I N D E X

Matt Cutts caused quite a stir recently after responding to a question in the Google Webmaster Help discussion forums regarding press releases.

> "Note: I wouldn't expect links from press release web sites to benefit your rankings, however."

This single line response threw many SEO professionals a curveball. However, it shouldn't. Over the years the value of a press releases has changed. It's just not as effective a link building tactic as it once was in the past. However, that doesn't mean press releases themselves are without benefit.

A primary reason you should use a press release is to relay newsworthy, important information about your brand or business to a larger market. This is what they're intended for in the first place. They can help with reputation management by pushing bad information down in the search results. They also come with an added bonus — if a reporter reads your press release and decides to write an article about your brand with links, then those links will certainly hold value.

Press releases are still a viable part of a well-rounded marketing campaign when you've got something to report or something newsworthy.

As SEO experts, we follow the below practices while submitting press releases:

- The press releases should be unique and contain newsworthy information intended especially for brand reputation.
- The press release should not be stuffed with keywords.
- While linking, make sure to only add one or two links which point to the website.
- If you have the budget, make use of paid PR distribution services like PRWeb or WebWire. These services make sure your release is distributed across various authoritative news channels for maximum benefit.

2 Guidelines for Local Business Reviews Get Changed Slightly

Google has updated their Policy Guidelines on reviews for your local business, specifically in the Conflict of Interest section. They explicitly discourage you from requesting reviews from customers on site and they also state that you should not review a company that is your own or one in which you currently work. The new paragraph reads like this:

> "Conflict of interest: Reviews are only valuable when they are honest and unbiased. For instance, as a business owner or employee you should not review your own business or current place of work. Don't offer money or product to others to write reviews for your business or write negative reviews about a competitor.
>
> We also discourage specialized review stations or kiosks set up at your place of business for the sole purpose of soliciting reviews. As a reviewer, you should not accept money or product from a business to write a review about them. Additionally, don't feel compelled to review a certain way just because an employee of that business asked you to do so. Finally, don't post reviews on behalf of others or misrepresent your identity or affiliation with the place you are reviewing."

The review guidelines seem to take aim at those who leave bad reviews or good reviews without really using the company's services.

Google will rarely remove reviews, but they can if:

- **Inappropriate content**
  We want to provide a clean and positive user experience for all users. We may remove reviews that contain or link to unlawful content, or content that violates our Google Places content policy. We may also remove reviews that include plagiarism or are copied from other sites.

- **Advertising and spam**
  Nobody likes spam and it can only make the author look bad. Don't use reviews for advertising or post the same or similar reviews across multiple places. Obviously, don't post fake reviews intended to boost or lower ratings.

- **Off-topic Reviews**

  Reviews should describe your personal, first-hand experience with a specific place. Please do not post reviews based on someone else's experience, or that are not about the specific place you are reviewing. Reviews are not a forum for personal attacks, rants or crusades. Please also do not use reviews to report incorrect information about a place -- use the Report a problem link for that place instead.

When starting a new project, or taking a fresh look at an existing project, it can be difficult to know where to start. That's why we've decided to share our in-house checklist to save you the trouble of making your own and to help you avoid missing important aspects along the way.

The following steps can be used for a comprehensive review and to help generate a plan of action to fix problems on most websites. We understand each website is different, but we intentionally made this list generic, so that it can be applicable to most sites you come across.

Crawling & Indexing

Review number of indexed pages

- Use the site:domain.com search command at Google and Bing. This will typically display all indexed URLs including subdomains. Reported numbers may be inaccurate for large domains.

- Record how many URLs are reported in the index.

- It's a bad sign if the home page or other important pages with lots of links are missing. It may mean severe indexing problems or a possible penalty.

Review number of indexed pages

- Do a site:domain.com search in Google Images, record the number of indexed images.

- Do a site:domain.com search in Bing Images, record the number of indexed images.

- Review how well the images are indexed using file name and image alt text.

Review Webmaster Tools Data at both Google and Bing (if available)

- In the Diagnostics Section, review Crawl Errors, robots.txt restricted URLs, and unreachable errors.

- Download data for further review and record keeping.

- Also check Diagnostics for Malware Warnings.

- Record Pages Crawled per Day under Diagnostics > Crawl Stats for future reference. Does the crawl chart look consistent, trending up or down?

Check cached content for important pages

- How recent are the cached dates? Important and frequently updated pages should be crawled frequently.

- Are there additional links showing in the cache that aren't showing when you look at the same URL in a browser? That may be a sign of malware or that the server has been compromised.

Search for Company Name, Brand and Unique Terms in which the site "should" rank

- If the site isn't ranking its home page or specific product pages for terms that it should rank highly for, there may be a penalty or severe indexing problem.

Check 404 Error Handler

- If you request a nonsense page from the site such ashttp://www.domain.com/blablahbla does the site return a 404 Error Response Page?

- Error pages should also generate a 404 Server Header which says HTTP/1.1 404 Not Found. You can use a HTTP Server Checker to check the 404 error response from the server. If you get any other response code for a missing URL request, this problem must be corrected.

Review robots.txt file and .htaccess file (if available)

- What URLs are blocked in robots.txt? URLs blocked in robots.txt can't transfer page rank.

- What URLs should be blocked, but aren't in robots.txt?

- Is there content that is blocked in robots.txt that shouldn't be?

- Are there settings in robots.txt that can be removed? For example, blocks for content those have long since disappeared from the search engines and from the site.

- Are there 301 redirects, or other commands in the .htaccess file that can be removed? For example, 301 redirects placed there 10 years ago probably are no longer needed.

Review XML Sitemap

- If an XML sitemap is used, is it correct and kept up to date? When it was last updated?

- Are proper and reasonably accurate update frequencies used?

- Is the XML sitemap referenced in the robots.txt file?

- What methods are used to ping the engines when the sitemap is updated?

- Are Geo-Sitemaps in use?

Does the site have an indexable navigation system?

- Is JavaScript or Flash based technology used for on-site navigation links?

Check the site with a Smartphone across various platforms like Android, iPhone, BlackBerry, Tablets, etc.

- Does it redirect to another URL?

- Can you use the navigation?

Duplicate Content

Check for off-site duplicate content problems

- Search for a unique snippet of text within quotes from recent, but not brand new content – does it show up anywhere else?

- If there are copies of content, attempt to determine the source. For example, are they scrapping the site? RSS feed? Content Syndication?

Are both the www and non-www versions of the site indexed?

- Check using the site:domain.com search command.

Is there a duplicate issue with mobile content?

- If a mobile site or mobile customization occurs for mobile, does that create a duplicate content situation on site, or on a m.domain.com mobile site?

Are there 301 redirects in place to the preferred (www or non-www) canonical version?

- Check using the HTTP Server Checker to make sure the site is not using a 302 redirect.

Is the site a dynamic database driven site, or does it use tracking URLs?

- URL variables and tracking URL's can often cause content to be indexed multiple times. Take a snippet of body text from an indexed page, and then search for it using thesite:domain.com "text snippet" method to see if you can find alternate URL structures.

Check for additional Domains, subdomains, subdirectories and secure servers for duplicate content.

- Does the same content exist on different domains, subdomains, subdirectories, or secure servers (https)?

- Review Google Webmaster Tools -> Diagnostics Section-> HTML Suggestions -> Duplicate Title Tags report. Duplicate titles often indicate duplicate content pages.

- Do other domain names point to the same content on the server? This can be a severe problem, and many companies do this without realizing the possible problems it can cause. Ask if the company owns other domains, get a list of any "extra domains" and check to see what content they are pointed at and do a site: search to see if they are indexed.

Website Content

Does the home page of the site have indexable text of at least one paragraph?

- Lack of indexable text can be a severe ranking problem.

- Rough rule of thumb, if you can hit CNTL-A then CNTL-C to copy the text on the site and paste it into a text editor, that text should be what is indexable.

Does the site have over usage of important keywords within the indexable body text, image alt text, and/or links?

- Is there excessive keyword repetition?

- Does the content look "spammy"?

- Has readability been compromised for the sake of optimization?

- Would you trust the site with your credit card information, email address, or other personal details?

- Are outbound links relevant to the topic on the page?

Meta Tags

- Review Meta description tags. Does each page have a unique, well written description? Google Webmaster Tools has a report that shows pages duplicate Meta descriptions.

- Look for use of the Meta robots tag. The noindex variable should only be used on pages that indeed should not be indexed. Make sure this tag is not in use on pages that should be indexed.

Title Tags

- Does each page have a unique title tag? Google Webmaster Tools has a report that lists pages with duplicate title tags.

- Is the primary keyword phrase at the beginning or near the beginning of the title tag? This is typically a ranking boost.

- Are there any title tags over approximately 70 characters long? If so, they will not display in search results. Long title tags can also cause Google to swap out the title for a more appropriate text.

- Do the title tags appear to be spammy, or keyword stuffed? This can reduce click through rates in search results and result in lower ranking.

- Every page should have a well optimized title tag; it is still one of the most important on-page ranking factors.

Are images optimized?

- Use of keywords in file name?

- Use of keywords in img alt text?

- Do pages that are dedicated to images, like a Gallery, have appropriate title tags to help describe the image?

Text Formatting

- Are Header tags (H1, H2, etc) in use?

- Is content formatted well and easy to read?

Advertising on the Website

- How many ad blocks are in use throughout the site?

- What approximate percentage is the ad to content ratio in regards to screen real estate?

- Is over 50% of the above the fold content composed of ads? If so, that may be viewed as poor quality by Google, and impact ranking negatively.

General Usability

- Review site using New and Older Versions of Internet Explorer, Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox and check for variations and problems rendering pages and using features such as navigation.

- Check the site using a smartphone or tablet across various platforms, does it have at least minimal functionality?

- When using a smartphone, can you find the address, email contact and phone number?

- Is the site usable if you turn off JavaScript and CSS in the browser?

Are there Rich Snippets compatible with schema.org in use?

- Is the markup properly formatted? Test using Google's Structured Data Testing Tool at http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/richsnippets

Are Facebook, Twitter and Google+ buttons in use?

- Are Facebook, Twitter and Google+ Social Buttons in use? Home page only? Sitewide?

- Is the content within the tags unique on each page and formatted correctly?

- When a URL is "liked" on the site, does the presentation on the person's wall look correct?

- Are the same Open Graph tags used site wide, or do they correctly reference each page uniquely?

- Are Facebook and Google+ Social Buttons in use? Home page only? Sitewide?

- Is the Like button properly referencing the URL where the Like Button is at? Or do they have all the Like Buttons referencing the home page, or their Facebook page?

Canonical Issues

- Is the rel=canonical tag in use on the site? If so, is it being used correctly?

- Does the internal linking structure agree with your canonical version of the site that is preferred? Otherwise, if you prefer to use http://www.domain.com/ instead of domain.com, do the links within the site use the www for example http://www.domain.com/

Are iframes or frames in use?

- Both iframes and regular frames are bad for ranking. Check to make sure the use of these methods are limited and not used to show any major portions of content. Iframe tags are quite common, such as the Facebook Like button, but should be avoided for content that needs to be indexed.

Is JavaScript used to generate content, or used excessively?

- Search engines typically have a problem reading JavaScript and in general, you should not expect JavaScript generated content to be indexed, or usable by a search engine.

- JavaScript navigation can make a site hard or impossible to be spidered by search engines.

Site Architecture

Navigation

- How many links are there in the main navigation?

- Are there over 100 links on upper level pages? Over 100 might be getting excessive and may be spreading available Link Juice too thin.

Link Anchor Text Structure

- Does the site utilize reasonable keywords in internal link anchor text? For example, links to product and category pages linked to using appropriate keywords?

- Excessive repetition of primary keyword in navigation structure (header OR footer) can trigger a penalty or reduced ranking.

Search Engine Friendly URLs

- Does the site utilize excessive URL parameters and/or session IDs? These can cause crawling and duplicate content problems.

- Shorter URLs are better for usability and are easier to link to.

- Descriptive URLs can aid in ranking and increase click through rates.

Local Search

Does the business have an Owner Verified Google Place Page?

- Is there more than one Place Page Listing for the business?

- Who is in control of the account via the listed email address?

Do Address & Phone Number on the Google Place Page and Web site match exactly?

- This is a factor in Local Search for Google.

Does the Web Site Title Tag contain the City and State?

- Use of the City and State can benefit Geo Targeted Search ranking.

Are City and State, and/or other location related Keywords in use within Hx tags and Body Text?

- Use of the City and State as keywords can improve Local Search Ranking.

Does the site make use of a KML File? Is it verified in Google's Webmaster Tools?

- KML Location files are recommended to assist Local Search Ranking.

General

Form Testing

- Test all forms to make sure they are functioning correctly. Verify form reply messages are correct and verify form data is sent to the appropriate people.

- Also test email contact addresses that are listed on site.

We know that checking all these things manually and noting the issues down can be an overwhelming task for you. To save you from this hassle, we have this process integrated into our Agency Platform. When you subscribe to Agency Platform, you will be able to generate professional SEO Audit reports with more than 90% of the strategies covered from the above checklist plus some awesome features. The best thing is, you can generate Unlimited SEO Audit Reports for FREE !!

You can take a quick look at our sample Professional SEO Audit Report by downloading it from here.

Bryson Meunier, from Resolution Media, posted an update on his personal blog about the correlation between mobile content and ranking on Google.

The study came out with three findings:

1. Having mobile optimized and rendered content is still highly correlated with getting organic traffic from Google. The study showed that 89% of the sites in the study that rank, all have either mobile URLs, dynamic serving, responsive web design, or some hybrid. But 89% of the sites that rank well, have some form of mobile rendered web site available to mobile users.

2. Switchboard tags have not been widely adopted by webmasters in this study. In fact, according to this study, only 4% of enterprise sites use them. Switchboard tags are basically like canonical tags but for mobile. Read this article to know more about the Switchboard tags.

3. The number of dynamic serving and responsive design web sites have increased year-over-year compared to sites using mobile only URLs. However, still, the majority of the sites in this study use mobile URLs, 67% do. 11% use dynamic serving methods and only 4% use responsive design. Here is the break-down:

So, what do the above statistics actually mean for your "small" business website?

The answer is - If your business mostly depends on attracting new customers through "Search", it's high time to take mobile SEO seriously. This is very obvious if you cater to local visitors, since mobile search results are typically tailored to the user's current location.

When your visitors spend more time on their mobile, it becomes critical for your business to incorporate SEO practices to your mobile strategy. Creating, and most importantly "Optimizing", your mobile site will make sure that your mobile site is easily detected by search engines and found by your customers.

Worried? We can help you!

We have developed our own platform to design and develop mobile sites. Integrated completely within our SEO Dashboard, we offer a wide range of features for your mobile website like:

- User Friendly Mobile Website Design and Development
- QR Codes and Tracking with Scan Analytics
- Professional Grade Website Analytics
- Social Media Sharing
- Mapping & GPS
- Dashboard Management
- Click-To-Call, Click-To-SMS and Click-To-Email

Below are few examples of mobile sites we have created:
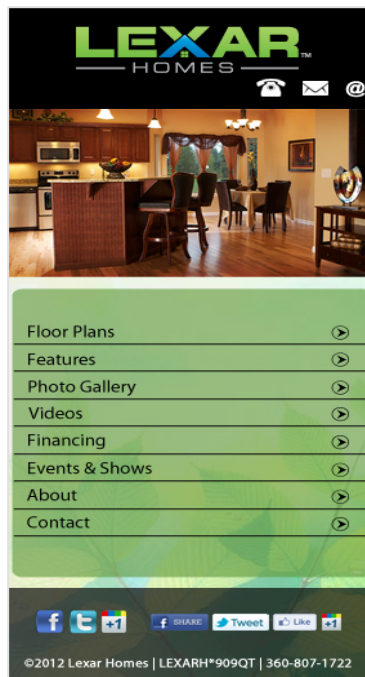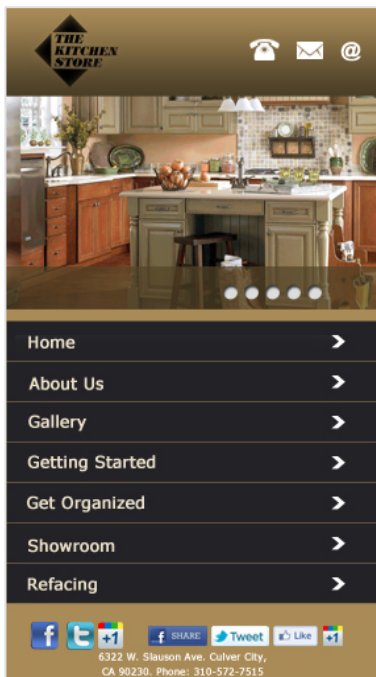
Apart from creation, we also help you to optimize the mobile site which will ensure that your site ranks higher in mobile search results.

For any inquiries or questions concerning this service, please contact us directly via the Agency Platform SEO Dashboard.

2012 has been an interesting year for SEO. It's been more than a full-time job trying to keep up with all of the algorithm changes. Google wants to lower the number of people manipulating its algorithm and also improve search results and quality for the end user.

Moving forward, let's take a look at some SEO Predictions that may drive your SEO marketing efforts this year:

1. **Guest Blogging With Quality and Relevancy in Mind** –
   Matt Cutts released a video mentioning how guest blogging can be a good method for acquiring quality links. However, Matt Cutts created another video about spammy guest blogging and how Google will take action against it.

   From an SEO point of view, the point of guest posting is that it is a viable way to get not only high-quality content for your own site audience but as a tactic you can use to push out your own content and achieve niche-related do-follow links.

   Check out our tips below before you decide to go ahead with Guest Blogging:

   - Do not involve yourself with guest blogs that have low quality content or spun content since it is a pretty bad indicator of quality.

   - Because of its easy nature, Guest blogging is getting manipulated by spammers.

   - Guest blogging and getting links from such spammy blogs can, in fact, hurt your sites reputation.

   - As the site owner or as the person who's trying to get links, you have to think about the quality of the links, the quality of the content, the amount of work that is put into it, and essentially whether users are going to be happy if they land on that page.

     ▪ Get links from such blogs only if they provide value to the users through high quality unique content.

2. **Google AuthorRank Might Influence Rankings:**
We've covered the importance of AuthorRank and optimization in 2012. We believe that AuthorRank will really come into its own in 2013. The importance of keeping your blog or article content ranking competitively may come down to whether you've established yourself as the linked to and recognized author of that content. If you haven't, don't expect to get the full algorithmic boost from that content.

3. **Google+ Will be Huge In 2013:**
Google+ is the social spine by which Google has built their entire future. Not only does the system have 100+ million active users as of 12/1, but it's projected to TRIPLE that in 2013. Google has also quietly expanded their third-party API functionality with the goal being to provide users substantially more ways to manage, track and promote their circles than ever before.

It intends to make a company's Google Plus pages the hub for everything it does or ever hopes to do online. In addition to the social sharing features consider what Google already has planned for local businesses on Plus:

- Business listing management (what we're used to doing in Google Places)
- Statistics dashboard (hopefully, with full Google Analytics integration)
- Deals and coupons (mobile coupons are already a reality)
- Contests & Games (via recently-purchased Wildfire)
- Events (including Google Calendar integration - invites, RSVPs, etc. which has already begun)
- Offline buyer loyalty reward program (Punchd)
- PPC Ads (AdWords Express)
- Integrated online payment system (Google Wallet)
- Post-purchase product delivery from local stores to buyers
- Customer service (via Video Chat, TalkBin SMS, Circles, HangOuts)
- Reviews (already integrated)

4. **Mobile SEO Will Take Off:** Make sure to read our previous newsletters in which we have covered the importance of Mobile SEO. If you don't have your site optimized for mobile users, you are missing a HUGE portion of traffic.

Mobile adoption is growing quickly and expectations of mobile sites are also rising. If your business mostly depends on attracting new customers through "Search", it's time to take mobile SEO in a serious manner.

Bing announced via their blog that they will now be sending out Crawl Error Alerts within Bing Webmaster Tools. The alerts will include an error type and a description with the number of times that Bing has encountered it. The complete list of the errors that Bing will be reporting can be seen here.

All of your alerts can be found within your Bing Message Center. Make sure you're not missing those alerts by setting up your email preferences.

Doing so is easy! Just click "Profile" – which is located at the top of any page within your Webmaster Tools account. You should see a pop-up window. After confirming that you'd like to receive emails from Bing, you can decide what types of alerts you'd like to be notified about and select the frequency. That's it!

Contact Us

Doug Dvorak – CEO & Founder

SEO Solutions

847.359.6969