

Successful Site Architecture

By Robin Nobles

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Notes taken at the Search Engine Strategies Conference
Dallas, Texas, November 2001
by Robin Nobles

(Written based on a session given at the Search Engine Strategies Conference in Dallas in November 2001.)

Speakers:

Barbara Coll*, CEO of WebMama (<http://www.webmama.com>)
Shari Thurow, Webmaster and Marketing Director of
GrantasticDesigns.com (<http://www.grantasticdesigns.com>)

Participants of the Successful Site Architecture session were in for an exceptional treat in Dallas recently when industry leaders Barbara Coll and Shari Thurow discussed strategies for creating search engine friendly Web sites.

This information-packed session should be on a "not to be missed" list for future participants, no matter what their level of expertise. I found myself continually saying, "Oh yeah! I forgot about that!" as they discussed strategy after strategy. The session offered excellent reminders of things that are so easy to forget, especially considering how complex search engine marketing is. And, it presented new strategies as well, important strategies that need to be placed in the forefront of all search engine marketing endeavors.

Barbara Coll, CEO of WebMama, opened by discussing the importance of considering search engine optimization in all areas of your project development. "If you'll start thinking 'SEO tactics' when you're designing your site, you'll have better results," she said.

Highlights of her discussion follows.

File Structure

According to Coll, site architecture can definitely impact your results in the search engines. For example, regarding file structure, most search engines don't know about anything beyond two directory levels. They'll index 40-50 files in those directories and do it alphabetically.

So, it's crucial for you to place your most important pages at the first or second directory level, breaking it up into 50 files per directory. Be sure to name your files and directories with your keywords. Don't use the underscore to separate keywords. Instead, use hyphens.

Don't stuff too many keywords in your file or directory names. Make them keyword rich but not too long.

Entry Pages

Coll calls any pages that bring you traffic "entry pages," and she recommends optimizing and submitting each of those pages. Make them stand-alone pages, just like your home page. When a visitor lands on one of your entry pages, will the visitor know where they are, who you are, and what the page is about? Include full navigation on all entry pages and make it obvious what the page and site is about. Don't assume visitors will find the index page first.

If your visitors come through your "contact us" page, for example, and all they see is a form, that doesn't tell them where they are or what the page/site is about.

Coll also recommends naming images after keywords, which is particularly important now that AltaVista and Google have image searches. Name your PDF's after your keywords as well.

Site Map

A very important entry page on your site is your site map. "Site maps have food that search engines love, and they have links to every single page that your visitors care about," explained Coll.

Therefore, make sure you submit your index page and your site map. Put your site map at the root level, and name it after your keywords. Use standard navigation on the site map. Add a blurb about the company or services at the top of the page or left column before the links. Use keywords in your links as well. Keep your site map simple, using no or few graphics.

Custom 404 Error Page

Coll also discussed the importance of a custom 404 error page,

which she calls "error trapping." Through your custom 404 error page, make it easy for the users to find where they want to go. Use HTML links and include a search box. META data on your pages is important for onsite search engines, so be sure to include it on every page.

For information on how to create custom 404 pages for every type of server, visit the 404 Research Lab (<http://www.plinko.net/404/>). The site also features many examples of custom 404 pages.

Problem Strategies

"Skip intro" pages are the worst thing you can do to your site, according to Coll. "Skip intro" or "splash" pages generally have no or very little content, often contain a movie, and frequently redirect to another page.

Your introductory page needs to contain content, so get rid of your intro page if it doesn't. Instead, stick Flash in a window on the home page and include it as an element, like an image.

Remember that Web technology that detracts from the content or provides no static content will negatively affect search engine rankings. Sites developed completely in Flash or other interactive technologies, large animated graphics, or movies are deterrents to content seekers and detrimental to search engine rankings.

Spiders don't see image maps and don't follow those links. They can't read graphics. Anything in an image is useless.

Coll also recommends not using frames. If you do use frames, she recommends making sure that you include META and title tags on all frames and frameset pages. Don't allow a frame to be shown without redirecting to the frameset first. Use a noframes tag and add keyword-rich content.

Shari Thurow, Webmaster and Marketing Director of GrantasticDesigns.com, opened her portion of the session by outlining the essential components of search engine optimization: text, links, and popularity.

She also discussed her definition of site architecture:

- * A site's navigation scheme (referring to image maps, text links, and dynamic content);
- * Layout of individual pages;
- * How directories are set up on your Web server.

In order for you to sell your products and services, your target audience needs to find what they are looking for as quickly as possible.

Remember your Target Audiences

According to Thurow, each Web site has two target audiences. The primary audience is the end user. The secondary audience consists of the directory editors and search engine spiders. Your goal in search engine optimization is to receive regular traffic over time from both the search engines and the directories.

Search engines do three things: index text, follow links, and measure popularity. End users have an effect on search engine ranking.

Visible Text

"Your target audience should not have to perform any type of action in order to view the most important text on a Web page," said Thurow. "Highlight the text on your page and copy it in Notepad, which is exactly what a search engine sees."

Thurow reminded participants that META tags aren't visible tags. ALT text is not visible, so it's not as important to the search engines as visible text. However, be sure to include your keyword phrase in your ALT text.

You can use ALT text in logos, image maps, navigation elements, Flash movies, photos, etc. "Always put width and height on image maps so the browser knows the size of the graphic. Download time is so important," said Thurow.

She also cautioned against the use of clear gifs. "Putting keywords as ALT text in a clear gif is considered spamming by the engines," she added.

Cascading Style Sheets

Thurow defined Cascading Style Sheets as an HTML addition that allows Webmasters to control Web page design parameters, such as margins, font/typeface appearance, link appearance, colors, and placement.

CSS massively decreases download time and saves a lot of time. But style sheets themselves don't matter to the search engines.

Be sure to use a robots exclusion file on sections of your site that the search engines have no interest, such as your style sheets, CGI-BIN, and any pages under construction to keep them from getting indexed. All search engines support this protocol.

Server-Side Includes

As defined by Thurow, server side includes are a type of HTML comment that instructs your Web server to dynamically generate

elements of a Web page before it sends the Web page to a browser or a search engine spider. SSI's can be used to put text elements on a page, such as text links, headers, footers, and content. As long as what is in the SSI file is search engine friendly, you won't have a problem.

Problem Strategies

Common uses of JavaScript include mouseover/rollovers, drop down menus, pop-up menus, and sliding menus. JavaScript is not search engine friendly and not important to the engines, so move it to a separate .js file.

Frames must be navigational within the frames. Include an option to use the site with or without frames. And, use JavaScript to keep frames intact.

Except Google, none of the engines can follow links in Flash sites. If you use Flash, include an option to view the site with or without the Flash. Rather than making the main page of your site in Flash, place a section of your site in Flash. Use only Flash movies, not Flash pages. Place the site in a frameset and use JavaScript to keep the frames intact.

Splash pages often contain no text, a one-way link, and a redirect. Because the main page might be the only page indexed and often ranks higher than other pages, and because content is so important to the search engines, stay away from splash pages.

Popularity

Thurrow stated that link popularity is measured by the number of links, the quality of links, the number of times end users click on links to your site, how long end users visit your site, and how often end users return to your site.

Orphaned pages can't get good popularity because very few links point to them. Also, orphaned pages have low click throughs, because they're typically advertising pages with no real content. Typical orphaned pages include pop-up windows, landing pages for banner ads, and landing pages for pay-per-click advertising.

In Conclusion . . .

Thurrow closed with the following reminder. "Make sure your pages have visible text. Give the spiders a suitable link architecture to help them find visible text. Use external files whenever possible. Use the Robots Exclusion Protocol to exclude information that is not important to the search engines. And, keep the most important pages in the top-level directory on your server."

Mark your calendar and plan to attend the next Search Engine

Strategies Conference! The conference will be held in Boston on March 4-5, 2002. See you there!

<http://seminars.internet.com/sew/spring02/index.html>

*For a more in depth look at search engine marketing strategies by Barbara Coll, visit her Web site and order "Tactics for Optimal Search Engine Positioning." <http://www.webmama.com/seo-white-paper-webmama.htm>

This article was written by Robin Nobles, a professional freelance writer and the Director of Training of the Academy of Web Specialists, where she has trained several thousand people in her online courses in search engine marketing strategies. http://www.academywebspecialists.com/more_info . She also teaches onsite search engine marketing workshops with John Alexander (<http://www.beyond-seo.com/workshop.htm>), and she has written three books that can be ordered through Amazon.

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