

## It's Called Search Engine "Optimization" for a Reason...

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I often find it amazing how prevalent the term "SEO" has become, even amongst those who barely know what HTML stands for in the first place. I don't mean that as an insult to newcomers or non-tech-types who are interested in putting their info on the internet, but it does bring to mind the old saying "first things first."

Perhaps the problem lies with the multi-million dollar price tags of web properties like MySpace, Skype, and YouTube—they seem to set the example that if your site gets tons of traffic, then the dollars will come rolling in, no matter what you're selling. However, for the 99.5% of the businesses on the internet that aren't Twitter or Facebook, getting traffic (and, by extension, being on the top of the search engines) isn't as important as developing a robust website in the first place.

In fact, it seems that far too many novice (and even not-so-novice) website creators forget that without a solid foundation of content, there's nothing to "optimize." After all, successful search engine optimization really isn't a trick, despite what some might claim. Gone are the days when overloading a page with keywords on a black background would get results (now, these ill-advised tricks are more likely to get you banned from the search engines altogether). Instead, the search engines of today are constantly evolving to eliminate the irrelevant and highlight the valuable. And, that's bad news for those looking for shortcuts.

On the other hand, it's nice to know that you've got Google (and others) on your side if you're committed to producing a quality, content-driven website. A case in point is Wikipedia. With thousands of contributors and an unbelievable amount of content on a seemingly endless variety of topics, it's no wonder that Wikipedia garners so many top ranking results on Google.

Now, don't let what I've written here lead you to believe that I think that SEO is worthless or unnecessary—that couldn't be further from the truth. That said, if you're starting a new website or if you're looking for a way to improve the performance of your current website, start at the most fundamental level, *the content*. Write articles that are relevant to your site's focus. If possible, integrate a message board or a blog with a comment section into your site. That way, you'll have other people generating content for you. What ever you do, make it relevant, make it original (copying from other sites can get you penalized with the search engines as well), and generate as much of it as you can. Because, without content, the search engines don't have a reason to index your site.

If, once you've gotten the content in place, your site still isn't performing up to your expectations, then you may need to look at optimizing your content or building your site's link popularity. However, chances are that the time you spend improving your site's fundamentals will reap the biggest long term benefits. After all, improving your site for your visitors is nearly always one and the same as improving your site for the search engines.