How to get your Website listed with Search Engines and Directories

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1. Introduction

Today, popular search engines like Google have indexed more than a billion webpages. Thus, the correct submission and the preparation of your websites for this purpose becomes an important factor for online marketing.

This document will provide you with some tactics on how to achieve higher ranking with search engines.

1.1 How do search engines work?

Before you start preparing your project for search engine listing, it is useful to understand how a search engine finds and ranks pages.
Search engines do usually have little programs called spiders or agents that follow the links on a page found by or submitted to the engine and analyses the content of each of these pages.
The analysis usually involves several steps:

- Page Title
- Keywords in text
- Keywords in Meta tags
- Headings

Some search engines also look for additional criteria like

- File- and directory names (Fireball)
- Number of links to a site (Google)

1.2. What about directories?

Directories like Yahoo manually sort submissions with "human work power". The points mentioned above are also important to make sure your site can found within a directory, however, they are not so important for submission itself.
It is also important to note, that it can take several months from submission until your site actually gets listed with Yahoo, if it gets listed at all.

The following chapters describe the actions that can help you get higher ranking in the most popular search engines und directories.

2. General Strategy

The Yahoo directory is responsible for half the traffic referred to most sites. Beyond that, most search engine traffic comes from two places: Google and Inktomi. Inktomi provides a technology that's used in many search-engines.
This means that it does make sense to submit your site to the say 10 largest search engines only and to prepare your sites for the ones mentioned above. More on this topic follows in chapter 6. Submission.

3. Preparing your Content

Since search engines check the text of pages for keywords, it is important to define certain keywords you want to be found by and *use* them in the content of your pages - if possible even several times. It is also important that these keywords are mentioned at the beginning of a page or even in the headings, because most search engines only analyze a certain amount of the content.

Also look at the keywords that are mentioned in the Meta tags of competitors' sites that you find using search engines. (For an explanation of Meta tags see below). You can also have a look at the most popular keywords at http://www.searchterms.com/.

4. Programming

Most of the factors that help you get a better ranking can be dealt with during programming:

Title Tag

The HTML Tag <title></title> should always be filled with useful information and not something like "Untitled". E.g. you could always start with the name of the site, then the title of the page and some additional information like keywords. This would result in something like <title>Coffee Shop: Our Products – Coffee, tea, biscuits</title>. This procedure not only adds information to the title, they also look good and "tidy" in a list of search results and might be preferred by a user therefore.

Try to keep the title short, though. (Less than 40 characters seem to work best).

Meta Tags

Meta tags in the <header> section of a HTML document provide "invisible" information to the search engines. The most important ones are:
- Description: <meta name="description" content="An online Coffee Shop. We sell Coffee tea and biscuits and accept all major credit cards">
- Keywords: <meta name="keywords" content="Coffee, Tea, Biscuits, Shop">

It seems it is the best strategy to include at least some of the most popular keywords overall if they match to your site in any way:

Zipf's Law predicts that traffic for any particular keyword on a search engine will be proportional to its popularity rank. That is, the number of queries (and hence potential clickthroughs to your site) for the most popular keyword will be ten times greater than that for the tenth most popular term. And traffic to term #10 will be 1,000 times higher than traffic to term number 10,000. Search engine logs don't quite match Zipf's curve, and they vary from one engine to the next. But the lesson remains: If you're not matching the top keywords, forget it.
(From http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/01/23/index1a_page4.html?tw=e-business)

Those top keywords can be found at http://www.searchterms.com/.

These three are the most important things to do – do them carefully. The actions that follow below are less important, but if your design allows you to implement them easily, do so.

Additional actions

Headings

Make use of the <h1>,<h2>,.. tags instead using other markup. The look of these tags can be controlled with CSS (Cascading Style Sheets).
Many search engines rank pages with keywords that are within <h></h> tags higher.

Image ALT tags

Since the content of images can not be analyzed (so far), it is important, that you make use of the alt tag: <image src="coffee.gif" alt="A steaming, hot cup of coffee">

Page Structure

As described in the section "Preparing your content" above, many search engines analyze only the first part of a page. In the currently popular tabular design with a menu bar at the left side, the content of the menu bar gets analyzed and not the actual content, because the column with the menu comes before the column with the content. A work-around for this problem can be found at
http://www.ideenreich.com/suchmaschinen/tabellen_optimierung.shtml (in German).

Robots.txt

It is also useful to add a file robots.txt to your webroot directory. Most search engines look for this particular file that can be used to block certain directories from being searched or explicitly allow them to be searched. A nice side effect is that you don't get entries in your errorlog because of this file. More information on the syntax of robots.txt files can be found at http://www.robotstxt.org/wc/robots.html.

On the other hand, "tricks" like creating comments with the keywords in it or even long lists of keywords in background-color are usually recognized by search engines and block them from listing this page.

5. Problems with dynamic sites

Most large sites are dynamically generated, which is a nice thing for maintaining large amounts of content. When it comes to submitting these sites to search engines you might run into some trouble, though.
This is caused by the URL's, which usually contain question marks or other special characters. (Such an URL might look similar to
www.mydynamicpage.com/data.cgi?var1=1234&var2=hhh).
Most search engines don't read anything beyond the question mark, so if your whole site runs via one script, only the content of the first page is indexed.

If you want your pages to be read by search engines, you have two possibilities:
1) Create Static copies of all dynamic pages – using a script, an application server or content management system.
2) Transform the URL to a search-engine-readable format. In most cases this means that no other special characters than slashes are allowed to appear in the URL. The idea is, that URL's are transformed and then sent to a script. E.g. for the URL above you could use www.mydynamicpage.com/1234/hhh/. This URL is transformed by a script to the actual form www.mydynamicpage.com/data.cgi?var1=1234&var2=hhh and then processed in the web-server. Obviously, you need to define a clear structure for your URL's and apply it throughout the whole site.
Amazon is using this technique for instants. Some application servers or content management systems offer this feature, too.

6. Submission

Now that everything is prepared, you are ready to actually submit your site to the search engines and directories.
The first step is to consider which engines and directories you want your site to submit to. I recommend the following strategy:

1) Submit your site to the "big ones":
   a. Yahoo.com
   b. Google.com
   c. Altavista.com
   d. msn.com
2) Select some additional international engines or directories:
   a. Hotbot.com
   b. Lycos.com
   c. Excite.com
   d. Opendirectory.org
3) Submit your site to some local or language specific engines and directories, e.g. for the German and Swiss market:
   a. Yahoo.de
   b. Web.de
   c. Infoseek.de
   d. Search.ch
   e. Sear.ch

You see that the list above is very short. It is important that you are correctly listed in the popular engines, the small ones usually don't matter.

The actual submission process can either be done manually or with the help of Software or online tools.

If you choose to do this manually, you have to look for the "Add URL" link on the page of the engine or directory you want your site to add to. This link is usually hidden at the very bottom of the engine's page.
If you've chosen a search engine like Google, you will have to fill the site's URL and your email in a form and that's it.
If you've decided for a directory, you usually have to fill out several-page-long forms, where you are asked for the category your site should appear, the site's topic and some other things.
Because Yahoo has a very long waiting list for their free submission it can take several months until your site gets indexed. As a business you have the possibility to pay a fee of $199, so that the decision whether your site will be added to the index will be taken within a week. However, the fee does not guarantee that your site will be added to the Yahoo directory.

If you want to speed up the submission-process, you can submit your site automatically using software. There are online tools and software for desktops available. The advantage of using a tool is, that you can store a profile of a site and submit it to several engines at the same time. However, it is recommended that you make some entries e.g. at Yahoo manually.
Often times, these tools also offer additional features like keyword generators or tools to check the ranking of your entries with the engines.
A good online tool is e.g. submitit.com. For a list of desktop tools please refer to the listing in the appendix.
One more thing: Don't be fooled by the marketing of the software companies – they usually point out how many engines you can submit your site to with their tool– this number is actually not relevant at all, the most important thing is the quality of the submission.

7. Additional measures to create traffic

Besides search engines and directories, there are additional actions you can take to increase traffic on your sites:

1) Get links. Inform partners or communities that deal with your area of business about your new page. They might set a link to your site, which not only increases "high quality" traffic (traffic, that is really related to your business), but also leads to a higher ranking in Google.
2) Publish your URL. Do this on every printed matter, use E-mail footers with your URL in it, display your URL in advertising or commercials.
3) Publish content like articles, white papers or surveys on community sites related to your business.
4) Create E-mail Newsletters to keep visitors updated on the changes on your site. (No spamming! Let users subscribe for the newsletter on your page).
5) Keep your page up to date. If you offer fresh and interesting content, people will return to your site.

8. Appendix

8.1. Resources

- Ideenreich (German): Several articles about search-engines
  http://www.ideenreich.com/suchmaschinen/
- Search engine Watch: Information, statistics about search engines
  http://searchenginewatch.com/
- Excellent article about strategy for search engine submission at webmonkey
  http://hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey/01/23/index1a.html?tw=e-business
- The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine – The original Google paper
  http://www7.scu.edu.au/programme/fullpapers/1921/com1921.htm