The Fundamentals of a
Winning SEO Strategy

Learn the Most Important Factors for Improving
Your Search Engine Rankings

crownpeak

SEO is a battle between you and your competitors. Your website's page titles, page descriptions, page content (text) and link authority are the best tools for winning at SEO.

If you are reading this e-book then you already know why search engine optimization (SEO) is so important. You want to be at the top of the first search engine results page (SERP) for companies like yours. Common sense and industry studies tell us that the top listing on the first SERP garners the most click-throughs to company websites — over 71%, according to one study. The same study shows that the top three results yield over half the click-throughs. That makes sense because viewers read the top results first and because a top position means the search engine considers a company highly relevant. Viewers will also likely click on the search result that appears to align most closely with what they are looking for.

But SEO matters for another reason: only a handful of companies can appear on the first page, and only one can be #1. If you're not there then a competitor will be. And if SEO is not working for you, it is working against you. The good news is that the rules for winning are the same for everyone, so the opportunity to win is really in your hands.

Two Ways to Win

There are two ways to win at SEO: on-page and off-page. On-page refers to all the things you can do within your website itself to boost rankings. Those include keyword-related content like page titles, headlines, and body text as well as invisible content like the HTML and CSS code that controls how the site behaves on different devices (what SEO experts call "site health"). Off-page refers to all the things you can do outside the website, such as ways to gain "link authority" for your site based on the number of other sites that link to your site (and the link authority of those sites).

On-Page SEO: Site Health

On-page SEO is all about keywords and site health. Search engines consider site health important when ranking websites, based on the premise that a competently built site serves users better than an incompetently built site. Signs of site health include:

Fast page loads. Remember, this is a competition — so the faster that pages load in a user's browser, the better. Three seconds or less is best.

Mobile friendly. It was back in 2015 that Google announced that more searches are conducted on mobile devices than on desktops, which is why search engines now favor sites optimized for both.

Secure pages. Pages with a URL starting with https:// (rather than http://) have a secure (i.e., encrypted) connection to the webserver and will rank higher in search results, all other factors being equal.

No orphans or broken links. An orphan is a page that no other page links to on the site. A broken link (which results in a "404" error when clicked), is a link that does not point to any page. Either situation can occur when a page is moved if the page is not deleted at the previous location or if an old link does not redirect properly to the new location.

On-Page SEO: Keywords

This is the area that probably gets the most attention when it comes to SEO. A keyword is not necessarily just one word but rather the word or words that a user will likely enter in a browser search bar (also called a search field or search box) to find information on a particular subject (like about companies that sell what you sell). Search engines amass huge indexes through a process called crawling — where search engine "bots" follow links, find web pages, read their content, and index their words. If you have a website on the Internet it will be indexed unless you embed specific code, called no-follow tags, in the HTML source of each page.

Use keywords in:

Page titles. This is the text that appears within the top of the browser window frame (or in a tab if multiple pages are open). It is also the text located within the title meta tag (as in <title>your title text here</title>) of the header section of the website source. Titles are the single most important on-page element for SEO — for two reasons. First, if your title contains meaningful keywords (not "home" or "about us," etc.) it will appear at the beginning of your SERP listing — so it's your first chance at a great first impression. Second, if the title matches (or comes close to matching) a particular search phrase, you have a huge advantage for coming near the top of search results for that phrase. Best practice is a length of around 50-60 characters.

Page descriptions. This is the text that appears just below the title in a search result — and hence another opportunity to tell visitors why they should click-through. This text is not visible on the web page but does exist within the description meta tag (as in <description>your description text here</description>). Best practice is a length of around 150-170 characters.

H1 and H2 headers. Understandably, search engines pay particular attention to headlines, or headers. On the page these typically appear in larger or bold type. Search engines recognize a major heading and secondary heading as text in the H1 and H2 meta tags respectively of the web page body — i.e., the section that follows the header section (not to be confused with header tags). You can also have multiple sub header levels — H3, H4, H5, etc. — although H1 and H2 headers carry the most SEO weight.

Page body text. Search engines can only read text — not images, graphics, or sounds. So although the trend is to have less and less text on a page — both because of limited screen space on mobile devices and visitors' short attention spans — we would recommend at least 300 words as your smallest text "target" for search engine indexing.

Image alt tags. Even though search engines can't read images it is possible to indicate to a search engine what an image depicts. Do that by using what is called an alt tag in the HTML code that points to the image. Alt tags were invented so that people with visual impairments would know what an image is about by listening to text readers. Search engines also read these tags, so they're another good place to use keywords.

Anchor text. This is text with an embedded link. Search engines consider anchor text more relevant for ranking than text that is not an anchor. So when deciding where to embed a link it is helpful for SEO to select text that is not generic (e.g., "read more here.")
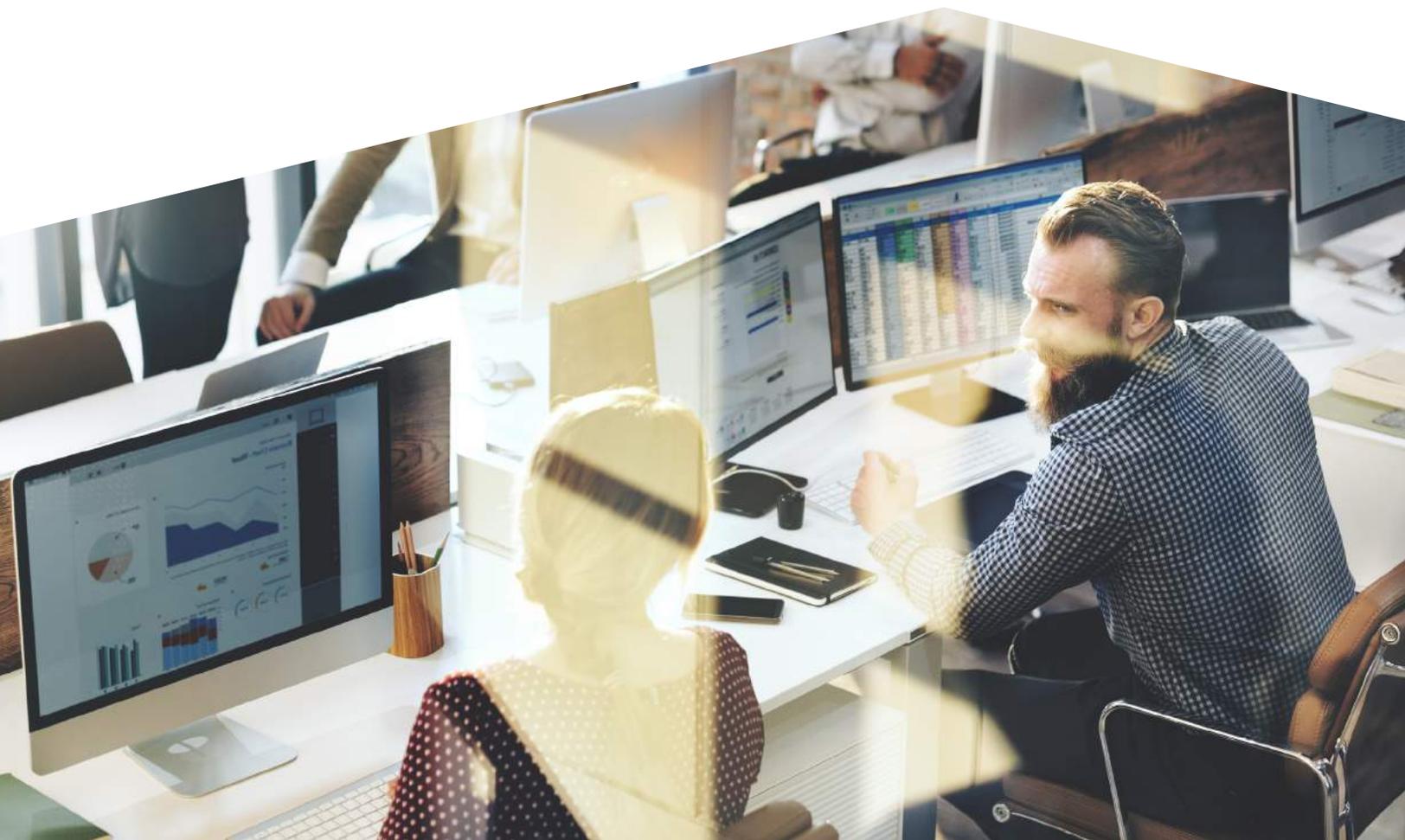
Keyword Best Practices

To identify which keywords to use, use a tool like Google Ads Keyword Planner. It can tell you how often any search phrase you enter has been searched over what period of time and also suggest other keywords relevant to your business. Obviously, you want to pick keywords that a lot of people search for. However, picking the most popular keywords may be a mistake because: a) there is more competition for these keywords (hence, less likelihood your site will come in at the top of search results), and b) because the most popular keywords may be less relevant to your specific niche. So, for example, rather than choose "Italian restaurants" as a keyword, you might pick "Boston Italian Restaurants" or even "North End Italian Restaurants" if that specific Boston neighborhood is your market. (Note: a great way to make your site stand out in a particular locality — for example, if you operate a restaurant chain — is to use locality in picking keywords.)

Another decision is the number of words a keyword should contain — as in, how many words are searchers likely to use? Typically keywords 2-5 words long are best.

The two most important rules for using keywords are: 1) make your keywords stand out from other words; and 2) try to engage humans, not just search engine bots. To make keywords stand out use them in titles, headers, descriptions, and anchor text. Remember too that keywords garner the most credit at the beginning of headers and subheaders, as in "North End Italian Restaurant Rated Highest" rather than "The Highest Rated North End Italian Restaurant."

Then there's the body text — which brings up rule #2. Search engines use semantic algorithms to identify text that a searcher might actually find worth reading. So, yes, web text should obviously contain keywords, but the text must still be semantically meaningful. Text that appears to needlessly repeat keywords (called "keyword stuffing") is a turnoff for both humans and bots.

Remember also that all these on-page practices apply to each page — so treat each page as a unique SEO opportunity. Each page should have a unique title, headers, description, and body text — even though you're optimizing on many of the same keywords across your site. You don't want pages competing with each other while you do want to increase the size of your "keyword profile" to search engines.

Off-Page SEO: Link Authority

One of the most potent ways to gain SEO traction is by building what's called "link authority." This is a measure of how much SEO credit a link from your site confers to another site. There are two ways to measure link authority: 1) by the number of other sites that link to your site; and 2) by the number of sites that link to those sites that link to your site. The premise is that the content of your site must be very valuable if lots of other sites are linking to it — especially other sites with lots of link authority themselves.

So how do you get link authority? A good start is to follow all the on-page practices just described. In other words, make sure your site contains a lot of semantically rich, keyword-optimized content that readers will want to share with friends and colleagues. Then do this:

Blog. Search engines love blogs, both because the content is fresh and because blogs contain lots of keywords. But equally important, interesting and well-written blogs spur visitors to keep coming back to your site and to share what they find there with others. Just make sure your blog is actually hosted on your site. To do this, make sure that the blog's web address (its URL) looks like this: blog.your-website-URL.com, in which case your blog is a subdomain of your main website. Alternatively, you can put the blog in a directory on your main website, as in: my-website-URL.com/blog. However, if you host your blog at a different web location than your website (like my-blog.wordpress.com) then your website won't get your blog's SEO credit.

Engage with others online. "Give to get" is an important rule for attracting links. You can guest blog, comment on other people's blogs, start a LinkedIn group, tweet and retweet, and interact in other ways on social media. The more content you share, over more channels — and the more people who like your content — the more people will link to it. But avoid reciprocal linking — which search engines don't like — which is when people exchange links purely to boost SEO. You also won't get credit by linking back to yourself from pages (like blog comments) tagged no-follow.

Engage with others offline. Speak at conferences. Volunteer in professional associations. Start a professional association. People who are active and authoritative in the real world also tend to get followed in the virtual world.

Actually, engaging with others in your space is probably the best advice for winning at SEO in general. Search engine designers devote massive resources trying to figure out what people are searching for — which are typically those websites offering the most relevant and authoritative content in areas of mutual interest to you and your audience.

So, make sure you give it to them!

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About Crownpeak

Crownpeak provides the leading, enterprise-grade, SaaS Digital ExperienceManagement (DXM) platform. The Crownpeak DXM platform empowers Fortune 2000 companies to quickly and easily create, deploy and optimize customer experiences across global digital touchpoints at scale.

Besides featuring content management, personalization, search, and hosting, it is the only digital experience platform that offers built-in Digital Quality Management (DQM) to ensure brand integrity, best practices, and web accessibility compliance, and a suite of monitoring and consent solutions, including a Universal Consent Platform, designed to help companies comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

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