Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Checklist

1. Domain Name

Most search engines **do** look at domain names when ranking pages, but the **direct benefit** of having keywords in your domain is very small.

There is also an **indirect benefit** to having a keyword-rich domain name: Search Engines like Google that factor link popularity into their ranking algorithms often also look at the **anchor text of incoming links**. In other words, the text used in a text link that points to your site should - as far as possible - contain your keyword. If your site is about purple widgets, you want people to link to you using "purple widgets" as the link text.

Like this:
Here is a good site about purple widgets.

Not like this:
Here is a good site about purple widgets.

But this is of course in the hands of the webmaster linking to you.

How do you increase the probability that they will link to you using your keywords? Yes, keywords in the domain. Many people (I'm one of them) prefer to link like this:

Purple Widgets
This is a good site about purple widgets
www.purple-widgets.com

Apart from SEO considerations, there are other (arguably more important) considerations when choosing a domain name.

A good domain is:

- short,
- easy to say and spell,
- descriptive and
- memorable.

You should be able to say it over the telephone once and the other person should know how to spell it and they should know what you sell. If you can do that AND work keywords in there, good for you. **If you can't, skip the keywords.**

2. File Name

The same applies here. The filename should preferably be short and descriptive. Having keywords in the filename helps, but not a whole lot.

By the way, if you do use keywords in the domain or filename, separate them with hyphens rather than underscores.

Google sees
seo-checklist as seo checklist (**good**)
but it sees
seo_checklist as seochecklist (**not good**)

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3. Content is King! The "bait" for search engine spiders to find your site

Search engines' primary way to locate your site are the keywords or phrases on the site that match the searcher's search. Without these being somewhere on your site, it'll simply not be displayed in the search engine's results. The actual page content should have a keyword density of about 20% and should weigh in at about 200 - 500 words - but there are as many opinions about this as there are SEO experts. Some say keyword density should be 5% and some say it should be 20%.

There is more consensus about page length @ 200 words. Those that disagree usually say it should be more. Some say it should be 500. There is no exact rule of thumb here. I've seen longer pages doing very well in the search engine results pages for highly competitive keywords so longer might be better. Don't fuss too much about this. Keep the file size under 101K though because Google chops anything above that.

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4. Layout & Design

- **You should have more _text_ content than HTML elements.**
- No fancy stuff (Flash, Splash, Animated Gifs, Rollovers etc.) unless absolutely necessary.
- No Frames. This often causes the user to scroll right to view your complete page. Do not assume that they'll do this.
- No JavaScript. If you need JavaScript, call it from an external file rather than dumping the code in the HTML file. JavaScript drop down menus prevent spiders from crawling beyond your homepage. If you use them, be sure to include text links at the bottom of the page.
- No ads if possible. Does anyone like pop-up ads?
- Nothing that does not fit perfectly into the page topic; There should be no doubt in the search engine's mind (or in he user's mind) what your page is about.
- No unnecessary directories. Keep your files as close to the root as possible.

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5. Page Title

The page title weighs heavily in the algorithms of all the major search engines, so be prepared to spend some time on it.

Here's what to look for:

- Write an accurate, keyword-rich page title of about up to 100 characters.

- Do not include stop words (and, the, a etc.) in the title. That just wastes space.
- Remember that each page can (and should) have a unique title characterizing its content.
- Remember that the title is the first and probably the only thing the searcher will look at in the search results. Having a keyword list as title might get you listed higher (if you're not penalized), but it's less likely to get clicked than a well structured title.

Syntax:
In the HEAD section of the site add:
<title>Your Keyword-Rich, Descriptive Page Title Here</title>

6. Meta Tags

The general consensus among SEO experts is that the **meta description tag** is used as a "snippet" in search engine results (see POINT#1 below). The areas just below the links returned from a Google search result for "Austrialian travel", show the snippets that are so important in whether a potential prospect clicks to go to your website or NOT. If the search engine crawler finds no meta description, it then looks for the first available readable text to display and uses that as the snippet.

Often this results in a jumbled,irrelevant-to-the-search snippet (see POINT#2 below).

Allin1 **Travel** Ireland - everything you need to **Travel** to Ireland

POINT #1 If you would like to exchange Austrialian travel links, please email your link exchange details to our webmaster at the following email address: Austrialian ...
www.allin1-**travel**.com/linksaustrialia.htm - 10k - Cached - Similar pages

December 23, 2004 Sydney/NZ Sapphire Princess - Topic **...**

You can fly to the barrier reef and book packages through **austrialian travel** agents. bye for now jeff Posts: 198 | From: ca | Registered: 05-21-01. **...**
messages.cruisecritic.com/2/ OpenTopic?a=tpc&f=4763056957&m=5913037067 - 101k - Cached - Similar pages

Raining Cats and Dogs -

POINT #2...... **Austrialian** Shepherd **Travel** Mug. Price: $16.95. Stainless Steel Mug. Quantity: **Travel** Mugs.
gallery.bcentral.com/Gallery/ProductDetails. aspx?GID=5021962&PID=2588842&page=1&sortOrder=0 - 9k - Cached - Similar pages

Here's how to use MetaTags:

Syntax:
In the HEAD section of the site add:
<meta name="keywords" content="KEYWORD1 KEYWORD2 KEYPHRASE1 etc. – about 30 to 40 unique words">
<meta name="description" content="An accurate, keyword-rich description – about 150 characters">

7. Headings

Use headings responsibly. From my own experiments they don't seem to make a huge difference, but they do count and won't hurt your site. Unless you misuse them of course. Don't be tempted to wrap your entire page in <H1>.

Syntax:
<H1>Your Top Level Heading Here</H1>
<H2>Level 2 Heading</H2>
<H3>Level 3 Heading</H3>
etc. all the way down to <H6>

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8. Bold text

With bold text, general consensus is that there is no advantage in having important keywords in bold text.

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9. Navigation Links, Linking

9.1 Navigation

What your site navigation link names are called to allow movement about your site is a very important and often overlooked area of how search engine spiders and site users view your site. Graphic only links can't be read and will not help spiders determine the relevance of the site to the search phrase entered. Alt tags with very descriptive text for these graphic–based links are needed to convey this. Text-based links are always read by the spiders. Many sites will name the links general, inexact terms such as "Products" rather than "Printed Circuit Board Assemblies". This will allow the user to know where they're clicking to and the spiders will be able to glean much more information about the site's nature to develop a more positive page ranking for you. Your keyword phrases should be woven into all of the navigation links.

9.2 Internal Linking

- Every page on your site should link to at least one other page. Ideally, you should be able to get to every page of the site from any other page with one click. homepage should include a link to your sitemap (a page that links to all the pages in your site). This is good for users and allows spiders to quickly access all your pages.

9.3 External Linking

Only link to external sites when you absolutely have to. Decide if it enhances the user's experience. If it does, add the link. Google algorithm, PageRank, weighs these links and the validity of the site of the inbound links, heavily in their natural search results pages (non-sponsored or paid for). This is termed link popularity.

9.4 Reciprocal Linking (link exchanges)

Only exchange links with sites your visitors will find useful. Don't exchange links only to increase link popularity. Links from link farms, a site that you have links to your site from just to increase your link popularity ranking in Google's algorithm, are now looked down upon by the crawlers.

9.5 Anchor Text / Link Text and Link Titles

Use descriptive anchor text for all your text links. Most search engines consider anchor text of incoming links when ranking pages. The jury is still out on whether search engines also consider other elements on the link page (like text surrounding the link, the page title etc.).

Link titles are like alt text for text links. Very neat. Link titles add to the usability of a site. It is not clear whether search engines consider like titles when ranking pages. I'm guessing they do.

Here's an example:
Hover your mouse pointer over this link to see a link title in action.

Syntax:
this link

9.6 Linking/Submission to Search Engines

There is no need to submit your site to search engines. The crawlers will find you. Simply link your site to other relevant sites and the spiders will locate and index it. This increases your link popularity as well as allowing potential prospects to locate you too. Check to see if you've been indexed already by typing www.yourdomain.com into Google Search, Yahoo, and MSN. Continual submission when your site is already linked takes up valuable crawler resources.

Also regarding crawler/server resources, we strongly advise against the use of rank checking software like Web Position Gold, etc. The following is straight from the "Google Information for Webmaster" area of the Google site:

Fiction: Automated "ranking checking" programs are a good way for webmasters to save time and measure their "online presence."

Fact: Automated "ranking checking" programs violate Google's terms of service. They use server resources that should be spent on answering user requests. We strongly request that you not use rank checking programs to check your position on Google.

As you can see, some things are written in stone.

10. Images And Alt Text

All images should include descriptive, keyword-rich alt text, especially clickable images.

Alt spam (alt tags that's nothing more than a list of keywords) is fairly common, but **can get your site penalized**. A good guideline is to use alt text to describe the image. If it's a product image, describe the product in such a way that someone with a text browser or images turned off knows what the image is about.

One possible exception is the title image. To just put "logo" in the alt is of no use to spiders or your site visitors. Here is the alt text I used in the logo at the top of this page: "Target Marketing Solutions - Search Engine Optimization Tips & Techniques". That tells visitors what they're missing and helps the spider understand what the page is about.

Don't be tempted to make it very long. If it does not fit in the image placeholder, it's probably too long.

Syntax:

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<img src="image.gif" alt="Your alt text here">
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11. Themes

Most of the major search engines prefer sites that focus on **one** theme. If your site is about widgets, gizmos and Santa Claus, you'll do better if you register a unique domain for each and split it into **3 separate sites**.

Please note: Do not register multiple domains to house **different parts** of **one theme**. If you have a site selling pink widgets and blue widgets, that should be on one domain - not on pink-widget.com and a blue-widget.com respectively. That will just dilute your link popularity.

Another note: Don't cross-link your domains. There is a lot of speculation about just how much cross-linking is safe. Don't go there. If the info you want to share is all on one theme, keep it on one site. If it is on multiple themes, place it on different sites with no links between them. There are rare exceptions where it's ok (from an ethical point of view) to cross-link your sites, but remember that search engines cannot look into the intentions behind every instance of cross-linking and your site might get penalized.

12. No Tricks

There are **no** tricks in **long-term SEO**. Cloaking, hidden text etc. etc. will all hurt your rankings in the long run. Build pages that the search engines will love, text-based, content-rich, tightly focused and you'll reap the rewards.