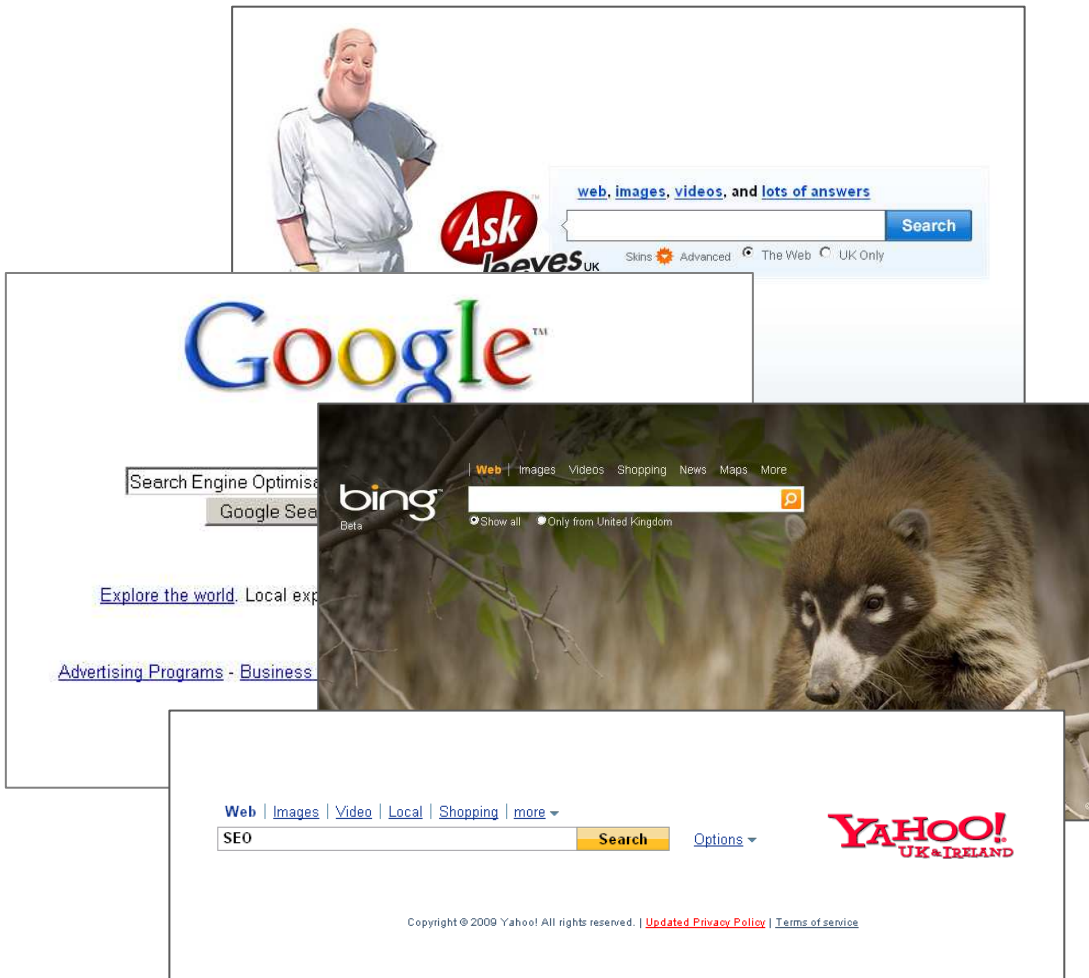


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## SEO - exploding the myth

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is viewed by many internet businesses as a riddle, inside an enigma, inside a code. Search engines as a rule don't tend to over-advertise exactly how they rate a site, so traditionally it has led to speculation and results gleaned by trial and error.

At UKFast, as an internet hosting provider, we have the benefit of being able to monitor the online journeys and success stories of hundreds of thousand of domain names. This whitepaper is based on our SEO findings over nearly a decade of internet hosting, combined with the advice of the search engines themselves.

### so, what are the key factors of SEO success?

Whenever you're optimising your website keep in mind the following factors for SEO success:

- Speed
- Relevant content
- Reliability

Keep in mind that the purpose of ranking sites is, from the search engines' perspective, to provide the web user with **the most relevant results** and therefore give them the best customer experience.

The search engines see traffic they send to your website as their traffic, not yours. The search engines are lending you their traffic so it is in their best interests not to dissuade people from using their service by directing people to slow, irrelevant, poor quality websites.

## speed

### customer attraction and retention

**Faster sites attract and retain more visitors. It's true. You'll no doubt have seen perfectly calm, level headed people turn to fire breathing dragons at the hint of a webpage delay, threatening to launch the PC and all its peripherals from the office window. At UKFast we don't stand for this – and not just because we're on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor – but because we know how frustrating slow pages can be.**

When social networking site All Join On joined the UKFast network they had a client base of 4,000. Now, just over a year later, the site attracts 60,000 visitors per month.



*"Two weeks after signing with UKFast our traffic doubled and in the first month it was up by 300 per cent. It hasn't slowed down since."*  
 Founder of [www.alljoinon.com](http://www.alljoinon.com)

On the surface it is easy to see why speed attracts visitors. In a society where consumers are growing ever-more demanding immediacy is rapidly becoming a right, not a luxury.

### what Google says

Google's Communications and Public Affairs department states: *"It's fair to say that a speedy site will rank better (it's true for adverts, as well)."*

Online businesses which deliver speedily loading pages give their web users a greater customer experience. Speed encourages people to stay on the site - a must when research shows

web customers abort due to slowly loading pages.

In the Official Google Webmaster's blog on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2009, Richard Rabbat and Bryan McQuade of the Page Speed Team posted:

*"At Google, we focus constantly on speed; we believe that making our websites load and display faster improves the user's experience and helps them become more productive."*  
<http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2009/06/introducing-page-speed.html>

But not only does it encourage people to stay on a particular site, when it loads quickly it encourages people to return. Google research shows that just a 0.5 second delay in page load speed can cause a 20 per cent decrease in traffic.

But what does this have to do with SEO? Well, busy sites which web users return to are rated successful sites with a high level of customer experience by Google and ranked more highly.

## speed and SEO

After launching a new site with a speed of 690KB/sec, Let's Stay Together was visible within Google rankings in two weeks. In six weeks it was ranked number one.



*"Delivering excellent search engine results with all of my websites is what my business is all about. UKFast is helping me achieve that aim. This extra performance of our site is clearly attributable to the speed of the UKFast dedicated, managed server."*

*"With over 30 websites I am obsessive about evaluating why and how my websites are performing so I'm convinced on this issue. Pages load very rapidly, navigation is seamless and this all contributes to a great user experience."*  
MD, Let's Stay UK

If pages time out and Google's bots cannot reach a website the bots will not be able to index that page and this can't fail to have a negative effect on page ranking.

It's important to note that if your site is blacklisted it is very hard work to get back into Google. You'll note that even when you're re-indexed your site will have decreased in rank. Best practise is therefore to make sure you do not get blacklisted.

## speed and PPC

In terms of paid search Google announced in March 2008 it was incorporating page load speed into its Quality Score of pages.

It stated its reasons as twofold: *"first, users have the best experience when they don't have to wait a long time for landing pages to load. Interstitial pages, multiple redirects, excessively slow servers, and other things that can increase load times only keep users from getting what they want: information about your business. Second, users are more likely to abandon landing pages that load slowly, which can hurt your conversion rate."*

(<http://adwords.blogspot.com/2008/03/landing-page-load-time-will-soon-be.html>)

### 1. how does load time affect my landing page quality?

You are able to see a grade for your landing page's load time in your AdWords account. 'Load time' refers to the amount of time it takes for a user to view your landing page after clicking your ad.

Several weeks after your load time grade becomes visible, it will begin to impact your landing page quality and, therefore, your Quality Score. We recommend working to improve your load time during this interim if it's received a low score.

### 2. why is load time a factor?

Users value ads that bring them to the information they want as efficiently as possible. A high-quality landing page

should have a fast load time as well as feature unique, relevant content. Fast load times benefit advertisers as well, since users are less likely to abandon a site that loads quickly.

### 3. how is my load time graded?

Each of your keywords will receive a load time grade based on the average Load Time of the landing pages in the ad group and of any landing pages in the rest of the account with the same domain.

If multiple ad groups have landing pages with the same domain, therefore, the keywords in all these ad groups will have identical load time grades.

Two things to note: when determining load time grade, the AdWords system follows destination URLs at both the ad and keyword level and evaluates the final landing page.

If your ad group contains landing pages with different domains, the keywords' load time grades will be based on the domain with the slowest load time. All the keywords in an ad group will always have the same load time grade.

Google evaluates your load time relative to the average in your server's geographic region. If your website is hosted on a server in India, for example, your landing page load time will be compared to the average load time in that region of India. This is true even if your website is intended for an audience in the United States.

## SEO: exploding the myths

### 4. how can I see if my load time is good or not?

You can see a keyword's load time grade on the Keyword Analysis page: if your keyword is graded "this page loads slowly" your landing page quality and Quality Score will be negatively affected.

If your keyword is graded "no problems found" your landing page quality and Quality Score will not be affected. The one exception is if your keyword is graded No problems found and marked Load Time is faster than the average in your server's geographic region. In this case, your landing page quality and Quality Score may be positively affected.

### 5. how can I improve my load time?

The AdWords system re-evaluates landing pages on a regular basis. If you make significant improvements to your landing page's load time, you should see improved Quality Scores. Note that your Quality Score may update incrementally over a number of weeks after you improve your load time. To improve your load time:

- Use fewer and faster redirects
- Don't use interstitial pages
- Compress the size of your page
- Contact your webmaster or web hosting provider to discuss other possibilities

While investing in server-side speed is very important, it is not the only method of ensuring a faster site. Now you've signed up to UKFast, you have your fast server set up and ready to power your business to success and give you the best chance online. But what next?

## relevant content

### coding

Google advises businesses to build a site from the ground up with SEO in mind. By ensuring your coding is developed in such a way as to encourage a high level of usability and accessibility you ensure they are more easily readable by search engines. By doing this you allow more pages to be indexed and stored on Google's algorithm.

When writing the code for your site see Google Page Speed's best practices: [http://code.google.com/speed/page-speed/docs/rules\\_intro.html](http://code.google.com/speed/page-speed/docs/rules_intro.html). Recently Google has published a website dedicated to making the entire internet faster. With reference to coding for speed the search engine giant gives the following advice:



### optimise caching

Web pages include resources that change infrequently, such as CSS & image files which take time to download over the network, increasing the time it takes to load a web page.

- HTTP caching allows resources to be saved by a browser or proxy.
- once cached, the local copy can be called instead of having to download again.
- you reduce round-trip time by eliminating numerous HTTP requests.
- you substantially reduce the total payload size of the responses.
- the result = faster loading pages.

### minimise request size

Every time a client sends an HTTP request, it has to send all associated cookies that have been set for that domain and path along with it

- cut down on client request time by reducing the number of bytes uploaded as cookie data
- keeping cookies small ensures HTTP requests fit into single packets (1500 bytes)
- serve static resources from cookieless domains to reduce no. of page requests

### minimise round-trip times

Round-trip time is the time it takes for a client to send a request and the server to respond

- minimise DNS lookups – cuts down number of DNS resolutions and RTT delays
- minimise redirects – cuts out additional RTT
- combine external CSS + Javascript into as few files as possible
- optimise the order of styles and scripts – enables better parallelisation/speeds rendering time
- parallelise downloads across hostnames

### minimise payload size

- there are penalties incurred for crossing an IP packet boundary
- best practice is to keep packet sizes under 1500 bytes

- enable Gzip – reduce bytes sent
- remove unused CSS – avoids downloading unnecessary bytes
- compact JavaScript code and speed up downloading, parsing, and execution
- defer loading of Javascript – reduce initial download size
- optimise images - properly format, size, and compress images

### optimise browser rendering

- avoid CSS expressions – they degrade rendering performance
- putting CSS in document head improves rendering performance
- specify image dimensions for faster rendering by eliminating the need for reflows and repaints



## populating your site

The more pages you have the more times you'll be crawled by search engines and the probability of appearing in search results increases.

However, don't be tempted to duplicate pages. Each page should be relevant to the product or service you are trying to sell and duplicate pages are the equivalent to spamming, which does not do your website any favours. Remember: do not attempt to hoodwink the SERPs, they do not react to kindly. Yahoo says:



### *Pages Yahoo! Wants Included in its Index:*

- *Original and unique content of genuine value*
- *Pages designed primarily for humans, with search engine considerations secondary*
- *Links intended to help people find interesting, related content, when applicable*
- *Metadata (including title and description) that accurately describes the contents of a web page*
- *Good web design in general*

<http://help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/search/basics/basics-18.html>

When populating your site remember that search engines rank individual pages rather than entire websites, hence apps like Google **page** rank. Your homepage is probably not going to be your most important page and linking externally to only this page is a plan we do not recommend.

Imagine this. You're looking for the Hitachi television, 5.6 series because

you know there is an offer on it. You go to Google, you type in "Hitachi television 5.6 series" and hit search. The first result which pops up is "Argos". You click the link and are taken to the Argos homepage and have to perform the search function over again. It is far more convenient for a customer to go straight to the relevant product page.

### content

Search engines have come a long way from the early days of optimisation. Remember the days when pages would contain lists of keywords in an attempt to get to the top?

Fortunately, (or unfortunately depending on your online marketing methods) those days are gone. Today's search engine model is considerably wiser in the way it crawls content. You can't con search engines with reams of keywords as it will be seen as spamming and therefore negatively affect your website's search engine rankings.

### how do you get your site in the search engines?

Firstly, make sure you submit your site to them all. A great website is useless unless Google et al know you are there and ready to do business.

## keywords

Keywords and phrases however are still very relevant to ranking – as long as they are used wisely – i.e. where necessary. It is vital to strike a balance between engaging informative content for people and keywords for search engines. Don't repeat the key term more than 3 times so to avoid keyword stuffing. A rough rule is to have one of your keywords in every 20.

Optimise each page around one key term.

In our experience updating website content on a regular basis helps keep pages fresh and boosts rankings as search engines appreciate up-to-date information.

## specific phrases

It is more effective to use a specific phrase rather than a generic keyword or keyword combinations.

Definitely don't use popular, yet irrelevant search terms to attract traffic as it just won't convert, this in turn will reduce the amount of time a visitor stays on your site which will reduce your rankings.

## site structure

An optimised site structure is one that adds weight to a specific page and term by breaking out niches in each main keyword area – this is known as siloing. Another benefit of this structure is that the visitor is funnelled in a logical order to the service or product / information they were looking for.

## linking

Inbound links are very important in enhancing ranking, search engines will crawl through the links and so crawl your site more often and perhaps more obviously, these links ensure people are drawn to your website from other avenues. Links from other sites to a website using target keywords and phrases as the link text are a key factor.

Only relevant and useful content will generate those all important organic links.

Reciprocal links have now fallen out of favour with search engines as they are an obvious sign of SERP (search engine results page) manipulation – online marketers use three way linking to generate links to a website.

Use HTML links and avoid framesets to ensure a crawler can index a page.

And remember to link to relevant pages, not just your homepage.

## externally building your brand online

A good way to get links back to a site is to post articles and press releases to other sites. Additionally, start a social media campaign. Sites such as Twitter, Blogger and Facebook can provide a vast array of links back to your website.

### copy

All copy you have on your site should be relevant and to the point.

When updating your content bear in mind that it is all relative. If you update five pages a month you practice good SEO, but if you update 50 pages a day you practice great SEO.

To ensure frequent, fresh content try starting a blog and add your own news releases. Giving your opinion on industry news can also help create a following online.

Search engines weight newer content more highly in the SERPs, this is why news articles and blogs appear in the rankings soon after they have been posted.

### good HTML

Search engines prefer standards-compliant and semantically correct sites so make sure HTML code is well formatted and make suitable use of the H1, H2 and alt tags.

### accurate meta

Accurately revealing the content of a page by using meta tags including page title, keywords and description helps some search engines list websites. And make sure that every page has unique page title and page description metadata.

Titles and descriptions are used in the snippets (that is the text in some search results) think of these as your websites advertising space. The more people that click on your listing and stay there, the more likely you are to move through the rankings.

Remember, to make them relevant include keywords but don't spam!

### don't cheat

Don't include hidden links, keywords or cloaking. Search engines can find cheaters and sites that get found will be penalised, if not emitted completely.

### usability

Create XML sitemaps and make sure you submit it to the search engines. Offer an HTML site map which is auto updated based on the XML site map. Plus, make sure you don't have more than three levels of navigation on your site – the more levels, the more difficult information becomes to find, and so crawlers struggle to index these pages.

GoogleBot is made up of several algorithms, DeepBot and FreshBot being the most obvious, FreshBot visits ranked pages regularly DeepBot less so

By submitting your XML sitemap to Google Webmaster tools you can see how many pages on your site Google is indexing.

### URLs

Keyword rich domains are beneficial, as they will give your website visibility in the search engines relatively quickly.

Keep URLs short for better SEO and use your key term in them - shorter URLs are more memorable and key terms are easily visible to crawlers when placed here.

**images**

Ensure image optimisation across the site to benefit from traffic from Google image search. To effectively optimise your images you can keep images on a folder level rather than a subdomain, use a descriptive name for the image as it affects the image content and include a keyword if relevant. Use alt text for all your images and give it a caption where possible.

Also consider new content such as video.



## reliability

A reliable site helps boost your search engine rankings. Firstly because customers appreciate it, return and boost traffic levels; secondly because if the Google bots which crawl your site cannot access pages, those pages cannot be indexed thus negatively affecting your rank.

### How-Do case study

Before joining the UKFast network, northwest online news outlet How-Do had outgrown its solution. Its site was either slow or offline and this frustrated visitors.



How-Do offers news, opinion and resources for those working in all aspects of media in the North West. The Website launched at the end of March 2007 and it now boasts over 40,000 unique users. With demand high from the beginning How-Do got off to a great start. However, it soon became apparent that the initial hosting provider could not deliver the reliability of service to support the website's rapid growth.

*"My previous hosting provider was just too unreliable. With them my website would go offline at least once a week. My business could not grow in*

*those conditions," How-Do owner Nick Jaspán stated.*

Thanks to the reliability and speed of a UKFast entry-level server How-Do flourished in early 2008. The website experienced an extraordinary increase in traffic as users responded to the quick and reliable service provided by the UKFast solution.

The improvement was so successful that the How-Do website needed to be upgraded to a more comprehensive dedicated server in May 2008 to cope with demand.

The graph above is from independent online search intelligence company Hitwise, and shows a massive jump in traffic at the time of the initial move to UKFast. Then it shows another leap in May which correspond to the transition to an even quicker UKFast dedicated server.

## conclusion

In our years of monitoring and building websites at UKFast we have noted that you simply cannot con the search engines. If your site is popular, well optimised without spamming, fast, and well designed, it will succeed.

But think not of what you are doing just for the search engines. Think of your customers – what would they want? – and give it to them. You will find sites which follow these rules are invariably those in poll position.

The moral of this SEO tale is to be good to your customers, give them a great customer experience, and the search engines will reward you.