

# “I’ve Got a Website – Why Can’t I Find It?”

## Search Engine Optimization

by Kurt D. Guntner

You may ask yourself why **SEO**, or **Search Engine Optimization**, should be important to you or your business. The answer is fairly simple. No matter how beautiful your site is or how valuable the information it contains may be, without people being able to find it quickly and easily, you probably won’t be in business very long.

The days of “if you build it, they will come” is long gone on the World Wide Web. Today’s search engine battlefield is much more difficult to navigate and is littered with self-proclaimed marketing sherpas, who for a small fee, claim can lead you to the Google front page promise land.

With over 5.1 billion searches (according to Nielsen/Net Ratings - 2005) being performed annually in the U.S. alone, it’s vital to every business to have a prominent online presence.

Outsourcing SEO to a qualified expert can be an invaluable decision for any company. However, it is prudent that you arm yourself with basic SEO knowledge in order to identify “snake-oil” tactics and protect your marketing budget.

In this three-part series, I will provide you with the basic knowledge you need to either build the foundation for your SEO efforts on your own or identify qualified individuals to guide you on your way.

There are two categories that fall under SEO:

**Organic Search.** An organic search is the listing that appears on search result pages due to their relevance to the search term. These listings are not paid advertisements but “organic”—results based on the search engine’s algorithm.

In contrast, **Non-Organic Search** contains **PPC (pay-per-click) advertisements**, display ads, and any results that are not “organic”.

The \$64,000 question is how do you increase your organic search ranking? The long and short of it is that no one can give you an exact formula of how to accomplish this.

There are, however, common best practices that have been proven to produce results. Be reminded that embarking on any SEO campaign is not an instant gratification item. SEO is a continual process that takes time to build.

**Meta tags** are the most basic form of SEO. Some common tags that you should include in your site are the **Meta Title**, the **Meta Description**, and the **Meta Keywords**. A common mistake I see is sites using the same keywords, titles, and descriptions on every page.

**Meta Titles** are similar to a book or article title—they describe what the page is about. Good titles should be able to accomplish this task in 70 characters or less. Keywords that pertain to the page should be worked into the title as well. The meta title appears at the top of the browser window and is also the default text for bookmarks.

**Meta descriptions** provide users with a brief overview of your site. Utilizing important keywords and terms in this description help search engines determine relevancy. Keep the description to 150 characters or less.

**Meta Keywords.** Although the larger search engines don’t weigh keywords the same way they used to, it’s still a good idea to include

them for lesser-known search engines. Plus, adding keywords won’t negatively impact you. A high number of keywords can dilute the effectiveness of each keyword, so keep your keywords to 10 terms or less per page.

**Site Maps** can improve your SEO by making it easier for search engines to find all of your pages. Google, MSN, Yahoo, and Ask now jointly support the Sitemaps protocol. Research on “XML site maps.” They are currently the preferred form.

**Concatenation** must be consistent. Search engines view “www.yourdomain.com” as a different site than “yourdomain.com.” This can cause inbound links to be split between the two forms of the domain name and reduce the effectiveness of your site. Research on how to do a “**301 Redirect.**” This is where you can consolidate all inbound links to a single domain or domain page.

**Heading Tags.** Just like magazines and newspapers, websites use heading tags to identify important information on a page. Using key terms within these heading tags can increase relevancy for those terms.

**Image Alt Descriptions.** Search engine crawlers cannot really “see” images. That’s why sites with lots of graphics and little textual content rarely rank well. One way to address the issue is to add the “alt” attribute to the image. The alt, or “alternative,” attribute allows you to describe the image in text format to allow crawlers the opportunity to read what the image is about.

**Avoid Keyword Stuffing.** Nowadays, crawlers determine the relevancy of your site to key terms by using **keyword density**—the search engine identifies words or terms that are used frequently and are tagged as important to determine how relevant your site is for a given search term. Keep all keyword terms in the 3-7% range—any higher and you risk being penalized for keyword stuffing.

**When does your domain expire?** One item that individuals sometimes don’t take into consideration is the age of their domain and its time to expiration. It’s widely believed that Google and other crawlers use age and time to expiration to separate fly-by-night companies from legitimate businesses. It stands to reason that longer, better-established companies are more trust-worthy. For this reason, you should try to renew your domain for an extended period of time as well as consider purchasing existing domains.

**Inbound Links** are like votes being cast for your site, but not all votes are equal. For instance, an inbound link from an authoritative site like CNN is much more valuable than a link from a random blogger. Traded links or purchased links are less valuable than a one-way link that was given freely. (In the third installment of this series I’ll elaborate in much more detail about inbound links.)

**Original Content.** Simply copying someone else’s content or rewording it slightly can have unwanted effects. Search engines make their mark by providing highly relevant material for given search terms. It stands to reason that they protect this function by penalizing individuals who try to cheat the system by stealing content. They reward sites who provide highly relevant, highly original content. Adding new content on a regular basis will also earn you points, which is one reason blogs have become so popular.

**PPC or Pay Per Click.** As I mentioned earlier, SEO for organic search takes time. If you aren’t currently ranking where you want to

be and need an instant presence, PPC can help you do that. As it pertains to Google, PPC is a bidding process for the top spot. However, Google also considers your organic ranking. For example, if you have a very low organic ranking, it will cost you more to outbid a high-ranking organic competitor for the same term. While PPC solves your immediate visibility problem, it is still very important to focus on organic search.

Finally, **Analytics Packages** for your site provide you with the information you need to identify what's working for you and what's not. Although, you can spend marketing dollars on high-end packages, I've always found that the free Google Analytics program has been robust enough to handle most client's needs. Get familiar by going to Google.com.

If you've made it this far (and I hope you have), you should now have a very basic understanding of SEO and how the process works.

Next Issue: WHAT NOT TO DO.

*I hope you've found this article helpful and would love to hear from you. Whether you have a question or a comment, visit my blog at [www.bluecollarNE.com/wordpress](http://www.bluecollarNE.com/wordpress) or email me at [info@bluecollarNE.com](mailto:info@bluecollarNE.com). Who knows, my next article could be about you.*

- KDG

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