Building Traffic, Making Money, and Measuring Success

There are plenty of people who will sell you snake oil they claim can gain more traffic. You don’t have to go far on Google to find plenty of balderdash about keywords, secret algorithms, and traffic-boosting tricks. In our own history as bloggers we have rarely had much truck with those sorts. In fact, there have been times when we’ve ignored search engine optimization (SEO) completely, writing stuff that we know will appeal to humans and not robots. That’s our trick.

Here’s our piece of advice: write good stuff, tell people about it, keep writing good stuff. As one of our favorite authors Farhad Manjoo once wrote, “Optimizing for Google results is a little like going out and buying the best VCR on the market.” Are you going to invest in something that will soon be obsolete? Google’s algorithms change regularly—it’s something the SEO-heads call the “Google Dance”—and anything you do today will be obsolete a few months from now.

SEO for Bloggers

However, we didn’t want you to feel short-changed, so we approached well-known search expert Eli Feldblum, CTO of RankAbove, to explain a bit about SEO for bloggers.

One of the most popular ways to get traffic to your blog is through search engines. People are always searching for stuff online, and if you’re writing about that same stuff, they probably should come to your blog. That theory is correct; in fact, it’s the theory that the major search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and Bing were founded on: connecting searchers to results.

But if you want to be in those results, and especially if you want to be at the top of those results, you need to make sure the search engines know what your blog is about—and you need to ensure that once they do, they think your blog is the most relevant site to show a searcher. That process is called search engine optimization, or SEO. Simply put, SEO is the process of explaining to search engines that your site is relevant (there’s that word again) to specific queries, which are primarily defined by the keywords people use when they search for stuff online.
The Key Phrase

The first step to SEO is making sure your content is truly relevant to what people search for, and that takes knowing what people search for. Let’s say you just bought a new iPhone. You start getting into it, and you start buying accessories and apps, and pretty soon you’re the guy your friends with iPhones ask for advice. You think you can turn the knowledge into cash by starting a blog about iPhone accessories. The most popular question you get is about hooking up an iPhone to a car stereo, so your first post is about iPhone car cables.

If your content is good, your page is optimized (we’ll get to that in a minute), and you get some links (we’ll get to that, too), you should bring in visitors by the thousands. So you’re pretty surprised when no one shows up. What gives? Your post was the perfectly optimized answer to any queries to any searches about iPhone car cables. Does Google just not like you?

The problem is this: no one searches for iPhone car cables. Lots of people want to hook up their iPhones to their cars; they just don’t use the word “cable.” Searchers prefer, in descending order, “iPhone car chargers,” “iPhone car mounts,” and “iPhone car kits.” According to data from Google, “iPhone car chargers” gets more than 27,000 searches every month in the U.S.—while “iPhone car cables” gets a mere 700 searches monthly.

The bots look at how often the key phrase and its variations are used. That will occur naturally when you discuss a topic, and there is no need to force it. Your content needs to appeal to users first, and then search engines.

Keep in mind that the perfect key phrase describes your story accurately, and also predicts which terms your readers will use to search for your story. When you’re choosing your key phrase, think of what you would search for if you were looking for the story you just wrote.

However, if the story you just wrote is a story that thousands of other bloggers are also writing at the same time, try to think of a slightly different angle that will attract readers searching for a key phrase that’s not so heavily populated.

For instance, if you’re writing about the new iPhone 7, your first instinct will of course be to use “iPhone 7” as your key phrase. But you will be competing against literally millions of other posts if you decide to use that key phrase. Think of a different angle, such as “iPhone 7 compared,” and then you can tailor your post around those keywords, comparing and contrasting that product with its competitors.

Isn’t determining keywords before you’ve written your post getting into “gray hat” SEO? Not exactly, because what you’re doing is trying to figure out a way to best reach your readers, and you’re not misrepresenting the content of your post with your key phrase. Of course, you’ll have to want to write a post comparing your product to others if you’re going to use our foregoing example, but you won’t be dishonest to your readers and those who have searched for your article by using that key phrase.

When optimizing SEO, keep honesty and integrity in mind. There are shady characters on the Internet who are abusing SEO. There are certain topics that you can’t search on the Internet and get a reliable result, because SEO has been gamed so much. For instance, try searching “SEO,” and you’ll see how SEO experts have made it impossible to find reliable information about that topic, just because of their unparalleled expertise.
On-Page

So now that you’ve picked the correct keywords, the ones that meet audience demand, it’s time to let Google and the other search engines know that your post is about those keywords. That’s called on-page optimization.

At the same time, think about the supply of readers. If there are a million people searching for a certain keyword and a billion blogs playing to that keyword, you’re going to get lost in the crowd. Look for niche keywords that are less competitive, giving you a fighting chance of grabbing a share of the audience.

No one from Google will come and read your site to determine how relevant you are—it’s all done via automated “bots” that crawl the web, jumping from link to link and reading the content (to the best of their ability) on each page, called “spiders.” (Get it? Spiders crawl the web? Funny people, those Google guys.) Because they are not people, the spiders are not perfect readers. They can’t read everything that appears on the page. And they rely on you highlighting specific sections of the page, called “signals,” to alert them to the most relevant content on the page.

These spiders operate by a few basic rules:

- They read only text, not images or Flash video or audio (at least, not fully, and not yet).
- They read from top to bottom.
- They look for signals to tell them what’s important.

Our friend Farhad was so right when he said Google’s search algorithm is a moving target. However, there are some basic parts of the search algorithm that can’t really change. For instance, the title of your post will always be the best place to find out what your post is actually about.

So that’s the first basic rule of our SEO philosophy: state the topic of your post as early as possible in the title. For instance, if you’re writing about the new Krazy Kikz shoes everybody’s talking about, you’ll want to have the words Krazy Kikz as close to the beginning of your title as possible. For optimum SEO, you’ll want the term Krazy Kikz in the first paragraph of your post, and in the first sentence if you can swing it.

You’ll want to add the term “Krazy Kikz” as an “alt” to all of the images on your page, and then in your content management system (CMS) such as WordPress or Blogger, you’ll want to be sure to include the term Krazy Kikz in your meta description of the story. Finally, be sure the term Krazy Kikz is part of your permalink for the story—that is, be sure the URL of your story includes it.

If you follow the routine of creating a thoroughly descriptive key phrase (often called “focus keyword”) and then use it in those specific places in your post, you’ll be well on your way toward SEO perfection. Let’s go over each of the specific places where your key phrase should reside in your post, and explain why each is significant.

Article heading: This is the title you use to populate the Title field of your page. It’s the SEO title as well—unless you would like to use a separate SEO title. There’s a place for you to change it to something different in most content management systems.

Page title: If you leave this blank, your article heading will also function as your SEO title. Why would you want to change it? One good reason is that the display in most search engines is limited to seventy characters, so if your display title is longer than
that, it will get cut off when people are searching for your story. In addition, for best SEO results, your title should be at least forty characters long. The page title is important, so if you can’t part with your display title, write a separate one for SEO and be sure to place that key phrase at the title’s beginning.

**Page URL:** Otherwise known as a permalink, this is where your post will reside on your site. You can set defaults for what all of your permalink’s look like, but you’ll always want to contain your key phrase in that permalink for maximum optimization. For example, when I’m writing about the iBarge, here’s how that post’s permalink will look: [http://charliewish.net/2013/08/iBarge/](http://charliewish.net/2013/08/iBarge/).

**Inside the content:** You’ll want to include that magic word or phrase in the first paragraph, and even in the first sentence if possible. You’ll want to mention it a few times within your post as well, but don’t go overboard. There is such a thing as mentioning your keyword too many times, for which your post will be downgraded. In our experience, using the key phrase before it feels forced or awkward is usually a good rule of thumb.

**Meta description:** If you’ve written a tight first sentence to your post, that will usually serve you well as a meta description. It’s usually limited to 156 characters, so stay within those parameters, mentioning your key phrase at least once.

**Other SEO enhancements:**

**Outbound links:** Include at least a backlink—that is, one link outside of your own site, and the SEO gods will smile upon you. We’ll tell you more about backlinks a bit later in this chapter.

**Image Alt:** Whenever you place an image in a page, there’s always a spot for alternate text, so place your key phrase in there, too. Try to add it to all of your images in the post. Before you’ve added it, you’ll see this in the code: `alt=""`. Between those two quotes is where you’ll add your key phrase. Here’s an example:

```
<img src='http://charliewish.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Apple-iWatch-02.png' alt='iWatch' width='1280' height='720' class='aligncenter size-full wp-image-630' />
```

**Subheadings:** If you find it aesthetically pleasing or editorially necessary to place subheads within your text, the more times you include your key phrase in those subheads, the more SEO power you’ll have.

**Post length:** Three hundred words seems to be the magic number for some SEO maven, but there’s little if any research that supports that number. However, as an esteemed colleague pointed out, a 300-word minimum is a good way to urge you to expound upon your post topic. Write more, add context, and make it yours on the way to getting the length up to 300 words. However, this rule is made to be broken, because many photos and factoids do fine with just one sentence or a short paragraph.

**Writing style:** You can adopt some styles of writing that will help, like the “Inverted Pyramid,” which is what some journalists use for news articles. In the Inverted Pyramid, all the crucial information is imparted in the first paragraph and then examined and explained in depth throughout the article. Because the spider reads a page from top to bottom, this style quickly alerts them to the content of the page, and it ensures the bots don’t give up on a long page before getting to the point.

After all that, we come back to this: **the most important thing is good content.** In the world of SEO, content is king. The foregoing rules will help Google understand your
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content, but if it’s not good content to begin with, it’s worthless. The search engines look for content relevant to what people search for, but that also abides by the rules of good—or at least pretty good—writing. And good content will also naturally get other people to link to your blog, which, as we’ll soon see, could be the most important part of all.

Overall, Google is looking for three things from your content: relevance, uniqueness, and freshness. Write good content frequently, using these rules, and you’ll soon see visitors from SEO.

Off-Page

Okay, so your blog is now relevant for the keywords people use when they’re interested in your topic. Here’s a dirty little secret. You’re not the only person reading about SEO. Lots of other bloggers and webmasters have also been working to optimize their sites. They may all be equally relevant to the keywords you are going after.

Once the spiders figure out all the pages that are relevant to a certain query, they need to rank the pages in a way that benefits the user. They want to show the user the best page first, and “best” is usually synonymous with most popular. The more people who like your site—and express that sentiment by linking to your blog—the higher you will rank for your relevant content. Google’s big innovation when it came on the scene was looking at the web the same way kids look at high school. The coolest kids are not just the ones with the most friends, but also those with the coolest friends (defined the same way; Google loves recursion). The kid with lots of friends on the football team and cheerleading squad is usually more popular than the one with friends on the chess club and the debate team. Google applied this to the web. Sites with more links—especially links from sites that also had lots of links to them, called backlinks—were more popular. Google gave each site a popularity quotient, called PageRank (named after co-founder Larry Page, no kidding).

Given two identically relevant and equally optimized pages, the one with better backlinks wins.

The SEO Bottom Line

So you’ve got three steps to make sure your blog ranks and gets traffic from SEO:

1. Make sure your content matches up with the keywords people are using for their search queries.
2. Make sure your content is optimized so that the search engines can read it and know what the important parts are.
3. Make sure other sites know about—and link to—your content.

That’s basically it, with an emphasis on “basic.” There are a host of other factors and signals the engines use to rank pages, but everything is based on keywords, relevance, and links.

Social Media

When you’ve written all your wonderful guff, you need to get the word out and let everyone know it exists. This is where you can leverage social media to spread the word about