

## SparrowWeb :: SEO Technical Implementation

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**Search engine optimization (SEO)** is the process of improving the volume or quality of traffic to a web site from search engines via “natural” (“organic” or “algorithmic”) search results.

As an Internet marketing strategy, SEO considers how search engines work and what people search for. Optimizing a website primarily involves editing its content and HTML coding to both increase its relevance to specific keywords and to remove barriers to the indexing activities of search engines.

SparrowWeb projects implement a strategy that optimizes SEO best practices in order to assist our clients in attaining their search engine placement goals. Though SparrowWeb isn't an SEO firm and doesn't sell services to guarantee any particular result, the websites that we design and develop in any of our favored content management system (CMS) are “search engine friendly” and easy to update as well as to optimize.

SEO best practices can be broken into 4 major categories of activity:

- 1. Subject-Matter:** To be developed and maintained by an expert on the topic of your website.
- 2. Information Architecture:** Mapping the content of your website for the purposes of development, with primary consideration given to the user and ease of navigation.
- 3. Technical Development:** Though primary consideration should always be given to the end users of your website, the reality is that the search engines have certain basic requirements.
- 4. Marketing** (*formerly known as “link building”*): In short, this means getting people to link to your website.

The SparrowWeb website design and development process focuses on subject matter, information architecture, and technical development. These components work together to make sure that your website will be a long-term, viable presence on the web and ensures that your users are receiving quality content that they are able to easily navigate. Category 4 (marketing), is an ongoing effort that should be allocated to your sales and marketing team.

**SUBJECT-MATTER:** There's a glut of information out there. Wading through relevant content is often an exercise in frustration for your customers. I can't stress enough how many times I had to have this debate with my clients; you must edit your content. Put yourself in your users shoes. They don't have the time to read the complete history of the development of your product - they want simple, bulleted lists that are easy to find and in a place where they expect to find them. Don't force material on a user if you expect them to stick around; if you make them wade through extraneous content, they will go elsewhere. So be gentle with your

“What if we focused on deploying quality content, instead? What would the result be if instead of this SEO mania, we rolled a out a truly useful product? You know, maybe people would come back, not because of how we rank, but because we offered them value.”

*Anthony Ina, application designer*

users, find someone who knows what they're doing when you are developing content for your website. If you're determined to do it yourself, enlist a second set of eyes when editing and be brutal editors. Don't ever stop thinking of your user and what it's going to be like for them to find what it is they are looking for.

If keeping your users happy wasn't a large enough motivator for writing concise, relevant content, consider that search engines don't respond well to irrelevant content either. If you want tons and tons of visitors who get to your site and do nothing, then writing lots of extraneous content may be the way to go. But if you're looking for traffic that is interested in finding you and actually converts, keep it simple, relevant, keyword-rich, and easy-to-read.

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**INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE:** Wikipedia defines information architecture as the “practice of structuring information (knowledge or data) for a purpose.” The SparroWeb design team creates an information architecture document immediately following an early strategy meeting. This meeting serves to build an overview of the project, stimulate and answer questions about the project and create action points that motivate both parties to submit deliverables on time. Typically, an information architecture document will take approximately one week and three revisions to finalize. It is the document on which the success of a project hinges, so everyone involved is encouraged to put effort into the creation and revision of this document.

*The basic elements of an information architecture include<sup>1</sup>:*

**1. Understanding how your users think about the topic area of your site.**

This is where keyword mapping exercises come into play. Keyword tools such as Keyword Discovery and Wordtracker are useful because they can help us to find out how users search for things related to the content you have, or plan to have, on your Web site.

**2. A well-defined and clear global navigation scheme.**

Make it easy for users to navigate your content. Menus should be consistent in structure and location. It's helpful to implement a “bread crumb” strategy – navigation that shows the structure of a site. This helps users to remember where they are and how they got there.

**3. Leverage common UI practices.**

This is no time to implement a new paradigm. Users have been conditioned by other Web sites to look for things in certain places on a site. Take advantage of this and make life easier for them.

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**TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION:** Failure to meet the basic requirements of search engines can mean poor organic search placement, inconsistent results or even being banned from a search engine for dishonest practices. SparroWeb follows the five rules below to put together a solid technical implementation for the search engines:

**1. Implement a clear navigation scheme that can be fully crawled using text links**

In cases where image links MUST be used, image replacement strategies will be implemented in the CSS of the website.

**2. Minimize the number of clicks to your key content.**

Search engines look to site owners for clues as to what is important on a given site. If a piece of content is 4 clicks from the home page, what are you saying about its importance?

### **3. Implement pages that are rich in search engine visible content.**

This means text-based articles and descriptions, and text-based links. Give the spider something to chew on.

### **4. Effectively link related content within your own site.**

This is a great tool for reinforcing the relevance of pages on your site.

### **5. Write effective meta description tags.**

This will not help your ranking, but these descriptions are often used by search engines as the description for your site in their results. Write meta descriptions for each page that are likely to get a user to click through to your site.

The thing to remember about technical implementation for SEO is that, though tactics evolve with the technologies used to render Web sites, certain fundamentals remain constant. SparroWeb follows the fundamentals<sup>2</sup> on the following page when designing, developing and implementing SEM for a website.

#### **1. Targeted keywords are relevant to site content.**

*Meta keywords and descriptions are written following the creation of the information architecture. It can be very helpful to develop this meta data during the creation of the copydeck. Leaving this step until just before launch is not recommended, as the keyword content can be helpful during the structural development of the website.*

#### **2. Targeted keywords are also popular phrases used in search engine queries**

*There's no point in trying to get high rankings on keywords and keyword phrases no one searches for. If you're not certain what keywords your current site is well positioned for, start digging through your referrer logs or Web analytics data to determine which search engines send your site considerable traffic for which phrases. If you can't access your log files and search engine referral data, use a tag cloud generator to get some visual clues as to how the search engines interpret your pages.*

#### **3. Page titles start with targeted keywords**

#### **4. H1 header tags are employed for prominent content titles**

#### **5. Permanent body copy is contextually sufficient and keyword-rich**

*As creation of this content is the responsibility of the client, it is important that they understand how 'bad' copy means not only contextually significant, but relevant and to-the-point. In most cases, we discourage writing excessive copy merely for the purpose of spreading a site more broadly across search as the result is poorly-qualified traffic. Few users will read much more than a sentence or two to find what they're looking for, so be as concise as possible.*

#### **6. Text links include targeted keywords that point users to pages within your site**

#### **7. CSS image replacement is implemented in graphical navigation when it must be used**

#### **8. Graphics used in the site will have descriptive, keyword-rich alternative attributes that are useful for visitors**

#### **9. All websites are developed with an xml sitemap as well as a site map with text links**

#### **10. The URLs of all dynamic, database-driven pages look simple and static**

#### **11. Websites have a flat directory structure**

- 12. Each site is validated in Google and submitted to list in Open Directory (DMOZ)**
- 13. All the pages in each website have keyword-rich meta descriptions**
- 14. Each site has a custom error page**
- 15. Each site's filenames and directory names include targeted keywords**
- 16. NEVER use pop-ups**
- 17. NEVER use cloaking; the exact same content will visible to both users and search engine spiders**
- 18. NEVER use free-for-all linking offers**
- 19. A robots exclusion file is included in every website**

Beyond technical implementation, site structure plays a large role in how well your site is indexed. The search engines have improved their ability to crawl through dynamic URLs, yet static URL structures tend to rank better so we stick with this strategy. Flash and AJAX present additional search engine visibility issues; this is a larger issue beyond the scope of this document.

<sup>1</sup>From: *An Introduction to SEO Best Practices* by Eric Enge, Search Engine Watch

<sup>2</sup>From: *SEO Best Practices* by P.J. Fusco, ClickZ