

# Search Engine Optimization— In Plain English

By Roberta M. Gubbins

**S**earch engine optimization, or SEO, is a technique used to ensure that a website is found by search engines using words and phrases relevant to what the site offers.

In many ways, SEO is a form of quality control for websites. If your law firm concentrates in bankruptcy, for example, the words used to describe your business would include *bankruptcy*, *law firm*, *lawyer*, your name, and the city in which you practice. Consumers entering some of those terms in a search engine would find a list of bankruptcy lawyers in your city, including you.

## How do websites appear on a page of results?

While some pay for placement, most websites rely on search engine ranking systems. Google, for example, uses automated robots to crawl through the web and build an index to provide consumers with a list of relevant websites. Assuming the more popular sites have the most valuable information, the robots rank those sites, pages, and documents according to popularity. Think of it as a map of the web highlighting only those locations that are both relevant and popular; the most popular appears first and the others follow in order of rank.

SEO involves creating a relevant and popular site that attracts a lot of visitors using strategies and techniques to obtain a high-ranking placement in the search results. SEO considers:

- How search engines work
- What people search for
- Keywords typed into search engines
- Which search engines are most popular with your target market



## SEO strategy

There are different forms of SEO strategy. A *white hat* strategy refers to using tactics that follow search engine guidelines and focus on a human audience rather than nonhuman search engines; e.g., a website that is optimized or enhanced for search engines while maintaining relevancy and that surfaces naturally because of its relevance to the search terms. This strategy produces organic search results as opposed to nonorganic results, which include pay-per-click advertising. Examples are websites that offer quality written content for human readers. These sites tend to stand the test of time, gradually and steadily building a readership.

In contrast, a *black hat* strategy uses aggressive techniques—including keyword stuffing, invisible text, doorway pages that lead you to a different site, or adding keywords unrelated to the website—to influence search engines for a quick financial return.

These tactics can result in being banned from a search engine; however, those who use them view that as an irrelevant risk.

## SEO terms

All disciplines have their own vocabulary and SEO is no exception. Here are a few terms you should know:

- **Keywords**—words like *lawyer*, *Lansing*, and *trust* are used by search engines in their hunt for relevant pages.
- **Hyperlink**—a word, image, or other element in an electronic document that links to another place in the same document or an entirely different document.
- **Back link**—a hyperlink that links from a site such as Twitter back to your web page; also called an inbound link.
- **Organic SEO**—a phrase used to describe processes of obtaining natural and free placement on search engine result pages.

You don't need to be an SEO expert to be able to use it your advantage. ■



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