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Special Report:

How To Prosper With The New Google

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Stop Press! Major Changes At Google

This journey started on November 16, 2003...

The fourth edition of "Search Engine Optimization Fast Start" (*a.k.a. SEO Fast Start*) had just gone through the final proofreading and editing stages, and I was writing the email to notify my readers of its availability, when my phone rang with a little bit of breaking news. Google had suddenly started acting "crazy," according to the caller.

I took a look at a few SERPs (search engine results pages) myself, and could see that something was going on... something big. In many cases, **all** of the top ranked sites had dropped out of sight. Obviously, something "big" was going on.

That was a month ago. Since then, the online discussion forums have been buzzing with all sorts of speculation. This update was bad news for a lot of people, but good news for just as many. Most of the speculation has come from those who see it as bad news.

Google hasn't made any announcements about the nature of their changes, and we don't expect that they will. Therefore, writing this report involves some speculation on my part. I hope that my readers will agree that it's at least "informed speculation."

In addition to significant changes in the methods they're using to rank web pages, Google has also made several key changes to the format of their search results, which I think are very revealing in terms of Google's overall strategy.

This report begins with an overview of the recent changes at Google, my take on Google's new strategy, how it helps searchers, and why none of us should fear this change. After that, I'll break down what I think has changed, dispel a few bad rumors, and provide some advice on how to prosper in the new Google results.

Overview of the New Google

Google is clearly doing something new and different now, to generate these radically different results on so many search terms. Before we dig into the "big change", let's look at a few "smaller" changes that may not be getting as much attention. These little changes add up to a lot of new features for searchers.

Keyword Stemming

In the middle of all this uproar, Google threw in a little something extra: word stemming. In other words, when you type "dietary," you might get some results based on "diet" as well. Rather than explain it in detail, I'll let Google explain it for themselves. Visit (<http://www.google.com/help/basics.html>) and read what it says under "word variations (stemming)."

Stemming has actually been in play for a while, or at least they've been experimenting with it. Now it's official. Hopefully, this will mean that we can start writing more naturally when it comes to Google, and let them figure out whether the plural and singular are both relevant. For now, it doesn't seem to be active in a lot of searches.

My advice, when it comes to stemming, remains the same – cover your bases by using all applicable variations of the word. As Google's use of stemming increases, this may become less important, but Google isn't the only search engine. In fact, Google is about to become a bit less important over the coming months.

Information First?

One of the first things that many of us noticed in the new Google search results, were a lot of "information" and "resource" type pages showing up in top positions, even on those searches that were considered to be 100% commercial in nature. I don't think this necessarily reflects a bias against commercial sites.

I'd suggest instead that the recent changes at Google exposed a lot of formerly top-ranked sites for what they were: empty shells, with inflated PageRank scores, that had no real authority. It used to be very easy to put a page into the top ten at Google – optimize a page, get enough links to it (regardless of whether the links were on topic or relevant), and voila – instant rankings.

If your website has very few relevant incoming links, no links that aren't part of a link swap, and very little content, the odds are that it suffered significantly in the latest update. Google's new algorithm seems to favor strongly themed sites with a lot of useful content. These are the same types of site that searchers favor.

Ongoing Tweaks

Google didn't stop making changes on November 15. They have continued to make adjustments in their algorithm, and many pages that had dropped from the rankings have returned to more prominent positions. We can all expect that Google will continue to make changes in an effort to improve the quality of their search results.

Google's Strategy

Delivering quality search results would be a lot easier, if search engines could understand the searcher's intentions. When they type "dvd player," what are they looking for? Are they shopping? Do they need to know how to connect their DVD player to their television? Do they want to see reviews? Are they looking for software to play DVDs on their computer?

Google's strategy, which sets them apart from other search portals, is to offer different search products for different types of searches. What's interesting about the new Google search results, is the way that they are beginning to incorporate these other search tools into their main search results.

Danny Sullivan of Search Engine Watch has coined the term "invisible tabs" to describe how search engines might attempt to deliver search results that more closely match the searchers' intent. His idea is that search engines (like Google) have access to multiple resources (Google has Web, Images, Directory, Groups, News, Froogle, Catalogs, Books, etc.) and that these sources will make their way into the main search results over time.

Froogle (Product Search)

Google has had a beta version of their product search online for a year now. Apparently, they're confident enough in this system to begin promoting it within their regular search results. Now, when you search for "DVD player" on Google, you get a lot of "information" type pages in the search results, but you also get a few links into "product search" results at the top of the page.

When searchers want to go shopping, Google wants them to use Froogle. When you want to promote a shopping site, Google wants you to promote it through Froogle. If you're running a shopping site, and you aren't submitting a product feed to Froogle, it's time to get that going. Submitting to Froogle is free, and it's very easy to do. For more on Froogle, visit:

<http://www.insideoutmarketing.com/index.php?p=pages&pid=17>

Google Directory

The Google Directory is a copy of the "Open Directory Project" database. Google has been showing links to the "Google Directory" within their search results for some time. When one of the pages shown in their regular search results also has a listing in the directory, the category and description from the Open Directory are displayed. Google also shows links to matching directory categories at the top of the page on a growing number of search results.

When searchers want to browse for information within a specific topic, Google would like them to use the Google Directory. If your site isn't listed in the Open Directory, it's time to get to work on that.

If you don't believe that a directory listing is important, read the last paragraph on Google's search tips page (<http://www.google.com/help/basics.html>), under "search by category." Google wants searchers to tell them what they're trying to find by searching within the directory. When I explain "topic-sensitive PageRank," you'll see how Google would be able to deliver search results that fit within a directory topic.

Google News

Google's "news" search is a bit different, because they aren't limited to a few major media partners. They currently index 4,500 news sources (according to the Google News site). When searchers want news on current events (Google News archives 30 days worth of articles and headlines), Google wants them to use this system.

Unless you have a news site, this probably won't make much difference to you, but links to Google News now appear in selected search results pages. To see this in action, try a search for "New Hampshire Primary."

Google Print (Books)

This service is in the very early stages, but as with the other new search offerings, it shows Google's strategy. Google Print (<http://print.google.com/faq>) allows you to search for content within the text of books. Currently this is limited to content from a small group of publishers, but I would not be surprised to see it expand quickly.

If you write or publish books, keep an eye on Google Print. When they open this up to more publishers, you'll want your books to be included.

More To Come?

There are plenty of new search products yet to come from Google, as they continue to work on improving the searcher's experience with their service. This is good news for searchers, who will find it easier to get what they want. It's also good news for web site owners, who may soon be able to put their efforts into attracting the type of targeted traffic they need, instead of shouting for attention in the increasingly crowded primary search results.

Uncovering The New Algorithm

There have been all sorts of theories put forward about Google's new algorithm. What I present here, as far as I can tell, fits the facts at hand. You are welcome to disagree with me.

Google Goes Topical: The Smoking Gun

About PageRank, And Why The Old Google Algorithm Doesn't Work Any More

The idea of PageRank is that a "random walk" through the web will tell you which sites are the most important. It simulates what would happen if a random surfer followed random links from one page to the next, hitting the back button at dead ends. The higher the PageRank of a page, the more likely it is that the random surfer will come across it.

The way this all works is pretty ingenious, really. The more links to a page, the more likely a random surfer is to find it. Links from more popular pages count for more, because the random surfer is more likely to find one of those links.

PageRank works great for searching collections of research papers within a particular field. For example, if you're searching a collection of papers (or web pages) about particle physics, the PageRank algorithm will quickly tell you which are the most important (and relevant) papers for a given search query, because those papers will be cited more frequently by other papers.

If the web were all about a single topic, this would work perfectly well. Unfortunately, the web encompasses millions of topics, and in the real world, searchers are not taking a random walk. Searchers are looking for information on a specific topic. The PageRank system rewards all links, regardless of the topic of the page carrying the link.

Google has tried to overcome this limitation by taking the text of the links into account, but savvy search engine marketers have learned to trick Google's algorithm by planting keyword-laden links all over the web. A cottage industry has grown up around PageRank, and links from "high PageRank" pages can be bartered, bought and sold.

I've received offers as high as \$3,500 per month to put (utterly irrelevant) text links on the home page of my Inside Out Marketing site, which shows a PageRank of 7 (out of 10) on the Google toolbar. While I am not entertaining these offers, others are actively and systematically pursuing such relationships.

When anyone can achieve high rankings for their pages by buying links from unrelated web sites, or trading links with unrelated sites, PageRank becomes nearly useless in finding quality results for many search queries. When the world's leading search engine sees the quality of their search results deteriorating, they don't sit still. We all need to understand that Google needed to do something different.

Meet Your New Best Friend: Topic-Sensitive PageRank

Taher H. Haveliwala, a Ph.D. student at Stanford University, published a very interesting paper in 2002 on "Topic-Sensitive PageRank." You can read the paper online (<http://www2002.org/CDROM/refereed/127/>) or download the extended version as a PDF (<http://www.stanford.edu/~taherh/papers/topic-sensitive-pagerank-tkde.pdf>). Interestingly enough, Mr. Haveliwala went to work at Google in October 2003.

Topic-Sensitive PageRank addresses the problems with the basic PageRank system by adding a "bias" to the random searcher's random walk. This new random searcher has a clear intent, and is more interested in following relevant links from relevant pages, related to a specific topic. This is a relatively new idea, but one that solves a couple key problems in delivering quality search results.

Mr. Haveliwala is clearly going to be an "impact player" in the search engine world. He has done substantial work in other areas of search technology, including some very interesting studies of how to compute PageRank more efficiently. You can see his published works online from his home page (<http://www.stanford.edu/~taherh/papers>).

In the original research paper, Haveliwala describes how he used the Stanford WebBase Repository to compute "Topic Sensitive" PageRank scores for 16 topics matching the top-level categories of the Open Directory. Even with a limited set of data (80 million pages) and a limited number of topics, this new method could be seen to improve search results, given an understanding of what topic the searcher was interested in.

In reviewing this paper last year, I noted two problems problem with applying it to a search engine. As we shall see, both of these problems can now be overcome.

The first problem is expanding the number of topics sufficiently. 16 topics is clearly not enough to produce a major improvement in search results, but the computation of PageRank is very costly, and unless some improvement could be found, it's unlikely Google could implement this system. There have been significant developments in this area in the past year, and I no longer believe that this is a significant obstacle.

The second problem is determining what the "topic" of a search might be – when the searcher uses the word "bicycle" in a search query, does she want to buy one, or ride one? I will explain shortly how Google might be able to determine the appropriate topic match for a given search query, and demonstrate how this explains why some search queries are affected more than others.

About Applied Semantics & CIRCA

Google acquired a small company called Applied Semantics early in 2003. This company's technology has already had a significant impact on Google. Among other things, Applied Semantics' AdSense technology is used to deliver context-based advertising for pay-per-click advertisers on Google's "Adwords" system. You can see AdSense at work on my content portal (www.insideoutmarketing.com) and many other web sites. The ads change based on the content of the page – pretty cool, right?

Well, AdSense isn't the only technology that Google picked up with this acquisition. In fact, the underlying technology of AdSense is called CIRCA. I'll take a short cut here, by quoting from a press release:

"Applied Semantics' CIRCA Technology is based on a language-independent, highly scalable ontology that consists of millions of words, their meanings, and their conceptual relationships to other meanings in the human language. The ontology, aided by sophisticated search technology, is the basis for a conceptual understanding of the multiplicity of word meanings, enabling computers to more effectively manage and retrieve information which results in improved knowledge discovery opportunities for searchers."

What CIRCA allows Applied Semantics (and Google) to do, is to identify concepts related to specific words and phrases. They use this technology right now to serve up relevant advertising in a variety of contexts. Applied Semantics technology may also be involved in Google's keyword stemming system.

Among other things, CIRCA can calculate how closely related or similar "phrase A" is to "concept B." If you search for "Colorado bicycle trips," CIRCA can relate that conceptually to a region (Colorado, which is in the Rocky Mountains), to concepts like bicycling and travel, etc. This is important, because it means that they can calculate the "distance" between your search query and various concepts in their database.

Putting It All Together – How To Implement A Topic-Sensitive Search Engine

So now that we know about Topic-Sensitive PageRank and CIRCA, how are they related? In other words, how could Google combine these technologies to produce a better search engine?

Let's imagine, first of all, that Google has solved the problem of how to calculate Topic-Sensitive PageRank for a large number of topics (or concepts) – perhaps hundreds, maybe thousands. With the old PageRank system, it was important to calculate a very accurate value, but as we shall see, a good fast approximation may be all they need with a topic-sensitive algorithm. Read through some of the published papers and you will see that this is already possible.

Now, take a typical search query like "Colorado bicycle trips." Those words are going to closely match at least a few topics within the CIRCA database. Based on the "distance" between the search terms used, and the topics in the database, Google could then apply a "topic-sensitive PageRank" score to deliver better search results. The more closely related the search is to a topic, the greater the impact of the topic-sensitive PageRank score.

Because a given search query might match multiple topics, an approximation of the PageRank score could be sufficient to deliver quality results, because any small errors in the PageRank

calculation would be averaged out over the various topic-sensitive PageRank scores affecting that query.

If there aren't any matching topics, Google could still use the good old PageRank system. If there are too many matching topics, they could do the same, although applying multiple topic scores might look a lot like the old system anyway. If the matching topics were only distantly related to the search query, the impact would simply be lessened.

Understanding The Changes, Ignoring The Noise

For some search queries, the results have been radically changed – in a few cases, the top 100 listed pages have all dropped out. The folks at Google Watch have compiled a listing of affected search terms (see www.scroogle.org), and the amount of change in each, which has proven very valuable in conducting parts of our research.

One of the big problems with the available data is that there is a tendency for these radically changed results to be reported more often. Those folks who haven't seen any change in their Google rankings aren't complaining, so there's a bit of a "squeaky wheel" effect at play here.

Most of the goofy conspiracy theories we've heard would be expected to show a lot of radically changed results, which is what you see in this "self-reported" data. The reason that it looks this way, though, is because most of the data is coming from people who lost rankings.

Rather than looking at the "self-reported" changes in search results, we've taken a different approach, capturing the "most recent searches" from several available online sources, and looking at the change in those search results.

When we looked at hundreds of unbiased real world search queries and mapped out the amount that each has changed, there is a very clean distribution in terms of how much they have changed. In the real world, radical changes are the exception, not the rule.

Topics Are Not Keywords... And It's Not Perfect

It's important not to confuse "topics" with "keywords." A topic would represent a general subject like "computing," "marketing," etc. Specific search terms, like "laptop rental" or "email marketing," would be related to more general topics.

When you take a look at some search results Google is currently delivering, it's clear that some of them have been matched up with the wrong topics. One example that's come up pretty often in discussions I've had is "laptop rental." You would think that folks searching for that would be interested in renting a laptop, but Google returns a list of laptop rental information from universities. Take a look: (<http://www.google.com/search?sourceid=navclient&q=laptop+rental>)

How could this happen? Looking at the links to those pages, you see a lot of similar topics like computing, housing (students rent housing in dormitories), etc. One savvy company has partnered with some of these universities to offer laptop rentals, and as a result they're getting a bit of a free ride right now at Google.

Through links pages like this one: (<http://computers-notebooks-laptops-lcd-projectors-rentals.com/rlinks.html>), the rankings of many university laptop rental pages have been boosted, and as we've seen with many other search terms, once you dig into the underlying links, the search results for "laptop rentals" become very easy to understand.

Is it still possible for Google to deliver less than perfect results? Sure. Is it still possible for Google to be fooled? Of course it is. But it's gotten more difficult, and we can expect Google to remedy many of these situations over time.

Why Some SERPs Have Changed Radically, While Others Have Barely Changed

When you weed out the noise, and look at the real data, it's not hard to understand why some search terms have been affected more than others. When you dig in and look at similar searches, it gets even easier to see.

Looking at "real estate," according to Scroogle.org's methodology, 77 of the top 100 pages dropped out of the top 100. Looking at the more specific "colorado real estate," 24 of the top 100 dropped out. You can see this pattern repeated over and over again. The more generic searches show more changes in the top results.

Look at the pages that dropped out of the "real estate" top 100. You will see a whole lot of local realtors who managed to link their way (using PageRank and link text) into enviable positions, but not too many are really among the 100 most relevant pages for that query.

The first page I see listed among the "missing" is titled "Southern California Real Estate." Interestingly enough, that page shows up at #2 for the more specific search "Southern California Real Estate." In other words, they haven't been penalized, they just don't show up where they don't belong any more.

There are also a few highly competitive search terms where the rankings have changed very little. The existence of these search terms has been used to justify all sorts of theories, but there is a simple explanation for every example I have seen.

The most commonly cited example is "search engine optimization," where there's almost no difference in the top 30 pages. If you look at the top ranked ages, you will see that they are already well linked within the community of related sites, and could be expected to do well under a topic-sensitive PageRank system.

It's also possible that some of these search terms have been used as a testing ground for the new algorithm for quite some time, in which case the radical changes would already have taken place. In the case of "search engine optimization," there was a pretty significant shake-up earlier this year, which at the time was blamed on "spam penalties." It now seems more likely that this was the result of testing by Google.

I Could Be Wrong, But It Doesn't Matter Anyway

As I said, this involves a lot of speculation on my part. I'm probably wrong, at least in part. Maybe Google is doing something completely different. Maybe they're doing some combination

of very simple things. However, this fits the facts. Come up with a better explanation, and I'd love to hear it. So far, I haven't heard a better theory.

It doesn't really matter anyway. It's clear enough that whatever Google is doing, the recipe for success is pretty simple. Those sites that have a lot of content and lots of relevant links (both incoming and outbound) have done well. Those that have gotten by with doorway pages and link swaps are no longer quite so successful.

Rumors That Need To Be Stopped

There are a lot of theories and rumors floating around. Most of them involve some sort of "filter" or penalty being applied to certain types of sites. Filtering out extreme spam is nothing new for Google. Among other things, they've been trying to catch hidden text for several months. I just don't see how a filter, or any combination of filters and penalties, could explain the current search results.

If Google were filtering out some sites, you'd expect to see them drop out of the top 100, and be replaced by sites that were ranking somewhere close to the top 100. That's just not what we see, though. We see sites that weren't in the top 1000, jumping into the top 10. It's not a filter, folks – it's a whole new way of ranking web pages.

Rumor 1: Google Is Using A Dictionary

This rumor was born about five minutes after the November 15 update began, and was the first attempt at explaining the new search results. The idea is that Google has a master list of search terms, for which they "penalize" commercial sites or something like that.

There are far too many search terms affected, for it to be as simple as a "dictionary" of commercial search terms. Google might have a list of topics, for which they have computed a topic-sensitive PageRank score, but they aren't trying to penalize anyone, they're trying to deliver better search results.

Rumor 2: Google wants to force commercial sites to use Adwords

This rumor is a variation of rumor #1. It was the first "conspiracy theory" to arise. I believe this rumor was born about 12 minutes after the November update started. The idea is that Google has dropped sites that weren't paying for Adwords listings. The other rumor was that sites that did pay for Adwords were getting dropped.

The fact that there are two conflicting and equally implausible conspiracy theories should tell you all you need to know. In reality, Google has deliberately kept the "paid advertising" and "free search results" separate, and there's no reason why they would do something like this. Google doesn't need to "force" anyone to buy advertising.

The folks who believe in this rumor may not have a whole lot of business experience. For a business, the decision to purchase advertising is based on the ability to make a profit from that spending. If it is profitable to use Adwords, businesses will use Adwords. This decision has nothing to do with whether that business's web site appears in the free search results.

I wouldn't stop using Adwords just because Google was listing my site in the free search results, nor would I start using it because my site wasn't showing up in the free results. I'm not going to stop using Adwords if my site gets dropped from the free listings, for that matter. I am in business to make a profit. I advertise because the advertising pays for itself.

Rumor 3: Google is using "Bayesian Spam Filters"

I am not trying to trash Seth Finkelstein, because he's done a lot of good for humanity. In this case, though, I just don't understand what the heck he's talking about. You can read this for yourself (<http://www.sethf.com/anticensorsware/google/bayesian-spam.php>) so I don't have to explain what the guy's saying.

Bayesian filtering is a great way to deal with email spam. I use a program called K9 (<http://www.keir.net/k9.html>) that does a great job of identifying junk emails and keeping them out of my face. It's a fabulous technology, but it needs to be trained for every user – my personal Bayesian spam filter is very different from yours.

There is no conceivable way Google could implement a "Bayesian" filter to recognize "search engine spam," and I can't believe that hundreds of very intelligent engineers would attempt to do so.

Google isn't trying to "penalize" or "filter out" anything. The people at Google are trying to build a system that identifies the most relevant web pages. Where they use filtering, it's to avoid being tricked by hidden text and that sort of thing. Bayesian filtering is very different.

Rumor 4: Google is punishing reciprocal links

The theory here is that Google is punishing web sites that trade links with other web sites. Maybe, if that's all you do, but that's probably been the case for some time. The original PageRank paper, titled "The PageRank Citation: Bringing Order To The Web" (<http://dbpubs.stanford.edu:8090/pub/1999-66>), anticipates some of these types of issues.

Leslie Rohde has published a nice analysis, showing why this rumor and several of the others just don't hold water (<http://www.optitext.com/pub/florida-report.html>). Even when using the Scroogle hit list to look for "penalized" pages, Leslie was unable to find any new correlation between reciprocal linking and Google rankings.

Rumor 5: Google is punishing "optimized" pages

The rumor here is that Google is trying to drop "optimized" pages. Not only does this not hold up under close scrutiny, it doesn't make any sense to begin with. Another way to describe an "optimized" web page would be "a well structured page that clearly indicates the relevant topics."

Does Google penalize dirty tricks like hidden text, over-stuffing HTML tags, etc.? Of course they do, but that's not optimizing, folks, that's spamming. Penalties for spamming are nothing new.

Rumor 6: Google is punishing "link text"

Nope, not true. If it were possible to create a penalty for another site by linking to them with the wrong words, you'd have complete chaos in a very short time.

Creating networks of web sites just so that they can link to each other with your keywords might trip a filter, but that's spamming, and penalties for this are nothing new.

Rumor 7: Google Is Out To Get You, And It's Personal

I haven't done a whole lot of detailed research to substantiate my beliefs on this, but trust me, it's not personal. The search engines are all trying to deliver quality search results, and maybe you aren't giving them what they're looking for. That doesn't mean you don't have a good web site. It doesn't make you a bad person. Maybe you just need to do some things differently.

How To Prosper In The New Google

Fortunately for SEO Fast Start readers, the key strategies for succeeding on the "new" Google are pretty much the same as they were with the "old" Google. Unfortunately, a lot of folks have taken short cuts – for these folks, and for anyone else out there who isn't familiar with the "fast start" strategy, here's a quick rundown of the important steps you need to take.

Step 1: Keyword Research: Cover Your Bases

Search engine strategy begins with identifying the right mix of keywords and phrases to target your audience. In spite of this, many website owners try to shortcut this part of the process, and focus all of their energy on a few generic search terms.

The main goal of your keyword research should be to identify all of the possible words and phrases that your target audience will use, including "modifiers" like brand names, localities, and adjectives.

Although it's only possible to target a few main keywords and phrases on each page of your web site, the combination of search terms and modifiers leads to far greater coverage in the search engine results.

Many website owners, who have followed an effective keyword strategy, barely noticed Google's November 15 update. By spreading their efforts across a larger number of searches, they may have seen declines in a few generic search terms, but their overall traffic has not suffered.

Focusing on a handful of search terms might seem like a great strategy, if you're able to rank well for all of them. However, when search engines make changes, as Google has done, this kind of inflexible strategy will fail.

Do your homework, cover your bases, and you'll have a solid foundation for your search engine strategy. If you have a copy of SEO Fast Start, go back and read chapter 3 ("Step 1: Keyword Strategy") just to be sure you understand the issues.

If you don't have the time or expertise to conduct your own keyword research, SEO Research Labs (<http://www.seoresearchlabs.com>) offers low-cost keyword research services for you.

Step 2: Effective Site Structure

In order for a broad-based keyword strategy to be effective, you need to organize your website to allow the search engines to "crawl" or "spider" all of your pages. To understand this, let's take a moment to review how search engine spiders crawl your site.

On the first visit, the spider will fetch a file called "robots.txt" (see Chapter 8 of SEO Fast Start, or read the online tutorial at http://www.clockwatchers.com/robots_main.html) to determine if crawling is allowed.

Spiders find your site by following a link on another site. Assuming you haven't made your site off limits with robots.txt, the spider will fetch the page the other site linked to. Sometimes this is your home page, sometimes this is another page.

When the spider reads this page, it will extract some information about the page's content and add that to the search engine's database. It also reads in all of the links on the page, and depending on how important it considers your page, it may add those pages to its list of pages to crawl.

If every page on your site has a set of links ("global navigation links") that point to the main sections of your website, chances are very good that those pages will be crawled next. Assuming that each of these pages, in turn, carries links to your primary content, it will be very easy for the spider to crawl your entire site.

The most effective structure, then, is a "top down" or "pyramid" structure for your web site. For larger sites (more than 10 pages), it's important to have a site map page, linked from every page on your site. According to web usability expert Jakob Nielsen, a site map is one of the most important features of a well-designed website, and he's right! Your visitors will appreciate the site map as much as the spiders, if not more.

A lot of folks would rather have fancy Flash or DHTML menus, and they object to using text links for site navigation. Unfortunately, search engines have a hard time following that kind of navigation system through your site. There's no reason to worry, though. Text navigation can be placed at the bottom of the page, and you can keep your fancy menus. It's the best of both worlds, for you and your site's users.

Having a clear path of text links to all of your content makes it easy for spiders (and people) to crawl your site. Try to keep all of your content within 2-3 clicks of the home page, even if you need to create a site map to tie it all together. For more information and examples, see Chapter 4 of SEO Fast Start (Step 2: Organizing Your Site).

Step 3: Develop Optimized Content

Your site's structure is like a skeleton. Now that you have a good plan for your site's structure, it's time to hang some meat on those bones, and that means content. If you've been following

the "fast start" plan, you have clearly defined content sections for your site, and you're ready to put it all together.

Remember all those keywords we found in step 1? All those modifiers you told yourself you were going to use along with them? Now is the time to use them. For every page of content, you want to use that page's primary keywords, along with modifiers, in several places:

1. The page's <TITLE>
2. META keywords and description
3. Main heading and section headings (H1 – H6) on the page
4. Within the body copy (<P>), lists (), etc. throughout the page.

Don't worry too much about esoteric stuff like "keyword density." Use your keywords naturally, using different variations and modifiers as appropriate.

As long as you use the important keywords a few times in the visible text of the page, and put them in a few prominent places, there's no need to "stuff" them into any *inappropriate* places.

For more information on the "fast start" optimization formula, read my online articles archive (<http://www.insideoutmarketing.com/index.php?p=sections&sid=7>) or review Chapter 5 (Step 3: Optimizing Individual Web Pages) of SEO Fast Start.

If you have mapped out a lot of content in your site plan, the task of writing it all can be daunting. So much so, in fact, that some folks never start, and try to get by with cheap tricks like machine-generated "doorway pages." Don't fall for these "quick fixes." The risk exceeds the potential reward, and it's not that hard to develop content.

If you're working on it alone like I do, it's a lot easier to break the work up into sections, and just keep at it. If you have decided to create 10 sections, with 10 pages in each, take it one section at a time. Create 1-2 pages a day, and keep it up.

Spending 2-3 months building a really useful and content-rich website is well worth the effort. Don't stop adding fresh content – even a page a week over the course of a year will represent a big improvement for your site's users. The more content you have, the more opportunities search engine users will have to find your site.

Step 4: Linking Strategy

So you've got a beautiful, useful, content-rich website, perfectly targeting your desired visitor with the search terms he/she is going to use. Every page is a shining example of optimized content, it's all linked together perfectly... you're done, right? Wrong!

If you stop after step 3, you're going to be very disappointed. Search engines aren't terribly impressed with a website that nobody else has linked to. Unless you take the time to promote your website and build up incoming links, you'll never achieve the results you deserve.

If you want to succeed in the "new" Google, you need relevant links from relevant web sites. You want as many links as you can get, from pages that link to sites like yours. So, how do you find them?

First, submit to all of the relevant directories you can find. Major directories like the Open Directory, of course, but also smaller directories like GoGuides, Skaffe, Gimpsy, etc. Look for any "vertical" or "industry" directories by visiting the "Search Engine Guide" (www.searchengineguide.com) and browsing their directory of directories.

Next, it's time to get linked into the community of related web sites. For all of the main search terms you're targeting, take a look at the top ranked pages on Google. I like to work with the first 20-30 top ranked sites, assuming that they're all really relevant. Visit each one – if they have a links page, or link to related sites, ask them for a link to your site. Next, look at who is linking to *them*, and try to get links from the same places.

Try to control the link placement as much as you can. A link on a big "resources" page is nice, as long as you're listed with similar sites. Links on higher-traffic pages, articles, reviews, etc. can often bring in significant traffic on their own. Find pages that link to sites like yours, and ask for links.

In many cases, the most appropriate page for another site to link to will be your home page, but this isn't always true. While you're working on links, look for opportunities to establish links into your "internal" content pages.

I get a lot of links into my Inside Out Marketing site, from webmaster resource sites. These folks will happily link directly to a resource like my article on "spam-proofing your website," because that's of interest to their visitors. These links boost the "PageRank" for all the pages on my site, they make it easier for all search engines to find my internal pages, and they make it a lot easier for folks to find those internal pages.

For more information on linking strategy, grab the free "Linking Matters" report (www.linkingmatters.com), visit sites like "Linking 101" (www.linking101.com), and read through Chapter 6 of SEO Fast Start (Step 4: Linking and Off-The-Page Factors).

Step 5: Don't Stop When You Hit The Top!

A lot of folks make a very critical error, when they start seeing good search engine rankings and the nice increase in traffic that good rankings can bring. They get busy with their new visitors, then they stop. They stop working on content, they stop working on links, and they eventually stop seeing good rankings.

Then, they start complaining about Google, or Inktomi, or whatever search engine dropped them first. They'll shout to the rafters that the search results have gone to heck in a hand basket, that the search engines are persecuting them, etc. etc.

My advice to you is simple – don't stop when you hit the top. Keep forging new relationships, keep building links, keep adding content, and keep your web site up to date. Your competition isn't going to stop trying to beat you, and that includes the folks who are still ahead of you.

The effects of your efforts usually show up in the search engines a couple months later. Some folks give up after a few weeks, because they haven't seen instant results. If you stop working

on your site's search engine rankings, by the time you notice a problem, you'll be a couple months (or more) behind.

If you're going to make a commitment to a search engine strategy for your website, and make the substantial investments it takes (both time and money), then stick with your commitment and execute your strategy. Don't give up too early, and don't stop when you hit the top.

About This Report

This report was prepared by Dan Thies, author and publisher of "Search Engine Optimization Fast Start," as a service to readers. Additional free distribution of this report is supported by sales of SEO Fast Start, and by those readers who purchase keyword research and link targeting reports from SEO Research Labs.

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Search Term	Search Volume	Competition	Weighted Avg	Competition Weighted
keyword research	385	95%	151	151
seo research	285	95%	114	114
seo research labs	155	95%	62	62
seo research services	155	95%	62	62
seo research tools	155	95%	62	62
seo research software	155	95%	62	62
seo research company	155	95%	62	62
seo research firm	155	95%	62	62
seo research agency	155	95%	62	62
seo research consultant	155	95%	62	62
seo research expert	155	95%	62	62
seo research specialist	155	95%	62	62
seo research professional	155	95%	62	62
seo research analyst	155	95%	62	62
seo research manager	155	95%	62	62
seo research director	155	95%	62	62
seo research executive	155	95%	62	62
seo research partner	155	95%	62	62
seo research affiliate	155	95%	62	62
seo research vendor	155	95%	62	62
seo research supplier	155	95%	62	62
seo research distributor	155	95%	62	62
seo research wholesaler	155	95%	62	62
seo research retailer	155	95%	62	62
seo research merchant	155	95%	62	62
seo research agent	155	95%	62	62
seo research broker	155	95%	62	62
seo research intermediary	155	95%	62	62
seo research representative	155	95%	62	62
seo research salesperson	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales representative	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales manager	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales executive	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales director	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales executive	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales professional	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales analyst	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales manager	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales director	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales executive	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales professional	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales analyst	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales manager	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales director	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales executive	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales professional	155	95%	62	62
seo research sales analyst	155	95%	62	62

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