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Ten ways to boost your search appeal

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If you don't know it yet, your marketing department will be telling you about it shortly. To get visitors to come to your site via search engine results (SERPs), you need to rank in the top 20 — if not the top 10 — for searches on specific keywords/phrases that your firm is targeting. If your Web site isn't appearing in the top 10, the chances of someone clicking on your listing drops exponentially for each subsequent page.

While writing search engine-friendly content is out of the control of the Web development team, there is a lot you can do to optimize your site markup for search engines. Here are 10 tips to help you mark-up your code properly.

Tip 1. The first rule of SEO is not to design your site in such a way that the code itself prevents a search engine bots/spiders from being able to index the site. This means avoiding pages that are 100 per cent graphics and no text, including pages that contain all images, or are Flash-only. Furthermore, if the first thing a user encounters is a log-in page before being able to see the site's content, then that's what a bot will see and it won't go any further. The bottom line: don't build a Web site entirely in Flash if you want any traffic from search engines.

Tip 2. To find out what a spider sees on your site, run a spider simulator on a given page. The simulator will show you what text the spider sees and what links it finds. There are many good ones on the market at various prices. If you're looking for something that's free, I'd suggest www.webconfs.com/search-engine-spider-simulator.php.

Tip 3. Each Web site should have a file called robots.txt. This file tells the spiders what directories they should not spider.

Tip 4. Determine the main topic of the page and use it as the page title. A page about high-performance running shoes from manufacturer XYZ shouldn't have the title "XYZ" — it should have a title something like "High-performance Running Shoes."

Tip 5. Write a unique description meta tag for each page — something you should ask the content provider to give you.

Tip 6. Put all your JavaScripts in external files and link to them. You'll be increasing the ratio of content to code on your page, which helps make your message clearer to search engines and you'll be making your markup cleaner and Web site management easier.

Tip 7. Search engines love content that appears in header tags (h1, h2, etc.) yet very few Web sites actually use them.

In the early days of Web design, we had little to no control of these elements and they simply appeared as big black text on your page. This all changed with the introduction of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). Take time to define your header tags in your CSS and use the header tag for the titles and secondary titles of your content. Sample:

```
<h1>Page Title</h1>
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<h2>Subsection</h2>
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To avoid spamming search engines, a Web page should have only one h1 tag. They can have as many h2 tags as necessary.

Tip 8. Don't spend time creating JavaScript mouseovers, trying using the hover feature of CSS instead. If, for specific reasons, you can't use CSS, then repeat the menu options at the bottom of the page with plain text.

Tip 9. Avoid unnecessary tables where possible. Limit your table embedding to a depth of three. Where possible avoid the whole table thing and start using XHTML with div tags and CSS to define position.

Tip 10. Use either `` or `` to mark up important words on your page. While most people use bold (``), according to the W3C the correct markup is "strong" for important words.

By following this basic outline, you'll be creating search engine-friendly pages. The search engine bots will easily index your pages, and with important words and phrases appropriately tagged; those words will receive proper

valuation by the search engines.

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