

How to Roll Out the Red Carpet for Search Engines

By Kevin Richardson

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There's nothing more frustrating for a Web surfer than not being able to find something on the Internet. You just know that it has to be "out there" somewhere -- but where?

Put yourself in your prospects' shoes for a moment...

You're using a favorite search engine to locate information on "weight-control exercise programs." You quickly scan through the first page or two of search results and click on a link that looks promising. People rarely go beyond the second page of results.

Now if your site appeared in those first two pages and caught the Web surfer's eye -- home run! Otherwise, you've been shut out.

You see, this is really bad news if you were counting on search engines to deliver tons of visitors to your site. And it's especially disappointing for health sites, because that's how most people will arrive at your virtual doorstep.

A Harris Interactive study revealed that most of the 100 million people who seek online health information use a portal or search engine. In fact, only 24 percent go directly to a health site. Obviously we need to be doing some things proactively to help out the search engines so people can find us easily.

Rolling Out the Red Carpet for Search Engines

If you want to send your page hit counter spinning into the stratosphere, we should take a lesson in service from five-star hotels:

Anticipate the needs of guests and they'll return again and again;
ignore their needs and they'll go elsewhere.

Just replace "guests" with "search engines" and you get the picture of why this is important. Search engines have unique needs. It's our task to find out what they needs and give it to them.

Master some of the search engine positioning techniques in this article, and you'll be rolling out the red carpet for search engines in no time. That should translate to increased visibility for your Web site in the search engine rankings.

Let's look at six ways to catch the attention of search engines and give them what they want and need.

1. Select Targeted Keyword Phrases

Keywords, or search terms, are the way most people will initially find your Web site out of the bazillions of pages indexed by the search engines. They represent the most important concepts, services, and topics associated with your Web site.

Your keywords actually should be "key phrases" not single words. If you enter a single-word search term in a search engine, you'll likely get about a zillion matches. Most people know this and now use two- or three-word search phrases to get better results.

So instead of searching for "exercise", they might use "muscle- building exercises."

This is important to know. Single-word keywords -- unless it's your company name -- will never bring you targeted traffic. There's just too much competition. If this is the case, then why are marketers still using them?

* Gather the Likely Suspects *

Brainstorm keyword phrases with a group of people. Ask them what words and phrases best describe your organization or Web site. Make a list and keep track of the ones that come up repeatedly.

Another place to look for search phrases is in the referrer logs on your Web server. These tell you where Web traffic came from before arriving at your site. While this will tell you what search terms people used to find your site, it doesn't tell you what terms other people used who *didn't* find your site.

A typical referrer log entry might look like this:

[www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=online healthcare marketing&btnG=Google Search](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=online+healthcare+marketing&btnG=Google+Search)

This tells us that someone used the Google search engine and entered "online healthcare marketing" to locate the Web site. So extract those terms and add them to your list of potential keyword phrases.

* Use These Online Tools for More Keywords *

To discover the frequency of searches for each term, take each of the phrases on your keyword list and use:

the Overture Search Term Suggestion Tool

<http://inventory.overture.com/d/searchinventory/suggestion/>

or the 7Search related Keywords Tool

http://www.7search.com/scripts/advertiser/sample_get.asp

You'll also be given suggestions for related terms.

You want to pick keyword phrases that are unique, have a good number of searches each month in the search engines, but not so many that you'll be competing with many other sites for the same phrase. After all this you might end up with 10 to 25 keyword phrases that you'll use to optimize and promote your site.

A word of warning. You may be tempted to include keyword phrases that are frequently searched, but unrelated to the content or theme on your site. Don't do it. The search engines will get wise and kick you out of the party.

2. Write Keyword-Rich Content Pages

Keyword-rich content makes the World Wide Web go round. The search engines love it, so it's important to learn how to write it. Even if you don't put any additional effort into creating meta tags, or optimizing this or that page, you definitely should do this.

First of all, the text on your Web pages should be real content, not just a list of keywords. After all, valuable content is what the search engines and Web surfers are looking for. If you don't provide it, someone else will.

So write your text with care and incorporate your most important keywords right up front. Include a couple of key phrases at the end of the page, too, for good measure.

When you're finished, a useful tool for counting the frequency of keywords on your pages is the Keyword Counter at keywordcount.com <http://www.keywordcount.com/> .

The free tool has an easy-to-use interface that will analyze the keyword occurrences on any Web page address you give it. You can also enter another address at the same time, such as the URL of a competitor's site, and you'll see a comparison. Very handy.

3. Use Meta-tags in Your Source Code

Meta tags are the descriptors found in the head section of your HTML code. They provide information on the focus of your content to the search engines. Not all search engines use them

anymore, but enough of them still do, so it's worthwhile to create them for each of your Web pages.

There are more than a dozen different meta tags, but only a couple are really important: the title, description, and keywords meta tags.

Meta tags are placed between the head/head tags in the HTML code for the page. If you want to take a look at the HTML code for a page in your Web browser, select View / Source.

The general format for these three meta tags is:

title Put the title of the site here /title

META name="description" content="The description of your web site"

META name="keywords" content="keywords,for the web site separated by commas"

* Stick This in Your Meta Tags *

The title of your Web page should not be "Welcome" or even the name of your company. It should be a phrase that includes the most targeted keyword phrases that you've identified.

Keep rewriting it until it's packed with keywords, makes sense when read, and is 60 - 80 characters in length. Search engines place a lot of weight on the title, so choose your title carefully.

The description meta tag provides search engines with a brief description of the Web page. Keep the description to 200 characters or fewer, and like the title, pack it with keywords.

Don't waste valuable space with fluff and hyperbole -- "ABC Company is the premier provider of widgets in the Midwest". You don't even have to mention your company name. Instead, write a powerful benefit-oriented description chock-full of keywords.

Then comes the keywords tag. Many search engines ignore this completely because some people abused it, stuffing it full of irrelevant words or repeating words over and over. But some search engines like it, so include it in your pages.

Place in this tag all of the keyword phrases that you have identified, but don't repeat the same word more than three times -- even if it's part of a phrase. Limit your total keywords to 1000 characters in length, including commas.

* Call the Meta Medic to Check Your Meta Tags *

After you've developed a Web page and incorporated your meta tags, upload it to the server and then cruise over to the Meta Medic at <http://www.northernwebs.com/set/setsimjr.html> .

The free Meta Medic is a combination web spider and syntax checker. It'll help you fine-tune the length and content of your meta tags for that page.

Just go to the bottom of the Meta Medic page, enter the URL into the text field, and click "Process URL." The application will generate a report on your meta tags.

4. Optimize Your Web Pages

Here are a few ways you can use your keyword phrases to optimize your Web pages and make them more attractive to search engines:

- * Use keywords in the "ALT" tags of images. Search engines will read the tags and index them as hot content.
- * Include keywords in hyperlinks and link text on your pages. Hyperlinks with keywords in the text or URL carry weight with the search engines.
- * Place keyword-rich headlines in H1 tags instead of just using a large font size. Headlines are given greater importance than other text on the page, so keywords inside of the H1 headline tags may help out your ranking.
- * Name your page files using keywords, such as "online_marketing.html" Domain names and file names containing keywords are an under-used technique for improving rankings. Directory names with keywords may not have the same effect.
- * Change the amount of copy on some of your pages every month. Search engines may rank you higher or they see that your content is updated frequently and therefore "fresher".

5. Increase Link Popularity by Trading Links

Your search engine ranking is influenced by the link "popularity" of your site. The more sites that link to your pages, the greater the popularity index that your site achieves.

Don't sign up for those free for all (FFA) link pages or link farms. You'll only be on a FFA page for a couple of hours or a day, then you'll be pushed off as more pages are added.

You need quality, permanent links. Seek out and contact sites with which you'd like to create a reciprocal link. In most cases they'll gladly oblige.

Check you link popularity for certain pages on your site with some of the search engines.

On AltaVista or Google, you'd type in the search box:

link:www.mydomain.com

This will show you how many links exist pointing to that particular page on your site.

6. Use Custom Doorway Pages for Specific Keyword Phrases

Say you have a special keyword phrase that you'd really like to get more mileage from. But there's too much competition for the phrase, and according to your referrer logs it's not sending you any

traffic.

You need to promote the keyword phrase more effectively -- and a doorway or gateway page may be just the answer.

Doorways are highly optimized pages for a single keyword phrase. Sometimes people also optimize for a particular search engine, as well.

However doorways or gateways have been controversial, because some people abuse the use of them. In their worst form, they contain no real content, just lists of key words to deceive the search engines.

The doorway page technique that I'm referring to is a content-rich page that focuses on your special keyword.

If you think the keyword phrase "muscle-building exercises" has great potential, then you'd create a page that has 500-750 words of quality content about the topic. Make sure to include the key phrase and parts and its parts throughout the text -- between 3% and 10% of the total text is about right.

* Putting Your Doorway into Action*

You'll use all of the techniques previously discussed to optimize your doorway page and build your meta tags. Create a powerful title and page headlines filled with the keyword phrase and words from it.

Can you guess what the name of the page should be?

That's right: "muscle_building_exercises.html".

Use the online tools to check the frequency of keywords on the page. Aim for five to seven mentions of the phrase in various forms.

Then include descriptions and links to other pages of your site that have content relating to muscle-building exercises. Do you see how this is set up? Most of the links connected to this page should be going "out" into other pages of your site.

Now, create a link from another page of your site pointing *to* this doorway page. Then submit the pointer page to all of the major search engines. The search engines will spider the pointer page and follow the link to your new doorway page.

Search engines are an independent bunch. They take great pride in finding valuable sources of content on their own -- e.g. your keyword-rich doorway. In fact, they'll probably rank the page higher than if you submitted it by itself. Just a hunch.

Register Your Site the Right Way

Sure, there are services that will automatically submit your site to 500-plus search engines. However it's much better to register by hand with the engines and directories that account for most of the search volume: MSN, Altavista, Google, Yahoo, and DMOZ (the Open Directory Project). Whether you pay someone to do it, or do it yourself, it really doesn't matter.

Registration at some sites, such as AltaVista, has to be done manually. As do other sites, such as Inktomi or Overture, which are pay-for-placement. Since each search engine has its own algorithm and preferences for what it likes to see in a Web page -- and these change frequently -- keep up on the latest news by visiting Search Engine Watch at <http://www.searchenginewatch.com/> .

Often it takes several weeks or months for a site to appear in the listings. If you don't see your listing right away, don't just keep submitting it every week lest you anger the search engines. Have patience, and do your best to roll out the red carpet for them. After all, we need them.

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