# Search Engines Series Pt. 1 - Content is King

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Practically every day a customer of ours will ask us about search engine optimization (SEO). It usually starts with something like, "What can I do to get ranked higher on search engines?" or "Why doesn't my site show up on Google?" or maybe "How do I use this new fangled contraption called a mouse?" I usually begin by patiently explaining that SEO is kind of an art - a dance between developer coding techniques, business strategies, content and the search engine. It's a boxing match where everyone has a part to play and the ground is always shifting. I go on from dancing and boxing to several other metaphors involving movement and competition (and one involving cheese). Then I recommend a few changes. At this point the customer usually says something like, "...and that will get me on the first page of search engines, right?" To answer I usually tell the Joke about MTV asking Bob Dole the same question they asked Clinton, "Do you wear boxers or briefs". Seventy year old Dole responded, "Depends".

(Series: click here for **Part 2 - The Header** )

In fact, it is important to emphasize to customers that there *is no magic bullet* when it comes to SEO. There are actually 3 areas of interest that need to be addressed with your customer. The "3 Cs" of SEO are:

1. Content is King
2. Coding for Search Engines
3. Crafting a successful *business* strategy

I'd like to address that first one in this post.

## Content is King

There is one item on our mental agenda that we need to address right away. Search engines do not employ strategies based on the *needs of your web site*. They don't work for you. Whether you get indexed or not is not of particular concern to them. Search engines target the *the browsing public*. A search engine makes money if it can find appropriate content to serve the searchers needs and match it with ads relevant to that content. In the search engine's ideal world, when a surfer searches for "candy" the search engine would be able to reach into the searchers brain and query whether he or she meant hard candy, candy corn, candy striper, candy cane or Candy the one-eyed dominatrix. The search engine could then fill the results with just exactly what the searcher was looking for and display targeted ads for the same.

Therefore, one of the single most important things you can do is to have relevant content and keep it up to date. While the task creating content falls to the customer, you will need to help them understand how to strategize. It usually starts with a quick trip to Google. Take your client to the nearest computer and have them open a browser to Google. Let's say I have a customer who sells widgets in the highly competitive widget market. The conversation might go something like this:

- Muse: Ok, you are Joe User. You've barely heard of widgets, but other than that you are blank slate.
- Customer: Hey, I just typed in my domain name, "macsWidgets.com", and here's my domain at number one! I think our work here is done.

- Muse: Uh... no. The only person who would type in "macWidgets.com" is someone who knows about it already - namely you, your wife and your mother. We are looking for new customers.
- Customer: Actually my mom died 2 years ago.... [Uncomfortable silence]
- Muse: um... sorry about that... anyway, clear your mind. You barely know about widgets. You are a blank slate. Pretend you are Britney Spears.
- Customer: Ok that helps... hey, what's this thing?
- Muse: That's a monitor, and I think you have gone a little too blank. Now concentrate. If you were a user who knew only a little about Widgets, how would you go about searching for them on the web?

From there we would begin by typing in words and phrases that might bring us to widgets. We would want to prepare a list of things that worked and things that didn't. If searching for "red widgets" brought us no useful results then perhaps a page on "red widgets" would benefit us (assuming that folks might search for red widgets). On the other hand if searching for "blue widgets" brought a host of results that included our competitors we might want to assume that blue widgets are popular and we need "blue widget" content to adequately compete for that traffic.

## Content and the 2 hurdles

Armed with your list of keywords you are ready to help the customer prepare pages of content that is relevant. This means that someone is going to have to produce *valuable textual content*. In other words someone is going to have to write. Now maybe your customer is a left brained visualizer who has had too much editorial control over the design of the web site. Consequently the entire site is written in flash or all the links are images. You will have to break the news that the "wow affect" that they broke the bank to produce is most often never seen because it can't be consumed by search engines. Perhaps your customer has a marketing degree and the site consists entirely of marketing copy - glowing, over-the-top, effusive descriptions and praise of widgets... why these widgets are the best widgets and how these widgets will help you buy a house or win a dream vacation. Unfortunately, that is not content (at least not valuable content). Virtually no one is going to search for "dynamic, powerful, best-in-breed widgets", not to mention it is mental cruelty.

Remember, search engines are looking for whatever users are looking for. In the case of the widget maker (not to be confused with the widow maker) such content might contain pages or blurbs on:

- The history of Widgets.
- Care and feeding of widgets.
- A page on how I select my widget color.
- Showing the difference between widget versions.
- A competitive matrix comparing my widget with my competitors widgets.
- An essay on the growing popularity of widgets.
- A widget blog
- Accurate descriptions of the widget within the product description. In other words, in addition to (or preferably instead of) the marketing copy, the product description should reflect the form and function of widgets. It should say something about *what it is* and *what it does*.

## Hurdle Number 1 - Writing

This brings us to the first content hurdle - the actual writing. Someone is going to have to write all this. I think that some "hyper visual" sites that I've seen are that way because no one can produce enough words to fill up the pages. There is a dearth of good writing in companies - especially small to medium sized companies. Larger companies have a different problem. Instead of good writers they often have good marketers. These folks produce content based on sales techniques - often through a long drawn out committee process that mirrors the print world. The end result is often not good. There is no substitute for good, accurate writing on the web. In spite of flash, interactive video and the dancing hamsters, the web is still primarily a world or words. That's especially true when it comes to search engines. As for your client, recommend a good writer to them (I keep a couple numbers handy) or simply make suggestions as they begin to produce for publication.

## Hurdle Number 2 - Writing Again

Search engines don't just love content - they love *fresh* content. The customer will have to get used to the idea of updating their web site. This is where products like Farcry give your customer an edge. A CMS will allow for easy updating of content without touching the layout. In the case of Farcry it comes with review dates for pages (to remind you when they need updating). It also comes with 3 types of content objects designed for regular updates - news, events and facts. RSS generation is native to Farcry and can include any content type. Just having such a tool will make the job of keeping the content fresh easier.

Even with fabulous CMS tools it is still work to keep a site fresh. Take the time to drive this point home to your customer. Once you start down this path there is *no end* to the tasks of content creation. If it is really important to rank high on search engines then they will have to produce valuable content periodically.

## Content Conclusions

In fact, on that last point, it should be noted that the task of search engine optimization is an *ongoing* task - not just in content but in coding techniques and in strategizing. The rules change constantly and your site must change as well to maintain a solid page rank. What works today is practically guaranteed not to work tomorrow. Why? Because developers of sites *without* real content will find ways to circumvent the rules and get ranked anyway. This causes the search engine to re-examine the rule sets for indexing and make adjustments to the algorithms - after which the spurious developers go back to the drawing board to circumvent the rules again.

Make sure you say this very clearly to your customer. SEO is not a one time deal. It's an ongoing effort that requires regular adjustment. They can easily hire one of the many specialty companies to "improve their ranking" and such companies will probably manage to do it (in fact, I sometimes recommend it). But 3 months down the road they will be right back where they started if they don't keep pace and solve the content puzzle. Give the searcher what he or she wants. Searchers want the web to be more than marketing copy or link farms that all seem to link to each other. They would like it to be the valuable pool of easily searchable aggregate information. Your customer can be part of the solution if he or she is willing to add value into the swirling mass of pages.

## Part II - Coding for Search Engines

Tomorrow I will write about specific techniques that we are currently using to improve

the ranking of some of our customers. An advantage to having several traffic dependent customers in different industries and with different types of sites (news, e-commerce, finance etc) is that we are able to analyze our results along a wide range of content. I also intend to podcast this series.