*The hottest SEO trends

Looking to stay ahead of the competiton? Mark Buckingham reveals the latest tools and techniques in the world of SEO and gleans valuable insights from some of the major players

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Image Knight Design Studio
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knight-studio.co.uk

Are you content with your search engine coverage – even a tad complacent, perhaps? Or is your site floundering in the dark backwaters of the search engine results page in the wake of savvier competition? As the old saying goes: to stay the same, you have to change. Fortunately, help is at hand. There are more tools and resources than ever before to help you negotiate the thorny path of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO).

Few would have envisaged the evolution of search in the last decade. Personalised and localised search, not to mention social networking, are all here to stay and forcing search marketers and businesses to revise and raise their game.

Google has around 10 times more pages indexed today than in 2000, and continues to dominate the search industry. According to Nielsen Online, last November there were 1.73billion UK search queries with 80 per cent of that month's queries going through Google, ahead of Yahoo with 6.3 per cent. Once saturated sectors are now positively drenched and vertical (or specialist) search is becoming an important consideration.

So where are companies going wrong? Google's customer solutions engineer Chewy Trewhella, who supports its larger advertisers, says: "A lot of the problems the large sites have are the same as the small ones. It can be quite simple things like making sure that a page describes a single topic: that's a really common issue." Danny Sullivan, editor-in-chief of Search Engine Land, agrees: "Things like good title tags often get overlooked and can still be very important;

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"A lot of the problems the large sites have are the same as the small ones. It can be quite simple things"
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View the top search queries in which your site appeared and the top queries from which users arrived at your site

>> a lot of sites say that's all they needed to change for things to work out well. Good quality links also continue to play a solid role."

This harks back to the bedrock of SEO: good content. "You have to have an exceptional site in order to do really well," says Jill Whalen, CEO of High Rankings. "You can't simply slap up a site, put some keywords in the title and copy and expect it to rank highly. Today you have to create a buzz. It's all about creative content and, to a certain extent, viral marketing."

Compelling content

A clouded message, prosaic text brimming to the seams with keywords and unclear calls to action will simply turn your prospect into yet another notch on the visitor signpost. But a blog can often be the difference between a bland B2B site and one that connects with its audience. Danny Sullivan concurs: "Having a blog is very important now as it gives you many more opportunities to be found in the search listings. It's no longer optional for a lot of people – you really want to run a blog in addition to any 'regular' sites you may have."

Matt Cutts, Google's SEO spokesman, notes that new trends are forcing sites to get content-focused. "A lot of people were able to find traffic from social media sites and not just from search engines. Social networking sites have really opened a lot of people's eyes and affirmed that being interesting and a great resource is even better than just being a resource."

Getting quality links is a big part of optimisation. While this is in part beyond your control, you can assist the process by seeking links from quality relevant sources, such as geographic or industry-specific directories, The Open Source Directory and other sites. Another great way to acquire links naturally, and to help boost your Google PageRank in the process, is to have a compelling or interesting service or resource on your site. Beyond the brand message, you can provide really useful information for the layman. Pages such as a glossary of terms about your product or a forum related to your field are good ways to start. Then maybe you can take it further. Using YouTube and other video sharing sites is also smart marketing – adding product videos and reviews is a great way to build up your content, and will also help you to generate links back to your site. But most importantly, offer something different or rare: you don't necessarily need to be a 'thought leader' in your field, but you need a unique angle.

Matt Cutts agrees. "Offer information that nobody else has, with an original take on it, and then think how to market it," he says. "The Will

Interview | Chewy Trewhella – Google UK

Chewy Trewhella is a customer solutions engineer at Google. His job is to make technical things accessible to non-techie people. When he's not at work, he likes to play the banjo.

net: Is Google Analytics a substitute for good old-fashioned field testing?
CT: Field testing can be really useful before you start the build, just to understand where to focus the design. But Google Analytics and Website Optimiser should be something you have on an ongoing basis, because your user base may change.

net: Should all sites worry about SEO?
CT: If you're moving into, say, the mortgage space as a very small provider and you're hoping to be top of the list, it's going to be tough. But for smaller providers in niche areas – those who are interested in Norwegian squid fishing, for instance – there isn't going to be so much competition for those really specific keywords.

net: How has Personalised Search affected search trends and SEO?
CT: People are a lot more concerned about it than they need to be. With Personal Search at the moment, we won't change more than two results on the page for you, so of 10 results that you see, eight will always be the same and two may be different. It's only when you're signed in and opted in that you'll start to get personalised results.

net: What's your overall view on SEO?
CT: I think of SEO as the last 10 per cent of completing a website: it's only when you've done everything else that you really want to be thinking about optimising it. Before that it's really common sense. Think about what

you want on the homepage and where people are going to come in, then make sure the content they want to see is there.

net: How do Google Webmaster Central tools work alongside tools like Yahoo Site Explorer?
CT: One of the things we've been focusing on, especially with the creation of the sitemaps protocol, is for Yahoo, Microsoft, Ask and Google all to sit together in a common protocol and for site owners to be able to say: 'Here are all-out pages, please crawl them and not have to write something new.' Now, for all four sites, you can write a sitemap in one format and give it to all the engines and they'll understand it. It's really important to us not to make you reinvent the wheel every time you want a different sitemap.

In fact, if you just say 'sitemap:url' in the robots.txt, then all four engines will pick it up and crawl it. MSN has just launched its Site Centre and you've got Yahoo Site Explorer, and they've also got individual ways of uploading the sitemap directly, because you can have more control if you want and get analysis. Rather than just saying, 'Here's my sitemap, crawl', each of them will give you additional information on what's been crawled, how often, the dates and so on.

net: Anything specifically different?
CT: Yahoo is right now doing an ever-so-slightly better job at allowing users to say what duplicate content should be presented. So if you've got six different URLs that all contain the same content, at the moment Yahoo uses the master, whereas we'll make a guess at which is the master, so it gives you that tiny bit of extra control. But fundamentally we all realise the users want additional insight and we're all kind of chasing each other whenever someone drops a new tool. There's lots of friendly competition, but ultimately it's good for the user because we're giving more and more information about how all the crawlers are seeing your website.

Blend videos are the perfect examples. You'd think that a blender was the most boring thing created, but these guys have a ton of links just by demonstrating how great their blenders are."

Keyword density

Of course, one of the building blocks of SEO is targeting the key phrases, or keywords, that you believe users will search for – but don't get fixated. "I wouldn't beat yourself up about keyword density," says Trewhella. "It's easy to lose days making sure you've got one keyword per 10 other words, but actually what we look at is just the theme of the page and the words, and you really only need to mention them once in the heading, the title, the URL and again in the text."

Whether you're a seasoned pro or doing it DIY-style, there are many new tools at your disposal. Any developer who overlooks the growing array of

free resources at Google's Webmasters is ignoring a great asset, too. It will show you any crawl errors, HTTP status errors, broken links and content analysis such as duplicate meta tag descriptions and information on your links. Valuable information to help solve problems at a glance.
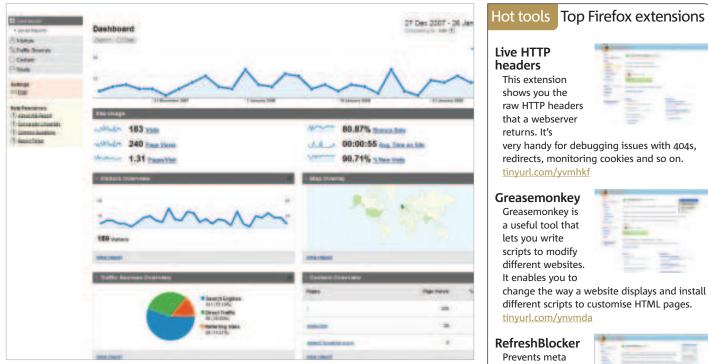
> "People now find traffic from social media sites, not just search engines"
> Matt Cutts

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Google Analytics is a free tool that can help you bolster your SEO and AdWords campaigns and improve ROI

Be wary of anything that calls itself SEO software. Programs that claim to do the job for you should be treated with caution, if not avoided entirely. Even if they work, SEO tools are not exactly empowering you to learn about what you're doing – and if things do go wrong you won't be so aware of what changes have been made.

First and foremost, ensure your site is uploaded to Google Sitemaps. "There are a number of different tools that allow you to see what position your site appears on for various terms," says Trewhella. "You can see the sites that are linking back, and we've recently added a geographic tool that allows people to tell us where a site should be considered to be from." And of course, while Google may have the vast majority of search traffic, you shouldn't overlook Yahoo Site Explorer and Microsoft's Live Search Webmaster Centre too.

Another great tool is robots.txt. If you've got content you don't want to be crawled, or just a 'contact me' page that you don't really need to be in the index, you can use this file to specify content you'd rather Google didn't pick up.

Yahoo says its Site Explorer gives you a quick, easy way to submit URLs and page updates to Yahoo Search. Priyank Garg, director of product management for Yahoo Search Technology, says: "It helps maintain an accurate view of which pages are indexed, by allowing you to provide information on your site's dynamic URL structure, thus helping to fight duplicates and redundant crawling and effectively improve a site's ranking."

But should you optimise your site for Yahoo or aim for Google and assume it will be well ranked in Yahoo accordingly? "The key attribute we're looking for is unique, valuable content that users like, and so are the other engines," says Priyank. "In terms of techniques, all of us use links and page content information. However, beyond the basic signals, we have numerous proprietary

Google's Webmaster Tools dashboard shows you indexing status, errors and when Google last spidered your site

techniques to find and rank content. Some user value techniques are likely to have more impact in one engine versus another."

The growing array of plug-ins and extensions for Firefox has made it a favourite in the SEO community, especially for the research or evaluation stages of SEO. Matt Cutts is certainly a fan: "There are a lot of really useful Firefox extensions such as Live HTTP Headers, which can show you the headers you get back from a page; Pref Bar, which lets you set your user agent to Googlebot or turn off images; and The Show IP tool, which will reveal the IP address of the given page and also allows you to perform a WHOIS look-up very quickly. There are all sorts of ways you can utilise even conventional tools such as Firefox a lot more effectively for SEO."

Google Analytics

Optimisation is also about ensuring the user experience is intuitive and streamlined, so your users are presented as close to the conversion as possible. Google's free Analytics application is a popular choice and allows you to observe obstacles to conversion, trace ecommerce transactions to campaigns and keywords,

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Hot tools Top Firefox extensions

Live HTTP headers
This extension shows you the raw HTTP headers that a webserver returns. It's very handy for debugging issues with 404s, redirects, monitoring cookies and so on.
tinyurl.com/yvmhkf

Greasemonkey
Greasemonkey is a useful tool that lets you write scripts to modify different websites. It enables you to change the way a website displays and install different scripts to customise HTML pages.
tinyurl.com/ynvmda

RefreshBlocker
Prevents meta refreshes from whisking your browser to a new page while you're reading something else in another tab. It can also be handy for debugging.
tinyurl.com/2wz2k2

PrefBar
This allows you to change your user agent. Change it to Googlebot to see exactly how a webserver responds to the Googlebot user agent, or try importing new buttons for extra features.
http://prefbar.mozdev.org

ShowIP
Shows you the IP address of a website and allows you to copy it to the clipboard. It also enables you to add new shortcuts – for example to run WHOIS on the hostname of a webpage.
tinyurl.com/3xj8r5

Google Browser Sync
A great feature that keeps your bookmarks in sync between your laptop, work and home computers. You can save browsing sessions, histories, passwords and more.
www.google.com/tools/firefox/browsersync
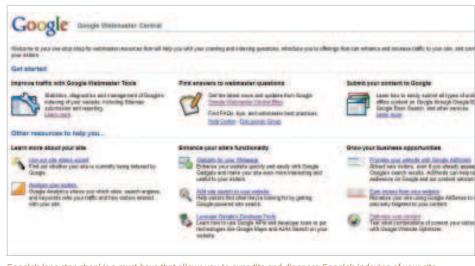
Are you targeting the right keywords? Google's Keyword Tool can help you determine the most popular keywords by search volume and advertiser competition.

Google's 'one-stop shop' is a must-have that allows you to expedite and diagnose Google's indexing of your site

>> identify which pages result in lost conversions or 'dropouts', geo-target, set conversion goals and evaluate traffic trends – to name a few. And if you're running an AdWords campaign, it offers indispensable information about which keywords are working and which aren't. But you need to implement changes wisely to gain maximum benefit. You might have Analytics to help determine traffic behaviour and what your hits mean, but do you know what your users see on each page? Bear in mind anyone can arrive at any page, so highlight your USPs on each one.

AdWords, Google's Pay Per Click programme, can be very useful for companies seeking instant targeted traffic and can be a useful SEO tool in itself – although there's no denying the savvier advertisers with better landing pages get more bang for their buck. Not surprisingly, Trewhella thinks it offers great benefits: "AdWords is cheap to do and you can quickly discover if it's going to work for you. It can sometimes give you some advantages over SEO, as you're able to do some keyword research where you're not certain of the exact terms people are going to be using."

Another benefit for AdWords users is Google Website Optimiser. Its multivariate and A/B split testing, available only to AdWords users, enables advertisers to test different combinations of site content. "You can see what type of message works best with your customers," says Trewhella. "It allows you to randomly test different bits of copy – we've seen people getting real success just from testing two different titles on their page." It's also worth casting your net a little wider and investing in Yahoo's paid search system, known as Project Panama. Its 'quality index' gives advertisers a sense of how the system will rank an ad, along with other sophisticated analytical tools.

If you're short on time and feel that you need assistance, it can be a prudent investment to hire an SEO company. But you should be judicious and perhaps opt for a firm closer to home that's willing to work alongside you, rather than simply for you. Be wary of anyone offering guarantees – you simply can't guarantee when, where and how a search engine will rank you – or those that don't have the track record or relevant in-house copywriting skills to help you craft winning, search engine-friendly text.

While most firms can get you rankings, it's the quality of the traffic they help you acquire that really counts. Jill Whalen is clear about what you should look for. "If they tell you that your keyword meta tag is not good, then that's a sign they don't know what they're talking about, since it makes no difference any more what you put in there," she says. "If they talk about how they can increase your Google PageRank, beware: this should never be a goal in and unto itself. By making your site better for your target audience, and then getting the word out, you'll naturally increase your PageRank (the real kind, not the one showing on the Google toolbar), because people will start to discuss your site with their friends, thus gaining you true links."

> "Sites such as digg, stumbleupon and so on can certainly help raise the visibility and amount of traffic to a site"
> Danny Sullivan

Stick to the basics

Has the bedrock of SEO changed? In short, no. Good SEO isn't an afterthought: it's pivotal to creating streamlined copy that's as easy to navigate as it is for the engines to crawl. It's integral to the design and copywriting process, and if required later, it should be added sympathetically, in harmony with your overall design and message.

So, what's the future of SEO? "Probably the biggest change in terms of search marketing is social media marketing," says Danny Sullivan. "Sites such as digg, stumbleupon and so on can certainly help raise the visibility and amount of traffic to a site, and that increases the odds that you're going to be getting links. I think those sites have to be taken into account as part of the arsenal of someone doing search marketing."

What not to do SEO sins that could damage your ranking

Don't cram your text into one page
A text-heavy page can be an instant turnoff. Organise your content so users can drill down and find the information they require easily. Ensure each section has consistent text, title and image tags, and catchy, descriptive headers.

Don't focus on too many keywords
Select just two or three phrases relevant to that page and work them carefully into your text, sub headers and title tags. Always proofread and edit accordingly until you'd never know they were there. And never write copy purely for the search engines, because it will quickly turn your visitors off and compromise your 'call to action' messages. Instead, focus on creating a connection with your reader and massage your keywords into

the text with care and attention. Be verbose with your keywords, but don't get hung up on keyword density.

Don't trust the promises of SEO firms
If you're looking for outside assistance, be wary of those who offer guarantees and reckon they can employ trickery to propel your site to the top. The major search engines will see through it and you risk a ban.

Don't be insular
Let your users help you generate new content and don't be afraid of product reviews. Establish yourself as an authoritative resource, or just a place to hang out where peers can exchange ideas. Create a buzz around your site and the traffic and links will quickly follow.

Personalised search is also a big future trend, but optimisers don't need to change their game specifically for this – just focus on good content and being the best they can be. Presently, Google also assures that no more than two results will be different, based on your search history and preferences and the like. Sullivan continues: "Personalised space is going to change as well in social terms, but it's difficult to say how you're going to control it. A lot will come down to the quality of your content. If they like what they see when they get there, that's going to reinforce whether they'll click with you and stay with you."

"We're still some way off a useful personalised search experience," says Priyank. "A major hurdle is that most people don't like to spend a lot of time configuring their preferences. The key to personalisation is to do it in a way that delivers a lot of value to the user but requires very little effort to configure. Within the next three years we'll have a lot of these issues worked out."

The next decade

Will SEO even exist in 10 years' time? "I think it will," says Matt Cutts. "I don't know whether it will be called 'SEO', but I think the idea of making your site friendlier to search engines will definitely be a concept that's still around. I think a future trend in black-hat SEO will be more cracking attempts, hackers if you want to call them that, where people will go and attack other people's websites. So you'll see an interesting collision between SEO and malicious hacking and I think that will bring a lot of people to a fork in the road, because no one really wants to do something illegal."

There's no doubt the evolving search landscape is forcing savvy optimisers and website owners to take a fresh look at their content and produce websites that are really pleasing and helpful to users. But the bedrock of SEO – good content and usability – will be the same for a long time to come.

SEO never has been, and never will be, an exact science and the pursuit of high rankings isn't getting any easier. So use the tools and resources at your disposal, but above all, understand and cater to your users, and give them what they really want – or perhaps didn't expect. Stand up and be counted: may the best site win. ●

WWW. *Have you had trouble getting your website to show up in the major search engines? Share your thoughts at underline forum.netmag.co.uk*

/tutorial/set up goals

Tell Google Analytics your business goals so it can measure your success

One of the most important things you can do when configuring Google Analytics is to set up goals that are relevant to your business and what you hope to accomplish with your site. It's not a necessary step, as Google Analytics will still function without doing so, but without goals you're not truly utilising its full capabilities.

Conversion goals are the ultimate way to monitor your website's success. A conversion is defined as someone who comes to your site and completes a particular action you've defined as a success metric, such as subscribing to a newsletter, filling out a request form or purchasing a product.

Below is a quick how-to process on setting up goals in Google Analytics from Jill Whalen at High Rankings. These can be done in a matter of minutes so that you can start accurately tracking the health of your website.

A goal is a page you've defined as critical to your website, which you hope people will view as they navigate your site. It could be any standard page on your website, such as your contact page, or it could be a page that's only displayed after someone has completed a particular action or process, such as the thank-you page when someone has filled out your request form.

START **Get moving** To start monitoring your conversions, you'll need to log into your Google Analytics account at www.google.com/analytics. If you haven't used Analytics before, you'll need to set up a user account and password. This takes you to the **Website Profiles** section.

2 **Access links** To the right of your profile you'll see a **View Reports** link and to the right of that an **Edit** link – click the link. You'll go to the **Profile Settings** page. In the **Conversion Goals and Funnel** section, click on the **Edit** link under **Settings** for one of the goals: in this case **G1**.

3 **Name your goal** You're now at the **Goal Settings** page, where you can name your goal, define the goal URL and create a funnel (the steps a visitor would take to arrive at the goal URL). There are many ways to define a goal, depending on your site's set-up.

4 **Copy and paste** The easiest way is to take the exact URL of your goal page, say www.highrankings.com/requestthankyou, and copy and paste it into the goal URL field. You can also simply use the relative URL of /requestthankyou as well – either will work.

5 **Exact match** Activate the drop-down menu to the right of the **Match Type** text and select **Exact Match**. This means the URL you placed in the **Goal URL** field exactly matches the URL of your site's goal page that's displayed in your visitor's browser and nothing else.

FINISH **Values** Enter a value for each goal. If your goal is lead generation you can apply some value to each time someone fills out your lead form. Define your funnel by entering the URLs for the steps a user would take to complete the process of arriving at your goal URL.