

## CHAPTER 7 – WRITING FOR SEARCH ENGINES

### CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

#### Overview

Meta Tags, SERPs, algorithms, spiders and robots ... and you thought this book was about writing and editing online! Well, it is and the successful online copywriter or editor should have an at least fundamental understanding of how **the use of words influences search engine positioning**.

This isn't a DIY guide to perfect search engine optimisation\* – that's best left to a specialist. However, it does provide a guide to how words really matter when it comes to gaining prominent positions in the SERPS (Search Engine Results Pages).

And why is it important? Because, with more than 250 million searches being conducted every day on Google alone, we want readers to find your words – and website - before those of others!

\*Search engine optimisation involves techniques that are used on websites in order to rank favourably within search engines for targeted words and phrases. This is primarily achieved through the manipulation of visible content, code and site structure.

#### Chapter objectives

After reading this chapter you will be able to write and organise copy which is both useful to readers and 'search engine friendly' - meaning the words are used and structured for best search engine placement. Meta Tags (elements of code read by some search engines) are also explained.

## Chapter structure

- Introduction.
- Body Text.
- Title and Meta Tags.
- Alt Text.
- Off the page factors.
- Summary.
- Checklist.

## INTRODUCTION

There is much talk about search engine algorithms (the closely-guarded 'recipes' that search engines use to decide how to rank the results of a given search).

However, the CRITICAL element is not  $PR(A) = (1-d) + d (PR(T1)/C(T1) + \dots + PR(Tn)/C(Tn))$   
...

... it's the **written word** – yahoo, say all of us!

Yes, folks, it's *our writing* that again makes the difference. And, although a specialist search engine optimiser will add to and modify our works, we can minimise these adjustments (and we'd really prefer they didn't happen at all!) while, at the same time, actually making our copy **better for readers**.

This chapter will take you through the key rules that apply to the main search engines.

## BODY TEXT

Search engines just love the words we weave within the body text of web pages and **nothing** has a stronger influence on positioning.

An ideal target is some **300-500 words per page** and keyword phrases (those word combinations most likely to be used by people searching for the kind of information you are publishing) used consistently throughout your body text will boost rankings.

And, once again, it's **the initial material** (the lead statement - the first two-to-three paragraphs and especially the first 150-250 characters) which is most important.

Of course, if those relevant phrases are important for search engines, they must be important for readers, too. So where else should they be than near the beginning? Doh! We're starting to see a theme here!

In addition, as with good content practice in general, when possible the targeted key phrases should appear at the start or near the **start of paragraphs**.

### <TIP>

#### **Target phrases, not single words**

Please note, your emphasis should be placed on **phrases**, not single words.

For example, when I searched on Google (uk) for 'marketing', I was presented with millions of results covering a wide range of marketing-related information sources. But I was really looking for 'web marketing guide'. By refining my search, I was then able to select from a smaller list of **more relevant** results.

That's what all searchers do and what we should bear in mind when writing.

At a Jupiter Ad Forum in New York, Ted Meisel, CEO of Overture, shared his view on search engine keyword length data. He indicated that, based on Overture internal data, the percentage of search words in a search query is getting longer:

- 1-word queries: 19%
- 2-word queries: 23%
- 3-word queries: 24%
- 4-word queries: 15%
- 5-word queries: 19%

The above data indicates 58 per cent of searchers are entering three keywords or more.

**</ TIP>**

And, on many fronts, good practice for search engines is good practice for readers, too. For example, how often have you seen links like:

- [Click here](#) for information about MediaCo's services.

Hello, what kind of services?

Better would be something like:

- [Online marketing services](#) provided by MediaCo – useful information.

And, yes, when it comes to links, many search engines consider the text **in and around hyperlinks** to be more important which is why I've presented the key words in the above sentence as the hyperlink.

## Meaningful Sub-Headings and Emphasis

Again, as we know, online readers tend to initially skim text rather than read every word so sub-headings and **emphasis** draw them to key areas or important content.

And, guess what, it works for search engines, too. They assume more importance is being placed on phrases in **bold** and within headings (which a web developer will appropriately tag e.g. <H3>**Heading here**</H3>) and phrases used in this way will help boost positioning if they match users' searches.

Another way to make effective use of your targeted search phrases while also assisting (those skimming, scanning) readers is to include them within bullet lists. For example:

MediaCo's **online marketing services** include:

- Search Engine Marketing;
- Email Marketing;
- Strategic Link Building;
- Website copy writing; and
- Viral [buzz] marketing.

But, beware, do not try to stuff every possible search phrase into one piece of copy or a single page. The **shotgun approach just does not work**. From a search engine perspective, this would simply dilute the weight of the individual phrases and it's most likely to appear clumsy to your readers.

Rather, **organise your content logically** with, ideally, each page being focused on a single topic and split material into **separate pages** or **sections**. This will assist your readers and allow the correct emphasis to be placed on targeted phrases – **best practice is three to five targeted phrases per page**.

Also, don't be tempted to be over repetitive simply in an attempt to shovel your key phrases into short or early copy.

For example, I doubt if you would be comfortable reading or writing this:

*Writing and Editing Online is about effective writing and editing for online. This guide on editing and writing online is an essential resource for anyone wishing to improve their writing and editing online. Writing and editing online – the guide.*

Google-eyed? Unfortunately, this misguided 'shuffle the words' approach is adopted by some who have no respect for written words or the people likely to read them.

A craftsperson will achieve better results by weaving the words much more effectively.

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