

Is Your Website Search Engine Friendly? Your Personal Checklist

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When I sit down with new clients and discuss the status of their new or existing site they are often shocked when I am forced to inform them that their site is not search engine friendly. Encountered with a blank but slightly shaken look I then explain that this means their site has a particular problem that is hindering search engine rankings. Often this is represented by an inflexible design, overuse of advanced web technologies, or simply a weak navigation scheme. As a result, if they were to continue with the site as it stands they are unlikely to attain competitive search engine rankings.

The following is checklist designed to help you gauge the search engine friendliness of your website and, if you are in the midst of planning a website this checklist will help you avoid the common pitfalls of unfriendly designs.

Technologies

First consider what technologies your website is using. There are certain technologies that require a little more hand holding than others to ensure search engine compatibility.

1. FRAMES

Lets start with this oldie. Luckily, frames are becoming a way of the past what with the use of DIV layers and the slow onset of incredibly flexible AJAX coding. The long and the short of it is that if you have Frames on your website then you are starting off at a disadvantaged position that cannot be truly search engine friendly no matter what you do. There are, however, some remedial fixes that will tie you over until you can redesign your site; yes I said redesign. The fix that I recommend is to use a noframes tag whereby you place another version of your web page inside of your framed page. This 'backup' page is what the search engines will view; here you can place relevant content and navigational elements so that the search engines can at least navigate portions of your site that are (hopefully) not framed.

More info on the [no frames tags](#).

2. FLASH

There was a big brouhaha that Flash had become search engine indexable and you no longer had to worry about its search engine issues. Frankly, I have not seen the fruits of this 'improvement' to a respectable degree yet so I still consider it a kiss of death for websites designed solely in Flash. If you have a Flash-only website then I recommend one of these two options; one is to design an html version of your website and make the home page of your website html rather than Flash where you can then allow users to choose between html or Flash. The second option is to redesign the site so that it mixes both html and flash together. For example, this might mean implementing Flash amidst content on an HTML page as you would an image. I realize there are certain limitations to this option but if you can create a slick site in this manner then you will have the best of both worlds; clean search engine friendly content along with an interactive, multimedia feel. Just remember that the majority of relevant text should be in HTML format for the search engines to index.

3. Search Engine 'Unfriendly Dynamic URL's

Unfriendly dynamic URL's are a common side effect of using a Content Management System that

is not designed with search engine rankings kept in mind. Here are some examples of some unfriendly URL's:

Sample 1: <http://www.mydomain.com/myproducts.php&354=prod333&subproduct>

Sample 2: <http://www.surfboardsforyou.com/boards/filename.php?id=F98ZF4&productId=39222§ion=wicked&brand=582&template=532>

These URLs are problematic because a search engine may consider these addresses too complex to spider. Why too complex? Suffice it to say that the more complex the URL, the higher the chance that a search engine robot will consider the content too dynamic to read; it changes too often to be valuable to a search engine.

The way around these types of URLs is actually not so difficult; it may only require a small investment of time and money. The 'time' will be required when researching which URL fix is right for your system. The money may be required to pay a programmer to implement and test the new URLs. Here are how the URLs might look once they are fixed to be search engine friendly:

Sample 1 Fixed: <http://www.mydomain.com/myproducts/354/prod333/subproduct/>

Sample 2 Fixed: <http://www.surfboardsforyou.com/boards/wickedboards/39222/board532/>

These URLs are better because they do not include the extraneous characters that are so telltale on dynamic websites. In addition, the URLs are designed to appear like normal website directories when in fact they are dynamic URLs.

Important: it is vital that you minimize the length of the URLs that you use. Search engines may stop crawling a website if there appear to be too many subdirectories. The samples above show fixed URLs that have about as many subdirectories as I would allow (4).

Design

This section focuses on the overall layout and usability of your designs from the perspective of a search engine robot. Search engine friendly design is occasionally quite complex so I have provided a list of the most common issues to consider.

1. Menus

Are the menus on your website spiderable? If not you may be hiding major areas of your website from search engine spiders and missing out on additional search engine rankings.

The fact is there are very few menus out there that a search engine will have a problem following, but there are definitely some worth avoiding. For instance do not use a JavaScript Jump Menu ([example](#)) as the core mode of navigation of your website; search engines cannot index this type of menu. Also be careful of Flash menus, they look slick but they will impede the progress of a search engine spider especially if they are the only means of navigation within your site.

General Menu Rules

The ideal menu would be text based and each text link would include the keywords you are targeting on the destination page. Setting up a menu with this much forethought requires that you determine the layout and content for your site before web design begins. Once you have a clear

picture of the content for each page you can then research the keywords that are best to target per webpage. This essential keyword research can be done in house easily enough using systems like [keyword research tools](#) that provide you with a glimpse into how your customers think by showing how many searches there are per month (or year) for a particular term.

Remember, almost every page within your site has a very real opportunity to gain a top ranking; all you need to do is ensure that the design, content and site structure is optimized. Ensuring that the menu is carefully thought out and designed is a crucial step for top rankings.

Finally, if you are at all uncertain whether your menu is search engine friendly then be certain to back it up with a text menu in the footer of your page using the same keyword targeting principles noted above.

Tech Advice: a simple text menu may be less than desirable for you; in this case I recommend [DHTML menus](#). These menus use text but in a manner that is quite appealing and very search engine friendly.

2. Sitemaps

Sitemaps can dramatically help the visibility of your website by allowing search engine spiders easy access to all of the pages in your site. Place a link to the sitemap on every page within your site to ensure easy access no matter where a search engine or user enters your site.

Sitemap Tips

Just having a sitemap will help but how you build your sitemap will also play a role in how well the search engines catalogue it. For example, if you have a twenty-page website it would be ideal to create a sitemap where each page is represented by a title along with a short description. Ultimately, the page may be a bit long but it will have content that the search engines like to index and it will boost the relevance of the linked pages because the titles will accurately represent the content. So in effect, you will now have more than just a sitemap; you will have a table of contents for your site that has the potential of getting a ranking and provides an extra boost to the ranking worthiness of each page.

Google Sitemap

Google Sitemap is an additional design element that you should consider adding. Here is an article Scott Van Achte wrote on [how to implement your own Google Sitemap](#).

3. Layout

How you layout your page can make a significant difference in how well your site ranks and ultimately how search engine friendly it is.

Tips for Layout

Search engine robots read a webpage from the top of the source code (the programming that made your page – see “view source” in your browser) all the way to the bottom. As a result, it is important to ensure that both of the following elements are found as close to the beginning of code as possible:

- A) A short sentence introducing the topic using the keyword targets you have chosen for the page.
- B) Your text menu and other navigational aids, or if this is not possible it would be even more beneficial to start with a paragraph or two of relevant content followed by the navigation.

By placing this information near to the top of the page, you will promptly present the search engine robot with relevant text that backs up the page title and backlinks. You will also provide an immediate sitemap of sorts for the search engine to spider, which includes keywords relevant to each page.

4. Splash Pages – ACK!

With the odd exception Splash Pages are a kiss of death for a website because the home page (the first page seen when someone visits your domain), your most important page, is often converted into nothing but an excess entry point with little or no relevant content on it. Aside from reducing your chances for ranking, you are also making your visitors take another step to get to content or sales material in your site. Any additional steps you add will lessen the likelihood of a successful sale.

Please Let Me Change Your Mind

If you think you need to use a splash page then you need to talk to someone who will change your mind. No, honestly, give me a call if you want because there is nothing more painful to a SEO or search engine friendly web designer to see a Splash Page in use. If, in the unlikely scenario your splash page is required, there are ways to make it slightly more search engine friendly.

1. Add a highly relevant and well-worded paragraph to the page so that the search engines have something to index that shows them they are in the right place.
2. Either provide a link to your sitemap or implement a text menu in the footer of the page so the search engines can access the internal workings of your website without having to take an extra step.

In Summary

Creating a search engine friendly website requires a basic to advanced understanding of how a search engine works, depending on the complexity of the planned website. Complexity aside, the notes above provide a good basis for you to evaluate the friendliness of your website and make changes where necessary. If you have questions regarding your website you can call me toll-free at 1-877-385-5526 (within North America) or [email me](#) and I will do my best to help or I will direct you to someone who can.