

Web Watcher

BY GLENN FLEISHMAN



Getting to the Top

STILL TRYING TO ATTRACT TRAFFIC to your Web site? A few tricks can move your site from the bottom of search-engine results to the top.

The key to effectiveness is knowing how search engines find and rank Web sites. Using spiders—unattended, automatic programs that follow links—search engines surf the Web, analyze the text on pages, and build matrices of frequently used words. They generally rank results from queries based on the *closeness* of sets and frequency of words in the indexed pages.

Submit URLs. Because spiders have a hard time finding new sites and unrefereed-to pages, you should submit your site's URL to search engines—every engine and directory has an Add URL button on its home page. Alta Vista, InfoSeek, HotBot, Lycos, Excite, and Yahoo are good places to start. Most engines restrict the number of URLs you enter, so submit your home page and two or three key subsidiary pages.

TITLE. The information you put between `<TITLE>` and `</TITLE>` is heavily weighted by search engines. In fact, the order of words and the message in the TITLE tag can push a page to the top or bottom of a search. What appears to be most effective is about 15 to 20 words starting with something descriptive (not just a company name).

META tags. The head section of any Web page generally includes META tags. Spiders use the description and keywords values for index-

ing and display. They look like this: `<META NAME="description" VALUE="approx. 30 words about page">` and `<META NAME="keywords" VALUE="comma-separated keywords">`.

The information in "description" shows up on the summary-results pages on engines like Alta Vista. Keywords are often given greater priority than the words that appear on a Web page.

Ignore advice that tells you to use ballot-box-stuffing tricks with the search engines. They morph all the time as programmers learn how to work around such techniques. Besides, if you're caught, a search engine might blacklist you, banning your pages from its index.

Writing. Well-written pages that stick to their topic tend to score high—the proximity and frequency of words are more likely to match the kinds of searches people make.

The first words on a page are often ranked very highly, so a zippy, on-target introduction can help you to the top of search listings. Text menus at the top of a page can skew results toward the words in the

menu, which may not be desirable.

Checking your results. Monitor search engines to see how you're doing. You can often do some reverse engineering, looking at the content and keywords on a Web page that ranked higher than yours to understand why. Stealing keywords isn't kosher, but analyzing success is.

Some services can help. Position-Agent (www.positionagent.com), for instance, offers reports starting at \$60 per year for five keywords/URL pairs. It travels weekly to ten major search engines, performs queries using information you provide, and summarizes the results for you.

Several tune-up Web sites check spelling and links, but many also give you an analysis of how well your META and TITLE tags are working. They'll even perform limited look-ups for you. Web Site Garage (www.websitegarage.com) is one of the best—it offers excellent services, some of which are free.

Rolling your own test is easy enough. When you search on most engines, the URL that shows up contains the words and details of your search. Copy and paste these into a local HTML file so that you can perform the same searches on a weekly or biweekly basis.

Another excellent test is to analyze the queries in your Web logs. If your logs contain the referrer (the URL the visitor was at when he or she clicked to reach your site), you can strip out page requests originating at search-engine sites and then visit links containing the terms searched on to see where you ranked. This information also gives you a good idea why people are visiting your site. ♦

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