

SEO 360: The Essentials of Search Engine Optimization

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INTRODUCTION

Effective Search Engine Optimization is not a highly technical or complex task, if you get the basics right:

- ▶ Invest in relevant, quality content
- ▶ Follow best practices in optimizing the content
- ▶ Update your site frequently with relevant content
- ▶ Leverage social media and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) efforts
- ▶ Manage the entire process with analytics, refining and improving the process based on results

We call it SEO 360⁰; whatever you call it, it is likely to be your lowest-cost, highest-quality site traffic.

Strong organic web traffic comes from great, well-optimized content so search engines and travelers can easily find and understand it. This whitepaper focuses on the essential best practices.

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Figure 1. Strong organic traffic (from search engine referrals) underpins the reach and audience of most travel and tourism websites

A. The Importance of Search Engine Traffic

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of making your website and its content highly visible to search engines, ranking well in relevant searches, and boosting organic traffic to your

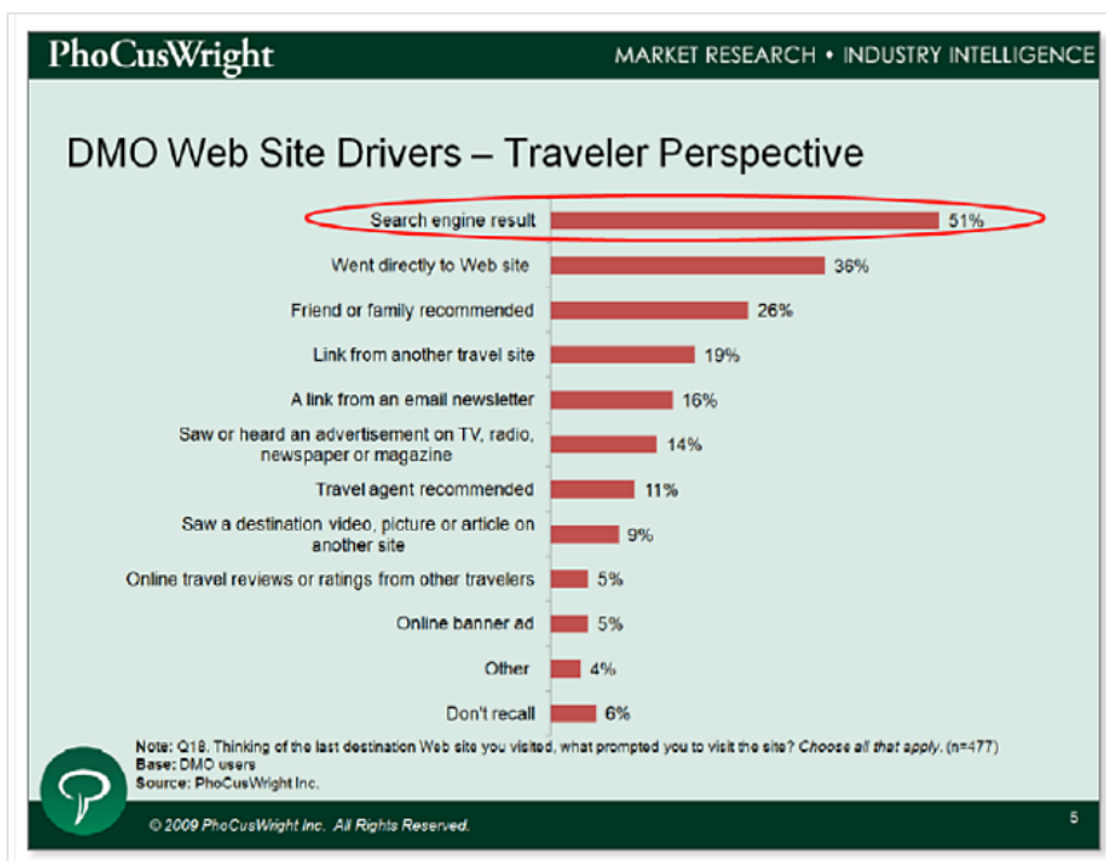


Figure 2. Search engine traffic dominates the way in which travelers find destination (and other tourism) web sites.

web site that is coming from search engines. SEO is a critical part of building a robust and sustainable source of visitors to your website and content about you. It is particularly important for smaller tourism businesses or destination marketing organizations without a large marketing and advertising budget. For most tourism-related organizations, search engines are the most important way in which consumers find you online. A major study by PhocusWright (2008-09), into the role and impact of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) concluded that over half of all consumers found a destination website using search engines. This importance of organic search traffic typically applies to tourism organizations of all types.

Organic search engine traffic is often your lowest cost, highest quality source of traffic. SEO programs do not require large marketing budgets, but they do need ongoing attention and maintenance.

B. The essential six building blocks of SEO

A wide range of factors influence search engine traffic. Indeed, Google search engine rankings are determined by more than 150 algorithms and variables. However, at its core, SEO is simple and straightforward: Invest in compelling and relevant content and information, and make it visible to both people and search engines.

Based on this core objective, strong organic search traffic and high search engine rankings are driven by attention to the following six primary areas:

1. **Content is King** – Investment in deep, rich and relevant content, including editorial, photos, video, user-generated content and more.
2. **New Content** – Content that is fresh, constantly changing and being updated.
3. **Optimized Content** – Ensure that the content is optimized following best practice guidelines in Title and Meta Tags to make them easy for a search engine to understand.
4. **Social Media** – Share, seed, facilitate, engage and link on social media platforms to relevant content on your site and to others.
5. **Navigation** – Ensure you have an easy-to-use website (for both people and search engines) that includes a search-engine-friendly (XML) site map, which makes the content simple for search engines to review.
6. **Quality Links** – Build inbound links from active and relevant websites, especially travel, social media and “authoritative” organizations (i.e.-city and state governments, community sites, etc.).

Get these basically right and you will have a successful SEO program with strong results.

While optimizing content to relevant guidelines is important, this is just one of a number of factors and these guidelines are exactly that—guidelines.

As Jill Whalen, noted SEO blogger and consultant highlighted, “One of the biggest mistakes people make when thinking about SEO is that they believe there are certain hard and fast rules and if you don’t follow them you will either get penalized or never see high rankings. Let me be the first to tell you that there are no real rules. No formulas.”

Don’t over invest in “SEO Agencies” who promise unique expertise and even special “tricks” in optimizing content and improving your rankings. Follow the essential steps in this white paper, get the SEO essentials right (optimizing your content) and focus your marketing dollars on creating and updating great content and in other areas of online marketing activities.

C. Why SEO 360°?

SEO 360° describes two critical characteristics of successful SEO. First, it is an integrated process in which SEO is undertaken as part of a coordinated online marketing plan. Search Engine Marketing (SEM) and Social Media Marketing, in particular, can offer tremendous insights and value to SEO, so your SEO activities should be undertaken in parallel with these and other online marketing efforts.

Second, it highlights the importance of a continuous improvement in your SEO activities. SEO is not a project or a periodic investment; it is an ongoing process. As new content is added to site, and as part of your ongoing social media activities, you should be continually optimizing this content and reviewing the results of SEO efforts to date. With the use of powerful (and free) analytics tools you can assess which content is ranking and which is not, along with which keywords are driving traffic and conversions on your site. Review and refine your SEO efforts based on key metrics, such as targeting new keywords, updating Title and Meta Tags, and seeking additional third-party links. This continuous feedback loop is an essential part of SEO 360°.

D. The six building blocks of SEO explained

1. Content is King

Investing in great content should underpin all your SEO efforts. Search engines are specifically designed to find, describe and rank relevant, engaging content. Therefore, your SEO efforts simply facilitate this process. In recent years, search engines have become increasingly sophisticated at finding relevant information and discounting content that may lack depth or value, hence no amount of SEO work can make up for a lack of relevant content. Invest in content that is compelling and targeted, and that meets the needs of travelers. Then employ smart SEO best practices to make it visible to search engines.

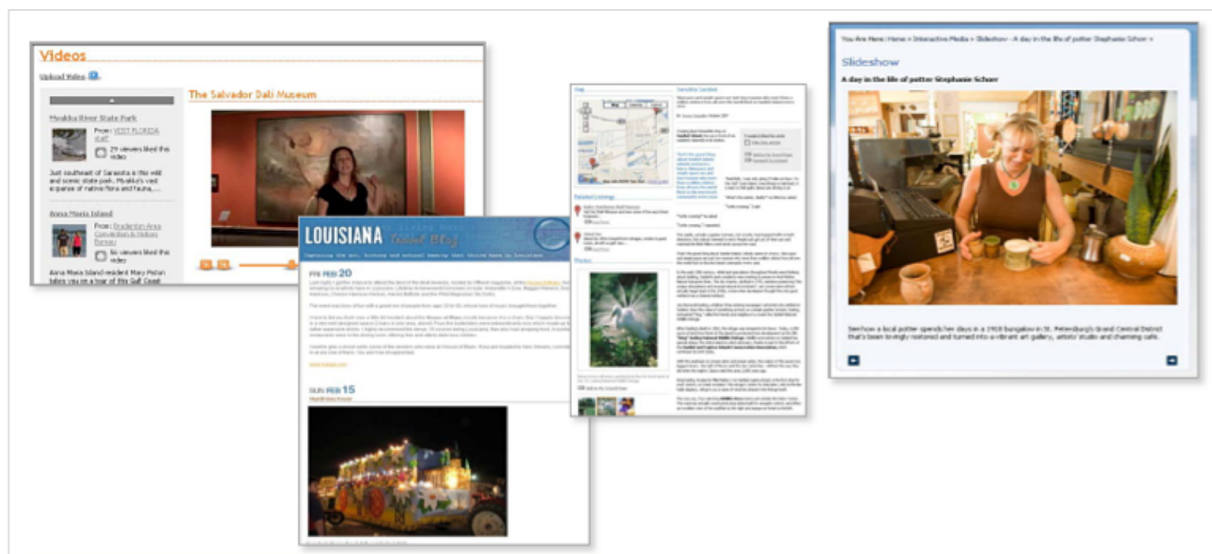


Figure 3. Invest in rich, compelling and constantly updated content as the foundation of your SEO.

2. New Content

Search engines love the new and the different. When search engine bots or spiders visit your site and find new, updated or changed content, this reinforces the importance and relevance of your site. Ensure that you have a content plan that adds content throughout the year and that updates existing content. Encouraging user-generated content or leveraging your social media activities (e.g. adding a blog or your Twitter feed, etc.) can be a great way to add new content, as well as relevant and engaging information to your site.

3. Optimized Content

By following some relatively simple guidelines, your content can be optimized so that it can be more easily found by search engines. This process involves researching and then “tagging” your content with relevant title and meta tags so that search engines understand its subject and the information it offers. These optimization steps should be part of all of your website activities and content development:

- a. **Integrate SEO from the Start** – SEO is best applied throughout your website and content development process. This includes using the keyword research process outlined below as part of your decisions on content development. Organic keyword research can identify popular content that travelers are seeking and suggest terms/phrases and keywords that they typically search against. Use these keywords in headings, subheadings and body copy.
- b. **Do Keyword Research** – Develop a resource set of keyword research documents for your site and content development process. This research set acts as an important resource during the content development, loading, and final SEO editing process. This includes:
 - ▶ **Keyword Lists of Relevant Search Terms** – This list of relevant search terms is created as a resource (or “vocabulary”) for SEO efforts. The terms should relate to content that you have developed (relevance) and be keywords that are both popular and not highly competitive (keyword efficiency). Keyword research tools include Google’s keyword research tool, Keyword Discovery and (as available) the results of SEM campaigns.
 - ▶ **Target Keyword List** – From this wider keyword list it is then appropriate to define a more targeted list of 20-100 keywords and phrases that are particularly important in your SEO work (the specific number depends on the depth of your content and the results of your research process). It is these target keywords that you should track and monitor progress against.
 - ▶ **Keyword Ranking Report** – Run these keywords through a keyword ranking tool to determine the current “baseline” ranking of your website against each of these search terms. Changes in this ranking report will act as important indicators of the impact of your SEO efforts.
- c. **Optimize Title Tags** – The title tag (which appears in the extreme top border of a web browser) is one of the most important elements in SEO and is significantly more important than meta keywords in the ranking assigned by

search engines. You should develop and add title tags that are specific, relevant and consistent to the content of each major page on the site. The most important words or phrases will appear at the beginning of the title tag, with a target total of approximately 9 to 11 words (60-70 characters or less). These words should be orientated to the words and phrases that end users will type into search engines and will typically exclude marketing terms or destination names that are not commonly used by travelers.

- d. **Optimize Headings, Subheadings and Visible Text** – The quality and quantity of visible text and related information on each page is also used by search engines to assess the relevance and importance of a site, and assess its consistency with the title tags and other SEO elements. MILES places great emphasis on quality editorial that benefits consumers with relevant in-depth information, and has the added benefit of maximizing search engine rankings. Each editorial article loaded by MILES will receive individual, personalized attention to ensure the SEO elements are optimized to match the topic and keywords/phrases of the story.
- e. **Make Images/Pictures Search Engine Friendly** – All pictures and graphic elements on a site should include alt tags. Relevant alt tags on images, which appear in some browsers when you “mouse over” the image, allow search engines to spider and categorize this type of graphic content, reinforcing the depth of relevant content on each page. alt tags should typically be 3 to 5 words that are specific and descriptive of the image. Given their short, directive style, it is usually best to separate captions, which may be longer and less appropriate for use by search engines.
- f. **Optimize Meta Descriptions** – Meta descriptions are used by many search engines as the description that appears in the search results. Google can also use your meta description or may create its own based on the content it finds on a page. Hence, your meta descriptions should be action oriented, promoting the user to click. They should be simple but compelling, written in plain, easy-to-read English. Usual target: 10-20 words and typically no more than 25 (150 characters).
- g. **Think about Meta Keywords** – Because of their abuse by many, most major search engines now place little value in these SEO elements. Google has publicly announced it no longer considers meta keywords in ranking a page. Hence, typical expert advice is that meta keywords should be present but you should focus your efforts first on other, more important SEO elements. Develop a simple set of keywords that you can quickly draw from to customize the content on each page: select a few relevant (3 to 5) keywords that describe the content on that page and then move on to other higher priorities.
- h. **Maintain a Smart Balance** – In all cases SEO needs to be balanced against the principles of good design and what works best for the end user. You and your

web development team should aim for a smart balance between strong design, an easy-to-use site and one that is optimized for search engines.

4. Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing is becoming an increasingly important part of any online marketing program. In addition to engaging with current and potential customers, social media marketing also offers significant SEO benefits. First, encourage the sharing of your content from your website by adding simple “Sharing” functionality. Free tools such as “Share This” allow users to post engaging content to their Facebook, Twitter, Digg or other social media accounts. Include links in posts or tweets on your own social media marketing sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter) back to your site. But, also links to other useful sites in the reciprocal spirit of social media. Use tracking codes in your links so you can track all referral traffic from social media and, if you use shortened urls (e.g. bit.ly or Tiny URL, etc.), make sure it is a 301 redirect so that search engines can find and rank the final content on your site.

5. Navigation

- a. **Search-Engine Friendly Navigation** – Search engines assess and categorize sites by sending out automated programs to “spider” the site, following links visible to them on each page to review content. To make this process easier the major search engines have collaborated on an open standard for XML site maps/“search engine friendly” site maps that make it easier for search engine bots and spiders to find and then review all the content on a site. Ensure you add an XML site map to your site and that it complies with this Open Standard (0.90) supported by Google, Yahoo and Bing. XML site maps should ideally be linked to your Content Management System (CMS) so that as you update or edit content your XML site map is automatically updated. Free or low-cost tools are available to develop an XML site map appropriate to your site, but check that these are compliant with the Open Standard. More information is available at: www.sitemaps.org.
- b. **Webmaster Tools** – Once you have optimized content and set up an XML site map you can access Google and Yahoo Webmaster tools to submit and review your SEO activities. These tools are free to use and offer invaluable information for optimizing your site (<https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools>). Getting access to these tools involves adding a simple piece of code to your site to verify that you are the owner. Once this is complete you can log in and submit your XML site map to Google and Yahoo plus check their search engine results for any issues or problems like crawl errors including duplicate and missing title tags, meta descriptions, etc.

6. Quality Links

The number and quality of inbound links is one of the most important factors in determining your search engine ranking. Indeed over the last few years, inbound link quality and the anchor text appearing with these third party links have grown significantly in importance. Many experts now consider this to be the single most

important factor driving high rankings in the major search engines. In this regard, search engine ranking is a popularity contest. The number of relevant and active/content-rich sites linking to your site helps determine your site's importance to a search engine. The quality of links trumps quantity; so less can be more in your linking strategy.

First, develop a linking policy that describes to and from whom you will seek and offer links. Consider what value such links will offer the end user. Develop a simple "Link to Us" page containing information, code and graphics for those wishing to add a link to your site. Review your existing marketing, media, and other business relationships for easy opportunities for you to ask for a reciprocal link. Finally, develop a linking strategy that will identify other opportunities for inbound links and actively follow up and manage these opportunities as part of your ongoing online marketing activities.

E. What's next?

Search is undergoing a fundamental shift with new and sophisticated technologies allowing search results to be even more personalized and contextual based on the user's behavior, their online connections and even their location. This is called "semantic search," and the emergence of analytics-driven marketing, behavioral targeting, social media and mobile are all underpinning this change.

However, a more fundamental shift is also underway. While the last decade was the decade of search, the coming decade will likely see less importance in search behavior as a primary driver of online interactions. Targeted, personalized content proactively delivered online, increasingly via mobile platforms, will make search less critical and less frequent, with content being suggested and targeted. This process raises technology, marketing and privacy challenges, but it is a paradigm shift that is already underway.

For more, see the blog article from ReadWriteWeb:

http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/4_tech_trends_you_must_understand_to_be_an_efficient.php

F. The essential SEO tool kit

There are dozens of useful tools, software programs and sites that can be valuable in your SEO program. As a starting point, here are seven essential and free tools for your SEO efforts:

1. **Robust Analytics** – e.g. Google Analytics: www.google.com/analytics
2. **Keyword Research Tool** – e.g. Google Keyword Tool
<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>
3. **XML Site Map** – <http://sitemaps.org>
4. **Google Webmaster Tools** – www.google.com/webmaster

5. **Yahoo (Explorer) Webmaster tools:**
<http://help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/smallbusiness/store/promote/sitemap/sitemap-16.html>
6. **Page Rank Tool:** <http://www.google.com/toolbar>
7. **Quantcast Audience and Affinity Information:** www.quantcast.com
8. **One or more SEO blog & community site(s) to review the latest debates, trends or issues in SEO** – e.g. SEOMoz – www.seomoz.org

APPENDIX – ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- ▶ *Top 15 Most Popular SEO Sites.* SEO sites as ranked by traffic. These sites offer advice, tools, tips, user suggestions and other SEO resources: <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/seo-websites>
- ▶ *Destination Marketing Organizations – Role and Relevance*, 2008-09, Study by PhocusWright.
- ▶ *SEO Top Ranking Factors for 2009-2010*, SEOMoz, June 2009. <http://www.seomoz.org/article/search-ranking-factors>
- ▶ [What's Next] *4 Tech trends you must understand to be an effective marketer.* ReadWriteWeb: http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/4_tech_trends_you_must_understand_to_be_an_effecti.php