

Why the Fundamentals of SEO Are Far From 'Basic' By Dixon Jones

Generally, there are two types of traffic from a search engine: Traffic for which you actively pay the search engine (advertising), and traffic that the search engine sends you because it felt the user was looking for you. If you didn't pay for this visitor, the industry calls it "organic" traffic, and it accounts for most of the traffic from the search engines.

Over the years, an industry has developed which has perhaps erroneously been called "search engine optimisation" — the art or science of generating organic traffic to your website from search engines. It can be incredibly powerful stuff, but a layperson trying to understand this alchemy from untrained friends and family — or indeed websites without foundation — would fall prey to many misconceptions. The danger is that a little knowledge can often be worse than no knowledge. But if you learn the correct ground rules, then even if you aren't going to be at the front end of search engine optimisation, at least you'll know what to look for, what to ask of agencies or employees, and what to be especially scared of.

The first danger is to assume that every site can still be truly "optimised" for search. Ten years ago, when the phrase was born, a website — or more accurately, a web "page" — might have been optimised for search. But in 2010, the best that the industry can offer is the ability to

influence, enhance, or focus organic from search. Even the word "optimised" has a problem. In the United States, the prominent spelling is with a "z."

The fundamentals of search engine optimisation, then, are far from "basic" at their core. Any specialist in this field will tend to sit at conferences, telling tale

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after tale of clients that maintain impossible or unrealistic expectations, without taking the time to listen to the very real and very safe ways of improving your

opportunities for winning new business through the search engines. After all, if most of the traffic from the search engines is not monetized, doesn't that indicate that proportionally most of your search engine ad spend should be allocated to influencing the non-monetised traffic? I believe that for the most successful companies, this is undoubtedly the case. They build businesses and marketing plans that touch search engines in unexpected ways. But way before all this, they build their web presence using sound building blocks. They use web architectures that do not make themselves inadvertently blind to the search engines. They build sites that can develop over time to feed a search engine rather than starve it of the thing it craves most — data, information, and knowledge.

A banker does not claim to be an accountant, and an accountant will rarely see a trading room floor. Yet they both measure money, right? How many of us have been asked to look at a friend's computer which faces the "blue screen of death," even though we may be far from qualified to do anything more than hold down the "off" button until the screen disappears? The words "fundamental" and "basic" are far from analogous, and it is the

well-trained programmers and the accomplished creative designers who will get the most out of a foundation session on search engine optimisation.

What drives the very few remaining search engines is not a quest to return "your" web page. It is a quest to feed the user with a sense of relevancy and a sense of productivity. Google's stated quest is to "organize the world's information" — although Google made it clear in 2009 that it wanted to do this under its own terms. Yet most of the web traffic from Google is not monetized by Google. What truly motivates them? And how can you return the balance of probability back in your favour over a competitor's when it comes to Google deciding which site to direct its users to?

Two pages on the Internet can say exactly the same thing. Yet a modern search engine is likely to show the user one and bury the other. It is rarely a personal vendetta by the search engine. Very few sites get actively or manually penalized. The results are displayed only after a myriad of automated decisions, counter-decisions, and probability algorithms come together. These days, another user will see an entirely different result. Change your web browser from a PC to an iPhone, and the results could entirely change again.

The "fundamentals" of search engine optimisation are not hard to grasp, so it's alarming to see so many people disregard them in their quest for the stars. Attend some of SES London's fundamentals sessions, including "SEO 101," unless you genuinely know why you shouldn't. •



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Want to learn more?

Dixon will be moderating the "Introduction to Search Engine Optimisation" session on Tuesday at 2:15 p.m. For more information, visit

SearchEngineStrategies.com/london