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# Five Sparrows, LLC

## The Building Blocks of SEO for Small Business *What it Takes to Be Found Online*



*A Whitepaper by Five Sparrows, LLC*  
*[www.FiveSparrows.com](http://www.FiveSparrows.com)*

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# 1 Overview

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Why is it necessary to optimize a web site for the search engines in the first place? Basically, it's because there are millions and millions of web sites on the internet today, all different, with no standardized mechanism for indexing or organizing the information they contain. It's like a giant internet encyclopedia with no table of contents to help us find what we're looking for.

Search engines were developed in an attempt to organize all of that information and make it searchable and relevant for users. In the early days of search engines, web authors could just add "keywords" to the meta data (the behind-the-scenes code) of a web site to let the search engines know what words they wanted their sites to be associated with. But eventually, people started using all kinds of keywords that had nothing to do with their site content, and abuse of the system ultimately meant that the search engines had to get smarter about how they organized and evaluated web sites, and how they judged a site's relevance to any given search phrase.

Today, web sites must rely on search engine optimization techniques and well-optimized web pages in order to get noticed by the search engines. Since that's the most effective way to make progress in the search engine listings, it's important for small businesses to understand the difference between a web site and an optimized web site, and also to know how the basic SEO building blocks are used to prepare a site to be read, indexed, and ultimately judged relevant by the search engines.

## 2 Optimized vs. Non-Optimized

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A non-optimized web site might display perfectly fine on the web, but the search engines will all but ignore it. The search engines need to see certain optimizations in place before they can read and include the site into their databases. Some of the basic optimization techniques typically used in SEO include: 1) adding meta tags such as keywords, title, description, etc., 2) including on-page optimizations, e.g., using keywords effectively in the page text, 3) building HTML and XML sitemaps that provide access to all pages, and 4) initiating external link-building activities to boost the relevance and popularity of a web site. An optimized web site will have these elements (and probably several others), which will then help the search engines understand what the site is about and what search terms it should be associated with.

There are also several types of sites that cannot easily be read or indexed by the search engines, such as frames-based, image-based, or Flash-based sites. Template-based sites can also be a problem in certain instances, since they frequently prohibit individual page code access or block edits to the HTML meta data tags.

## 3 The Building Blocks of SEO

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Getting a web site listed in the Search Engines involves more than just meta tags and keywords. Small businesses must take a comprehensive approach to optimizing, submitting, and monitoring their web site rankings as well as the rankings of their key competitors. This is a critical step. Without proper optimization, your web site stands a good chance of never being found by your target market.

Of course, there are dozens of legitimate SEO techniques that are used to get sites noticed by the search engines, but most can be categorized in one of the five basic categories that are discussed in this whitepaper:

- research
- internal functions
- external functions
- validation testing
- reporting and monitoring

## 3.1 The first building block in SEO is *Research*

Obviously, before you can begin adjusting and optimizing your web site to be accurately read by the search engines, you have to discover what keywords and phrases should be used on your site. The only way to get a comprehensive list of the terms that will be successful for your business and your site is to simply do the research.

### 3.1.1 Keyword Research

The most important element in Search Engine success is choosing the right keywords and keyword phrases for your business and your audience. In order to make good selections, you must have access to keyword analysis tools that will enable you to determine *in real-time* how your selected keywords perform in actual web searches. You really need to know what people are *actually* searching on, not what you *think* they are searching on. Keyword research enables you to tap into how people are searching, and to know the exact words and phrases they type into the search engines to find information.

For instance, if your business sells blue widgets, you may think that “blue widgets” is the way people would search for your product. But by using the right keyword research tools and analysis, you can find out in real time what searchers are really using, whether it’s “blue widgets,” “blue widget services,” “Michigan blue widgets,” and so forth. Why spend time and money optimizing for keywords that nobody actually uses? It’s typically far more effective (and less expensive) to do the keyword research up front so you can target the appropriate keywords and phrases based on actual user data.

It is also important to know the number of times your keywords are searched on during a specific time period (e.g., 60, 90, or 120 days), how many other sites compete for those same keywords, and also to discover new keyword variations you may not have thought of that will help pinpoint the right keywords and keyphrases that will get good results.

Once you determine which keywords searchers are really using on the web, it’s important to understand how competitive each keyword is. If the term “blue widgets” gets lots of searches but is found on 10 million other sites, it might be nearly impossible for your site to rank well for this particular term. It may be better to go with a keyword that gets fewer searches, but also has fewer competing web sites.

Searchers today have also become accustomed to using very specific, multiple-word search phrases when they are looking for information on the web. Often, the most popular keywords are actually three or four single keywords strung together to create a search phrase, also referred to as “long tail” keywords. Remember to consider the long tail keywords and phrases when researching keywords to be used in optimization.

### 3.1.2 Competitive Research & Analysis

Competitive Research & Analysis is the process of investigating the companies that also compete for your keywords and keyword phrases, then determining the best way to position your company web site based on this data.

Competitive Web Analysis can help identify what your competitors are doing with their web marketing, and help you determine what can be done to improve your own SEO strategy. It can also help you identify the optimizations you may be missing that your competitors are already using to their benefit.

For example, do your competitors use any keywords that you haven’t thought of, or that you have forgotten about? Where are all of your competitors’ links coming from, and who owns those sites? Once you understand your competitors’ keyword strategies, you

can refine your own efforts and work toward jumping ahead of your competition in the search engine rankings.

## 3.2 Internal Functions – Behind the Scenes Meta Data

Meta Data is behind-the-scenes code on a web page that is not visible to regular web site visitors, but search engines depend on it when evaluating a web site. There are several types of meta data tags, but the most influential for search engine optimization are the *title* and *description* meta data tags. These are displayed on the search engine results page when your site comes up in a search.

Typically, when your site comes up in the search results, the title tag (up to 80 characters) is displayed as a link to your web site in blue, underlined text. The description (up to 200 characters) is displayed beneath the title. Most search engines limit the number of characters they will display from meta data tags, so it's important to be concise when writing keyword-rich meta data tags and stay under the recommended number of characters for each tag. Meta data that goes beyond these limits is often truncated and/or ignored.

HTML meta data for the title and description tags must be inserted into each individual web page on your site, and the data should vary from page to page. The title tag must be well-crafted and keyword-rich, something that goes beyond the simple addition of your company name. The description tag should be both powerful and comply with character size limits, using the targeted keywords and text appropriate for each individual page.

### 3.2.1 Geo Tagging

Geo tagging is the practice of adding location-specific geographical identifiers to the meta data on a web page. It is based on positions obtained from Global Positioning System (GPS) data that presents locations in a latitude/longitude coordinate system.

There are a number of geo-tag generator web sites available, where you simply enter your address and it will generate the necessary geo-tag meta data to add to your web pages. The geo-tagging data for Five Sparrows below was generated with the free tool available at <http://www.geo-tag.de/generator/en.html>.

```
<meta name="geo.region" content="US-MI" />  
<meta name="geo.position" content="42.66;-83.75" />  
<meta name="ICBM" content="42.66, -83.75" />
```

### 3.2.2 Other Informational Meta Data Tags

There are many other types of meta data that can be added to your web page code, although they will not necessarily help you with your search engine rankings. What it will help you with is adhering to good coding practice and provide supplemental information about other elements in your document. Here is an example of the additional meta data used in the Five Sparrows web site:

```
<meta id="MetaCopyright" name="COPYRIGHT" content="Copyright (c) 2008 by Five Sparrows, LLC" />  
<meta id="MetaAuthor" name="AUTHOR" content="Five Sparrow, LLC" />  
<meta name="RESOURCE-TYPE" content="DOCUMENT" />  
<meta name="DISTRIBUTION" content="GLOBAL" />  
<meta name="ROBOTS" content="INDEX, FOLLOW" />  
<meta name="REVISIT-AFTER" content="1 DAYS" />  
<meta name="RATING" content="GENERAL" />  
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=utf-8" />
```

## Page Optimization

On-page optimizations are the elements that are visible to web site visitors, including the keywords that are used in page content, headers, sub-headers, image alt tags, and anchor text (link text). Many other factors should be considered with on-page elements, such as keyword densities that ensure the keywords are used enough to be helpful to the search engines, but not too much since it could be considered keyword spamming.

Other on-page elements that contribute to good search engine rankings include the correct use of headings and sub-headings, bulleted lists, and bold or italicized words for emphasis. Also, anchor text (the text that is used in a hypertext link) can also be helpful in boosting search engine scores. Use your keywords and phrases whenever possible as anchor text for your on-page links. All of these elements provide the search engine spiders with clues about what you think is important on your web page.

### 3.2.3 Page Testing – Validate the Work

After the on-page optimization work has been completed, your pages must undergo a series of test and validation procedures to make sure the web site is optimized accurately, and that the site will perform correctly once the search engines index the pages of your web site.

Testing should include a keyword density report, which identifies how effectively the keywords and keyword phrases have been used in the page content. Keywords must be used often enough to be effective with the search engines, but not too much to be considered spamming. Optimum keyword densities for keywords and keyword phrases are between 2% and 6%. Densities that are higher than that are at risk of being flagged as keyword spamming. Densities that are lower than that are too low to be useful to the search engines.

Testing should also include a spider simulation test, which simulates what a search engine spider will see when it visits the web site. A spider simulation basically validates the syntax of the behind-the-scenes optimization work, making sure that the search engines can accurately read the meta data tags and HTML elements correctly.

Another important validation test is a listing simulation test, which demonstrates what the web site listing will look like when displayed on the search engine results pages. Typically, search engines will display the meta data title tag and the description meta data tag, so it's important to make sure that the characters display as intended and are not truncated because of character limits that have been exceeded.

### 3.2.4 Site Maps & Robot Files

All of the major search engines have their own method of indexing web sites and ranking results, but one of the things they do have in common is that they all need web pages that are readable by the search engine spiders that visit your site. Spiders must be able to find and read your web pages accurately in order to properly index your site and display search results listings with the correct title, description, and link text.

#### Site Maps

There are two types of sitemaps that are common to optimized web sites, **HTML sitemaps** and **XML sitemaps**. HTML sitemaps are visible to users, and are basically a list all of the pages of the web site, with links to each individual page. Search engines navigate the web via links, so when an HTML sitemap is included in a site, it provides a direct path to each web page so the search engine can access and index each page of the site.

Having site maps for your web site helps the search engines quickly and easily discover links to each one of the individual web pages on your site. The most important place for the HTML site map link is on the home page, because when a search engine spider finds and follows the site map link on the home page, it will then find and follow links to all pages from there.

Creating a site map for your web site not only ensures that the search engines will find links that lead them directly to each one of your web pages, it will also provides your visitors with a complete list of your site's pages all in one place.

XML sitemaps are a specific type of code file that is typically generated by a script or a special tool that produces an XML code file. XML sitemaps contain very specific information designed specifically for search engines, such as priority and change frequency. They are not visible to users on the site, but are placed in the root directory of the web site on the server.

### **Robot Files**

Another special type of file created just for the search engines is called a Robots.txt file. A robots.txt file for your web site acts like an invitation to the search engine spiders, and is the first thing a search engine spider looks for when it visits your site.

Robot.txt files are also placed in the root directory of the web site on the server, and provide specific directions for the search engine robots on how to index the web site, including instructions for any files or directories that may be off limits to the search engines (like image directories, internal files, web scripts, or confidential company directories).

## **3.3 External Functions**

In addition to the strategies used internally, there are a number of external functions that can be used to help improve your web site's results in the search engine rankings. Although there are also some new technologies being developed today (such as social media) that may prove to be helpful as well, this section will discuss four existing tactics that are typically useful in improving a web site's search engine rankings.

### **3.3.1 Domain Names**

The web address that you register for your web site (your domain name) can actually help you in the search engines, especially if you are able to use your best keywords or keyword phrase in the domain name itself. Domain names that are at least six months old generally get more attention from search engines, mostly because it implies (to Google, anyway) that the site is permanent and is intended to be a legitimate, long-term web site.

When selecting a domain name, the best top level domains (TLDs) to use are .com, .net, .org, or .edu. These domains typically get the best results in the search engine rankings, with .com and .edu being the most successful. Try to find a domain name that includes your main keywords, but if none are available (e.g., already taken by other sites), try adding dashes between the words until you find a domain name that is available. If you already have an existing domain name, you consider purchasing a second domain that is keyword-based, and then point it to your existing site as well.

### 3.3.2 Inbound Links

Up to 75% of your ranking score in Google is determined by the number of quality inbound links that point to your web site. To the search engines, each inbound link that points to your site is a “vote” for your web site. The value of inbound links depends not only on the quantity of links that point to your site, but also the *quality* of the links that point to your site. For example, a link on a website with similar or complimentary topics will be much more helpful than a link from a FFA (Free For All) link page or a link from a web site that has nothing in common with yours. When calculating link popularity, search engines take into consideration the quality of the page that is linking to you as well as many, many other factors.

Search engines, especially Google, determine how high your site should rank based in part on the number of inbound links that point to your site. The more inbound links, the better your site will do in the search engines as long as the inbound links are coming from a variety of other “quality” sites. Inbound links can also provide additional traffic sources for your web site and increase the overall visibility of your site on the internet.

### 3.3.3 Directory Submission

Online directories are a great way to get your business listed in multiple places on the web, but they are also a good source of credible, quality inbound links to your web site. Online directories really serve two important purposes – first; they provide more web exposure for your business as people continue to depend on the Internet when looking for information (on computers, cell phones, PDA devices, etc.), and second; they add to your inbound link count which can help improve your rankings in the search engines.

Some online directories are free while others require a fee, but it’s important to balance your directory submissions among local, national, and world-wide outlets. The best results come from being listed in multiple types of directories, such as locally focused, geographically focused, industry focused, general information directories, etc.

Most top online directories also make their data accessible to the smaller online directories, meaning listings can often appear in hundreds of smaller online directories as well.

Recent studies have shown that more than 80% of consumers today consistently turn to search engines when looking for information about businesses, rather than looking up information in printed phone directories (*WebVisible and Nielsen*). Of course, the convenience of having directory information instantly available on computers, cell phones, PDA devices, etc., is a growing trend that your business probably cannot afford to ignore. But by using online directories, you can also help build quality inbound links to your web site at the same time, which has been shown to be a huge factor in determining how well your site will rank in the search engine results.

There are many types of online directories to consider, including both the paid and free varieties. In either case, be sure to stick with only the reputable directories, such as [www.yellowpages.com](http://www.yellowpages.com) (which offers both paid and free listings to businesses). When submitting your business information to an online directory, always be as complete and specific as possible. Research has shown that the more complete a business profile is, the better the results for both users and search engines.

### 3.3.4 Press Releases

Another terrific source of both inbound links and web visibility is to send out press releases about your business. Press releases have traditionally been used to enhance your marketing efforts and help build brand-recognition and customer awareness, but they are also very effective in building in-bound links and driving traffic to your web site.

Today, there are many low-cost or no-cost media outlets on the web that accept press releases from businesses of all sizes, such as [www.prweb.com](http://www.prweb.com) or [www.pressexposure.com](http://www.pressexposure.com). Using web outlets for press releases means that once your company's news is published to a web outlet, it creates inbound links to your site in several places. First, the news outlet site will post your release, creating inbound links to your site. But then, any other sites that decide to "pick up" your release and report on it creates even more inbound links. It's like ripples in a pond; the more exposure your press release gets, the farther your links carry out onto the web.

Distributing press releases to web outlets has many advantages for small businesses, especially the lower cost and better accessibility. Chances are good that if you submit to web outlets, they will publish your press release on their sites, even if it doesn't spread any further than that. But the big benefits of submitting to web outlets are realized when your press release is picked up by other sources on the web, creating additional inbound links to your web site and improving overall web exposure for your business.

## 3.4 Tracking & Monitoring Results

Of course after optimizing a web site, it's critical to monitor how the optimization is working for each of your key phrase targets, and determine if things need to be adjusted or fine-tuned as time goes by. In order to do this, you must monitor, analyze, and track the site's progress in the search engines every month so you know if your site shows up on page 1 or page 1001, or if it shows up at all.

Because tracking your progress is so important, search engine monitoring should be part of your regular marketing activity each month. By watching your search engine positions, you are able to not only evaluate the effectiveness of the optimization work, but also intervene if necessary to stop any negative trends that could threaten your hard-earned rankings. Monitoring your progress allows you to act or react according to how your keywords and keyword phrases are performing, and will also help keep your site ranking ahead of your competitors.

## 4 Conclusion

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A small business web site, even an optimized one, is still considered a work in progress. Once the site has been thoroughly optimized and you are monitoring results, the search engines will have a better understanding of what your site is about and the search terms that you would like to be listed for. However, even if your site manages to break into the top positions in the search engine rankings, it certainly will not stay there unless you have a plan to update your site and add new content on a regular basis.

Search engines thrive on fresh content, but if your web site content never changes, the search engine spiders will eventually stop visiting your site, assuming that it must not be very important if it's been left unattended or has gone "stale." Search engines must provide their users with the latest, most relevant information possible, and one of the ways they determine if a site is a good resource is by looking at how often the web site gets updated or changed.

Unfortunately for many small businesses, it's just not that easy to keep adding new content all the time. It can be a challenge to constantly come up with new things to add to the site, and the time commitment can seem daunting. But since fresh content is so critical to the success of your web site,

it's usually worth the time and effort it takes to maintain your site - for the sake of your visitors as well as your search engine rankings.

To help make it easier for you to keep your web site fresh and updated, here are some suggestions you can use to create new web site content and keep the search engines coming back:

**1. Use a RSS feed on your home page.** A RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed is simply a "feed" of information (such as news headlines, industry announcements, articles, updates, etc.) that comes from another web site (or blog) and is displayed on your web page. It's useful to your search engine rankings, though, because a RSS feed that will provide you with updated, fresh content on a regular basis.

**2. Add a Blog (and/or other social media).** By now, you probably know that blogging and social media has become a big hit with business web sites. Why? Because it is a great way to communicate with your customers, add content to your web site, and get attention from the search engines.

**4. Re-Use Existing Marketing Materials.** Remember that new brochure you just had printed? How about the ad you ran last week in a local publication? If you have existing marketing materials that are just sitting around, why not re-use them as new content on your web site? You can use almost any marketing materials that you already have, including coupons, recent articles or publicity, or new product information. If it's not already on your web site, maybe it should be!

**5. Send E-Newsletters.** E-Newsletters are a great way to add content to your web site, since the content of each e-newsletter that you send to your email list can also be published as business articles or news items on your web site. E-Newsletters also give you a way to keep in touch with your customers and keep your company's name and message in front of them, which helps you win mindshare and improve name recognition, too!

## 5 How to Get Help or Find More Information

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Five Sparrows, LLC provides high-quality, professional web site and marketing services to small businesses and non-profit organizations at prices that fit small business budgets. We work extremely hard to keep prices affordable for our clients, while giving them access to the same web site and marketing services that have always been available to large companies with big budgets.

We offer a complete line of services including web site development, search engine optimization (SEO), and SEO reporting and monitoring services. We offer a full range of products and services at a fraction of the cost of traditional web site firms, and we would be glad to provide you with more information on any of the material provided to you in this whitepaper.

If you'd like a customized marketing and search engine strategy for your small business that will result in higher search engine rankings and better overall visibility on the web, please contact us to see how we can help.

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