Search Engine Optimization

Search engines can be used to find all types of information from your personal contact information to what organizations are involved in relieving world hunger and how they are doing it. Each day, over 2 billion searches are done by Google, so how does Google determine the order of the results based on the phrase you are searching? The answer is using search engine optimization, or SEO. SEO is the process or strategy of using techniques and tactics to increase website traffic by obtaining high placement in the search results page of search engines such as Google and Bing. SEO makes sure your site is visible to users, and increases the chance of your site being found when they search for it using search engines. It is a relatively inexpensive, yet challenging, way for non-profit organizations to reach their audience.

Why should Nonprofit Organizations use SEO?

For starters, let’s say we want to find a place to volunteer in Waco. We will search the phrase “volunteer in Waco” in Google. There are about 1.4 million results. Below are the first five results.

It is extremely uncommon for users to go through every single result to find what they are looking for. This is why SEO is important. The higher your site is ranked, the more likely it will show up on the first page of the search results and users are more likely to visit it.

In addition, SEO helps you stay competitive among your peer organizations. Using the above example, if you want people to volunteer at your organization, it is important to include the key words “volunteer in Waco” in your website, so your website will be ranked higher than if you do not have those key words.

SEO is not just about having keywords, but also having good content. If you put up too many keywords without providing good content, search engines will check your content and drop your ranking.
**SEO Strategies**

Your organization can utilize several SEO strategies to boost your website rankings. When optimizing your site for SEO, think about who visits your site and content that would interest this audience, what keywords they use to find your website, and the relationship between your website and similar websites.

1. **Content**
   
The key to everything is your website content! Search engines use it to 1) rank search results based on web content quality, 2) determine whether users are returning to your site or sharing your webpage, and 3) ultimately to increase your website traffic. It is important to have keywords in the webpage's body content, but do not flood the body with keywords or use the same keyword excessively on other pages of the same website.

2. **Choose your keywords carefully**
   
   By asking your existing audience or by analyzing data from your website traffic (see [Web Analytics](#)), you will be able to learn which keywords or phrases are used most often to find your website. Build a list of these keywords. Good keywords will help search engines understand your website. If you do not know which keywords to use, you can use [Google Keyword Tool](#) to plan which keywords to use and where to place them.

3. **Have sharable content**
   
   Sharable content will improve your web traffic, contribute to SEO, and attract and maintain audiences. The more your content is shared, the greater the chance it will have a higher ranking.

   You may do this by adding social media buttons, so your audience can share the content over Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, etc.

   Creating a regularly updated blog in which you share news, interview donors, and announce events will also attract and maintain your audience, increase likelihood your content will be shared, and improve SEO. This is the case because search engines like relevant and new information, which is the same reason why you should update your website often.

   For example, the Nonprofit Technology Collaboration website has social media buttons where users can connect with the website via Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Podcast, Youtube, and RSS Feed.
4. **Optimize your webpages for SEO**

After you have a list of keywords and phrases, incorporate them into your **website content**. Remember, focus more on quality, not quantity. Include no more than 5 keywords or phrase on each webpage. The key to SEO is having good keywords and good content. Make sure the webpage’s content sounds natural and appealing to your audience, so that users are left with a good impression of the organization.

Even though different web hosts and different content management system (CMS) have different ways for you to manage your SEO, there are strategies that can be implemented regardless of web host or CMS.

**Title Tag**

Every webpage should have a webpage title. Many search engines examine webpage titles when ranking websites. One of the most important locations to place keywords describing your site is the website’s **title tag**. Place keyword(s) as close to the beginning of the title tag as possible.

For example, if I search “volunteer in Waco” using Google, Cameron Park Zoo is among the top page search results. One reason for this is because this webpage’s title tag has the word “volunteer” in it, and the keywords “volunteer” and “Waco” occur multiple times on the webpage. Another reason is related to the use of “permalinks”, which is discussed below.
**Permalinks**

Permalinks are enhanced webpage address (i.e., URL) links for your webpages that can be used to improve SEO by using your page title or other descriptive content in the URL. Instead of using a pre-generated default URL that does not make any sense to your users, like http://www.baylor.edu/adfnbi;a=?wmx, use a URL that is meaningful, like http://www.baylor.edu/business/mis/nonprofits. Also, with these user-friendly permalinks, your users will better remember how to find your site, increasing your website traffic.

**Meta Tags**

Use meta tags. In webpages, meta tags are used with HTML (the programming language of webpages) to provide descriptions of what the website is about, who created it, which keywords represent the page’s content, etc. Meta tags are not displayed in the page’s actual content. It is one of the many things search engines look at to determine the ranking of your website.

**Image Descriptions**

Using image descriptions will also contribute to your ranking. When you add keyword to the image description, that image will show up in both web search results and image search results when users search for your keyword.

**Links, inside and out**

If you are partners with or receive donations from other organizations which also have websites, it is important to ask them to include your website link in their websites. As a result, search engines will rank your website higher because they trust your site to have good content since your site is supported by other sites. However when picking which websites to include your link, make sure the websites you pick have good quality content. If a website that references your website does not have good content, that website will have a low ranking, which could potentially lead to your site being ranked lower because of the association.

For example, the Acknowledgment page of Baylor MIS Non-profit Technology Collaboration website has external links to Waco Foundation. This will help Waco Foundation’s search engine rankings because Baylor’s website has good content, and vice-versa.

Another way of using links to attract and retain site visitors is to have links on one webpage of your website that are linked to other webpages of the same website (see image on right, above). This will create an easier way for users to navigate your website and also allow you to have more keywords on the webpage without cluttering the content. You can do this by having a footer menu or site map as shown below.