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The Evolution of Writing From Cave to Keyboard



A Web CopyWriting and SEO Primer

Introduction

Early copy writers used stone tablets and chisels to convey thoughts and feelings. Crude, but effective for the time.

Quills took the place of chisels, parchment and paper replaced stone. Less crude, about as effective.

Today, the tools for the web copywriter are electronic, and effectiveness can be measured with far more exactness than ever. Those tools include both the keyboard and the calculator.

Everything on and about the Internet is measurable to the penny, to the person, and that includes especially the effectiveness of words on a web site.

Search engines are word value-based systems, and they take their measure of a web site by the words they find on it. Word count, keyword density, content structure and content placement are all important aspects of those words, and they determine how search engine robots will index a site. That indexing, in turn, determines for which searches the site will be presented as a relevant result and where it will be ranked in those results.

Search engine optimization is the crafting of a web site's architecture and content in such a way as to optimize its indexing, and its rank position, for the right keywords. By “right keywords” I mean keywords that represent searches most likely to be conducted by potential customers and for which you want your website to be a result.

The more specific and “drilled down” the keywords your website is optimized for, the more likely your website is going to be found by people who are, in fact, looking specifically for your product or your service. Although the example is a little simplified, let's consider someone with a bed and breakfast accommodations business in the resort area of Cape Cod. The keyword “bed and breakfast” is likely to generate millions of search results on one of the major search engines. The keyword “bed and breakfast cape cod” is likely to generate far fewer search results. If your business happens to have a water view, or be in the town of Chatham, the keyword “bed and breakfast cape cod water view” or “bed and breakfast chatham cape cod” are not only likely to generate a very few results, they are likely to include your web site in those results.

Web surfers have learned over time how to use search engines efficiently. More and more searches are conducted using these “long-tail” keywords, drilled down, to make it easier for the searcher to find exactly what he or she seeks.

The Internet and search engines have changed the nature of writing to be more than just good story telling. The audience has expanded to include search engine robots, little pieces of software that crawl through a web site measuring words and discerning what the site is all about. A determination is made based upon those measurements how the site should be stored in the search engine data base and for which search it would be a relevant result.

Writing web copy doesn't necessarily have to be of a particular writing style to be successful, and the voice should match the site's owner and its product or service. But, the writing has to be a bit more measured and calculated, and the search engine audience needs to be considered carefully in those measurements and calculations. The basic rules of good writing, though, remain the same spelling is important, as is good grammar and sentence structure. After all, people are reading it, too.

Content Placement and Structure

The source code of each web site page includes a section referred to as “metas.” The source code is the HTML and PHP includes that each page is built with, the code that your browser (Internet Explorer or Firefox, etc.) interprets and presents as what you see.

To view that source code, in the upper left of your browser window, select “View” and from the drop down menu select “Page Source.” A new window will open and the raw code of the page will appear. At or near the top of that raw code you will see lines and sections entitled “meta name description” and “meta name keywords,” followed by text or words.

Search engine robots do look at the source code and the meta sections, but only in passing. In the early years of search engines, the meta keywords were very important in determining what searches a web site would be presented as a good result.

The Googles and Yahoos of the Internet learned quickly, though, how easy it was for web site owners to manipulate the results and ranks by inserting keywords that had little to do with the subject of their site, but represented keywords frequently searched.

Metas fell into disfavor, or at least dropped in their significance. They are still on the list of criteria the search engines employ in evaluating a web site, but very low on that list. It is very telling that the Google Webmasters Guide doesn't mention meta keywords at all.

The source code should contain a good “description,” though. There are those occasions when the meta description will be the text snippet included in a search result, and so it can be valuable.

The structure of content on the home page of a web site is important to the robots. Headings and paragraphs are the preferred structure to them just as it would be to people reading a magazine article. The headings are referred to in the source code as H tags, and they are the perfect place for keywords. The paragraphs that follow those headings should repeat and reinforce the keywords in the headings.

The H1 tag is the first heading in the home page content, and the most important keyword belongs in it. The paragraph that follows should repeat that keyword in some variation a couple of times to reinforce its importance.

The H2 tag, the second heading in the home page content, would hold the second most important keyword, and the subsequent paragraph should repeat it in some variation a couple of times to reinforce its status.

This practice should continue for the remainder of the home page content. Word count in this main body text, with headings and paragraphs, is important, as is the density of the keywords within it. I recommend somewhere between 350-700 words in total count, and a keyword density of between 9-20 instances within that word count.

By that I mean the closer you are to the 350 in word count, the closer you should be to a keyword density of 9; and, the closer you are to the 700 word count, the closer you should be to a keyword density of 20. The further below that density, the harder it will be for the robots to determine what the site is all about and for which keywords it should be indexed; the higher above that density, the more likely the site runs the risk for what is called "keyword spamming." You'll fail to score points as a result of the former, while you will be penalized for the latter.

There are more considerations than these few in the development and placement of web site content, but they do represent some basic and firm rules to follow. Here are a few examples to illustrate these points.

Measuring Performance

A website's performance can be measured to the penny, to the person. Measure often, analyze, adjust, and then measure again. Well crafted copy writing and a carefully considered SEO Plan are the way to ensure your site's success.

Both Google and Yahoo offer free Analytics code, and it's a terrible mistake if you don't have that code on every page of your site. It will gather all of the statistical data you will need in order to make informed decisions about working your site content: visitor numbers, where they came from, what searches they conducted that brought them to your site, what page(s) they visited, how they stayed, what page they entered your site on, which page they exited your site from, and so much more.

Knowing all of this information can help you decide whether your copy is working for your site as you intended, and if not, how you might want to consider editing it for better search engine performance.

Of course, you also want to run a rank analysis of your site for each of the keywords you optimized it for in its content; and, then, when you take measurements again from your Analytics, you will want to run another rank analysis to note movement up or down in rank.

Just as a website should be considered a perpetual work in progress, so should its search engine optimization strategy. These measurements should be taken on a regular basis, bi-monthly at the longest, monthly so much the better. You should assume your competition is doing the same thing, and you don't want to be left behind.

That perpetual work in progress concept should include the regular and frequent growth and refreshing of your website's content. Whether it's by adding new pages, or integrating a blog and posting to it, or adding an archive of past newsletters or white papers about your business or industry, the content of your site should remain dynamic. Search engines will reward the effort.

It is a matter of following the proper methodology, and engaging in regular content updating and content growth. Search engine robots are hungry, and require a steady diet of new words to review. An active and dynamic web site that undergoes regular content updating and content growth will be rewarded by them.

The point of the exercise is to sell a product or a service - - find new customers - - and good search engine optimization practices that result in high rank positions help those customers find you.

Let's Recap With Your 7-Step CheckList

Now that we've touched on the basics, let's assemble a simple checklist for you to follow in considering your own SEO Plan:

1. Determine your keywords. Put together your first draft of that list, what you think your website should be optimized for in order to attract the right visitor.
2. Research and refine your list. Use online services such as NicheBot and others to learn how many searches are already being conducted for those keywords. Adjust that initial list accordingly, for if you already know how people are searching for your site, get it in front of their eyes.
3. Write page titles, meta description, and main text body content for your site, using the structure of headings and paragraphs, making sure you have a keyword in each of those spots.
4. Install an Analytics tool. Google and Yahoo's tools are free.
5. Run a rank analysis of your website for each of the keywords on your list. You need to establish a baseline from which future results will be measured.
6. Review, analyze, adjust. In a month, perhaps two, review your data and site performance, and determine what, if any, adjustments should be made, and then make them.
7. Repeat Step 6. Forever.

It is that simple. It's not easy, but it is that simple. These are all “white hat” best SEO practices, and they'll serve you well.

This is not intended to be all-inclusive, as the subject of web copy writing and SEO practice, while not complicated, is involved. It is also tedious and unexciting, but when it is done well the results make the effort very worthwhile.

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