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A Conceptual Geography of Search Engine Optimisation by Trevor Southwold

Article published on January 19th 2012 | Seo

Search engine optimisation (SEO) can be confusing. So many different terms and concepts exist in the world of SEO that it can be difficult for a beginner to know where to start. For the purposes of this article, SEO will be taken to refer to a collection of processes and techniques that improve the organic search engine results page (SERP) rankings for a given web site; by contrast, pay-per-click (PPC) search engine advertising bypasses the organic search results and forces your advert to the top of the page, regardless of its relevance or value.

Web search engines are as good a starting point as any. Understanding how search engines work is crucial to understanding how they can be manipulated. Although the algorithms that construct search engine results pages are incredibly complex, one feature stands out in importance above the rest: backlink-driven relevance.

In extremely basic terms, search engines are interested in two qualities of a given web page or site when they are determining where it should rank in their results pages: value and relevance. Value refers to the general level of quality of a web page or site, while relevance refers to the relevance of that site to the key terms entered by a search user.

Value is significant, difficult to accrue and mysterious - many professionals spend their entire careers trying to unravel the factors used by search engines to determine value. Some good examples of web sites with high value are newspaper web sites and government web sites - forgetting about relevance for a moment, these high value sites have a headstart when it comes to ranking for any and all key terms. Value can be passed from one web site to another through links, but more on that later.

Relevance is a little easier to pin down. Like value, it can be passed through links, but the text used in a link is vital in determining how relevance is awarded: if a web site links to your report with the word "here", you will only gain relevance when users enter the word "here" into search engines. On the other hand, if the web site links to your report with the word "report", you will gain relevance when users enter the word "report" into search engines - a much more significant gain because search users who enter "report" may well be interested in yours, while those who enter "here" are statistically far less likely to be. It is not just a matter of visibility or raw traffic, it is a matter of click through rates and ultimately conversion rates.

Links are the currency of the web and their importance to search engine optimisation can hardly be overstated. Just like relationships between individuals influence the authority those people are perceived to have, relationships between web sites influence the authority those sites are perceived to have. If you receive numerous links from illicit pharmaceutical web sites, your site will be associated with them and may suffer reduced performance - but if you receive numerous links from newspaper sites, your site will be associated with them and will probably experience ranking gains.

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Article Keywords:
backlink building

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