

How Google works

Everybody wants their website to score highly on Google (as that's what most people in the UK use to search the web with) – and to achieve this you need to optimise your site. There is no magic wand! and no guarantee that you will get listed or in which position, but there are several ways of maximising your chances. Many thousands of pages have been written on this subject but here are a few key points to consider.

Google PageRank

A high PageRank score will push you up the search results listings. PageRank is Google's algorithm (according to wikipedia, this is named after Larry Page, one of the inventors, rather than referring to individual pages of the site) and it is this algorithm which sets them apart from other search engines. A site can score between 0 and 10, with 10 being the highest. The system works by interpreting links from other web users as "votes" which they interpret as an indication of how important the site is.

Google explains:

"PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves 'important' weigh more heavily and help to make other pages 'important.'"

So the most important thing is to get other sites linked to your site – and this is most effective if the linking sites are themselves ranked highly. Think about who you can get to link to you – offering reciprocal links is mutually beneficial. These need to be "real" links – some people try to sell links from highly rated sites ("link farms") but these only work short term and – if discovered by the search engines – can get your ranking downgraded or even get you banned. The Google toolbar will tell you your page rank – and for Mac people there's a little widget available for the dashboard.

Text, key words and phrases

Google (and other search engines) will look for relevant words in your site when someone searches. Obviously for it to search, your text must be live – eg not rendered as pictures.

For this reason we recommend that all copy and as many titles, buttons etc as possible are live text.

Google rates words in different sections as more or less important. For example, text found in a title tag (the words that come up in the title bar of your browser when you're on a page – eg www.landb.co.uk/technical/general.html) are rated as most important, followed by words found in headings, and then words found in text.

This means that when writing your copy you need to ensure that all the words and phrases that you think people might use to search for you are included. However, you have to be careful not to "stuff" your text – again if the search engines think you are doing this, you can get banned. People have tried all sorts of tricks such as repeating keywords in white on a white background but they do get found out. We will make sure that relevant words (and your company name) appear in the title tags.

Meta tags and descriptions

Before Google took over the world, the search engines used to check meta tags – words embedded in the code which were not visible to the end user. Google ignores these so they are no longer relevant to page ranking. You still need a meta description, which is a phrase embedded in the code describing your company. This is used by some search engines (not Google) as the text to display under your URL and title in the results listings. Google will use the text from your home page so do make sure it works if seen in isolation!

Other considerations

Splash pages are not search engine friendly as they are generally image based. They have really gone out of fashion anyway, as many people see them as a barrier – and we think that now people are more used to the web, and expect it to work fast as a resource, they are less seduced by bells and whistles for their own sake.

If a site is created in Flash, the text may not be readable by the search engines, and in any case would be unlikely to rank as highly as HTML text.

Beware of frames – search engines find the HTML pages that make up the frameset and not the frameset itself, so you will almost certainly lose the navigation and/or page header.

Sites need to be submitted to the search directories – each has its own requirements. We can advise you as to your options as part of your website design. Submission should not be done until the content is complete. We will do this for you the first time, once your site goes live – but it might take as long as a month before it appears in the listings.

Every so often (generally 3 or 4 months) Google will tweak its algorithm and websites can rise or fall in their ranking overnight without changing any content themselves. This is of course completely under Google's control – but it is worth monitoring your ranking and considering whether you should be adding keywords (important if you've added new content). It's not, however, a good idea to constantly tweak a site to try to improve rankings – and particularly not within 3 months of submitting your site to search directories.

Google AdWords

Another option to get your site displayed in the results list is to sign up with Google AdWords. You select key words that you think people would search for you with (Google will help you to pick out relevant words by analysing your site or you can select your own) and then you agree a cost per click, and a daily limit. Your details will then appear in the list of "sponsored links" to the right of the Google results listing, and you pay when people click on your link. The position in this listing is not guaranteed and obviously depends on the amount of other companies who have signed up with those words. The cost of a word will vary wildly but you can check an estimated cost for your chosen words (and read more about the process) at <https://adwords.google.co.uk>.

We trust that you find this information interesting and useful, and we welcome your feedback at info@landb.co.uk.