

11 Tips for Optimizing Your Website for Search Engines (SEO)

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When someone types “adopt a dog” into Google or another search engine, a variety of factors determine what websites show up first in the search results. Paid advertisers will show up first for most search phrases. What appears in the “organic” search results are the websites that are best optimized. Nothing will guarantee a #1 spot—but you can do a lot on your site (*for free!*) to make sure it’s performing its best.

1_MAKE SURE YOUR WEBSITE IS REALLY MOBILE-FRIENDLY.

More than half of internet users today access the web from a smartphone or tablet—not a computer. Google now penalizes websites that are not mobile-friendly by placing them lower in search engine results.

2_DEFINE YOUR META TAGS FOR EACH PAGE.

Meta tags are the extra information “behind the scenes” on each page that search engines read. The important ones are the title tag and the description tag. The title tag tells search engines what they should call the page when it shows up in search results. The description tag is that block of text that appears below the title.

3_ADD ATTRIBUTES TO YOUR IMAGES.

Every time you add an image to your site—a stock photo, home page slider image, sponsor logo, event photo, etc.— put in alternative text that could be shown if the image can’t be displayed. Google also uses this text to understand what’s on a page, so it can return the best information in the search results.

TIP:

Google will penalize you for “keyword stuffing,” which means putting a bunch of random keywords (even if they are relevant) into your alt attributes. This will potentially get your site flagged for spam. Just take the time to write accurate, succinct and keyword-rich alt text.

4_HAVE LOTS OF LINKS – EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL.

One way Google decides if a site is a good site is if it links to external sites. You can link as much text as you want—just make sure it makes sense! It’s a bonus when the text is not just the keyword itself, but actually provides information to Google about the site you’re linking to. Google really likes that! Here’s an example:

See **dogs for adoption in Jacksonville** on Petfinder.com! Using “*dogs for adoption in Jacksonville*” as the hyperlinked text—also called anchor text—is better for Google, because it provides an accurate description of what the Petfinder.com site is all about. This helps your site in search engines, but it also helps Petfinder, too!

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For internal links, make sure each page on your site has some links to other pages on your site. This can be as simple as “*Click here to see our adoptable dogs!*”.

5_MAKE SURE YOU HAVE LOTS OF INCOMING LINKS, TOO!

This is when other websites link back to YOUR site—lots of links on other sites, going to pages on your site, tells Google that your site has high-quality content—that’s why so many other sites link to it!

Any website can link to yours—local news media, other nonprofit organizations, social media. One way to get lots of links to your site is to provide good content that people want to link to—like FAQs, how-to sheets, top 10 tips, etc.

6_WRITE “REAL” URLS THAT (IDEALLY) CONTAIN KEYWORDS.

Most good content management systems now let you specify what you want the URL of each page to be. You have a great opportunity here to help your site perform better in search engines, and also for visitors to understand what they will see on each page of your site.

Click around to a few pages on your website. Look in the address bar of your browser for each one. You want it to be easy-to-read, and clearly communicate what you’ll find on that page. Keep it short and sweet. Here is a good example: **www.yourwebsite.org/adoptable-dogs**.

7_MAKE SURE YOUR SITE IS SECURE.

If you ask people to submit forms on your site—contact us forms, adoption applications, donation forms—your site needs to have a security certificate. This means you’ve got `https://` in front of your domain name instead of just `http://`.

TIP:

Google has also said it will penalize websites in search engines that don’t have a security certificate by ranking them lower, even if your site doesn’t collect or transmit any personal information. Starting in January 2017, if a site that transmits personal information does not encrypt it with `https`, Google’s Chrome browser now indicates that the site is unsafe.

8_PRODUCE NEW CONTENT REGULARLY.

Google rewards sites with fresh content with better search engine placement, so make sure your site (especially the home page) is always providing new, relevant content!

TIP:

A blog is a great way to produce new content on a regular basis. You can also have featured pets, or other news that changes regularly.

9_USE A CMS TOOL AND FIND A GOOD SEO PLUGIN TO MAKE THIS EASIER.

In the early days of website development, you had to know a lot of code to optimize your website, and even to update the content on your pages. Now, **CMS** (*content management system*) tools make this much easier.

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Lots of different CMS are available. Some are free and open-source, others are proprietary to certain development firms. Choose whatever works best for your organization. Wordpress is a popular open-source CMS (*it's free*). The most user friendly CMS website builders are sites like Wix or Squarespace. You can build a really nice website for very low cost, and you don't have to know any code!

TIP:

When you use a CMS, they all have plugins or add-ons available (*again, often free*) that will make SEO painless. Install the add-on, click a box, and it will give you fields to enter your title, description, etc. and easily change the URL of your page, as well as enter alt tags for images. No more coding!

10_SUBMIT YOUR SITEMAP TO GOOGLE.

Give Google a list of all the pages on your website so it can make sure it has "crawled" them all looking for content. *It's free and easy!* Set up your **Google Webmaster Account** at www.google.com/webmasters. Then you'll need to create your sitemap. You can use www.xml-sitemaps.com, but most CMS tools have add-ons you can use to automatically generate one, too. Then you just upload that to your webmaster account.

TIP:

Google Webmaster Tools also provides you a lot of important information about your site—notably, it shows you how many links are coming TO your site from outside sources, and which ones. You can also see the keywords people are using to find your site, and much more.

11_RUN A SITE CHECKUP USING A TOOL LIKE [HTTPS://SEOSITECHECKUP.COM](https://seositecheckup.com).

This free, web-based tool runs a quick check on your site to tell you where your SEO is lacking. It will help you see where your holes are so you can start fixing them.

TIP:

If you're a larger organization, you may get calls from SEO "experts" and firms wanting to be paid lots of money to optimize your site. Beware of anyone promising they can get you to #1 on Google. Nobody can do that. If you have the budget to hire a firm to do your optimization, great! Chances are, they're going to do all of the things mentioned above—things you can do yourself (and mostly for free) if you spend some time. If someone is selling you something that sounds too good to be true... chances are, it is!



Emily Garman has been a foster mom and animal welfare volunteer for 15 years and founded **TheSocialAnimal.com** in 2008 to teach animal advocates how to use social media to raise money, recruit volunteers and save more lives. She presents on next-generation fundraising, social media and mega-adoption events all over the world. In 2011, she traveled to Riga, Latvia to present at the Dogs Trust European Summit and to the US Virgin Islands to consult with individual shelters. She received the 2010 Advocate in Action Award from the Oklahoma Alliance for Animals for her work in using social media to pass puppy mill legislation in Oklahoma; she helped Texas organizations do the same in 2011.