

Features

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Nailing Search Engine Optimization

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While the challenge of ensuring that your website is search engine optimized (SEO) can feel daunting, getting your hands around SEO basics may be easier than you think—and well worth the effort.

“We have managed a consistent SEO campaign for two years now and can compare year-over-year results that show traffic increases,” says Laura Hammond, director of marketing for Al’s Garden & Home, which has four locations in the Portland, Oregon, area.

Adds Marisa McTiernan, office manager for The Garden Factory outside of Rochester, New York: “As a retailer, you have to anticipate what people will be searching for and make sure they—and Google—are able to find it on your website.”

Fortunately, there are a number of software packages green businesses can use to greatly automate the process of SEO-optimizing a website and ensure it’s maximizing its sales potential. You’ll also find in using these tools that while the practice of SEO continually evolves, most of the basic principles over the years have stayed constant, at least so far.

For example: It’s still important that your ecommerce website offers technical files that enable search engines to quickly process what you’ve got. And it’s still important that you use keywords to attract visitors to your site. Ditto for ensuring that your website downloads quickly.

Tips for SEO

That said, here’s an update on what’s working best right now with SEO, including the basics and latest trends:

- **Consider using SEO software:** As noted, there are a number of top-rated SEO solutions that will automate a great deal of the site optimization process. These same packages also offer numerous tools that will give your green business deep insights into what’s increasing visits and sales at your website, and what you need to change. (See more on SEO software below.)
- **Strive for quality content:** Google and other search engines are increasingly putting a premium on truly useful content. And they’re continually refining their tech to ferret out such content for their users.

Google defines truly useful content as articles of at least 1,000 words that offer deep perspective on a topic. “As long as you write unique content, provide valuable content to the user compared to other pages and offer insightful analysis, Google will reward you,” says Andreea Sauciuc, a copywriter at CognitiveSEO, an SEO services firm.

- **Ensure every post reflects Expertise, Authority and Trust (EAT):** Amidst much fanfare, Google released a

guide in February 2019 detailing its preferences for posts and articles that conform to three overarching concepts: Expertise, Authority and Trust (EAT).

The upshot: If you have an expert at your business who's posting deep dives into their specialty on your website—using articles, whitepapers, case studies, videos and the like—you're on the right track. If not, you should think about hiring an expert to produce that content.

Essentially, having expert content on your site is what Google considers Expertise. Moreover, if your expert is supplementing these posts with, say, a weekly curated guide to breaking news in his or her specialty, that's even better. That establishes what Google considers Authority. Finally, if your expert is continually refreshing your website with "deep dive" content that accompanies that curated news over a long period of time, that establishes what Google sees as Trust.

Granted, establishing Expertise, Authority and Trust the "Google Way" takes time, but "it is a good mindset to get into," says Dawn Brown, owner of Fink Marketing.

More Tips for SEO

- **Nail your on-page SEO:** On-page SEO is really nothing more than basic SEO—businesses will want to get on-page SEO right by titling their pages correctly, making sure their keywords are right, making sure their writing is easy to read and the like. Most SEO software packages help automate much of this basic SEO.
- **Nail your technical SEO:** This is a more granular version of on-page SEO and is often passed off to a web design expert or SEO expert if handled manually. Specifically, technical SEO involves ensuring your website index is right, your links work, you've got the right schema mark-up and the like. Again, this is something most SEO software packages will help automate for you to a great degree.
- **With every post, add links to related articles on your site:** This practice is also known as "internal linking." It essentially promotes the idea that visitors to your green industry website will stay engaged if every post includes a link or links that enables them to dig deeper into a specific topic.

Google's rationale here appears to be if you've got a post that includes links to additional, multiple articles on the same topic on your site, there's a very good chance you really are an authority on the topic.

- **Consider using longer, more specific keyphrases:** You can compete with media goliaths who always seem to pop-up on page one of Google search returns by using keyphrases that feature more words. Done right, those additional words enable the keyphrase to pinpoint an extremely specific idea.

Generally, fewer websites use long keyphrases, also known as "longtail" keyphrases. So when someone uses a longer keyphrase in a search that's coded into your website, there's a much better chance that your site will pop up high in search engine returns for that longer phrase.

- **Bullet-proof site security:** Google now gives higher search engine returns to every website that features an SSL certificate, indicating the site is more secure than sites without such protection. Google also warns its users to stay away from sites without such certificates. So opting for SSL is a no-brainer; you absolutely need an SSL certificate if you want to play nice with Google and get higher search engine returns.
- **Ensure fast download of your website:** Not only do fast downloads of each page make perfect business sense, but fast downloading sites are also rewarded by appearing higher in Google search engine returns.
- **Make sure you're mobile-friendly:** Was there a time when smartphones were not seemingly fused to the palms of millions of people? Smartphones are so important these days, Google announced a "mobile-first" indexing policy in July 2019. That means Google now places a heavier emphasis on how well your website performs on mobile

devices as compared to traditional computing devices. Fortunately, Google also offers a free test you can use to verify that your Web pages are mobile-friendly: search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly.

“You have to be optimized for mobile devices,” notes Laura. “We test all of our postings on various smartphones to ensure that they render quickly and correctly.”

- **Use Google Analytics:** This is an extremely useful, free tool you can use to snag daily metrics on how your website is performing and how well your SEO is performing (analytics.google.com). Specifically, you can use the tool to analyze your site each day by the number of visitors, where those visitors are coming from, how long they stay, how many pages (in aggregate) they’re viewing and more. For help demystifying the metrics, you can find all of Google Analytics terms defined in *The Ultimate Google Analytics Glossary— 2019 Edition*.

“Google Analytics provides a ton of great tools to help you figure out information about your website visitors,” adds Marisa.

- **Sign up for the free Google Search Console:** This is another free Google dashboard you can use to measure your site’s search traffic and performance, fix issues and ensure your site has the best shot to appear high-up in Google search engine returns (search.google.com/search-console/about).
- **Stay current:** While as noted, the basics of SEO have stayed pretty much intact, you need to stay abreast of how Google and other search engines tweak the ways they rank websites. That will give you the best chance for your site to appear high in search engine returns—and continue to appear high.

More Resources for SEO

Search Engine Land (searchengineland.com) and Search Engine Journal (www.searchenginejournal.com) are both great resources for such tracking. And Wordpress users can secure excellent advice from the Yoast SEO Blog: yoast.com/seo-blog.

Search Engine Journal also offers a number extremely informative, no-fluff ebooks on SEO, including “Beginner’s Guide to SEO,” “Complete Guide to SEO” and “47 Experts on the 2019 SEO Trends That Really Matter” (www.searchenginejournal.com/ebooks).

As for SEO software: Here’s a rundown of the top SEO packages currently available, according to G2Crowd, an informative business software rating service that features hundreds of thousands of reviews on all sorts of software, penned by actual business users.

- SEMrush (www.semrush.com)
- Conductor Searchlight www.conductor.com/product-overview)
- Moz Pro (moz.com/products/pro)
- Serpstat (serpstat.com/features)
- SpyFu (www.spyfu.com)
- SE Ranking (seranking.com/why-seranking.html)
- Ahrefs (ahrefs.com)
- Siteimprove (siteimprove.com/en-us)

- Netpeak Spider (netpeaksoftware.com/spider)
- Yoast (yoast.com/wordpress/plugins/seo) **GP**

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