

# Ten Tips for Optimizing a Web Page for Search Engines



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Date: Aug 24, 2007

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Wondering what it takes to get a web page to appear in the top listing of search results in Google, Yahoo!, MSN, and Ask? Other than paying for those top "blue" spots, how do you get the search engines to decide who goes where in the unpaid listings they return? Certain very simple things can either inhibit a page from ranking or propel it to the top of the listings. Find out what these things are by taking a walk in the world of web page optimization as Li Evans shares ten tips to laying a foundation for optimizing the pages of your site.

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With the growing popularity of search engines into the global culture, increasingly webmasters and marketers alike ask the question, "How do I get my site to appear in the search engines?" The following ten tips will help you *optimize* your site—that means laying down a strong foundation for getting the pages of your web site to start making it into the search engine rankings.

Why optimize? Because you want to make sure you're in control...that you're telling the search engines exactly what the site's pages are about. You want to give the search engines all the clues they need to discover that your page is truly relevant for the keywords and phrases you're targeting.

## 1. Do Your Keyword Research

How can you optimize a web page without first doing some research into the keywords or key phrases that you would like to be searched for and found? Unless you do the research, it's just like throwing strands of spaghetti against the wall and waiting for something to stick. Keyword research is fundamental to your optimization—whether you have one page or thousands, you should have an idea of what words you want to optimize for.

Having a clear understanding of your goals when it comes to the keywords you select is also imperative. Ask yourself, "Who is it that I want to find my pages?" If you go too broad in your keyword selection, you could find yourself in a highly competitive market. Go too narrow, and you miss the opportunity to cast that wider net for traffic and rankings. Marketers must strike a careful balance when optimizing the pages of a web site.

Unless you're a household name or your product or service has received a lot of recent buzz, optimizing for your company's name or branded items is something you want to avoid. Searchers tend to search on words and phrases that have nothing to with your company's name, but rather on general terms that describe services, products, or types of information.

Let's take a look at a made-up example: the Oasis Camels site. Oasis Camels is located in a suburb just outside Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and offers camel rides for parties and events. If someone just looked at the company's name, they might wonder, "Do they raise camels?" or "Do they offer camel rides?"

People around the Cherry Hill area likely don't even realize that Oasis Camels exists; so do you think they'll be searching on "Oasis Camels"? Probably not, unless maybe the company gets a splash on the front page of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, showing the mayor riding one of the camels. So for our example company, the keyword research should focus around "camel rides," "camel ride operators," and "camel rides for parties." It should also hone in geographically on New Jersey and the southeastern Pennsylvania region.

Now, you're probably wondering how to get that research done, right? There are several free tools that can

assist you in your research. Just keep in mind that these tools have definite limits. Free tools such as Yahoo's free keyword tool tend to give only the prior month's data on the number of searches performed on a keyword. The issue with that is seasonality. If you sell Halloween costumes and you're researching in March, your information will be highly skewed. Paid services include [Trellian's KeywordDiscovery](#), [Wordtracker](#), and [Hitwise](#). Each offers a varying degree of features.

Keyword research is the basis of all optimization. It's important to understand what keywords will work for your business—keywords that will not just drive traffic but will drive *quality* traffic.

## 2. Incorporate the Keywords in Your Site's Content

Now that you've done your keyword research, it's time to focus on using those keywords on your pages. Actual content that the search engines' spiders can read is an important factor in how search engines decide whether your page is relevant to the queries that are performed millions of times each day.

A search engine spider reads a web page from top to bottom, left to right, just as most of us read a newspaper. The search engines give a lot more emphasis to what appears first. Most search engines can delineate between your web site's navigational architecture and actual content, so remember—whatever appears first in your actual content has the highest significance.

Plan to have at least 250 words of text on your page to give it a decent chance at being considered relevant. Taking that into consideration, focusing on optimizing for two to three keywords will allow your content to flow and be read a lot more naturally. It's also important to remember that your keyword phrases don't need to be together in every instance. You can use them separately throughout the content on your page.

Beware: Focusing on just one keyword or phrase will make your web page sound unnatural or "spammy." Your audience will definitely notice overuse of the words, as will the search engine spiders, and will know what you're up to. If you repeat "camel rides" 15 times within 250 words of content, the search engines could quite possibly think your page is nothing but spam. The opposite end of the spectrum is true also: Concentrating on too many different keywords or phrases will mean the focus is spread too thin, and your page won't really be optimized for anything.

## 3. Use Specific HTML Tags for On-Page Optimization

You can use special HTML tags within your content to add emphasis to your keywords and phrases. Positioning of these tags should make sense and should flow with the content. If you bold or underline "camel rides" every time it appears, that will stand out awkwardly for the reader. And if it seems unnatural to a reader, you can bet that the search engines are going to react the same way.

Following are some HTML tags that you can use to help optimize your page's content.

### Header Tags

Header tags are <h1> through <h8>. You should utilize their hierarchical structure logically, just as the search engines interpret and understand it. If you use <h1> for the main headings of your content, the next level of subheadings should be <h2>, and so forth. Including header tags with keywords and phrases adds a certain amount of emphasis.

Here is an example of utilizing a header tag correctly to get the most benefit:

```
<h1>Camel Rides by Oasis Camels of Cherry Hilly New Jersey</h1>
```

which is much better than this:

```
<h1>Welcome </h1> or <h1>About Us</h1>
```

## Emphasis Tags

Emphasis tags include bold `<b>` or `<strong>`, italics `<i>` or `<em>`, and underline `<u>`. There is no difference in value, so you can utilize them all to spread emphasis around "organically" within your content. For an excellent example of how to incorporate emphasis tags into content, take a look at how [Wikipedia](#) does it.

## Anchor Text

The text you use to form the links on your web pages is called anchor text, and it does matter when it comes to optimizing your content for the page. Not only does anchor text help the page it's on, but it also helps the page that the link is pointing to.

Try to avoid building your links with terms such as "click here," "more information," and "home page." These won't help your optimization efforts for any of the linked pages. There are likely hundreds of thousands, if not millions of web sites that do this. You can do much better. The optimal way to form a link is like this:

```
...check out our information on <a href="http://www.yoursite.com/servicename.html">
Camel Rides for Birthday Parties</a> perfect for making any child's special day
a great memory...
```

## Bulleted and Numbered Lists

Bulleted lists and numbered lists offer an excellent way to put emphasis on content in short, quick bursts. Using keywords and phrases within lists is a way to boost the emphasis you're placing on pieces of your content. As with any of these emphasizing features, only use lists when it makes sense and when they flow naturally with the page's current content.

## 4. Choose Title Tags Carefully

No matter whether or not someone reads the top blue bar of the browser, searchers *do* read the first line of each result listed in the results from a search engine. Remember, first impressions are everything! Search engines use your web page's title tag to display what your page is about, so this is the place where a searcher makes the decision to either click on your listing or pass you over.

The search engines also use the title tag to decide what your page is all about, and to help determine your page's relevance to a searcher's query. If you leave your title tag as just the default "Home Page" or "Index," you're not telling the search engines anything specific about your page. Treat your page's title tag as an introduction piece. Not only is this tag important to tell the search engines what your page is about; it tells the searcher as well.

So let's look at some "don't" examples, and one "do." Don't do these:

```
"Oasis Camels - Home Page"
"About Us"
"Website of Oasis Camels"
```

Instead, do this:

```
"Book Your Camel Rides with Oasis Camels | Licensed Camel Ride Operators in the Cherry Hill, NJ Area"
```

If you can only optimize one or two things, make sure that each page's title tag is one of those things you can optimize. Remember, as well, not to reuse the same title tag over and over again. If you have a special page

dedicated to Children's Party Camel Rides, and one for Special Events Camel Rides, make sure you customize the title tag for both. The same title tag used repetitively loses its "power" to tell the search engines what all your pages are about.

## 5. Use Meta Descriptions

The meta description is one of those tags that don't appear on the actual page's content but are seen in another form. The meta description of a page appears as a "snippet" with the page's title tag when a search engine displays its results. The main item to keep in mind about a page's meta description tag is that it does not have any value to the search engines as they look for relevancy.

"So wait a minute here," you're saying. "This is important even though the search engines don't think it is?" That's exactly what I'm saying. Just like the title tag, the meta description is part of the searcher's first impression. Searchers do read the snippets under the title tag. If you give them a reason to click, they're going to click. You give them a reason to click by customizing your meta descriptions to work in conjunction with your title tags.

If you don't define meta descriptions for your web site, the search engines will actually pull content from your page that is relevant to the searcher's query, to display in the results. So basically, when you omit a meta description tag for each page, you're leaving it up to the search engines to decide how to describe your web site in their results.

Here's an example of a customized meta description for the Oasis Camels example:

```
<meta name="description" content="Looking for a unique and fun way to make your child's birthday a memorable one? Why not book a camel ride with Oasis Camel for their birthday party! Every child will remember the fun they had with riding our camels all around the back yard.">
```

## 6. Use Meta Keywords

Much like the meta description tag, the meta keywords tag doesn't show up in the content portion of your page—actually it doesn't show up anywhere, but the search engines do read it and use it. However, the tag is insignificant when it comes to using it to gauge relevancy for a web page.

In the past, webmasters and marketers alike would fill this tag with hundreds of keywords, thinking this would propel them to the top of the rankings. That strategy worked in 1999. Because of the abuse of this tag, however, search engines have devalued it in terms of relevancy. So with that in mind, you're probably wondering "why should I bother?"

If you're optimizing a web page for a particularly competitive market space, filling the meta keyword tag with your keywords isn't going to make a difference at all, so in this case—unless you have copious amounts of free time—leave the common words out of the keyword tag. What you *can* spend your time on is utilizing the meta keyword tag for common misspellings that you don't want to show in content that is visible to the searcher.

Here's a sample usage for the Oasis Camel example:

```
<meta name="keywords" content="cammel rides, camle rides, camell rides, carmel rides">
```

## 7. Pick Meaningful URL Names for Pages

How you name each of your pages definitely has some weight with the search engines' decision on what your web page is all about. Beyond the normal "index.html" name for your home page, each subsequent page should have a name that reflects its role.

While it's true that there isn't a set limit of filename characters imposed by any search engines, don't get carried away when naming your pages. Extremely long filenames could raise a flag that you're trying to spam or play games with the search engines. When it makes sense, you can use a few words, but if your filenames tend to include more than eight words, rethink your strategy.

Here are examples for the Oasis Camel site. For the "camel rides for birthday parties" page:

```
birthday-party-camel-rides.html
```

For the "camel rides for special events" page:

```
special-events-camel-rides.html
```

## 8. Incorporate & Optimize Images

Images are important to web optimization for two reasons: what to do and what not to do. A lot of businesses on the web make the mistake of embedding their keywords into images. The problem here is that, although the searcher can see the word, the search engines have no clue that the word even exists on the web page. If "Camel Rides" were embedded into all the pictures on the page, but the actual text "Camel Rides" never appeared on the page, there'd be no indication to the search engines that this page was about camel rides.

If you're displaying images that are separate from the actual look and feel of your web site, such as pictures of products, events, services in action, etc., make sure these are optimized properly as well. The search engines take a lot of cues from what is on the page around a picture to determine what the image is about. Along with the name of the image file, other factors help to determine the purpose of the image, much like the web page filename discussed previously. Utilizing the alt attribute of the image and giving it a relevant description does help the search engines, along with any type of short description that falls in the immediate area of the image.

Search engines are increasingly trying to give searchers more and more relevant content results. You can now see images and videos appearing alongside regular web page results. If your images are optimized just as your web pages are, it's possible you'll start to see traffic coming in from the various image search engines as well as from regular searches.

## 9. Use Flash with Caution

There is no doubt that incorporating Flash technology into your site will make it stand out above the competition. It adds a lot of variety and creates interest for your visitors to click further into your site. However, just as image content cannot be read by search engines, so it is true for Flash pieces. This is because the information is embedded within the file and is not actual text on your pages, even though the human eye sees it as such.

With that in mind, having your web site entirely in Flash and not offering an HTML version will mean that your site is entirely invisible to a search engine. All that will be seen is your home page with the title and description tags. And with only those two pieces to tell the search engine what your site is about, your site will not rank as well as it might.

So put Flash to work for just pieces of your web site, and avoid using it as the exclusive form-navigation piece. Remember that the search engine spiders won't be able to read the URLs and follow through to the pages you're pointing to.

## 10. Be Aware of JavaScript's Limitations

JavaScript can be a vital element of your site. However, if you're considering using JavaScript to power the navigation for your site, you might want to rethink that strategy. Search engine spiders are very childlike. As

discussed in the tips just above, they cannot open an image and read the keywords on it; nor can they follow links in Flash files.

In the same way, search engine spiders cannot follow JavaScript links. So they'll come to your home page and not go any farther because they cannot follow to where the JavaScript link is pointing. What that means for your site is that unless you provide direct links to the pages pointed to by the JavaScript, the spiders will never find the pages and nothing will get indexed by the search engines.

To resolve this issue, provide an alternate form of navigation at the bottom of your page, or have a non-JavaScript-created link that points to your sitemap page. This will guide the spiders through your pages, and still allow you to keep the cool and funky things that your pages and site can do through JavaScripting.

## Wrap-Up

A web page takes a lot of pieces to put it together just right, and so does optimizing it. There isn't one specific way to optimize 20 web sites and get them all ranking in the Top Ten all at the same time. Always consider content, title tags, filenames, your market space, competitors, and changes in your industry—these factors and many more make each site different in its optimization goals for attaining great rankings.

Starting with the strong foundation resulting from these ten tips will help you get your web site off to an impressive start in the search engines!

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