

The goal of this SEO checklist

I am Jacques Vrolijk a Search Engine Optimisation Expert based in London. This guide and checklist is created to make it easier for you to find a good SEO expert for your business and *help you to avoid* using an SEO expert that might be harmful for your business.

There are many ways to get a site placed on the first page of the search engines, some techniques are slow some are fast and some will work for a long time and others might put your website at risk of being de-indexed by the Search Engines. To be able to understand what is done to get a site on the first page of Google and what results are you need some SEO knowledge yourself.

In this guide I will not compare current Experts as I am biased in that and would of course say you are most likely best of with me. I will be as open as possible and in the end provide you with some good questions to ask the Experts you interview. That way you can choose the SEO Expert that fits your business the best.

Jargon buster

This industry is filled with Jargon and you need to know some to be able to understand us.

Search Engine

Google, Bing , Yahoo are the main Search Engines. Google takes up over 88% of the market share in the UK (66% in the US) the next one is Bing with less than 6% of the market. This show that Google should be the key focus (esp. in the UK) of your search marketing campaigns.

Search Engine Algorithm

This is the “formula” that is used by the search engines to determine which websites to return for a specific search query. Depending on the activity within the market of that search query the results can change frequently. Basically what all Search Engines try to do is provide you with the best answer/most relative results. Google makes constant changes in their Algorithm and releases small and big updates a couple of times a year. In 2012 they averaged around 10 changes a week, ignoring the big updates. An update can result in a sudden rise or drop in a websites ranking. This depends on the methods used to build up the websites authority.

SERP

Search Engine Result Page. The results you see after entering a search query.

Keywords

The words used in a search query. Search Engines read website constantly to find new content and determine what the subject of a page and entire site is actually about. Using keywords in content at the right spots help search engines to determine what a website is about. Creating content that uses keywords that have a relative high search volume will make sure a website will be able to serve more people. Note that you do not want to use Keyword Stuffing.

Ranking



The place a website is at for a certain search phrase. Being on page one is a wish of most business. The visitors a website receives will depend on where on the first page a website is ranked. On average 42% of searchers will click on the website ranking #1 less than 12% will click on the website ranking on spot #2 and less than 5% for #5. This shows you how important it is to keep working on SEO ad content to prove to the Search Engines you are the authority in your market.

URL

This is the web address of a web page or anything else stored on the internet. For instance http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniform_resource_locator is a URL on the domain of wikipedia.org/ In SEO the name of the URL plays a role in determining it's ranking.

Google Panda

First released in February 2011 Google Panda is a series of updates aimed at the quality of content on a website. Trying to make low quality sites appear lower in the search results and higher quality content appear higher. After the 21st Panda update Google announced it will be updated on an on-going monthly basis.

Google Penguin

First release in April 2012 Google Penguin updates are aimed at lowering rankings of website that violate Google's Terms and Conditions including Link building, Link schemes and various other spammy methods that could be used to show authority. The latest update is Google Penguin 2.0 that was released in May 2013 and was among other things aimed at lowering the importance of links coming to sites.

Google Hummingbird

Release in September 2013 it is not something to worry about. Although it affects 97% of the searches it has not affected many rankings. This is because the update is about search intent. If for instance you Google "100 USD GBP" then the search engine will try to answer your question directly. This does show where Google is heading and how important it is to server people on the internet.

De-indexing

De-indexing means: being removed from all search results of a certain Search Engine. This means a website would not even appear for a search of itself. This is usually only happens to websites who use spammy SEO techniques to rank a website. The Penguin updates are all aimed at targeting these methods.

Backlinks

A backlink is an outside link to a website. This can be a link in a Blog comment, Forum post, a news story, Wikipedia, Social Media or any other website. The amount of links pointing to a website is used in the Search Engine Algorithms as a sign of Authority and trust. Note that building backlinks, paid or unpaid, with the intention to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results is against Google's Webmaster Guidelines & Terms and Conditions. And if found out will result in lower

rankings or even de-indexing. SEO Experts that build backlinks need to make sure that the links look as natural as possible to make sure the search engines do not find out it is a unnatural link. Backlinks can also be build natural by your site visitors a good SEO Expert knows how to do this.

PageRank (PR)

PageRank shows a site's authority in its niche. It is calculated by assessing who and how links to a website are structured. Most websites have a PageRank of Zero. Receiving links from a website with a high PageRank (PR2+) will boost a sites authority and thus ranking. Do note that linking with the purpose of passing PageRank or increase your ranking is against Google's Terms and Conditions. That said at the moment it is hard for Search Engines to discover for search engines to discover the purpose behind a link.

Outbound links (OBL)

These are links on a site that point away from its own domain. For instance a link to a source or a link to your site is an outbound link. Having no outbound links on your site can actually hurt you. And a backlink on a site with many outbound links will have less impact than one with just a few. Assuming their PageRank is the same.

Black hat SEO

Black hat SEO is a name given to SEO techniques that are a violation of the Search Engines Terms and Conditions. Link Wheels, Link Farms and any form of Link building is Black hat SEO. Black Hat SEO is focused on fooling the Search Engines to make a website rank higher instead of creating and showing more authority. Black Hat SEO can be effective on the short term. Most techniques out date quickly as the Search Engines find out about them and the next Algorithm update roles out to flag or de-index these websites.

White hat SEO

White hat SEO are optimisation practises that are approved and recommended by the Search Engines. This mainly involves the creation of high quality sharable content. Note that by definition there is no such thing as White Hat link building and the term white hat SEO is quite often used on products and services that are still against the Search Engines Terms and Conditions meaning that they are called white hat but actually are not. As soon as you hear or see the term: "white hat SEO" pay attention to it and determine for yourself if it actually is. If the focus is not on content and user experience but more on fooling the Search Engines it cannot be White Hat.

On Page SEO

On Page Optimisation involves all things that can be done on the website. This includes the website content, user experience, page load time, mobile friendliness, inner linking, image data, site meta data, increase crawl ability, deletion of duplicate content and all things that are in your hands or the hands of your webmaster/web designer/Search Engine Optimiser. Every SEO expert should start with this as this is the basis of SEO.

Impressions & CTR

Impressions is how Google measures how often a website is shown in results and Click Through Rate (CTR) is a measurement that show what percentage actually click through to your website. If this is low while you are on the first page it means your site title /site url /site description might not be

compelling enough. You can find this data in Google Webmaster Tools something that should have been set up with the launch of your website.

Duplicate Content

This is no original content made to look like original. Clearly something that would infringe copyrights. There are tools like Grammarly that help to see if content is original or not. Search Engines like Google try and combat duplicate content and push sites down the ranking when content does not seem original.

Curated Content

Is content gathered from other sources and distributed via the web. Properly curated content is not seen as duplicate content and can even help website rankings. This show that providing value to site visitors is a main ranking factor as not all content needs to be yours you can spread news from your industry on your website as well.

Ranking Guarantee

Something that is promised easily but impossible to do as Ranking is determined by many factors one of which is the efforts of competitors to rank their sites. Guarantees are used as sales techniques to take away doubt. If you have doubt my advice would be to trust you gut instinct and check more SEO experts.

My vision of SEO

Before we continue you need to understand my vision on SEO. Ranking a website in the top 3 of Google can be done in many ways. Every Search Engine Optimiser will have a different approach to SEO.

Although I am a serial entrepreneur and do not mind taking risks I do like predictability. For that reason alone I cannot recommend black hat link building schemes as you never know when an algorithm just got smarter and you do not want to go from 300 visitors a month to zero.

Having a background in web development and online marketing I also know the difference between visitors, leads and customers. Most SEO consultants stop at visitors as driving traffic is what they are hired for. I believe that every page should have a purpose and that should be to convert them to a buying customer, a phone call, a subscriber to a list, a fan on Facebook, a Tweet follower, or a YouTube subscriber.

Coming back to predictability I love building in redundancies by diversification. Building several sites and ranking them, all hosted on different servers and showing no connection between them. This is what I call SEO domination. How far this should be taken depends only on how much more business can be handled by my clients.

My approach to SEO has content at its starting point. Websites can rank on the first page without a single backlink when **on page SEO** is done correct, of- course depending on the competition of the keyword. It is useless to build links to a site that is not optimised so ON page SEO should be done well. This goes beyond the scope of changing title tags and meta descriptions.

Then the site should help to make content sharing easy so that site visitors can aid in building natural backlinks and social signals. An important part of this is having the right content.

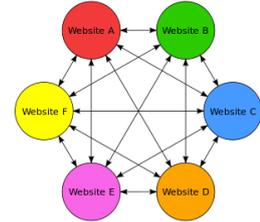
A few of the common ways to build backs, some still work and quite a few don't:



The extinct animal symbols are there to visualise how long ago the technique stopped having any effect on rankings.

Directory submission

Submitting websites to 250+ directories and site listings has been one of the first backlinking tactics around (before 2000). These days it will not do you any good and you might even want to steer away from it for future safety.



Link Farms & link exchange program

All the sites in a classical link farm link towards each other. This used to work really well as you could get a lot of links to your site by just sharing other links on your own site as well. To get rid of this form of web spam the search engines had to not just look at what links are coming in to a site but also how they are connected to each other. Pretty much starting off the forced evolution of the search engines.

Blog post commenting

Still practiced a lot by most SEO providers but as this resulted in serious web spam it was clear in 2012 it would not work for much longer. So once Penguin 2.1 came out in September 2013 a lot of site disappeared from page one. Not because they were penalised but because Google gave links from blog comments less importance. Where previously a site might have been ranking only because of these spammy links.

Sponsored articles and reviews

Frowned upon by Google and they discourage any sponsored article and if used they would like it clearly advertised that it is pay for. It is quite hard for a bot to check if an article is sponsored or not. It can work well if the site has a high PR and works even better when it is relevant to your niche.

Guest blogging

Almost similar to sponsored articles only often these are on larger sites where the owner can't keep up with providing content. In this case they start welcoming guest bloggers. This practice has become really spammy and Google announced early 2014 it now considers guest blogging to be similar to web spam.

Article submission

An old school way of providing backlinks is where you can submit an article to a website like eZine where people are allowed to reuse your content as long as links are not messed with. This technique stopped working a while back and only creates more issues with duplicate content.

Press Release submission

Doing press release well can result in bigger news sites such as BBC picking up a story and giving you backlinks. But in most cases the article is not really news worthy and gives some false hope in what

can be expected. That said there are some press release platforms that have a lot of authority and can rank their press release on the first page of Google very quickly for non-competitive keywords.

RSS directories

If you have a blog on your site and are active with it making sure it has an RSS feed on it and is submitted to RSS directories helps you to spread the news and get the Blog post indexed quicker. The link itself will not do much for your rankings.

Forum links

They can be as spammy as blog comment links. But! This can be a great traffic generator when done well. And leave a bit of link juice dripping to your site. The key here is not a lot of links on a lot of forums but enough links on a few relevant forums. No SEO can do this properly as the content on both the blog post and the forum reply needs to be of quality and solve a problem.

Fresh content

You might have heard it "Content is King" and it is important to provide value. But I have single page websites ranked on page one that haven't seen a content update for 3 years. If this was a major ranking factor sites should constantly slip down when not updated. That said, relevant content that provides value and invites sharing might grow your network and help you convert more visitors.

Social Media interaction

With the increase use of social media the amount of shares, retweets and other social mentions a site is claimed to help a site rank higher. In the meantime Google claims no longer to even check this as they have been denied access by Facebook and Twitter in the past. Facebook post can't be even crawled and thus links would go undetected. Tweets can be crawled and can potentially count as backlinks. As all links will be coming from the same domain the amount of tweet-links will hold a low value if they are used at all. Having Social Media interaction should not be done from a ranking perspective but from a traffic generation point of view.

Social profile

On most Social Profile you can link back towards your site. These end up being links from High PR sites and do-follow to even bring some link juice back to your site.

Google+ Local Page (Google Places)

A Business Page on Google+ Local doesn't just helps you create a powerful link like any social profile link, when optimised well it can out rank your website and bring in clients directly from this page.

Raffle

You have probably seen it on Facebook. Like for a change to win. These promotions are basically social backlinking schemes that work well and grow your audience. Before doing this you better have a social media strategy and social media manager on board since you want to use your Facebook followers more than your email list.

PDF submission

PDF submission sites allow to post a relevant PDF with a link back to your site, dependant on the authority of these sites they work better then article submission sites and do create okay backlinks.

Authority Profile

Profiles on high authority sites (high PR or .EDU .GOV sites) usually allow the use of a html profile description which enable the use of anchor text links from a site that will always be seen as important by the search engines.

Blog Network

Blog Networks have evolved so far that the name is by now completely incorrect. First of these days they are no longer blog but sites. And they are also not networks as the sites are not connected to each other. To have real effect the sites in these “networks” need to have a high PageRank (PR2-5) and a limited amount of outbound links. For low competition keywords 10 of these links can get a site ranked quickly. And when the site content is relative to your niche they work even better.

What can be learned from this?

If something looks spammy it will eventually not work in SEO as that is the main thing Google is fighting. The authority of the site giving the link becomes more and more important, the same with relevancy. The more outbound links a site has the more of its link juice is spread over many sources depleting effect the less authority that site has.

The backlinks I build

What I like to call my **Golden PR links** are the best links to get. They come from a high PR blog Network that I and my team are constantly expanding. There is a waiting list for these links because as soon as a network is finished it is sold out in half a day. They are worth the wait and this is my prime method of building links. If you have had SEO done before and lost rankings these are the links you need as they have a high trust flow and can counter balance the blog comment links you already have.

To add to the mix I also build **PR2+/Social/.EDU/.GOV profile links** as these are links that have the best effect (least amount of links for highest gain) after my Golden PR links.

The above two types of linking services work great if a site needs to rank for a few keywords only. This often is the case with Local businesses. When a site needs to rank for a large amount of keywords more keyword diversity is needed, meaning more links with anchor text that roudades through all the keywords are needed. To do this we revert back to the somewhat spammy method of building links on (Wiki/EDU blogs/Web 2.0 profiles/PDF/ Social Network) sites on a regular basis (around 15 per day). This **Drip Feed linking** method is safe because the amount of links build is not directly over doing it and it works because of two reasons: **1.** The drip feeding creates a constant stream of links signalling that this site is important. **2.** We enforce those links by building a large amount of tier-2 links to these links.

I'll be honest and say that this is a spammy method especially due to those second level links, at the moment they are just hard to filter out and thus work well. This system should only be used when a large and diverse method of keywords needs to be targeted and then only in conjunction with at least some Golden PR links methods.

SEO is often sold saying it takes 4-6 months before you will notice results. This is the case when the main tactic used is blog commenting as you needed tons of those links before so form of authority is

build up. Ever since September 2013 these SEO agencies stopped having any success and as a result lost many clients in the process.

Dispelling what is said often: When ON page SEO is done correctly a new site can rank high in 4-6 weeks with just a few backlinks. Add a dozen high PR links and a new site can be on page 1 in that time frame, for low to medium competitive keywords.

Exclusivity is quickly forgotten in the SEO world. But how can 1 SEO company have more than one client that is after the same keyword? I check every new client I take on-board if there is no conflict with existing clients and if their marketing plan works with mine.

I do not like making empty promises and understand choosing the right SEO expert can be a difficult decision. For that reason I have created **Zero Risk SEO** a Risk Free SEO service. This is where I build and Rank a website designed to convert visitors into leads or calling customers for your business. After the website is ranked and started to create leads you can decide if you want to use it or not. If you want it you can pay the price we agreed beforehand and if not you do not pay anything. This way you avoid the following risks:

- Paying upfront and wait months hoping for some result.
- No dubious backlinks will be built to your website.

Basically you get all the benefits of a working SEO campaign before you pay anything. I do this to prove to you I can do SEO. After I have proven myself I can do the same for your website. Resulting in you having two websites ranked high in Google. If you add your Google+ Local listing to that your business will dominate the market.

Questions to ask

Let me start that you will need to interview a couple of SEO experts to see the difference. Best is to do this over the phone and explain them that you are comparing Experts and want to ask a few questions to their approach to SEO. All good SEO consultants should be open to the techniques they use and more than happy to share their approach to SEO.

#1 What is your main strategy for ranking a website?

Good words: On page SEO, Content creation

Bad words: white hat backlinks, link wheels, Guarantee

If they give a Guarantee, tease them and ask the following: So if you miss the guarantee do I get my money back? Do we sign a contract where that is stated?

#2 Do you need access to my website?

Good words: **Yes**, could be only via WordPress or another Content Management System and FTP.

Bad Words: “**No!** We can rank you without website access.” Unless your site content is fully optimised ON Page SEO is needed to have a lasting effect.

#3 How long does it take on average before I am on page one?

Good answer: Where are you ranked now?

Bad answer: Any time frame is bad without research.

To see first results it does not take months. Months are usually only needed with low quality backlink services.

#4 Can you give any guarantees on my search engine rankings?

Good answer: No, although they might have a low/no risk strategy for you.

Bad answer: Yes, any guarantee even 70% of keywords make it to page 1 is a false promise.

#5 What are main factors for Local SEO?

Citations, Reviews, Backlinks, the Business Location and a consistent business NAP (Name, Address, Phone number).

#6 How do you measure success of a SEO campaign?

Do they measure in increased visitors, rankings per keyword, generated leads, increase phone calls, or do they track online sales? Add bonus points if they add data from Google Webmaster Tools.

#7 How and how often will we communicate?

The way your SEO expert communicates with you needs to match your desires. You should at least expect a monthly report of rankings, visitors and converted visitors.

#8 What happens when we part ways?

Perhaps a difficult question to ask, but you need to know as this depends on the SEO methods used.

What really happens: As long as the SEO tactics used were not just based on a constant stream of links are placed on sites that lease link space. Your rankings will not drop in the short term. Of course when you stop maintaining SEO and your competition keeps active in it your ranks might be affected.

#9 What other services do you provide?

Traffic generation has become more reliant on social media and depending on your industry social Media Management might be a good addition. AdWords Management is usually within the skill set of an SEO as it is still a part of Search Marketing. And personally I add Lead Generation to that mix. Providing clients with the effect of SEO without any of the worries.

#10 Why should we hire you?

Do not fall for promises or past results as all SEO Experts can give you that. Instead listen and find their USP and determine what sets them apart from the others is what attracts you to them.

#11 What do you need from me in order to succeed?

Good SEO should be part of a marketing strategy, thus the SEO Expert would need to know a lot about your business to be able to determine where the best opportunities lie. If you have been using AdWords it is really helpful for a SEO to have an insight in this. And a Good SEO expert should ask for it and might be a Google partner so all you need to provide is a AdWords customer-ID.

#12 Are there any risks with the SEO services you provide?

No SEO likes to admit to this, but SEO is reliant on ranking on a third parties product (Google) So any change in the algorithm can bring the risk of losing rankings. Even my Golden PR links are at risk. Not the links itself as Google will have to restructure their complete algorithm for things to change there but Google does update PR once in a while and some site can drop PR in this process. Resulting in replacement of those sites and a possible temporary dip in ranking when a minimum of PR links are in place.

That is it!

I hope this guide/checklist will help you have a better understand of SEO, how sites rank and in the differences between SEO experts. If you have any questions about SEO or some comments about this guide then don't hesitate to contact me.

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