

Dogwood's Guide to SEO

Search engine optimization is the long game strategy for increasing your website's search rankings organically. We love doing SEO work for our clients and wanted to share some of our wisdom with Dogwood's Guide to SEO!

This guide will dive into the following:

1. Crawl Accessibility
2. The Importance of Compelling Content
3. Keyword Optimization
4. Creating a Great User Experience
5. Share-Worthy Content (Link Building)
6. Title, Url, and Descriptions
7. Snippet Schema Mark-Up

Don't worry if you don't know what all the terms mean- we will break it down into easier to understand language!

Setting the Foundation of SEO

When deciding where to begin work with your SEO strategy, there are a few things that must be in place before moving on. Envision a strong-rooted tree. The roots and trunk are the strongest parts of the structure that hold the tree in place. From there, the branches and leaves help the tree to continue growing. In a similar manner, there are aspects of SEO that must be completed first to create the strength needed for further organic growth and more detailed SEO practices. You must have crawl accessibility, compelling content, keyword optimization, and an overall great user experience in place on your website before you can "branch out" (pun intended) to link building, detailed descriptions, and featured snippets. I realize you may not know what all those terms mean if you are a novice but understand that before you can do the fine detailed SEO work you must have the strong structural components in place or none of the details will matter to search engines.



How SEO Works...

Before you can begin any SEO work, you must have a good website. Most importantly, you must have a website that can be easily read by search engines. Yes, search engines could read every bit of text on each page of your site, but they don't do that. Instead, they quickly scan the text to try and get an idea of what the content is about. Search engine optimization is the language that search engines read most fluently in regard to determining the content on your website. When you optimize your site for search engines, they can easily tell exactly what content is there and then best match that content to your customer's search queries!

Crawl Accessibility

Search engines scan the content through a process called crawling. Each site is crawled every few months. If you are launching a new site or have made significant changes to your current site then you will want to signal search engines to crawl your site sooner than later by uploading a new XML sitemap. A sitemap is simply a map of all the pages on your site. Once search engines have crawled your site, they next begin indexing your content. Indexing is the process where search engines then decide how relevant your content is in regard to search queries. We reinforce this relevancy through the use of keywords (more details on that later in the guide!) Once the search engine decides your relevancy then it can easily rank your site in regards to search queries.

SEO begins with a website that is capable of being crawled by search engines. An easy way to tell if your website pages can be crawled is to input site:yourwebsitename.com into the Google search bar. It will then pull up all pages on your website that it is able to crawl. If you enter DogwoodMediaSolutions.com into the Google search bar you will see that we have 188 pages that are currently crawled by search engines. Your number may not be that high (we blog a lot!) but if there are no results then something is off with your crawling capabilities. You will not have any results with SEO if your site cannot be crawled. We explained even more details on this foundational part of SEO in our blog post titled "Website Crawling, Indexing, and Ranking Explained."

Content Creation and The Importance of Compelling Content with SEO

Do your customers want to read what you are sharing? If your content does not add value then users will not stick around to read it. All the SEO efforts in the world cannot make a person want to read poor content. Make sure what you are sharing adds value to the visitor. What are you sharing about your business? Are you answering questions that potential customers are asking? Creating compelling content is crucial to showing up in search results. This is one of the reasons we recommend blog writing for our customers or are hired to write for them. Great content on your website also offers great content to share on social media. While sharing on social media does not impact your SEO directly, it usually garners more traffic which can help your SEO in the long run.



Keyword Optimization

Keyword optimization is the process of identifying the main topics of your content on each page or blog post and signaling this to the search engines. The simplest way to do this is by installing an SEO plugin like RankMath or Yoast. These plugins will walk you through the process of inputting everything you need for on-page SEO optimization.

Things such as:

- Identifying your focus keyword or keyphrase
- Updating your meta description
- Using images in your content and including Alt Text
- Using Headers in your content

To learn more details about on-page SEO, refer to our blog posts: "Alt Text: What is it and Why Should I Use it?" and "Blog Writing with SEO"

Keyword Research

You can have the best and most compelling content, but if it is not optimized for search engines the chances of it being found by search engines is minimal. During the crawling and indexing actions of search engines, they are discovering your website (crawling) and deciding its relevance to keywords (indexing) so content is key but so are the keywords you choose. This is where your keyword research comes in.

Keyword research is the process of researching the monthly search volume for keywords and phrases, evaluating the competition connected to those keywords, and then making wise choices as to which keywords you want to rank for. There are different ways to do keyword research and we have shared all the details in our blog posts 10 Tips for Keyword Research and Choosing Effective Keywords with SEO. Since search engines connect keywords to your content and then connect your content to search queries, it only makes sense to choose keywords that your target audience is searching for! At Dogwood, we like to choose our main focus keywords then create content educating on more details of that main keyword. For example, if the main keyword is "SEO" then we will have a dedicated post or page to that keyword. (called a pillar page or cornerstone content) Then all of the other pages and posts that deal with subsets of our focus keyword will link back to that pillar page or cornerstone content. This practice is known as Topic Clusters and you can read more about it on our blog "Content Creation Using Topic Clusters."



Creating a Great User Experience

The above-detailed SEO practices are the foundational parts of great search engine optimization. We cannot forget though that our website visitors are real people and they are the bottom line. We must create a great user experience on our websites to encourage that 1) they stay awhile when they visit our site and 2) that they would want to come back to our site in the future!

Some great questions to evaluate your website for user experience are:

- Can visitors easily understand what my business or organization is?
- Are the photos and graphics easy to see and understand?
- Does the navigation on my site make sense?
- Is my website optimized for mobile devices?
- Do my pages and graphics load quickly?
- Are my social media platforms connected to my website?
- Are there any broken links or errors on my website?

All of these factors play a huge role in creating a great user experience and must be addressed and/or corrected so that the more detailed actions of SEO can be understood by search engines.

Share-Worthy Content (Link Building)

When I say “Share-Worthy Content” in regards to SEO, I am not referring to sharing links on social media. If you are sharing compelling content as we mentioned earlier above then social shares should already be happening for you. Instead, what I am referring to is link building. One of the major aspects of SEO is what is known as Site Authority- or how well you are respected online. Search engines measure authority by how many other websites link back to your website.

Since social media arrived, many people find it much simpler to share your link to their social platforms rather than actually linking your website to theirs. This is what makes the link-building aspect of SEO more difficult. Tip #1- Is there a natural connection between your site and another that could call for a website link? Talk to that website owner about both of you linking to each other’s sites. Tip #2 Have you been mentioned online on another site? You could email them and ask them to link to you. This is known as link reclamation. Tip #3 Join community and business groups. They are great at linking to your sites. Tip #4 Do not pay a sketchy company that promises links. Search engines don’t care so much about the number of links but about the quality and relevancy of those links!



Title, URL, and Descriptions

When creating content for your pages or blog, the title, URL, and descriptions are important for SEO. URLs improve user experiences, are a ranking factor in search engines, and reinforce what the content is about. Best practices for writing great titles, URLs, and descriptions include using your primary keyword, use hyphens between words in the URL (no spaces), keep titles and URLs short and simple (no long numbers or titles), and be sure to describe the page's contents in your meta description.

These are small but important steps in your SEO strategy that can have a strong impact on your search rankings.

Snippet Schema Mark-Up

Whenever you search for a term online, you may see a short answer, image, graphic, or list pop up in the top results. These are known as "rich results," "rich snippets," or "SERP features." Rich results are visually enhanced search results that provide supplemental information to the title, URL, and meta description of a web page. Common rich results to optimize for are: images, local packs, reviews, recipes, and site links. Rich results are very engaging to your audience!

Rich results are obtained by using structured data. Structured data helps search engines understand your content the most, but it is also more technical to implement. To implement them you must use Schema Mark-Up. This is a script placed on a web page to communicate structured data to search engines. There are 3 options for implementing Schema Mark-Up: 1) Work with a developer (We can help!) 2. Use a plugin (WordPress has multiple plugins that allow you to use structured data automatically. 3. Add it manually.

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We hope that you have learned something from Dogwood's Guide to SEO. We are proud to offer SEO services to our clients. If this is something you want to implement into your website, please contact us, and let's start a conversation!

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