



How to Make Sure Your Think Tank's Web Site Shows Up in Search Engine Results

By Isabel Isidro

The Web is an important component in the growth of any public policy organization today. It helps think tanks increase their visibility, circulate their research, and spread their messages.

But just being on the Web is not enough. In order to get traffic, gain market share, and get your ideas out, you need a Web site that gets found easily via search engines such as Google.

HOW DOES CONTENT LIKE YOURS GET FOUND?

The first step to improving the visibility of your organization in search engine results is to ask these questions:

1. What search terms do people use when they look for the kind of information you have?
2. Which sites show up in the search engines for those searches? Is your site one of them?
3. In what searches can you be found?

If you're a think tank in North Dakota, for example, and one of your main issues is the North Dakota state budget, then you'd want Web users to find your content when they search in Google for "North Dakota budget." Or, if your organization focuses on the health care system in Georgia, then you'd want to show up when people look for "health reform in Georgia."



If none of your pages show up in these or similar searches, then it is time to draw up a search-engine optimization plan for your Web site. (In “geek speak,” search engine optimization is often referred in shorthand as “SEO.”)

GET SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZED

Search engine companies like Google, Bing, and Yahoo advise that the key to getting good rankings is to develop a Web site with your users primarily in mind, providing them with original and compelling content so that they will want to come back and visit the site regularly. It is also important to make your Web site easy to use and navigate.

Some basics of search engine optimization include:

Focus on Your Customers. The key to generating traffic on the Web is to produce top-quality content that your visitors will appreciate and naturally want to share with others via blogging, social bookmarking, tweeting, and Facebooking.

Give Every Page on Your Site a Unique and Descriptive Title. The page title needs to communicate the topic of the content in order to maximize its search engine visibility.

One of The Heritage Foundation’s most successful papers in terms of traffic is “Understanding Poverty in America,” published in 2004. (You can find it at www.heritage.org/research/reports/2004/01/understanding-poverty-in-america/.) The title is short, yet descriptive of the content. The paper is about poverty in America and all the main keywords used in the title appear in the paper itself. One of the main advantages of this title is that “poverty in America” is itself a frequently used search phrase.

When crafting the titles of your pages, think of keywords that people are likely to use in search engines to find the type of content you have created. Colorful titles may catch the eyeballs of readers who see the piece, but that doesn’t mean search engines will find the article. Titles featuring clever wordplay, academic jargon, or unfamiliar colloquialisms run the risk of not being returned in relevant searches.

For example, not everybody knows that the Service Employees International Union has branded its picketing campaigns the “purple wave.” So a story about SEIU activities that uses “purple wave” but not “SEIU” in its title will not be very effective. It is not a term that users will likely use in a search.

Tone down the wonkiness of your titles and balance it with the phrases that an ordinary person would use when searching for the information on the Web. For example, many people have probably heard the phrase “smart growth” in reference to a set of policy ideas on urban planning. They are less likely, however, to type “urban growth boundaries” into a search engine.

Note that you can have the best of both worlds—colorful article titles and straightforward page titles that get good results in searches. With the right content management system, you can show one title for the users (typically catchy and short) and another title for the search engines (typically more keyword laden).

The social media news site Mashable.com, for example, recently featured an article titled “Facebook Reveals its User-Tracking Secrets.” The page title shown to search engines, how-

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ever, was “How Facebook Tracks Its Users,” a phrasing that a user would more naturally type in a search.

Another example is the recent New York Times article, “Facing Crisis, Technocrats Take Charge in Italy.” The title for search engines was “Italy’s Monti Forms New Government.” The search engine title was crafted in the hope of that the article will pop up in searches that mention the name of the new Italian Prime Minister.

Pitch Your Links to Other Outlets. The quality and quantity of links to your pages are critical to getting top rankings. The more quality links you can get from authoritative and trusted Web sites, the higher your rank will be in the search engines.

Pitch your content to local media, other think tanks, and even local blogs—and request them to add a link to your Web site. Be active in social media as it increases the visibility of your content and can be a rich source of links. Search the terms for which you want your content to be found and review the sites that come up. These sites are important because the search engines consider them to be important. Ask those sites, especially if they don’t directly compete with you for the same audience, to mention your article or blog post and link to you.

Link to Yourself. Before you request links from other sites, make sure that your Web site links to its own pages. For example, if a blog post talks of budget and spending, link the phrase “budget and spending” to the relevant section of your site.

Wikipedia provides the classic example of this practice. In Wikipedia articles, any mention of a topic that has a separate Wikipedia page is hyperlinked to that page. If you are a small think tank, you might not have the resources to replicate the extensiveness of Wikipedia’s internal linking, but you can ensure all your important internal pages are

linked from within the site itself.

Make Sure Every Page on Your Web Site Can Serve as an Entry Page. Not all visitors come to your site via the homepage. Thus, you need to ensure that the basic navigation links on your homepage are also available on every content page. Users who land on an article about taxation, for example, shouldn’t have to click on the homepage link in order to find links to your other issues.

Focus on Engaging Your Audiences. Google (and other major search engines as well) are working to measure how well you engage the audience in your niche. They look at a number of signals on user engagement, and rank high the sites they consider are most useful to users. Possible signals include users bookmarking a page as a favorite, visiting other pages on the same site, sharing your content in social networks, or returning to the same page later.

Track and Measure Your Success. Use Web analytics tools such as Google Analytics to help you understand the patterns, growth, and opportunities in your traffic. Study your analytics thoroughly and see patterns of engagement in your site. Pay attention to where your visitors come from, what are your most common referring pages, how long your visitors are staying on the site, which content gets the most traffic, and which pages get the least traffic.

Be patient. Getting good rankings in the search engines takes time to work. Just be sure to incorporate search engine best practices in your everyday operation: Make your titles more keyword-rich using search phrases that people are likely to use, pitch your links to other outlets, and write content that your target audiences want to read.

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