

Workshop notes: Basic SEO

Recommended reading

SEOMoz's Beginners Guide to SEO is an excellent introduction:

<http://www.seomoz.org/beginners-guide-to-seo>

How search engines rank sites

Each search engine has a vast database, called an **index**, storing information about all the pages they've found and how the pages are connected to each other by links. The index is created using software known as a **robot**, **crawler**, or **spider**. Robots find new pages by following links from existing pages. Some search engines allow you to manually submit new sites to them, but this isn't necessary as long as there are links pointing to the site.

The ranking of a page in the search results is determined by a combination of **relevance** and **importance**. Relevance depends on how much a page relates to the user's search terms. Importance is independent of any particular search query, and depends on factors such as the number and variety of incoming links.

Titles and meta descriptions

The title and meta description are two examples of **metadata** – information that is not shown directly within a page but is available to search engines.

The **title** (often incorrectly called the title tag) is shown on the browser tab containing the page and in the browser title bar when viewing the page, and is the main link in the search result. The **meta description** (often incorrectly called the description tag) is often used as the longer **snippet** of text that appears in the search result.

[it'seeze: creative, flexible and affordable website design](http://itseeze.co.uk/)

itseeze.co.uk/

We design creative, flexible and affordable websites to help you market your business online. **it'seeze** editable websites from just £150.

The title is the single most important item to optimise in order to improve a site's perceived relevance. A search engine will regard a page that includes the user's search terms within its title as more relevant than a page that only includes the search term within the page text. Key elements to include within a title are:

- brand
- location (if applicable)
- descriptive terms, including possible search terms

For example, the it'seeze home page starts with the brand name, followed by some descriptive terms including possible search terms such as 'affordable' and 'website design'. Because it'seeze covers the whole of the UK, we do not need to include further location information in the title. If we were only targeting Devon we might use a title such as "it'seeze: affordable website design in Devon".

Away from the home page the brand can be left until the end of the title – for example, "Latest news and developments from it'seeze". People are more likely to click on a search result when they see relevant words at the start of the title. As the home page will be the highest ranking page on the site for a search for the

brand name, it is the only page whose title is worth starting with the brand name.

A title that is too short does not take full advantage of the ability to include search terms within it. A title that is too long is truncated by the search engines, and the additional text past the truncation point does not help ranking. The recommended title length is between 20 and 80 characters.

The meta description does not affect a page's ranking. However, it is often shown in search results and hence can act as a 'pitch' to encourage users to click through to the page. It should be a few sentences, around 50 to 200 characters in length (longer descriptions will be truncated), that give users a compelling reason to believe the page is worth reading. Note that for particular search terms search engines may decide not to use the meta description and instead use some relevant text from the page as the snippet.

Keywords and keyword stuffing

Keywords are the search terms for which you believe your page is relevant. For example, keywords for the it'seeze home page include 'it'seeze', 'website', 'web design', and 'affordable'.

It is possible to tell search engines your intended keywords using **meta keywords** (often incorrectly called the keywords tag). While this was important in the early days of search, the major search engines no longer use this information as it is easy to abuse. Instead they attempt to algorithmically determine the terms for which a page is relevant based on the page content.

For a search engine to know that a page is relevant for a term, that term (or closely related terms, such as different spellings or parts of speech) must be used on the page. Using a keyword more often on the page will generally increase the relevance of the page for that term. However, **keyword stuffing** – overuse of a keyword – will instead cause search engines to penalise a site by decreasing its ranking. Keyword stuffing can be recognised by unnatural writing, with certain words occurring unusually frequently. If text reads naturally it is unlikely to be guilty of keyword stuffing.

Another form of keyword stuffing is the inclusion of long lists of keywords, usually at the footer of a page. This is commonly used to list all of the locations a company serves. While a short list of half a dozen locations is fine, long lists will cause search engines to penalise the site.

Headings

Headings on websites are not just larger or more prominent text; they are explicitly indicated by invisible pieces of code called **heading elements** (often incorrectly called heading tags). Keywords that appear within heading elements have a greater effect on relevance than keywords that appear in normal text. However, this effect is relative to other text on the page, so a page where all the text is a heading will be treated the same as a page where none of the text is a heading; this prevents heading elements from being abused.

In the it'seeze system, the heading component allows you to insert heading elements. The most important heading on a page should be set as the **h1** heading. Further headings can be given the levels **h2** to **h6**, although it is rare to use levels past **h3**. There can be multiple headings of a particular level on a page, but in general there should only be one h1 heading.