

SEO digital marketing guide for SMEs - Part two



Optimise for digital success

Know your target audience and target keywords? Then it's time to begin optimising your web pages and website to attract more visitors.

If you've already read Part 1, you'll know all about the importance of targeting the right keywords. Once you've chosen which keywords to target and created a master keyword list, the next step is to begin optimising your pages. This will help you to rank higher in the search engine results pages (SERPs) and attract more of the right audience of visitors to your website.

Of vital importance, in this respect, is site and page relevance. 'Google's algorithms are there to give users a good experience searching for things online,' says Daniel Cody, an SEO consultant at [Greenlight Digital](#), a Digital Growth Agency. 'If your site provides a substantial amount of unique on-site content, this signals to Google that your site is providing valuable information for searchers. Each page should contain keywords related to the purpose of the webpage, with terms that searchers use.'



Mo Talukder

Sales director of audio guide location app Geotourist

'We provide audio guides, accessible via your smartphone, for any location or building in the world. Using GPS, our app locates interesting tours around you, which you can do at any time at your own pace, discovering interesting facts and history of the world around you. Anyone can create a tour and it's free to download.

We incorporated some SEO at the start of our website design strategy to enable users to find us, because we are a new technology, which brought us a number of good enquiries from global organisations. So it was well worth the investment made.

As a new technology servicing multiple types of users – from independent to business travellers – our keywords are not as restrictive as other organisations might be.


Our technology is used across several industries from tourism to large commercial organisations. Crocs used our platform to promote fun, family activities by creating walking trails in several cities. Historic England used Geotourist to promote incredible art sculptures across the UK. Thus our keywords change per tour as we target the audience it relates to. Committing a lot more time and effort into SEO for us is quite an expensive return on investment and for our technology. In some cases there are better ways to reach our target audience, such as partnerships with other organisations. However, the initial SEO planning and strategy has served us well.

It is definitely better to plan a website properly from the outset. Even though it might cost you more and take more time initially, it will save you a lot of hassle and money later on. This is often a catch 22 for small organisations who do not have the financial resources to commit, so it is a balancing act.'

www.geotourist.com



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How to optimise your pages

Optimising your web pages for SEO success doesn't need to be difficult, fiddly or mysterious. While experts may vary in some of the advice they give, there is broad agreement on what the most important elements are – and how to do them.

Patience is important too – says James Pybus, an SEO consultant and founder of [Digital Marketing Implementation Services](#).

'In cases where the completion is relatively low, if you understand what you are doing, you can dominate the search. Once you have confidence that you've made the correct changes, leave things – because it can take time for the results to have effect. Just because you don't see an immediate result, don't fiddle further. A bit of patience is key.'

SEO titles

An SEO title tag is an element that specifies the title of a web page. Title tags are displayed on search engine results pages (SERPs) as the clickable headline for a given result. 'With SEO title tag, it's mainly left to right, so put the most important terms on the left,' says Adam Bunn, Director of SEO & Social at Greenlight. 'The two things that are vital are that the title tag is compelling to people looking at the results listings, and that it is relevant to the content on the page.'

Google searches by scanning web pages that have the title-tag terms in them, even if the terms are separated on the page, but will give more weight to pages that have them in that particular order, looking for matches between what the user has searched, the SEO title tag and the actual content on the page (as well as other things such as the heading). 'If you have certain three words in the SEO title tag that are important, and Google can match those in order with what's on the page, then that's the ultimate relevancy for Google,' Bunn says.

Indeed, whatever phrase someone has searched for, Google is looking for things that are relevant for it. 'Use the constituent elements of searched-for phrases to make the most compelling and readable title to the user,' advises Bunn. 'Avoid writing something that sounds artificial. If you do have an exact, popular phrase and you can fit it in, that's ideal. But if you have the relevant words and they are close together, that's still good.'

Be aware that the SEO title can only be a certain length, Pybus warns. 'The maximum that Google reads is 65-70 characters long – so limit it to that length – and the important keyword (which can be more than one word, of course) should appear as far to the left as possible.'

'Wherever you can, use the exact phrase, generally the one that is higher volume is the SEO title, while lower volume search queries can be the H2 tag [the subheading] and less important tags,' Bunn advises.

Although you can have more than one keyword in an SEO title, Cody advises caution. 'If you do find yourself trying to cover two topics with one title tag, then it tells you that maybe you've gone wrong in terms of your page structure, because you are trying to cover two topics on one page. So maybe the answer is to divide your content over two pages on the site, and then optimise for each of them.'



A man with short, dark hair and a light beard is sitting at a desk, looking down at a laptop. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. His hands are on the keyboard. In the foreground, there is a white cup with a spoon. The background is bright and out of focus.

Optimise headings

The page heading – the line of text in bold at the top of a web page (like the ‘title’ of a newspaper or magazine article) is also important. ‘The heading and the SEO title tag are the two most important elements and then the content,’ says Bunn. ‘The heading doesn’t have the length restriction that the SEO title tag has, so you can be wordier – and take advantage of different variations.’

A point to note is that **most websites will naturally create an SEO title tag from whatever heading you give the page, but you can choose a different SEO title if you prefer.** However, similarity between the two is important. ‘You’ve only got a limited amount of space to show Google what the page is about, so it’s in your interest to make the title and the heading include the same or similar terms,’ Cody says. ‘Work out what your primary focus is and make sure that is in the title and heading. Secondary priorities can be used on less important pages or for certain links.’

Urls and metadata

URLs

URLs with keywords in them are a signal to Google that the page is relevant. 'If you are setting up a new website and have the ability to name pages easily, that's great,' say Pybus. 'But if you have an existing site and change an existing URL to incorporate a particular keyword, it can lead to issues with 404 errors (an error that occurs when a webpage can't be found) if other pages or posts link to the previous URL aren't updated and if you don't put a '301 redirect' on it to forward traffic to the right page.'

Main content

The main content is what users will read, if they click on a link and arrive at the page. Google is looking for relevant content to show people searching, so if the SEO title, heading and content on the page all match up, this sends an important signal to Google that the page 'does what it says on the tin', so to speak.

Length has relevance too. 'Although it's not a hard-and-fast rule, I suggest the content on the page should be approximately 300-500 words,' Pybus says. 'The keyword should appear as far to the top and left as possible – ideally within the first sentence.'

Meta description

The meta-description or 'snippet', is the summary that users see when browsing search results. If you don't proactively fill this in, Google will choose random elements from the content on your page. It's better, therefore, that you write this for each page if you have time, Pybus advises. 'The description should be between 150-160 characters long [although Google has recently extended this to almost 230 characters], and the relevant keyword should be as far to the left as possible – ideally within the first sentence.'

Meta keywords

Meta keywords are the tags that signal the subjects relevant for the page. Google claims to no longer recognise/use meta-keywords, so filling these in may not help you rank higher, Pybus advises. 'There are alternative Search Engines available that may use this feature, such as Bing,' says Pybus. 'So if you are editing a page anyway, I'd recommend assigning your chosen keyword as a meta-keyword too – as it only takes a couple more seconds to do.'

Images and alt-tags

Images are worth optimising for too. 'For e-commerce, if it's something where visuals matter, it might be quicker or easier in the first instance for someone to browse dresses by images on Google rather than trying to find a website to browse on,' says Bunn. 'So optimising the images on your site can be very worthwhile, and I think it's something that big companies probably don't focus on as much as they should do – or they might be unable to give their images rich file names and titles, that kind of stuff. A smaller company can be more agile, so it can be a way to rank highly for a search query that you probably wouldn't rank highly for otherwise.'

'It is important to ensure that your images are named appropriately, as Search Engine 'Robots' can't 'read' images,' Pybus says. So you need to help Google to know why that the picture is relevant to anyone.'

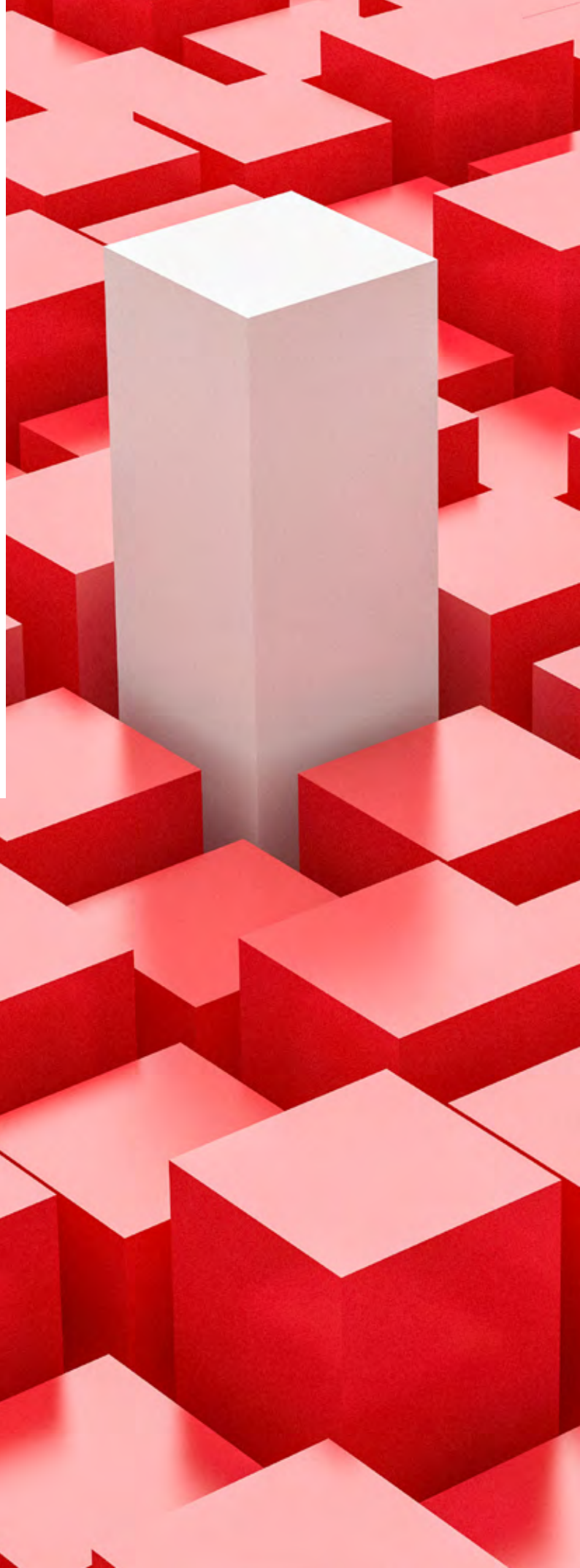
'To optimise the images, you need to use Alt tags, title tags, text and title of the image' (which is what comes up when you hover over the image) rather than title of the page,' Bunn says. File name also counts, and text that is near the image on the page. On top of that, other websites hot linking the images – i.e. embedding them on their own pages – helps with ranking too – ideally within the first sentence.'


Answer boxes

Search results themselves continue to evolve. ‘One of the most important changes by far is the proliferation of “answer boxes” ranking in first position for informational queries,’ says Bunn. ‘Optimising for these has become an important and valuable approach.’

It isn't known exactly how Google chooses which content to include. ‘You can learn a lot just by looking at which ones Google is picking, within your niche,’ says Bunn. ‘Some return a paragraph, some return a list or a table.’

It's worth trying to make that kind of content, Cody advises. ‘Analyse the competitors and try to do better. Q&A is a good format, so ask the question with a heading and then provide a good answer. You have to be ranking on Page 1 in the first place to get in the answer box, so you have to have good SEO in any case. But you can be anywhere on page one and still be chosen for the answer box. And if you don't get chosen, the fact that you now have this useful content on your site will still benefit users, and probably SEO generally too.’





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Local search optimisation

‘Local search is important for small business, and can be one of the ways that you can really compete for SEO’, says Bunn. ‘It’s a bit of a different discipline. With local search, Google’s algorithm is pretty much: “How certain can I be certain that this business is really who they say they are?” From Google’s perspective, if someone types in “Wedding dress shop in Chelsea” and follows the map and it ends up being a pizza restaurant, that’s an awful user experience – no matter how good the pizza is.’

Google has a verification procedure for local business, but for the best local SEO optimisation, you need to do more. ‘Get other sources to back up the fact that you are there,’ Bunn advises **‘Once you have made your Google profile as full and accurate as possible and verified it, go to directories like Thompson and Yelp and make sure that they have exactly the same information. Consistency is what Google is looking for; any difference of information will sow doubt – and search rankings will suffer.’**

Link building

Links to your web page, from websites that Google rates as trustworthy, are one of the most influential ranking factors. 'The more links you have saying that yes your website does do such and such, and those links are high quality, then your quality score is going to go up, your status will increase, and your overall optimisation on the pages will come up higher in SERPs,' Pybus explains. 'If all the links into your site are from websites with low influence scores, it won't help much. So you need high-value websites confirming what you are doing.'

You can use [SEO Profiler](#) to assess that, which is only one euro for the first month.'

'Very often links into websites use anchor text with terms that no one is searching for, such as "Click here"', says Pybus. "Because no one is searching for the term "click here", a lot of the value of those links is lost. **So if someone is writing a blog or online article that mentions your company, you can suggest anchor text** to them, which should include the keywords that you are targeting – something that people are searching for. This will greatly help improve your SERPs.'

Internal links within your website are also useful and important – and you have full control of these, Bunn says. '**With internal links, just try to use rich anchor text as much as possible.**'

Bunn warns that with external links into your site, you shouldn't try to artificially place too many links with the same text, because it will look to Google like your anchor text profile has been artificially engineered. Make sure that people who want to link to you do it naturally, rather than insisting on exact keywords. Links that include your company name along with rich anchor text (in the same link) can have advantages too, as it signals authenticity.'

External links are one of the areas where help from an SEO expert or agency can be particularly useful. 'You can analyse your competitors anchor text profile and then make that your target, but this is quite an in-depth exercise,' says Bunn. 'Once you've done it, you won't need to change it unless you notice a radical change with the search results – suggesting that Google will have changed their algorithm.'





Links from social media

Social media is important in general, but it's unlikely to impact on SEO. 'The way that social can impact on SEO is through brand awareness, where if you are using social effectively you are getting a bigger following,' says Bunn. 'You'll get more people searching for you and more positive reputation signals as an effect of social. Part of doing social well is making sure it's all connected with your website. But you won't get a direct ranking impact from that because a link from Facebook, for example, may not even be discoverable by Google.'

Optimisation of your server

According to Pybus, Google looks at over 200 'touch points' that it uses in assessing websites – and each of these has an influence on how high you list in search results. One of these is the speed of your server.

'Google wants users to have a good experience when browsing websites, so it rewards sites that load quickly, especially important given that an increasing proportion of web browsing takes place on mobile devices. Free tools such as [GT Metrix](#) will help you assess the speed of your server and indicate which things you might change in order to improve it, such as reducing image file size so that loading times are faster.'

SSL certificates

SSL certificates provide secure, encrypted communications between a website and an internet browser. 'A year ago someone would probably only have an SSL certificate if they were doing transactions on the site,' Pybus says. 'But now it's become a very important trust sign to Google, and will make you much more likely to appear in the top five positions on Google – it is very advisable to get one for your site.'

Cody agrees. 'Google now takes the security of a site very seriously. Google offers a ranking boost to sites using HTTPS, and sites which ask for personal information from users are flagged as 'not secure' by Google Chrome if they do not use HTTPS.'




Mobile performance and click-through rates

In the past year, Google has really ramped up the importance of a site's mobile performance. 'Google has started to index sites based on their mobile performance, and this now weighs more heavily in its algorithm than a site's desktop performance,' Cody says. 'Mobile user experience should always be a primary consideration, so make sure page speed is a priority for your website.'

Google also factors click-through rates from its search results into its algorithm, Cody explains. 'Because Google has access to a wealth of information from the Google analytics data of millions of websites, they are likely to already be factoring things like bounce rate (how many users leave your site after a single page) and time on site into their rankings too. Google prioritises the search experience above all else, and uses any data it can to assess the user-experience benefits that your site provides.' are faster.'





“The big value in search console is diagnostics, because it gives you insights on its own”

Google

Google Search Console

Google Search Console (formally called Webmaster Tools) is a free suite that can help you assess your SEO and see how to improve it. ‘The big value in search console is diagnostics, because it gives you insights on its own,’ says Bunn. On the whole most of it is fairly self-explanatory and there are help-guides too.

‘Search Console tells you your rank, impressions and click-through rate, but only for terms that you are ranking for and that people are searching for regularly,’ Bunn says. ‘So it can be of limited use for niche sites or searches, where people might be looking for unfamiliar terms that don’t show up in the data.’ Don’t bother with Bing Webmaster Tools, Bunn advises. ‘Bing’s market share in the UK is very low. Unless you’ve done Google to death and you want to move onto the next one.’

Google Analytics

Can Google Analytics help with SEO? Not in the strict sense, says Bunn. ‘Google Analytics is pretty complex, unless you’ve looked at an analytics package before. It doesn’t help from an SEO point of view, because it doesn’t tell you what keywords you’re getting traffic from. However, in terms of behaviour on your site and which paths people are taking, it’s useful – especially when you are considering user experience. So in the wider scheme of things, it does form part of the overall “SEO and user-experience package” – if you don’t find it too formidable.’

Further Resources

James Pybus

SEO Consultant

www.emarketing-strategy.co.uk

Greenlight

Digital Growth Agency

www.greenlightdigital.com

GT Metrix

www.gtmetrix.com

SEO Profiler

www.seoprofiler.com

