Beginners Guide to SEO

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Here at AIM Internet we get asked all the time for the SEO basics. So we're giving you what you want: This article will be a basic introduction to search engine optimisation (SEO), an essential marketing tool if you want your website to be found through search engines like Google.

On any given day, people conduct more than 2.2 million searches. And that's just on Google — other search engines are still out there (believe it or not). Therefore, being present on the first page of Google is pretty important to the success of your business.

Let's start at the beginning...

What is SEO?

Definition: According to Moz.com, SEO is "the practice of increasing the quantity and quality of traffic to your website through organic search engine results."

This is great, but how do you apply it to your business? How do you optimise your website for search engines? How much time should you spend on SEO? How can you differentiate "good" SEO advice from "bad" or harmful SEO advice?

How exactly do you increase your website's visibility in search engines?

The answer is a well thought out and managed SEO strategy, which includes blogging (unique content), optimising your site design, building back links and much much more.

What factors play a role in SEO?

One question we get asked a lot is "what factors do I need to be focusing on when it comes to SEO?" Essentially, "what factors are affecting my website ranking on Google?" When deciding what listings to show on its results page, Google takes both searcher-related factors and publisher-related factors into account.

Searcher-related factors

When you go online to find something Google will take into account, what you have searched, your location, social network, and the device you use to conduct your search. These are all searcher related factors.

• **Location –** if you're based in Birmingham, UK, for example, and you search "best digital agencies in Birmingham", Google will show you relevant agencies from Birmingham, UK not Birmingham, Kansas.

• **Social network –** this means Google is more likely to show you results that are within your social sphere. For example, if you search for "beginners guide to SEO", and there are several articles to choose from, but Google notices one of your Google+ contacts has recently shared one of them, then Google will show you this article first.

• **Searching Device -** Google also takes note of what device you have used to make your search when deciding what results to show you. Google will always prioritise relevant mobile-friendly websites over websites that are not optimised for mobile, especially if you are searching from a phone or tablet.

Publisher-related factors

Publisher related factors are what you have the control to influence. According to Google, there are over 200 variables in the Google algorithm, so it's near impossible to optimise your website for them all (we don't even know what they all are) but here are some of the key factors we think you should be looking out for and acting on:

Quality of content – any content you produce should add value to your readers. A well-written article with great content will always rank higher on Google. The secret is to write for your readers and not for Google. Keyword stuffing is not beneficial to anyone and will only result in you being penalised.

Click through rate – having a healthy click through rate means people think your website is relevant to their search. Consequently, Google will adjust their results, and rank you higher up the page as your site is regarded as reputable.

But how do you increase your click through rate?

Firstly, you need to ensure your title / header stands out from the crowd – yours needs to be the one that grabs the users attention. You should also include a Call To Action (CTA) in your meta description (the HTML attribute that provides a brief summary of your web page) to encourage readers to click through.

• **Bounce rate –** once people have clicked through onto your site, you want them to stay there and take a look around. If your bounce rate is high, and people are leaving your site pretty soon after they arrive, then something isn't right, which will result in your website being pushed down the ranks.

What is bounce rate?

Bounce rate is the percentage of visitors who navigate away from your site after viewing only one page. If your content is relevant to the user they are unlikely to leave straight away. If they are leaving as soon as they hit the homepage then this indicates to Google that your content isn't relevant, subsequently pushing you down the rankings.

Still not clear on why SEO is important?

The simple answer is that SEO helps you generate more website traffic and eyes on page. This ultimately means more leads, conversions, and profit for your business. Even if you are already getting plenty of organic traffic, investing in SEO is an on-going process that requires continuous analysis, management and updating.

"I'm generating plenty of paid traffic so why invest more time in organic traffic?"

Like everything in life, there are no short cuts to long-term success. Paid campaigns are the equivalent to fad diets – great for short-term goals and results but difficult to maintain long-term. It's important to remember that the more business owner's start advertising on Google AdWords, the more expensive campaigns will be. How long can you sustain growing costs for the same results?

There are of course other platforms such as Facebook Ads, but not only does the platform you are using need to be right for your target audience, ultimately any platform you use where you bid for keywords, impressions, or ad clicks and the number of businesses using it increase, the higher your costs are going to be.

However, that's not to say there isn't a place for paid campaigns.

PPC is still an important part of a marketing strategy, but you just need to be mindful of what will work best for your business.

On-page vs off-page SEO

On-page SEO refers to what's happening on your site. On-page SEO components include:

Keywords – keywords are extremely important to a great SEO strategy. Targeting keywords and including them in your content (only when relevant not for the sake of it) will make your site more valuable, which will ultimately improve your ranking.

Meta-description - Meta-descriptions are the few characters of preview text you see on SERPs, or when sharing a link preview on social media. It's imperative that these are an accurate description of what the user will find if they click through on to your page. It's a great idea to use keywords in the Meta description.

Headings - or H1s as they're commonly known - are the largest pieces of text on your page. You should aim to include keywords in these since algorithms generally pay more attention to them.

URL – ideally, URLs should also contain your target keyword and be no longer than three to five words.

Internal links – internal links are a great way to keep users on your site, always link to other relevant content where you can. The longer users are engaged on your site, the more valuable Google thinks you are. Internal linking also makes it easier for Google's spiders to crawl your site.

Page loading speed – today's users expect everything instantly. This means if your website has slow loading pages they are very likely to abandon your site and head over to a competitors site. As we mentioned earlier, a high bounce rate will mean Google thinks your site is not valuable, this is not what you want.

Off-page SEO

Off-page SEO, is all about promoting your website via external sources. Off-page SEO strategies include:

• **Link building** – search engine bots crawl the internet to find links that lead back to your website. The algorithms then decide how to position these, and backlinks have an influence over this. If you have high-quality links from other relevant, and authoritative sources in your industry, you improve your own value and reputation.

• **Social media marketing** – a strong social media presence gives you a platform to share content with your users and is a great way to interact and engage with them.

• **Guest blogging** – guest blogging is a great way to build quality backlinks to your site while also building quality content.

As we mentioned above, it's important to have a well-rounded SEO strategy, that means embracing both on-page and off-page SEO.

White hat vs black hat SEO

Firstly, you're probably wondering what on earth hats have to do with SEO?

Here's the basic rundown:

Black Hat SEO

Black hat SEO refers to backhanded techniques and strategies used to get higher search rankings, which generally means breaking search engine rules. Black hat SEO focuses solely on search engines and not so much a human audience (as we have already been talking about). Some techniques used in black hat SEO include: keyword stuffing, link farming, hidden texts and links, and blog content spamming. Black hat SEO can result in your site being banned from a search engine and de-indexed and is not a long-term solution.

White Hat SEO

White hat SEO refers to the use of techniques and strategies that target real people and users (not the search engine). Techniques that are typically used in white hat SEO include using keywords, and keyword analysis, doing research, rewriting meta tags in order for them to be more relevant, backlinking, link building as well as writing content for real people. White hat SEO delivers long-term results for your business.

If you're not sure whether what your doing is right, there's a simple question you need to ask yourself: "Will this benefit my audience? Would I do this if search engines didn't exist?"

How will Google know if I use black hat SEO?

Google is very strict on ethical SEO and is constantly updating their algorithm and crawlers to shut down any businesses using black hat tactics. Not only will this damage your business but you'll also get a Google Penalty.
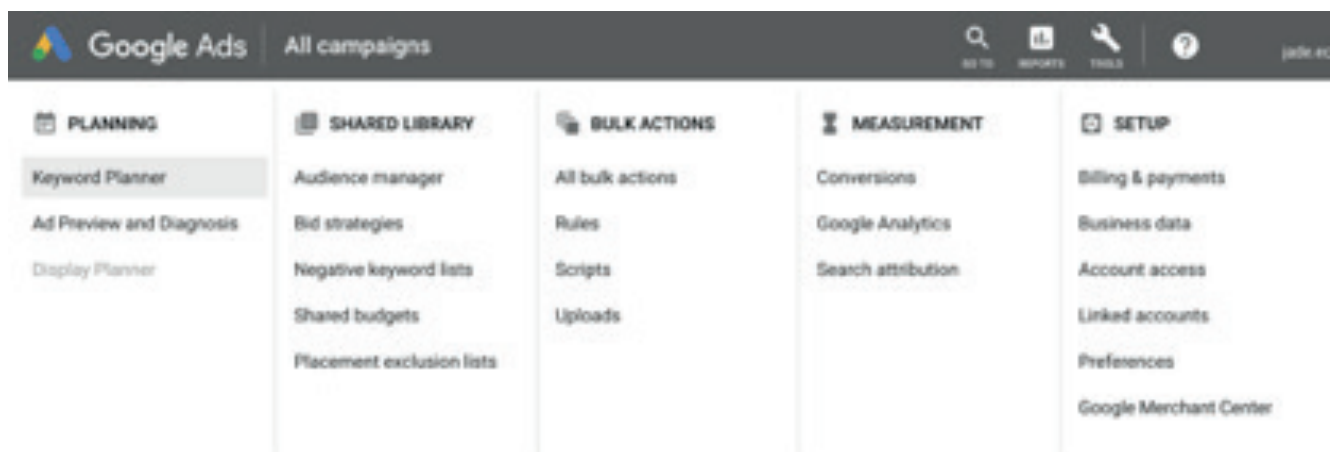
What do I need to do to get my website to rank on Google?

This is the interesting part, how exactly do you optimise your website so that it ranks on the first page of Google?
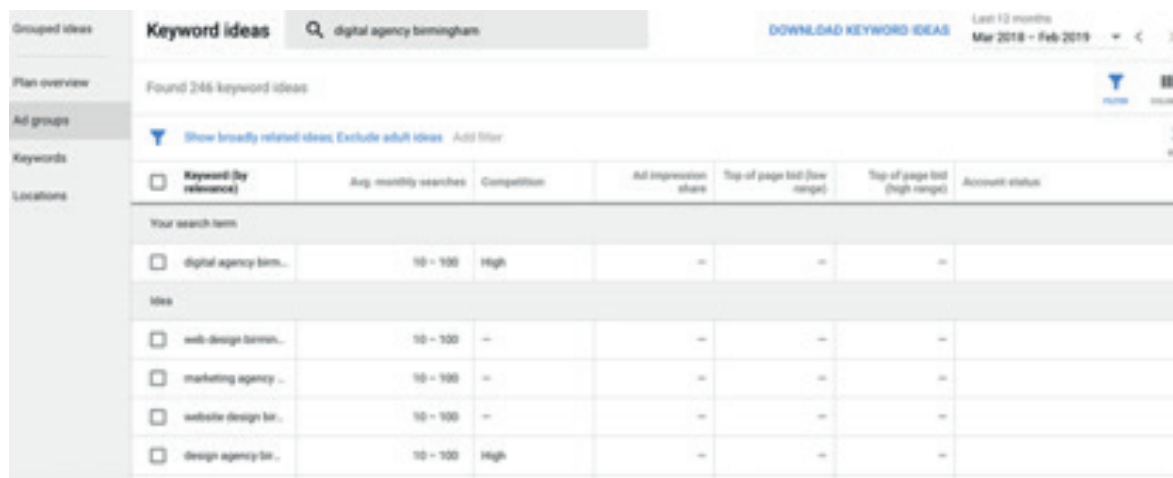
Researching keywords

The first step of any SEO strategy is always keyword research. You need to identify which keywords are relevant to your business in order to drive quality traffic to your site.

To get started, you will need a Google Ads account. Next, click on "Tools" from the top panel, then on "Keyword Planner".

From here, click on "Find new keywords", and enter words, phrases, or a URL related to your business. For example, we might type in "digital agency Birmingham". Google will then give me a list of keywords that could be used for targeting.

In an ideal world, you are looking for keywords that don't have huge competition but have high average monthly searches. Keywords that fit this brief will bring more traffic to your site without being too difficult to rank for.

It's also important to research what your competitors are bidding on. You can easily do this by visiting SimilarWeb, then typing in your competitors URL. This will deliver a list of their best-performing keywords.

The question then arises about the best way to approach your campaign; do you go into direct competition and use the same keywords? Or is the best method to avoid those completely and try and rank for different keywords? We would recommend taking your own path and bidding on keywords specifically targeted to your business and audience where you can. Understandably, there will be some cross over, just be smart in your actions. If your competitor has been doing it a lot longer and has been doing a good job at it, then it's probably going to be difficult for you to catch up. In this instance, it would definitely be more effective to invest your time in other keywords.

Other helpful keyword planner tools include:

• **Moz's Keyword Explorer**
• **SEMrush's Keyword Difficulty Tool**
• **Google Trends**
• **Keywords Everywhere**

Short tail vs long tail keywords

Short Tail Definition: Short tail keywords are search phrases with three or less words. Their length makes them less specific than searches with more words.

Long Tail Definition: Long tail keywords consist of; you guessed it, longer phrases with three or more keywords.

Does it matter which one I use?
Short tail keywords will be searched for in much higher volumes, which may bring more traffic to your site, but they are less effective when it comes to conversion. Long tail keywords have a higher conversion rate and are easier to rank for, but are obviously less searched.

For example, we're not the only digital agency in Birmingham, which means other agencies are probably also bidding on "digital agency Birmingham". If we were to use a long tail keyword it narrows down the search and eliminates some of the less relevant traffic that is less likely to convert.

Another way of narrowing it down is highlighting what your business specialises in. For example, we specialise in SEO and digital marketing strategies, being more specific will help you generate traffic that's a better fit. If you have any niche terms this is even better, as the less competition, the easier it is to rank for your keywords.

Common mistakes people make when targeting keywords

A common mistake that lots of business owners make is using "clickbait" keywords. This means leading your audiences to your site under false pretences. If a user has clicked on your link because they want the best tips and tricks to drive traffic to their site and when they get there the page doesn't deliver this information, not only will they not be happy, they're going to leave with a sour taste in their mouth. Which, as we know leads to a high bounce rate and low ranking.

Content is King

As you will have heard many times before, content is king when it comes to your website. Creating interesting, valuable and unique content will go a long way to improving your Google ranking. This means doing your homework. Look at the content your competitors are delivering, see how you can improve on this to make your content even better.

It's also important to establish a tone of voice for your brand that your audience can relate to. Long content needs to be conversational and easily digestible so that the user stays engaged. Generally, writing in the first or second pronoun is more effective. It's also an idea to include images; videos or any other alternative content that may help the user digest your content and remain interested in what you have to say.

Most importantly, don't forget that most of your readers will now consume your content from their phone so it needs to be mobile friendly and easily digestible. The best way to do this is to break up the text with plenty of images, bullet points and headers.

Optimising your on-page elements

Once you have a well-crafted, valuable piece of content you need to optimise your on-page elements to get the best out your efforts. These include:

• **URLs**
• **Title tag**
• **H2 tags**
• **Meta descriptions**
• **Image file names, alt text and title tags**
• **Internal links**

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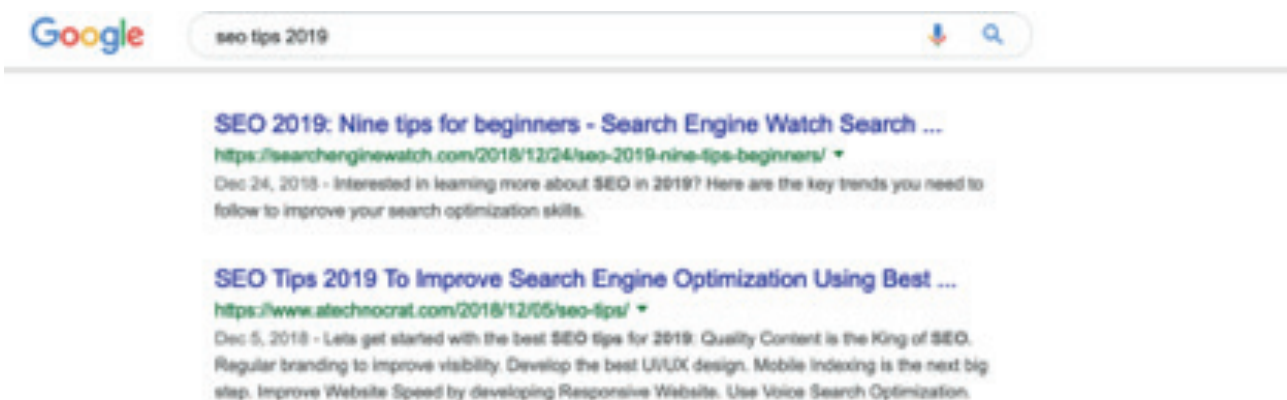
URLs

Your URL should be short and sweet. Google recommends URL's with only three to five words.
For example; https://www.aiminternet.co.uk/marketing-strategy/
It's short, sweet and even uses our keywords.

Title tags

Your title tag should also contain your keyword (where possible this should be at the beginning), and be simple and easy to read.
Take a look: if I Google "SEO tips 2019" the top two organic results include the keyword at the beginning of the title.

H2 Tags

Along with your title tags you should also include H2 tags, these help structure your content. Just as with your H1 tags, you'll ideally include your keywords in the title (but only if they are a natural fit).

Meta description

We previously touched on meta descriptions, which are the snippets of text that Google displays on your search listing, right below your title tag.

This is another opportunity to include your keywords. As you can see from the above image Google will bold these keywords, which helps users, notice your site, which in turn should lead to a better click through rate, better ranking and increased conversion!

Images file names, alt text and descriptions

Images are a great asset to your content, but there's more to it than just being there to break up the text. By adding file names, alt text and descriptions you are also maximising your SEO.

Firstly, name your file something that is relevant to the image and content, and of course, use your keywords wherever possible. Then add your alt text and descriptions, also using your keywords.

What is alt text is?

Alt text (alternative text), also known as "alt attributes", "alt descriptions" are used within an HTML code to describe an image on a page.

Finally, make sure you include an accurate description, which includes your keywords.

Internal links

Like we mentioned earlier, adding internal links is a great way to engage your reader and keep them on your site longer (which as we know, indicates to Google that our site is valuable).

The key here is to ensure that they are not forced links, and are only added in if it's a natural progression. Descriptive links rather than generic links work much better when enticing your readers to click through. For example: you may also find our article on How to Assess Your Competitors Online to Help Your Marketing Strategy an interesting read.

Optimising the backend of your website

The way you organise your website is another very important element when it comes to SEO. If you link a to particular page on your site more than any others Google will assume that this page holds more importance than the others. This increases likelihood of it being ranked highly.

But is it really that important?

Put simply, yes it is. Lets say one of your articles is raging success and generates masses of traffic plus backlinks from other reputable websites, you'll want to make the most of this! You can do this by linking it to and from your other pages. The reason this is good for business is because said article is now regarded highly by Google, so by linking to other pages you're passing on some of its authority to the other pages.

Other factors to take into consideration

Other questions to take into consideration when optimising the backend of your site are:

• **Is your site easy to crawl by Google?**
• **Is your site mobile friendly?**
• **Does your site have a quick load time?**

A quick an easy way to make your website easier to crawl, is to ensure you have plenty of internal links (notice how everything all ties in together for one well-rounded SEO strategy). Internal links inform Google on how each page relates to another.

It will come as no big surprise that by now your website needs to be mobile friendly in order to rank highly on Google. If your content is not optimised for mobile you will automatically lose out to competitors who have this in place. If you're not sure how friendly your website is, use Google's Mobile Friendly Test tool to find out.

If you'd like more insight into this, read our article on the Importance of Being Mobile First.

Finally, your website should have a quick load time. We briefly touched on this earlier. The longer your website takes to load, the more customers you will lose, the higher your bounce rate and the lower your SEO ranking.

As page load time goes from:

1s to 3s the probability of bounce **increases 32%**

1s to 5s the probability of bounce **increases 90%**

1s to 6s the probability of bounce **increases 106%**

1s to 10s the probability of bounce **increases 123%**

Source: Google/SOASTA Research, 2017.

A quick and easy way to check your page load speed is Google's Test My Site tool. This will also give you handy recommendations on how you can improve your page load speed.

Building backlinks

Backlinks are links from other websites that lead back to your website. As we discussed before, this helps add value to your website. Having plenty of quality backlinks from other authoritative websites will help boost your ranking.

Track key metrics and refine content

Your final step, and perhaps one of your most important steps, is to track your key metrics, then manage and develop your SEO strategy accordingly. When it comes to SEO and business there isn't a one-size-fits-all, it's imperative to know your business and understand your audience to custom tailor your approach.

To get started, here's a list of useful SEO key metric we recommend tracking:

- **Organic click through rate**
- **Bounce rate**
- **Conversion rate**
- **Pages indexed**
- **Pages crawled per day**
- **Crawl errors**

- **Exit pages**
- **Keyword rankings**
- **Pages per session**
- **Average page load time**
- **Backlinks / referring websites**

Conclusion

Hopefully this guide has helped clear up a few questions you had about SEO. In today's competitive digital world search engine optimisation is not optional, which means it's important that you get the basics right. A few wrong steps can have a lasting and damaging effect on your business. Remember that a good, organic SEO strategy takes time and continuous work, don't give up at the first hurdle or expect to see instantaneous results.

Make sure you do your keyword research before you write your next blog post. Then, use this information to optimise the basics, such as your title tags, alt tags and descriptions.

Getting started with SEO can be daunting and there's a lot to digest, but everyone has to start somewhere. And of course, if you'd like a helping hand our SEO experts are happy to help.

Reach out to us on 08700628760 or contact Sarah at info@aiminternet.co.uk