

EPISODE 8: SEO EXPLAINED

In today's episode, I'll explain search engine optimization or SEO for short. In brief, SEO is about driving traffic to your website. SEO aims to revise and update a website so that a search engine will prioritize that site in its results. SEO is basically writing, revising, and updating the content of your site so that an algorithm will prioritize your website. Very briefly, SEO is about writing your titles, content, and HTML tags in certain ways so that a search algorithm and bot will pick up your website in a search. There are great benefits to SEO as well as benefits to not optimizing your website. There are a number of myths surrounding SEO. I am going to discuss the benefits, drawbacks, and myths in this episode.

BENEFITS

There are several benefits to SEO. **The first, and most important, is priority placement in a search engine's results.** This means that more people will have the opportunity to click on your site based on a particular query. Proper SEO should result, most likely, in driving traffic your website. I hedge here because SEO doesn't guarantee people will click on your site. It probably does but it is not a guarantee. The result of good SEO is increasing the number of people who read, listen, or watch your content. **A secondary benefit to SEO** is familiarity with your own content. When you perform SEO, you are constantly re-reading, re-editing, and re-revising. Since SEO itself is an ongoing endeavor, it will make you familiar with your content, especially older content. **A third benefit of SEO** is that it encourages you to analyze your site and record your analytics with a purpose. While SEO is often associated with making money by converting your audience from a click to a product, it's actually a much deeper act. Performing SEO maintenance can offer opportunities for rethinking and creativity. **A fourth benefit of SEO** is the focus on user experience and usability of your website. SEO makes you focus on your audience—it reminds you of your readers, listeners, and watchers. It prods you to produce content with their experiences in mind.

DRAWBACKS

First and foremost: both expert and novice SEO runs the risk of pandering to the respective search engine. Google famously asks for keywords, standard English, and connections to content via hyperlinks. This has lead to what experts label "black-hat" techniques. Black hat techniques are strategies that specifically aim to jump a website up a search engine's results at the expense of your content. A common black hat technique is "link stuffing" or paying people to put a link to your site on unrelated content (you can think of clickbait sites or Wikipedia for websites where linkstuffing occurs). Other black hat techniques include keyword stuffing or unrelated keywords. This means writers use numerous unrelated words when producing their content because they know that a search engine looks for those words. They might also put keywords into the code of the website, even if those keywords are radically different from the content of the website. For instance, Google prioritizes proper names and black hatters tend to put celebrity names in the

code of a site to drive traffic. Other black hat techniques copy and pasting content from another site (which is straight up plagiarism), url hijacking, and mislabeling the title of a website, webpage, or url. Doorways passages are also black hat techniques—these are websites that are search engine optimized but then redirect users. Besides being dishonest and unethical, black hat are short-term solutions to long-term problems. Google, Bing, and Yahoo generally learn to account for black hat solutions over time—and then they punish sites guilty of black hat techniques. So while black hat techniques may work for a few days, they could damage the reputation of your site in the long-term. Don't settle for short-term results because black hat techniques damage long-term viability of a website.

Another drawback may be to avoid SEO altogether if you want to keep your site relatively private. In other words, it's also helpful to consider when NOT to optimize a site. If you're not looking to be Google-able, then you might learn SEO techniques to avoid optimizing your site. Remember, even though stuff on the web is generally public, a lot of content is overlooked or never read. If you want to stay accessible but relatively unknown, avoid optimizing your website.

And, finally, the third drawback is integrity of your content. This sounds a bit odd, so hear me out. SEO is about rewriting or recreating your content to reflect a search engine's bias—and basically, at this point, there is really only one search engine in the game: Google. Are you willing to let Google be the arbiter of your content's values? Again, this is a judgment call that you need to decide for yourself.

MYTHS

Myth 1: there are general methods of SEO. No general approach to SEO works because you're revising your website based upon a specific search engine (an algorithm really). You must revise and update your website based upon a particular search engine as well as its bots and indexing algorithms. You must stay abreast of changes and tweaks that search engine designers and programmers make. This includes their biases and preferences for certain website architecture. Furthermore, search engines don't produce the same result. Google, Yahoo, and Bing may require different tweaks and values from a website to place it at the top of the results' page.

Myth 2: you perform SEO once. SEO is not an activity you do once and are finished with it. SEO is constantly changing for two reasons. First a search engine can update its structure and the equations it uses for producing results. Second, we are constantly adding and tweaking to our own websites (or at least we should be). This means that we need to learn new SEO details and brush up on old ones. While you don't need to optimize your website daily or weekly, you should do it at least once a month. I recommend weekly if you have the time. In the long run, if you tweak a website at least once a month, you won't end up with a large overhaul every few months.

Myth 3: SEO has no cost. While it's true that SEO is technically free of monetary costs, it involves a massive time investment, which means it still has an associated cost. While there are a number of guides to SEO, I recommend going to the number one source of SEO: Google itself. Google provides a search engine optimization guide (all you have to do is google SEO start guide). And while you can skim the document, you should read it thoroughly and carefully—a task that will take you several hours. This alone has an associated cost—namely, time and concentration.

Myth 4: SEO is about making money. Having your webpage pop up at the first result on every result will not result in a returning audience or guarantee people will like your content. SEO will not make you money, either. It will increase the likely of traffic, which can mean any number of good things. But it can also bring you unwanted attention from hackers and trolls.

Myth 5: SEO is objective. SEO maintenance is fairly objective. However, the values of a search engine's bots and algorithms are highly subjective. The Google search engine didn't just float down from the clouds. People and especially men, designed the google search algorithm (which is called page rank). Thus, while SEO fulfills the values of a search algorithm, the act is inherently filled with the bias of the algorithm's designers.

Myth 6: SEO requires high-level technical skills. While SEO requires knowledge of HTML and web-design, especially tags, it's closer to a writing skill than a computer coding skill. It requires attention to fine-grained, just like copy-editing does. Thus, if you're good at copy-editing and have knowledge of HTML and web language, you will be good at SEO.

Okay, so I had to think for a while about how to go broader in terms of SEO. It can make the past relevant again. Even though SEO is a good activity for getting search results, I think it has a subtler effect: it makes you revisit your older content and reconsider the relevancy of things from the past. The past has a way of reentering our lives in unintended ways. SEO maintenance can open a door to the past in a similar way. That's where I'll end this episode: when you engage in SEO, it makes you re-read and re-listen to things with a new eye or ear. And that is itself an important activity.

Once again, thanks for listening! You can send me an email at johnrgallagher@gmail.com or contact me on twitter @meresophistry