SEO Fast Start:

A Simple, Step by Step System

For Better Results

By Dan Thies

Map Out Keyword Strategy	**Brainstorm Keywords/ Topics**	**Discover Core Terms (Themes)**	**Expand Keyword Clusters**	**Map Clusters To Pages**
Optimize Site Structure And Link Text	**Logical Structure (Humans)**	**Dynamic Linking (Spiders)**	**Anchor Text & Reputation**	**Improve Index Penetration**
Develop & Optimize Web Pages	**HEAD Section: Title/Meta**	**Headings & Links**	**Body Text & Modifiers**	**Content Creation**
Promotion & Link Building Campaign	**Inventory Current Assets**	**Vertical & Directory Links**	**Inviting: Link Bait & Targets**	**Promoting: PR & Content**
Measure Results & Resources	**Establish Metrics**	**Set Up Analytics**	**Measure Results**	**Track Resources**
Refine Strategy & Tactics	**Refine Keyword Strategy**	**Refine Content Strategy**	**Refine Site Structure**	**Refine External Strategy**

Preface:
A Word from the Author

It has been over seven years since I published the first edition of *SEO Fast Start*, in November 2001. Since that time, we've all seen a lot of changes in the wide world of search engines, but the core of the fast start system remains as useful today as it was then.

Since I started offering SEO Fast Start as a free download in 2004, it's been downloaded and (I hope) read by more than 60,000 people. The 2007 edition marked a return to annual updates, and more than 2/3 of my readers are "new" since then.

Unlike the 2008 edition, where there just wasn't much to change, we've actually got some real changes to talk about in 2009 – although for those who implemented the basics of the "fast start" system, these changes will usually be more "interesting" than actionable.

If you are reading SEO Fast Start for the first time, welcome. As you read through this book, I'm confident that you will notice a big difference between this book and any others you may have seen.

Some highlights of the updated *SEO Fast Start* include:

- ✓ A visual approach, with **process maps** to guide you every step of the way. Every part the system is mapped out so you always know what to do next

- ✓ The best practices, systems and processes I've discovered in more than 10 years of SEO are reflected in each update, along with any real changes that may have happened in the search engines.

- ✓ A companion site (**www.seofaststart.com**) and a free private membership community (**www.whitehatblackbelt.com**) to keep you up to date and answer your questions.

SEO Fast Start Is Free

The first four editions of SEO Fast Start were sold for $29.95, and I've been advised that I could sell this book for at least that much[1]. The conventional wisdom says that a free book just isn't taken seriously by its readers.

Well, screw the conventional wisdom. **I am giving this book away,** because I think everyone should have this information… but you can do something for me in return.

Get on the companion site **(www.seofaststart.com)**. Ask questions, give feedback. Let me know what you think of this book. Let me know what you think of the system. Let me know how it's working for you. Tell your friends about it.

Most importantly, do us both a favor, by reading my book, using my system, and growing your business. We've used this system over and over. It works.

SEO Fast Start Is Not "Just a Book"

What I've created here is more than just a book – it's a **framework** for learning SEO. In fact, it's a framework for understanding SEO, for managing SEO projects, for developing better methods, for teaching, for communicating with clients, and more.

One important goal is to teach beginners a simple process that consistently delivers results. But this book isn't just for beginners.

Even the most jaded veterans of the SEO wars can use this framework. If you don't like what we're doing at any particular step in the "fast start" process, just plug in your own process for that step.

The overall framework should make sense, no matter how experienced you are.

One of the major advantages of this approach is the ease of making updates – and keeping you up to date on any changes that may happen in SEO.

Last year (2008) there wasn't a whole lot to talk about, but this year, there are changes in a couple key places, so if you've read the book before, can go straight to chapters 3 & 4, and dig into the changes.

---

[1] The consensus among marketers was $97 – that's a dollar a page! No thanks.

There Are Some Things I Can't Fix

Some of you who are reading this may be depending on one "scheme" or another to sustain your business. Maybe you're running "made for Adsense" websites, with automated content generation software. Maybe you're using cloaking or JavaScript hacks to hide your site's true content from the search engines.

Here's some bad news: one day, these schemes will stop working. I can't fix that. I can't help you. If you're trying to outrun the search engines, don't come crying to me if they catch up to you one day. Enjoy your run while it lasts… but you might want to start thinking about a more sustainable business model for the long haul.

A Note about Hats

White hat… black hat… gray hat. People have been arguing for years about the "right way" to do SEO.

"Right" might mean a couple of things. There's "right" in terms of whether what you're doing gets results, and there's "right and wrong," in terms of ethics. Even when you boil it down to getting results, you can argue about the importance of short term vs. long term results.

I am a little tired of the conversation to be honest, but I can't write an entire book about SEO without at least talking about this stuff once.

I call what I do "white hat" because I would have no problem discussing every detail of the SEO Fast Start system with anyone from any search engine, telling them the URLs of every site I own, etc.

If you're doing things that you wouldn't want the search engines to know about, I'm going to call you a "gray hat."

To me, it's really that simple. **Either you're doing things the search engines are trying to detect and block, or you're not.** We can all use common sense to decide what these things are.

I hope that this book will move a few more "gray hats" a little closer to the "white hat" side, when they see how a "white hat black belt" like me gets things done.

So what makes someone a black hat? If you're trying to deceive people, "hijack" websites, or "hack" a competitor out of search results, I'll call that "black hat," because it's truly evil.

If you don't like these definitions, I am not going to argue with you, and I don't want to hear about it. I have books to write.

Chapter 1:

Introduction: Start Here!

I know how tempting it is to skip the introduction, but please don't.

In this chapter, I will explain how to use the rest of the book, and hopefully convince you that you got on the right track (maybe for the first time) when you decided to download it.

I will explain why this book is different and "better" than others you may have seen… and how it fits into a bigger plan that will help you with a lot more than search engine marketing.

No Dark Secrets - Just SEO, Simplified

Are you just a little confused about SEO right now?

If you are, that's probably because so many people are trying to convince you that there's some "trick" to it, and you just don't know that trick… that if you'll just slap your credit card down, they'll clue you in.

The biggest secret in search engine optimization is that there really aren't any secrets – at least not the kind most of these folks want you to sell you. There is a lot of technical detail, and I'll do everything I can to help you with that in this book. But real secrets are hard to come by.

The truth is, if you know what you're doing, and don't try to trick the search engines, very little has really changed in SEO for at least five years. That still leaves plenty to learn, but there is no magic silver bullet.

If you don't believe me right now, that's healthy skepticism. There's hope for you. By the time you're finished with this book, you won't have to believe it, because you'll know that it's true.

"But This Guy Told Me…"

Be careful where you get your advice: I met a guy at a conference a while back, who thinks that he's getting special treatment because he put a Google search box on his web site. He was planning to publish an e-book, with all his "secrets."

He has a great site with an active blog, which is always getting new links from other web sites, but that was just an afterthought to him. It couldn't be that simple, could it? There just has to be some trick to it!

If you believe that there's some secret that the "insiders" aren't telling you, you're experiencing normal healthy paranoia. Good for you. Your ancestors were the same way, and sometimes it helped them survive.

Back in the Stone Age, if one of your caveman buddies drank some yellow water from the hot springs, and got sick, you all stayed away from it. The ability to learn is a big part of why we're all still here.

On the other hand, if you killed a gazelle with white spots on its tail, and then there was an earthquake, you might have thought twice about killing another one like that. Today, we know better… but we still have superstitions.

Don't get me wrong. **Some people really are better at SEO than others.** Their success, though, is mostly due to more experience and better processes. The people who are exceptionally good at SEO also have a lot of knowledge about the technical side of search engines and web sites.

I think I've proven over the years that I am one of those people… and I want to help you.

To understand how this book is going to make you successful, let's look at what goes wrong for most people who try their hand at search engine optimization. I'll bet it's not what you think.

Why Most SEO Efforts Fail

If you've tried to do your own SEO and failed, you're in good company. It's easy once know what you're doing, but it's very hard to learn. There's just so much bad information out there, folks. It's scary.

Some people will tell you that there's nothing you can't learn about SEO just by reading stuff on the web. **That's partly true, if you only knew which stuff you could trust!** Not so easy…

Most of what I know could be found somewhere on the web… if you can handle math and read between the lines a bit. Too bad that most of what you will find on the web is wrong, misleading, or so poorly written that it actually makes things worse.

Don't worry, this book will help you cut through the noise… but knowledge is not the biggest problem. **The #1 reason why most people give up on SEO is that they spend far too much time and money without getting the results they need.**

Five Not-So-Easy Pieces

SEO is pretty simple, really. It boils down to doing five things right:

- Developing a keyword strategy to target the right searchers
  (Chapter 3)

- Building a well-structured web site
  (Chapter 4)

- Creating good content and doing basic "on page" optimization
  (Chapter 5)

- Promoting your site to get links from the rest of the web
  (Chapter 6)

- … and avoiding technical "gotchas"
  (Chapter 9)

That last one hardly matters to most folks, but I've still woven information about it through this book. Even if you find the right information and understand what all of those things really mean, you're still missing a very critical piece.

You need a step-by-step plan to put it all into practice. If you don't have a good road map, you get lost. You get frustrated, results aren't happening fast enough, and you start looking for shortcuts… in short, you probably end up doing something like this:

- You settle for a "thin" keyword strategy with a handful of phrases, or you run in the opposite direction and target so-called "long tail" or "niche" phrases that can never bring you enough traffic.

- You rewrite your content in "keywordspeak" to get more "keyword density" instead of just writing naturally and placing your search terms in the few key places on the page where they'll actually help.

- You submit to a few directories, you spend some time trying to trade links, and when that doesn't get the job done, you try different automated linking schemes, or start buying links, the "link rental" bill never stops growing, and results are hard to find.

- If you're really unlucky, some kind of simple, easy to fix technical problem gets you. You panic, maybe you've been penalized. "Experts" on forums confirm the diagnosis, and you start undoing all the good work you've done.

Does any of this sound familiar? If it does, then you know how painful it can be to do this stuff without a good plan. If none of these things has happened to you, you're probably in great shape… but a good road map can still make you more effective.

No matter where you are in your efforts, the SEO Fast Start system will help you find new opportunities, and give you the tools you need to take advantage.

How to Read This Book

While you may be tempted to jump around, I encourage you to read through this book from start to finish at least once.

Process Diagrams

The illustration on the cover page is called a **process diagram**. I've created this to help you understand the big picture, and to illustrate the entire SEO Fast Start system at a glance.

The "big steps" of the SEO process are mapped out down the left hand side, and for each of these, a more detailed process is shown from left to right. It's all color coded, so you can see how it all fits together.

You will also notice that the chapters in this book are organized around these big steps, and each chapter is built around the specific steps within that. For every step in that process, I'll explain what you need to do, and what you're trying to achieve.

Read The Words!

If I did nothing but describe the process, this book would still be useful, but it wouldn't serve you very well. There are a lot of important concepts you need to understand, and there's more to it than just step by step.

You have to understand why you're doing it, if you want to do it well. You need to be aware of the exceptions and gotchas.

The only way to do that is to make sure you read every word.

So please, I've spent more than nine years writing it… and then I gave it to you for free. You can spend a couple of hours reading it. It's only about 100 pages altogether, with lots of pictures and 12 point type.

"White Hat Black Belt" Techniques

I've got a huge archive of really cool strategies and tactics that my students and I have come up with over the years. When the appropriate situation arises, I'll pull one of these ideas back off the shelf and use it to break into a difficult market or give my students an edge on their competition.

I can't share all of these techniques with you in this book. As I just said, it's less than 100 pages (a key editorial decision) and **some things just don't fit.** The actual archive itself is several overstuffed 3 ring binders, nearly 20 gigabytes of video and audio files, and thousands of pages of printouts.

What I can do, though, is sprinkle a few of these in throughout the book. Try to spot them as you read. I'm not going to tell you where they are, because you might just skip ahead, instead of reading the whole book.

Recommendations

Those who have been following me for a few years already know one thing about me – I rarely recommend any products or services. I hesitate to recommend

individual consultants, even my friends… because I feel personally responsible for the outcome.

Others will happily recommend anything that will earn them a few dollars in commissions. Not me.

So, when I recommend something to you, it's because I really believe it's worth the price. You don't have to buy anything based on my recommendation, but by the time we're through here, I hope you'll understand that my endorsement is not given lightly.

Why This System Doesn't "Age"

I've been doing more or less the same things in SEO for years, and they still work. Even today, when I start work on a new web site, I expect that we'll be able to start seeing significant traffic from search engines within the first month or so, and that we'll start seeing page one rankings for our key search terms within six months.

Why do I expect that to happen? Because it's happened for me, over and over, for years and years… and all we did was apply this system. I've seen competitors come and go, in many markets – flying high in April, shot down in May, while my students have continued to prosper.

Why have I been able to sit back and laugh while so many people have struggled over the years? It's simple.

I don't try to fool the search engines.

Optimizing web pages, if you were doing it right, hasn't really changed in years. A lot of tricks (hidden text, keyword stuffing) have stopped working, but they were never necessary to begin with.

Now, with the SEO Fast Start process as a framework, I don't expect that this system will ever go out of date. We may add a new wrinkle here, or change a thing or two within a particular step, but for the most part, the system will remain the same.

What will change? New strategies and tactics, new opportunities, and unless I miss my guess, years of watching your risk-taking competitors fall by the wayside as the search engines figure out their games.

The Big Picture: Why I Am Doing This

These new editions of SEO Fast Start are the start of something much bigger.

Basic Knowledge Should Be Free

80% of SEO is the same for everyone… For the SEO industry to evolve, everyone must be armed with the same basic facts. The only way to accomplish that is to make the basic information available to all, for free.

Not just free, but well organized. The web is free, once you have access, and there's not much in this book that you couldn't find on the web… But the web is not well organized.

And let's be honest, there's no editorial filter on the web – lies look just as good as the truth when you have a good designer, and mistakes and misinformation don't come with warning labels.

The web, by itself, is not a solution.

For information to be really useful, it has to be collected, reviewed, edited, organized, and written by someone who knows their stuff.

Someone has to do it.

I can afford to do it.

So here we are.

SEO Is Just the Beginning - Five More "Not-So-Easy" Pieces

I came onto the web with a background in direct marketing and sales. The first book I wrote was about email marketing, not SEO… but I never published it, because the subscribers to my newsletter wanted to read a book about SEO.

So I wrote one. Thousands of people read it, and before you knew it, I was an "SEO guy" as far as anyone was concerned. Now, I think I've done "OK" in SEO, but that's not all I do.

I've been working with my students on a lot more than SEO, and doing a lot more with my own sites. So it should come as no surprise that SEO isn't the only area where we've applied the "fast start" approach.

In fact, I have "fast start" process maps for a whole lot of subjects, and people working on creating even more.

Once we shake out the bugs in the publishing process (*another* fast start process) for these free "fast start" books, you can expect to see more of them.

Pay per Click Fast Start will be released next – July 18, 2009 (you will find it at www.ppcfaststart.com). I'm not sure what the next one will be after that. Reader feedback will have something to do with it, but email marketing and information publishing are the two most likely topics.

As Niches Sub-Divide, Quality Suffers

One of the people I pay for coaching is Rich Schefren. His approach to growing a sustainable business has worked wonders for me.

Rich has this theory about niche markets. Rich says that niches have a tendency to sub-divide. If someone is already the "pay per click guru," then someone who wants to break in will pick a smaller niche, and become the "Adwords guru."

It makes sense, I understand why it happens, but it sucks for beginners, especially when nobody steps in to the big niches (like pay per click). **When everyone is trying to be a guru, nobody wants to teach the basics.**

In the end, all this sub-dividing means that you can't get the whole story, you have to buy it in pieces, and every sub-guru has their own approach to the big picture, which they never explicitly spell out.

One of my core beliefs is that niches don't have to be sub-divided; that's just what everyone has been doing. Well, not me.

If I have the expertise to put something together on a topic, I will. If I don't, I'll work with other people who can. We want to teach everyone the basics for free. That's the goal. Anything else comes after.

How You Can Help

If you think this is a good thing… if you believe as I do that there's a real benefit to the world when the basic information is made available for free, then you'll want to help me out.

If SEO Fast Start helps you, then don't keep it to yourself. Let others know about it. Send them to the website **(www.seofaststart.com)** so they can register. Get on the newsletter list yourself while you're at it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Before you recommend SEO Fast Start to anyone, please read it.

Watch the Portal, and Join the Conversation

If you're on the mailing list, you'll receive frequent invitations to join our free community forum and portal – as of June 29, 2009 we've got over 2,750 members.

Please Register!

If you registered to download this book at www.seofaststart.com, as opposed to receiving a copy from a friend, then you're already subscribed to our free weekly newsletter, which will alert you to all of the news from the portal.

If you haven't registered, please take a moment to do so. I'm giving away some of my best content, but it won't all be found on the public site. You have to register for the newsletter to get access to the private site and other bonuses.

Chapter 2:
How Search Engines Work

Before we get into the "fast start" process itself, let's take a look at how search engines work – both from our perspective (crawling and indexing) as well as from the searcher's side of things.

The actual technical details are much less important than you've probably been led to believe, so I'll give you a quick walk-through of what search engine spiders do, instead of beating you to death with detail.

In reality, the search engines are more alike than they are different. While there are still significant differences between them in some areas, the methods you'll learn in this book will help you stay on the right side of those differences.

Why It Matters To You

There's a lot of very bad advice out there on search engine positioning. A lot of this bad advice is for sale, and this market has created a lot of self-reinforcing myths about the subject.

Many of these myths are really just self-serving propaganda created by various players in the search engine positioning industry, and repeated by well-meaning writers in e-business publications and other media outlets.

Think about this for a moment. Where does "conventional wisdom" come from? Well, it comes from various media outlets, such as television, radio, print, and the Internet itself. But where does a writer from a business magazine find out about any industry? They get their information from the "experts" in the industry itself. Reporters don't have a lot of time to do research, so a lot of what you see in print is just repackaged press release material and the "industry line."

In reality, following "conventional wisdom" without thinking can sometimes do you a lot of harm. A lot of people spend a lot of time trying to make their pet schemes sound like "standard practice."

In the process of becoming search engine literate, you'll learn that a lot of the things you've been told are just plain wrong. In this book you'll also discover that this whole subject is much less intricate and mysterious than many "experts" want you to believe.

My intent here is to share the knowledge I have, and let you make your own informed decisions. Every chapter in this book was written with that goal in mind.

Why should you care about how search engines work? By investing the time it takes to read this chapter, you'll be better prepared to understand the rationale behind everything we do throughout the rest of the book.

What a "Spider" Does

The first thing that you need to understand is what a search engine "spider" is, and how it works. A "spider" (also known as a "robot" or "crawler") is a software program that search engines use to find what's out there on the ever-changing web.

There are many types of spider in use, but for now, we're only interested in the one that actually "crawls" the web finding pages. This is a somewhat oversimplified picture, but basically this program starts at a website, loads the pages, and follows the hyperlinks on each page.

In this way, the theory goes, everything on the web will eventually be found, as the spider crawls from one website to another. Search engines may run thousands of instances of their web-crawling spider programs simultaneously, on multiple servers.

When a "crawler" visits one of your web pages, it loads the page's contents into a database. Once a page has been fetched, the text of your page is loaded into the search engine's index, which is a massive database of words, and where they occur on different web pages.

So there are really three steps. It starts with crawling (fetching pages), then indexing (breaking them down into words for the index), and a final step where the links (web page addresses / URLs) that are found get fed back into the crawling program to be retrieved.

When the spider (some of them will check later to verify that a page really is offline) doesn't find a page, it will eventually be deleted from the index. This is one reason why it's important to use a reliable web hosting provider.

Robots.txt & SiteMaps.org

The first thing a spider is supposed to do when it visits your site is look for a file called "robots.txt". This file contains instructions for the spider on which parts of the web site to index, and which to ignore. The only way to control what a search engine spider sees on your site is by using a robots.txt file. Chapters 4 & 9 provide information on how to control spiders, and why you'd want to do this.

All spiders are supposed to follow certain rules, and the major search engines do follow these rules for the most part. We live in exciting times, though, and the major search engines are finally working together on standards. The latest standard is the XML Site Maps protocol, which I'll discuss in Chapter 9.

How They Find You

The most common way that search engine spiders find a website is by following hyperlinks from other sites. In search engine terminology, these are known as "found pages."

Some search engines also have a "submit URL" form, where you can request that they add your web site to their index. Typically, you just give the primary URL for your site (like http://www.seofaststart.com), and this address is added to their list of links to crawl.

There are services (some paid, some free) that let you submit your site "automatically." This is not really a good deal, even if it's free. At this point, there are only four "major" search engines, and you can't even submit to all of them.

The same applies to software that submits your site to "thousands" of search engines. As I've just stated, only a few search engines actually matter. Using this software is more likely to generate a flood of junk email than anything else.

If all of this sounds like I'm recommending you let the search engines find you, rather than submitting your site, I am. I haven't submitted anything to the

search engines in years, and it rarely takes more than a week or so for them to find and crawl my new sites.

Read Chapter 6, and focus on getting links set up – this will not only improve your rankings, it will ensure that the search engines can find you on their own.

Some search engines (like Yahoo) offer a "paid inclusion" program. Although you get no special advantage from using it, in terms of your site's ranking, it does ensure that your site's indexing is up to date. This isn't necessarily a great deal, since it usually involves paying by the click for traffic you may have gotten anyway.

What Gets Indexed

When a search engine indexes the pages on your site, they don't actually store the entire page. What they do instead is to store information about the text on your pages. Which words appeared on the page, and where they occurred.

Images, scripts, and rich media may also be indexed and stored, but these are only found through specialized searches. People still use words to search, so search engines mainly care about the words that are on your pages.

In addition to the text of your site, some search engines also store the content of your META tags. The "description" META tag is sometimes used to display a description of your page when a web surfer sees the results of a search. There's more on META tags in Chapter 5.

Along with the textual content, search engines store information about the hyperlinks on each page. This helps the search engine to determine what the page is about, because the text in hyperlinks often reveals something about the subject matter of the page.

This also enables them to determine the "link popularity" and relevance of the pages each site links to. This is the main way that search engines find out about new websites and pages.

There are a lot of differences between search engines in terms of what actually counts as text content. Some search engines may index the content of the "ALT" property in <IMG> (image) tags on the page, which is often erroneously referred to as an "ALT tag." Other odds and ends, such as file names in URLs, are sometimes indexed as well.

Even if a search engine finds your site right away, it may be several weeks before anyone using the search engine will actually find you in search results. Typically, it doesn't take more than 1-2 weeks for the spiders to find you, the delay is caused by the time it takes for them to find links and update their index.

Unfortunately, the only way around this is paid inclusion. Google doesn't have a paid inclusion program, but they also do a very good job of keeping their index up to date and accounting for new pages and links almost as quickly as they find them.

How Pages Are Ranked

Every search engine has its own algorithm, or process, for determining where your pages rank for a particular search term. There are common elements to many of them, but they all apply their rules a little differently. It's probably not possible to create a single web page that satisfies every major search engine completely, but the system we use in this book has proven to be effective across all of the major search engines.

There are two types of factors in play with search engine rankings[2]. What's on the page still matters, but "off the page" factors (like the text used in links that point to the page) are becoming more important.

On page factors vary from engine to engine, so our system tries to position your pages in the "common ground" between them. The position of keywords (where the phrase appears) is the most important. If the phrase appears in headings, page titles, and other key spots on the page, a search engine will see this as more relevant than a page where the search term appears once in the middle of the page.

In addition to positioning, link popularity and other "off the page" factors contribute significantly to your page's ranking. This is because good web sites usually have other sites linking to them. Since there will usually be a good number of pages that have just the right mix of keywords and position, link popularity makes a good "tie-breaker" for search engines to use when ranking pages.

---

[2] User feedback and predictive models of satisfaction might be called a third factor, but why complicate things?

Closely related to link popularity is "link relevance" and weighting. This means that a link to your "hamster food" page from a page that actually contains those words is more relevant than a link from an unrelated page. The text used in the link itself is especially important – this is known as "anchor text" or "link reputation."

Google's "PageRank" system is the best documented, and most discussed, of the search engines' link analysis methods. I'll talk about it more in Chapters 4 and 6, but for now, a simple explanation should suffice.

Essentially, PageRank is a quality of web pages. Every page has some, and it flows from one page to another through links. The amount of PageRank that flows from a page is divided between all the links on that page – the more links that point out of a page, the less PageRank flows through each link.

PageRank comes to a page from incoming links. So the more links you have pointing into your site, and the more popular (better linked) the sites linking to you are, the better off you'll be. The more pages you have in the index, the more PageRank you have within your site.

As I'll explain in Chapter 4, you can take some control of how PageRank flows within your site, which can help you boost the profile of your most important pages.

How Important Is User Feedback?

Although none of the search engines will talk about it much, they all incorporate some notion of "user experience" in their rankings. This may be as simple as measuring whether a visitor who clicks a link on search results returns to look at another result. It may be far more involved than that.

All of the search engines have ways of measuring or estimating the overall user satisfaction with your web site. How much of a factor this is today, we don't know, but you can bet that it will become more important over time.

By designing our sites for human visitors, not spiders, we are protecting ourselves against any negative impact from user feedback. This is an important part of the "fast start" system, and always has been.

How People Use Search Engines & Portals

One of the most often overlooked factors in search engine positioning is what the people using the search engines are trying to accomplish, and how they go about it. It's an oversimplification to say that people get online to find "information," but it's a useful starting point.

When a web surfer visits a search engine to find information, they type a keyword or phrase in, and wait for the results to be displayed. There are 1000 ways to say 'real estate' and 50 ways to spell it. What this means to you is that even if your website is about "hamster food," people will not always use that exact phrase when they're looking for what you offer. They misspell words, add words, put them in seemingly random order, etc.

Typically, there are two main types of searching people do. "Drill-down" searches are done by someone trying to research a subject. In this type of search, the surfer usually finds a "hub" or "authority" on a particular topic, and doesn't return to the search engine for quite a while.

More often than not, this is the way I search – I use a search engine to find a few authoritative sites, then they follow the links from those sites. The most popular search terms are usually searched in this manner. If your site isn't one of the top authorities or hubs, you'd better try to get them to link to you.

The second type of search is what I call a targeted search. In this case, the surfer is looking for a specific site, person, or product. It's amazing how many people get onto a search engine like MSN (which has a link to Hotmail right on the page), only to type in "Hotmail" and click away to the Hotmail site. It's almost as if they forgot the address. In many cases, though, the searcher is trying to find the official website for a particular product or company, and doesn't know the URL.

Once presented with a listing of search results[3], how do people decide which site to visit? They'll scan the listing looking for the first result that appears to meet their need, by reading the title and description. Page titles like "UNTITLED" or "Home

---

[3] Search Engine Results Pages are often abbreviated as SERPs by SEO people. We like to make our own acronyms. That's why we usually use TLA to mean "text link ad" and not "three letter acronym."

Page" are less likely to attract attention than "Wide World of Hamsters." Likewise, a page without a concise, attractive description is less likely to be visited.

Searchers working on a "drill-down" search will usually gravitate toward those listings that offer a wealth of information and links. One of my websites saw more than a 40% increase in search engine click-throughs after I added the words "links to top website promotion resources" to the description. Searchers often want to get away from the search engine, and onto an authoritative website, so give them what they want.

If you are operating a web store, you'll probably be more interested in targeted searches. If you're selling products that are available elsewhere, you can get a lot more attention and traffic by providing such valuable resources as reviews, independent testing, and side-by-side or feature comparisons.

Takeaways – what we've learned

Understanding key concepts in the search engine world was our primary goal in this chapter, and I hope we've accomplished at least that much. The information I've introduced to you will come into play throughout this book, as we work through the step-by-step process of creating a search engine strategy for your website.

Although this fact is not emphasized to a significant degree here, a big part of the puzzle is "off the page" and not under your direct control. Although we can tune up your web pages to better fit what search engines like, your rankings depend on what's happening out there on the web at large.

In fact, the quality of the inbound links to your website, in most cases, will be more influential with the search engines than the content of your website itself.

We've spent a little time inside the web surfer's mind, and I hope you won't forget about that. Depending on the nature and character of your website, understanding the anonymous person on the other side of the search engine could make all the difference in the world. It's not enough to have your site ranked well, if nobody clicks on the link – you have a tremendous opportunity to increase traffic without even changing the content of your site.

Finally, I hope I've gotten you to start thinking strategically about search engines, and helped you understand a little bit about why they exist, what they do, and who they serve. In the highly competitive world of web portals and search engines, traffic

equals revenue. Whereas a small content site that gets a few hundred visitors a day might provide a living for one or two people, a portal (like Yahoo!) that gets millions of visits a day might employ thousands.

When someone comes up with a clever trick to fool a search engine into delivering less relevant results then that search engine can lose customers. People can lose their jobs. With so much at stake in this market, search engines are very active about maintaining the integrity of their product.

Search engines don't care about you, they don't care about your website, but they do care about their customers. If I get what I'm looking for when I use a search engine, I'll use it again. Search engines are trying to deliver the most relevant results possible for every search.

When you understand this, you'll have a leg up on everyone who's trying to "fool" the search engines. **By working *with* the search engines, instead of *against* them, you'll win in the end.**
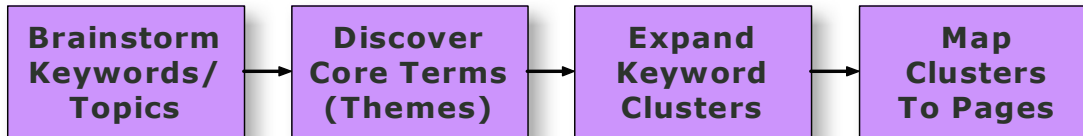
Watch the Newsletter, and Join the Conversation

As we continue to develop the SEO Fast Start community portal, I'll add case studies and additional tutorials for every step in the fast start process. You can help us develop that content by posting your comments and questions at our public site:

http://www.seofaststart.com/

Chapter 3:
Developing Keyword Strategy (Step 1)

Brainstorm Keywords/ Topics	→	Discover Core Terms (Themes)	→	Expand Keyword Clusters	→	Map Clusters To Pages

Important Note for 2009 Edition: *There is a small but significant change – Google's new Adwords Keyword Tool (which has a free "external" version) was released last July – I now recommend this tool for estimating the search volume of a keyword.*

In the first step of the "Fast Start" process, you will uncover the most important search terms used by your target audience, organize them into thematic "clusters," and create a "keyword map" for your web site.

Along the way, you will learn a number of important concepts and principles, which you will apply often as you build an optimized web site.

All of the tools we use in this process are free. For those who are interested, I will also mention some other tools that are worth buying. The Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that I use for keyword maps will work just fine with the (free) OpenOffice Calc program.

The Purpose of Keyword Strategy

Map Out Keyword Strategy

The goal of your keyword strategy is to get the best total quality return on your investment. If that sounds like a mouthful, it's because there's more involved here than just how many people visit your site.

If someone finds your site in search results, but they're looking for something else, you didn't do yourself any good. It's far better to get 50 visitors who want what you have, than to get 1000 people who leave before the first page finishes loading. What your web site needs, more than anything, is targeted traffic.

Understanding keyword strategy begins with knowing how people search. For any given topic, there are literally thousands of ways that people will select a keyword or phrase when using a search engine. The more different keywords and phrases your site "ranks" on (in the top 10 listings on the search results), the more often it will show up when a member of your target audience conducts a search.

Every time your site appears in the search results, there's a chance your site will be visited. Obviously, the higher your site ranks, the better your chance for success. Ranking is very important, especially when you're in the top ten. But the difference between #1 and #3 is not as significant. What matters most, once your site appears in the search results, is whether your title and description match what that particular web surfer is looking for.

The total formula, then, involves how many keyword phrases your site can rank well on, how high your site ranks for each of those searches, combined with how relevant and enticing your page titles and descriptions are. Obviously, then, increasing the number of keyword phrases your site covers will often deliver far better results than trying to rank well on one extremely competitive keyword.

The best part of this, from our perspective, is that increasing the number of keywords actually helps you target the right audience. This only makes sense – a #1 ranking for "real estate," even if you could achieve it, only attracts a very general audience. A #1 ranking for "Dallas TX condos" and related phrases is much easier to attain, and far more targeted.

Keyword Terminology

Before we move on, let's cover a few definitions, to make sure we're speaking the same language. A "keyword" in the fast start system is a single word. Phrases are made up of one or more keywords. Search terms are the actual words that a searcher types into a search engine.

In an effective search engine optimization campaign, you will be able to target a broad spectrum of search terms. Keyword strategy in the fast start system is the

effective combination of keywords into phrases, which results in you targeting the right search terms, and ultimately bringing visitors to the right web page to satisfy their goals.

Don't worry if this sounds complicated. It can be very complex if you don't know what you're doing, but the fast start process is designed to get you past that.

Brainstorming Keywords (Stage 1)

Brainstorm Keywords/ Topics

The first stage in the process of developing a keyword strategy is brainstorming.

At this stage, you're trying to come up with a list of "candidate" search terms, without leaving a whole lot out. In the next step (discovering core terms) we'll prune the list down a bit by focusing on the most relevant and popular search terms that people use to look for what you offer.

Major Search Terms (single keywords & short phrases)

One of the worst mistakes that novices make is trying to focus on a single word (like 'books') or phrase (like 'real estate'), and attempt to build a website that will rank well. Extremely general terms such as these are very competitive, difficult for search engines to handle well (in terms of giving good results to searchers), and hardly worth the trouble in the first place.

Let's imagine that, after spending hundreds of hours tweaking, perfecting, and promoting your site, you managed to get a #1 ranking for "real estate." Unless you sell real estate of all kinds in every part of the world, a substantial amount of the traffic you'll get will come from people who are looking for something you don't have to offer.

Although you may not optimize your site for such keywords, it's very important that you know what they are, as it applies to your site. As you work through this chapter, make a list of the 5-10 "major" keywords that describe your website. These should be mostly single words (like 'homes'), with perhaps a couple of commonly-used phrases (like 'real estate') mixed in.

These major keywords form the backbone of your site design effort, since they help define the themes around which you will organize your content. Don't worry too

much about them right now, because this is one of the many cases where you can easily correct an omission at a later time. In other words, if you forget a major keyword today, you can do something about it next month.

Core Terms (Themes)

The next level in the keyword hierarchy consists of the two and three word phrases that will attract the bulk of your keyword traffic. While these may not fully encompass even the majority of search phrases used, they should represent the most popular phrases. As you work through this chapter, try to build a list of at least 10-20 core terms for your site. This list will continue to grow as long as your website exists.

Whenever possible, try to keep these phrases organized under the major keywords you've listed. The major keywords serve as a means of categorizing the vast universe of keyword phrases. For example, if you're working the real estate category, under the major keyword "homes" you might list such phrases as "homes for sale," "beachfront homes," etc.

Singular or Plural?

It would be great if every search engine knew that someone searching for "concert ticket" is probably looking for the same thing as someone searching for "concert tickets." Unfortunately, that's not the case – Google doesn't recognize them as the same, so for every singular word we target, we also have to think about whether the plural might be important, and vice versa.

Stemming & Misspellings

Now that you've found a bunch of keywords and phrases, it's time to consider a couple of real-world problems with them. Although most experts consider these two concepts unrelated, the fact is that the practical problems (and opportunities) they present are virtually identical. They're also not nearly as important as the rest of our keyword strategy.

Word stemming is the use of root words as synonyms for many other words. For example, "boat" is the root of "boating." This doesn't mean you can get away with using only one word, but that you should list each possibility, and identify the root

words. Remember, the goal is to match the relevant search phrases that people actually use – there's no point trying to cover every version of "toast" if all you're selling are toasters.

Misspelling is a whole other problem, with the same basic outcome. The fact is, a lot of us can't spell to save our lives, and we still expect to get search results. By incorporating common misspellings into your keyword list, you'll be able to squeeze a little extra traffic from the search engines. Focus on the most popular variations only, and I don't recommend using them in your content directly – more on this later.

All of the search engines do a pretty good job of helping searchers correct their misspellings anyway, so if you choose to ignore misspellings, you aren't missing much. Try it – go to www.google.com, and search for "aito repair."

"Stop Words"

Some words are in such common usage (a, and, the) that they appear on almost every web page. Some sources will advise you to avoid using "stop words" in your pages, but don't listen to them. **As of late 2007, all of the major search engines were indexing the full text of documents, so there's really no such thing as a "stop word" any more.**

So, it really doesn't help to try to eliminate stop words from your search term list. In fact, since search engines consider word order and proximity when ranking pages, you've actually got a better chance of showing up for "finding the truth" if you use the words naturally, and write the phrase out.

Obvious Keywords

The process of researching keywords is still a bit difficult. Although there are tools you can use to help the process, it's still sometimes a bit more art than science. The best place to start is with those keywords and phrases that are obvious to you. Starting with a list of such words will make the rest of the process easier, so begin by listing the most obvious keywords that describe your site, your products, the type of information you have to offer, etc.

Related Terms

The next important group of keywords is the set of related terms that are used to describe things similar to whatever your site is about. The SEO Fast Start site is about search engine optimization, but there are many related topics in search marketing. In many cases these related terms will be in your main list, but if they're not, start making a list.

You'll use these terms later as you work to strengthen your site's "off the page" factors like link popularity and link relevance. Related sites that aren't direct competitors are great candidates for partnerships, such as content sharing cross-promotion.

A Handy Tool from Google

Google has created a nice keyword brainstorming tool, the "Adwords Keyword Tool," which will suggest related terms for a web site, or from a list of keywords that you enter. You can find it online at:
https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal

2009 Update – In July 2008, Google started showing actual search volume counts, and seasonal trends, in this tool's reports – making it nearly a one-stop shop for keyword research and discovery.

A Truly Nifty Tool From Microsoft

MSN's Adcenter Labs has an "Online Commercial Intent" prediction tool – this can help you assess whether people using a search term are trying to buy something, or just doing research:
http://adlab.msn.com/Online-Commercial-Intention/OCI.aspx

Discovering Core Terms (Stage 2)

Discover Core Terms (Themes)

While brainstorming can be done with pen and paper, the next stage in the process will require you to use some online tools. In this stage, we'll work through the list of possible search terms you came up with, and start mapping out the "core terms" that

will form the basis of individual web pages.

When you were brainstorming keywords, you probably didn't give much thought to how relevant your web site might be to the searcher. At this stage, the idea of relevance becomes critical, so let's give you a working definition.

In the fast start system, the relevance of a search term is defined as the likelihood that your web site will be of interest to the searcher. I like to express this as a percentage – what percentage of searchers is likely to be interested in your site.

If the search term is "real estate," and you only sell real estate in Boca Raton, Florida, less than 1% of people searching for "real estate" would find your site of interest, but 100% of those who searched for "boca raton realtor" would find your site relevant.

There are ways to get a more precise number, but for now, I'd like you to use your judgment, and my process, to narrow down your list of candidates.

To move on, you'll need to use one of the online keyword databases. In addition to the Google Keyword Tool mentioned above, there are two other noteworthy databases that can help you identify lower-volume search terms not covered by Google.

Keyword Tools: Keyword Discovery

Trellian's Keyword Discovery (www.keyworddiscovery.com) offers a free trial version and a paid (subscription) service. If you have no budget, I recommend signing up for the free trial, and using that for this stage of the process. The paid version will work well for this stage (core terms) and the next stage (expanding clusters).

Keyword Tools: Wordtracker

The Wordtracker database (http://www.wordtracker.com) does have a free tool (freekeywords.wordtracker.com) which you can use in the next stage (expanding keyword clusters), but not in this stage. If you have the paid version of Wordtracker, you can use it in this stage, because it offers far more data than the free version.

Using the Tools to Discover Core Terms

For each of the candidate search terms in your list from the brainstorming stage, use the keyword database (Keyword Discovery free or paid, Wordtracker paid) to examine the top 10 variations, by typing the candidate term into the keyword database's search tool.

Assess the relevance of these variations. An easy way to do this is to just say "yes, no, or maybe" to each variation. For example, if you sell red widgets, and the candidate term is "red widgets," you would probably say "yes" for "buy red widgets" and "maybe" for "red widget" because that's no more specific. "Free red widgets" would get a big "no," because you aren't giving them away.

If you can say "yes" or "maybe" to at least 3 of the variations, then we'll consider this candidate a good core term. Make a list of core terms and their variations, along with the search count provided by the keyword database.

These core terms and their variations are called "clusters" in the fast start system. You should have at least 10-15 clusters, but there may be more.

Expanding Keyword Clusters (Stage 3)

At this stage, you should be ready to set some priorities for the first round of search engine optimization. In the fast start process, we'll revisit this step later on, as you optimize more and more of your site.

Prioritizing & Targeting Core Terms

Now that you've got a good list of core search terms (clusters) it's time to set some priorities. If you've done your research well, you should have little trouble. High traffic comes from a lot of searches, so your top priority should be those keywords or phrases that show the greatest number of searches in the keyword database.

Before you instantly jump on the most popular search terms, take a moment to consider how closely each will target your desired audience. A search term that gets 10,000 searches a month might look great at first, but is it really a good fit? If only 10% of those using it are actually looking for what you offer, the effective value is really only 1,000 searches a month.

I recommend that you decide on 10-15 top priority core terms at most, which will become the primary keywords used in your site.

If you miss a few important search terms at this point, don't worry, because we will revisit your keyword strategy more than once. Now that you have a list of the most important core terms (clusters), it's time to expand those clusters.

Understanding Modifiers

For each of your clusters, you'll also want to come up with a list of modifiers that will frequently apply to these search terms, such as "free." One of my old sites, Website Promotion Central, for example, used modifiers such as "free," "help," "tips," "info," etc. along with keyword phrases like "website promotion" and "email marketing."

You can use the keyword databases to help you find these extra words. Using the paid version of either database, or the Wordtracker free tool, examine the top 100 variations for each search term in your cluster. Pick out all of the extra words that appear in the list, which aren't part of one of your top 10 variations.

These are the modifiers for that cluster. We'll use them later on, when you're writing optimized copy for your pages. In addition, there are a couple other types of modifier you may want to consider using.

Localizing Words

Location is another important modifier. If your business is in any way local, don't forget to include a list of geographic names in your list of modifiers. City, state, county, names used for the local region, etc. could be important modifiers.

Brand & Product Names

One of the most overlooked types of keyword is the brand name. One of the sites I worked with was selling heavy equipment, but it never occurred to them that people might look for "Komatsu" or "Caterpillar" equipment. Those keywords were worth far more traffic than "backhoe" and "forklift."

Mapping Clusters to Pages (Stage 4)

Map Clusters To Pages

Once you have a good list of clusters that you're going to target in this round of SEO, it's time to decide which pages you're going to position at the top of search results.

Because you can have more than one URL listed on the first page of search results, I like to select at least two pages for each cluster. Choose the best match for your first URL, and your next best match for the second URL.

You will have a hard time optimizing a single page for more than one cluster, so keep that in mind, and understand that you may need to create new content to fully target all of your important core terms.

If the cluster you're looking at has several very popular variations, you may want to create additional sub-pages to help broaden your site's profile. I don't recommend doing this during the first round of SEO, but as you revisit your strategy (Step 6 of the fast start process) it will usually make sense to expand your content for some clusters.

In general, the best match is the page that most exactly fits the search term, and the second best will be the page right above it in your site's structure. If you have a shopping catalog, for example, the "red widget" product page might be the best match for "red widgets," and the "colored widgets" category page might be the second best. If you have many red widgets, you may even want to create a separate "red widgets" category.

Most of your clusters will map out to internal pages… this leaves the home page.

The most general and popular core terms, from your top 2-3 clusters, will be the primary targets for your home page. As you move along through several rounds of SEO, you'll find that it's possible to bring your home page up into the top rankings for more core terms, but 2-3 is a good starting point.
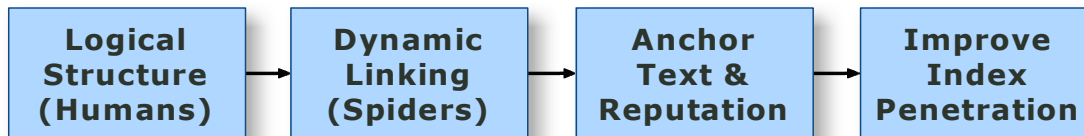
Now that you have a "keyword map" for your web site, the keyword strategy step is complete. It's time to make sure that your site is structured to give you the best chance of getting the rankings you want.

Join the Conversation

As we continue to develop the SEO Fast Start community portal, I'll add case studies and additional tutorials inside our private site. You can help us develop that content by posting your comments and questions in the keyword strategy section of the public site:

http://www.seofaststart.com/keywords

Chapter 4:
Optimizing Site Structure (Step 2)

Logical Structure (Humans)	→	Dynamic Linking (Spiders)	→	Anchor Text & Reputation	→	Improve Index Penetration

---

Important Note for 2009 Edition: *The second section of this chapter (Dynamic Linking) has been rewritten to reflect some changes made by Google.*

In the second step of the "fast start" process, we'll work on improving the structure of your web site, to optimize its potential for better search engine rankings.

If this is your first experience with the fast start system, then you'll have an easier time reading this chapter. If you've read one of the older editions, please try to read through this with fresh eyes.

Why Site Structure Is Important

Optimize Site Structure And Link Text

One of my students (she's a little shy so I can't use her name) has been absolutely dominating the search results in her industry for a couple years now.

When I tell this story to most SEO people I meet, they immediately want to know what we've been doing to build links into her site, because everyone seems to think that SEO is all about getting links.

Now I'm not saying that links aren't important, but the "punch line" to this story is that we haven't done much link building work at all since I started working with this student – the budget is close to zero for that.

Most of her successes, and the ability to improve her rankings, have come from improvements we made in the structure of the web site itself.

Her story isn't the only one like that. In fact, site structure is probably the most overlooked and misunderstood aspect of SEO.

While most of your competitors are still trying to use a "sledgehammer" approach, and overwhelming the search engines with massive quantities of inbound links, you can gain a tremendous advantage by paying attention to how your site is linked together.

There are four primary goals in structuring, or restructuring, a web site:

- Improving the user experience is your first goal, because this leads to higher conversion rates, happy customers, etc. If I ever have to choose between creating a good user experience and an SEO objective, I will choose my site's visitors every time.

- Improving the "crawlability" of the site and channeling "link juice" (PageRank at Google, other search engines have their own formulas) into the most important pages – the ones that you're trying to get ranked in search results. One method we use for this is called dynamic linking.

- Increasing the ranking of individual web pages within the site, and "broadening the profile" of our most important pages. By using the "anchor text" of our own internal links, and adding the right links in strategic places, we can boost our own search engine rankings.

- Getting more pages into the search engines' index, also known as "index penetration." Every additional page that gets indexed adds to our ability to improve our rankings, and in fact makes it easier to increase index penetration.

It shouldn't be terribly shocking that the four stages of the "site structure" step are mapped against these four goals.

Designing the "Human" Structure (Stage 1)

Logical Structure (Humans)

Before I say another word about site structure, let me emphasize that the point of building a web site is to create a positive interaction with human visitors.

If you do nothing but design a web site that is structured well for human consumption, and don't do any silly stuff with Javascript and image maps, you will probably do very well with search engines, with no further effort.

When I first started talking about theme-based design seven years ago, I was looking for a way to reconcile "search engine optimization" with user-centered design. It worked, but only by accident, and only if you followed a fairly rigid approach that didn't work for every site.

As the system was developed further, we let some of those restrictions go, in favor of a better user experience.

I can't give you a complete lesson in how to design your web site to best serve your visitors – that's a whole other book at least[4]. Instead, I'll demonstrate how you can create a good user experience without hurting your search engine rankings.

For now, it's all about our human visitors. To help with that, I'm going to walk you through the structure of a typical web site.

The "Content Pyramid"

The best analogy I've seen to describe how themes work is to look at the website as a pyramid – the capstone on top of the pyramid doesn't support nearly as much weight as the stones which make up the base.

The Sky Above: The World Wide Web

The sky above the pyramid is what I used to call the "network." That created some confusion - I don't recommend that you attempt to create a network of sites, unless there is some compelling business (human driven) need to do so. To simplify things, we'll call it the World Wide Web – since you've probably heard of that already.

---

[4] I highly recommend reading Steve Krug's "Don't Make Me Think" to start.

You simply need to understand that what happens on the web matters, in terms of how other sites talk about and link to your site. The relationship between inbound links and SEO will be explored in Chapter 6.

From a human visitor's perspective, the context of an inbound link "frames" the user's experience, along with the page to which the visitor is sent. When the page on your site matches what the visitor expected when they clicked the link, you're likely to have a happy visitor.

First Tier: Your Home Page

The first tier of the pyramid, the homepage, is where most visitors enter most web sites. This is the "home page" of your website. On your home page, you establish what your site is about, what you offer, etc. – in many ways you frame the user experience from this point.

If you do a good job of SEO, you might find that more visitors enter from other pages, but no matter what you do, your home page is likely to be visited by more people, more often, than any other page on your site.

If it's easy for people to find what they're looking for from the home page, you win. If it's not, you've got work to do. Using a site search and analytics tools can help you improve this – see Chapter 7 (Measuring Results) for more.

If you've never really done usability testing or reviews of your site, it may be helpful to write down a list of things that people will want to do on your site – the common tasks and questions. As you look at your home page, ask yourself how many of these critical things are easy to find.

Second Tier: Categories ("Roadmap Pages")

The second tier, from a human visitor's perspective, is the set of category or directory pages that lead them closer to their goal. In an e-commerce site selling widgets, there might be categories for "colored widgets," "large widgets," "chrome widgets," etc.

Usability studies have shown that people don't mind clicking their mouse a few times to get to their goal, as long as they have a clear path to take.

Dividing your navigation elements into chunks of 5-7 choices, and using standard user interface conventions (e.g. blue underlined links in body text, tab navigation, breadcrumbs, left hand navigation, etc.) will help your visitors find what they want.

The second tier, for most sites, will also include the ultimate roadmap, a site map page (or pages). This is a page that simply carries a link (and brief description) to many other pages on your site.

From an SEO perspective, the second tier of the site is really any page that's linked to from the home page (assuming that spiders can follow the link). You'll learn more about this when we get to the next stage.

Third Tier: Content ("Destination Pages")

The third tier is where most of your important content will reside, if you have a typical web site. A visitor typically moves from the home page to a roadmap page, then to a destination page. In some cases, where the destinations are very popular or important, you may have direct links from the home page.

In an online shopping site, the third tier is usually where you'll find the actual product detail pages. For those selling software or services, this is where you see the detailed descriptions of features and benefits, pricing, etc. For content sites, the third tier usually contains the articles that make the site valuable.

From an SEO perspective, the third tier is anything that's two clicks away from the home page.

Tier Four: Deep Content

Creating a third tier may be all that is needed in many cases. You can have thousands of pages within the first three tiers of content, so you may never have a need for more. Even sites that are basically three-tier structures may have supporting pages (shipping rates, product color charts, etc.) that make up a fourth tier in the user's experience.

From an SEO perspective, the fourth tier is three clicks (or more) away from the home page, and special steps may have to be taken to get the search engines to find this content – assuming that you even want them to index it.

Don't Be A Robot!

These tiers are defined to help you THINK about site structure from a human perspective – you don't literally have to divide your site into 4 levels. Some sites only have two levels of content, and they work fine.

Designing the "Spider" Structure (Stage 2)

Dynamic Linking (Spiders)

Let's be honest for a moment. Most websites have a lot of "content overhead" for human visitors, that we really don't want showing up in search results. Things like the privacy policy, terms of use, contact forms, etc.

While these pages are extremely important from a human design perspective, they don't really do much for us in SEO. In fact, some SEO experts will tell you to keep the spiders off those pages entirely. Throughout this section, I'll refer to these as "overhead pages."

We could argue that there's some small value in making it possible for people to find your contact information with a search engine, but if you design your site well, they should be able to find it just by looking at the page they're on.

Google's PageRank system makes us pay an even heavier price, because every link we point to one of these "overhead" pages steals PageRank from the pages that we're trying to get ranked.

This was a major SEO problem until 2005, because the only way to "hide" these links from the search engines was with JavaScript, Flash, or other not-so-user-friendly methods, which I could never recommend.

Then Google came to the rescue in 2005, by introducing the "nofollow" attribute for links. This allowed webmasters to control the flow of PageRank through their sites, without having to make messy compromises between SEO and usability.

As a result, the past 2 editions of SEO Fast Start have recommended a simple strategy for using nofollow on internal links – which, when followed on a basic level, is still a net "win" for many sites today.

However, some things have changed, and it's no longer as simple as it used to be – so I no longer recommend the use of nofollow on internal links within your site.

> Unfortunately, in 2009, Google has again taken the "nofollow" tool out of our hands – once again forcing SEOs to choose between less-than-ideal "hacks" and usability.
>
> Google's Matt Cutts announced this at the SMX Advanced conference in Seattle, in early June 2009. While many SEOs are overreacting to this change, I prefer to see it for what it is, and react accordingly.
>
> Now, instead of *conserving* PageRank, using nofollow on internal links allows nearly all of the PageRank you would have saved to sort of "evaporate" – the story is actually somewhat more complicated than that, but it doesn't really matter.
>
> If you want more information about this, read my posts on the SEOFastStart.com blog, and get on my mailing list, since further updates are sure to follow.

Because I just don't like "hacks," I will begin by explaining how you can avoid making that choice in most situations. For those interested in more "advanced" (read: experimental, undocumented, and difficult) methods, I would suggest that you get on my mailing list, and check the SEOFastStart.com blog for further updates.

Basic Internal Linking

If you finished step one of the fast start process, you have a list of search terms and web pages that you're trying to get into the search results.

One important idea of internal linking is to focus more of your site's PageRank onto those pages. If this is your first time through the process, you're probably talking about "second tier" pages, and your home page, as the targets.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the amount of PageRank a page can give to other pages is limited to the amount that it picks up from inbound links. The amount that it gives to other pages is divided between all the links going out from the page.

Therefore, we have a choice to make – we can reduce the number of links to less important pages from a given web page, or we can increase the number of pages linking to our more important pages.

In SEO Fast Start, we'll do a little bit of both.

Before I begin with detailed instructions, let me introduce a little HTML into the mix, in the form of "named anchors." An anchor tag (<a>) links to a URL – we all got that, right?

Named anchors allow you to link to a specific spot on a page. For example, if you have a page (let's say it's called about.html) with your privacy policy, terms of use, contact information, etc. you can add a named anchor to that page above each section, like this:

```
<a name="privacy">Privacy Policy:</a>
```

Now, when we want to link to that page from elsewhere, and take visitors straight to the privacy policy section, we link like this:

```
<a href="about.html#privacy">Privacy</a>
```

To a search engine spider, the named anchor part of that link is meaningless. When we create several links on Page A, pointing to several named anchors on Page B, this is effectively the same thing as having one link.

This allows us to reduce the number of links to overhead pages from a search engine's perspective, without changing the way the linking page appears to our visitors.

Home Page Navigation

The home page is a special case in internal linking, because so much of the PageRank in your site will flow into (and from) the home page.

For the basic dynamic linking approach, here's what you want to do on the home page:

- Remove any unnecessary links your "overhead" pages. Don't do this at the expense of usability – but it's easy enough to combine multiple pages

(privacy, terms of use, disclaimers, contact information) into a single page, and provide just one link to that page using named anchors.

- Avoid linking out to other web sites from your home page, unless you have a good reason to do so. Bloggers, keep in mind that one of the points of having a blog is to link to other stuff – but you can control outbound links from your home page by controlling the post summaries that are displayed there.

- If you have site map pages or "crawl pages," (more on crawl pages below) linking to them from your home page will help them get indexed.

In fact, if you only do these few things on your home page, you'll probably improve your situation considerably.

Global Navigation / Interior Pages

If your site has "global" navigation elements, do the following on all of the interior pages throughout the site:

- As with the home page, reduce the number of unnecessary links.

Using Site Map and Crawl Pages

The site map should link to your second and third tier pages… if you can do so with only 150 outbound links from the site map page. If you can't do that, you can add more site map pages, or make some strategic decisions about your most important content, because you only have 150 outbound links to play with on a page.

Why 150 links? Because I have never been able to consistently get spiders to crawl past the 150th link on a web page. Unless you have an absolutely terrible design (or you're running a portal like Yahoo), there's no reason to have 150 links on any page. In fact, reducing the number to 100 or so would be my best advice.

Although we know that site maps are rarely used by human visitors when the site is well designed, the site map page adds an extra boost of PageRank to the pages you link to from it. If you want to lose the site map altogether, I doubt that anyone would complain to you, but it's still useful for funneling PageRank and adding "link reputation" (stage 3) to important pages on your site.

This may be a little bit advanced, but I usually prefer to use the primary site map (the one that's linked from the home page) to focus links on the pages I'm trying to get ranked, and then I'll link from the primary site map to my second tier pages, and overhead pages that might be important to human visitors.

What's A Crawl Page, Then?

The "difference" between a site map and a crawl page is a matter of perspective. A site map page looks like a site map – but a crawl page usually looks exactly like all of the other "second tier" pages on your site. It's simply an extra page that you add, to channel more PageRank and anchor text toward the pages that it links to.

Advanced Dynamic Linking

> **WARNING: The SEO General has determined that this stuff is very complicated.** Do not attempt this stuff unless you're actually capable of understanding the math involved with PageRank – including all of the changes recently announced by Google. This is for the "advanced" SEOs. I can do the math in my sleep, and even I don't use this stuff all that often. **You have been warned.**

The Third Level Push – Dynamic Linking Style

In most sites, your global navigation links to the entire second tier from every page, including the home page. This causes the second tier pages to accumulate a lot of PageRank, at the expense of your third tier.

In the old version of the fast start system, I told people to avoid cross-linking their second tier pages, or to mask those links with JavaScript. That's because we consistently got a measurable increase in traffic when we did this.

At the time we all assumed this had something to do with the topics of the pages not being closely related, and keeping our "themes" confined to "silos," but we were wrong. What we were really doing was a "third level push."

I'd like to thank Leslie Rohde[5] for giving it a better name, because "silos" sounds stupid and sort of misses what's really happening.

When Google had their big "Florida update" in late 2003, and nearly every SEO I knew suffered huge losses in rankings and traffic, I saw huge gains in traffic on the sites I worked with, even if they lost some "big keyword" rankings. I know now that this was because the third level push drove us upward on the "long tail" searches.

So what's a third level push? Well, it's simply a matter of taking more of the PageRank from your second tier, and pushing it down into the third tier, by doing this to your second tier pages:

- On all second tier pages, you "mask" all links pointing to other second tier pages – unless you're trying to boost a specific page.

- Now that you can't do this with nofollow, you do this by hiding those links with Javascript tricks. Which, as I already said, I don't like much…

That's it. On a shopping cart site, this means that your "category pages" still link to each other, but you use Javascript to hide the links between them. From the spider's perspective, your global navigation is different on the second tier.

More PageRank is pushed down into the third tier (products). In theory, if you don't screw up your major rankings, you get more traffic to product pages, and you sell more stuff.

This stuff is complicated. It's easy to screw it up. It's easy to shoot yourself in the foot. If you do screw it up, it can take weeks to notice and weeks to get out of it. So be careful, and don't do it just because you can. It's rarely necessary.

Have a reason, and don't forget that a third-level push might help in the short term (driving more traffic to product pages) but hurt in the long run (making it harder to get your second tier pages ranked).

---

[5] Leslie is a well known SEO expert, who pioneered dynamic linking and developed most of these techniques with a full understanding of why they worked… long before anyone else caught on.

Third Level Push Alternative: Crawl Pages

The "third level push" is designed to solve one main problem – that it's difficult to get your deeper pages indexed, and ranked. It's always solved the first problem better than the second, in my opinion.

So, as an alternative, let's consider another technique that I've been using and teaching for many years: crawl pages.

First, let's look at why you have a "PageRank problem" at the third tier of your site in the first place.

As you will recall, the second tier pages are all getting a link from the home page – in fact, this is what defines a second tier page. The third tier pages are not getting a link from the home page – again, that's just the definition.

So, as you move from the first tier to the second tier, all of the second tier pages are getting an approximately equal amount of "link juice" or PageRank from inside the site. I refer to this as "second tier equality" in my advanced classes.

As is often the case, an ecommerce shopping site is the clearest example. In such a site, you would have "category" pages at the second tier, listing products that are available for sale, and linking to third tier product pages.

If the category pages have equal amounts of PageRank, but some categories contain more products, then some of the product pages (those in the smaller categories) get more PageRank than others (those in the larger categories).

Now, you can "split" a category into smaller sub categories, and this is one option, but it's not always the best thing to do for your site's conversion rate – which means you could end up selling less stuff.

The idea of a crawl page, is to create these additional category pages, and link to them from the home page – but not in the main navigation. For a crawl page, you would use a link in the page's footer, similar to how you are probably linking to your site map pages.

Depending on the situation, creating sub categories and linking to them from the parent category page can also help, but it doesn't drive nearly as much juice as a crawl page that's got a link from the home page.

Oh yeah – remember that second problem – getting your third tier pages ranked? Crawl pages, like site map pages, can also send anchor text links into your third tier pages, to help them get ranked, something that simply "sculpting" your site structure (as with the third level push) doesn't do.

Circular Navigation

Circular navigation is used on the third tier. Basically, if you have a category (second tier) and a bunch of third-tier pages under that, you link the third tier pages together in a circle.

If it's (A, B, C, D, E, F) at the third tier, you link from A to B & F, B to A & C, etc. One link points to the previous page, another points to the next page. Web rings (if anyone remembers those) worked like that.

This just shares a little more PageRank between third level pages, and gives you another place to add anchor text for to improve the link reputation of those pages.

The "Trapezoidal Silly Putty" Technique

OK, there's no such thing as the Trapezoidal Linking Matriflux™ Technique. That was a joke. What I've described here are the main structural devices that I've used, but you can invent your own. From a spider's view, the structure of your site can look like just about anything you want, as long as you can do it by subtracting links.

Enough about dynamic linking and removing links; let's talk about adding some links back.

Using Anchor Text for Link Reputation (Stage 3)

Anchor Text & Reputation

Although I've touched on link reputation and anchor text a little bit, I haven't really delved deeply into the subject so far.

Those readers who have some SEO experience have probably been waiting for it, but it doesn't really come into play until you've established a keyword strategy and made some decisions about how to structure your site.

Now that we've done all that, I can let you in on a little secret: Anchor text and link reputation might be the most important part of SEO!

Sure, optimizing your page's content (next chapter) is still important, but to today's search engine, the words that are used in links pointing to that page are extremely important.

While you're limited in what you can do on the page, there's no real limit to the number of links that can point to a page.

This will come into play again in Chapter 6 (Link Building), especially with your most important search terms, because you'll want to boost your pages reputation even further with anchor text from other sites.

For now, let's focus on what we can do within the site, and make sure you're covering your bases. The point of this exercise is to point links at the pages you're trying to get ranked, using all of the search terms that you want the page to rank for.

How Link Reputation & Anchor Text Work

The first time through, make sure that you cover your bases and have anchor text for every variation of every search term for every page, at least once or twice. This means cross linking from one page to another, using keywords in the text of the link.

If you're trying to help page A get ranked for "purple monkey hats" then you put a link from page B to A, with "purple monkey hats" in the text, like this:

```
We also offer a great selection of <a href="a.html">purple
monkey hats</a>.
```

Now page B has sent some link reputation to page A. Page A should rank just a little higher, when people search for purple monkey hats.

For more competitive terms, you'll probably need to go back and add more text links to help improve your rankings. Internal linking like this will only get you so far, and you will also want to spend some effort on bringing links in from the rest of the web (Chapter 6).

If you already know that a search term is going to be very competitive, go ahead and add a few extra links at this stage. If you come up short this time around, you'll be able to catch that as you measure results and refine your strategy.

For this stage, I'll consider two types of links that can point to a web page:

- Navigation links – those that are present in your global navigation or in the navigation you've established for a section of your site. This could include links that you add to the "footer" of your pages.

- Contextual links – those that are present in the text body of an individual web page. These links can enhance usability and conversion, as well as boosting the link reputation of the target page.

Global Navigation

For the most part, the amount of text that you can use in a navigational link is limited, because the amount of space you have on the screen is limited. I don't try to fight against that, because usability is paramount.

One very important link that's pretty much always going to be part of your global navigation is a link to your site's home page.

Because of the way that search engines handle link reputation (anchor text), I recommend using a format that allows you to include some keywords in every page's FIRST link to the home page, but also having a "Home" link in your navigation somewhere.

Your global navigation will normally contain text links to your second-tier pages. In fact, if you haven't got a text link to a page from your global navigation, you may as well consider it a third-tier page from a user's perspective.

For each of these second-tier pages, you probably have a core term and a cluster of related terms, from step 1 (keyword strategy). In your global navigation, you would normally use the core term as the text for that link.

This helps boost the page's link reputation for that core term, by linking to it from a lot of different pages. That takes care of the core term, but it doesn't necessarily help with the variations and modifiers that are important for that page's overall profile.

Section Navigation

Your second-tier pages, as roadmaps, probably contain links to third-tier pages. So, you'll use these second tier pages to boost the link reputation of your third tier pages by using keywords in the text of the links, where it makes sense for users.

If you're using breadcrumb style navigation on your internal pages, you could use "home" as the text of your links to the home page, but you can also use the main search term for your home page without confusing anyone – we're all used to breadcrumb trails and we all know that the link on the left side will take us back to the top of the site.

You can take this a step further on your third-tier pages and use slightly different text for the second-tier links in your breadcrumbs as well – just be careful with this. Changing the text can become a usability issue if visitors don't understand where a link is supposed to take them, but slight variations ("baby gifts" vs. "gifts for babies") shouldn't cause a problem.

Using Contextual Links

Besides the links that are present in your site's navigation, you can also link from one page to another, using keywords that appear in the body text of a page. If your category page about colored widgets mentions that you also sell chrome widgets, you can use that as an opportunity to link to the chrome widgets page.

Sometimes this is quite natural, as in the example above – why wouldn't you give your visitors a link there, so that they can go to the page you're talking about, and see the products you're talking about?

Sometimes, we have to create content in order to link from it. This can take the form of additional copy at the top or bottom of a page, or even additional content (third tier pages) that offers specific information and also links out to a few other pages with anchor text.

Make It Make Sense

One thing I hate to see is linking just to get anchor text stuffed in somewhere. If you find that you're doing this, either look for a more appropriate context for the link, or think about adding new content.

Chances are good that you already need to create some new content to cover your keyword strategy – use this content wisely, and you'll get a dual benefit. Not only will you broaden the site's profile by targeting more search terms, you can use these additional pages to support the keyword strategy for other pages.

Is It Really Important?

I don't know, why don't you ask Amazon and Wikipedia? Do you think they get much traffic from search engines? These two sites have a lot of incoming links, but the main reason why they appear so often in search results is that their pages are massively interlinked, with text links.

Try searching for the title of a book on any search engine, and chances are good that you'll find Amazon near the top of the search results. When you look at a product page on Amazon, you see links to other products that are recommended. People who bought this book also bought that book, with **that title**.

All those links mean that every page on Amazon contributes link reputation to many other pages. The higher the sales volume for a title, the more links it gets, and the more likely it is that Amazon will be #1 when you search for that book.

Try searching for any famous person, or any standard encyclopedia-type topic. Did Wikipedia show up? Probably. If you use a tool like Yahoo Site Explorer[6] to look at the links pointing to any page on the Wikipedia site, you'll discover that they have several, and possibly hundreds, of keyword rich links pointing to that page, from within the Wikipedia site itself.

Amazon's strategy is deliberate, and although it helps with SEO, that's not their main motivation. All of those links help users find the right book for them, and this has helped turn Amazon.com into an incredibly powerful selling machine. Wikipedia's interlinking has nothing to do with SEO. It's done by editors for usability reasons.

These two examples should give you a better idea of how you can use anchor text and internal linking for the dual benefits of SEO and usability. Now that I've exhausted yet another topic, let's move on to another important stage.

---

[6] http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/

Improving Index Penetration (Stage 4)

Improve Index Penetration

Except in very unusual circumstances, most of us wouldn't even consider building a one-page web site, right?

The more pages you have, the more search terms you can target, the more opportunities you have to appear in search results, and the more "link juice" you have to throw around. More is better, right?

That much is obvious to us all. What isn't immediately obvious is that the search engines all have their own idea of how many pages are on your site. This is called "index penetration" – how many and which pages are actually getting indexed by the search engines.

To a search engine, a page that isn't in their index may just as well not exist. If you're pointing links at pages that aren't getting indexed, the PageRank (link juice, whatever) is passing out through those links into the ether.

Therefore, it is important in the long run to know which pages are getting indexed, which aren't, and to take steps to improve. In the long run, you'd like to have your entire site indexed. The first step is checking to see if you're getting indexed at all.

How to Improve

As an exercise, take one of the pages from your site that's not indexed at all, and link to it from a couple pages that are in the index. Wait a couple weeks, and check back to see if your page has moved into the index.

Did it move? If it did, you can repeat the process to bring more pages into the index. **If this isn't working, then you probably need to work on getting more PageRank into your site.**

This could mean simply getting more links into the site in general (Chapter 6) or getting links from other sites into the sections of your site that aren't doing well (ditto). For established sites, you can usually do a lot simply by using links from within your site.

If this is your first time through with the fast start process, don't get hung up on indexing just yet. You'll have plenty of chances to revisit this stage, after you've done

some work to develop and optimize your content, build links, and started measuring results.

Key Points For The "Advanced"

There are a few points that I want to drive home with full clarity, so I'm putting them here all by themselves:

- When you decide to mask or remove the links from Page A to Page B, you may as well remove ALL of them.

- If you are using multiple links from Page A to Page B, the only link that will predictably become part of the anchor text / link reputation for Page B is the link which appears first in the code.

- This means that you may wish to modify your site's code, so that you can put the keyword-rich contextual links into the code first. An SEO-friendly design would use tables or CSS to make sure that the "content" section of your pages appears first in the code, before your navigation elements.

- If you find that you can't "grok" the dynamic linking concepts, or you are afraid you'll screw something up, then don't do it! You can always get more links from outside of the site to point into sections that need more link juice.
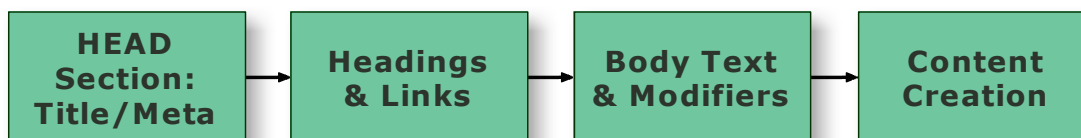
Join the Conversation

As we continue to develop the SEO Fast Start community portal, I'll add case studies and additional tutorials for every step in the fast start process. You can help us develop that content by posting your comments and questions in the site structure section at:

http://www.seofaststart.com/structure

Chapter 5:

Optimizing Web Pages (Step 3)

HEAD Section: Title/Meta	→	Headings & Links	→	Body Text & Modifiers	→	Content Creation

I don't miss the "old days" of search engine positioning (circa 1998), when optimizing pages was about "density," page length, and other hard to measure factors.

Everybody had their own formula, and most of them were wrong. Technically speaking, we all had it wrong… but you don't need to worry about that.

These days, you really just need to know the basics of on page optimization.

The system I use to optimize pages is really very simple, and the work should proceed fairly quickly, if you've done a good job of organizing your site and selecting keywords.

Note: this chapter requires a basic understanding of HTML – if you need a refresher course, or an introduction, I recommend starting here:

http://www.htmlcodetutorial.com/

How to Think About On Page SEO

Develop & Optimize Web Pages

Optimizing your pages is the easy part. If you get all worked up about this stuff, you'll never get any work done. I'm going to give you a set of basic guidelines, but this isn't some special magic formula that you must follow to the letter.

If you need to "break a rule" here and there to make your pages easier to read or whatever, don't worry. It's easy enough to make up for it with anchor text.

If you hear people talking about "keyword density," ignore it. There's no such thing as far as the search engine is concerned. Don't feel badly if you didn't know, we all used to believe in it.

Anyway, this is a short chapter, and other than this paragraph, it's identical to the 2007 edition.

What I'm going to do is walk you through the web page from top to bottom, and tell you where your keywords will have the most impact.

Throughout this chapter, remember that a long phrase also includes individual keywords. Using the phrase "large purple monkey hats" also covers you for "monkey hats" and "purple monkey hats."

The Head Section (Stage 1)

HEAD Section: Title/Meta

The HEAD section of your HTML code isn't actually visible to human visitors when they come to your site. Actually, the TITLE tag will appear in the title bar of the browser window, but it's not visible on the page.

There are some important things you need to know about this section, and a lot of this may be news to you.

Title, Keywords, & Description

Page Title: The page title should be 5-10 words long at most. It should contain the 2-3 primary keyword/phrases you've chosen, and little else. It's sort of like an ad headline, so it should be designed to attract clicks from those who find you in a search. I like to vertical bars (right above the Enter key), dashes, or commas to separate the different items:

```
<title>Free Search Engine Optimization Book – SEO Fast Start ebook</title>
```

What you may not know, although it's pretty important, is that you can only expect the first 65 characters of the TITLE to show up on a search result page – more than that, and it will get cut off some of the time.

Because the title is also the clickable link on search results, you would like to have the actual search term appear in the first 65 characters, because the search engines will display the matching keywords in bold, which will improve the click through rate for your listing.

What's better than being #1? Getting more clicks from your #1 listing!

When we already have a lot of top (#1) rankings for a site, I like to experiment with title changes, to see if we can squeeze a little more traffic through. Believe it or not, we've managed close to a 50% increase in search engine referrals for some keywords, simply by writing better title tags – even though we were already #1.

Keywords META Tag: The keywords META tag is a waste of time in my opinion, but if you want to, you can put your keywords for the page in here. You can put also common misspelligns into the kewyords tag if you have a lot of spare time[7].

Description META Tag: I highly recommend writing a separate description for every page. Use the first 10 words or so to attract visitors, working in keywords where it makes sense.

The description that's displayed on search results also influences the click-through rate for your listings – for longer search queries (4+ words) it's usually more important than the title tag.

Like the title tag, you only get so many characters to display. Right now, 155 characters is the cut-off; you can't expect the full description to be displayed on search results if you have more than that.

Robots META Tag: The robots META tag is important; because it lets you take some control over what spiders do. Here are some examples:

```
<meta name="robots" content="noindex, nofollow">
```

This tells the search engine spider not to index this page, and not to follow any links on the page. Do this if you don't want the page to be indexed. You don't need to use "index" or "follow" because that's what spiders do.

---

[7] You probably missed the joke here. Sorry.

```
<meta name="robots" content="noodp, noarchive, noydir">
```

NOODP tells the search engines that you don't want them to use your Open Directory description (DMOZ.org) on SERPs. NOARCHIVE says that you don't want them to keep a cached copy of the page. NOYDIR says that you don't want Yahoo to use your Yahoo directory description on SERPs.

As in these examples, you can combine different elements (noindex, nofollow, noarchive, noodp, noydir, etc.) in your robots META tag. The search engines will all observe noindex and nofollow, the rest are "extensions" that may not be supported by everyone.

Other META Tags: The only other META tag that's really relevant for SEO is the "verification" META tag used by Google Webmaster Tools (Chapter 9).

Headings & Links (Stage 2)

Headings & Links

If possible, you want to use the core terms and top variations in headings and sub headings (H1, H2, H3…) on the page. It's not absolutely essential that the heading is the first thing on the page.

Besides the headings, you should also try to work these same terms into the text of links on the page. This is usually a logical thing anyway, because you should have two URLs that you're trying to get ranked for every search term (a first and second choice) so you can take care of this just by linking them to each other using keywords.

You may have already done this (or at least planned it out) in step 2 (site structure). You do NOT need to work every keyword into links. Remember, the phrases you use in your writing can contain more than one variation of a search term.

Body Text & Modifiers (Stage 3)

Body Text & Modifiers

Writing the body text is usually pretty easy. Just write naturally, and work your keywords (including variations) in where they make sense.

Let me say that another way… Write to sell. Write to persuade. Write to inform. Write words that make sense. Do not write in "keywordspeak." If

your copy doesn't do its job with human visitors, then you have failed, no matter how high your rankings may be.

You may get a very slight boost by using your most important search terms in the first paragraph, but it's not worth doing if you lose readability or fail to persuade your visitors to keep reading. Make sense?

So… just fit the search terms in where they fit. OK? If you get all your variations in at least once, you're doing great. You probably don't even need to go that far, as long as all the individual keywords in your cluster get used somewhere.

More important than the exact placement of keywords in your copy is the use of the modifiers you uncovered in step 1 (keyword strategy). Let me explain why:

About "The Long Tail" – You will often hear people talking about "long tail searches," the "head" and "tail" of search, and that sort of stuff.

The basic idea here is simple.

The most popular search terms get a lot of traffic. They're easy to find out about by using keyword databases. They show up on the radar when you do your research, because they are popular.

The truth is, though, that most real world search queries don't fit into this convenient set of search terms that we can see in the databases. We add a word here; we change the order, etc.

In the real world, there are 1000 ways to say one thing, and people use them all. In fact, the most popular terms probably make up less than 20% of the overall searches.

The "long tail" refers to the other 80% of search queries, that don't show up in the keyword databases. We target these by using a lot different variations of our core terms, along with modifiers, when we write copy for our web pages.

As you write your pages to fit the core terms and variations for a cluster, try to use as many relevant modifiers as you can, because this will greatly increase your ability to rank for "long tail" search terms.

Creating Content (Stage 4)

Content Creation

Most of us, when we map out a keyword strategy for the first time, discover that our site doesn't actually have enough content to support our strategy. This also suggests that there's important content that's missing for our visitors.

In fact, one of the most valuable things you'll get out of developing a keyword strategy is a sense of what kind of content your visitors need.

The most important thing about creating content for your site is to avoid creating duplicate content. This means that you don't just re-use the same boilerplate text and change a few keywords to make a new page.

Whatever search terms you're targeting on the page, write something original. If you're building your site with other people's content (from article databases etc.) you'll do a lot better if you add a little of your own editorial content to it.

Tier 1 (Home Page)

It's possible to get rankings without writing copy for your home page, if you're willing to pour a lot of resources into building links, but it's very unusual to find a site that can't do better with some copy on the home page. Google's done pretty well with just a search box, but I can't think of any other examples. Write copy. It's easier.

Tier 2 (Roadmaps / Categories)

I see 'em all the time. Shopping carts with great copy on the home page, and no copy whatsoever on the category pages. Nothing but pictures and links… you know what happens to these? The search engines spot these nearly empty pages as duplicate content, and they crawl no further.

Can this be overcome with enough links? Sure. Is it worth the bother? No! You can easily write a few paragraphs of unique text for these pages, and you can even use

that copy as a place to add some "anchor text" links to other pages (Step 2, Site Structure, Phase 3).

Tier 3 (Destination Pages)

Shopping cart product pages are yet another place where people seem to think, quite often, that they don't need to write copy. Not only is this crazy from a usability and conversion standpoint, it's a terrible idea for SEO.

If you do a good job of writing and expanding your content, the third-tier pages are going to bring you a lot of traffic from the search engines.

User-Generated Content (Forums, Reviews, Feedback)

If you have discussion forums, allow comments on your blog, take user reviews, etc. you are actually creating a lot of content. Not only is this great for the user experience, it creates a great deal of keyword rich content. Content that you can use to bring links into your site, send anchor text to your other pages, and which may even bring visitors in from search results.

Blogging for Content

Writing a blog is an easy way to add content to your site. If the blog is any good, you may even get some good interaction with your visitors, and attract a lot of links. Writing a blog allows you to continually add fresh content to your site. That's the good news.

The bad news: unless your site is a blog, with no other purpose, you still need to create optimized pages for your targeted search terms outside of the blog. Getting a blog post ranked is nice, but not if the visitor is several clicks away from the page you actually wanted them to find.

If you're going to blog, as an "add-on" to an existing website, think about how you're going to funnel all the traffic and link juice into the rest of your site. I am NOT saying that you shouldn't blog, but it's no substitute for creating the content that you need elsewhere.

Some Guidelines For Search Engine Friendly Design

Some basic rules apply to designing pages to be "search engine friendly." Keep them in mind as you build your site, or you could be in for a lot of headaches. These all have to do with creating a site that search engine spiders can navigate and read.

If you have to "break" one of these rules, you'll need to sort out the details of making your content accessible to the engines.

Frames

Search engine spiders don't handle frames very well, so you're better off avoiding the use of frames altogether. If you must use them, create a NOFRAMES version of your site that links all of your content together. Better yet, don't use frames.

Flash, QuickTime, Plug-Ins etc.

Search engines actually can read and index Flash web sites. The problem is that they can't really trust what they find in the Flash files, because there's no easy way to determine which text is visible.

Doing your entire web site in Flash is (in my opinion) crazy from a usability standpoint, and although there are hacks to work around the SEO issues, we'll have to save those details for the support portal.

This doesn't mean that you can't use Flash, QuickTime, or other plug-ins selectively on your HTML web pages. You can. There are a lot of cool things you can do with embedded audio and video, or with the interactive elements that Flash can create. Just because search engines don't see it, that doesn't mean you can't use it.

JavaScript

Although some of the search engines have experimented with reading JavaScript, you should assume that anything you do with JavaScript is basically invisible. This doesn't mean that you should try to get tricky, by doing "sneaky redirects" to take people away from your search-engine-optimized pages to somewhere else.

Image Maps

Image maps can be useful in design, but the search engines don't all follow them, and like images, there's no way to include anchor text. You need an alternative form of navigation if you use image maps.

HTML Validation

There's a lot of debate about whether HTML validation is important. In my experience, running your code through an HTML validator will almost always generate a lot of "warnings" that don't mean much in the real world.

When you see actual "errors," this might mean that you've forgotten to close a tag or something, and this can create issues with spidering and indexing. My rule of thumb is to fix the errors and ignore the warnings.

You can check your HTML code at: http://validator.w3.org/

Watch the Portal, and Join the Conversation

As we continue to develop the SEO Fast Start community portal, I'll add case studies and additional tutorials for every step in the fast start process. You can help us develop that content by posting your comments and questions in the Content SEO section:

http://www.seofaststart.com/content

Chapter 6:
Link Building & Promotion (Step 4)

Inventory Current Assets	→	Vertical & Directory Links	→	Inviting: Link Bait & Targets	→	Promoting: PR & Content

If you've read anything about SEO, you know by now that link building is extremely important. In fact, link building is almost as old as SEO, because search engines have been using link analysis for a very long time.

Larry Page and Sergey Brin's invention of PageRank ushered in a new era for search engines. By late 2001, when I wrote the first edition of SEO Fast Start, Google was well on their way to claiming a dominant position in search, and everyone was looking for links.

Because of the "link building arms race" that Google started back then, link building has changed a lot since 2001. Link building has become a discipline unto itself, and one short chapter isn't enough.

Watch the portal and read the newsletter for updates on this and other premium content. For now, I'll give you a high-speed run through the link building landscape.

Link Building Concepts

Promotion & Link Building Campaign

The first step in understanding link building is getting a sense of how the search engines see things. As explained in Chapter 2, all of the search engines use link analysis to help them determine their rankings.

There are only a few areas where the search engines are actively working to fight what they call "spam" and link analysis is by far the most active subject. As a result,

it's very important for you to understand their position, and what they're looking for, if you want to create an intelligent link building strategy for your site.

There are a number of ways to look at any given link that you find on the web. From your perspective as the person trying to get ranked, it might seem that the only important questions are:

- ✓ What page does this link point to?

- ✓ What words are used in the text?

- ✓ How much does this text count?

- ✓ How much "link juice" (if any) am I going to get?

- ✓ Is there any risk of being penalized?

Fair enough. I'll teach you how to answer those questions, at least most of the time. But in order to understand the answers, you need to understand the questions, and that means starting with the search engines' perspective.

What Search Engines Want

From the search engines' perspective, they want to understand some other things about a link, before they can decide the answers to your questions.

Why Does This Link Exist?

The primary question for search engines is why a given link exists at all. For your internal links, those that they find in the body copy, with a visible (blue and underlined) link, are most likely there to help your users.

What about links that are concealed (no visible indication that it's a link), buried (tiny text in the footer of the page), or both? Isn't it likely that you only put those links there to influence your rankings?

Which link do you think they trust more?

Why Was This Link Given?

So it goes with links from other sites. At the core of any search engines efforts to fight "link spam" will be an effort to determine the intent of each link. When it comes to external links, the question is the same; it's just asked a little differently.

When you find a link from one web site to another, there are only a few ways that it got there. I break them into five main categories:

- ✓ **Stolen links** exist because some web applications (blogs, directories, and many insecure scripts) allow users to add links to a web page. For example, when blogs were new and nofollow didn't exist, spammers could easily create links to a site simply by adding worthless comments to blog posts.

- ✓ **Bartered links** are more of a gray area for search engines. Aside from link exchanges, this category also includes signature links in forums, and those found on social networking sites[8] like Squidoo. Depending on the value of the contribution to a forum or social network, these may be more like stolen links.

  Bartered links aren't necessarily endorsed by the site owner, but they're allowed because the site owner gets something in return – usually content or a return link. When a link is given in return, search engines can detect this relationship and discount the value of the link.

- ✓ **Manufactured links** mostly exist because someone has gone out of their way to create entire web sites and web pages so that they can use this content for linking purposes. This is known as "link farming" and it's difficult for the search engines to detect.

  Another type of manufactured link exists, though, because there's a whole class of web sites that are creating by "screen scraping" search results, stealing content, modifying RSS feeds, and other nonsense. As a side effect, websites that are present in search results usually pick up a slow but steady stream of manufactured links that they didn't really ask for.

---

[8] Many social networking sites now add "rel=nofollow" to their links, to prevent abuse

✓ **Purchased or rented links** are not really a gray area for the search engines. These links may be legitimate and profitable advertising for the buyer, or they may be created solely for the purpose of influencing search engine rankings.

If search engines get better at detecting and filtering out these links, their effectiveness will decline. SEO people are a resourceful bunch, so there will always be new schemes designed to avoid detection. Personally, I buy links when it makes sense because of branding or direct traffic value.

✓ **Given links** or **editorial links** are what the search engines value the most. If they could rank pages based on the natural links that are created because one person actually likes and recommends another site, they'd be able to deliver the best possible search results.

Within the last category, what search engines really want are the "natural links of pure love," as I described. But there are other types of editorial link.

Every time an online news story talks about Apple and the iPod, there's a good chance that those words will be linked to Apple's website. This is just an editorial reference, but it still sends a little link juice their way[9].

If I link to the Microsoft web page with the words "evil empire" I am probably not recommending Microsoft's products[10]… but I would be sending them some PageRank nonetheless.

Search engines would probably like to be able to tell the difference between these types of links. They'd like to be able to break links down into even finer categories than I have.

For most readers, your approach to building links will depend, to an extent, on what you think search engines are capable of doing today, what they may become capable of doing in the future, and how you expect them to respond to different types of links.

---

[9] As noted with respect to internal linking, links within the text area of a page might actually count for more than any other type of link.

[10] Actually, I recommend several Microsoft products, including Outlook, Word and OneNote. I don't think that any specific person at Microsoft is evil – they're just doing their jobs.

Authority and Trust... and an alternative approach

In today's search engines, the value of a link from a web site depends on how much authority (Google measures this with PageRank) and trust a site has. An authoritative site may do very well in search results and have a very high PageRank score, but still not be trusted because they sell text link ads to SEO people.

Links from such sites may be worth nothing to one search engine, and a lot to another. In the end, it only matters to you if you're spending money or time to get that link, without getting anything else in return.

Because Google publishes an approximation of their PageRank score through the Google Toolbar browser plug-in, you'll see a lot of emphasis out there on "high-PR" links and that sort of thing. There are only a few ways to get such links, and the categories I listed above spell them all out.

For most of us, it comes down to buying, bartering, or actually earning an editorial link. We know which ones are most valued by search engines. It's not impossible to get the best kind, but you do need to think a little.

My general approach to link building is based on the concepts of authority and trust, like anyone's would be. We want more links, from sites that are as authoritative and trusted as possible.

But we can't measure these things directly, so I prefer to use tactics that have the potential to generate a profit on their own. That's why I only buy links when there's some branding or direct traffic value – otherwise, it's just another expense where I can't measure the return on investment.

Developing a Game Plan for Links

The "fast start" process for link building and promotion is broken up into four stages:

✓ Inventory of Assets

✓ Directories & Verticals

✓ Link Targets & Link Bait

✓ Website Promotion

There's a little bit of overlap between these stages, and it's unavoidable. We're not really talking about a step by step process once you get into link building and promotion activities. The step by step process is designed to help you create a strategy.

Inventorying Your Assets (Stage 1)

Inventory
Current
Assets

Developing a link building program, even for new sites, begins with an assessment of the current situation, not just of where you stand, but where the competition is.

Even if you don't currently have any links pointing to your site, there are still some important steps you should take to identify strengths and weaknesses before mapping out your initial link building campaign.

Measuring Incoming Links

One of the first things I do when I take on a new student is assess their current incoming links. This means actually trying to find every page that's linking to their site, checking to see what kind of link it is, what text is used in the link, etc.

It's difficult to come up with a complete picture, but there are several tools that make the job a lot easier.

- ✓ Google Webmaster Tools – when you sign up and verify your site, you get a very complete look at all of the links that Google has found pointing to the site. Fairly new, very cool. (www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps)

- ✓ Yahoo Site Explorer – allows you to explore the incoming links for a single page or an entire web site. Comparing the number of links to a site vs. the number of links to the home page gives you an idea of how many "deep links" the site has. (siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com)

- ✓ Backlink Analyzer– Backlink Analyzer (tools.seobook.com) is a free tool from Aaron Wall's SEOBook.com site, and it does a very good job of analyzing the links to find anchor text, but it doesn't always perform perfectly. There are other free and paid tools, including Tattler, Optilink, and SEO Elite.

Although it can be a time consuming exercise, there is real value in actually looking at the sites that are currently linking to you. Some of them may be willing to change the text or context of the link, others may be interested in receiving some free content (with a link to you of course), and you may also find affiliates or other marketing partners.

You can also use the same tools to examine competitors – more on this in a moment.

Identifying Link Targets

There are two sides to every link. Naturally, if you want to get pages ranked, you would like to have people link to those pages, use your search terms in the anchor text, etc. That's your side of the story.

As you move through your SEO campaign, you will identify pages on your site that could use a little link love from the web, and I'll be happy to help you get that done. For now, let's look at the other side of the link… from the perspective of the person who is giving you a link.

The real question you should be asking right now is what pages on your site people would actually want to link to, and how you can improve in this area.

If your site has the definitive resource (or a very good resource) on a topic, people will naturally want to link to it. Shelly Lowery of Web Source has a page full of HTML character codes (http://www.web-source.net/symbols.htm) that I have used over and over and linked to many times. The last time I checked, there were several hundred links pointing to this page alone.

Even if you don't have a resource like that, there are things you can do to improve the prospects of winning natural links. If you have pages on your site now that make good link targets, great. If not, think about how you can create some.

For example, let's say you sell logo merchandise for some professional sports league. People buy hats with the team logo, jerseys for their favorite players.

What if, instead of just a big catalog of merchandise, you had a page for each team and player, with RSS news feeds, a place to sign up for email alerts, as well as (of course) links to the merchandise. Are people likely to link to these pages? You bet they are. Are people likely to find these pages when they search? Of course.

If you do it right, your link targets aren't just there to collect links. They collect visitors too, and give those visitors a reason to stay and explore your site further.

Assessing Your Strengths & Weaknesses

We all went to school, and when we were in school, at some point they told us that we were all unique and special individuals, with unique and special talents. Think for a moment about how unique and special you are. How much you mean to the people in your life.

Feel better? Good… now forget about that for a minute and think about your web site.

How is it unique? How is it special? Is it unique, or is it just another "me too" in the crowded world of the web? Be honest.

Whatever is unique and special is a strength for you. The more strengths you have, the easier it is to build links, because you can leverage those strengths. If you have a "me too" site, all is not lost, but it will affect your strategy.

If you have a "me too" site, but you have a good writer on your team, that's a strength. If someone on your team is a great researcher, that's a strength. What are you good at? What needs work?

This goes beyond link building, but it helps to know these things as you look at all the possible strategies and tactics you can use to promote your site.

Evaluating Your Resources

In particular, evaluate the following question: do you have more money than time, or more time than money?

If you have no money, no staff, and no time, then your strategy will be different from someone who has a large and effective team, with a profitable business.

Assessing the Competition

There are a couple ways to assess the strength of your competition. In the long run, you'll want to run detailed link analysis on your major competitors to see who is

linking to them, how they get their links, and what their strengths and weaknesses might be.

In the long run, you'd like a lot of the sites that link to your competitors to link to you as well. Sometimes they will, sometimes they won't. Which ones you pursue, and how much effort you put into that, is a matter of balancing resources. It's usually easier to go find your own links, once you've exhausted the directories and verticals that link to your competitors (Stage 2).

In the short term, you can at least identify the major competitors (the ones who keep showing up on the search results where you want to be) and do one simple thing.

Go install the Google Toolbar if you haven't already got it. Turn on the advanced features to enable PageRank. Or, if you have Mozilla Firefox, get the SearchStatus plugin. Once you've done that, go look at the "toolbar PageRank" of your main competitors, and compare it to your own score.

The toolbar is a nifty tool that Google offers (go to http://toolbar.google.com) which lets you perform Google searches directly from your browser. It also has a set of "advanced features" which provide some information about any web page that you view in your browser.
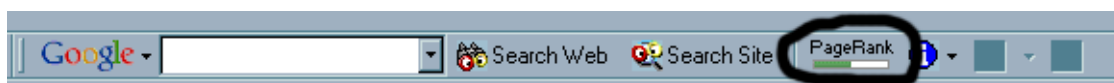
Among these is a graphical display of Google's "PageRank score" for that page, represented as a number from 1-10. While this is not a perfect representation of the exact value (the real number has a much larger range than 1-10), it does allow you to quickly assess the strength of a competitor's links.

If your major competitors are beating you in this area, you can still do a lot with keyword strategy, site structure and optimized pages, but it's a good indication of where you stand.

Getting Listed In Directories & Verticals (Stage 2)

Vertical & Directory Links

Submitting your site to web directories is one of the simplest things you can do to boost your web site's profile with search engines.

If you do nothing more than submit to the top few general-purpose directories, the additional search engine referrals and direct traffic should more than justify the investment.

At this stage in the game, though, it's worth expanding our definition to include vertical (topical) directories, and topically related "resource listings" on other sites. In almost any market, the potential for listings like this is huge.

Major Directories

At this point, there are really only two major directories: Yahoo.com and DMOZ.org. The bad news is that Yahoo charges money, and DMOZ is badly in need of new leadership. The good news is that they're both worth the effort.

In spite of this, I don't launch a web site without submitting to both of them.

Yahoo charges "commercial sites" $299 a year for a listing. Your site must pass an editorial review, which they guarantee they will complete in 7 days. You just surf through the Yahoo directory (dir.yahoo.com) to find the category where your site belongs, and click the "Suggest a Site" link at the top of the page.

Follow the guidelines precisely. Your directory listing is not an ad – it's a description of your site. If you're rejected, you get one chance to correct the problem.

Once you've secured your Yahoo listing, then go to dmoz.org and do the same thing. Surf to the category, submit your site. I like to use the same basic language (with a few edits) that the Yahoo editors used to describe my site. DMOZ editors, if they see your submission at all, do not want to read an advertisement – using a well written editorial description greatly increases your chances.

Why submit to Yahoo and DMOZ? Well, Yahoo is the directory behind the Yahoo portal, and DMOZ is the directory that Google offers to visitors. Neither search engine puts a lot of emphasis on the directory, but both directories do generate some traffic.

More importantly, a Yahoo listing in particular tells search engines that your web site is a serious, legitimate business, not just a fly-by-night operation. People who build spam sites do not spend $299 to have an editor look at them, because they don't want anyone from the search engines taking a close look at their site.

If you get into either directory, make sure that you add the corresponding entry (NOYDIR and/or NOODP) to the "robots" META tag for the page they've listed. Usually this only applies to the home page, because these directories rarely link to internal pages. This will tell the search engines to use your own META description on search result pages. See Chapter 5 for more on META tags.

Minor Directories

In addition to Yahoo and DMOZ, there are a few "second tier" directories that I always consider for every site.

I wish I could tell you which are paid, which offer free listings, how much they charge, etc. but it would be a waste of time because it could change by the time you read this.

Best of The Web - http://www.botw.org

Gimpsy - http://www.gimpsy.com

GoGuides - http://www.goguides.org

Jayde - http://www.jayde.com

Skaffe – http://www.skaffe.com

Starting Point - http://www.stpt.com

Because these directories are rarely fully crawled and indexed, it's worth checking one thing before you submit.

Surf to the category where your link will reside, and check to see if that page is actually in Google's index, with the info:URL search I showed you in Chapter 4 (Stage 4, index penetration.

If the page is indexed, and not listed as a supplemental result, then go ahead and submit.

If it's listed as a Supplemental Result, but there are no sites listed on the page (an empty category), then check other nearby categories that aren't empty. If these other categories are indexed (not supplemental) then it's likely that you can move your category out of the supplemental index by adding your site.

If the page is not indexed by Google, I'd recommend giving it a pass for now, and revisiting it later to see if things have changed.

There are many other directories out there. SEOPros maintains a list of reviewed directories[11], and it seems that everyone has a list nowadays. To me, directories are going to have a point of diminishing returns, but as long as you can see that your category page is being indexed by Google, the link is probably worth something.

Vertical Directories

Besides the general-purpose directories I just mentioned, there are many more "vortals" or vertical directories for any topic or market. Sites like SearchEngineGuide.com and the Internet Search Engine Database (ISEDB.com) offer searchable listings of vertical directories.

You will also find a lot of vertical directories by searching for terms like "widget directory" on search engines, and by examining the inbound links of your major competitors. Finding a good vertical directory is great, because there's a strong chance of realizing a profit from the traffic that it generates.

Another tool you can use (though it's not just point and click) is Hub Finder (tools.seobook.com). What you're trying to do with this tool is find sites that link to multiple competitors, since these will often be vertical directories. Even if they aren't directories, they're likely candidates to host a link to your site.

Blogs & Forums

If there are blogs and forums active in your market space (there probably are), you may find a great opportunity exists, if you're willing and able to spend the time to develop good relationships within these communities.

By that, I mean that you should actually contribute something. Making pointless posts and comments simply to get links is not a good use of your time. Building relationships with a community of people is a great use of time.

---

[11] http://www.seopros.org/search/dirlist.asp

Even if you don't invest a lot of time, knowing who is speaking to your target audience, and linking to sites in your industry, is worthwhile. Blogs have blogrolls; forums usually have FAQs and lists of recommended resources.

These are partly "friend lists," and partly based on who has already established themselves. If they link to someone else in your industry, there's no reason why they can't link to you, if they have a good reason to do so.

I've personally spent a bit of time on SEO related forums, talking with bloggers, etc. because it just makes sense for me to participate in the community. I didn't do it to get links, but if I asked all of the friends I have made to do me a favor, I could probably generate a thousand links in a week to any kind of related site.

Building relationships isn't easy and quick, but it can be fun and very rewarding on a lot of levels.

Content Sites

In every market, you will find sites that are more focused on content than ecommerce. News, articles, tutorials, reviews, whatever is applicable in your market or industry. If you are capable of creating content, contributing content to these sites can be a great way to get links and traffic.

Even if you don't write, these sites are another potential rich source of links. How you would approach them depends on the type of site, and how they operate. I wish I could give you an easy step by step for this, but it's not that simple. When you find one, look for opportunities.

In general, any site that appears in the top few pages of search results for your most important search terms is a place where you'd like to get a link.

Developing Link Targets (Stage 3)

Inviting: Link Bait & Targets

So far, the methods I've outlined involve soliciting links from other sites. The primary purpose of these activities was simply to create links. In many markets, you'll be pleasantly surprised

to discover that your reward for doing these activities[12] is a lot of first-page rankings and search engine traffic within a few months' time.

Great… you've had a taste of success. But that's really just the beginning. There will still be plenty of room for improvement – search terms where you're approaching the top, search terms where you're still buried on the second page or even deeper in the search results.

Now it's time to look at ways to create more links. Both this stage and the next involve actively promoting your web site. The main difference is the underlying approach.

In this stage, we're looking for ways to "incite" or "invite" other web sites to link to you, by creating compelling link targets on your site. This used to be seen as basic website promotion, but thanks to the efforts of many people, "link baiting" has become a subject worthy of separate consideration.

The core concept here is to create some reason for people to link to you. Rather than attempt to write a comprehensive manual for this, I'll use a few examples to get your creative juices going.

Making News & Making Noise

If you've never heard of Jason Calacanis, you're not alone… but a lot more people in the SEO business know his name, because he used his "notable expert" status as founder of Weblogs Inc. to say some pretty ignorant things about SEO[13].

This created more than a little controversy. I have no idea how much this little firestorm delivered to his blog, in terms of traffic and inbound links, but it would not surprise me if it's far more than he ever got by blogging about other topics.

So there's one way to do it… just insult large groups of people who have blogs. Remember "natural links of pure love?" These are natural links of pure hate, I guess.

---

[12] Assuming that you've done Steps 1 & 2, to develop a well optimized and well structured site

[13] Apparently pleased with the results, he's gone on to insult other professionals as well.

You can also do something positive to make news. In fact, that's what I would recommend. My point here is that anything noteworthy (even noteworthy ignorance) is likely to get a lot of attention… and with that attention, traffic and links.

Giving Stuff Away

One of the easiest forms of link bait is to give stuff away. This might be free software, for example. Many folks have invested time and/or money to develop add-ons for Wordpress, extensions for Mozilla Firefox, and even standalone software. Free software is great, especially if it fills a need.

If you can't see yourself developing and supporting software, that's no problem. If you sell baby gifts, it could be a contest for the most adorable baby picture. The fact is people love to get free stuff. Money is good, merchandise is good, and trips to tropical islands are good.

The main thing here is to have a "reason why" that makes sense, and make some noise about it.

If We Build It, They Will…

Actually, if we build it, nothing will happen until someone sees it. If you create a great web site, people may occasionally mention it to their friends if they happen to stumble across it. They might even link to it. If we add some "Digg This" and "Del.ic.i.o.us" buttons to it, they might even help other people stumble across it too.

There is value in developing good content, good tools, and creating a good user experience. Because it's hard to quantify the natural links and goodwill that this creates, people have a hard time accepting "great web site" as a link building strategy, but it is.

Of course, it's a more effective strategy if you don't just take the "if we build it…" approach. Make it easier for people to bookmark your link targets, add them to social networks, and tell a friend about you. Ask them to do it, and give them a reason why.

Blogging for (Link) Love

It turns out that there is more to blogging than sharing your life story, spouting silly opinions, and posting pictures of your cat. Who knew?

In fact, simply creating a blog and writing on it regularly can generate a steady stream of traffic and links, because of the nature of the "blogosphere" itself. Your content goes out into an RSS feed, which will be picked up here and there.

When you blog about other blogs (it may sound silly) the "trackback" links and back-and-forth dialogue can generate a tremendous amount of links and traffic. Participate in the conversation, have something to say… give and get back.

An added benefit of blogging on your own site, assuming your content is good enough to get indexed and attract links, is that you can use the blog (judiciously) to point some anchor text links back into the rest of your site.

Why Do We Love Lists So Much?

I don't know what it is about lists. Back in the 70s, there was a best selling book called simply "The Book of Lists." It was nothing but a bunch of lists. Most famous last words, most dangerous animals, stuff like that.

People still love lists. Simply creating a top ten list for anything, if you can make even a little noise about it, is a great way to attract links for a blog, a web site, etc.

Presence Builds Presence

This sort of bleeds over into the next stage, but it's also a simple truth. Presence builds presence. If you're found in paid search results, you'll get some links just because you were there. If you're found in the organic search results, in a popular magazine, on a billboard… you are likely to get some links as a result.

Promoting Your Site (Stage 4)

Promoting: PR & Content

For me, the best type of link building campaign is one that isn't really about links at all. There are a large number of marketing and promotion activities that generate profits, help with branding in positive ways, and generally pay for themselves.

A lot of these activities (presence builds presence) also create links. The web, after all, is built out of links. I call these activities "profitable promotions," and if you can use them to build links, you may not need to do anything else.

Content Promotion

Most commonly referred to as "article marketing," the creation and distribution of content to other web sites is one of the most powerful promotion and link building tactics available. In fact, I dedicated an entire week to this subject in my link building classes last year.

Although a lot of people "know about" content promotion, very few do a good job at it. Like a lot of the "fast start" system, the basic idea here is pretty simple. The greatest value is realized when you go a little bit past the basic idea.

Let's just say, for example, that you write an article, and submit it to an article directory like ezinearticles.com. You'll get a link from that directory, and assuming the search engines don't ignore it, you get a little link juice for your site.

So, what does the average article marketer do? They "spin" that article into dozens of variations, and submit it to dozens of article directories… and they get dozens of links from article directories. Assuming the search engines don't ignore those links, they get a little more link juice.

Allow me to suggest an alternative, based on the idea that any fool can get a whole bunch of links from article directories… so, if you want to do better than the competition, you might want to get some links from other web sites besides the article directories.

The topic of the article, and the quality of the writing, now comes into play. A well written article on a topic of broad interest is much more likely to be picked up from an article directory and placed on another site. So, don't write articles about how to buy your products. Don't write advertisements. Write real articles.

Now, instead of the article directories as the primary source of links, you have "other web sites" as the main source of links. We're making progress.

But there's a challenge here, and an opportunity. As you already know, search engines don't like duplicate content, so the same article placed on a dozen web sites is likely to be ignored (along with the link) by at least some of the search engines, to the extent that they can identify it as duplicate. In practice I'd bet that at least 20% of the duplicates won't get filtered out, at least not right away.

Duplicate content is the reason why so many article marketers "spin" their articles before submitting them to directories, replacing a word here and there, changing the order of paragraphs, etc. This makes it even less likely that another site will pick up their article, because spinning does not improve the quality and usually makes it worse.

What if you could solve the duplicate content problem, and build strong relationships with the owners of great content sites, by doing just one extra thing? Would you consider it?

Here it is: go direct. Contact the web sites that pick up your article, and offer them a unique article in its place. Offer them an updated or expanded version. Offer to create content for them. Write actual unique content for them, or at least write a different introduction for the article.

You can find out where your articles appear by running a Google Alert[14] (www.google.com/alerts) with the author's name and the title of the article. Whenever your article is picked up by another site, you get an email alert, and you can take a look at where your article has appeared.

You don't have to contact everyone. You don't have to offer everyone unique content. But when you find a good quality site that wants guest articles on your topic, it's a small investment to make for a long term link.

Don't feel like bothering with the article directories yourself? Not a problem, if there are other writers covering the same topic! You can use searches and Google Alerts to find out which web sites have picked up their articles, and contact these sites directly.

I could (and just might) write an entire book about ways to leverage content into links and traffic, but we don't have that kind of space here. If you want the rest of this story, please watch the link building videos I've provided as a companion for this chapter.

---

[14] If someone on your team isn't running some kind of alert (news, web, blogs) on your business, you really should think about it; it's a great way to see what the web is saying about you

Update for 2008 – Social Media Sites

This isn't really a new thing, but after working with content sharing sites like Hub Pages (www.hubpages.com) and others for the past year, I have developed a real appreciation for those sites (like Hub Pages) that maintain quality standards.

What's more, the search engines seem to share that appreciation. Don't be a "toad" and publish junk on these sites. Learn the rules and how they work. But it can be a very worthwhile use of your time to publish good information through these channels.

Public Relations

A couple years ago one of my students hired a PR agency to help him promote his business. They managed to get his site a mention (via a photo credit) in a story in the USA Today newspaper & web site. The story was about upside down Christmas trees, which were invented so stores could sell more ornaments[15], but people had started buying them as a novelty.

This one story alone generated quite a bit of traffic and links, but it didn't stop there. Not even close. Over the next couple months, my student did radio & TV interviews and the "upside down tree" was even featured on a major network morning show. Wire services wrote stories. It was amazing. It was transforming.

It wasn't that hard. All he did was write a check and have a few conversations with the PR guys.

The next year, he didn't hire a PR firm, and decided to do it all himself. When he saw a news story on Christmas trees, he contacted the writer/reporter to offer some info and of course his availability as a resource. One result of this was a link from the Wall Street Journal web site.

Did he get a big boost in search engine rankings from all this? You bet. But it was a very profitable activity, even without that extra benefit, because he got a lot of traffic, sold a lot of trees, and built a very large email list of current and potential customers.

---

[15] It's easier to see the ornament when it's hung upside down – branches don't get in the way

Viral Marketing & Affiliates

Viral marketing is sort of a vague topic, and I've lumped affiliate programs with it here because that may be the easiest variation to understand. As a link building tactic, any time you can give someone else HTML code, that they're likely to copy and paste into their web site, you have an opportunity to create links.

The link building videos will walk you through a couple of really cool promotions, involving affiliate programs and "plug in tools."

Some affiliate programs are more SEO friendly than others. The one I'm most excited about right now is called Link Connector (www.linkconnector.com), because they allow affiliates to give you a direct link and still earn commissions. This is usually possible with most other programs[16], but with Link Connector, there's no extra work involved.

You don't see a lot of people doing plug in tools, because it involves work, but this is another powerful viral marketing strategy.

As an example, let's say that you're involved with the real estate market in some way, and you've developed a really cool mortgage calculator tool. If you offer that tool to other sites, and the copy-and-paste code that you give them includes a link back to your site, you'll earn a little link love every time someone uses your tool on their site.

Marketing & Advertising

If you haven't picked up on it already, I'm going to make it very clear right now: **anything you do to advertise or market your business has the potential to build links** to your web site, especially if you think about links as a possible benefit when you plan your activities.

I could tell you a thousand stories here. Trade show booth has a cool hologram effect on it, people link to the site. Trade show booth at a fairly conservative event has "boat show booth babes," outraged and amused people link to the site. TV ad

---

[16] This is very technical, for more details watch the link building course

gives out www.example.com/tvoffer as a URL to track the ad's performance, people link to that.

What's so cool about this? Plain old marketing and advertising activities also have the potential to generate a profit on their own. If you can turn a profit and get some links in the bargain, you're miles ahead of any competitor who thinks that the solution to SEO is to just go rent text links.

Go forth, and market your business. When it comes to link building, forgetting about SEO altogether isn't the end of the world. It might even be the start of something big.

Outbound Links & Link Exchanges

Once upon a time, you couldn't find a book or website about SEO that didn't talk about reciprocal linking, or link exchanges, as a core strategy. In fact, a lot of people still cling to the idea of link exchange as a great way to build links.

Forget about it. Unless there's something more to the relationship than just "linking for SEO," you're wasting your time with link exchanges. Search engines can see both sites, they can identify the reciprocal links, and they can easily ignore these links.

Beyond that, search engines can and do consider the quality of the sites you link to when they evaluate the quality of your site. This means that you should evaluate the sites and pages you point to, and determine whether they're really worth linking to. If you have to link to a site you don't like, it's easy enough to add "rel=nofollow" to the link, so that search engines know you aren't endorsing that site.

Reciprocation Is Not a Sin

Obviously, when you link to highly relevant resources, a link back to your site is worth pursuing. There is no penalty for exchanging links, and if you can share a little traffic with another site, it's almost always a "win win" situation even if the search engines completely ignore the link.

So the bottom line on outbound links and link swaps is simple: if you would link to that site if search engines didn't exist, then go ahead and link. Otherwise, think about using a "link condom" (nofollow) or just skip it.

Conclusion – Don't Ever Stop Working On Links!

In the short term, even 20-30 high-quality inbound links will improve your rankings a great deal. It's not unusual for us to enter a market with a brand new site, go through the basic link building I've described, and see page one rankings within 3 months.

In the long run, your goal should be to have as many high-quality, relevant inbound links as possible. It's tempting to stop working on links when you reach the top of the SERPs, but you shouldn't rest on your laurels once you hit this target.

Keep an eye out at all times for new opportunities, and look for "profitable promotions" that can make link building something that just happens in the course of doing business.

You should never really stop working on inbound links. Websites come and go, pages vanish, and the links they carry go with them. If you don't continually invest in building up links, your rankings may begin to fade since it can take a month or two for links to be properly indexed. By the time you notice things slipping, you're a good month or more away from fixing the problem.

The importance of links is not a secret any more, even if everyone doesn't understand it very well. Your competitors are probably not sitting still.

Need More?

As I've said several times, registered subscribers of "SEO Fast Start" can see all six weeks of my 2006 link building course as streaming video. Those who participated in this class have told me that it completely changed the way they look at link building.

Please bear in mind that these classes were recorded live, and the audio quality occasionally drops from great to "crank up the speakers and listen carefully."
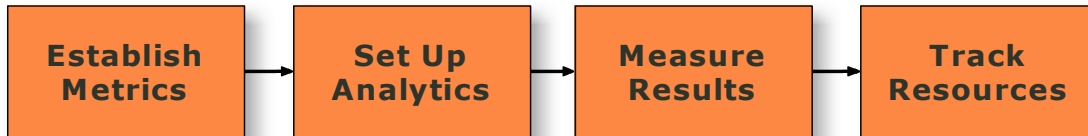
I am currently running a completely updated link building class called Link Liberation – although the class was a fast sellout, you can get on the waiting list for the next one at www.linkliberation.com - and get some free information too.

Watch the Portal, and Join the Conversation

You can help by posting your comments and questions about link building at the portal: **http://www.seofaststart.com/linking**

Chapter 7:
Measuring Your Results (Step 5)

Establish Metrics	→	Set Up Analytics	→	Measure Results	→	Track Resources

> This is a short chapter. I would love to give you a one size fits all template for measuring your results, but it depends a lot on your site, your business model, and your market.
>
> In spite of this, some things are universal. Every web site should have certain measurements of performance, every campaign (SEO or otherwise) should include some way of measuring the outcome.
>
> Seriously, if you aren't measuring what's happening you aren't really in the game at all. Wishful thinking is not a strategy.

Why We Measure

Measure Results & Resources

Even though search engine optimization generates "free traffic," we all know that it's anything but free. It takes time, it takes effort, and it costs money to do it right.

Since we are spending resources, we want to see a good return on our investment. That's why we measure… some of the things we do will deliver a good return, and we'll want to do more of those things. Others will fail to deliver a return, and we'll want to improve or remove those activities from our plan.

What we're really in here is a planning cycle. You start by assessing the current situation and setting some goals. You make a plan, you execute that plan, you measure the results, and you go right back into another cycle.

It starts with deciding what to measure.

Establish Metrics (Stage 1)

Establish Metrics

Before we can measure anything, we need to decide what we're going to measure. With a good analytics solution, you'll be able to capture a lot of data and ask questions about it later, so at this stage we're really just interested in what we expect to monitor on an ongoing basis.

Here are the main categories where you may want to measure what's happening

- ✓ **Rankings** – For the main search terms you're targeting in your keyword strategy, it can be helpful to monitor changes in your rankings across the top 3 search engines… as long as you promise not to freak out when you move from #55 to #82 for one search term. SEO is a long term process.

- ✓ **Referrals & Traffic** – Outside of looking at your rankings for specific search terms, you will want to measure the overall impact of your SEO campaign, in terms of the total volume of traffic generated from organic search results. It should be increasing over time, of course.

- ✓ **Links** – If you're actively engaged in link building and promotion activities, you will naturally want to monitor your progress. Even if you can't tie the outcome to a specific activity every time, you should be able to determine whether your efforts are effective.

- ✓ **Leads & Sales** – I don't know about you, but my most important goals are usually based on specific business results, not rankings. With a good analytics solution, you can measure these things as they relate to specific keywords and marketing campaigns.

- ✓ **Costs (Money & Time)** – You're spending resources, remember? Keeping track of what goes into each activity can help you decide where to spend more the next time around, and where to spend less – especially if you can relate the expenditure to specific results.

Personally, I would establish some metrics for all five of these categories. Once you've decided what you want to measure, it's a lot easier to look for solutions that will let you do it.

Setting Up Analytics & Tracking (Stage 2)

Set Up Analytics

In this section, I'm going to give you a few recommendations for tools that have worked for me. There are, in every case, plenty of solutions on the market. As we gather feedback and questions on the portal, I'll try to get you more information on other solutions as requested.

Tracking Rankings

There are a couple tools I like for this. If you like a web-based solution, DigitalPoint (www.digitalpoint.com) offers a free keyword ranking tool that works with all 3 of the major search engines. I prefer to use an offline tool called Advanced Web Ranking (www.advancedwebranking.com) because it generates nicely formatted reports.

Whatever you use, don't go nuts – checking your rankings for the top 25-30 core terms every week is more than enough. Remember, rankings don't do any good unless you're getting targeted traffic that actually leads to something happening on your site. I only run a report once a month for my sites.

Tracking Referrals & Traffic

To track referrals and traffic, I like two analytics solutions. Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics) is free, and extremely capable if you implement all the features. If you're paranoid about letting Google hold onto your data, my other favorite is Clicktracks (www.clicktracks.com).

In fact, for high volume sites, I like to use both, because they let us do different types of testing and comparisons. Either one will let you see where your traffic comes from, down to the keyword level for search engines. Either one will allow you to track other types of marketing campaigns.

Tracking Links

There are two tools I like to use for tracking inbound links. Yahoo Site Explorer (siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com) has been around for a while, and can be used without giving Yahoo any information about your site. If you don't mind registering and verifying your site, Google Webmaster Tools

(http://www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps) gives you a very useful look at the incoming links that Google has found, along with a lot of other information.

I like to look at the incoming links for my site every week, even if things don't change very quickly. If I am working on a campaign for a specific page, I like to monitor the "before and after" link counts for that page.

Tracking Leads & Sales

I've already mentioned Google Analytics and Clicktracks, which I use to help track traffic and referrals. Both of these solutions can also help you track conversions (leads or sales), and even capture the actual value of ecommerce transactions. This lets you associate individual search terms or marketing campaigns with a total value, average $ value per visit, average time on site, etc.

Tracking Costs

How you track the time & money cost of your SEO activities is entirely up to you… if you find a great solution, please visit the portal and let me know. I have never been entirely happy with any of the solutions I've used.

Measuring Results (Stage 3)

Measure Results

Once you've established metrics and set up your analytics solution, you'll want to set up a regular schedule of reporting so that you can look at the same reports at the same time each week, month, etc.
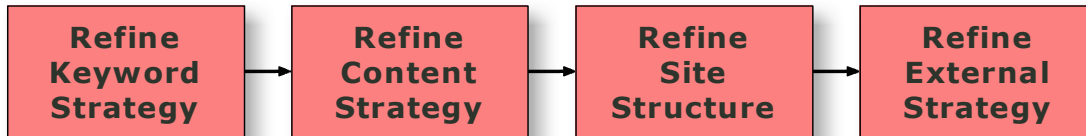
Tracking Resources (Stage 4)

Track Resources

As I mentioned above, I am not thrilled with the way I'm tracking my own use of resources right now. We all know we need to do it, but the challenge is particularly acute when it comes to tracking time spent. Even large organizations struggle with this. At the very least, you would hope to have some overall measure of time and money spent with your weekly or monthly reports.

Chapter 8:
Refining Strategy & Tactics (Step 6)

Refine Keyword Strategy	Refine Content Strategy	Refine Site Structure	Refine External Strategy

> The sixth and final step of the SEO Fast Start process is a time of reflection, when you analyze the results and formulate a new plan of action for the next cycle.

Planning Cycles in SEO

Refine Strategy & Tactics

For the most part, we know what creates good rankings and results from our SEO campaigns, when we begin. What we don't know is how much work to put into one thing or another, how many links, etc.

I usually run my SEO campaigns on a 2 or 3 month "cadence," that is, we take stock of all our metrics and evaluate our strategy every 2 or 3 months. For a brand new site, I like a 2 month cycle, but as a campaign matures, we might move to longer or shorter cycles as circumstances change.

The length of your planning cycle will depend on how much work you have to do after each cycle. If you find that you're overloaded with changes after two months, it makes sense to move to a monthly cycle for a while.

Assessing Your Keyword Strategy (Stage 1)

Refine Keyword Strategy

Unless you're running pay-per-click campaigns, give it at least a couple of months before taking stock of your keyword strategy. Of course, your primary goal is to increase traffic, and within a couple of months you should begin to see results, rankings creeping up, etc.

As you move along through successive planning cycles, some patters will begin to emerge. Some search terms will deliver more in terms of business results, and you'll want to put more effort into these terms that are delivering the highest quality of targeted traffic. Some search terms will become lower priorities.

When you look at your analytics data, you'll discover search terms that you hadn't even thought about, especially if you run pay-per-click campaigns with "broad matching." If you offer visitors a site search capability, check the logs for your site search, to see what terms your visitors use after they reach your site.

Your goal at this stage is simply to determine what changes should be made to your keyword strategy – are you targeting the right search terms, and are your visitors coming to the right page.

Refining Content Strategy (Stage 2)

Refine Content Strategy

As you move through each planning cycle, keep an eye on your analytics to identify where you need to develop new content, which pages are not performing well (in terms of visitor behavior), and where you may have missed a chance to boost your rankings with good keyword placement.

Usually, we don't need to "re-optimize" a page, but if the copy isn't doing its job of persuading, don't be afraid to change it. If you're getting visits for some "long tail" search terms, but not ranking at the top, go ahead and let a few of your modifiers have more prominent positions on the page.

If you've discovered any new search terms in stage 1, now is the time to plan out what kind of content you will add.

Refining Site Structure (Stage 3)

Refine Site Structure

If you need to add new content, it will of course have to fit into your site structure. If your plan was good to begin with, this will usually involve only minor changes.

More often, we revisit the site structure with an eye toward sending more PageRank to specific pages, and increasing the amount of anchor text we point to those pages, in order to improve our rankings on specific search terms.

If you need to boost a page's ranking, you really have two choices[17] – you can fire more links at the page from inside your site, or you can get more links from off site, with the keywords in the anchor text.

Refining Link Building & Promotion Strategy (Stage 4)

Refine External Strategy

Links from inside of the site will get you so far (sometimes to the top), but if internal linking isn't getting you where you need to go, then it's time to bring in some help from outside of your site. Over time, your link building efforts will increase your ability to do things with internal links as well.

With each planning cycle, take stock of your links, and the effectiveness of your link building activities. Activities that have been particularly successful are worth pursuing further or expanding. Those that haven't delivered need to be improved or removed from your plan.

Because I put a strong emphasis on profitable promotions, I like to try something new with every planning cycle. I always want to have at least one new type of promotion going on, with the goal in mind of creating a profitable marketing activity that will create links as a side benefit.

If you have paid for advertising from vertical directories, take a look at the traffic these links are bringing in, and how well it converts into leads and sales. If you find a particularly profitable type of advertising, then look for ways to expand it, possibly reducing the budget in other areas where you aren't generating a profit.

In the long run, we want our link building campaign to pay for itself. That's not an easy goal to reach right away, but it is possible to get there over time.

---

[17] Other than obsessively tweaking on page stuff, which is unlikely to help much

Chapter 9:

The Random Chapter...

Gotchas & Technical Details		Tools	→	Technical	→	Gotchas	→	Ideas

The first six chapters of this book really laid out "how to do SEO" for 95% of readers. The following two chapters explained the importance of measuring your results and continually refining your strategy and tactics.

Then there's this one... the random chapter. A whole bunch of stuff that was too detailed, too speculative, or too strange to include in the first 8 chapters.

What's The Point?

Gotchas & Technical Details

So what's in this chapter? Well, all through this book I've been promising to tell you a little more about tools, promising to explain a little more of the technical detail, and warn you about a few little "gotchas" that could trip you up.

I did this so that you could keep moving, since most readers will never need to know about any of this. Along the way, it occurred to me that there are a lot of dumb (and smart) ideas that just need to be explained, or explained away. So we've got a little of that too.

Cool Tools You Can Use

Tools

When I first mapped out the 2007 edition of SEO Fast Start, I had a huge list of tools that might be a part of it.

The more I worked through the process maps, the more I realized just how few tools we actually needed. As we get your

participation and feedback in the portal, I'll add some reviews of the tools you're most interested in, and if we find cool tools, we'll let you know.

Technical Jibba-Jabba

Technical

In this section, I'm just going to run through some technical stuff real quick, mostly using links to online resources. There's a lot of technical detail in SEO, but most of it will never matter to you.

If you have questions that aren't answered here, check the portal for more information, and if you don't find an answer, just ask!

Robots.txt

Robots.txt is a simple text file that you upload to the root directory of your website. Spiders request this file first, and process it, before they crawl your site. Robots.txt tells the spider what pages they are allowed to fetch.

It helps to work through an example to really understand how this works, so that's what we're going to do. The simplest robots.txt file possible is this:

```
User-agent: *
Disallow:
```

That's it! The first line identifies the user agent – an asterisk means that the following lines apply to all agents. The blank after the "Disallow:" means that nothing is off limits. This robots.txt file doesn't do anything – it allows all user agents to see everything on the site.

Now, let's make it a little more complex – this time, we want to keep all spiders out of our /faq directory:

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: /faq/
```

See how simple it is? The trailing slash is necessary to indicate that this is a directory. Without the trailing slash, not only the /faq directory, but any file whose name begins with "faq," would be disallowed. We can also add more directories to the disallowed list:

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: /faq/
Disallow: /info/about/
```

That was easy, but what if we want to disallow access to only one file? It's simple:

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: about.html
Disallow: /faq/faqs.html
```

Now let's get specific. So far, we've created rules that apply to all spiders, but what about an individual spider? Just use its name:

```
User-agent: googlebot
Disallow: /faq/
```

Now, let's combine individual spider control with a catch-all:

```
User-agent: googlebot
Disallow: /

User-agent: *
Disallow: /faq/
```

This set of commands tells Googlebot to take a hike – the slash character ("/") by itself means that the entire site is disallowed. For all other user-agents, we've just kept them out of the /faq directory.

Each record in a robots.txt file consists of a user-agent line, followed by one or more Disallow directives. The blank line between the two user-agent records is necessary for the file to be processed properly.

If you'd like to add comments, you can use the "#" character like this:

```
# keep spiders out of the FAQ directory
User-agent: *
Disallow: /faq/
```

You can use any text editor that saves text in a web-friendly format. I like Notepad or Unixedit, both of which are free.

Google has created their own extension to the robots.txt format, which allows the use of "wildcards" to do partial matching on file names. Yahoo now supports this as well, and their documentation (http://www.ysearchblog.com/archives/000372.html) is a lot better than Google's.

XML Sitemaps

With Google, you can submit your sitemap via the Webmaster Tools console (www.google.com/webmasters/sitemaps). With Yahoo, you can use the Site Explorer tool (siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com) to submit an XML sitemap or a list of URLs to crawl.

Submitting is no longer necessary, because the big three (Google, MSN, and Yahoo) have gotten together and agreed on a standard protocol, which is described at www.sitemaps.org. This new protocol allows you to specify the location of your XML site map in your robots.txt file.

There are many tools that can help create an XML sitemap, and developers are busy at work, adding sitemap capabilities to applications as diverse as blogs, shopping carts, and content management systems. If you can't create a sitemap automatically, I recommend GSite Crawler (www.gsitecrawler.com), which is free.

301 & 302 Redirects

Not everyone needs to know about redirects, but one redirect that you should set up if possible, is a 301 redirect to combine the "http://www.example.com" and "http://example.com" versions of your site into one.

Redirects will also come up if you need to move a site, or if you've got affiliate links coming into your site. This is a huge subject, and I can't do any better with it than Ian McAnerin already has: http://www.mcanerin.com/EN/articles/related.asp

The Gotchas That Can Get Ya

Gotchas

There are a few ways to cause yourself problems with search engines, besides trying to spam… these things aren't usually deadly, but they can be dangerous if you don't deal with them. The first is duplicate content, and closely related is "spider traps" or endless loops.

Duplicate Content & The "Canonical Link" Tag

I've already mentioned duplicate content, in its most mundane form – pages that have the same content, or very little unique content. There's a more subtle form that can arise from dynamic sites, where you can potentially have hundreds or thousands of URLs that deliver the same content, if a script isn't well written.

GSite Crawler (mentioned above) does detect "exact duplicate" content, so if you use that, it will help you identify the worst type of duplicate content problems.

Google announced a new solution in February 2009[18], which allows you to add a tag on duplicate versions of a page, pointing the spider to a single "canonical" URL.

You just add this tag in the <head> section of your pages:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.site.com/page.html"/>
```

This won't solve every duplicate content issue, but it can come in handy when you have a product page that exists in multiple categories in an ecommerce store. By adding this tag, you effectively consolidate all those pages (and link juice) into one.

Spider Loops

A spider loop is an endless sequence of pages that link to pages that link to pages that… you get the idea. The best (worst) example is the "perpetual calendar" you often find on web sites, which shows a calendar of events. The "May 2007" page has a link to "June 2007," which if you follow it links to "July 2007," and so on to the end of time. Most of them will also go back in time as well, to the dawn of the Universe.

A spider doesn't know that it's never going to stop getting pages… if it's well programmed, it will eventually stop checking, but it's a lot better to just use robots.txt to keep the spiders away from spider loops. Leslie Rohde has created a program called Optispider (www.windrosesoftware.com/optispider/) that can check your site for these issues.

---

[18] For more details: http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=139394

But What About…

Ideas

There are a lot of good ideas, and a lot of crazy ideas, floating around in the SEO world. In this section, I'll try to give you the highlights so you at least understand what the heck people are talking about.

Latent Semantic Indexing

Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) is the latest overblown concept to hit the SEO (and predatory marketing) scene. If you want to understand how it works, take a look at his entry from the Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latent_semantic_indexing

If that didn't make any sense, don't worry about it… because none of the search engines have implemented LSI, and as far as I can tell, it's a very long way off even if they wanted to, because it would take a lot more computing resources than any of them would want to use.

If they ever do use LSI, the "fast start" system will work just fine, because natural writing and linking related pages together is the right thing to do for LSI too.

Double Listings & Super Listings (aka Sitelinks)

Google normally allows only two pages from the same site to appear on the same SERP. If you have a page at #1, and another at #10, they'll actually appear as the first two listings, with the second one indented under the first. This is called a "double listing," and it's one of the reasons why we map each of our major search terms to two pages.

Google occasionally shows a lot more than two links for a site – for example, if you search Google for "advanced web ranking," you'll probably see this in action. This is called a "super listing," or "Sitelinks," and there are plenty of theories on how to get one… all of them are probably wrong. This is done automatically, when Google thinks they have a pretty good idea which site you're looking for.

The "Google Sandbox"

There's no doubt that new sites have a hard time cracking the top rankings on search engines. I don't know if this is especially true of Google, but since everyone seems to worry about Google more, this phenomenon has been dubbed the "Google Sandbox."

The theory is that Google puts new sites into a "holding cell" or something until they've aged enough to warrant consideration. First of all, this is definitely not how it works, but it's quite possible that new sites are "untrusted" at first.

The biggest reason why new sites have a hard time getting ranked is that they should have a hard time. Their competitors have had years to get plugged into the web. Years to build links, develop content, etc.

I don't know of any easy way to overcome this, but I don't think it's inevitable that you must wait a year or two to get ranked. I know it's not inevitable, because I launch new sites with my students all the time.

"SSA" Penalties (Retrieval, Ranking, and Reordering)

Way back in the day, search engines were pretty simple machines. They retrieved some results from their index, they ranked those pages, and then they presented the search results to the user.

Now, there's a third step – reordering. After the search engines have ranked the pages, they apply another level of "something" to change the order of the results. Sometimes this is easy to see, but usually it's invisible to us as searchers.

Google applies some very obvious re-ordering to some sites. One of my students got caught up in this last year, with a group of sites she inherited. One day, lots of #1 rankings. The next day, lots of #41 rankings.

On search term after search term, the sites dropped exactly 40 spots. After resolving some duplicate content problems and other issues with the sites' quality, they miraculously returned to their former top positions.

Other sites have dropped from the first page all the way to the very last page (page 99, results 991-1000). This is clearly no accident. We don't know the cause of this,

but it seems to happen primarily to sites that have significant quality problems, such as:

- ✓ Very little unique content, which may result from not creating new content, and having other sites "borrow" or copy (steal) the existing content

- ✓ Broken links – both internal links to nonexistent pages and links to nonexistent pages on other sites

- ✓ Large amounts of machine generated or "scraped" pages, pages built from nothing but RSS feeds, etc.

The solution to this, as far as I can tell, is to clean up the mess and file a reinclusion request with Google through the Webmaster Tools console, detailing what the mess was, and how it has been cleaned up.

All of the "big 3" search engines do some kind of re-ordering, which is probably based on user feedback and mathematical models that predict a user's satisfaction with a given search result. It's the future, folks[19].

Site Launch Process

I am often asked what I do to launch a new web site. The short answer is that we use the "fast start" process to build a good site that's well optimized, and start promoting it. But there are a few things I wouldn't go without, when launching a new site:

- ✓ Submission to Yahoo and DMOZ (Step 4, Stage 2) – nothing says "we are a legitimate business" quite like paying Yahoo to do an editorial review… and passing it.

- ✓ An active pay-per-click advertising campaign, with at least Google Adwords. As we work through the PPC campaign, we inevitably find things we can improve about the site and the user experience. I suspect, but can't prove, that the "quality score" on Google Adwords is similar to whatever Google uses to "re-order" search results.

---

[19] If this is really the future, where is my flying car?

✓ Other marketing and promotion activities that aren't directly related to SEO, but that do generate links to the site. This would include things like a press release on launch, advertising in vertical directories, asking bloggers to review the site and give feedback, etc.

The Secret To Success In Life Is…

I don't really know, but if you see me at a conference or seminar, buy me a drink, and I'll give it my best shot. Unfortunately, I promised to keep this book to 100 pages, and we're already there – or I might hazard a guess right now.

Watch the Portal, and Join the Conversation

As we continue to develop the SEO Fast Start community portal, I'll continue to add content – you can also get on the newsletter mailing list if you aren't already:

http://www.seofaststart.com/

About My "Link Liberation" Training Program

Link Liberation (as I mentioned at the end of Chapter 6) is my new 12 week long link building course, which includes a lot of stuff that you just can't cram into a book.

To learn more, join the next class, or just get on the mailing list, go to **www.linkiberation.com** - I'll be delivering regular updates and free link building tips and advice to all subscribers, via a regular podcast called "Link Liberation TV."

My advanced video course is on sale for a dollar…

If you liked SEO Fast Start, you'll love my advanced video course on SEO, "Stomping the Search Engines 2.0" – produced in partnership with StomperNet. You can see their latest offer for this course at **www.stomping2.com**

At the time of this book's publication, the offer was a whopping $1 if you take a trial subscription to The Net Effect, which is a monthly magazine for online marketers that I write for.

Your sample issue of the magazine, and the course, are just a dollar, and you have 30 days to decide whether you want to keep or cancel the subscription.