

YOUR GO-TO SEO CHECKLIST



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If it seems like new information about search engine optimization (SEO) is coming out all the time, it's for good reason. The methods search engines use to evaluate and rank websites change constantly; just when you think you have it down, something new comes along. For this reason, SEO should be thought of as a process rather than something to be done and forgotten about.

In addition, search engines become smarter every day, and some of the techniques that worked yesterday are no longer valid. Some of these techniques fall into the “black hat” category; they trick search engines into ranking the site higher while providing no value to the reader. As search algorithms develop, websites using these questionable methods are punished by being ranked lower and appearing farther down in search results.

It is better instead to use “white hat” methods to ensure your website is up-to-date, fresh, and providing real value to viewers. As we prepare our businesses for the all-important fourth quarter, add optimizing your website to your to-do list. Here is a checklist to help you make sure your website is presented to as many potential customers as possible in time for the busy selling season.

1) Are you mobile friendly?

We reached the point a few years ago at which Internet usage using mobile devices exceeded that of laptop or desktop devices. According to Google, 94 percent of people

who have smartphones use them to search for local information, and 77 percent of those searches occur at home or work—places where desktop devices are likely available.

A website that is not mobile friendly, requiring a user to pinch and zoom to read it, or that has awkward navigation, will cause user frustration and lead them to move on quickly. This is such an important issue that Google now looks at mobile versions of websites exclusively when evaluating them for search results.

To give your mobile site a checkup, start with Google's evaluation tools. Go to search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly and enter your website address to see how you measure up.

2) Is your website descriptive?

Search engines can be thought of as the card catalogs of the internet. They look through websites and examine them to find out what they are about and then categorize them. Just as a book's title should give the reader an idea of what is inside, the titles on a website need to say what the page is about. These descriptions are found in the title tags of the website's coding and are what show up in the title on a browser tab and in search results. To be useful, they need to be descriptive and concise. Avoid generic titles like “Home,” and instead use something like “Jay's Framing in Columbia.”

Don't try to put too much information in the titles, ei-

ther; simply describe what the page is, such as “The Framing Studio: Location and Hours.” Stay away from jargon. Instead, consider the terms a customer would use in a search. For instance, a customer is much more likely to search for “comic book framing” than “ephemera framing.”

3) Are your images descriptive?

It’s easy to forget that search engines also look at images. They’re not quite smart enough to look at a photo and know what it is (yet!); that’s what the file name is for. Consider the file name “photo28973_af.jpg.” That name tells no one what is in the picture. However, “shadowbox_jersey_baseball.jpg” gives you, and search engines, a very good idea what is in the picture. Notice that the most important information—the term a customer is likely to search for—is at the beginning of the name.

Another detail to look for is the alt text for each image. This is code on the website which will describe the photo if it will not show up in the browser for any reason, and will provide a description for a visually impaired person using a screen reader. Make sure it accurately explains the picture and, when possible, includes the SEO keyword for that page. As an example, on a page about shadowboxes, be sure the description includes the word “shadowbox.”

4) Is your website up to date?

All search engines reward novelty; they know an out-of-date website is very unlikely to provide much value to a reader. If nothing else, they want to know you’re alive and in business. It might seem that once a website is done and published, there is not much more to do. So, what to change? A few easy changes include:

- Special store hours, especially around the holidays
- New framing projects
- Special in-store events
- Coupons or other offers
- New products
- Holiday or seasonal themes

Activity and change on a website lets a search engine know that new, useful information is likely available, and it will present that website over an outdated site.

5) Are you letting search engines know?

Search engines regularly check websites to evaluate and categorize them in a process known as indexing. When changes are made to a website, search engines will eventually make note of them, but that process is unpredict-

able and it may take weeks before any improvements are noticed.

For this reason, it is helpful to submit your site to the various search engines to draw attention to it sooner rather than later. The easiest way to do this is to simply do a search on “submit website to Google (and Yahoo and Bing),” and follow the link provided by each engine.

Have you claimed your listings?

Search engines do not look only at a website when evaluating it. Links to it (inbound links) from quality and popular websites indicate that it has value and is useful. For this reason, it is important to keep an eye on your digital footprint by checking sites such as Yelp, Google business listings, Yahoo, local directories, and even digital Yellow Pages.

Anywhere it is possible, claim your business listing and make sure all the information—especially your website—is correct. The more places your website is listed, the more traffic and the better your site will rank. Like your website, these listings should be kept up to date. Many of these sites will allow you to upload photos of your store and your work and post special hours. Again, activity attracts attention.

You may have noticed that nowhere in this article was the phrase “one weird trick” mentioned. There is so much magic one-step trick to achieve real, sustained search engine optimization. Such gimmicks, which often make their rounds on the Internet, may lead to a temporary boost in your website traffic, but search engines will quickly catch on and not only will your website drop in listings, but it also might be punished by being pushed off the first page of results—an Internet death sentence.

The good news? Better methods of achieving SEO, such as the ones touched on here, are all relatively easy. This process only requires your time and attention to detail; two things framing retailers are already used to dedicating to their businesses. Carving out some time in your schedule to work on your website’s SEO will ensure your business is front and center when potential customers search for framing services in your area. **PFM**



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