



THE SCHOLL GROUP

Advertising and Communications

## Informative Report: Strategic Writing for the Web

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When it comes to search engines, content is key.

### **What search engines like to find:**

- Simplicity
- Content with the right keywords
- Keywords in heading tags and bold text

How do search engines work vis-à-vis keywords? Let's take the words "beauty school" as an example. The search engines look for:

- Pages with the exact words: beauty school
- Pages that have beauty and school in close proximity
- Pages that have both words not in close proximity
- Pages with either word
- Pages with links pointing to them, in which the link text contains the key phrase: beauty school
- Pages with links pointing to them, in which the link text contains beauty and school, but the words are not together

Ranking is based on whether the keyword or phrase is in:

- Bold text
- Italics
- A bulleted list
- Text larger than other text
- Heading text (<H> tags)

### **Selecting keywords**

Obviously selecting the right keywords is critical, as is strategic positioning of those words. In selecting keywords, it's important to focus on the ones customers/prospects use because they may not be the ones you're accustomed to using to describe your company and what you do.

In other words, speak the user's language. Use keywords that match users' search queries.

A keyword analysis will reveal the words people use when searching on the web. Here are the steps:

- Type into a Word doc all the words and phrases that come to mind.
- Look at your web site's access logs to see keywords people used when they clicked a link to your site at a search engine; add these terms to your list.
- Go to competitors' sites and open the source code of a few pages; choose View[arrow]Source from the browser's menu bar; then look for the <META NAME="keywords"> tag for any useful keywords.
- Brainstorm with colleagues.
- Ask current and former customers.
- Include frequently misspelled words, e.g., cosmetology or esthetician (can be 20% or more of words keyed into search engines).
- Include split or merged words, e.g., scholar ship and beautyschool.
- Add singulars to plurals and vice versa.
- Include certain words with/without hyphens, e.g., beauty-school; but determine which (hyphenated vs. not) is most common because search engines treat them as different searches—with a hyphen typically treated as a space.
- Geography is often important, e.g., Pottsville Beauty School.

## **Keyword tools**

Now you're ready to use a keyword tool to add terms you didn't think of and to determine which are the most important, i.e., the ones used most often by people looking for the products/services you provide. Wordtracker is regarded as the optimal search engine keyword tool.

When you advertise with Yahoo!, you can access their list of suggested keywords.

Google's keyword tool can be accessed at:

<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>

After you've used one or more keyword tools, you can determine the relative popularity and value of each word or phrase. You may find some surprises and you'll know which words/phrases to incorporate into content. Bear in mind that it's sometimes wise to target phrases lower on your list because they contain multiple words, including those high on your list.

## Domain name

Now you're ready to think about creating web pages that maximize SEO. When it comes to the domain name:

- It should be short and easy to spell and remember.
- In most cases, you should use the .com version.
- Bear in mind that search engines get clues about the nature of your site from its domain name.

## Incorporating keywords

When it comes to keywords:

- Obviously keywords should be incorporated into web pages to make it easy for search engines to locate them, read them and consider them important.
- Your list of keywords might be quite long, so you should focus on (1) those at top of list that are most frequently used in searches; and (2) those lower on list that might be overlooked by competitors; when a prospect uses the phrase in quotes, e.g., "jobs in cosmetology," the search engine will find far fewer pages.
- Optimize each page for one or two keyword phrases. The idea is that the page will rank well for the specific keyword phrase(s) when they're keyed into a search engine.
- You can't optimize effectively for more than one keyword phrase at a time. But that doesn't mean you don't use the additional keywords from your list. The idea is simple: pick one key phrase for a page, but sprinkle in as many additional ones that make sense.
- It's important to achieve prominence with keywords to achieve SEO. The <TITLE> tag is a critical component of a web page; optimally use the keyword at the beginning of the tag. The same goes for the DESCRIPTION meta tag. A word at the top of a page is better than one at the bottom.
- Keyword density is also important. It's the ratio of the search phrase to the number of words on the web page. If the ratio is too high, the search engine may decide that you're being manipulative and therefore ignore your site. Also, according to Stephan Spencer, "Too many occurrences of your keywords" on a page "will trip the spam penalty algorithm, which will damage your page's rank." The bottom line: if the phrase appears too often, you've overdone it.
- Following on this point, don't forget your customer/prospect. What will they think of the content? Sometimes, in an attempt at SEO, writers place keywords in

headers, text, etc., where they make little or no sense. At the end of the day, content should be clear, concise and reader-centric.

- If someone uses a certain word or term in their search, e.g., beauty schools, the search engine will typically prefer the site that uses the phrase on multiple pages rather than, say, just one or two pages.

Beyond web pages, it's a good idea to name directories and images with keywords because search engines get clues about the site's nature from these names.

## **Writing content**

Tips from Janice Redish, author of *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*:

- Good web writing lets people grab and go. “Breaking different information into pieces for different users,” topics and needs “helps web users to *grab* just what they need and *go* on to look up their next question, do their next task, make a decision....”
- Before or during development, “The best technique for finding out how well a site works is usability testing: watching and listening while representative users try to find specific information or accomplish specific tasks with the web site.” Redish says, “Test early; test often; test on a small-scale, iteratively.”
- Gain full understanding of your audience(s). “Actually watching, listening to, and talking with your web users and potential users of your site—are the most useful” steps in the process.
- “Talk to Customer Service. Who is calling with questions” and what are the questions?
- “Get people who come to the site to complete a short questionnaire.” Ask them a few questions about themselves, “why they came to the site, and whether they were successful in finding what they came for.”
- “Gather your audiences’ questions, tasks, and stories,” i.e., the questions people “expect the web site to answer, the tasks they need the web site to support, and the stories they tell about their experiences with your web site, with other web sites, and in relevant non-web situations.”
- Don’t translate users’ words into your vocabulary. Use their vocabulary in your web content.
- Create personas. “A persona is an individual with a name, a picture, and specific demographic and other characteristics. A persona is not a specific real person,”

but rather “a composite of characteristics of many real people.” It “brings together in one example the facts you’ve gathered from thinking about or, even better, watching and listening to the people who come to your web content.” The key is for your personas to “represent your web users,” so you know whom to write to and what language to use.

Personas should include:

- key phrases/quotes
- experience, expertise
- emotions
- values
- technology (e.g., connection speed)
- social/cultural environments
- demographics

Start “with demographics so that the persona has a specific age, family status, education, job, interests, income level,” etc. Then add a photo and name.

The web team focuses on the personas and asks questions like: Which search terms might Hilary use? Will she be able to find the information she wants? What if she has a question?

Personas:

- can come to meetings as life-size cardboard cutouts
  - their photos and information hang on the wall in the team’s work space; they can be printed on placemats or mouse pads
- Use the information gathered for personas to develop scenarios for your site. These are “short stories that give you a good sense of the people who come to your site, what their lives are like, and what they want to do at your web site. Scenarios give life to goals...in the same way that personas give life to lots of data about your web users.”

Key points:

- If there’s “no plausible scenario” for content, “why have it on the web site?”
- Scenarios can help you focus on what is most important to your site visitors, “write with their words” and “realize how goal-oriented most web users are.”

- “As you plan your web content, always ask: Who will use it? What should I keep in mind about them? What story (scenario) will bring them to this web content?”
- Other tips from Redish:
  - A good home page “makes it instantly clear what the site is about”; it’s “mostly links and short descriptions.”
  - “Don’t make people wonder which link to click on.”
  - “Most site visitors are on a hunt—a mission—and the pathway is just to get them there.”
  - “People don’t want to read a lot while hunting.”
  - “Give people only what *they* need.”
  - “Layer information to help web users.”
  - Break up text with headings.
  - Write meaningful links.
  - “Use a style guide to keep the site consistent.”

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