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Five Steps to Optimizing an eCommerce Site for Search Engines

A Systematic Approach to Implementing SEO on an eCommerce Website

Whitepaper Written By:

Tom Kuthy, Search Engine Optimization Expert, WSI

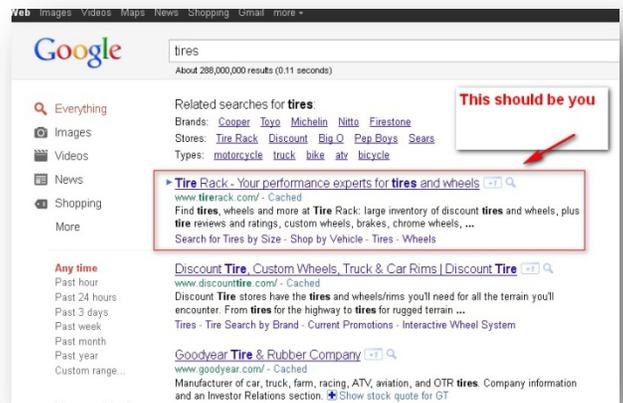
Introduction to SEO

Creating a popular website is more than just having a good idea; in order for a website to succeed it needs to produce a steady stream of incoming traffic, and to do that cost effectively, you need to implement solid SEO. SEO stands for search engine optimization, and is what allows search engines like Google and Yahoo! to find your website.

If you perform a search on Google for anything, how many pages do you typically look through before choosing one of the search results? If you're like 97% of the population, you pick a result on the first page. Not only that, you probably click on one of the top 3 or 4 results. It makes sense then that those websites receive exponentially more visitors than a website located on the 2nd, 3rd, or 7th page. The purpose of SEO is to rank your website among those top results, based on common search phrases related to the subject matter of your eCommerce site.

SEO has become so popular that we're at the point where any website that doesn't utilize SEO techniques is sure to fail. That's not a doomsday prophecy; it's just the nature of the beast. Luckily, basic SEO can be done by anyone, although for top Google ranking you should work with an experienced SEO service.

Any type of eCommerce website is essentially dead in the water without at least some form of SEO strategy. The whole purpose of these websites is to sell a product – if nobody's looking, nobody's buying. Any salesman also knows that sales are about numbers. You might only sell one product for every 50 people who view your website, but if you're bringing in 80,000 unique page views per month, you start to build a steady stream of income.



Step 1: Conduct Your Keyword Research

Keywords are what people use to search for websites. If you have a website that sells tires, then you would want people to find your website by searching for something like “snow tires”. They want what you're selling. Keyword research involves finding popular phrases that people are looking for that don't come with a lot of competition. This is the foundation of every SEO campaign because every other technique is built on top of the keywords that you choose at this step.



The trick with keyword research is finding keywords and key phrases that you could actually rank for. Obviously, the word “tires” is a highly competitive keyword with thousands of websites already using it in their SEO. However, the phrase “Yokohama all weather tires R70-16” probably has less competition,

which will make it easier for you to get a high page rank for searches using that keyword. Of course, these keywords are undoubtedly searched much less frequently than “tires”. So which one do you pick?

Higher Searches = Higher Competition

As a general rule (although there are exceptions!), the more monthly searches a keyword has, the harder it will be to rank. When doing your research, use a tool that gives you the global monthly searches and the competition for any given ranking. Google Keyword Tool is a good, though basic, tool for this. Alternatively you could use paid services like Market Samurai or Micro Niche Finder to research on your own, or a reliable company like WSI that will take care of this time consuming step for you. You want to find a keyword with: LOW Competition and HIGH Global Monthly Searches.

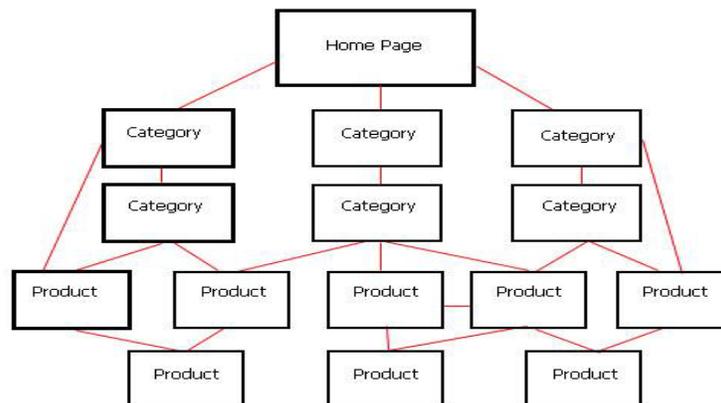
Below your specified keyword Google Keyword Tool will give you a list of similar keywords, and these are often the most useful part of the tool. You might notice a keyword that you wouldn't have thought of otherwise, and using this method you can slowly begin to build a keyword architecture for your site.

Step 2: Develop an SEO Site Architecture and Keyword Mapping

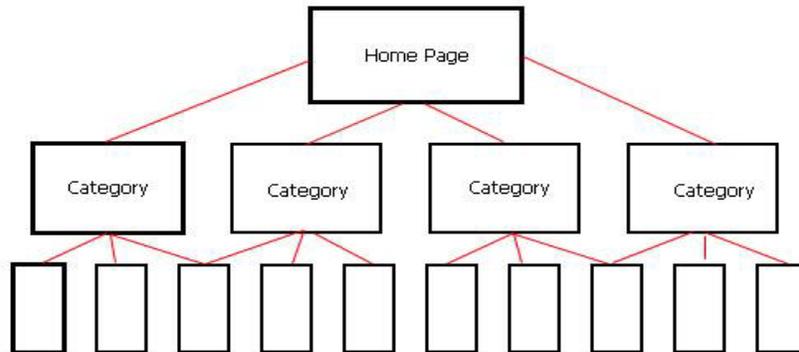
You would be surprised how many website owners would just give you a blank stare if you asked them about how their site architecture was set up. Many eCommerce sites were set up before SEO became an established Internet marketing discipline. The site architecture of these websites typically reflects that of pre-existing catalogues, or even how a warehouse filled with products might have been organized before the advent of the Internet.

Perhaps the most important concept in eCommerce SEO is that **keyword search volume can be used to determine the proper organization of an eCommerce site**. This is accomplished by using pages higher in the site to rank for broader terms, and then mapping less frequently searched terms to pages deeper in the site. For our tire example, here is how site architecture might be transformed based on this:

Poor Site Architecture Based on Historical Catalogues:



An optimized eCommerce site has the home page optimized for the overall type of products that the site sells such as “tires”. Below the home page should be the most frequently searched *categories* of tires such as “snow tires”, “all weather tires”, “off road tires”, etc. The next level down should be subcategories of tires. These *subcategories* may be brands like Michelin, Goodyear, Yokohama, etc. or sizes like R70-16. The names and levels of the categories and sub categories should correspond to the search volume of the keywords that each page is trying to rank for.



Keyword Mapping

This set-up is relatively simple if you have a fairly small website, but some eCommerce websites have more than a thousand different pages of content and that's where keyword mapping comes in. This is a long and arduous process that is crucial to your on-site SEO. You have to assign keywords to different pages so that your site as a whole covers the keywords that you need.

For each keyword that gets searched, the search engine’s goal is to serve up the most **relevant** content possible to give the searcher what they are looking for. By focusing each page in your site 100% around a single keyword that you are trying to rank for, you maximize the chances of ranking for that word. Try to rank for too many keywords with a single page and you will end up not ranking for any of them.

Step 3: Conduct Your On-page Optimization

Once you have the foundations laid for your SEO campaign, the next step is to develop your on-site or on-page SEO. The objective of on-page SEO is to clearly signal to the search engines that this page is all about a specific keyword, or in other words that this page is highly **relevant** to what the searcher is looking for.



On page optimization involves strategically using the keyword in those places that the search engines are looking for it. There are a lot of misconceptions about where and how keywords should be used. However, experienced SEO experts know that keywords should be use in the following places:

The URL – Most eCommerce sites dynamically generate URLs that do not contain keywords, but rather category ID numbers and Product ID numbers. An optimized site should have URLs that look something like this: www.mysite.com/michelin-snow-tires.

The Title Tag – Each page has a Meta title and the keyword should be used in the Meta title towards the beginning of the Title.

The H1 and H2 Tags – These are the on-page headings of each web page, and usually correspond to cascading style sheets or CSS. Keywords should always be used in the H1 and H2 tags.

The body copy – keywords should not be repeated over and over in the body copy. Just a few times is enough. Having the keywords toward the beginning and the end is good, and using bolds, bullets and italics for the keyword is also helpful. “Stuffing” keywords unnaturally into the body copy does not increase rankings, and it could get you kicked off the search engines.

Images –Using the keywords in the image names (i.e. Michelin-snow-tires.jpg) and in the alternative text that appears when the mouse hovers over an image also helps the search engines understand what the page is about.

There are many subtleties and nuances to including the keywords on your site and an experienced WSI SEO expert can guide you on proper usage, and even write optimized pages for your entire site.

Step 4: Conduct Your Off-page Optimization

While on-page optimization is all about signalling to the search engines that you have relevant content on your page and deserve to be ranked for the target keyword, off-page optimization is about signalling to the search engines that you page is the **most popular** page that contains that content.

Google, in particular, uses links into your site as a proxy for popularity. The quality and the quantity of links coming from other sites into your own is how search engines decide which of two pages that have equally good content should rank relative to one another. All things being equal the site with more links and better quality links will rank higher. The practice of off-page optimization is therefore sometimes referred to as “link building”.

There are so many techniques for link building that it's impossible to put them all into one small paper. At the most basic level, here are 5 strategies that work effectively:

- Videos
- Blogs
- Social Media
- Press Releases
- Articles

Videos

Video marketing wasn't an extremely popular Internet marketing tool 5 years ago, but is now one of the fastest growing methods for high search engine rankings. Websites like YouTube and Vimeo are making it easier than ever for eCommerce businesses to post short promotional videos with a short description that links to their web page. Not only do the video channels allow you to link back to your site, but the search engines also rank video content on its own, which can get your brand on the first page for targeted keywords even before you site ranks.



Blogs

Blogs are like an endless pool of off-site content that links directly back to your website. There are two ways to use blogs: either create your own or comment on other blogs. Creating your own is simple enough; just use one of the many free blogging platforms such as Wordpress or Blogger. Then create a series of short blog posts using keywords as the anchor text linking back to your site. Blog commenting involves leaving engaging comments on other blogs that receive a lot of traffic, also with links back to your site.



Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and many other social media sites are invaluable for developing strong SEO. These allow you to network, gain a following, and connect with the millions upon millions of people who visit these sites each and every day. Posting a link on your Facebook Page and Twitter Page that points back to your content can be helpful in building popularity for your pages.



Press Releases

Release an official statement for the press for new products, events, website launches and anything else you can think of. These can create a lot of buzz for a product that will get a lot of potential clients excited about what's going to come. And, of course, you will want to use keyword based anchor text to link back to your site.



Articles

Articles are one of the easiest methods for giving your website targeted backlinks. Blogs can also do this, but it takes awhile to build a new blog into an authority site. Links that come from respected, aged domains, count for even more points. With articles, you can submit to article directories like ExineArticles and use that domain to strengthen the quality of your inbound links.



Step 5: Tracking and Analysis



Because of the very nature of SEO, it can be hard to determine if the techniques are actually working or not. It's a process that goes on behind the scenes. Tracking results before and after your campaign will allow you to gauge the effectiveness of your different techniques. If some are working extremely well and others are proving ineffective, you can simply adjust your strategy to compensate.

There are plenty of tracking programs that will allow you to view the statistic of your website. Most hosting services provide free access to analysis tools, although they're sometimes very limited. Alternatively, Google provides a free tracking and analysis tool called Google Analytics. By pasting a code into the HTML of your website you can view incoming traffic, page views, search phrases, individual pages viewed and much more.

At a basic level, you should track 3 things:

1. **Rankings** – The goal of SEO is to get your content to rank for targeted keywords. You should take a baseline reading before you engage in SEO and then track your site's rankings for the desired keywords on a monthly basis to measure the progress you are making.
2. **Website visits** – Rankings are only a means to an end. Your SEO should be driving traffic to your site. Google Analytics allows you to measure traffic generated by specific keywords, and this is where you can really gauge the effectiveness of your campaign.
3. **Sales by keyword** – Just as rankings are only a means to an end, visits are only valuable if the visitor actually buys something. Google Analytics allows you to track the dollar sales of visitors who entered by searching on a specific keyword, and this is the true measure of your eCommerce SEO success.

One thing to keep in mind when tracking your SEO progress is that SEO takes time. Don't expect instant results, or you will surely be disappointed.

Conclusion

That last sentence really sums up the process of SEO: it takes time. You can't expect everything to happen at once. Sometimes it takes months to see results; it all depends on the subject of your eCommerce site and what keywords you're using.

The success of websites today all comes down to how well they rank in search engines. In an age when nearly nobody takes the time to remember specific website URLs, it makes no sense to try to go in that direction. Even if I know I want to go to a specific tire website for my snow tires, I'll still just type in "snow tires" and see where that takes me. It's the mindset of the Internet using population, and there's no way to fight that.

SEO takes time, yes. It takes dedication and a working knowledge of how these systems work. There's a lot of trial and error involved for first time optimizers, and if you want to take care of your site's SEO then you are going to have to expect that.

However, when implemented correctly into a strong website, SEO has the power to dramatically boost incoming traffic, which subsequently leads to higher conversions and ultimately more product sales for you. Remember the numbers: if one visitor out of every 50 buys a product from your site, you want to focus on bringing in more visitors. Get 10, 20 times that number of visits and you'll start to notice a real difference in your bottom line. That's the freedom that you can get from proper SEO.

SEO can feasibly be done by anybody with a computer. That doesn't mean it will be effective though. Our goal is effective SEO that actually shows results, conducted by a team of experienced and knowledgeable search engine optimizers.

If you want to make sure your SEO is done properly so that you get the most out of your website, contact WSI for these SEO services. When we do something, we do it right. That's the kind of commitment that your website deserves.

About the Author



Tom Kuthy is a trained and certified WSI Internet Marketing Consultant based in Colorado Springs. With more than 25 years of experience running internet businesses and learning marketing at Fortune 500 marketing firms, Tom brings a unique and highly valuable perspective to his clients.

If you have any questions, please email education@wsicorporate.com.