

The question most often asked when a client is interested in a new website is “How do we increase our search engine ranking?” Everyone knows that search engines are the easiest way users find your website, and clients are right to be concerned about their search engine ranking. Search engines are changing their algorithms all the time, to provide users with better, more relevant results, so gaming the search engine system is no longer a viable solution to increased search engine rankings. But by following the fundamentals of good web design, you can go a long way towards making your website more search engine friendly, and increase your search engine ranking.

SAMPLE KEYWORD AND DESCRIPTION METATAGS

```
<meta name="keywords" content="Volledge, search engine, optimization, search engine optimization, seo, web design, marketing, communications, branding, Madison, WI, Voltage, white paper, section 508, w3c, flash, compliance" />
```

```
<meta name="description" content="Hints and tips for search engine optimization." />
```

EXAMPLE OF OPTIMIZED AND UNOPTIMIZED CODE IN HTML AND CSS

Unoptimized Font Style:

```
<p><font color="#FF0000" size="3" face="Arial, Helvetica, Sans-serif">Here is some red text</font></p>
```

Optimized Font Style:

```
<p class="redText">Here is some red text</p>
```

Unoptimized Image Positioning:

```
<table width="700" border="0" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0"> <tr><td></td></tr></table>
```

Optimized Image Positioning:

```

```

METATAGS

Metatags are still important in search engine optimization. The two most important metatags are the description and keyword tags. There are a few rules to keep in mind when using these tags.

The Keywords Metatag

The Keywords Metatag contains a list of keywords and phrases you think users will use to search for your website. This list should be anywhere between 15 and 20 words and phrases which are found in the content of your web page. If the keywords and phrases that you use aren't found in the body of your web page, they will be meaningless to the search engines.

The Description Metatag

The Description Metatag contains a short, one or two sentence description about your page. This is the description that shows up underneath the link to your website in the search engine results. The description should reflect the content on your page and should contain some of the keywords found in your Keywords Metatag.

CLEAN CODE

Another important factor in search engine optimization is the HTML code behind your website. In the pursuit of more relevant search results, the search engines are looking for pages with a lot of content and little HTML, or a high content to code ratio. To achieve this, the web designer needs to spend time optimizing the HTML behind a website, taking out unnecessary code, and re-writing the code to be smaller and more efficient. The best way to do this is to move from an HTML- to a CSS-based design.

A CSS-based design lets the web designer move most of the code involved in color, font, and layout to a separate file, not read by the search engines. For example, to set the font and color of an element on a website, you would need to use a font tag to define the size, color, and font face inside of your HTML file; but in CSS, you can move that code out of your web page, into a separate file.



CHECK YOUR WEBSITE FOR COMPLIANCE

www.w3c.org

Check your site for compliance with the latest HTML and CSS standards.

www.cynthiasays.com

Check your site for Section 508 compliance.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lynx_web_browser

For information on the Lynx web browser, and links to download.

The class, redText, is defined in a separate file. Along with optimizing your HTML for the search engines, this also allows for easy updates to the design of your website, since you only have to update one file to update your design, rather than updating every file on your site.

The layout of a website is another design aspect that can be moved outside of the HTML and into a separate CSS file. In the past, the positioning of design elements on a website was typically accomplished using HTML table elements. Now, by using CSS positioning, not only is the amount of HTML used in the website drastically reduced; the flexibility of CSS-based design allows for more control over the layout of a website, and better overall design.

Again, by moving from an HTML- to a CSS-based layout, updates to the design can be accomplished by updating one CSS file and not every HTML file in the site.

CODE COMPLIANCE

Making a website compliant with current standards can go a long way towards helping to increase search engine rankings. There are two types of compliance that need to be tested in order to optimize a website: W3C compliance and Section 508 compliance.

W3C, the World Wide Web Consortium, is responsible for setting standards in HTML and CSS that web designers and browser developers all need to follow to ensure that their websites are visible by as many users as possible. Most browser developers support the W3C standards, but are also extremely forgiving of mistakes in HTML code. Web crawlers, the programs that search engines use to index websites, are basically simplified web browsers, that don't necessarily need to be as forgiving of those mistakes. So by making a website W3C compliant, you can guarantee that a web crawler can read your entire website, and index all of the content. Websites can be tested for W3C compliance at w3.org.

Section 508, the federal guidelines regarding the accessibility of electronic content by persons with disabilities, is extremely important not only in search engine optimization, but in the overall success of a website. Section 508 covers issues like the accessibility of content by people who are legally blind, those with color blindness, or people who need to browse the web with a screen reader instead of a typical web browser. To get a good idea of what a website "looks" like to a screen reader download Lynx, a text based web browser, and try to navigate through your website. Doing this gives an idea of the difficulty of browsing a lot of websites out there, and this text based browser is basically what the search engines use to index your website. So the easier it is to browse a website in Lynx, or a screen reader, the easier it will be for the search engines to crawl the site.



TRACKING WEBSITE PERFORMANCE

www.google.com/analytics

Sign up for Google Analytics and track hits to your web site by time, referrer, and geographic location.

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT FLASH

Adobe Flash is an extremely popular browser plugin, giving a richer multimedia experience on the web. Although Google has stated that it is now able to index Flash based websites, this ability is still in the development stages, and Adobe is still recommending that if you have a Flash based website, you should also have a separate website for SEO purposes. Because of this, we recommend that you only use Flash as an individual element on a website, like an image, or a movie, and not as the entire website.

TRACK AND ADJUST

Search engines are changing their search algorithms constantly, in order to provide better search results for the their users. By following the fundamentals of search engine optimization, good metatags, clean HTML code, and code compliance, you can go a long way towards increasing your search engine ranking, but that's only part of the solution. You also need to get your site out there to make it easier for search engines and users to find your website, with social media like blogs, bulletin boards, and RSS feeds. You need to track the results of traffic campaigns, using website statistics packages like Google Analytics, and based on these results, make adjustments to your code, keywords, and descriptions to produce better results.