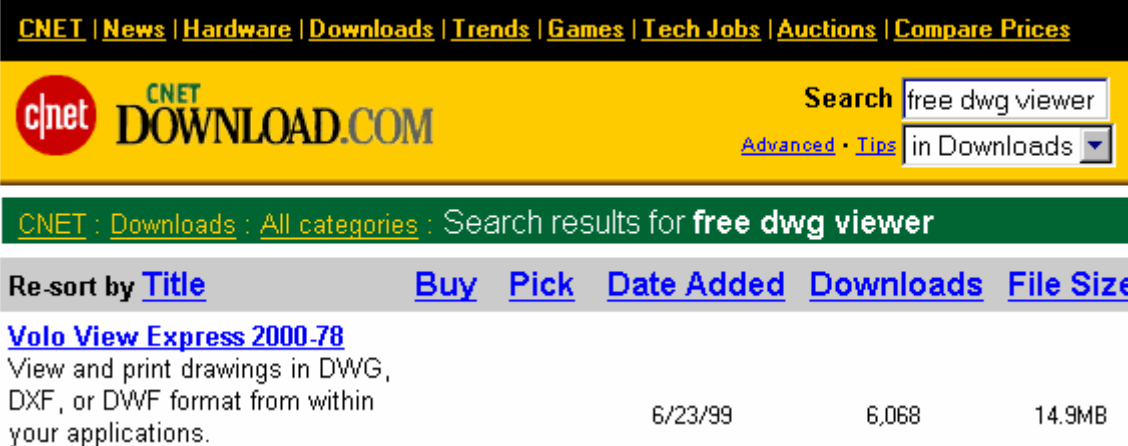
Market Your Site

Make submissions to online directories. Chances are that listings specific to your industry are available. Many are found at publications, associations, and trade show sites. These sites need content, which can include your company description and URL. If you find these opportunities to be too numerous, prepare a standard e-mail message stating what you have, why your site should be listed, and your URL.

Be different. Instead of dispensing expensive glossy brochures at trade shows, which often go unread, consider simply passing out inexpensive paper or plastic cards consisting of your logo, a simple message, and your URL.

FREE!

The notion of "free" remains a powerful concept on the Web, one with strong drawing power that appeals to web users. If you can offer a free download (software, documents, images, games), do it. Example:

If you work for a software company and offer a trial version, freeware, or shareware, submit your program to any or all of these popular sites:

> http://www.bhs.com
> http://www.download.com
> http://www.jumbo.com
> http://www.shareware.com
> http://www.tucows.com
> http://www.winsite.com

FUN!

If you can offer a game, contest, or prize that is associated with your product or service and can be integrated with your other marketing efforts, do it.

Banner ads

The average "click-through" or response rate is reported to be about 2-4% for most banner ad campaigns.

Rates can vary from zero to 15% or higher. Banner ads are most effective if you use an eye-catching design, the proper message, and if you target your message to the proper audience. Advertise only on sites that are related to your target audience. Most search engines will allow your banner to be displayed on the results page when a relevant keyword is search on.

Organizational Issues

If there's no big secret to search engine optimization and all it takes is some thinking and some work, then why is it such a holy grail? Some observations based on five years of web experience in several different settings:

- This type of work is new and doesn't fit neatly into today's business organization. Search engine optimization work is just one of many necessary web tasks that have sprung up in recent years.

- It is multidisciplinary work, requiring a mix of technical understanding and marketing skills. Web marketers want more site traffic, but aren't sure exactly how to get it. Page authors aren't sure exactly what to do to pages to get better results. System administrators and technical web staff having server access are needed to set up log file analysis and robots.txt files.

- No one has the time to keep track of rankings, submit pages and follow up. Other priorities such as keeping a website updated, collecting customer leads, and implementing e-commerce, usually are higher priority.

- Search engine attention is important, but tedious and not especially challenging. Yet executives and senior management often ask "why don't we show up?" Apply the strategy presented here, and you'll have the answers!

Conclusion

Better search engine rankings for your selected keywords CAN be achieved by:

- Understanding the basic concepts

- Applying effort in a focused way

- Following up periodically

This work can be done by any marketing person, or even an intern, with the proper training. If the process is turned over to someone else, it's important for the webmaster or web marketer — whoever has ownership of the issue - to understand the basic principles presented here.

Appendix

Use the following worksheets to organize your efforts and measure your success.

Search Engine Boosting Worksheet

(enter date)

Purpose: To determine and document your keywords, meta tags, and target pages. Copy text from this worksheet into your web pages. Choose target pages for each keyword based on existing content.

1) Keyword: apple

Targeted Page: http://www.yourdomain.here/fruits/apple.htm

Add to Page:

```
<TITLE>Apple Central - fresh apples and apple pie</TITLE>
<HEAD>
<META NAME="description" CONTENT="We're all about apples, including apple pie
and apple juice.  Now you can order apples, bananas, cherries, and other fruit
online. Download a sample today.">
<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="apple, apple pie, apple juice, apples">
<IMG SRC="apple.gif" alt="Apple">
</HEAD>
```

2) Keyword: banana

Targeted Page: http://www.yourdomain.here/fruits/banana.htm

Add to Page:

```
<TITLE>Banana Central - banana splits and more - go bananas!</TITLE>
<HEAD>
<META NAME="description" CONTENT="Banana's are nature's perfect food.  We're
all about bananas, including banana splits and banana peels.  Now you can
order apples, bananas, cherries, and other dried fruit online.  We offer free
samples online.">
<META NAME="keywords" CONTENT="banana, banana split, banana peels">
</HEAD>
<IMG SRC="banana.gif" alt="Banana">
```

Search Engine Analysis Worksheet

Use this worksheet to measure your rankings. Or use software such as WebPosition, which will produce more detailed reports (but maybe more than you can digest). You can also copy your target page URLs from this document when making submissions to search engines. Whether your company name is a keyword or not, include it in your searches to determine if your site is visible to search engines at all.

www.yourdomainhere.com

Search Engine Analysis Worksheet

(enter date)

Keywords	Co. Name	apple	banana	cherry	dried fruit
Target Page	Any	http://www.yourdomainhere.com/fruits/apple.htm	http://www.yourdomainhere.com/fruits/banana.htm	http://www.yourdomainhere.com/fruits/cherry.htm	http://www.yourdomainhere.com/fruits/dried_fruit.htm
Alta Vista					
Excite					
Infoseek					
Lycos					
Yahoo					

Gains: (since last check)

Losses: (since last check)

Notes: Big gains on __(engine name)__ after 3 weeks.

(Note: You can shade cells in the table above based on rankings to help identify problem pages.)

Progress Report

Date	Top 20 Results	Success Rate
Month 1	xx out of yy	zz%
Month 2	xx out of yy	zz%
Month 3	xx out of yy	zz%

Complete Sample Page

```
<HTML>
<HEAD>
<TITLE>Apple, Banana, Cherry, Dried Fruit</TITLE>
<META name="description" content="apple, banana, cherry - we've got the
best online selection of dried fruit.">
<META name="keywords" content="apple, banana, cherry, dried fruit, apple
pie, banana split, cherry cobbler, apples, bananas, cherries, dried
fruits.">
</HEAD>

<BODY>
<P>Apples, bananas, cherries, and dried fruit is our business. To learn
more, just pick your fruit:

<H1>Dried Fruit</H1>
<H2><A HREF="apple.htm">Apple</A></H2>
A is for apple.
<IMG SRC = "/graphics/apple.gif" width = 50 height=30 alt="apple">

<H2><A HREF="banana.htm">Banana</A></H2>
The banana is often called "nature's perfect food."
<IMG SRC = "/graphics/banana.gif" width = 50 height=30 alt="banana">

<H2><A HREF="cherry.htm">Cherry</A></H2>
Cherry cobbler is our specialty.
<IMG SRC = "/graphics/cherry.gif" width = 50 height=30 alt="cherry">

</BODY>
</HTML>
```

Author's Experience

Peter Moran has led the design, deployment, and operation of websites, intranets and extranets since 1994, providing both hands-on production and management leadership in the areas of:

- Site design, launch, operation and maintenance
- Implementation of secure e-commerce systems
- Integration of web marketing activities with existing business processes
- Building site traffic via search engines and other means

This work experience has been gained primarily in high-tech settings, including web marketing management at two top 50 software companies and a successful startup:

ESRI − World leader in geographic information systems software.

MetaInfo − NT server software maker, acquired by Checkpoint Software.

Autodesk − World leader in design software and makers of AutoCAD.
Currently Internet Marketing Manager, Design Solutions Division.

In 1998, Moran also founded and operated his own web consulting business in Seattle — The Site Tuner. The goal of the business was to increase the effectiveness of clients' online presence by improving site look and feel, enhancing content, and increasing site traffic. Since all clients were naturally interested in more site traffic and improved search engine rankings, he gained in-depth practical experience in this area, and produced highly measurable, favorable results.

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