



Ranking Factors for SEO

By: Ivan Strouchliak

Rating: ★★★★★ / 1

2009-03-17

What factors affect how high your web page will rank in Google? There's a long list, and some of the items on it might surprise you. In this article, we will begin to wade through these factors, explain why they are important, and what you can do to get them working for you. This is the first part of a five-part series.

Internal Link Structure

Internal linking is one of the most important factors that impact search engines rankings. Internal links pass page rank in a fashion similar to external links. If a certain page is cited from many pages, it is considered important. Use of targeted anchor text also plays a role. If you're going after "green widgets," make sure internal links point to that page with "green widgets" as their text for the link.

Age of the Page

This depends on your content model. If you focus on news, then fresh pages are better. If you provide regular content, then the age of the document is computed with an overall relevancy score. There are many other factors to consider, like domain age, link age and number of links, but it can be one of the trust factors.

Explore some search results on Google and you will find many old, poorly designed pages.

External Links

Who you link out, it gives the search engines a clue as to the quality of your pages. If X site links to a bad neighborhood, it will be considered part of that neighborhood and get slapped. Outbound links to quality sites indicate the quality of your content, and are likely used in the relevancy computation.

There are many top-ranking sites that don't link to anyone, so this may only affect newer sites. This is another indicator used in conjunction with other factors. Linking out to quality sources won't get the rankings, but if done with other SEO activity it helps with the overall trust and relevancy score.

Links to spam can get you flagged as spam, so be careful.

Page Updates

This depends on your vertical. If you're after "...your keyword + news," then page updates are essential. If you're providing "cat food" information, it's a different story.

We tried the update trick on a financial website in a very competitive marketplace. The update was on the home page, about 150 words, every day. Our crawl rate was once in several days, but for some reason we kept updating the page every day (it must be the copywriter who sent daily content; what the hell were we supposed to do with it? :-). There was no effect on rankings at all.

Frequent page updates may also change content and keywords within tags, which may affect the rankings. There are many top ranking documents in search results that haven't been updated in ages, so it seems this factor is not as crucial on the page level. Updating the site is more important.

I don't think search engines can really tell the quality of the document directly, assuming all other factors (inbound links, internal links, etc) are not counted. If you take two documents of the same length, on the same topic, one written by a 10th grader who knows nothing about the topic and was given 30 minutes to research it, and the other by an expert who spent 15 years in the field, can search engines really spot a difference? Assuming, of course, that there are no other clues.

There's the LSI and language pattern analysis, but I don't believe search engines put too much weight on this factor.

Quality content is great for one-way links. When people see quality they link to it, so it's a killer technique for link building, but I don't think search engines can tell the difference without other indicators, at least for now.

Grammar

Misspelled keywords are part of the PPC economy. Microsoft even has the Keyword Mutation Detector tool (who was the smart guy that came up with that name?) that spots misspelled keywords and help advertisers bid.

I don't think search engines really care about proper spelling, but we haven't tried ranking misspelled pages.

Do your grammar check in Word, Firefox, Dreamweaver or any other application. Open Office is free, and it features a great spell checker. The grammar is more of a user experience issue than a search engine issue.

Amount of Content

We ranked many sites with little content, including those with Flash. This is a factor in the overall relevancy computation, but not a deciding one. If external links can make up for having relatively little content, than it's okay to have a somewhat small amount of content on your pages.

You may miss many long tail searches (which send a lot of traffic) if there's little content. It's also easier to get one-way links if there's some killer content on your pages.

Validation

As long as the code doesn't prevent or stop bots from spidering, validation doesn't matter.

It does create more jobs in the SEO field, however, so for this sake let's say that validation matters to search engines.

Number of Folders

The number of folders is represented with a slash in the URL. Example:
www.site.com/folder/folder/folder/folder/page.html

Spiders can crawl deeply into the web, and it is the commercial interest of the search engines to make sure they have all the content. If a page is within many folders, *but* has many external and internal links, it probably doesn't matter.

Your PageRank measurement is based on the distribution of links to your domain from around the web. Quality links matter the most. The more decent links you have, the better. Look at Wikipedia and About.com. Many of the well-ranking pages have few links, but rank purely on the domain's link power.

I believe link popularity (or link authority) is the most important ranking factor in Google. Once you have link popularity on a domain, you can easily rank for medium competitive terms with no or few links, while less authoritative sites have to do much more work.

Anchor Text of Inbound Links

If you don't know what [anchor text](#) is, click the link and learn.

Anchor text is one of the most important items to work on in search engine optimization. The anchor text of external links leading into your pages is the biggest indicator of what your website is about. If you want to rank for "grey dogs," then make sure that outside and internal links have "grey dogs" in their anchor text.

Google has also moved away from pure anchor text to authority links from power domains. A generic link from a highly authoritative PR 8 site, with nothing but the address as the anchor text, and a page title related to your targeted keyword may be more valuable than 10 keyword-rich links from low quality directories.

Anchor text can also hurt you if you do not vary it. For example, if you get 100 links, all with "grey dogs" as the anchor text, this will set off red flags. Varying the anchor text to appear more natural is very important.

Age of Link

The older the link the better, just like your domain.

New links need to age several months before they start passing value. This may be part of Google's algorithms to fight spam. If a link survives for a certain period of time, then it's a good indicator that the link is pretty decent.

Many SEOs think of aged links like wine; the older it is, the better.

Google puts weight on the text surrounding the link.

If a link with the anchor text "dog food" is surrounded by content about insurance, how relevant can that link be? This would be a good reason to discount or lower the effect of that link.

Content is a perfect indicator of link quality. It puts less emphasis on footer links, which are likely to be bought or swapped, but values editorial links from content much more. This lead to the new SEO technique of short burst blog posts with links to the targeted site. It camouflages a link in between content and makes it look natural. There's also the pay-per-post industry where SEOs pay bloggers per each post to include links.

"I launched a site called Fruit Cast a year or so ago and it ranked for podcast advertising right away because of the text surrounding the links. It still ranks today and I have nothing on that site." – Neil Patel

Domain of a Linking Site

The .edu and .gov domains tend to carry more trust because they are harder to manipulate. The notion behind bias towards those domains is this – it's almost impossible to buy a link from professors, and .edu domains only link out to very informative parts of the web, which Google looks on very favorably.

This seems to be the factor that makes those links so desirable.

University and government domains also tend to be older, with plenty of inbound links from around the web, which a link popularity factor.

If you know some pros in your field who have no presence on the net, try getting some papers, research or articles from them. Offer to host those articles in the editorial section of your site (make sure there are no links to commercial offers there) and then lobby for links from .edu and .gov webmasters. You can also invest in creation of killer content, but be sure to minimize the commercial elements of the site.

We will continue this in the next article, in which I will touch on topics, hosted domains, link updates, rate of links, rate of new pages and more.

DISCLAIMER: The content provided in this article is not warranted or guaranteed by Developer Shed, Inc. The content provided is intended for entertainment and/or educational purposes in order to introduce to the reader key ideas, concepts, and/or product reviews. As such it is incumbent upon the reader to employ real-world tactics for security and implementation of best practices. We are not liable for any negative consequences that may result from implementing any information covered in our articles or tutorials. If this is a hardware review, it is not recommended to open and/or modify your hardware.