Boosting SEO with an Organic Search Site Review

A Hands-On Guide

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Why Is an Organic Search Site Review Necessary?

If your website isn't producing the results you want, it's time for an audit to figure out what's going wrong—or right.

A technical and content-focused site review should be your first step. Websites are dynamic and organic. They are constantly being changed and updated. The people responsible for the content come and go, as do the people responsible for the programming and maintenance. Over time, the search engines change their rules on what is acceptable. On-site errors creep in and there are unintended and undetected consequences that sometimes accompany change. A thorough site review addressing the key areas search engines review when looking at your site will uncover these issues, and provide a blueprint for cleaning up your site and revving its productivity engine.

There are several aspects of an organic search site review:

- Architecture
- Technology
- Source code
- Content (siloing)
- Key words and phrases
- Content (quality and originality)

The combination of these elements, optimized for search, will allow the content on your site to stand out from your competition, driving well-qualified visitors to your site.

With the burgeoning importance of Internet marketing, the Marketing Department and IT find themselves increasingly thrown together to achieve their goals. This is particularly so in search engine optimization (SEO), where Marketing needs to understand some of the boiler-room workings of Internet sites to effectively optimize sites for search engine discovery. Merely understanding how to use keywords isn't enough any more. Performing a technical and content site review requires the participation of both Marketing and IT in a true partnership. Marketers need to understand the elements and tools used to make websites sing—and what can make a site hard to crawl and result in a loss of search engine traffic.

The review should examine the site as others see it, keeping two key audiences in mind: search engines and directories ("spiders") and people (prospects, customers, vendors, partners, shareholders, etc.). The purpose is to uncover anything that might block search engines, and result in Google reducing its evaluation of the site's value, or result in site users being unable to do what you want them to on your site.

Architecture

The site needs a consistent layout and structure that emphasizes the content where you want visitors to focus. Where are the logical "buckets" of content? Sometimes it appears logical to have content in more than one place on the site. For example, if you are selling motorcycles and motorcycle accessories, it may seem to make sense to have the information about Harley-Davidson T-shirts in the Harley-Davidson section of your site, and to repeat this information in your apparel section. However, Google doesn't want to see the same content repeated in different areas of your site and will ding you for it. A site review will identify these issues and offer concrete actions to address them in the most search engine-friendly way.

Once the content is organized, you need to look at directory names. Every directory name has the ability to be named with keywords such as Motorcycle Helmets>Full-Face Helmets>Bell Helmets. Don't let these descriptors get too long; you need them to communicate crisply. Longer descriptors may confuse or mislead, and usability is the guiding principle.

Incorporate key phrase-rich names for files and directories that mirror the content of the pages. This will increase your site's search visibility to search engines by increasing relevance. (Remember, anything that makes Google's search results more accurate will help your ranking.) Make sure they are used in page titles, file titles, link text, ALT tags and metadata within the media files. (Content creation programs have a means of embedding key words and phrases within the files they produce.) This will assure that when users perform a Google search, the right words and phrases will be included in the brief description search engines provide for each site.

There are tools you can use to crawl the site and look at it the way Google sees it. One excellent tool is Screaming Frog, which has free downloadable versions for Windows, Mac OS and Ubuntu. The Screaming Frog SEO Spider is a small desktop program you can install on your PC or Mac that crawls websites' links, images, CSS, script and apps from an SEO perspective. Screaming Frog will tell you where it has crawled and the pages it has found, reports 404s (missing pages), redirects, broken links, duplicate pages, and more. Moz.com is another great tool. These tools will allow you to gain a good top-

level understanding of architectural and some content issues that interfere with search engines, including how pages relate to one another (or don't).

Your site should be architected to be wide, but shallow. Spiders give priority to the content closest to the root of the site (the first directory after the ".com"). That means if users have to click three or four times to get to the content they want, the content is given less weight when the search engine analyzes it (See Figure 1).
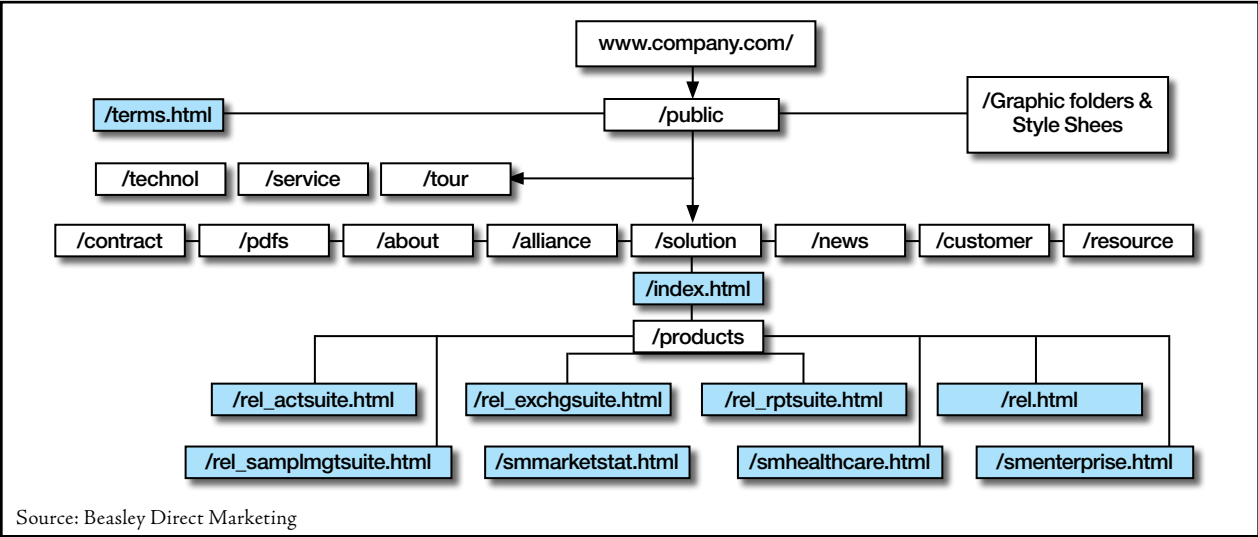

Figure 1: When Key Content Is Buried Too Deep (Below Root and Secondary Directories), Spiders Won't Crawl It

Pinpoint your meatiest content (the content you most want users to be able to access), and make sure that content is at the root and secondary levels. (See Figure 2.)
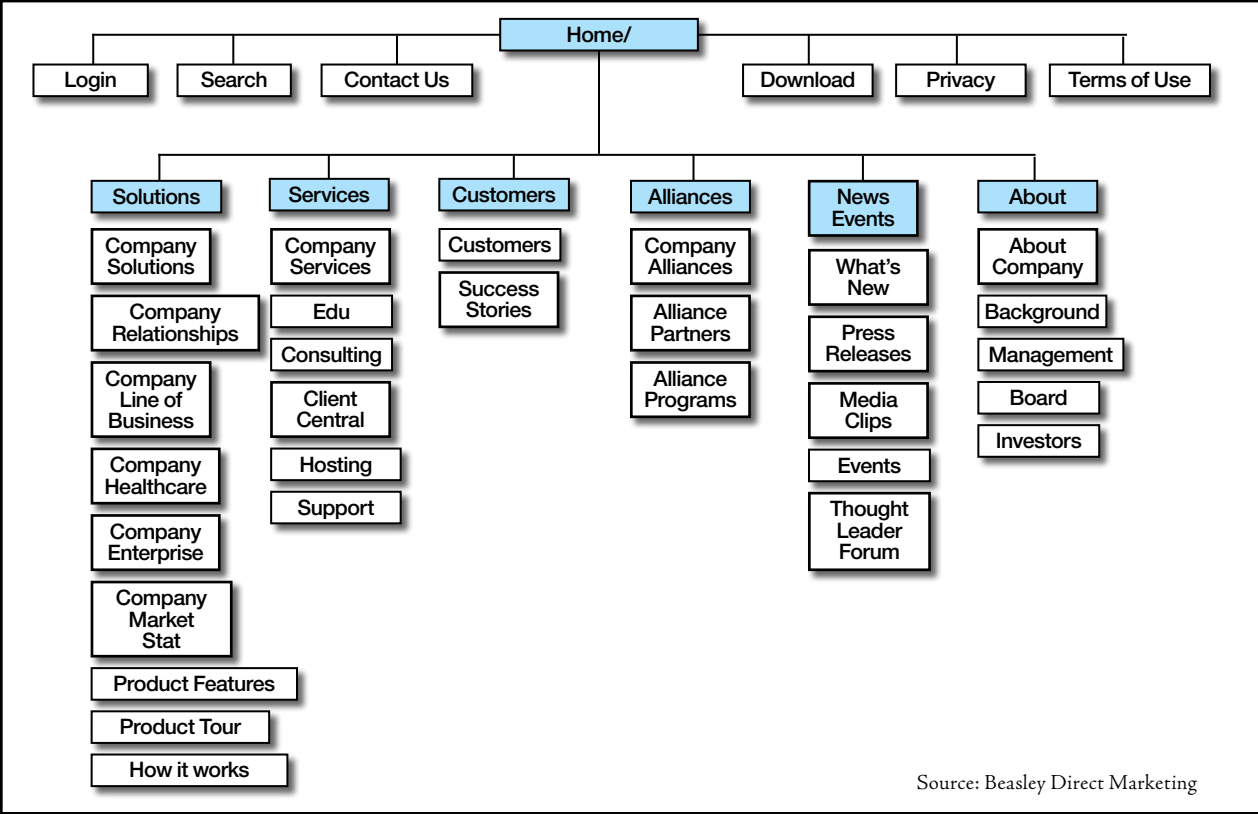

Figure 2: In a Well-Architected Site, Key Content Is at the Root and Secondary Levels

Use "Eye Candy" Web Technologies Sparingly

There are hundreds of content management systems available, from WordPress to Joomlah. Most of these systems try to incorporate SEO best practices. They have a default set of built-in options that can help or hurt SEO, depending, so these need to be carefully examined before implementing on your site. You particularly want to be able to look at and modify the page titles and META descriptions. For example, the generic installation of WordPress—one of the most popular content management and publishing systems—does not allow this, but a plug-in from Yoast allows you to categorize WordPress pages with unique titles.

Page titles are good drivers of SEO rank if they are composed well. Title tags get picked up immediately by crawlers and help the search engine to understand and rank your page in comparison to others. In addition, a well-written META description that is concise and has a benefits statement in it will help to increase the click-through rate when your site comes up in the search results. A standard but not very useful META description might say, "Full-face motorcycle helmet," while an effective META description might say, "Full-face motorcycle helmet meets highest safety standard." Do research around your content and make sure the metadata relates to it closely.

Some of the technologies used in building websites make for nice "eye candy", but can prevent the site from being effectively crawled. FLASH technology for movies is fine, but sites built on FLASH cannot be crawled thoroughly. Spiders can read only the links and a limited amount of the content, and search results tend to be poor as a consequence. Also, some FLASH pages can have one URL, but have three or four content "pages" associated with it. You need to be aware of this and associate one page of content with one URL in FLASH. A best practice is not to rely on FLASH to build your entire site but to use it on a page-by-page basis to enhance sections of the site that will benefit from the interactivity of FLASH. Additionally, many of FLASH's features are now offered in a much more friendly HTML 5 format that doesn't raise barriers to search engines as FLASH does.

AJAX (an acronym for asynchronous JavaScript and XML) is a group of interrelated web development techniques used on the client side to create asynchronous web applications. They allow great interactivity, such as mousing over a photo for more detail, and allowing information to load in the background. This is great for user experience, but unless you code the page correctly, it can confuse and block search

engines from fully indexing the content. Search-engine friendly AJAX is well understood and can be implemented by most competent web developers, but it often must be listed as a specific requirement when building a site.

The lesson here is to use these technologies as an adjunct to your main content, and only where they achieve a useful purpose, such as usability. Users who want to get to the meat of what you offer may be irritated and turned off by too many shiny bells and whistles, while users with older, slower connections and older browsers may not be able to use a gimmicky site at all.

Take a Good Look at Source Code

The average site has a code:content ratio of 80:20. This means that one in five "words" on each page is user-friendly content. The rest is "spider junk food," and it doesn't help SEO. Search engines will pay the most attention to the user visible content and less attention to the myriad scripts, tracking tags and hidden developer comments. Offload code segments into cascading style sheets (CSS) and Javascript, including files. Aim for a code:content ratio of 55/45 or better.

Be aware that search engines—Google in particular—take into account where your site is hosted. If your site is hosted on a server where your virtual neighbors are undertaking dubious activities like phishing, this "bad" neighborhood will taint your site ranking. Your hosting company should be above reproach.

Search engines also take into account how fast your site loads and how quickly it can be browsed. Consider if your host server is optimized for your type of site and its location. For example, if your site is hosted on a server in Connecticut and you are selling surfboards to Californians, images and media files can take longer to load as they need to travel across the country to appear for your California-based users One of the tools we use to test how fast and efficient your site loads is the Google PageSpeed Service. Enter any URL and Google will give you a ranking for it and offer suggestions to make it load faster.

Make sure all images are optimized for compression. Have scripts load content first and interactivity second. If you have audio or video files, host them remotely to make the site load faster without them. As they are large chunks of code, they can seriously slow down a site. Use a content delivery network to load these files quickly. Offload code segments into .css and .js files.

Carefully Silo Your Content

Search engines reward well-organized sites with clear content/subject/sections. Directories and sub-directories should all be structured to have related content, creating content "silos." Internal links should reinforce these content silos. Content should be focused, even on a huge site that contains many different pages and may have many different kinds of users. Carefully siloing the content presents spiders with logically arranged content they will use to assess the value of the site.

Evaluate your content for frequent use of appropriate and key phrases. Key words and key phrases should be used throughout every page, including headlines, subheads and copy. They should be repeated about five times per page (taking care not to sacrifice the quality of your content for readability) so that spiders can pick up and use these to assess your site's value to users.

Remember that spiders don't see your graphics files the way users do. They see the content around the image, ALT tags associated with the file and any embedded META information. Use the surrounding content and embedded META data to put context and explanation around your image, audio and video files.

META tags and HTML formatting commands can be made to serve a dual purpose: providing "food" for spiders and reinforcing your customer message. Figure A shows how to use keywords properly on a page.

Keyword Research and Your Site Audit

Any good search engine optimization audit for your site requires doing in-depth keyword research. The keywords—really key phrases that you eventually want to select—use the actual language that your potential site visitors use when looking for information on what your site offers. Remember that most people use a search engine because they are looking for a specific answer to a question or a solution to a problem, so finding a site they already know about is generally a secondary concern. Keep this in mind as you begin the keyword discovery process.

STEP ONE *Leave Your Pre-Conceptions at the Door*

Yes, you are the expert on your site and what it contains, but remember that the rest of the world does not necessarily speak your internal language when discussing your products and services.

STEP TWO *The Storm of Brains*

Sit your communications, marketing, sales and support team around a table and start throwing out ideas. Each group will bring its own unique insights into how people discuss your products and services, some of which will be a surprise to the rest of the table. At this point, there are no wrong ideas; encourage the outlandish and crazy to come up with the gems that will drive the traffic to your site.

STEP THREE *Mix It Up and See What Else Comes Out*

You have your base keyword list. Now start pouring it into various online tools to see what you may have missed and to garner some potential traffic and competitive data. There are a number of excellent tools online that can help you with this. Most of these will come up with suggested keywords and keyword variations, as well as give you the traffic competition data.

Our favorites at Beasley Direct are WordTracker.com, Google's AdWords Keyword Planner (requires an AdWords account), Keyword Discovery, Google Suggest (those fun little suggestions that drop down when entering a new search term in Google and Google Trends) for the latest hot searches and comparative data on your potential keywords.

Enter your base list of keywords into these tools and harvest the results. Use this data to compare the traffic potential to the number of other sites competing to appear for this word. The ideal is a highly relevant word to your product or service that has limited competition and good traffic. Remember the more sites you compete with for a key word, the harder it is to achieve that rank.

STEP FOUR *Time for a Haircut*

Once you have the data in hand, you need to select out the top 20 to 30 keywords for your site and start to assign them to individual pages and sections of the site, ideally selecting three to six keywords per page.

STEP FIVE *Putting the Right Word in the Right Place*

Now look at the pages, the file title, the page titles, headlines, picture/video captions and meta descriptions and start to work your selected keywords into the copy. Remember that well-written copy is essential to any successful site and you need to prevent your keywords from overwhelming your copy. People like copy that reads naturally; "keyword stuffing" just to get the keywords on the page can hurt your site more than help. (See Figure 3.)

STEP SIX *Lather, Rinse, Repeat*

Keyword development is an ongoing process that reflects changes in your marketplace and the larger web as a whole. You cannot just set it and forget it. Set aside time on a quarterly or bi-annual basis to re-examine your assumptions and perform fresh research.

Remember that any page on your site is a "landing page," depending on the search engine results the user has received. That means every page on your site needs to be rich in "spider food," e.g., key words and phrases. Your navigation bar should contain these and appear on every page, along with keyword-rich links and copy. Figure 3 shows a good example of where to use key words effectively.

Source: Turner BioSystems Website

Figure 3: Using Keywords on a Page

Evaluate how results show up on search engines (especially Google). Figure 4 shows an example of an organic result that has everything: benefit-based title and subtitle, a description with a benefit statement, and lots of keywords.

Source: Google.com

Figure 4: Organic Search Results Should Be Rich in Benefits Statements and Key Words and Phrases
That Are Contained in a Well-Written Page Title and META Description Tag

Do you have a site map? If not, you're missing another opportunity to improve SEO. An added benefit is that they also improve site usability for humans, which is always a plus.

Content Quality
and Originality Are Vital

"Author authority" is a concept Google developed to assign value to sites and social media streams that feature original content, content that is developed by you and is unique to your site, blog, etc. Author authority is more valued by Google and other search engines than content that you share from another source. So you get SEO brownie points for original content.

The more SEO brownie points you have (not a Google term; blame it on Beasley Direct Marketing), the greater your visibility on the Internet. Visibility combined with demonstration of your expertise leads to several very good things:

- Increased traffic to your site from sites on which your content is posted
- Increased reputation on the Web for your person-to-person communications (sales team, marcom team, etc.)
- Increased visibility within search engines, resulting in higher ranking and more search traffic
- Increased visibility and authority within social media
- Increased trust
- Increased revenue

Above all, your content must be targeted to your audience, relevant to their needs, and accessible. Can you tell your audience something that no one else is telling them? Good content is quality information with unique insights—which is not quite as easy as it sounds. It means you need to know what other people in the field are saying, and avoid merely repeating it. It means you need to know what your customers are thinking and feeling; what problems are they trying to solve? What issues have they faced—can you tell them how to avoid these issues? In particular, do you know what difficulties or issues people face when dealing with your competitors? Can you show them that you are different? Can you "make it stop hurting"?

Timeliness is also important. Are there changes in your industry that customers need to know about? Keep abreast of industry news and news in general. Is there something going on in the world that directly affects your business and its customers? For example, let's say you sell automotive parts used by long-haul trucking firms. A strike by Malaysian port workers will adversely affect deliveries of palm oil, which is used to make biodiesel. A shortage of palm oil will lead to decreased production of biodiesel, followed

by an increase in the price of conventional diesel fuel. You are not affected by the palm oil shortage, but your customers certainly will be, and they will be grateful to you for calling their attention to the issue. If you happen to sell a fuel system that increases miles per gallon, so much the better!

Use language with which your intended audience will resonate. If you are selling cosmetics, language such as "fresh and flirty!" works. This would not be as well received by an audience seeking financial advisory services. Know when to use informal language and when to stick to more sedate prose.

The importance of good headlines cannot be over-emphasized. Headlines must serve two purposes: SEO and getting your audience to read the content. For SEO purposes, you must have at least one keyword in the title, and more is better. More is better, that is, unless it forces you to write a boring headline. If the headline is uninteresting, your audience will go on to the next thing, assuming that the content will be as stultifying as the headline. Let's say you have a blog hosted on your website and you've written a blog piece on the cost of biodiesel in the U.S. You might have written a headline such as "An Analysis of the Cost of Biodiesel in the United States." This has the right keywords, but it also could be used to aid someone coping with insomnia. How about "10 Reasons Biodiesel Costs Too Much"? It still has good keywords for SEO purposes, but sounds like a more interesting read.

Remember that the site's content should encourage actions and next steps by the user. Be engaging and friendly and have original value. At the end of the day, it is not about the traffic getting to site alone, but what that search-driven traffic will accomplish as part of your larger marketing and communications goals.

The Final Word:
Keep Your Site Productive

Most websites tend to grow organically. Things are added over time. Website managers come and go, and sometimes the "rules" with which you started get lost in the shuffle. We recommend doing a technical SEO site review at least once a year or whenever you are undertaking major revisions to your site's structure or content. This will assure that broken links, 404s, misdirected links, orphan pages, old content and other detritus is cleaned up on a regular basis. It also assures that, like your car, your site gets a regular tune-up to continue to perform at optimum speed.

Awards:

Caples
Summit
MarCom Creative Award
Echo Bronze
Echo Leader
Golden Pyramid
Pioneer
Communicator
Echo Finalist

About Beasley Direct Marketing

The insights in this report are based on hundreds of engagements with clients in a range of industries. They represent best practices from our own experience. We hope they will save you the time and expense required for trial-and-error that few companies can afford in these economic times. Beasley Direct Marketing is a full service online and direct marketing agency. We offer a full range of marketing services and we specialize in search engine optimization and pay-per-click advertising management.

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