

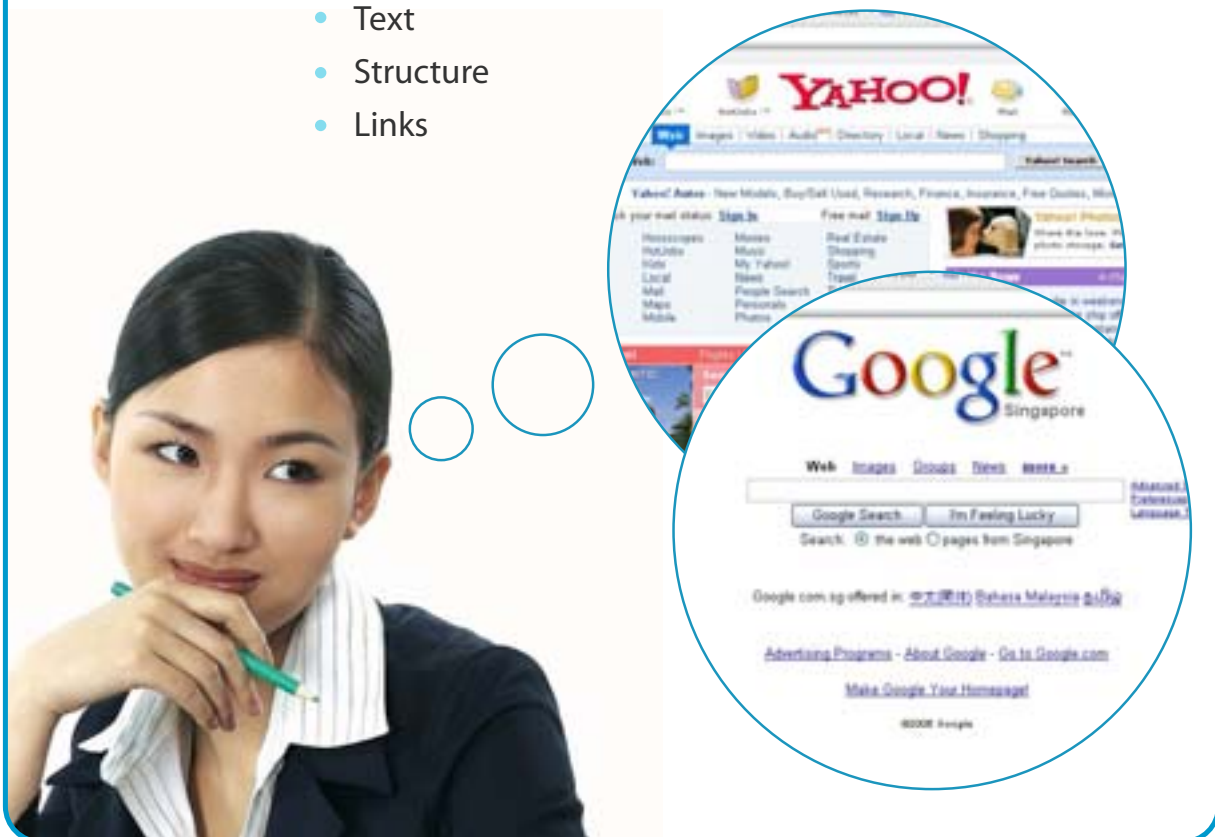
Happy New Year!

Here's wishing everyone a successful and fruitful year.

In this issue, we explore a slightly more advanced topic of website search engine optimization or SEO.

We'll look at the basics of:

- ▶ Why Search Engines
- ▶ Difference between Search Engines & Web Directories
- ▶ The Three Pillars of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
 - Text
 - Structure
 - Links



Why Search Engines?

Search engines are frequently used by internet users to locate relevant information such as websites, images, videos, documents etc. Many providers of products and services have found such users to be a valuable source of business leads. When you think about it, it makes pretty good sense: These are users that are looking for specific products and services online, so they are all primed to purchase. If you can grab their attention at this moment, you have a good chance to make a sale.

If your website lists well on search engines, you get all this targeted advertising for FREE! Now do you need a better reason than this to take SEO seriously?

Search Engines and Web Directories

Before we dive into the topic, there is a need to clear the confusion over Search Engines and Web Directories.

▶ Search Engines

Search engine databases are compiled through the use of automated programs called spiders. These spiders classify the relevance of each site based upon a pre-determined algorithm. Google.com is probably the most commonly used search engine.

▶ Web Directories

These are listings reviewed and added by human reviewers. Think of them as a 'Yellow Pages' online. Yahoo! is a popular web directory.

When you go to www.yahoo.com.sg and look under 'Yahoo! Web Directory', you can find the SBS Transit Bus Guide under

- **Directory > Recreation > Travel > Transportation > Buses**

However Yahoo! results can also be augmented by a search engine provided as part of the Yahoo! Search feature. If you do a search on Yahoo!, it will present content from both its directory as well as its search engine

How do you tell which is which?

Listings from the directory come with a directory path name:
e.g. Category: Singapore > Bus Lines > SBS Transit

Listings from the search engine do not show a directory path name.

Three Pillars of SEO

Search engine optimization is built around the 3 pillars of:

- **Text**
Text refers to the text on your webpages. They should contain keywords that tell a search engine the relevance of your webpage to the information a user is searching for.
- **Structure**
Structure your website so that it is easy for a spider to locate all the pages in your website. If you keep your website simple, this should not be an issue, but often schemes used to jazz up a website can detract from this goal.
- **Links**
Links from external sites, especially if they are from important or highly reputable sites are interpreted by search engine spiders as measures of your site's importance.

▶ Text - **Keywords**

The relevance of the content of a webpage or website is determined by matching the readable text on the page/s to the search words that users type into the search engine. These search words are called 'keywords'.

For example:

If someone is looking for corporate gifts and types 'corporate gifts' into a search engine, your site has a chance of listing if you have many occurrences of 'corporate gifts' in the text of your website.

Identifying keywords

To find out which keywords are frequently searched, you can use online tools provided by some of the major search engines.

For Google keywords, you can use the link below:

<https://adwords.google.com/select/main?cmd=KeywordSandbox>

Google not only shows a list of keywords directly related to your target keyword, it also makes recommendations for other possible keywords.

This is useful for developing a list of keywords that are relevant to your website.

You can also analyse keywords using Overture. This is the engine that powers Yahoo! Search, MSN, Alta Vista, CNN.com and InfoSpace.

Here is the url:

<http://inventory.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/>

Overture presents the results in a different manner. It helpfully provides an estimate of the number of searches per month for your target keywords, so you get an idea of how important that keyword is.

The best keywords are the ones with the most searches right?

Not necessarily.

If you own a small site, then you are not likely to be ranked very high, even if your site contains frequent mention of a popular keyword. Bigger, more established businesses will also be optimizing their sites for the same keywords and are likely to rank better, simply because they have more content.

Often, it is more effective for smaller businesses to target specific and narrow keywords.

Take the example of the keywords 'corporate gifts'. On Overture, 'corporate gifts' yielded 141,294 searches in Nov 05. A more specific term like 'corporate golf gift', attracted only 1,325 searches. 'Corporate Golf gift' is therefore a less competitive keyword. If that is an accurate description of what you are selling, optimizing for this narrower keyword is likely to yield better results.

Not all keywords are created equal

Search engine spiders attach different importance to the keyword depending on where the keyword appears in your webpage.

- **Title:** This is probably the most important text in your webpage
 - Most search engines give considerable weight to the page title.
 - Title is displayed in search engine results
 - Title is shown when someone bookmarks your webpage

Many websites make the common mistake of ignoring the title and giving every page a generic name. You need to give your page a title that is descriptive of the content of your webpage, and every page should have a different title.

- **Body Text:** This is the visible text in your webpage and the next most important area of your webpage for SEO. Search engines assign this high importance, since this is the message that your website visitor is reading.
- **Meta Data:** This comprises non-visible text in Meta Keywords, Meta Description. This used to be important, but due to frequent abuses (such as stuffing the meta data with popular but irrelevant keywords), search engines are starting to reduce the importance attached to Meta Data.

Nevertheless it is still a good practice to put relevant keywords in your Meta Keywords, and a short summary of your webpage in the Meta Description. This is probably the most important text in your webpage

Keyword count, keyword density, prominence

Now that you have learnt how to identify keywords, know where to place them, it is time to get down to writing the text for your website. Some of the broad strategies that search engine spiders use to evaluate the relevance of a page to a particular keyword are:

- **Keyword count**

This is simple: the number of occurrences of a particular keyword in your text. In general the higher the count, the more relevant a page is.

- **Keyword density**

This is a measure of:

$(\text{Number of occurrences of a keyword}) / (\text{Total number of words})$ or
 $(\text{Number of occurrences of a keyword}) / (\text{Total number of unique words})$

Different sources have slightly different definition. Don't get overly hung up on the precise definition, it is the general principle that you should be focusing on.

In general the higher the density, the more desirable. However past a certain point, the page may get blacklisted by a search engine spider. (A density of 100% obviously indicates something suspicious!)

- **Keyword prominence**

This is a measure of assigning higher weight to keyword occurrences that appear higher up in the page. The higher up in the page a keyword is, the higher the prominence.

There are various free online tools to help you analyse the keyword count, density and prominence of your webpage. Links to some of these tools are listed below. Use this only as a guide. Different tools use slightly different methodologies and you are likely to experience variance in the results.

<http://www.ranks.nl/tools/spider.html>

<http://www.jimworld.com/tools/keyword-analyzer>

Avoid:

Before we end this section, just a warning about some 'no-no' practices. Avoid:

- **Text in graphics:** Search engine spiders can't read the text in a graphics file so avoid it.
- **Spam:** Don't try fooling a search engine spider into thinking your page is more relevant than it really is. This practice is called 'spamming' and includes unethical practices such as stuffing keywords into a page and hiding them by defining them in the same colour as the background. The guys at the search engine companies have been at this game much longer than you, and they know more tricks than you can imagine. Spamming is likely to get your site blacklisted.

That's all the time we have for this issue. In the next issue of Interact!, we will cover the pillars of 'Structure' and 'Links'. Till then, have a good week ahead.

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