

If You Build It, They Will Come

An Investigation in Search Engine Rankings

PART I OF 5

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A number of years ago a great movie starred Kevin Costner, one of my favorite actors. Anyone who has seen this movie will recognize its key slogan: “If you build it, they will come.” It seems that most people in the awards and recognition industry share this philosophy when it comes to their websites.

You were told over and over that you needed a website. Your phone company may have given you a free website with your telephone book ad, or maybe you received a free website as part of your DSL or cable package. What did you do next? You may have hired a college student, or maybe you had an employee at your business who dabbled in HTML. Before you knew it, you had a website. You built it, and you waited for them to come. And today you continue to wait.

Sometimes dreams are only for the movies. For award stores, simply building a site will not bring in new customers and new revenue. You must do more, and in this article series you will begin to learn how to get people to visit. We will investigate various avenues to increase your search engine rankings using a variety of techniques. Google

uses more than 200 different pieces of criteria to determine website search engine rankings, and we will look at some of the more important weighted criteria in this series.

Let’s start with the basics. Before you can begin to achieve any sort of ranking in the search engines, you must have something the search engines like and want to rank. Simply placing a web page online is not going to cut it. Let’s improve your website’s visibility in the search engines starting from ground zero.

English Grammar and Spelling

I have reviewed over 100 different web sites in the awards industry in the last year and in 98% of mostly cases! the the most basic of problems exist such as bad grammar and spelling errors.

You guessed it—the problem that will have the most detrimental effect on your search engine placement is poor grammar and spelling. Some of the most powerful grammar checkers and spell checkers ever developed are used internally by search engine companies and by their web crawlers that index websites.

Your website is under the microscope. Just as it was

difficult for you to make heads or tails of the intentionally misspelled and grammatically incorrect sentence above, this is also the case for those who click on a link in a search engine to go to your website. For this reason, search engine spiders lower the rankings for websites riddled with grammatical and spelling errors.

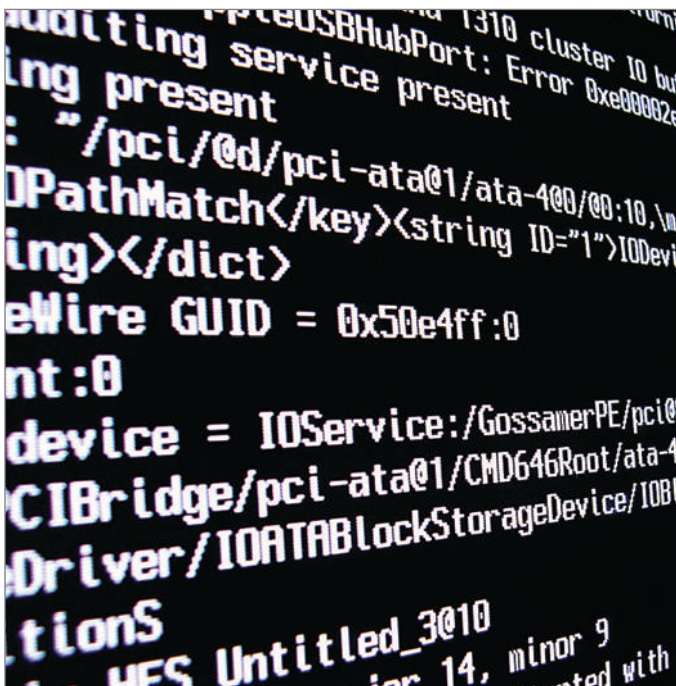
A search engine's goal is to identify the most relevant and accurate websites in response to a search term and place them in the higher-ranking positions. After all, if the search engine is not providing the best-available choice on a search, people may stop using that search engine to find what they want on the Internet.

Take some time to review your website's content. If you offer a shopping cart, you most likely have an interface so you can add product descriptions. Take time to correctly spell words in your product descriptions. Pay close attention to the grammar used in these descriptions. The search engine spiders are evaluating what you do and if you're shoddy, your rankings will also be shoddy. Always write detailed, accurate product descriptions. A good rule of thumb is to assume that a person who is visually impaired should be able to use your description to visualize the product.

HTML Grammar

The second-most-overlooked problem is not so much overlooked, but instead creeps into your website thanks to the unskilled, untrained people who are hired to design your website. We are talking about shoddy website HTML code and CSS code. This is a little harder for the layperson to recognize due to unfamiliarity with the standards defined by the World Wide Web Consortium (<http://www.w3c.org>). The documents and white papers that define proper code structure and design are created to institute a standard under which the entire Internet functions.

The problem comes into play at the hands of those who



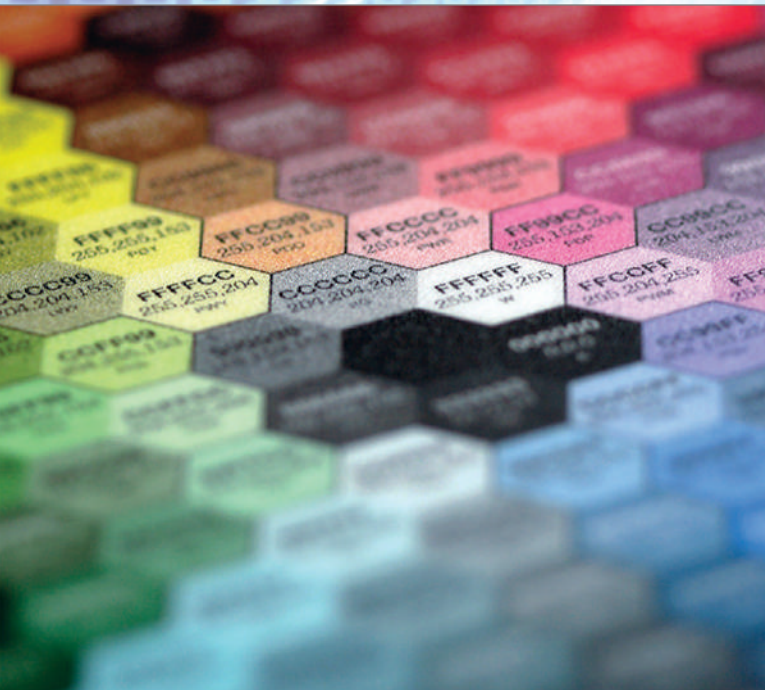
call themselves website designers, yet have never read the standards for web standards coding. Their intent is to create a website that looks good despite shoddy code. These people are looking to make a quick dollar off you for their work. Even larger corporations fall victim to this type of web designer.

Web browsers are designed to compensate for errors in coding. Browsers try to make sense of bad HTML code and display web pages as best as possible based upon the web browser interpretation of the HTML code. Consequently, poorly coded web pages exist. Even though the web page may look great in your web browser, the underlying code is riddled with errors. We can thank the web browsers for cleaning up the coding errors before displaying the web page to you or your customers.

Your website may look good to you, and the designer you hired made sure it looked good, but under the hood it is grinding to a halt, and the search engine spiders give it negative rankings because it doesn't meet W3C standards. The majority of websites in the awards industry that I have reviewed have significant W3C standards coding violations.

Because HTML grammar requires technical understanding, how do you know if your newly designed website meets these standards? Well, you never really will know, but checking into a company's reputation is a good way to start. Here are a few questions you should ask as part of your due diligence when interviewing a company to work on your website design project:

1. What kind of rankings in the search engines do other websites developed by your company enjoy?
2. What do your current customers say about your website solution?
3. What history does your company have with the awards and recognition industry?



4. How much time does your web designer devote to his/her work for your company?
5. Does your website designer have experience in search engine optimization?

Use online resources to read reviews (such as LinkedIn.com) to learn what others say about a company or designer. You cannot eliminate bad web designers, but you can weed-out 95% of them through a simple interview process. If the company is using packaged software solutions, determine if the solution is suited to the awards and recognition industry by using online comparisons. Many Internet resources can help you unearth a lot of information on almost any topic. Start at your favorite search engine and just ask questions or type in keywords such as the company's name or a person's name in the case of an individual designer. Then review what comes up in the searches.

As long as you hire a reputable company to do your web design, you can avoid most HTML grammar or W3C standards violations, and this will play a significant role in your search engine rankings.

Accurate, Relevant Content

A major problem in the awards and recognition industry is an apparent lack of quality when shortcuts are used. We don't want to write product descriptions to describe our products, instead, we simply perform a data dump from a word database into a product database, or we simply link our websites to some other catalog our suppliers provide. Sure, it's quick and easy. But you won't rank well in the search engines. This is the shortcut, or lazy route. The effort or lack thereof will be commensurate with where the search engines will rank you.

As Yoda told Luke Skywalker, "Try Not! Do! Or Do Not! There is no try." This should be our motto as we go through

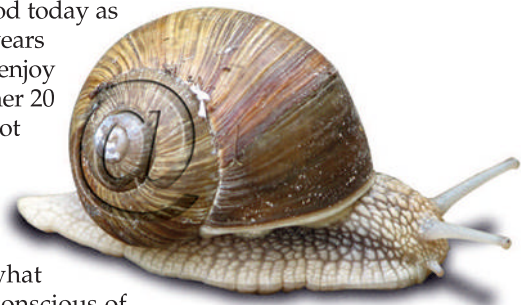
life. Anything worth doing is worth doing correctly, so why are we taking shortcuts all the time?

If you want high rankings, take the time to show that you want them by writing accurate product descriptions and webpage content that describe your product and/or business.

Website Server Speed

Website speed is another key factor in search engine rankings. Slower websites rank lower than faster websites, and typically the cost of a site is going to be commensurate with the quality of the site. I can't stress enough the old adage, "You get what you pay for." The largest problem with the small-business thinking process is that we tend to continue to think in small terms. We want the best, but we want to spend nothing to gain it. So we seek out the cheap. There is a reason why the word cheap has two definitions. One definition means "inexpensive" and the other definition means "lower quality." Ever wonder why the two definitions are attached to the same word?

Throughout my lifetime, I have probably purchased at least 30-40 pillows for my bed. It seems the pillows never last longer than a few months. I was being "cheap" because I felt that spending \$15 for a pillow was better than spending \$200 for a pillow. To make a long story short, about 5 years ago I purchased my first \$200 pillow. Before owning this expensive pillow, I was replacing my cheap pillows every 3 months. Over a lifetime I have spent approximately \$450-\$600 on cheap pillows versus my one \$200 pillow that lasts longer. My \$200 pillow is as good today as when I bought it 5 years ago. I suspect I will enjoy this pillow for another 20 years. Cheap does not always translate to savings; in many instances, it means replacement.



Again, you get what you pay for. So be conscious of price shopping—always quality shop. Your goal is to gain new revenue, and if you must spend a little more to ensure your rankings are a bit higher to gain new clients, so be it.

Other Considerations

Other technical style problems are usually handled by web host themselves, but, unfortunately, many web hosts or shopping cart hosts are lacking in technical knowledge of Internet protocols and standards. Their violations of those standards affect your ability to achieve higher search engine rankings.

Before you submit your website to any search engine, make sure to resolve grammatical errors, spelling errors, HTML coding errors, CSS coding errors, web server speed, and any configuration issues that are handled by your hosting company.

Next month we will delve into the next steps to increase your website's search engine rankings when we discuss researching keywords, meta keywords and meta descriptions and ensuring that web page content matches keywords, and descriptions. ▲