

Search engine overview

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Search engine overview - what they do and what they want

To do any kind of business via your website, you first need to get visitors to your site. There are a couple of ways to do this. Search engine traffic is one of these ways.

Search engines are an important means of driving traffic to your website. But to get your share of this targeted traffic, you need to make sure your website is something the search engines like. To do this, you need a little background info on search engines, info like...

- What search engines do and what they want
- How does a search engine work?
- Meta tags and keywords

What they do and what they want

Very basically, search engines (the more well-known ones include Google, MSN, Yahoo and Ananzi) provide internet surfers with a means to search for specific information. If you want information concerning soccer clubs in South Africa, for example, you'll type something along the lines of "soccer clubs South Africa" into your search engine of choice and it will display a list of results. Each of these results links to a specific website that is supposed to contain information about the subject you're interested in.

However, I've heard many people complain, "But when I use the search engines and follow the links they give, all I get are hundreds of websites that have little or nothing to do with the thing I'm looking for!" And here begins the never-ending struggle between the search engines and the website owners and webmasters who want their sites to be listed...

To get an idea of why the search engines work the way they do, it helps to look at things from their point of view. Search engine companies, like Google, make their money by (among other things) selling advertising space. For this business model to work (and for them to stay in business), they must be able to ensure that their advertisers get value for money by having large numbers of people viewing their ads. And the only way to make sure large numbers of people consistently come back to them so that these visitors can see the adverts on display, is to give the searchers what they want...

What do visitors want from a search engine?

Fast, accurate, relevant results, time after time. A search engine that lists results that don't lead to the type of information you're looking for actually wastes your time as it is only after you open the irrelevant link that you realise that it's of no use. By then, the time you have available to spend on the internet is severely limited and you still don't have what you're looking for. Eventually you click off feeling frustrated and determined never to use that search engine again. Not a very good situation for the advertisers and so not a very good situation for the search engine.

So, search engines want what visitors want: relevant, accurate information that matches the initial search criteria. If the

searcher is looking for info on soccer clubs in SA, the search engine does not want to spit out results concerning rugby, night clubs or South America.

Now consider for a moment the aim of website owners the world over: To get to the top of the search engine lists. Research proves that sites that are at the number 1 position for a specific search get far more visits than sites that are at position 8 975. So obviously everyone wants to be number 1, resulting in a hardly surprising scenario of severe competition with people trying all kinds of tricks to force the search engines into listing them in top place.

Trick a search engine? For a while it was quite easy to con the search engines into thinking your site was fantastic and so they gave it great rankings. Although some older search engines still rely on the old, trickable technology, good search engines today can see a scam from a mile away and severely penalise sites that aren't above board. Websites and firms that use "Black hat" tricks to try to get search engine rankings are going to get more trouble than results!

How does a search engine work? Well, again very basically, the search engines send out little program, called spiders or robots, to "read" your website. The spiders analyse the content of your website according to certain algorithms and then decide how relevant your content is to certain search terms. The actual workings are all quite complex, but the only thing that's really important and necessary to remember is that the spiders are evaluating your content.

Meta tags and keywords Search engine spiders consider two main aspects of your website to determine your SE ranking: meta tags and keywords.

Meta tags are "descriptions" or "information labels" placed in the code of a website. The meta title tag, for example, tells the search engine the title of a particular web page. It also displays at the top of a visitor's browser when she views the website. Some search engines also use this title, together with the description of the page given in the meta description tag, when displaying the search results. By using your page keywords as part of a sentence in this tag, visitors seeing your title and page description, will know that you have the info they want and they'll be more likely to click through to your website.

The meta keyword tag, however, is the one to watch out for...

Keywords are simply the one or two main "themes" in your content on a specific page. If we take this page, for example, the main keywords are "search engine" and "website". Each page on your website should be focused on only one aspect of your business.

By focusing on only one or two relevant keywords on each page of your website, you offer really great information and advice on a focused topic, which not only makes it a wonderful source for your visitor, but a wonderful page for the search engines too. (For example, while your website may be all about flowers, each individual page will only cover one type of flower. The page about roses can't also give detailed information about pansies; it will be too confusing.)

If each page on your site tries to cover everything your business does, the result will be a confusing mess of information that turns visitors away instead of attracting them to do business with you.

And if that confusing page is one that comes from a search engine results listing, the search engine isn't going to love you either because you're not allowing it to do its job of serving useful, accurate information. This simply means you'll move further and further down the search engine rankings until no-one will find you.

While it is important to focus on your main keywords per page when writing content for your website, it is also important that you don't over-use them.

One of the main ways keywords are abused is by filling the keyword meta tags with them. Some website programmers believe that because the visitor can't see the meta tags but the search engines can, they can fill the meta tags with lots of keywords - often words that have nothing to do with that page and don't appear anywhere on it. They think this will trick the search engines into thinking the page contains lots of useful info about those topics.

But search engines are using some of the most advanced technology on the planet and immediately pick up that this is a trick. Their reaction? They ban that website for keyword stuffing, or, if they're feeling slightly more lenient, only move you to the bottom of their list. Many search engines now don't even consider the meta tags when it comes to allocating rankings and place you based solely on the relevance of your content. (The meta tags are still needed for the description the search engine displays when someone is looking for your info though.)

The best way to get good rankings on the search engines is to

- make sure that the content you place on your website is relevant to your business and target market,

- focused on one specific topic at a time and

- well written with one or two main keywords per article. Remember, the aim of your website is to do better business, whether by sharing your expertise, building relationships and getting visitors to contact you directly or by selling your product straight from your site. Getting hordes of visitors to your site under false pretenses is not going to do you any good as they'll simply click away in anger for having their time wasted, never to return again. And the search engines will quietly make sure you disappear in cyberspace.

Isn't it nice to know that, even in cyberspace, good old fashioned honesty and integrity is still what people are looking for and still the way to go? Some things never change. :)

Find out [How to use keywords to help your search engine rankings.](#)