

VIEW

the magazine of the
Marketing Research
and Intelligence
Association

MAY 2010

**MAY 30
TO JUNE 2 2010**

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If You Want to Rank in Google, Start by Fixing Your Site

You have an informative, visually striking, well-constructed website. So why doesn't it rank well in Internet search results? The problem is not about being attractive; it's about attracting attention. Jon Henshaw outlines a five-step approach to fixing the problem.

By Jon Henshaw



When it comes to ranking in Google, I'm an organic guy. Ever since I created my first website in 1996, I've always shunned paid advertising. It wasn't just because I couldn't afford it back then; it was also because I loved the challenge of exploiting a search engine's algorithm.

A *lot* has changed since '96, and ranking well on search engines has become much more difficult. Even the sites of well-known brands struggle against smaller, lesser-known sites. In fact, many larger companies often see their coveted keywords, and even their brands, seemingly hijacked by other sites targeting the same terms.

What most companies don't realize is that they themselves are the reason they don't rank well. It's not Google's fault or a competing site's fault; it's their own fault.

That may sound harsh, but it's true. Companies, especially large brands, have traditionally approached the web as an extension of their existing marketing efforts. In doing so, many have relied on the same creative team to both produce their web presence and extend their brand. Big mistake.

Until recently, most creative agencies didn't know anything about search engine optimization (SEO), and they didn't care about it either. Instead, they focused on what they knew and did best – visual communication. The result was the creation of beautiful websites that had no consideration whatsoever of SEO.

A typical example can be seen in sites that utilize a lot of images and Flash interactivity. It's indicative of a creative team's lack of knowledge about web standards and SEO, and of their dependence on software like Quark, InDesign and Flash.

Even sites that don't use a lot of Flash have given little consideration to the structure of the site, the URL naming convention for pages, or the HTML code underlying the visual presentation of the pages. This lack of understanding and attention to key SEO principles is the reason why many of these sites don't rank well.

There's a five-step process I use when I'm building a new site or rebuilding an old one. The order of the steps is important, because the steps work as building blocks from one to the other. If you follow them, you're practically guaranteed to rank well in Google. This is especially true for larger companies with established brands.

Step 1: Do Keyword Research

Words are the semantic tools of search. Without words, search engines have no idea what your website is about. That's why sites that are heavy with images and Flash struggle to rank well.

Everything you publish on your website should focus on the "key" words that your target audience would use in searching for your products or services. Take the time to fully evaluate what your company does and what you want to communicate to your audience via the web.

As you put your keyword list together, make a final list that consists of a handful of "short-tail" keywords (one- or two-word phrases that are frequently used in searches) and a list of "long-tail" keywords (two- to four-word phrases that are less frequently used). If you sell widgets, then your short-tail keywords might be *widget*, *blue widget*, and *round widget*. Your long-tail keywords would include less searched, but possibly more targeted, keyword phrases such as *blue widget review*, *best round widget*, and *cheap blue widgets*.

After you create your list of keywords, you have to find out how often they're used in searches. While you may think you've developed a good keyword list, you won't know for sure until you've checked the actual search volume. *Search volume* refers to the average number of people who search using a particular keyword phrase. You can determine the search volume by using the Keyword Tool of Google AdWords (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>). See Figure 1.

There are two main benefits to running your keywords through Google's keyword tool. The first benefit is that you'll find out which keywords people are actually using in their searches. The second is that you can discover related keywords that weren't on your list but have a high search volume.

Step 2: Optimize Your Information Architecture

Your keyword research establishes the foundation of your website and should influence the remaining steps as you build and optimize your site. The finalized keyword list should be directly applied in the way you structure your site.

Google relies heavily on how you structure your site and how you use your keywords in it. For example, the keywords used in internal links help Google determine what your website is about. If you wanted to emphasize the keyword phrase *round widgets* on your site, you would want to link frequently to the relevant page, using this keyword phrase (or a slight variation of it) on several pages throughout your site. The links would go to a page like domain.com/round-widgets, reinforcing for Google the fact that the destination page is about round widgets.

The same holds true for the way you build your main site navigation and content sections, and how you name your URLs. The most common mistake made when developing the information architecture (IA) for a website is ignoring target keywords. This oversight can be seen in a typical site navigation.

[Home](#) | [Products](#) | [Services](#) | [FAQ](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#)

The problem with these navigational items is that they don't provide Google with any information on what the site is about. Yet these non-targeted keywords and links are repeated and emphasized on every page of the site. The site isn't about home, products, services, or FAQ. It's about widgets: selling round, blue, and cheap widgets!

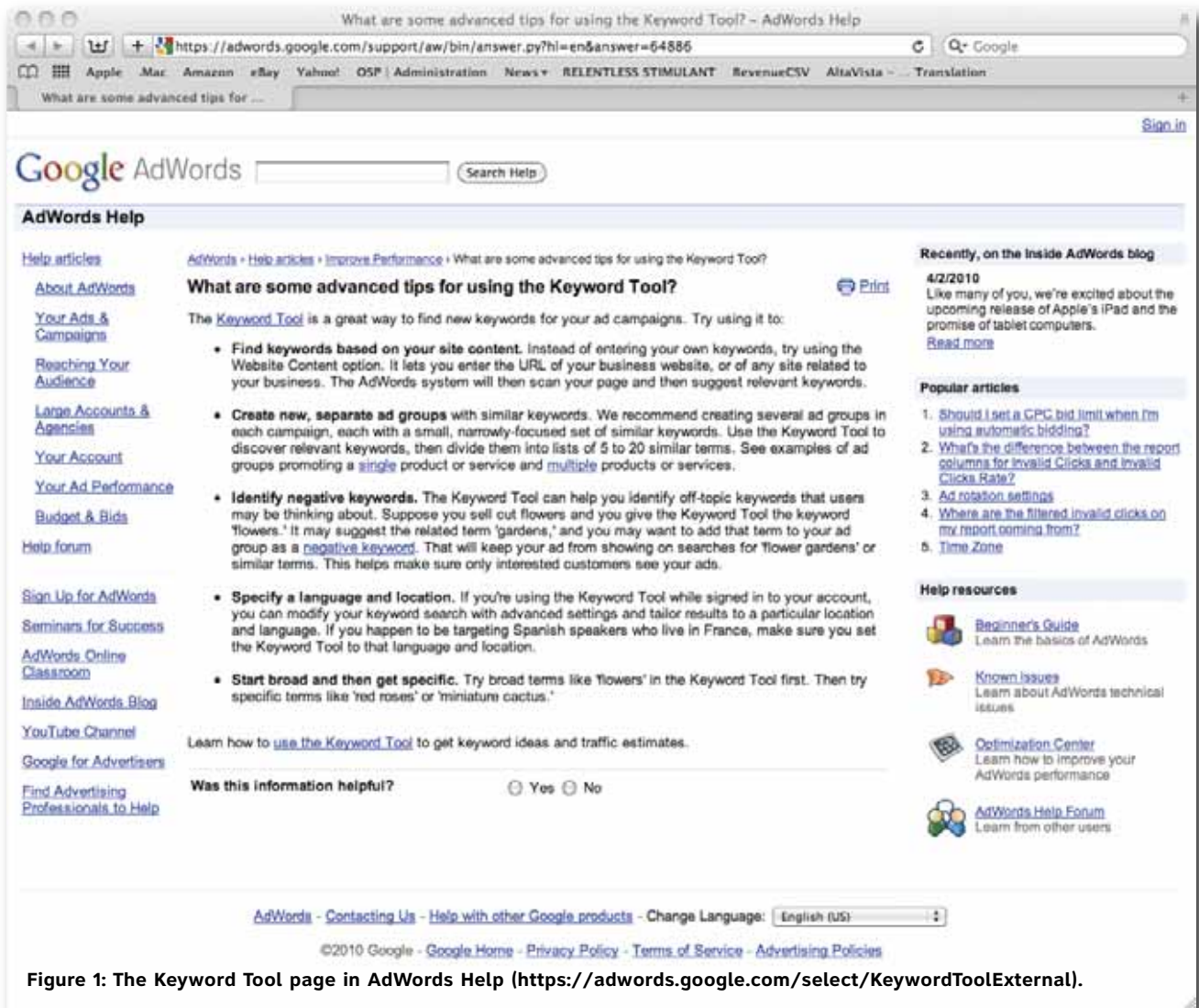


Figure 1: The Keyword Tool page in AdWords Help (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>).

To promote your widgets, you should consider picking four to six keyword phrases from your keyword list and using those terms to define your main navigation.

[Round Widgets](#) | [Widget Colours](#) | [Widget FAQ](#) | [Order Widgets](#) | [About Widgets Inc.](#)

The “contact us” and “about us” pages can be implemented as secondary links, or they can be placed in the footer. And to return to the home page, consider using the brand’s logo image in the header to create that link, making sure to include the keyword *widget* in alternative text for the image.

You should consider keywords when developing the structure of every area of your site. The sitemap, URL naming

convention, and section structure should always reinforce the keywords you’re targeting.

Step 3: Use Semantic Code

After you complete your keyword research and optimize the IA of your site, the next step is to focus on the HTML coding of your pages. Many web developers completely ignore web standards and semantic markup when they build out HTML pages and templates.

It’s important to use semantic markup in HTML coding of your pages, because there are certain elements that can help Google better understand what your pages are about. Semantic markup includes the use of

HTML elements to specify page titles, properly contain copy inside of paragraphs and lists, and make each page easier to comprehend for both people and machines.

Here’s a basic example of semantic markup:

```
<h1>Title</h1>
<p>Paragraph</p>
<h2>Sub-Title</h2>
<p>Paragraph</p>
<ul>
  <li>List Item</li>
  <li>List Item</li>
  <li>List Item</li>
</ul>
<p>Paragraph</p>
<blockquote>Quote</blockquote>
<p>Paragraph</p>
```

While that may look like gibberish to you, it makes the content more presentable to site visitors (when rendered in a browser), at the same time providing Google's algorithm with a better understanding of what your content is trying to communicate. The <h1> and <h2> heading elements act as the most important text on the page, specifying what the page content is about. The <p>, and <blockquote> elements designate properly formatted content that relates to the parent header elements.

Semantic code can be taken a step further by implementing "microformats." Microformats provide a standard way to code and read specific types of data – for people first, and machines second. There are microformat standards for content (related to people and organizations), calendars and events, opinions, ratings and reviews, licenses, tags, keywords, categories, lists, outlines, and much more.

Google is starting to use these microformats to provide summary information about search results – "rich snippets" – which can enhance the way your organic search results appear to users. Microformats can also increase the number of ways for people to find your website.

Step 4: Write Keyword-Focused Copy

A well-structured site is nothing without well-written, keyword-focused copy. When it comes to writing copy that's optimized for search engines, it's not necessary to get overly scientific about how many times a keyword is mentioned. Instead, focus on copy that's well written for people *and* machines. That means you should write to be meaningful and interesting to a targeted reader while following a few formatting rules to optimize the copy for Google.

There are four main items that copywriters should always keep in mind: headlines, body content, internal linking, and external linking.

Regarding headlines, keep in mind

that article titles should always contain the main keywords, but in a natural and legible form. This means cute, funny or clever page titles are out, unless they can incorporate the keywords. The length of body content should be at least 250 words, and the main keywords should appear – in a natural way – within the first few paragraphs. Try to stay away from loading up the paragraphs with keywords; doing so may be seen as "keyword stuffing," which can lower the value of the page to Google.

Blogs can be an incredibly powerful tool for increasing traffic and significantly improving organic search rankings in Google.

Linking to other pages on your site – "internal linking" – helps reinforce to Google what your pages are about. Consider including, within the copy of each page, a few internal links to the important pages on your site. Make sure the links include keywords that match, or are similar to, the page to which you're linking. In addition, linking to external sites can be beneficial to your website. This is especially true if you practise linking to relevant, high-quality websites – even to competitors' sites (gasp!).

Step 5: Blog, Blog, Blog!

Many companies struggle with the idea of having a blog, and if they do have a blog, they have no idea what to publish on it. A typical corporate blog consists of rehashed press releases and other company announcements. However, since the entries aren't even remotely interesting to the target audience, the blog gets little if any attention or traffic. To compound matters, lack of traffic to the blog is often interpreted as meaning that the blog is useless, and it subsequently gets even less attention.

Blogs can be an incredibly powerful tool for increasing traffic and significantly improving organic search

rankings in Google. Companies that don't take blogging seriously are leaving money on the table.

Google prefers fresh and original content. People prefer fresh and original content. Therefore, if you provide fresh and original content in your blog, Google and the people who make up your target audience will prefer you too!

Every company should assign at least one person to manage its blog. That person (or team) should then focus on writing about topics of interest to the

target audience. While the blogs should give attention to the target keywords, the entries don't always have to focus on them. As long as the topic is relevant to the interests of your audience, it should be considered blogworthy.

Blog entries should be informative, altruistic, and interesting enough for readers to bookmark them, share them with friends, and hopefully even blog about them – linking back to you. Some of the most popular types of entries are instructional how-tos, numbered lists, in-depth research reports, and hot topics. If you ever get stuck, try Googling "blog writing ideas." You'll find an endless list of ideas for your blog.

Bringing it all together. The methodology outlined in these five steps works for both brand new sites and sites that have been around for years. If you follow these steps, and you blog regularly, you will rank in Google.

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