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Search Engine Optimization: Best Practices for Google

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Search Engine Optimization:
Best Practices for Google

by

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Bachelor of Science
Cornell University
2002

A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Table of Contents

PART ONE	4
Introduction	4
Purpose	5
Statement of Problem	5
Justification	5
Constraints.....	6
Glossary.....	6
PART TWO	8
Introduction	8
Search Engine Optimization Basics	8
Title Tag	8
Description Tag	10
Keywords.....	11
Uniform Resource Locators (URLs)	11
Navigation	13
Anchor Text.....	14
Images.....	15
Heading Tags	16
XML Sitemap	16
Google Change History over the Last Decade (2002-2012)	17
2002	17
2003	18
2004	18
2005	19
2006	19
2007	20
2008	20
2009	20
2010	21
2011	21

2012	22
Further Research	22
Conclusion.....	24
PART THREE	25
Introduction	25
Recommendations	25
Website Do's	25
Website Don'ts	26
One Year Action Plan.....	26
Conclusion.....	33
References	35

PART ONE

Introduction

The internet is a major delivery system of hotel reservations. Approximately 25% of all reservations made at a hotel come directly through the hotel's website (Douglas, 2012). Another 11% of total reservations are booked online through online travel agent websites, or OTAs, such as Priceline.com or Expedia.com (Douglas, 2012). These additional reservations booked through the OTAs come at a cost to the hotel, however. Typical commissions for OTAs are approximately 25 % of a total booking (Sanders, 2012). In 2010, it was estimated that the commissions associated with these OTA bookings cost hoteliers 2.5 billion dollars (Douglas, 2012). Because of the increased cost associated with reservations that come through the OTAs, and the increased competition of competitors websites, hoteliers must takes steps to ensure that their property can easily be found within search engines.

In the United States, there are three major search engines that drive traffic to websites: Google, Yahoo, and Bing (Smith, n.d.). These search engines are not equal, however, with Google, Yahoo, and Bing accounting for referring percentages of 74, 14, and 9 respectively (Valentine, n.d.). Google is also a major factor in foreign countries' searches (with the exception of Russia and China), with an average of 80 percent of all search engine referrals in foreign countries coming from Google's search (SEOMoz, n.d.a). With the referring power of these search engines, especially Google, being sought after by OTAs, as well as the competitive properties, it is essential that a hotel maximizes their placement in organic search results.

This paper will examine best practices in Google search engine optimization of hotel websites. The literature review will examine the basic criteria for successful search engine optimization as well as major changes within Google's algorithm over the last decade. The

review will also touch on other relevant research that has been conducted to provide tips and insights to hotel booking websites. Ultimately, this paper will serve as a resource that will offer recommendations for hoteliers to maximize their organic search potential within Google's search engine.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to identify best practices for search optimization of a hotel booking website in Google's search engine. This professional paper will identify best practices for anchor text, keyword placement and frequency, meta-tags, link building, and site content for optimization of hotel booking websites. It will also discuss the importance of relevant content as well as the significance of regularly updating site information. The focus of this paper will be on Google's search engine results. For context and history, this paper will also include previous best practices and changes in Google's algorithm that have taken place over the last ten years (2002-2012).

Statement of Problem

The OTAs spend four times as much as hotels on search engine advertising, allowing them to buy visibility in consumer hotel searches (King, 2012). Because individual hotels do not have the massive budgets for advertising that the OTAs have, they must make sure that they maximize their organic search placement within search engines. This is vital as organic search placement cannot be bought, and this placement also results in the lowest cost to the hotel for a referred reservation.

Justification

Many hotel professionals are not versed in what it takes to optimize a website for search engine results. Their trust is placed in the hands of the Information Technology (IT) individuals

that create and then optimize their websites. It is important that hoteliers understand what is needed in order to hold their webmasters accountable. Additionally, it is important to understand that search engine optimization is an evolving science and must be periodically reviewed and recalibrated.

Constraints

This paper is limited only to information that is publically available concerning search engine optimization. Additionally, because of the complexity of search engine algorithms, an exact blueprint for success is unrealistic. However, the paper will include all available strategies to become successful in organic search placement. This paper will only be focusing on search engine optimization associated with non-mobile devices. Different strategies may need to be implemented when addressing mobile searches. Further breakdown of mobile strategies may also need to occur when looking at smartphones versus tablets.

Glossary

Anchor Text - The hyperlinked text on a web page; the words a user clicks on when selecting a link (Gardyne, 2012).

Global Distribution System (GDS) - Electronic travel distribution systems that enable connectivity, shopping and booking among numerous travel providers and more than 163,000 travel agencies around the globe (Quinby, 2009).

Information Technology (IT) - The technology involving the development, maintenance, and use of computer systems, software, and networks for the processing and distribution of data (Merriam-Webster.com, 2012).

Keyword - A significant word from a title or document used especially as an index to content (Merriam-Webster.com, 2012).

Meta Tag - Page data tags that lie between the open and closing head tags in the HTML code of a document (Schachinger, 2012b).

Online Travel Agency (OTA) - A travel booking website whose branding is oriented online and that mainly conducts commerce online (Quinby, 2009).

Organic Search - A term for search engine results that are naturally generated and not influenced by commercial relationships between an organization and a search provider, ISP or other party hosting search results (Janssen, n.d.).

Pay Per Click (PPC) - A model of charging for advertising on search engines and websites (Frontczach & Lech, 2009).

Search Engine - A site on the World Wide Web that uses such software to locate key words in other sites (Merriam-Webster.com, 2012).

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) - Everything that is connected with web marketing within a search engine (Frontczach & Lech, 2009).

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) - A method which increases the quality and the quantity of the traffic coming to a website from organic search (Frontczach & Lech, 2009).

Smartphone - A cell phone that includes additional software functions (as in e-mail or an Internet browser) (Merriam-Webster.com, 2012).

Tablet - A wireless, portable personal computer with a touch screen interface (Rouse, 2010).

PART TWO

Introduction

For a website to receive a high ranking in a search engine's results, it must be optimized based on factors that a search engine deems relevant. While there is not one exact way to ensure that a website is created properly, there are many factors that have been identified as important when determining where a website shows in the placement of results. These factors do change, however, with importance shifting from one area to another as search engines try to stay one step ahead of website developers. Search engines, especially Google, are constantly making changes to their results, and features, to proactively keep from being manipulated and ensure their results stay relevant. The below information will discuss these factors and changes, as well as highlight some findings from other relevant hospitality website studies.

Search Engine Optimization Basics

Title Tag

A title tag can be likened to headings in an outline, or chapters in a book; it provides a broad explanation of what a website is all about (Schachinger, 2012a). The title tag is incorporated into results by a search engine in two distinct ways. First, it allows the search engine to understand at a very broad level what the website is about. Second, it is prominently displayed in the results of a query, and in a browser's chrome, allowing users to see what the website has identified as its most basic, high level depiction (SEOMoz, n.d.b). An example of a title tag in Google search results is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Title tag in Google results (google.com).

In this example, the title tag loaded is “Boutique Rockport Texas Hotels | The Lighthouse Inn at Aransas Bay”. This website has identified these words and phrases as the most succinct description of what the website represents. The selection of this text is very important as the title tag is one of the most key influences in achieving increased search engine results (Whalen, 2012).

While the title tag is important in search engine results, it also serves a function within a browser: it appears at the top of the page when a user is on the specific website, allowing that high level description to be visible throughout their browsing session. An example of the title tag in the browser’s chrome is shown in Figure 2.

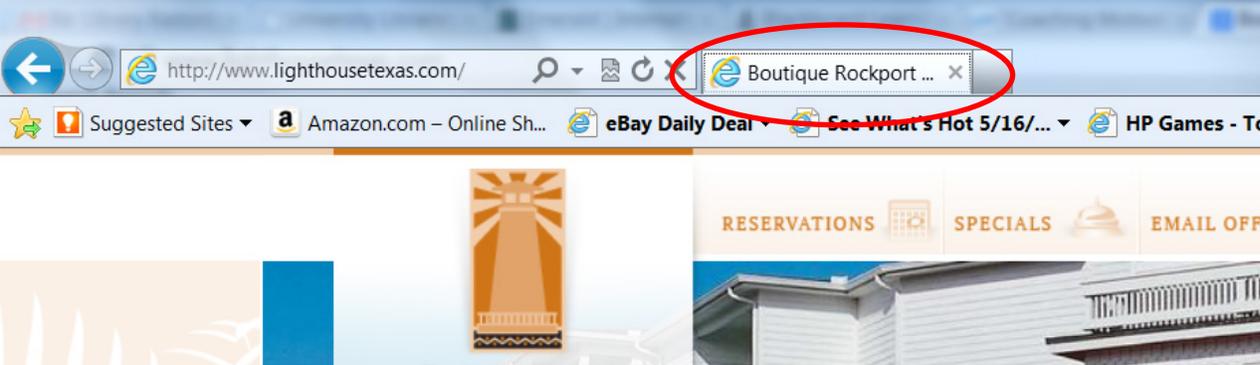


Figure 2. Title tag in a browser (www.lighthouse-texas.com).

In this example, the entire title tag is not viewable; only the beginning, “Boutique Rockport”, is shown due to size limitations of the browser tab. Because of this, it is also

important to put the most relevant word choices first as there may be instances where the entire title tag is not viewable. When determining a title tag, it is vital to examine what is trying to be communicated; a hotel “must have some ‘vision’ for the hotel's online presence and consider whether their website will add some value to their marketing activities and have a clearly defined utility/value” (Kielgast & Murphy, 2008, p.95).

Description Tag

The description tag allows for a website to utilize 160 characters to give a more detailed description of what the website encompasses (Hines, 2012). The description tag also is displayed in the search engine results directly under the title tag. Because of this, it is important that the description creates a “call to action” that entices a user to click through to the website (Van Horne, 2012). If a description tag is left blank, then a search engine will select a phrase from the text of the webpage to serve as a description (de Valk, 2012). To this end, it is essential that a website loads the description tag in order to control what information is presented to users conducting a search. An example of a description tag in search results is shown in Figure 3.

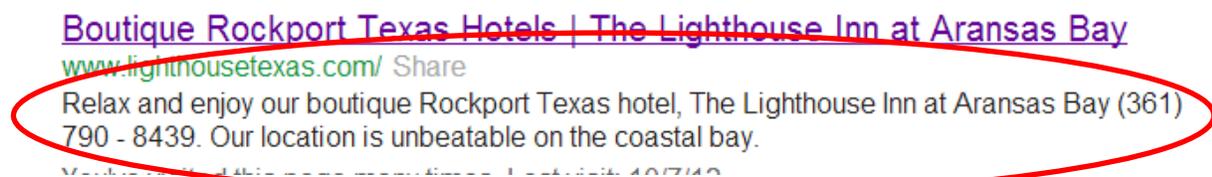


Figure 3. Description tag in Google results (google.com).

In this example, the website has decided to include the same phrase as its title tag in the description: “boutique Rockport Texas hotel, The Lighthouse Inn at Aransas Bay”. It also provides additional information such as its phone number and identifies its location as “unbeatable on the coastal bay”. When users search for terms that are included in the description

tag, there is a greater chance of showing in the results since these “are words Internet search engines look for to list your site in their indexes” (Squires, 2002, p. 46).

Keywords

The planning and selection of keywords is critical to understanding how a website will be viewed by a search engine (Buhalis, Katsogridakis, Law, & Paraskevas, 2011). This keyword selection is vital as keywords will be included not only in the content of the website but also the title tag, description tag, URL, alt text, and heading tags. Websites must also examine how often keywords are being used and repeated. An ideal keyword saturation level in website copy is between 3% and 7%; any less will take away from relevance, and any more would be viewed as “keyword stuffing” (Buhalis et al., 2011).

While keywords need to be in the website copy, they can also be submitted to search engines through the use of the keyword tag. An example of the keywords identified through a keyword tag is shown in Figure 4.



Rockport Texas Hotels, The Lighthouse Inn at Aransas Bay

Figure 4. Keywords. loaded for www.lighthousetexas.com (bruceclay.com).

While most search engines no longer look to loaded keywords for search relevance, loading keywords gives a website positive weighting compared to websites that don’t have them loaded, leading to better overall site visibility (Christopher, 2000).

Uniform Resource Locators (URLs)

In order to find a website, a user can perform a query in a search engine or type a specific URL into a browser’s address bar. An example of a URL in a browser’s address bar is shown in Figure 5.

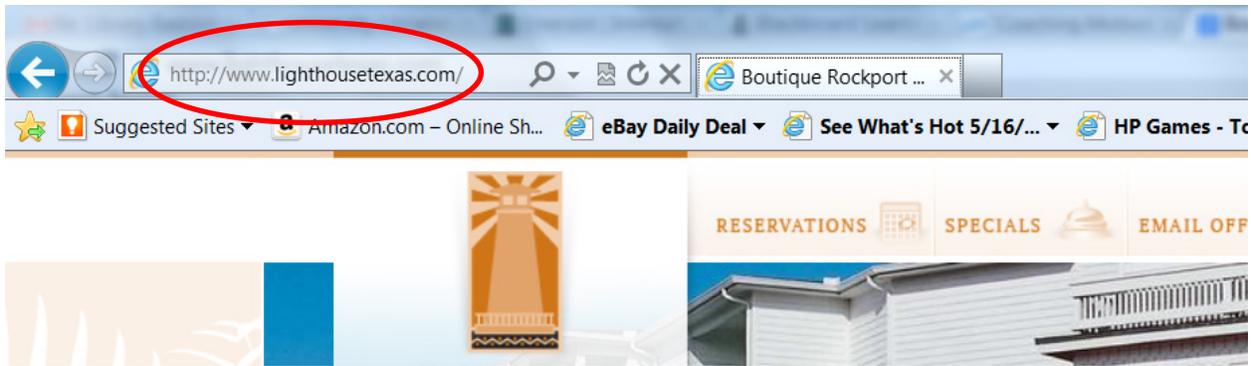


Figure 5. URL shown in a browser address bar (www.lighthouse texas.com).

In this example, the URL is: <http://www.lighthouse texas.com>. Part of what makes up the URL is the domain name. In the above example, the domain is: [lighthouse texas.com](http://www.lighthouse texas.com). It is important not to create complicated or excessively long URLs as users and search engines can have trouble with these (Nunney, 2012).

Utilizing keywords is an important part of the process when deciding on URLs. Having a keyword rich domain name and selecting keywords in page naming can allow greater search engine optimization (McCoy, 2011). Keywords used in page naming are viewable when a user selects an additional page on the site. An example of this is shown in Figure 6.

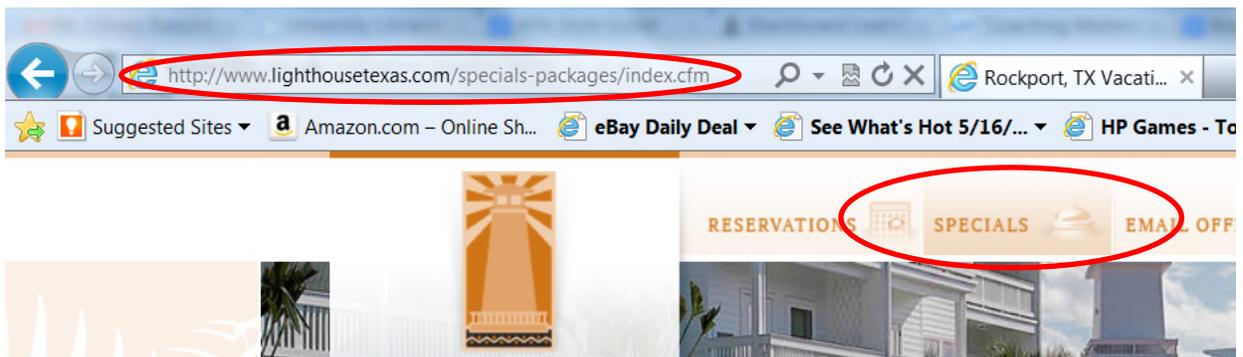


Figure 6. URL with additional keywords(www.lighthouse texas.com).

By navigating to this page, the URL updates with additional keywords linked to the specific page. In this example, “/specials-packages/index.cfm” is added to the URL. These are appropriate keywords as the page has to do with specials and packages. An example of what the URL with the additional keywords looks like in search engine results is shown in Figure 7.

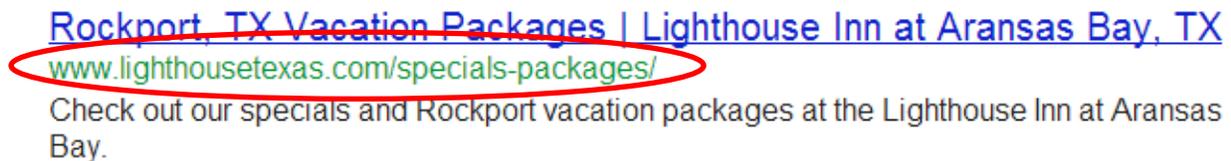


Figure 7. URL with additional keywords (google.com).

It is important to decide on a URL beyond just the name of a hotel; search engines use keywords found in a website URL to determine the relevancy of a site’s content to a query (Hacker & Monti, 2011). When making a keyword selection, it is also important to err on the side of a shorter URL. In search results, it was found that a shorter URL resulted in higher click-through rates (Hacker & Monti, 2011). Additionally, a shorter URL can be easier to communicate to users over the phone and in advertising.

Navigation

When creating websites that are optimized for search engines it is essential to remember that it is not humans that will be navigating the sites, but search engine crawlers or “spiders”. Because of this, it is important to make sure that the website’s hierarchy flows in a logical order and is easily navigated (Buhalis et al., 2011). Aiding with search engine optimization is the linking of pages within a website. This allows each page to pass its popularity on to the other pages, making the whole site more relevant in the eyes of a search engine. An example of this linking (known as “breadcrumbs”) can be seen in Figure 8.

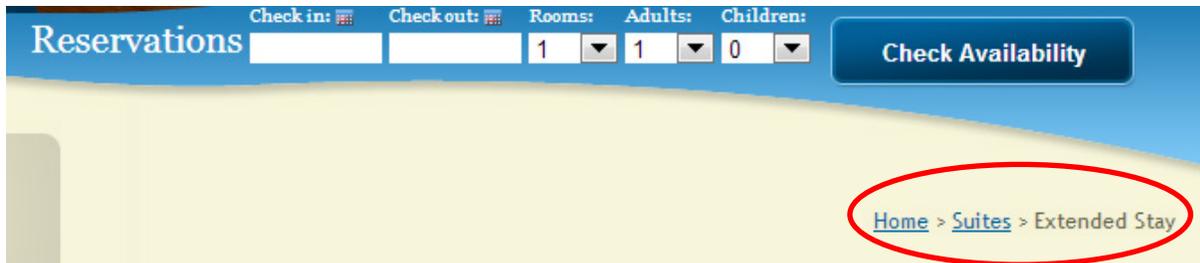


Figure 8. Navigation within a website (www.hotel-round-rock.com).

By creating these easy to follow links, hotel websites can reap the rewards in many different ways: allows easier user navigation, allows “deeper” webpages to get more visits, allows easier search engine navigation, and improves search engine rankings (Lincoln, 2012).

Anchor Text

According to Barizo (2009), a survey of 37 search experts concluded that anchor text was the second most important factor in search engine optimization. Anchor texts are the words that a user clicks on when they select a link. An example of anchor text is shown in Figure 9.

Popular Texas Coast attractions close

- [Fulton Mansion](#) - .1 mile

Figure 9. Anchor text of a link.

In this case, “Fulton Mansion” is the anchor text and clicking on it will take a user to the URL of <http://www.visitfultonmansion.com>. The reason the anchor text is important is that when a search engine spider identifies the link, it associates that text with the URL (Safran, 2012).

The anchor text carries so much weight that it has been used very effectively to manipulate search results. Perhaps the most famous occurrence took place when the anchor text

“miserable failure” was associated with George W. Bush’s White House Biography (Piper, 2004). Typing the words “miserable failure” into the Google search engine resulted in the number one ranked result being President Bush’s Biography. This was accomplished by as few as 32 web pages with the anchor text of "miserable failure" that linked to the president’s biography (BBC News, 2003).

Images

It is possible to have keywords associated with images by including text in the “alternative text” (alt text) field of the image file. Alt text is utilized by users who have disabled images, as well as search engines, to categorize images (Smarty, 2008). Additionally, after a “traditional” search, the second most utilized search function is one just of images (Evans, 2007). An example of an image search in Google is shown in Figure 10.

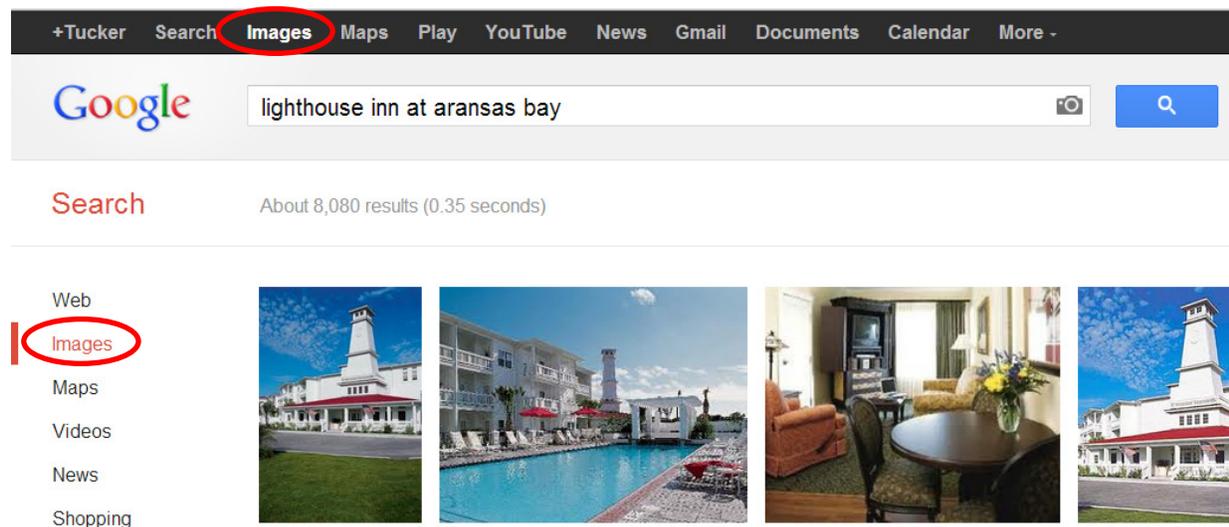


Figure 10. Image search results in Google (google.com).

It is important to ensure that alt text is completed properly since search engine spiders cannot interpret images; spiders can only associate images with their connected alt text. Alt text

should be focused, concise, and accurate in describing images (Smarty, 2008). Additionally, if the image is of a logo, the term “logo” should be added (Craven, 2006).

Heading Tags

The first heading tag, or “h1”, is viewed by search engines as containing the most important text on the page, and is weighted heavier than other content when determining relevant keywords and phrases (Lawhorne, 2011). This tag should be used to communicate the main points of the site, similar to the title tag. Additional headings can be used including h2, h3, h4, h5, and h6, however, each heading higher than h1 is viewed by search engines spiders as diminishing in relevance. An example of a heading tag from www.lighthousetexas.com is shown in Figure 11.

A screenshot of an HTML heading tag. The text is displayed in a monospaced font, with the opening and closing tags in blue and the content in black. The text is centered between two vertical lines: a thin orange line on the left and a thicker grey line on the right.

```
<h1> Upscale Waterside Escape in Rockport, Texas</h1>
```

Figure 11. Heading tag in website (www.lighthousetexas.com).

It is important to understand that the content in the h1 tag must not only be relevant to the rest of the webpage, but must communicate the ideal keywords and phrases to the search engines. Additionally, each individual website page should have its own unique h1 verbiage (Lawhorne, 2011).

XML Sitemap

All websites should have an XML Sitemap that can be submitted to search engines. This is done to facilitate indexing as many pages of a website as possible (Kocher, 2012). An XML Sitemap serves as a roadmap for search engine spiders and can also be known as a “spider path”

since it makes finding the pages much simpler for search engines (Buhalis et al., 2011). An example of a portion of an XML Sitemap is shown in Figure 12:

```
<!-- created with Free Online Sitemap Generator www.xml-sitemaps.com -->
- <url>
  <loc>http://lighthouse texas.com/</loc>
  <lastmod>2012-10-20T22:51:22+00:00</lastmod>
  <changefreq>daily</changefreq>
  <priority>1.00</priority>
</url>
- <url>
  <loc>http://lighthouse texas.com/specials-packages/index.cfm</loc>
  <lastmod>2012-10-20T22:51:22+00:00</lastmod>
  <changefreq>daily</changefreq>
  <priority>0.80</priority>
</url>
- <url>
  <loc>http://lighthouse texas.com/email-offers/index.cfm</loc>
  <lastmod>2012-10-20T22:51:22+00:00</lastmod>
```

Figure 12. XML Sitemap code (lighthouse texas.com).

Google Change History over the Last Decade (2002-2012)

While no one can be sure exactly how much each of the above practices affect search engine placement, one thing is certain: the parameters are always changing. Because search results can be manipulated if a webmaster identifies the optimal mix of strategies, search engines are constantly altering and updating their indexing algorithms as well as the services they are offering. Google was created in 1998 and below is an overview of some of Google's known changes over the last ten years (2002-2012).

2002

In 2002, Google launched its "Google News" feature, creating an almost real-time news stream that auto updated every 15 minutes (Ojala, 2002). This was developed to ensure Google remained relevant, especially when contending with Dialog, Factiva, and LexisNexis (Ojala, 2002). The Google News algorithm worked well right out of the gate, appearing to match the accuracy of other news sources with human editors almost immediately (Hansell, 2002).

In addition to Google News, 2002 introduced a pilot program designed to track repeated searches performed within the search engine (Warner, 2002). Also, in 2002, Google developed an online catalog service allowing over 3,000 different catalogs to be viewable in their original, full-color format. 2002 also marked the beginning of “Google Answers”, which allowed users to post questions for a fee (\$.50) and pay for the answers (\$4-\$100) from independent researchers (Conhaim, 2002).

2003

In 2003, Google made a change to its algorithm designed to eliminate “over-optimized” pages, which resulted in many pages losing their top ranking for certain search terms (Sullivan, 2003). Part of this change was also designed to eliminate sites’ popularity that had an overabundance of inbound links from blogs (Wiggins, 2003). Blogs were targeted as they were viewed as the easiest way to get inbound links and could be rapidly created by website owners.

While Google was changing the algorithm to fight against over-optimization skewing search results, Google also launched an advertising program that sold and delivered their ads to other websites based on relevant keywords that Google had identified (Walker, 2003). This expansion of advertising onto other sites allowed for rapid acceleration of Google’s revenues and influence.

2004

In 2004, Google went public with an IPO offering on the NASDAQ Stock Exchange. “Google Alerts” were also launched in 2004, allowing users to enter search terms and receive emails each time these terms were added to the Google index (Piper, 2004). Additionally, Google launched “Google Scholar” which allowed for search results only to be returned from journal articles, theses, books, preprints, and technical reports in order to facilitate research

(Butler, 2004). Google also launched “Google Print” in 2004, allowing users to read two page excerpts of books before making a purchase (Waters, 2004).

2004 also revealed that Google had many different algorithms that it switched between many times throughout a month, resulting in constantly changing requirements for high results rankings (Zhao, 2004). Another important milestone in 2004 was the launching of “Google Mail”, or “Gmail”, a free email service with 100 times more storage than Hotmail or Yahoo Mail (Wiggins, 2004). Gmail was originally invitation only through either a referral or a fee, but eventually became available to anyone.

2005

2005 brought “Google Local” directories and the launching of online directions and maps (Peek, 2005). Google also started personalizing results by taking into account what a user had searched for previously and using that information to deliver more targeted results (Sullivan, 2005). This change created profiles for users and placed an emphasis on sites they had visited before. “Google Earth” was also launched in 2005, displaying a three dimensional image of the world for users to explore.

2006

Google introduced the “Supplemental Index” in 2006, which users could access by clicking on a link at the bottom of their search results that indicated some similar results had been omitted (Schwartz, 2006). “Google Trends” was launched in 2006 too; first letting users know how many times a term had been queried over the previous five years, and eventually morphing into a service to see current trending topics (Arrington, 2006).

2006 also brought a lawsuit against Google by Kinderstart, who alleged Google violated antitrust and communication laws after the site went from the number one result for the query

“kinderstart” to the number 45 result (Pike, 2006). Kinderstart contended that Google was not just updating its algorithm, but actively blocking or delisting specific sites. The suit was eventually thrown out of court.

2007

2007 brought the arrival of Google’s “Universal Search” which integrated different results from images, news, videos, and books into the main search results (Sullivan, 2007). Google also updated its algorithm to more actively ward off “Google Bombs” that skewed results by providing targeted anchor text pointing to specific websites (Claburn, 2007; Goo, 2007).

2008

In 2008, Google introduced “Google Suggest” which auto-populated related searches below the search box as a user entered a query (Sullivan, 2008). Google also came to the forefront of censorship issues around the world as governments (Turkey, Thailand) blocked content from Google owned YouTube.com. Google was forced to make decisions to remove content or risk the banning of YouTube.com entirely by those countries (Rosen, 2008). 2008 also marked the 10th anniversary of the founding of Google.

2009

Google launched “Real-Time” search results in 2009, meaning that results from queries included real-time information such as current Twitter postings (Sullivan, 2009). 2009 also brought the launch of a search tool, code name “Caffeine”, which greatly increased the speed, size, accuracy, and results of the Google search (Parr, 2009). Caffeine also took into account the updating of an entire website, as opposed to just the home page, when determining recently updated information (Hargrave, 2010).

2010

In 2010 Google started to incorporate integration with social networks (such as Facebook) in its ranking algorithm, utilizing available social signals (Schwartz, 2010). Google also made changes to how its results were displayed in 2010, allowing a single branded website to dominate the results when a user searched for that specific brand (McGee, 2010).

Additionally, Google started penalizing websites that had poor customer reviews in 2010, pushing their rankings lower in query results (Shearman, 2010). 2010 also brought about the addition of bicycling directions integrated into Google Maps (Tomkins, 2010).

2011

In 2011, Google continued to focus on the quality of the results that it was returning. An update focused at removing low quality, or duplicated, information was implemented affecting as many as 12% of results (Levy, 2011). Google also placed more emphasis on recent information enacting another update that gave more weighting to fresh material, affecting up to 35% of searches (Google, 2011b).

In addition to focusing on search quality in 2011, Google entered the social networking arena with the launch of “Google Circles”, later updated to “Google+” (Sullivan, 2011). 2011 also launched the “+1” button, linking user’s Google+ accounts, and preferences, to the Google index for all users to see (Sullivan, 2011). Google expanded the “Sitelinks” feature, or links to pages within a site from eight up to 12 (Google, 2011a). An image of Sitelinks is shown in Figure 13.

[Boutique Rockport Texas Hotels | The Lighthouse Inn at Aransas Bay](#)

www.lighthouse-texas.com/

Welcome to the **Lighthouse Inn at Aransas Bay**, a bayside gem on the beautiful Texas Coast. Relax and enjoy boutique accommodations and modern amenities, ...

6 Google reviews - Write a review - \$129 ▼

200 South Fulton Beach Road Rockport, TX 78382
(361) 790-8439

You've visited this page many times. Last visit: 10/19/12

[Photo Gallery](#)

View the photo gallery for a tour of the waterfront Lighthouse Inn at ...

[Rockport Texas Hotels](#)

Learn more about our Rockport Texas hotel, The Lighthouse Inn ...

[More results from lighthouse-texas.com »](#)

Figure 13. Sitelinks in Google results (google.com).

2012

As of the publication of this paper, 2012 is not complete, but there have been some significant updates and changes enacted by Google. With the expansion of Sitelinks, Google has also limited the number of results from 10 to as few as seven showing up on the first page of results, affecting nearly 20% of queries (Sullivan, 2012). Google has also launched its most aggressive update regarding webspam, called “Penguin”, aimed at eliminating websites from the index that are viewed as engaging in aggressive results manipulating strategies (Google, 2012).

Further Research

Several hospitality studies have focused on the importance of websites and their associated content. Although many of these studies touch on the importance of website content for ease of use in order to increase conversions, they did not have a heavy focus on addressing search engine optimization. It should be noted, however, that focusing solely on optimization of a website for search engine results would be irresponsible. Hotel websites must also be designed with an eye towards the end user experience and converting visits to sales.

A study titled *“How do the preferences of online buyers and browsers differ on the design and content of travel websites?”* discussed the importance of ease of use of travel websites in influencing purchases. It went on to identify differences in importance of various website features between users that were simply “browsing” and users that went on to make a purchase. Interestingly, some of the keys that the study identified to create a higher likelihood of converting a sale were also important to search engine optimization such as positive customer reviews and easy navigation (Bai & Law, 2008).

In addition to augmenting websites in order to drive additional purchases, research into what makes a website valuable as part of an overall marketing strategy was completed in a study titled, *“A review of hospitality website design frameworks”*. This study identified five measurable attributes of a hotel’s website in the context of a hotel’s web marketing program. Previous studies had not specifically broken the website into sections that could be focused on in order to get a measured return. The study concluded that relevant updated material is essential in order to create a website that can be used in conjunction with a marketing or advertising campaign (Hashim, Law, & Murphy, 2007). This is also in line with the Google search engine’s preference for regularly updated, relevant website information.

While using a website to enhance a marketing and advertising campaign is an effective use of that asset, it is important to understand who the users are that are using the website. A study titled, *“An evaluation of hotel website attribute utilization and effectiveness by hotel class”* separated hotels into distinct star classes and examined the differences of 27 website attributes between star class. It found that the same factors were not as important throughout different star classes. There was not a one-size-fits-all approach that was appropriate to all hotel websites. It is important to understand who will be visiting the website when determining where to focus the

content (Bojanic, Musante, & Zhang, 2009). This is similar to understanding who the users are that will be searching for a website in a search engine and creating an appropriate description tag that will entice them to click on the corresponding link; it is essential to understand the user.

Conclusion

There are certain, agreed upon, parameters that a hospitality website can complete, and update, in order to ensure they are receiving the highest possible ranking for various searches. These updates must be made, however, with an eye towards what search engines, particularly Google, are enacting in order to retrieve the most relevant results. Google's evolution into the search engine giant that it is today has been accomplished by constantly providing additional services and making changes to how results are indexed.

A hotel website must be conscious of the changes that are occurring in the search results as well as other products that Google is introducing that integrate into the results. This is a process that will continue as webmasters try to influence results and Google tries to keep the integrity of their results while providing additional features that it believes will enhance the user experience.

PART THREE

Introduction

In order for hoteliers to effectively utilize their websites to drive additional traffic, websites must be easy to find and, thus, optimized to appear in search engine results. This focus should certainly be emphasized during the creation of a website; however, an existing website should also be updated if it is not in line with current search engine optimization best practices. Because so much of search engine results are based now on freshness and relevance of content, Part Three will consist of some general “do’s” and “don’ts” when creating and updating websites, followed by a one year plan of action to ensure that a website is being consistently and systematically updated with relevant, fresh information in order to maximize search engine result rankings.

Recommendations

Website Do’s

- Utilize the title and h1 tags with an eye towards search engine queries; ensure that these tags are targeting the most macro level words and phrases that a user would search for.
- Ensure that the description tag creates a “call to action” that will make a user click on the associated link.
- Make sure keywords are loaded and relevant.
- Setup the website with easy to follow links, or “breadcrumb trails” that a search engine crawler will easily recognize.
- Create and submit an XML Sitemap.
- Label all alt text in images.
- Work to build inbound links with relevant anchor text.

- Utilize the URL for search queries, not just brand keywords.

Website Don'ts

- “Stuff” keywords (have more than 3-5% of a website’s content devoted to specific words or phrases).
- Pursue inbound links from websites that sell them or consist only of links (link farms).
- Leave any information blank (title tag, description tag, h1 tag, alt text, keywords).
- Use irrelevant or unspecific names for pages (example: “page 2”).
- Leave information on a website static and outdated.

One Year Action Plan

January

- Assess and update title, description, and h1 tags for all pages within website.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Go through amenity list and ensure that everything is up to date (specifically look to add details about internet Mbps speed, descriptions of televisions, available channels, mp3 docks, new bedding, breakfast offerings, hours of operation for services, etc.).
- Create an “add-on” for reservations (1 dozen roses, bottle of champagne, late checkout, breakfast in bed, turndown service, etc.).
- Create a blog and link it to the main page of the website (can be a page of the existing website, or standalone blog).
 - Write posts about New Year’s Resolutions, President’s Day, and make some predictions about what might happen in the New Year (example: someone invents time travel, the first human is cloned, etc.).

- Sign up for Google Analytics (or analyze and print current report as a baseline).

February

- Assess and update all alt text for pictures on the website.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Write blog posts on Valentine’s Day, Leap Year, and Black History Month.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Update local “things to do” section of website (make at least three changes).
- Assess and update page names.
- Get three inbound links from local businesses with appropriate anchor text.
- Create a “Romance Package” promoted on the main page of the website that offers an upgraded room and a late checkout.

March

- Ensure that each website page has proper navigation and a “breadcrumb trail” that allows for search engines to easily find all content.
- Create (if needed) and submit an XML Sitemap to major search engines.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Create a “St. Patrick’s Day Package” promoted on the main page that offers a six pack of Guinness, a box of Lucky Charms, and a late checkout.
- Write blog posts about St. Patrick’s Day, Spring Break, and favorite spring-time activities.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Get one video of a guest giving positive feedback and post it to Youtube.com with a link on the hotel website.

April

- Write blog posts about Earth Day, favorite things from the first quarter of the year, and the nicest thing a boss has ever done for you.
- Add at least one updated picture (with appropriate alt text).
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Rewrite the main page text ensuring that appropriate keyword frequency and relevant content is utilized.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Highlight a new business or strategic partner and write a review on their business on one of the site’s pages.
- Create an “add-on” for a birthday celebration that includes a cake and balloons.
- Start a monthly contest promoted on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.

May

- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Write blog posts about Cinco de Mayo, Mother’s Day, and Memorial Day.
- Get three inbound links from local businesses with appropriate anchor text.
- Run a promotion on the main page for “one last getaway before the kids are out of school”. Include a bottle of wine, free movie rental, and breakfast in bed.
- Create an “add-on” for reservations of movie tickets from a local theater.

June

- Run a promotion on the main page that offers a fuel card for the summer driving season.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Spotlight a new business or strategic partner somewhere within the website.
- Write blog posts about summer, Father’s Day and D-Day.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.

July

- Reassess and update title, description, and h1 tags for all pages within website.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Write blog posts about Fourth of July, favorite family vacations, and summer reading lists.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Run a promotion on the main page that offers a “True American Package” that includes an apple pie and a six pack of either Coke or Budweiser.
- Update driving directions on website to include landmarks and directions from additional locations.

August

- Write blog posts about the hottest day you ever remember, back to school shopping, and a favorite “summer love” story (can be a movie).
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Add pictures from a local Fourth of July celebration to the “local things to do” section of the site (include proper alt text).
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Assess Google Analytics and make updates to the home page keywords based on click-through information.
 - If new keywords are added, include them in the loaded keywords, description tag, and title tag (if appropriate).
 - Update alt text of photos with more relevant keywords.
- Create an “add-on” to reservations of a bucket of six beers.

September

- Run a promotion on the main page that offers a chance for “one last vacation”. Include two adjoining rooms with a free pizza for kids and a bottle of champagne for the adults.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.

- Write blog posts about Labor Day, the first day of school, and remembering September 11th.
- Get three inbound links from local businesses with appropriate anchor text.
- Get one video of a guest giving positive feedback and post it to Youtube.com with a link on the hotel website.

October

- Run a promotion on the main page that offers a “Halloween Getaway”. Include candy, two pumpkins, and some stencils to use to carve the pumpkins.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Write blog posts about Oktoberfest, Halloween, and superstitions.

November

- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Run a promotion on the main page that offers a “Hassle-Free Thanksgiving”. Include a prepared meal with turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and green beans; allow for an early check-in.
- Write blog posts about Thanksgiving, Veteran’s Day, and daylight savings.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Get three inbound links from local businesses, with appropriate anchor text, that are promoting New Year’s Eve parties. Offer a discounted rate to their guests.

- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.

December

- Write blog posts about Christmas, snowmen, and holiday decorations.
- Run a contest on social media (specifically Facebook and Twitter) that gives away a free night stay to a user that “likes” or “follows” the hotel.
- Repost the best comment received on TripAdvisor.com to the website; link it to the post.
- Announce employee of the month on “About us” or “Contact us” page.
- Assess Google Analytics and make updates to the home page keywords based on click-through information.
 - If new keywords are added, include them in the loaded keywords, description tag, and title tag (if appropriate).
 - Update alt text of photos with more relevant keywords.
- Run a promotion on the main page that offers a “Holiday Head Start”. Include a fifty dollar gift card for shopping, wrapping paper, scissors, tape, and a bottle of wine.

Conclusion

Web based reservations continue to be a significant portion of any hotel’s overall reservations. Due to this significance, it is important that a website is easy to navigate and, more importantly, easy to find. There are many agreed upon best practices that will allow a website to ensure that it is using all tools available in order to be listed high in search engine results. Perhaps the most important factor, however, is the relevance of the site’s content and the frequency of its content being updated.

Since a website must now regularly provide new content, on all pages of the site, in order to achieve higher search engine results, it is imperative that a strategic plan is created to ensure

that these updates are being made in a systematic way. It is essential to focus on these updates in the same way that any other marketing strategy is focused upon. Updates must be planned out for a minimum of one year, and executed, as a part of a successful marketing plan.

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