

The Search for Extension: 7 Steps to Help People Find Research-Based Information on the Internet

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Abstract: *For Extension's unbiased, research-based content to be found by people searching the Internet, it needs to be organized in a way conducive to the ranking criteria of a search engine. With proper web design and search engine optimization techniques, Extension's content can be found, recognized, and properly indexed by search engines and people. These techniques will improve the ranking of Extension websites on search engine result pages and drive added traffic to Extension's online content.*

Introduction

People use the Internet to find answers to questions and information on a daily basis. Extension has answers to many of these questions, but sadly, Extension websites often rank so low on search results that people may not even know they exist (Rader, 2011). This article outlines 7 steps to improving Extension websites so that they are easy to find using an Internet search engine and simple to navigate once found. With improved Web design and basic search engine optimization (SEO) techniques, Extension can help more people find its unbiased, research-based information on the Internet.

Step 1. Keywords

Keywords are essential for helping users find information on the Internet and should be strategically used in the URL, title, sitemap, headers, and content of the website. Selected keywords should be broad, simple, and avoid the use of jargon (Lynch & Horton, 2009). The [Google Keyword Tool Box](#) can identify the search volume

of a particular keyword and those that are similar. Keywords with moderately high search volume will likely drive the most traffic to a website, because there is fierce competition for keywords with the highest search volume (Gardener, 2011). A credible and useful Extension website that uses keywords effectively will rise in ranking over time.

Step 2. Page Titles

Page titles appear at the top of a Web browser for each webpage and are also displayed as a link on a search engine results page. Page titles are important for users in determining whether or not to click on a website (Google, 2012). FC Expert Blogger (2011, August 29) explained:

A good title needs to be catchy, clever, and draw the reader in. It has to clearly convey what the article [or website] is about, but not be so descriptive that it gives away the farm. It can't be misleading, nor can it be too long. It has to follow proper style, but also project the correct tone of the content.

Page titles provide a context for each page and communicate relevant information with search engines so that the site can be appropriately indexed (Gardner, 2011).

Figure 1.

A Page Title Example in an HTML Document

```
<title>4-H Youth Development Organization | 4-H</title>
```

Page titles should (Google, 2010):

- Be no more than six to 10 words in length
- Use relevant keywords
- Mix keywords into a sentence
- Directly reflect the content of each page on a website

Step 3. Headline Tags

Headline tags are contained in the body of an HTML document and are a way to highlight certain keywords. In HTML, it looks like this: <h1> (keywords here) </h1>, <h2> (keywords here) </h2>. It's important to use targeted keywords in HTML tags because search engines pay special attention to text that has been emphasized this way (Palmer, 2006).

Step 4. Meta Tags

Meta tags are found at the top of an HTML document inside the <head> (keywords here) </head> section. Meta tags are not required and are no longer a major determinant in search engine rankings, but these tags do help search engines more accurately index a website. Spiders contrast meta tags with the content of each page, rejecting pages where meta tag keywords differ from the words on the page (Gardner, 2011).

The "keyword" and "description" meta tags provide information to search engines that is not displayed on Web browsers. Here are examples of both:

Figure 2.

Keyword Meta Tag Example in an HTML Document

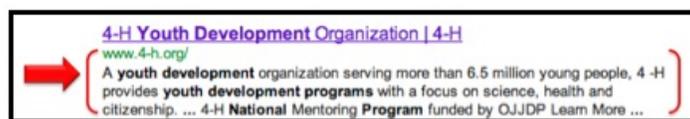
```
<meta name="keywords" content="Youth Development Organization, Youth Development Programs, Youth Programs, Youth, 4-H, 4H, 4 H" />

<meta name="description" content="A youth development organization serving more than 6.5 million young people, 4-H provides youth development programs with a focus on science, health and citizenship." />
```

The "description" tag might be displayed on the SERP as the summary of a page; therefore, only relevant keywords should be used here, placing the most important words first. Most search engines only read approximately 250 characters of each meta tag and ignore the rest (Google, 2010).

Figure 3.

Description Meta Tag Content Displayed on a SERP, also Referred to as a "Snippet" by Google



Recommendations for meta tags (Gardner, 2011):

- Limit the "keywords" meta tag to 100 characters or less containing only relevant keywords.
- Limit the "description" meta tag to 200 characters or less.
- Do not repeat keywords more than three times.
- Separate keywords by commas.
- Make sure meta tags directly reflect the content of the body of the page.

Step 5. Inbound Links

Inbound links can drive Internet traffic from external Websites to Extension Websites. Inbound links are essentially votes for a Webpage, often coming naturally to pages that offer a unique or compelling service with fresh, relevant content (Ferguson, 2010).

Inbound links can be generated from the following (Palmer, 2008):

- Websites of family & friends
- Extension professionals nationwide
- University Extension websites & blogs
- Community partners & sponsors
- Vendors & organizations serving Extension
- Social media pages

- Wikipedia contributions
- Press releases in local newspapers. Also submit to prnewswire.com

Step 6. PageRank

PageRank can be thought of as how popular a website is. It is a numeric value on a scale of one to 10 (10 being the highest) that Google assigns a website based on its secret algorithm. This value conveys the significance, relatedness and legitimacy of inbound links to a website (Ferguson, 2010). To find a website's PageRank, visit:

- [Google Webmaster Tools](#)
- [WhoLinks2Me](#)
- [PRchecker](#)

It's important to be aware of a website's PageRank and how it changes over time. This can be used to continue to improve the website. Using PageRank in addition to Google analytics can help improve the flow of the website and the relevance of keywords.

Step 7. Website Design

A poorly designed and organized website is not only frustrating to navigate, but it will also rank low on a SERP. Extension organizations are complex and provide information on a wide array of topics. With thoughtful organization and by "chunking information" (Lynch & Horton, 2009), Extension can help users navigate through the complexity.

Content on a website can be organized by category, time, location, sequence, and alphabetically (Wurman, 1989). Extension information is well suited to being organized in all of these ways. The groupings used should be chosen carefully and with input from the public, Extension Agents, and web designers; groupings should be broad and simple, and avoid jargon. "Chunking information," or organizing information in short, concise discussions, is preferable to long and comprehensive discussions on the Internet that force users to scan a great deal of information to find what they're looking for (Lynch & Horton, 2009).

How an Excellent Extension Website Was Built

It is no small task to provide online access to the wealth of material Extension has to offer in a way that is compelling, easy to navigate, and thoughtfully organized and has a frequent and high rate of returning users. A multitude of one-time visitors is not the sign of a well designed and curated website!

The new Oregon State University Extension website (extension.oregonstate.edu) took 10 months and an estimated \$250K to develop, beginning in August of 2010. The original website was completely discarded and replaced by an entirely new structure of pages and features.

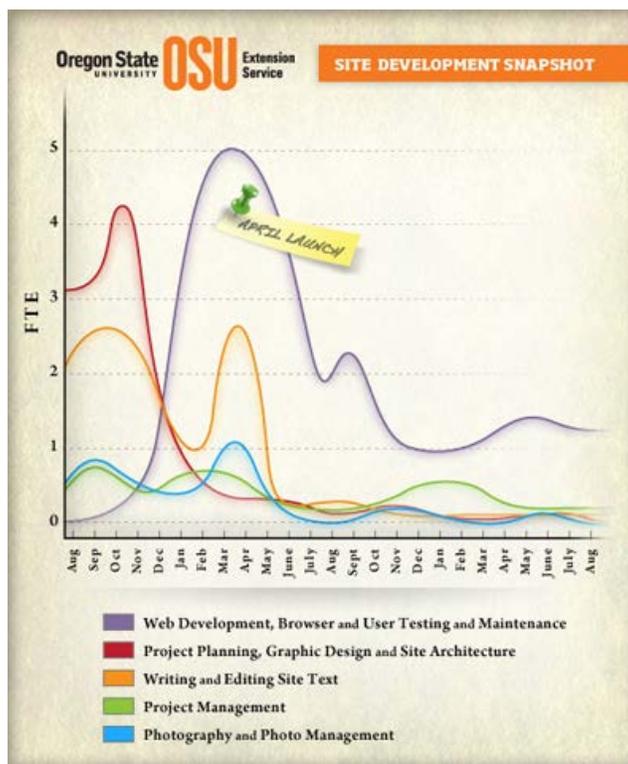
The Web Team

The website revision project was a team effort co-led by an instructional designer and Web designer and consisted of two full-time Web-programmers, a full-time graphic artist, and three part-time student Web programmers. Three full-time staff science and news writers and a full-time photographer/videographer provided content. Thorough text editing was done by three full-time, publications editors. Additional tasks included social media development, photo management, and user testing provided by classified staff and 10 non-Extension volunteers.

The tag line "Life. Get good at it," provided a powerful theme woven throughout the website.

Figure 4.

OSU Extension Service New Website Development by Full-Time Employees



Impact

The change in analytics was dramatic for the redesigned site. Comparing data from April through September 2010 on the old site to that same interval in 2011 showed a 284% increase in site visits and a 160% increase in page views. This impressive growth curve continued into 2012, with a 211% increase in site visits and a 206% increase in page views. Analytics from 2012 also reported a 150% increase in the average length of stay on the site.

These numbers speak highly of the value of redesigning Extension websites to apply SEO principles, and most important, to provide a richer visitor experience.

Conclusion

Search engine optimization (SEO) is a constantly changing practice. Recent changes in the Google algorithm favor sites that not only have optimized content, but are also the most useful to users (Cournoyer, 2011). Other metrics such as how many people "like" a site on Facebook and how long users stay on a site are becoming increasingly important (Cournoyer, 2011). With fact-based and relevant information, Extension websites are well situated for this preference. Extension can help more people find its research-based information on the Internet by using simple search engine optimization techniques.

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