

Can the Mainstream Media Understand SEO?

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

I am a SEO. As a search engine optimization specialist, I have spent the better part of the last decade studying search engines to get a better understanding of how they work in order act as a guiding consultant for paying clients. My clients, or more appropriately, my firm's clients, are interested in having their web documents found on the first page of search results across all the major search engines. After spending years traveling trenches full of fiber, my colleagues and I have gotten very, very good at getting those first page placements. If only SEO was so simple.

In the trade-press we can discuss our personal war stories and write about website marketing campaigns and all is good as we tend to understand the metaphors being used. When talking to the mainstream media however, representatives of the SEO community seem to lose the thread of an otherwise sensible message.

Explaining the finer points of website optimization and search engine marketing to a person who has never designed a website themselves is tricky, under any circumstances. It is all too easy to get carried away when discussing one's ability to put a website on the first page of Google results, especially over drinks.

Where most clients are generally happy to learn that their SEO is a proficient practitioner, mainstream journalists need to feel they understand the subject they are covering and have a limited amount of time in which to learn it.

Though an increasing number of articles are appearing, writers in the mainstream media still find it difficult to wrap their heads around the practice of search engine optimization without sensing and reporting some form of techno-skullduggery. Articles appearing in the mainstream media tend to note how SEOs "game" the search engines by using techniques that give documents an unfair advantage. Perhaps reporters on the business and marketing beats simply perceive SEOs as cyberpunk hackers-for-hire, professional players in a [William Gibson](#) metaverse.

An article in the NY Times April 9 edition, "[This Boring Headline is Written for Google](#)", noted how news writers were adapting their headlines and styles to meet the challenges of getting prominent placements in search engines. The author likens search engine optimization to a chess game played between SEOs and search engines.

The goal of the game is to get first place listings. Being seen means being read. In the world of search engines, being seen means being on the first page of results. Journalists are intensely interested in search engine optimization. High rankings bring strong click-through rates and tend to generate happy publishers.

It's all about the rankings, or as noted in a recent piece in the Washington Post, "[How to Juice Up a Site's Rank](#)" it's all about the Google juice. Google juice, (for the SEO-illiterate), is apparently produced by squeezing links. To be fair, the article is based on the "[v7ndotcom elursrebmem](#)" contest initiated in January by [John Scott](#).

Though achieving a Top10, or first page placement is only half the game, it is the part of the process the mainstream media is fixated on. That is to be expected, given the conditions under which most business reports work. They perceive the Internet as a research and communications tool.

Understanding that most writers view search engines as indispensable workplace assistants, it is little wonder their imaginations turn to imaginings of the old-school game of cat-and-mouse SEOs used to play, back in 1998.

Search engine optimization and placement in 2006 is very different from the information used to describe the industry in previous years. The Internet and the search engines that guide users across it have changed and evolved enormously over the past twelve months.

Mike Grehan published an excellent two-part article, "[Does Textbook SEO Work Anymore?](#)" which should become required reading for SEOs who want to get a better understanding of how Google is learning to learn about web-documents and their connections. (link to [part 2](#))

Mike points out that Google is now considering a couple more important factors (in addition to the multitude of other ranking factors) when determining the placement of documents in its index.

The first is a deeper analysis of the network of links that lead to any particular document. "Aggregate linkage data can tell so much more about the subject matter and content of a site."

What this means to SEOs is simple. Links from one document to another are used to determine the topical relevancy of information found within those documents. In other words, Google is learning about you by examining your buddies.

The second is that Google is studying user data to determine what information its users find relevant based on their initial search query and behaviours after choosing a listing. "End-user data proves that people who were interested in the initial search query were also interested in other information-related to the topic."

Google is as interested in what visitors do on a site as it is in what they read while they are there. For SEOs this means that site usability, analytics and planning are essential to delivering a full package of services. Achieving and maintaining strong placements at Google requires the ability to predict and funnel users through a site in order to A) help guide visitors to relevant information or towards conversion goals, or B) help guide spiders to relevant information.

The working world of search engine optimization specialists has come a long way from the cloak and dagger world that existed in the late 90's and into the early 2Ks. Perhaps reporters and journalists will start to see the intricacies of SEO work and move away from the cyberpunk image they too often portray. If that is going to happen, it is up to the SEOs themselves to make it happen. Next time the media calls, let them know there is a lot more to the story than gaming Google for wild rankings and fun times. (Try to help them imagine writing about the cadre of fun loving criminal robots spamming away on the PPC end of things.)