



## WHITE PAPER: FOUNDATIONAL SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION—BEST PRACTICES

### INTRODUCTION

As the Internet has become the dominant research tool of business, including C-level executives, a firm's online visibility and awareness plays a larger role in business development. A Forbes survey on the daily Internet usage of corporate executives revealed that a significant percentage of C-level execs in the survey use the Internet daily.

- **54% C- level executives do online research**
- **34% Go to the Web first to find information on a product or service**
- **86% Use search engines**

Analyze keywords by practice and lawyer, and track their effectiveness in finding your site. Use your analytics data to track visitors' travel patterns once on your site.

If you compare the 86% of C-level executives utilizing search to the 77% of the general public utilizing search as a recent Nielson study indicated, you see that online search is a critical research tool for enterprise level decision makers. This reinforces how important it is for firms to develop and implement a thoughtful online marketing strategy. And any online marketing strategy starts with foundational search engine optimization of the firm's Web site.

Below are some simple guidelines to follow when focusing on search engine optimization for your Web site.

### KEYWORDS

Even though Google's formula changes regularly and it currently isn't focusing on keywords, they are a focus of the other popular search engines, and therefore, we think a best practice. Users enter keywords and key-phrases in search engines to get information they need—your goal is to optimize your site for such words and phrases. It is important to identify keywords not only for the firm as a whole, but also for individual practices and industries. Repeat these keywords in all relevant areas of content – including descriptions, press releases, articles, publications and lawyer biographies.



Some keywords quick tips follow.

■ **Keywords in title tag**

This is one of the most important places to have a keyword, because what is written inside the title tag shows in search results as your page title. The title tag must be short (six or seven words at most) and the keyword must be near the beginning. (The title tag is the word or string of words located in the upper left-hand corner of your browser window.)

■ **Keywords in URL**

Keywords in URLs matter - e.g - <http://yourlawfirm.com/SOX>, where "SOX" is the keyword you hope to rank well. But if you don't have the same keywords in other parts of the document, it doesn't matter if you have them in the URL (note that "Sarbanes-Oxley" doesn't translate into SOX from an SEO standpoint). It is important here to use the "Vanity URL" functionality provided in the CP Web Pilot tool.

■ **Keyword density in document text**

Keyword density is another important factor. You can check it by viewing [www.seo.chat.com](http://www.seo.chat.com) and choosing the Keyword Density Calculator from the SEO Tools menu. 3-7 % for major keywords is best, 1-2% density for minor keywords. *Keyword density over 10% is suspicious and looks more like keyword stuffing than naturally written text. This is considered a "black hat" practice and should be avoided.*

■ **Keywords in anchor text**

This is also important, especially for the anchor text of inbound links. If you have the keyword in the anchor text in a link from another site, this is regarded as getting a "vote" from this site, not only about your site in general, but about the keyword in particular.

■ **Keywords in headings**

Keywords in headings matter. But beware that your page has relevant text that contains or supports the particular keyword.

■ **Keywords in the beginning of a document**

This also counts, though not as much as anchor text, title tags or headings. However, note that the beginning of a document does not necessarily mean the first paragraph. For instance, if your page begins with a table, you will want to make sure your keywords are included there.



■ **Keywords in metatags**

This is basically irrelevant for Google SEO (because Google’s PageRank tool continues to become more sophisticated in identifying content that can be viewed by the user), but it is still applicable for Yahoo and MSN. We believe it is still a best practice, because it keeps lawyers focused on the most important keywords in their practices and industries. And, it is an attribute in the Ten Foundational Best Practices for Web sites.

■ **Keyword proximity**

Keyword proximity measures how close in the text the keywords are. It is best if they are immediately one after the other (e.g. “bankruptcy and insolvency”), with no other words between them. For instance, if you have “bankruptcy” in the first paragraph and “insolvency” in the third paragraph, this counts, but not as much as having the phrase “bankruptcy and insolvency” without any other words in between. Keyword proximity is applicable for keyword phrases that consist of two or more words.

■ **Keyword phrases or “key-phrases”**

In addition to keywords, you can optimize for keyword phrases that consist of several words – e.g. “full-service law firm in Florida.” It is best when the keyword phrases you optimize are popular ones—the goal is to get a lot of exact matches of the search string. But sometimes it makes sense to optimize for two or three separate keywords (“full-service law firm” and “Florida”) than for one longer phrase that might get an exact match only occasionally.

■ **Secondary keywords**

Optimizing for secondary (or less obvious) keywords can be a goldmine. When your competitors are focused on only the most popular keywords, you can rank much higher for pages that are optimized for the secondary words. For instance, “corporate securities law” is a key-phrase in much demand and is used frequently in law firm Web site content. However, using the secondary terms “corporate registration” and “equity securities” (suggested by Google AdWords) may net you additional and better-targeted traffic.



A good way to begin a secondary keyword list is to use online keyword tools, such as the Google Ad Words Keyword Tool (requires registration) or <http://inventory.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/> (does not require registration). Type in your primary keyword and hit "Enter" and you will receive a list of additional phrases that Web site users type in search engines. Once you have identified the secondary keywords most applicable to your firm, begin to weave them into your content.

■ **Synonyms**

Optimize for synonyms of your target keywords, in addition to the main keywords. Sometimes using different words or more common terms that mean the same thing can greatly improve your results. For instance, you may be more successful using the keyword "M&A" rather than "mergers and acquisitions" or "lawyers" rather than "attorneys." Search engines are becoming smarter every day and are developing their systems to recognize synonyms when ranking sites. Optimizing for synonyms will put you ahead of the game.

## CONTENT

In addition to keywords, the type of content and the way it flows in on your Web site is important.

Here are some quick tips for ensuring that you have the best search engine-friendly content on your Web site:

■ **Unique content**

Having better and deeper relevant content, which is different from the content on other sites, both in topics covered and wording is a real boost to your site's rankings.

■ **Frequency of content change**

Frequent changes are favored by your search engine visitors - and your human visitors! You are rewarded when you regularly add fresh, new content, but you get few points if you are simply making small updates or edits to existing content.



- **Keyword font size**

When a keyword in the page text is in a larger font size in comparison to other text, this makes it more noticeable; therefore, it is considered to be more important than the rest of the text. This could include paragraph headings, sidebars and call-outs, which generally are in larger font sizes than the rest of the text. However, as you are designing the interior pages of your site, think through this—you don't want to sacrifice good design in the process of maximizing your SEO.

- **Keyword formatting**

Bold and italics are another way to emphasize important keywords and phrases. However, use bold, italics and larger font sizes sparingly, or you might be perceived as black-hatting it (you'll also have poor design implications).

- **Age of page content**

Recent page content is favored over "old" content.

- **File size**

Generally, long pages are not favored, or at least you can achieve better rankings if you have three short rather than one long page on a given topic. Find ways to split long pages and descriptions into multiple smaller ones.

- **HTML text**

The more content that can be placed in HTML on your Web site, the better. Spiders are often unable to crawl PDFs and other image-based text, so you lose SEO potential with these document types. If it is necessary to upload a PDF document on your Web site, ensure that it is a searchable PDF (if possible) and ensure that the content also appears in HTML text. Also, be mindful that an HTML page and a searchable PDF could be deemed "duplicate content" as detailed later in the over-optimization section of this White Paper. In these cases, you can add instruct robots not to search the PDF version of the document by adding a small bit of code to your Web site.



## BACKLINK BUILDING CAMPAIGN

Building quality “backlinks” is one of the most important factors in Search Engine Optimization. Backlinks link your Web site to another Web site. The number of backlinks is an indication of the popularity or importance of that Web site. They are important for SEO because some search engines, especially Google, give more credit to Web sites that have a higher number of quality backlinks, and consider these Web sites more “relevant” than others in their results pages for a search query.

However, it is not enough just to have a lot of backlinks, it is the *quality* of them along with the quantity that help you rank better. A backlink could be considered as a “quality backlink” if 1) the theme of the connecting Web site is similar to your Web site; and 2) it links to your Web site with the keyword or key-phrase that you are trying to optimize.

Here are some quick tips for building effective backlinks:

- **Anchor text of inbound links**

As discussed in the keywords section, this is one of the most important factors for good rankings. It is best if you have a keyword in the anchor text, but you can see success here even if you don't.

- **Origin of inbound links**

Besides the anchor text, it is important if the site that links to you is a “reputable” one.

- **Links from similar sites**

Having links from similar sites is very useful. It indicates that the competition is “voting” for you, and you are popular within your legal community. Consider links from legal blogs.

- **Links from .edu and .gov sites**

These links are important, because .edu and .gov sites are considered more reputable than .com, .biz, .info, etc. domains. Additionally, such links are perceived as harder to obtain. A good starting place?—seek links from the law schools of your lawyers and at which you recruit summer associates. Link to the Careers page of your site, not your home page. (This is where vanity URLs come in handy.)



Avoid “black hat” SEO practices, such as buying links—the red flag is if you’ve gotten too many new links in too short a time period.

■ **Number of backlinks**

Generally, the more, the better. But the reputation of the sites that link to you is more important than their number. Also important is the backlinked sites’ anchor text, whether there is a keyword in it and how old the sites are.

■ **Anchor text of internal links**

Internal links are links within one section of your site to another. This also matters, though not as much as the anchor text of inbound links.

■ **Around-the-anchor text**

The text that is immediately before and after the anchor text also matters, because it further indicates the relevance of the link – i.e., if the link is artificial or it naturally flows as part of the text.

■ **Age of inbound links**

The older, the better. Getting many new links in a short time may suggest a “black hat” practice of “buying” them.

■ **Links from directories**

These are useful, though it depends on which directories. Being listed in DMOZ, Yahoo Directory and similar directories is a great boost for your ranking. However, having numerous links from one Web site is useless and it can even be regarded as link spamming, if you have hundreds or thousands of such links. These are referred to as “link farms.” Links from public relation Web sites and legal directories can produce positive results, however be mindful of having too many links.

■ **Number of outgoing links on the page that links to you**

If a page links to your Web site, and it also includes 100 links to other Web sites, it isn’t helpful. The fewer site links on a page, the better for you. The link to your Web site looks more important.



## SEO BASICS AND HOUSEKEEPING

At Content Pilot, we handle most of the daily housekeeping items for you. We want to keep you aware of some of the important areas we handle in your Content Pilot CMS, and other basic items you can track to ensure a higher SEO ranking.

Here is a basic list of some of the SEO tips Web site administrators and marketers often forget, but that are important:

Spiders love large sites, so ensure that any vertical or mini-site strategy doesn't detract from the strengths of your main site.

- **Keyword-rich URLs and filenames**

These are important, especially for Yahoo! and MSN.

- **Site Accessibility**

This is another fundamental issue, but one that is often neglected. If the site (or separate pages) is inaccessible because of broken links, 404 errors, password-protected areas and unavailable images, then the site simply can't be indexed.

- **Site map**

It's important to have a complete and up-to-date site map, visitors love it and spiders love it, no matter if it is a plain vanilla HTML sitemap or the special Google sitemap format. With CP Web Pilot, the site map updates automatically any time you make add or delete a page.

- **Site size matters**

Spiders love large sites. However, if not carefully thought through, big sites can be user-unfriendly and difficult to navigate. Consider separating your big site into logical mini-sites or vertical sites. On the other hand, there are few sites that are penalized because they are 20,000+ page sites, so don't split your site in pieces only because it is getting larger. Your firm and practice strategy should dictate when and if you divide the main Web site into smaller mini-sites.



■ **Age—older is better**

As with wine and cheese, older URLs are respected more. The idea is that an old, established URL is more “trustworthy” (they have been around and are here to stay) than a new site that has just popped up. If you have a URL that isn’t intuitive [www.xyzlaw.com](http://www.xyzlaw.com) and you now think that you should use [www.firmname.com](http://www.firmname.com), there are a couple things to consider. Keep the old URL, because it’s “established.” Point the new URL (firmname.com) to the old URL, so when I type in firmname.com, the URL that shows up in the browser is xyzlaw.com. To do this, instruct your Web developer to utilize a “301 redirect” so that you don’t lose the positive SEO points from your previous URL.

■ **Site theme**

It is not only keywords in URLs and on a page that matter. The site theme (e.g. law firm Web site) is even more important for good ranking because when the site fits into one theme, this boosts the rankings of all its pages that are related to this theme. As mentioned before, building mini-sites around a particular theme or niche area is important for to gain positive SEO status.

## **OVER-OPTIMIZATION**

The fight to top search engines’ results knows no limits – neither ethical, nor technical. There are often reports of sites that have been temporarily or permanently excluded from Google and other search engines because of malpractice—using “black hat” SEO optimization techniques.

The reaction of search engine managers is easy to understand – with the many tricks that SEO experts include in their arsenal, the relevancy of returned results is seriously compromised, to the point where search engines could deliver completely irrelevant and manipulated search results. And even if search engines do not discover your black-hat practices right away, your competitors might report you.



To avoid being placed on the “no” list, here are final thoughts to keep in mind:

■ **Keyword Stuffing**

Sometimes SEO experts go too far in their desire to push their clients' sites to top positions and resort to questionable practices, such as keyword stuffing. Keyword stuffing is considered an unethical practice—it occurs when you use the keyword in question throughout the text too often. Keeping in mind that the recommended keyword density is from 3 to 7%, anything above this starts to look like keyword stuffing. Be aware that this will likely get noticed by search engines.

■ **Duplicate Content**

Google warns publishers in its guidelines about having the same content on multiple pages. Duplicate content is defined as text that is exactly the same as text on a different page on the SAME site (or on a sister site, or on a site that is heavily linked to the site in question and it can be presumed that the two sites are related). For example, when you copy and paste the same paragraphs from one page on your site to another, then you might expect to see your site's rank drop.

We realize that duplicate content is necessary in your marketing efforts (publishing content on your main Web site and an ancillary site or blog – or repurposing a *pro bono* description in the Careers section to the About Us section), but our advice is to think through it carefully and don't overdo it. When you do re-publish content, attempt to create content that is unique to that particular posting. In the instance of the *pro bono* description, we suggest you utilize internal links where the *pro bono* description actually lives in the About Us section and the *pro bono* description in the Careers section merely links back to the original description.

If you syndicate content on your site, make sure it links back to the original syndicated article. And avoid using repetitious boilerplate content at the bottom of pages, such as press releases on your Web site. Delete the boilerplate before you repurpose them on your Web site.

Delete boilerplate language from news releases and practice materials before you repurpose them to your Web site.



■ **Links Spam**

Links are another major SEO tool, and like the other tools, they can be misused. While backlinks are important (for Yahoo, the quantity of backlinks are important, while for Google it is more important from what sites backlinks come), getting dozens or more in-bound links from a link farm or a blacklisted site is begging to be penalized. Also, if outbound links (links from your site to other sites) considerably outnumber your inbound links (links from other sites to your site), then you have put too much effort in creating useless links. This will not improve your rankings.

■ **Illegal Content**

Using other people's copyrighted content without their permission or using content that promotes legal violations can get you kicked out of search engines.

■ **Single pixel links**

When you have a link that is a pixel or so wide, it is invisible for humans to see, so nobody will click on it. It is obvious that this link is an attempt to manipulate search engines – don't do this.

■ **Invisible text**

This is a black hat SEO practice. When spiders discover that you have text designed just for them but not for humans, don't be surprised if you get penalized.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Remember that SEO is both art and science, and it is always changing. We look forward to visiting with you and answering your questions about how CP Web Pilot can help you with foundational search engine optimization.



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