

# Small Business Owners Guide to Search Engine Optimization

The Secret To Marketing Your Website and Business on the Internet

A 6-Part SEO (Search Engine Optimization) Whitepaper

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## Part 1: Why Search Engines

Perhaps more than any other topic I am asked about Search Engine Optimization.

### What is Search Engine Optimization?

To understand what search engine optimization is, you must first understand search engines. You do know what a search is don't you? As a user of the Internet you are probably familiar with a search engine. Maybe you're doing research for your local business competition, maybe you're looking for the best price on a pair of crocs. Whatever the case may be you have probably used a search engine to find what you are looking for. The major search engines are (in this order):

- [Google](#)
- [Yahoo](#)
- [MSN Live](#)

You visit these sites and are greeted with a long rectangular box, prompting you to type something in, hit "search" and suddenly, magically, results appear. Sometimes they are exactly what you need, sometimes you have to refine the words or order of words you typed in. This list of results, particularly along the left hand side are websites and pages that the search engines think you are looking for. You search for "*Dry Cleaners Estero*" and bam, a list of results pops up, sites or pages that the search engines think match your desire of "*Dry Cleaners Estero*." Without going into any technical detail of how this happens, or how Google, Yahoo, MSN Live, and the other guys find, store, and sort all of this data...

### Search Engine Optimization is the manipulation of these results.

Let's take a look at an example. You provide custom stair construction to clients throughout southwest florida. So, knowing that a lot of people no longer use the yellow pages, and are now turning to search engines to find the local businesses and services they need, you try to do everything you can to appear at the top of the list for relevant terms: "fort myers custom stair cases," "naples stair installation," etc.

And that's it for now. Search engine optimization simply involves planning, crafting, and developing your site over time in order for your site to appear when your target market is searching for exactly what you have to offer. It is an incredibly effective form of marketing (cost effective, leading to phenomenal results), but it comes at a VERY high cost - albeit not always a monetary cost.

This guided white paper reveals more technical details on Search Engine Optimization as well as how any small business owner can use this to bring in mountains of traffic to their website, get contacts, get leads, close sales, or sell products.

In the meantime if you just can't wait I highly recommend checking out the information available on this search engine optimization blog and book. As always, if you have any questions or comments, just scroll down and post to the comments section. We'll respond immediatley!

## Part 2: Search Engine Optimization Overview

In the last section we learned about search engines, what they are and a little bit about how they work. As you now know, it is beneficial for your company or website to appear in high spots when users throughout the world search for things that you offer. For example, your company sells paper products, if a user on the web searches for "paper ream" it would make sense for your business and website to appear. This turns conventional marketing on its head. Instead of clamoring for the attention of eyeballs in magazines, newspapers, or on TV - you allow your target audience to find you, and you appear, exactly when they are looking, when they *need* your solution! And the potential is limitless. I just heard a story about a very small internet-based business in rural Kansas that sells premium pool (the game) equipment. By strategically targeting their niche online via search engines they are able to provide services to a worldwide audience, making millions each year. This business would otherwise be impossible to sustain in their local economy and is only possible because of the vast reach of the Internet and search engine's ability to funnel targeted traffic into your website.

No more sales talk! I promise. You know the Internet is powerful, you know you get traffic through search engines, so how do we position ourselves at the top? Three simple and key axioms.

### 3 Rules of Search Engine Optimization

- Code
- Content
- Links

In a nutshell the three important parts of search engine optimization are code, content, and links. This section is a quick highlight of all three and in future sections I will present more information on each.

#### Code

How was your site built? Is it set up for success for search engine marketing/optimization by the use of modern, standards-based coding? Does your site have specific code implemented traits that ensure it will give you an edge over your competition, provide the best experience for your users and ultimately raise your chances of search engines success?

#### Content

Content is king! Nothing drives more on the web then content. And don't forget it. If search engine optimization is the lifeblood of any website, content is the red blood cells. Content, especially from a search engine perspective **MUST** be there. If you have the first axiom (code) down properly, it's time to move on to content. How much content do you have? How relevant is it to the general topic/theme of your site? How often is it updated. If you don't have a plan for implementing more content, you should get moving, start planning, and start writing. If you are not willing to do this, you might as well give up now, and not waste time and money on a website.

#### Links

Finally, the third axiom in search engine optimization are links. Links truly drive search engine optimization, but are also the hardest and final part of the equation. How many sites

throughout the web link to your website? Why do you care? Because search engines use links as a way to measure a website's content and legitimacy. It's like a vote of confidence. If site A links to site B search engines read it as "site A thinks site B is legitimate and valuable and so should we." Additionally, the content of the site that links to you is also important. If you sell jewelry, a link from a manufacturer or jewelry resource website will be more meaningful than a link from a friend who has a website that deals with bread recipes.

To conclude, search engine optimization will involve Code, Content, and Links. Keeping these three axioms in mind will help prepare you for what's to come and set you up for top rankings on search engines.

## Part 3: Search Engine Optimization Code

**It's all about the code.** This is the first section in this article on search engines where we will really dive deep into how to get to #1. Again, we're trying to come up as high as possible in the search engines when our target markets are searching for products or services we have to offer. Why is this? Well let's say you provide health benefits to a local audience. Doesn't it make sense to have your website appear when someone searches for "health benefits fort myers?" How valuable is that to you? No matter what your business, it can benefit from this kind of exposure. But, besides this generalization I have some more search engine optimization peddling to do:

- **It's PULL not PUSH marketing** - People are searching for WHAT YOU HAVE! Your visitors, potential customers, and sales are seeking you out, and are actively looking for what you have to offer. Crazy, I know!
- **It is very targeted** - Again, people are searching for what you have. Search engine optimization works by taking your visitors in a side door to the products or services they need to get to quickest. If your site is well optimized and you've gone through all of the motions, you can deliver a page dedicated to the specific needs of searches right away.
- **It is timely** - Your site and the opportunity to get a client or make a sale is delivered at precisely the moment they are in need - and searching - for what you have to offer.
- **You have instant "street-cred"** - By having a good ranking visitors assume you are credible "Google, recognizes this company enough to show their page #1, surely they are good and reputable." Although this isn't always the case (the results may not actually be credible, or they might not be a great company), the association is definitely implied and recognized by potential customers.

Now on to the nuts and the bolts. This section will discuss in detail the first step in making sure your site comes up, how your site is built.

In order to rank well you or your web developer or development company need to make sure your site is built with the goal of marketing in mind. Specifically these things should be addressed:

**XHTML & CSS** - (*I know it's technical gobbley gook, but just hear me out.*) This is the standard of code used for your site. XHTML is the language used to present your content on the web, and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) is how that content is styled (the design). By sticking to the latest XHTML & CSS standards, it means your website will be smaller in size, quicker to download, and easier to read by search engines. Although there is a debate as to whether XHTML vs. Tables (old style web design) will have an impact on search engine results for your sites, our own tests have seen large increases in ranking and performance by simply updating this.

Additionally, proper coding of XHTML, what's called "*Semantic Coding*", or using tags as they were meant to be used to present the content will help the search engines and other automated tools read your content and assign value. For example there are tags that carry more weight than others, by coding correctly, this can be communicated, and you can rank well or better, than if your website was not coded to these standards.

**Unique Title Tags** - The title tag is a tag on every web page. The text within this tag is displayed at the top left corner of your browser, and is also often used for the title of search engine results. Making sure this title is specific to each page, and relevant to your overall

goals will help tremendously. Just changing the order of certain words in your title tags can have a significant impact on search engine results.

**Unique META Tags** - META tags are tags on a page that provide additional information on the page below. Again, much like title tags, they should be unique for each page (a real pain in the ass for sites with lots of pages). META information is not as important as it once was, but is still measured and used by search engines.

**Alt & Link Title Tags** - If your website is coded using XHTML/Semantic coding, this will already be factored in. Alt tags are used so that users who can't see images on your site, understand the images on your site. For example, a picture of an elephant would have the alt tag say "elephant" that way if the user has poor vision, or is surfing without images turned on they will be able to know what is going on. Likewise the title tag, can be used to provide more information to your users. Implementing these two tags and making sure to stick to updating them will help inform your visitors and search engines about your content.

**File Structure** - How you organize your content is also very important. On a smaller, simpler brochure site, this might not be as important, but even the smallest sites can see search engine benefits by appropriately naming pages and folders. For example, lets say you have a services page on your website. You should name it "*example.com/services.html*." If you have a larger site with a number of services, say for example, lawn mower repair you should follow a similar structure: "*example.com/services/lawn-mower-repair.html*." It's that simple! Structuring your site in this manner helps inform users of the content on the page, in that section, and also helps search engines understand the format of your site.

**Sitemap** - A sitemap, both one your users can read and understand (example: [Bonita Business Sitemap](#)), as well as an XML sitemap that is used by search engines (example: [Bonita Business XML sitemap](#)) should also be generated for your site. These two files tell visitors and search engines, exactly what is available on your site and the location of every file. It will help speed up the process of being included, or help improve your rankings on the search engines. If your site is built on a content management system the creation of a sitemap may be simple. If it wasn't, or the process isn't simple, you can always use available [free online tools to generate your sitemap](#).

**Post-Launch Steps** - After your site has all of the above complete, it's been structured properly from a coding and file perspective, it is helpful to submit it to the various search engines but not by any conventional search engine submission sense! Use the following services to verify that you are the owner of your site which will also include it in the search engine's:

- [Google Webmaster](#)
- [Yahoo Site Explorer](#)
- [MSN Webmaster](#)

These tools also allow you to verify ownership of your website, learn more about them over time (like what people are searching for when your site comes up and how many links your website has - more to come), and they also allow you to submit your sitemap, speeding up the process of getting in the search engines.

**Side note: Hosting** - Hosting can have a significant impact on your search engine rankings. If your website is hosted by a server or company that is unreliable, whose computers or network is constantly down and thus inaccessible by search engines or visitors, you will not rank as high.



## Part 4: Search Engine Optimization Content

Let's do a quick recap. We discussed the general principals of search engine optimization, why it's important, and how to code your site properly (or make sure that it is), now it's time to talk about content. This is perhaps the most important part of search engine optimization. Many local businesses, be they in Bonita Springs, Fort Myers, Estero or Naples routinely hear this part and start to get upset. No matter what your business, whether you are a small local business marketing nationally OR locally, the content on your website will play a key role in marketing yourself.

For example let's say you are a [custom stair builder in Fort Myers Florida](#). Wouldn't you like to rank well for the search: "[custom stair builder fort myers](#)" in Google? It makes sense right? That might be something your prospective customer might search for. Well, how do you get to #1 using content?

### 4 Keys To Successful SEO Content

- Start from the Beginning
- Keep it Fresh
- Keep it Relevant
- The more you have, the more likely search engines will find you and respect your site

### Where to Start? Start from the beginning.

Start with the current content on your site, has it been laid out properly and organized efficiently? Most often I see websites with very little organization. Once a good organization has been determined effectively filling in your general content should be easy. This is an example of a small website that has organized effectively:

- Home
- About
- Staff
- Pledge
- Services
  - Service 1
  - Service 2
  - Service 3
- News/Blog
- Contact

If you already have a website, try reorganizing it. There is nothing more confusing to search engines and users than when a website has no depth or categorization. Make sure to keep future content or goals in mind when doing so. Then, swoop back around and begin filling in the details. If a product or service is separate, and you think there is enough demand or text for it to have its own page, create one. Make sure to keep in mind the previous rule regarding search engine optimization (code) in mind when creating your pages.

Okay, so your site is laid out properly and you have a good amount of text about your core business and services, now what. Remember, when thinking about content from a search engine optimization perspective, keep it up-to-date and keep it relevant. Your website has a purpose, an audience, and the more often you update the text, the more weight your website will have with search engines and the more you keep it centered around your core

business and services, the more search engines will respect your site for the category of business you are in.

This may seem like a daunting task, but there is a VERY easy way to accomplish this.

So how do you incorporate all 4 elements of a successful search engine optimization content strategy? One very easy way to do it is implement a blog. A blog is simply an online journal that allows you to quickly post an article to your website and typically allows users to respond through comments.

### **Easily, and Quickly, Build Your Website's Foot Print**

A typical small business website will be informational in nature, what may be referred to as a "brochure website." You might have a home page, about page, services page, and a fancy contact page, but, not much else. This is a mistake, but often a necessary one as the creation of new pages and content usually takes some savvy computer know-how and coding knowledge. But, once installed or setup, a blog allows you to freely create pages and pages of information for free. Become the expert you already are by writing about the things you already love. A blog allows you to quickly and cost effectively grow the size of your website. By creating many blog posts and organizing them effectively you will immediately increase the amount of text on your site (your site's footprint). Although users will read your content, more importantly your posts will feature text combinations that people will search for, bringing in additional traffic. Finally, the blogosphere is ripe with people looking to read good content and send links back your way. Which takes us to the final step in search engine optimization...

## Part 5: Search Engine Optimization Links

### What is a Link?

What's a link? [This is a link](#). [This is a link](#). If you want to see what's going on in the background here you go `<a href="http://www.google.com">This is a link.</a>`

***A link is simply a snippet of code (not code again!) that tells your web browser (the program you are using right now to surf the web and read this article) to jump to another location.*** It can be a spot on this page, or an entirely new website.

### Why Are Links Important!?

That's pretty simple. ***Links are important because it is a way (one of the biggest) search engines evaluate you. It is the tool the search engines use to determine whether you should be #10 or #100 for a search term.*** Google, and the other search engines take a look at links in a very interesting way. They assume relationships through links.

### How Do Links Work (from a search engine's point of view)

Links establish relationships and value. Let's start with an example. Here is a chunk of text that appeared on our personal site:

Project Management software is key to any web developer's success. A [great online project management software](#) will provide you (as a developer) with the tools you need to get and stay organized, and communicate with your team and clients along every step of the way. To that affect, we have been using [basecamp](#) for sometime and it has helped us tremendously with all of the above.

In the above paragraph (ignore any of the technical terms mentioned), simply notice that "great online project management software" and "basecamp" are underlined. When you hover over them, you can then click and be brought to another website. This is another illustration of a link.

But, Google and the other search engines, also view this link as a vote of confidence. They read the surrounding text (relating to project management) and assume, since I am linking to it, that the underlying linked website (in this case Basecamp) probably has something to do with what I wrote. The more websites that link to basecamp, and the more they mention project management, the more likely this website will rank well for... Project Management. Additionally, Google tallies all of the links coming into basecamp and essentially assigns it a score (called a PageRank) - I know this is a gross simplification of PageRank. Additionally, PageRank is determined by the size of the site (write that content!) and the coding of the site (I told you it was important)! If your website has a large PageRank, and you link to another site, that site gets a larger boost in the search engine results.

### How Do You Apply This to Your Business?

Okay, this sounds complicated, but it really isn't. Let's say you own a small flower shop in Bonita Springs, Florida. You would LOVE to be #1 on Google when someone searches for "**Flowers Bonita Springs.**" How do you do this? Well, let's assume you have your [site](#)

[constructed properly](#), and you have [a lot of great content](#), but you're still not coming up. The next step - and of supreme importance for new websites are the number of websites that link back to yours. So, perhaps you can contact your vendors or suppliers of flowers, vases, etc. and ask them to put your company information and a link to your website on theirs. Or you can see if any of your recurring business customers will mention their experience on their own website and link back to yours. The more links you have the better.

### **How Do You Get Links?**

Good question. Here is a breakdown:

- Directories (paid and unpaid) - much like old yellow page ads
- Participating in Online Forums, Communities, Blogs
- Writing Your Own Amazing Content (people will find your stuff, read it, and link back to it)
- Real Relationships - If you have a business relationship with vendors, merchants, brands, etc. you can contact your vendors or customer base and see if they will link back to you

### **REMEMBER**

Now remember, this always seems to trip businesses up: FOR THE MOST PART YOU ONLY CARE ABOUT OTHER WEBSITES LINKING TO YOURS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Sure, you may have content that requires a link to an outside website, link to it, as it will help your audience and that website, but when we are trying to grow our own search engine ranking, the greatest thing that will affect your own site's performance on search engines, are the number of industry relevant websites and blog posts that link BACK TO YOUR WEBSITE!!!! So, a links page on your own site, for example, does not help. We care about links coming in!

### **Analyze Your Business & Your Competition**

Links are also a really good way, if for example you are looking to break into the online space and don't yet have a website, or have one and are looking to spruce it up. To evaluate your competition you can use the following website:

<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com>

Type in your website or your competitors website, select "INLINKS" (remember we care about links coming into websites) to see how many links you or your competitors have. This is a great opportunity to also find out where you've been mentioned. Often times on the web, you won't even know if someone (article, publication, etc.) has mentioned you.

## Part 6: Search Engine Optimization Conclusion

Well this is it. It has taken a number of months to finish the entire 6 part series and this is the 6th part. First a recap:

### Why the Web?

*Do you really need to ask?* More and more households in the United States and throughout the world are signing on and using this tool to discover businesses like yours!

### You Need a Website

As a business owner you should be thinking of marketing 24/7. I know I probably don't need to tell you this, but you need to be thinking about your clients, their concerns, their needs, and addressing them at every turn. Address your future clients' needs in advertisements (learn from your current customers) and preemptively answer the questions you already know they have. You need to address your current clients' wants by refining your processes, performing better services for cheaper, providing a better customer experience, etc. And, there is no better way to do this than a website. I know it's sales-y coming from a guy that designs websites, but I have never experienced the same potential to meet and address all of these needs (across hundreds of clients) by any other means. A well crafted website can get the job done.

### Market Your Damn Website! (sorry I cursed, I'm just passionate)

As you begin the process of developing your website keep in mind the rules of the web. As a user of the net you are probably already familiar with the rules of the web, you just need to KNOW and UNDERSTAND.

*How do you find a business?*

*How do you look up the name of the city in Lebanon you were just asked about?*

Simple, you open your favorite browser (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari) and you do a search. You look to Google, MSN, and Yahoo as your prophets, and their results guide you to the answers. So search engines need to be a priority. But it doesn't end with search engines.

The general marketing of your site needs to be a priority. How are you going to get visitors, where will your site be seen? Concentrate on this, as well as what they see and the questions you answer once you get them to your site. Remember, a website alone will VERY RARELY accomplish anything. Expect to spend time and money getting your website marketed. Although this marketing medium is very powerful and very inexpensive (compared to print or other conventional mediums).

### Learning The Rules of Search Engines:

- **Make sure your website is up-to-snuff** - your development team, you, or the automated software you select needs to take all marketing related elements of your site into account BEFORE IT IS CREATED. Removing this first speed bump will allow you to sail through the Internet's super highway steadily. Make sure the code is tight, clean and includes all the attributes [mentioned previously](#).

- **Concentrate on getting content** - Your website is not static. If you think it can sit there on the interweb lonely and stale, and perform you are dead wrong. Maybe you don't believe a website can bring in business or shorten sales cycles? Great, but step aside as progressive forward-thinking businesses do, and snap up your market share and put you out of business. Content is the core of this marketing vehicle. Write about your events, your successes, even your failures. Connect with your customers and your website will begin to bring in traffic in very interesting ways!
- **Get those links** - Physical networking is a core of any business. You got a client from a friend of a friend? Linking is no different. You need to get your website out there, get people talking about it and get it known.

**That's it! It's not rocket science (although some of the coding might be a little unfamiliar or seem complicated), but by following this simple guide you will be on the path to placing your website at the top of the search engines!**