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THIRTY DAYS TO TRAFFIC



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STEP-BY-STEP TRAFFIC BLUEPRINTS MADE EASY

COURSE SUPPLEMENT

Principles of Effective Search Engine Optimization

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CLEVER TACTICS FOR CLEVER BIPEDS

Principles of Effective Search Engine Optimization

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Introduction

Search engine optimization (SEO) encompasses all of the techniques you undertake to ensure that pages within your blog rank highly in the organic search results for a particular keyword or keywords. SEO deserves a book all to itself, and we won't try to cover the spectrum of SEO topics in this book. But we will cover all of the vital topics to get your blog started the right way.

It's possible for a blog to rank highly in the search engine results pages (SERP's) by performing extensive SEO only. It's also possible to rank highly by following a persistent, innovative traffic generation plan. But you can maximize the traffic you receive and maximize your visibility in the SERP's by using your traffic generation plan as a component of SEO.

By optimizing your pages before you execute your traffic plan, you ensure that you receive maximum traffic as both a direct and indirect result of your marketing efforts. You receive traffic in response to each effort you undertake to market your blog, and those efforts in turn help to cement your rankings in the SERP's. So in this chapter, we're going to focus on the things that will augment the rest of your traffic strategy, and will help maximize the traffic you receive.

The Google Sandbox

I hate to open the subject of SEO on such a depressing topic, but it has to be said. Your blog is new and it will be difficult to generate waves of synergistic traffic right out of the gates. You can still get the initial traffic surge, but improvements in your



THIRTY DAYS TO TRAFFIC

search rankings will be few and far between due to the Google sandbox effect.

That's okay, because we'll focus on maximizing that traffic surge, building backlinks and repeat readers, while loading your blog with highly optimized, original content; and by the time your blog is released from Gulag, you will begin to rocket towards the top of the SERP's.

The Google Sandbox is a **suspected** filter placed on new web sites. The filter prevents a new site from rising too quickly in the search rankings, regardless of the number of inbound links and the amount of unique, high quality content. The rationale is that new sites shouldn't have been able to attract a large number of backlinks without resorting to tactics like paying for links. So in essence, the sandbox is a probationary period for your blog.

This is both good and bad. Good because it ensures the quality of Google's search results, helps prevent bad content from getting good ratings, and reduces spam. Prior to the sandbox, it was relatively easy to publish a spam blog, or splog, purchase several hundred links for \$100, jump to the top of the rankings and cash in. Of course, the splog was shutdown in a matter of months, but the splog owner would just repeat the process.

The downside is that the sandbox can dampen your traffic generation results, at least temporarily. The dampened results aren't the worst effect, though. The worst effect is the demoralization that can occur. Just keep in mind that your work will payoff—maybe not right away, but it will payoff at some point in the future. Just because the sandbox exists, doesn't mean that your site will end up in it. The sandbox is generally used for sites that target competitive keywords. If there is no keyword competition, there is no need for shady linking tactics, so the sandbox is bypassed.



For sites that do end up in the sandbox, they will stay there for anywhere from one to six months, with three months being the common visitation time. If your site is targeting “life insurance,” you’ll probably find yourself in the sandbox for six months; less competitive keywords will remain in the sandbox for shorter periods of time.

An additional filter you should be aware of is the backlink filter. Again, this is an assumed filter based on observed behavior and common sense, but it has not been verified by Google. The backlink filter dampens the value of any new incoming links to your blog for a period of one to six months. Its aim is to discourage the buying and selling of text links that attempt to pass on PageRank.

It should also be noted that although it seems apparent that there is a Google sandbox, and Google has alluded to this fact, there is no solid evidence that it exists. The sandbox effect was first noticed in 2004.

The existence of the sandbox should not change your promotion plans at all. You should keep building links and adding content as normal, so when the probationary period is over, you can quickly climb to your position in the search rankings.

Align Your Web Property

Almost universally, this is everyone’s least favorite part of the SEO process. But it must be done. It’s easy, doesn’t take long, and just might save you time and expense down the road. The end result of alignment is focus, and with focus comes relevancy, and with relevancy comes rankings and traffic.



Determine Your Goals

C'mon, you knew it had to start here! Take a few minutes to clarify exactly what it is you're trying to accomplish with your web property. You likely have one or two primary goals, and several subgoals.

For example, if you run a how-to web property for do-it-yourself plumbing enthusiasts (I'm sure there are some out there), your primary goal might be to increase revenue off of your new Acme Plumbing Toolkit. But down the road, you realize that you can't reasonably support more than 20 purchases a day, because you have to build these kits by hand. So your subgoals might be to attract volunteer moderators who can handle questions on your discussion forums, and to find a distribution partner to handle product acquisition and order fulfillment for you.

Maybe your goals don't involve online sales; they could be offline sales, lead generation, fostering community, improving awareness of a topic, informing your audience, entertaining your audience, persuading or influencing your audience, driving people to a brick and mortar property, etc.

Spend some time determining your goals now.

Examine Alignment

With your goals firmly in mind, review any content you already have on your blog, and ensure that each page fits into your overall goals. Also ensure that all of your goals are represented on your blog. Think about this from a reader's perspective.

For example, if you are selling an Acme Plumbing Toolkit, you'll want pages describing the contents of the toolkit, available shipping options, your return policy,



THIRTY DAYS TO TRAFFIC

7

etc. You might want pictures of your toolkit in action, submitted by past purchasers, both to foster community and as implicit testimonials. If you're looking for volunteer moderators, have you created a value proposition for candidates? Have you mentioned that you're looking for moderators and thought about the benefits from their point of view?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for this. You know your content best, so you'll need to be the judge of whether your blog is properly addressing your business goals. If your blog does not meet your business goals, the search engines will know about it. That's what they do, and that's how they determine what to show searchers.

Sounds ridiculous? It's not. If you are able to attract targeted traffic to your plumbing toolkit, but those viewers quickly click away because your property is missing something those viewers need, the search engines know this. Your rankings will decrease as the engines detect a pattern around your visitors' behavior. It's only a matter of time (often, very quickly) for this to happen. Your content must be aligned with your goals to get to or remain at the top of the rankings.

Make Changes

Our goal is not just to attract immediate traffic with the techniques in this book, but to attract repeat readers, customers, and the ongoing traffic that follows as a result of our immediate marketing efforts. Take however much time you need to make sure that your content and goals are aligned. It will make a difference.

Choose Target Keywords

The most important part of your SEO campaign is keywords. So important, in fact, that it bears repeating. The most important part of your SEO campaign is keywords.



The keywords you choose to target will be the focus of the entire optimization process, and your entire traffic generation plan. These keywords will become part of your blog copy, your pages will be optimized to highlight them, you will use them in offsite anchors (discussed later), and you will use them to measure your campaign's success.

If you choose your keywords wisely, you will receive more click-throughs (because your keywords are relevant to your content) and more conversions (because your keywords will attract a targeted audience). If there is one thing that can make or break your entire traffic generation campaign, it is keywords.

For small or simple blogs, you might only have five keywords, and for complex or large blogs, you might have as many as 20. But 10 is a good number to shoot for. Keep in mind that this doesn't mean that your blog is focused on 10 different topics, but rather that searchers might have 10 viable, accurate ways to find the one topic that you focus on with your blog.

A recent article in Information Week stated that the highest conversion rates from search engine traffic come from people who do four-word queries. The great thing about your blog is that it can get so well-indexed that you have the potential to show up for any number of four-word phrases that are relevant to your industry.

Optimize Your Pages

Optimize Your Content

The best SEO is good content. The purpose behind all of these optimization techniques is to get your good content noticed by the search engines. If your content



is no good, even the best optimization won't help. Start with good content, and then build from there.

The focus of optimization is to yell to the search engines "Yes, I'm relevant!" You display your relevancy for targeted keywords by displaying the keywords in prominent places. But for each optimization you perform, remember that you're writing for two audiences. You want to mention target keywords in appropriate places for the search engines, but you still need to write content that "pops" and connects with your readers, because ultimately, they are the ones who will be clicking through.

Optimize your Page Names

You're likely to get conflicting opinions on the exact format, but one thing everyone can agree on is that you need to get rid of dynamic URL's. Dynamic URL's are used to pass name-value pairs to the server and look like this:

<http://myblog.com?month=1&year=2008&postid=357>

WordPress offers a permalink option to rewrite dynamic URL's into static ones so that your URL's look cleaner. We've already done this in Part 3, but now you see another reason why it's so important.

<http://myblog.com/2008/01/search-engine-optimization/>

Search engines like static URL's far better than dynamic ones. Other than that, your URL structure is a personal preference. Some people like to keep them as short as possible (a good idea), while others like to make them as descriptive as possible (also



a good idea). I prefer to include a good long-tail keyword in each of my pages, in addition to my anchor keyphrase.

Optimize Your Page Titles

Your page titles will most likely show up as the first line of clickable text on a search results page. They must be unique and compelling for both readers and search engines.

Each page of your site should have a unique title consisting of your site name and the page name. Your site name must be included to differentiate your results from competitor's results. Titles should be 6 to 12 words long, and contain keywords without being "stuffed." Your top keywords should appear within the first 6 words or 40 characters.

Bad: Acme Plumbing: Plumbing Store

Good: Home Repair Toolkits for the Do It Yourself Crowd – Acme Plumbing

Your page titles are found in the <head> section of your page, surrounded by <title> tags. You will use the All-in-One SEO Pack to optimize your titles (mentioned later). I'll reiterate in the event that it wasn't clear: your page titles on your money posts or anchor posts should all be unique—do not use the same title on each page within your blog.

Optimize Your Page Headings

Your page headings should organize the flow of information on your pages, and you should be using heading tags (<h1>, <h2>, etc.) to mark them as such. Search engines



also use these headings to determine important content on a page, so make sure that they're optimized. Similar to page titles, you need to write for two audiences. Include keywords for search engines where appropriate, but don't forget that ultimately it's the readers you need to impress.

If you choose a theme that claims it is SEO-aware or optimized, chances are your page headings are ready to go straight out of the box. Sometimes it requires some template tweaks though.

Optimize Your First Paragraph

Your first paragraph will be scrutinized more carefully to determine the relevancy of your page. So write like a newspaper journalist! Introduce your page and summarize key concepts while making sure to use keywords (as appropriate).

Throughout the page, keep in mind that bold text, italicized text, and words in image alt tags are weighted more heavily than regular text on the page. If keywords naturally appear in these areas, great! If not, don't try to stuff them (mentioned later).

Optimize Your Meta Tags

Meta tags aren't nearly as important as they once were for determining search engine rankings, but they still should not be ignored.

Add your top keywords to the keyword meta tag, making sure that they're all relevant and that you don't use any one word more than three times. Type a keyword-heavy description to place in the meta description tag, but gear your description to humans. In some cases, the description you type here will be displayed in the SERP's, so make it compelling, and sell the click without selling.



Warning: if you've carefully crafted a valuable PPC keyword campaign using something like Google AdWords (not AdSense), don't put your best key-phrases in your keywords tags. It makes it too easy for others to piggyback off of your hard work. You should still put some good keywords in your description tags, which benefits your Yahoo! and MSN results.

Optimize Your Site Navigation

Search engines can't make use of any of your JavaScript functions, so if you're using any mouseover or hover effects to display a multi-level menu, don't expect a search engine to be able to follow the links. If that's the case with your blog, the solution is simple: add the page links to the bottom of the page, to a sitemap page, or submit an XML sitemap to the search engines.

Chances are that your theme has already been optimized to account for this.

Assign Landing Pages

A landing page is a page that has been designed as an entry point to your blog for a particular search phrase. It is commonly interlinked with the rest of your blog. When most people think of landing page, they picture squeeze pages. But that's **not** what I'm referring to here.

Properly designed landing pages can suck in large amounts of relevant, qualified traffic. Landing pages are a good, ethical, search engine friendly technique, but are often confused with their more nefarious cousin, the doorway page.

A doorway page is a form of search engine spam. Doorway pages are designed to fool search engines by displaying keyword heavy, heavily optimized text to search



engines, but completely natural text to real users. It's considered a spam technique because the search rankings are achieved through content that is never shown on the site.

Landing pages are a good SEO technique and are completely ethical. Their content is optimized, but it is also highly relevant. Doorway pages are spam. If you are caught implementing doorway pages, you risk blacklisting your entire blog.

Map Keywords to Landing Pages

Pull out the list of your top 10 keyphrases.

For each keyphrase, find a page on your blog that naturally aligns with this keyphrase. You don't want to "force" the fit. If you don't yet have any content on your blog, great! One of your seed posts should be an anchor post that doubles as a landing page; i.e. create an anchor post that is highly optimized for one of your keyphrases and you've killed two birds with one stone.

For any phrase without a natural alignment partner, create a page or post. Why? If this is truly a relevant keyphrase (and it should be if it's on your list), it should be covered on your blog. It represents a gap in your blog content that needs to be addressed. Create the new page, and interlink it with the rest of your blog (WordPress will take care of that for you).

Optimize the blog title, blog headings, page meta tags, and first paragraph of text specifically for the keyphrase, keeping your dual readership in mind. It must be optimized for search engines, but compelling and readable for humans.



XML Sitemaps

Sitemaps let search engines know about all of the pages on your blog that are available for crawling. A sitemap is a simple XML file listing URL's, their expected update frequency, your estimation of their indexing priority, and when the file was last updated. Using sitemaps helps ensure that search engines can find the entirety of your blog, and regularly reindex its content.

Pro secret: you should update and resubmit your XML sitemap after every new blog post. If you are a regular blogger, i.e. you are making daily posts and often multiple posts in one day, Google will begin to learn from your submission behavior. Your initial blog submission might take weeks to get indexed, but as you continue posting frequently and updating your XML sitemap, your content will be indexed faster and faster. I've seen some content on my active blogs get indexed in as little as 10 minutes. Try it!

While the XML sitemap format is simple, it can be very tedious to manually generate a sitemap for your entire blog. But that's why you're using the Google XML Sitemap plug-in to automate the entire process.

Domain Names

Buy a Keyword-Rich Domain Name

This might not be possible in many niche markets for the more popular keywords, but you should still strive for a domain name that mentions your keyword. Ideally, your domain name will include your main keyword, will end in ".com," and will not contain any hyphens, but hyphenated domain names are getting more popular.



Always shoot for an exact match to your anchor keyphrase. An exact match with hyphens is better than a close match without hyphens.

Register Your Domain Name for a Long Time

Browsing through a recent Google patent filing, I came across some interesting text that suggested that Google would start examining the length of a domain's registration in determining search engine rankings. The rationale, I assume, is that if a domain is registered for just one year, the owner might be testing a concept, or is at least not committed to long-term maintenance of the content on the domain.

Conversely, if someone registers a domain for ten years, it appears more likely that this person has long-term plans for the domain.

So if you don't yet have a domain, try to register it for at least two years, and preferably 3 to 5 years. If you already have a domain, you can enter your registrar's control panel and renew the domain before it expires, thereby extending your ownership period.

If this is just a niche site that you're testing out, don't be afraid to just register for 1 year. I often like to see if traffic will "stick" on my niche blogs, and until it does, I'm not willing to register names for multiple years. I have close to 400 active domains, so the registrations really begin to add up!



Other SEO Tips

Get a Dedicated IP Address

The blogs you deem most important might benefit from having unique IP addresses. This eliminates any chance that “bad neighbors” sharing your IP address will negatively affect your search engine rankings.

Use Keyword-Rich Category and Menu Names

Make sure that the category and page names you set up for your blog consist at least partially of keywords. Be creative with your menu text titles and have a few of them be actual key-words that relate to your blog.

Place JavaScript at the Bottom of the Page

If you are going to add JavaScript to your theme, make sure you add it near the footer. Search engines will often not index an entire page, so there’s no use wasting their attention indexing a script that has nothing to do with the content on your blog.

Use Alt Tags for all Images

When adding a picture to a blog post, be sure to give it a short description containing a key-word. This description is used as the “alt” attribute and will improve your on-page SEO.



Onsite vs. Offsite SEO

For those of you versed in search engine optimization, you will notice that this chapter was an incomplete look at SEO. Specifically, I only discussed onsite SEO. Onsite SEO refers to the steps that you can take to optimize the content on your blog to improve your search engine rankings. Onsite SEO is active, and involves factors that are entirely within your control to optimize.

Conversely, offsite SEO refers to all of the other techniques that don't involve your own content that you can undertake to improve your blog's ranking in the search engines. Of the two, offsite SEO is far more important, as it relies on social proof, or the assumption that if others link to your blog, your blog is more important. And this is a valid assumption that works incredibly well for finding useful content on the web.

But that doesn't mean that onsite SEO should be ignored. Onsite SEO is the low-hanging fruit that should be plucked by all good bloggers.

The bulk of the Thirty Days to Traffic course will address offsite SEO.



Appendix A: Google's Guidelines

You'll notice that the language used in [Google's Webmaster Guidelines](#) is very broad—they are asking you to use your own common sense to determine if a technique is ethical.

Basic Principles

- “Make pages for users, not for search engines. Don't deceive your users or present different content to search engines than you display to users.”
- “Avoid tricks intended to improve search engine rankings.”
- “Don't participate in link schemes designed to increase your site's PageRank.”

If you're unsure of whether a technique is ethical or not, here are two good questions to ask yourself:

1. Would I be doing this if search engines didn't exist?
2. If I had to justify this action to Google, what would my explanation sound like?

Specific Guidelines

- “Don't use cloaking or sneaky redirects.”
- “Don't send automated queries to Google.”
- “Don't load pages with irrelevant keywords.”



THIRTY DAYS TO TRAFFIC

19

- “Don’t create multiple pages, subdomains, or domains with substantially duplicate content.”
- “Don’t create pages with malicious behavior.”
- “Avoid “doorway” pages created just for search engines, or other “cookie cutter” approaches such as affiliate programs with little or no original content.”
- “Provide unique and relevant content that gives users a reason to visit your site first.”

