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I. Base Overview

A search engine is a database of resources extracted from the Internet through an automated "crawling" process. This database is searchable through user queries.

How does a search engine work? Words or phrases you enter in the search box are matched to resources in the search engine's database that contain your terms. These are then automatically sorted by their probable relevance and presented with the most "relevant" sites appearing first.

How search results are organized Once a search engine has used your search terms to gather "hits" from its database, it lists or "ranks" the resulting sites in order of its own estimation of their relevance. The procedures and factors used to create this ranking are often company secrets, so understanding exactly why one hit is listed higher than another is difficult.

The following is a survey of some of the factors search engines use to automatically sort web sites for presentation to the user.

Relevance Prediction Currently, search engines predict relevance based on two sets of factors: those based on a **site's content** and those **external to the site**.

Factors based on a web site's content

- Word frequency (How often search terms occur in a page in relationship to other text).
- Location of search terms in the document (Are they in the title? Are they near the top of the page?).
- Relational clustering (How many pages in the site contain the search terms?).
- The site's design (Does it use frames? How fast does it load?).

Factors external to the site

- Link popularity -- Sites with more links pointing to them are prioritized.
- Click popularity -- Sites visited more often are prioritized.
- "Sector" popularity -- Sites in a sector with many competitors have more difficulty with target positions.
- Business alliances among services -- Results from a partner search service are ranked higher.
- Pay-for-placement rankings -- Site owners pay for high rankings.

II. Types of Search Placement

Search engine placement fall into three basic categories:

- **Natural or Organic Search**
- **Pay Per Click, Keyword Buys**
- **Paid Inclusion**

Natural/Organic

Natural or Organic Search refers to the non-sponsored results that the user finds when searching fro a particular term. Natural Search is the most desired search position as the site in question does not have to pay per click. When this concept is applied to heavily search / high priced terms, the financial benefits of natural search are clear.

However, while natural search is a top priority of a search optimization program, it should not be a commercial client's only optimization strategy as it is much less predictable and requires work on the part of the marketer:

- It cannot be forecast with a high degree of accuracy as there are many uncontrollable variables.
- There are no guarantees in natural search.
- You'll only be able to calculate the total benefit at the end of the campaign. This requires the purchaser to assume some risk.
- The client will have to make changes to its site. There's some (dare I say it?) work involved.

PPC

Pay per click search engines let you set up an account with an initial deposit, and then bid for the top positions in the search results pages for keywords or keyphrases that you are interested in. Your bid will typically be set in cents or dollars per click. When a prospect clicks on your link, you are charged the amount of that bid.

Naturally, the keyphrases that people search for the most will command the highest bids.

*Note that over the last 18 months PPC has come to include not only keyword buys on major engines, but also contextual and browser-bundling buys. While potentially significant, each of these opportunities present there own set of issues which must be reviewed on a case by case basis. For example, some of the keyword buys from browser bundles are the result of spyware and are not ethical for the user and will not produce positive results for the advertiser.

Paid Inclusion

Paid inclusion is a method of placement that is now a tactic recommend only for second tier search engines such as Exact Seek and Looksmart. However it should be noted that these properties, notably Looksmart, still provide results to other major engines.

If the Natural Search and PPC optimization programs are setup and executed properly, then paid inclusion may be considered the 3rd tier of search engine optimization.

III. Key Notes

1. Guaranteed Rankings Are a Myth

Guaranteeing rankings is highly unethical. It is impossible to guarantee rankings unless you have access to Google's database itself, and even then I'm not sure it's possible. Keep in mind, we are working with a 3rd party. A highly guarded 3rd party that doesn't, under any circumstances, reveal it's secrets. No one outside of the companies that run these search engines knows what it is exactly that makes search engines rank sites high. Especially due to the fact that these search engines and the rigorous ranking filters they use to spit out search results change almost monthly. Even a former Google employee doesn't know how to guarantee rankings! If someone is telling you they'll guarantee top rankings, run fast! Those are some shady, shady claims. Google themselves have said:

"No one can guarantee a -#1 ranking on Google - Beware of SEO's that claim to guarantee rankings, or that claim a "special relationship" with Google, or that claim to have a "priority submit" to Google. There is no priority submit for Google.

2. Size Matters

The size of a web site can have a huge impact on search engine rankings. Search engines love content, so if you have only a few pages to your site and your competitors have dozens, it's difficult to see a top page ranking for your site. In some cases it may be difficult to present several pages of information about your business or products, so you may need to think about adding free resources for visitors. It will help in broadening the scope of your web site (which search engines like) as well as keep visitors on your site longer, possibly resulting in more sales.

3. Using Frames

Don't use frames. Frames are a thing of the 90's (and in the Internet world that is eons ago) and are not even supported by some search engines. The search engines that are able to index your site through frames will most likely frown upon them. Whatever you are trying to accomplish by using frames can usually be done with the help of PHP includes or CSS (Cascading Style Sheets). Some browsers are not frames-compatible, so there is the danger of some visitors not being able to see your site at all. Bookmarking of individual pages within a frame becomes difficult without lengthy scripts being written.

4. Content is King

Once you have set up the structure of your page, you can write your web copy. While creating the text, you want to include the majority of the keywords at the top and the bottom of the page. In addition, the keyword should be included a few times in the middle. Basically, the common saying is that the keyword density should resemble an hour glass shape.

The total web copy of your optimized page should be about 300-500 words. Also, the keyword should be about 5-12% of the total words of the page.

5. Outside Links are Critical

If content is king, then linking is the queen that shares his throne. We have all heard about adding content to your site to give the search engines fodder to consume. But the secret to luring the search engines is the links to your site. Today's search engines look very carefully and critically at who is linking to you, and what it is that they are saying about you. A link from a leader in your industry carries a lot of clout and means that your site is important. Two links from industry leaders means your site is even more important. 100 links from random web sites, from industries you are not even related with, means almost nothing. Thus, getting links is only the start; the important thing is getting good links from quality web sites.

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