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## Getting search engines to find your site faster

By Matt Van Wagner  
Find Me Faster

In the old days, we used to say that if you built a better mousetrap, people would beat a path to your door.

That same sort of "better mousetrap" thinking is still alive and well today in the way many companies approach their Web site development. With great optimism and excitement, they design and build gorgeous Web sites with eye-popping graphics, Flash animations and user-friendly JavaScript menus for easy site navigation. Several thousand dollars and a few months later, they submit their sites to the search engines and then sit back and wait for the hits to go through the virtual roof.

In too many cases, however, a different and disappointing reality sets in a few months later. Web site traffic does not pick up as expected and a quick search on **Google**, Yahoo or MSN reveals that neither the Web site nor the company's products can be found anywhere near the top of any search results. These companies are left wondering what it takes to get the search engines to rank their Web site higher.

Search engines are now as important in your marketing mix as print advertising, trade shows and direct-mail campaigns. So it makes sense -- whether you engage an outside search engine marketing firm or decide to meet the challenge yourself -- to gain a basic understanding of how search engines work and help improve how your site gets listed.

There are two ways to get your company listed in search engine results -- paid listings and free listings. Both types of listings can be very effective for getting end-users to click through to your Web site, but in this article we will concentrate on how search engines work for the free listings. (We'll save the discussion of paid listings for another article.)

### How the engines work

The first thing to understand is that search engines see only words on your Web site.

While you and I like Web sites that are well-designed with high-quality graphics, interactive Flash images and other such elements, they are completely meaningless to the search engines. In spite of their amazing computing power and technology, none of today's search engines can recognize images on your Web page, unless they are accompanied by some descriptive text.

The second most important fact about how search engines work is that they all use some sort of word density computation to determine what your site is all about and how relevant it is, vs. other sites using similar keywords.

On a daily basis, the engines launch software programs known as spiders or Web bots that crawl to a site and grab whatever words they can find and then report those words back to a huge central database. The engines then sift through all the words on your Web site and apply algorithms to develop context and relevancy ratings for your site based solely on those words.

For example, if a search engine finds the word "elephant" six times on a Web site for a zoo and the word "giraffe" only once, they will consider the word "elephant" to be roughly six times more important than "giraffe." Let's further assume that another zoo has a Web page about elephants, but they only have the word elephant listed once, next to a great big picture of a pachyderm. It is highly likely that the page with six elephant references will rank higher than the page with just one.

This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of how the search engines determine relevancy when they return the results for the word elephant, but it does illustrate the concept.

Each search engine invests heavily in its own highly proprietary algorithms that consider a wide range of other factors, including where the keyword appears on the page, whether it is part of a headline or body text, if it is included in a hyperlink to another page and how many other pages link to that page from around the world.

One strong word of caution, however, before you attempt to influence the search results by some dubious means, such as repeating the same keyword thousands of times in tiny white text invisible to human eyes but clearly visible to the search engine spiders. A third principle underpinning the search engines is that they must present relevant search results, or else users will stop using that engine. To protect the relevancy of their search results, all search engines go to great lengths to filter out the search engine spammers, and they will drop violators completely from their databases when they detect this type of behavior.

### **Home page is key**

Here are a few hints to making your Web site more search engine-relevant:

- Pay special attention to your home page. Search engines tend to assign more relevancy to home pages, so spend more time analyzing it with an eye to the search engines. Make sure you have enough text on the page that the search engine can index and determine appropriate relevancy to your business, and that it contains your most important keywords. Some engines will not crawl much further than your home page, so it is important to concentrate on this page first.
  - Do you really need that Flash Animation "splash" screen on your home page? Remember that search engines cannot index whatever text is in graphics or flash animations, so you may want to reconsider using it at all if search engine traffic is your primary goal for the page.
  - Include text navigation links on your pages. If you want the search engine to find all the inner pages of your Web site, make sure they can get to these pages via text links, even if you already have beautiful JavaScript menus for users. Consider using both navigation styles, and put the text links at the bottom of your page.
  - Always include a site map. Site maps are good for users trying to find things on your Web site and also good for search engines, since they contain important keywords and links to your inner pages.
  - Use a unique, descriptive title meta tag for each page on your site. Notice the title of your Web page that appears in the blue bar at the top. Consider using a descriptive title that helps sell the content on that page. For example, don't just call your home page something like "Acme Home Page." Instead, use a more descriptive and interesting sentence, like "Blue and Red Widgets from the world's widget leader -- ACME Corporation." You have roughly 72 characters of text to get your keywords into the title tag, so take advantage of it.
  - Use the ALT meta-tag to describe graphics. Whenever you have important product images on your page that you want the search engines to catalog and index, then it is important to describe those images with visible words on the page itself, or at the very least, in the underlying HTML code in the "ALT" meta-tag. If you are not yet familiar with HTML or meta-tags, it would be a very good idea to pick up a book at your local library or bookstore and familiarize yourself with the topic.
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