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How to Optimize Your Website

As Google's dominance grows, there are a number of tools you can use to ensure that parents and students can quickly find your district on the Internet

Given Google's growing market share—69 percent of all searches by the close of 2007, according to Compete (www.compete.com)—it's absolutely critical for any school on the Web to ensure its site is Google-friendly.

A Google-optimized site ensures that students and parents can quickly find your district on the Web even if they don't know the address. Plus, good search optimization simply makes good sense when attempting to reach out to the rest of the world via the Internet.

Fortunately, Google has come out with a free suite of online tools specifically designed to help you tweak your site's nooks and crannies and give your

district the best shot of ranking as high as possible in Google search engine returns.

Most of the analytics tools in the Google Webmaster Central suite are extremely easy to use. And while a few require more technical expertise, your Web designer or search engine optimization consultant should have no problem mastering the trickier tools in a matter of minutes.

The bonus is that once your site is optimized for Google, all the tweaks you've made should also help spike your district's rankings on most of the other major search engines as well.

Specifically, here's the 14-step game plan Google recommends for giving your site the best possible shot on its search engine:

The first five steps

First, sign up for a Google Webmaster's account (GWA) at www.google.com/webmasters. This officially puts you on the map with the Google search engine.

The second step is to officially submit your site to Google. It is one of the first

things you'll do as a new Google Webmaster account holder, and is well worth the two seconds. I've personally seen one of my own sites rocket from obscurity to number one on Google simply by "officially" submitting my URL, or Web address, to the search engine. (You also can submit your site's URL without an account at www.google.com/addurl.)

Third, run "Overview" to determine your site's overall status. This tool lets you know if your home page has been successfully indexed or "crawled" by Google, and shows you which pages have been indexed by the search engine. You can use this information to rework pages that are being missed.

The "Overview" tool also has links for more information on improving your site's ranking, why certain keywords entered in Google don't pull up your site, and why Google-indexed pages on your site may be dropping in rank.

The fourth step is to run the GWA Diagnostics. You'll find out about any problems Google may have in indexing your site here, along with insights on how to make things right. Often it's just a matter of tidying up page titles. As a bonus, Diagnostics also shows you any problems on pages that you've programmed for viewing on cell phones, which are becoming de rigueur for middle schoolers and older students.

For the fifth step, use "Top Search Queries," or keywords, in the Statistics toolkit. The right keywords, properly placed on your Web pages, can dramatically improve your site's ranking on Google and other search engines. This tool shows which keywords on your site are most popular.



Armed with that information, you can seed other pages on your site with the same words, and ensure that those keywords are among the first to appear on each page.

The middle five

"Crawl Stats," also found in the Statistics toolkit, identifies the most commonly visited page on your site each month, which can sometimes come as a surprise. Some designers put extra information on a page that they discover is visited much more frequently than first envisioned.

In addition, "Crawl Stats" generates a comparative graph showing the relative page-rank performance of all your pages.

The seventh step is to run "Index Stats." This handy feature gives you a complete overview of which sites are linking to yours and which pages those sites are linking to as well. You can use Index Stats to look at links you've created between pages on your site and verify that all those links are working.

Links to your site are another critical component of high rankings on Google and other search engines. This GWA "Links" tool will show pages on your site that already have links from other sites, and allow you to verify when additional links are promised for your site. You also can use this tool to ensure all internal links on your site are working properly.

Adding a Google sitemap to your Google Webmasters Account, the ninth step, makes it easier for the company's search engine bots to index your site. This is another way to achieve higher search engine returns. Sitemaps contain info such as all the URLs associated with your site, how often you generally update those URLs, and related information. Google's sitemap generator and information page (<https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/docs/en/sitemap-generator.html>) offers techies and non-techies alike details on how to create a Google sitemap for your company's site.

The GWA "Tools" page should be

your 10th step, but this toolkit is a bit more technical than some. You may want to leave this task to your Web designer or search engine optimization consultant. For the brave of heart, stop by here to tweak the labeling on your site's images for better indexing by Google, change how often Google visits your site, and inform Google of pages on your site that you don't want indexed.

The final four steps

As you move into the home stretch, don't get dodgy. Attempting to trick Google into a higher search engine return often results in complete banishment from the site—the cyber-equivalent of a one-way ticket to Siberia. Don't fill your pages with non-relevant keywords, put up "cloak" pages that only contain keywords, or engage in similar shenanigans.

The next two steps also are "Don'ts." Don't use images to do the job of text, and don't create multiple copies of the same page.

Google's search bot does not recognize text contained in graphics, so don't use images to display important names, content, or links, if at all possible. And while many companies offer printer-friendly versions of their pages, such postings can be interpreted as search-engine spamming by Google. The solution: Block such pages with a Google robots.txt file. You can find more information on creating and managing this file in GWA's "Tools Overview" section.

Finally, our last step is to program for a unified search. Google is giving added weight to video, images, and news items in its search engine returns. When these items on your site are named and tagged properly, your video, images, and news items show up higher in Google's search engine returns. Verify with your Web designer that such items are tagged and named properly for Google's unified search. ■

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