

# Inc.

## How to Improve Your Site's Search Ranking

*Search engine optimization can raise your website's profile, delivering more traffic, more customers, and bigger revenues. Here's how to make the most of this essential marketing tool.*

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Trying to improve your website's search engine ranking can seem a bit like the quest for romance. Like people looking for love, websites looking for a high search ranking can find it many different ways and with varying degrees of success. As with romance, you don't need to spend a lot of money; your intrinsic appeal matters more than the size of your investment. And, as with love, you can't achieve a high search engine ranking once and then never worry about it again. Search engine optimization (SEO) is an ongoing effort, and the more you work at it, the better it will be.

There are many things that any small business—even one with no budget for SEO—can do to improve its search rankings. Here's a look at some of the most effective ways to raise your profile in search.

### Finding "Link Love"

The most effective and long-lasting way to improve your ranking in a search engine is to increase the number of "inbound" links to your site from other websites. Inbound links represent an endorsement of your site. If these other site owners find your site useful, the logic goes, then Internet searchers are likely to find your site useful too.

Building a search engine based on inbound links (instead of simply reviewing keywords in hidden "meta tags" or website text) is what propelled [Google](#) from a late entrant to the search field to its current position as undisputed leader. Google currently has more than 65 percent of searches, and shows little sign of relinquishing this dominance, despite [Microsoft](#) and [Yahoo's](#) combined effort to unseat it.

This link-based approach (called "link analysis") proved so effective that other major search engines followed Google's example. "Link analysis is at the core of almost all major search engines," says Aaron Wall, author of [SEO Book.com](#), a search engine optimization education service that, incidentally, is the first website result in a Google search of "SEO."

### Five Ways to Get Linked

1. *Give stuff away.* Does your company offer free samples of its product? Do you have any handy applications or an ebook you can let site visitors download for free? There are few more effective ways to get people to link to your site than to offer something for nothing.

2. *Share useful information.* Links are commonly used to share information, so putting useful information on your site, such as articles or how-to guides will help draw links.

3. *Connect with your community.* This can be either your geographic community or a community based on your industry. Sponsoring an event at a local charity, interviewing an industry expert and posting the interview on your site or writing articles and blog entries for others to post can all bring inbound links.

4. *Reach out to the blogosphere.* Bloggers are always looking for new ideas, new websites to link to, and new products to write about, and they can be a great source of link love.

5. *Use good old-fashioned PR.* Getting mentioned in the press is good for your company in many different ways, and one of them is that online publications may include links to your site or your information if your company is mentioned in an article.

**WARNING:** Whatever you do, don't join a "link farm"—a website consisting only of links whose only goal is to raise rankings. Search companies are liable to punish sites listed in link farms by lowering their rankings instead.

### Words That Sell: Finding Search Terms

Words are the cornerstone of an effective SEO strategy, so one of your first tasks is to determine exactly what word or phrase searches bring customers to your site. If your business sells umbrellas and galoshes, do you get the most benefit from searches of "umbrella" or "rain gear?"

1. *Think phrase, not word.* Search "batik shower curtains" in Google (at press time) and the top result is the site for Saffron Marigold, an online retailer of fair trade, hand-printed linens from India. Searches on various products account for some 60

percent of the company's business, according to Sandip Sarwate, co-founder. "It would be extremely difficult for us to rank with the search terms 'shower curtains,'" he says. "The key instead is to have 'long tail' terms that are very specific to you."

2. *Think buyers, not just browsers.* "You should focus on conversions, not just traffic to the site," Sarwate says. He uses [Google Analytics](#) reports to break down keywords and phrases by revenue, so he can concentrate on optimizing for words that lead directly to revenues.

3. *Look for suggestions.* Several online tools, such as the [Google Keyword Tool](#), can help you come up with terms your customers are searching that you may not have thought of. Starting from "rain gear," the tool comes up with hundreds of suggestions, including "nylon rain gear," "golf rain gear," and "breathable rain gear." A quick way to get just a few ideas is to start filling in a search text box and see what your search engine suggests. Typing "rain" into Google elicited the suggestion "rain boots," for instance.

3. *Don't forget to ask.* Asking customers how they found you and what made them choose you over your competitors should give you some clues to what your most effective search terms will be.

**WARNING:** Don't get so obsessed with keywords that your page becomes a mass of search terms with just a few other words stringing them together. Your main objective is to appeal to human visitors, so you should limit yourself to a few very effective keywords per page. Remember that each page has a different focus, and each should be optimized accordingly: Optimize for "raincoat" on the raincoats page, "rain boots and galoshes" on the footwear page, etc. Needless to say, trickery such as white-on-white text to fool search engines is a bad idea. It will only serve to get your page downgraded.

### Using Search Terms

Once you've done your research, you should wind up with a manageable number of search terms that dependably generate revenue. Use these terms in the titles and headings of your pages. (Titles show up on browser tabs, but don't appear on the page itself, as headings do.) You may be able to gain benefit by varying them. For instance, in our rainwear example above, the title of the page could be "Rain gear and waterproof apparel," while the heading on the page itself might read "Umbrellas, galoshes, rain coats and wet weather clothing."

You may have heard a lot about meta tags and search engines. Meta tags are invisible text incorporated into web pages to describe what the page contains and list relevant keywords. Meta tags are read by "spiders," software applications that search the Web and rank pages for search. Before Google and link analysis, meta tags were an important SEO tool, and unfortunately one that was subject to manipulation. Today, meta tags have lost their luster. You should still use them, but don't expect them to help your search ranking.

### Making the Most of Search Technology

With a good keyword and link strategy in place, you can use some features of search engine technology to help your search rankings.

1. *Refresh content often.* Search engine spiders return most often to websites that are most frequently updated. This is one reason blogging is a popular activity among small business sites. "Creating a blog is the one thing that definitely changed our search engine presence," says David Lewis, president of OperationsInc, a human resources outsourcing company. The OperationsInc blog is updated daily Monday through Friday, he says, and contains information from a newsletter the company also sends to about 1,500 subscribers.

2. *Consider a content management system.* Created to support blogging, content management systems are versatile website platforms that can allow you and your staff to add content to your site easily, encouraging the frequent updates that can boost rankings. OperationsInc's website is currently being transferred into [Drupal](#), an open-source content management system.

"Drupal and [WordPress](#) are the two most popular content management systems, with Drupal having both a steeper learning curve and more features," Wall says. Either way, he adds, content management systems make it easy to post material and easy for users to comment on posts, all of which can be good for search ranking.

3. *Eliminate underused pages.* If pages on your site are out of date or generating little interest, remove them, Wall advises. This will help your search ranking, since the number of links or "link equity" you have can be diluted by a large number of pages. "If a page isn't generating any real traffic and no one is linking to it, the content probably isn't useful and you should get rid of it," he says. Not only will this help your ranking, it will also help keep your site relevant and fresh.