

Church Website Search Engine Optimization, a Church SEO Primer

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Search Engine Optimization. SEO is that high-tech sounding buzzword that gets bandied about the technology-savvy church water cooler. It's one of those words your church website communication staff have probably been thinking about; but probably has not gotten around to doing too much about. SEO is sometimes heard alongside other cool-sounding but semi-sensical terms such as Web 2.0, social media, mobile web, cloud computing, viral marketing, analytics, usability, and even tweeting.

Growing Church SEO Awareness

Churches are beginning to be more aware of SEO and the many valuable benefits churches and church websites can enjoy from an investment in SEO. Believe it or not, even small investments can make a huge difference in where you rank in Search Engine Results Pages (SERP's). When researching SEO services it is entirely possible to obtain high SERP rankings without spending a medium-sized fortune to just get started.

The important thing to remember is to get started right away thinking about implementing SEO. In this day of lightning fast information where the average person wants immediate answers to any questions they have, or a solution for any need they have, these people always go online first to get the information they need.

Getting Started

Searching for an SEO firm can be a daunting challenge, especially if you are on a budget. There are many options, and finding pricing is not easy at times. However, one example of an effective yet affordable set of starter SEO services is Church Web Optimizer. Church Web Optimizer (<http://www.churchweboptimizer.com>) is an affordable, get-started-quickly package, and it includes Google Analytics installation, Google Webmaster Tools installation and evalu-



ation, a Google spider-friendly sitemap submission, Church Website Analytics/pre-SEO evaluation, Google Local Search listing optimization, and featured directory submissions on Church Cloud and Sermon Cloud. Church Cloud (<http://www.churchcloud.com>) is a nationwide church directory, and Sermon Cloud (<http://www.sermoncloud.com>) is a sermon repository in use worldwide.



Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools are great tools for any church website, submitting a spider-friendly sitemap, optimizing for Local Search, getting added to at least a couple of high traffic directories, all tied together through a preliminary analytics and pre-SEO evaluation goes a long way in providing your church the information it needs to understand your church website's current state of affairs. Evaluation of your church website metrics through an analytics evaluation helps by not only potentially rooting out problem pages on your website, but also brings to light potential search engine optimization opportunities.

Half of churches surveyed are actively pursuing an SEO strategy

Preliminary results from our current winter 2009-2010 church analytics and church website content and media study indicate that about half of the churches interviewed have begun exploring at least the idea of an SEO strategy and are actively heading towards their next steps in SEO.

This means that for half the churches surveyed, church technology or communications personnel are actively researching SEO topics online through Google, or choosing an SEO friendly Content Management System (CMS) such as Drupal (<http://drupal.org>) or Ekklesia360 (<http://www.ekklesia360.com>), implementing some exploratory SEO steps personally or through a church communications team member, beginning a discovery process with a search engine optimization firm, or hiring an SEO company on retainer to manage and monitor their church website's search engine optimization efforts.

The Importance of an SEO-Friendly CMS for Church Websites

An SEO-friendly content management system is critical for a church website that desires to be search engine optimized because inelegant content management systems prevent many on-page search engine optimization strategies involving optimized page titles, meta tags, alt-tags, anchor-link test, and search-friendly URL's from being deployed properly, if at all.

SEO to reach previously untargeted segments

One church we spoke to, Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Illinois (<http://www.willowcreek.org>) was thinking about how they could leverage SEO to their church's benefit by thinking about optimizing their church website for the keyword phrase "addiction recovery program Chicago". This is one way to think outside the box when trying

An advertisement for Church Community Builder (CCB). At the top, a quote from Steve, IT Director, reads: "CCB is church management software that works for me. It's web-based, they take care of all the updates and backups, it's secure and has an API. Now I can focus on our internal network." Below the quote is a circular orange badge with the text "FREE DEMO". To the right is a portrait of Steve, a man with glasses smiling. At the bottom, the Church Community Builder logo is displayed, along with the website address www.churchcommunitybuilder.com and the phone number 866.242.1199.

to bring in more people into your church. Does your church have any programs of a community-building nature that may be effective at ministering to and drawing in people from the community?

Targeting the un-churched

Several surveyed churches have mentioned free community tutoring, pregnancy resources, and an affordable low-income food distribution network as great draws for the un-churched in their community. Ideally, these ministries would have their own pages and content on the main church website optimized for some of these community-building programs.

More SEO

In the future, we will be releasing more articles about SEO, but for now, for those who would like to understand more about the evolution of search engine optimization and also see how it got to be where it is today, we've compiled a brief history of SEO below.

A Brief History of SEO

Prior to 1996, directories edited by humans dominated. Moving into 1996-1998 or so, search engines used on-page criteria such as Meta Data, Keyword Analysis, and Search Engine Submissions. Between 1998 and 2006, pages started getting ranked using off-page criteria. Y2K was when you saw Keyword Density, Link Development, Reciprocal Links, and Directory Submissions really taking off. By 2004, Site Architecture, Sitemaps, Text Link Advertisements, and Optimized Press Releases started showing up.

When 2006 rolled around, search was beginning to have more of a blended nature to it, with sitemaps evolving to XML Sitemaps, and the addition of new types of search, including Image Search, Local Search, Mobile Search, Video Search, and Updated Content (content that was not static.) The biggest challenges in SEO today are trying to optimize for and grasp Social Marketing, Website Usability, Blog Marketing, User Generated Content, Social Media Video (such as YouTube), Frequent Content Updates, and effective Audience Engagement across content.

Stay on top of search algorithm changes

One of the challenges churches need to be continually staying aware of are the algorithm changes that occur in Google and other search engines. People must follow these trends and be continuously involved in the space because as these algorithms are modified, these changes are not necessarily always broadcast to the



general web public. What that means is that one day, certain inbound links or content styles could be helping a site but then on the next day, these links or content styles could be penalizing a site. We witnessed this in several examples.

Black Hat SEO Beware!

Black Hat SEO involves what might be termed unethical optimization practices, some of which may include cloaking, buying links incorrectly, reciprocal link spam, doorway page spamming, automated content generation, and content theft, to just name a few. Looking up Black Hat SEO in a search engine will tell you what practices may be considered unethical. Do not try anything they recommend!

Consequences of unethical website optimization

Oftentimes, website administrators can get their website blacklisted by Google simply because they were too aggressive with their page titles, wrote a ton of meaningless content that spammed in unrealistic keyword density.

Accidental unethical website optimization carries a deep penalty.

Sometimes, trying to optimize your church website by trial and error can allow mistakes to creep into your website page source or links. This can lead to tremendous penalties, even if it was not the intent of the administrator to format their website unethically. When Google removes you from their index, you can ask to be reinstated into their index by submitting a reconsideration request through Google Webmaster Tools. Be honest, and explain why you thought you were blacklisted. Read Google's Webmaster Guidelines to ensure you are not setting your website up to be blacklisted

and ignored by Google!

When in doubt, get counsel!

It is *highly* risky to be modifying your website content without expertise, simply because the penalties from Google are so steep (a virtual invisibility to readers for 3-6 months or more) should there be a mistake.

It is *highly* advisable to seek SEO counsel through reputable companies that are devoted to staying on top of the newest trends and are capable of coming up with a strategic plan for your church to tackle the often tricky task of optimizing for a search engine without incurring long term website penalties. Look for companies that already rank well for terms in their own field and in the terms that are important to you as a start.

What you can do: Write naturally, and for the reader.

Google spends millions of dollars creating robot algorithms to sniff out shady operators who are using suspicious content. Don't be caught trying to manipulate Google!

It's more important to write for an audience by providing real value to users so that they will return than it is to create a website so incredibly optimized for Google that the content reads like machine speak, and no one will read your website or link to it.

SEO topics to continue

There are numerous SEO topics to discuss, and this column will revisit some of the other topics and implications of SEO in a future article.

How do you keep people from falling through the cracks?



“ My group's calendar comes through my Outlook! ”

“ I don't have to spend so much time managing. I can actually pastor again. ”

“ I can download my group's weekly lesson with a couple of clicks. ”

“ It helps group searchers become group members. ”

www.groupsinteractive.com

Your Small Groups Ministry will never be the same.