

Warthog Web Design
Search Engine Optimization
and Other Tips for a Successful Tourism Website

SEO (search engine optimization) and SERP (search engine results position) have become big business as sites struggle to be seen on the Internet. However, if you are considering a redesign of an existing website or a new website, a little thought beforehand can pay big dividends.

This short guide will provide you with some ideas.

1. The Site Content

Usually the part of the website that is given the least attention but it will, with absolute certainty make or break your website.

All the content should be largely devoid of adjectives unless absolutely essential. Leave out words like – bird lovers paradise; tranquil; home from home etc. They add nothing to the site and act to dilute the rest of the content.

2. The Site Content 2

The purpose of the site content is towards one single objective – to get your unknown visitor to contact you.

All the content should be informal – use the first person plural (us, we, our) to involve the visitor. It should be short, focussed and persuasive.

3. The Site Content 3

The content should be well laid out, with short paragraphs and short bulleted lists. Use whitespace to guide visitors through the page. Verdana is an easy to read font found on all computers – it was designed for web pages so use it. If you are short of space such as in a newsletter container, then only use Arial.

Keep good space between the edge of the page and the text.

4. The Site Content 4

Headings should be hierarchical. HTML provides six levels of headings, like a newspaper. Search engines look for the text in the first heading and allocates a weight to the words it finds there. They then go through the other headings, at least to heading 4 allocating less weight each time to the text in the headings.

Use HTML headings and think carefully what text you put there.

5. The Site Content 5

A header is the graphic at the top of the page. Too often these are clichéd montages of various views and animals. The footer is the bottom bar that usually contains the copyright notices.

Headers contribute very little to the site and can slow the whole page down, leading to visitor loss. They are often too large, occupying almost a

half of the viewable area of every page.

The header should occupy no more than one quarter of the viewable area (100 pixels) – its your content that's important.

It should incorporate real text, not graphic text. Search engines read real text to find out what the site is about. Real text can be customized for every page. Real text takes no time at all to download.

There should be at least one if not two lines of real text in the header that simply describe what the site is about. The first line of text will be allocated a top level heading so that a search engine will regard the words in the heading as important.

Search engines look for identical words in the footer so whatever words are in the topline of text in the header also appear in the footer.

For example:

'Mokoro canoe safaris and holidays in Okavango, Botswana – Delta Rain' in the header.

'Copyright 2007 Mokoro canoe safaris and holidays in Okavango, Botswana – Delta Rain' in the footer.

Stilted text it may be but its packed with keywords and is designed primarily for search engines.

The second line of text should amplify the first and be allocated a H2 heading.

For example:

'Explore the Okavango Delta in Botswana by mokoro for your next vacation'

Each of these text passages can be modified for each page. Here, we have used the US version of holiday – vacation.

6. Plan

Before you engage a web developer decide on your target audience – young adventurers or older folk.

A young audience will expect bright, lively text whilst older visitors will expect some degree of authority and restraint. Families will expect something different again.

Look at businesses like yours in Google and see what you think it is that enables them to rank highly. Is there any sort of consistency in the top ten sites?

Choose your search words carefully – they must be the sort of words that a visitor who doesn't know you exist but wants a holiday in your area would use.

'Accommodation' is one of the most widely used search terms but it

returns millions of results and for this reason although visitors looking to holiday in your area might use it at first, the very volume of results will cause them to refine their search.

'Accommodation in Durban' yields 650,000 results.

'Bed and breakfast in Durban' yields 160,000 results.

I believe that visitors know the type of accommodation they will use before they travel so are likely to use more specific terms to get a useable result more quickly.

Eventually, you will have 30 – 40 keywords/phrases but there will be about 6 that will be far more important than the others.

For example:

'bed and breakfast'; 'guest house'; st. lucia (or your geographical location); 'holiday'; 'vacation'; 'natal' (or your province).

'kwaZulu-Natal' confuses overseas visitors who think its in Zimbabwe so I use simply 'natal' to concentrate the search terms.

7. **Apply**

Once you have your list of keywords/phrases, apply them to the content on all the pages. Instead of saying 'Kingsley is noted for it's birdlife', say 'Kingsley Bed and Breakfast in Durban is noted for it's birdlife'.

Reinforce and amplify what it is you do at every opportunity.

8. **The Content Cascade**

Search engines apply more weight to the top two paragraphs than others on the page so don't think a huge page is going to be to your advantage.

So, use more keywords in these two paragraphs than the others. State simply what you do, how you do it and where you do it.

'Kingsley guest house is located in Durban, Natal and offers superior accommodation on a bed and breakfast basis. We are close to Durban's beaches, conference centres and shopping malls.'

9. **Keyword Density**

A phrase used by search engines. A high density means that there are lots of words in the content that point towards one single activity, each reinforcing the other.

If you have a restaurant and charter boat business as well as your B&B, don't try too hard to promote them on the B&B website. You'll dilute the focus and thus the SERP of the site. Use a separate site.

10. **How Humans Read web Pages**

They never read pages – they skim them for keywords that are important – in this case, 'bed and breakfast' and 'Durban'.

They will skim read the whole of the first two paragraphs and the left half

of the third and fourth paragraphs. If they find no suitable keywords, they will leave the site. If they do however, they will return to the top of the page and read it.

11. Lists

Don't list multiple phrases in a paragraph. It is far more efficient in terms of information transfer to use a list.

'Durban offers tourists and vacationers long sandy beaches, mild weather, surf for surfers, plenty of restaurants, many nightclubs, tropical climate and zulu culture'.

'Durban offers tourists and vacationers

- long sandy beaches
- mild weather
- surf for surfers
- plenty of restaurants
- many nightclubs
- tropical climate
- Zulu culture

See, quick to read, however, use no more than six bullets per list because people start to forget what's in the bullets if the lists are too long. Rather use two lists.

12. Charging Your Visitors

Yes – you are charging them. Not their money but their time.

In exchange for perhaps finding what they want on your website, they are prepared to donate time.

Slow pages are the principal headache. A page should download in under 10 seconds – 15 at the most at DSL speeds. If a page takes a minute to download, it will have lost well over half it's visitors. They will not be prepared to 'pay' to watch a page download.

When you look at your target audience, decide whether they are likely to be on DSL or on dialup. If the latter, design the page to be fast.

In any event, it is courtesy to present them with your pages as quickly as possible.

13. What People do with Web Pages

If you are in the doctor's and you pick up a magazine, the first thing you will do is look at the pictures. If they are interesting, you will read the accompanying text.

On the Internet, visitors do the exact opposite – they read the text first. Text will always be quicker than pictures but even in cases where its not, people read first and look later.

Therefore, get you message out first. Forget the fancy photos – put those further down – and get your text to start right at the top of the content

area. People can be reading that while photos are downloading further down the page.

14. Photos

While we're on the subject.

Please leave the endless collages of buffaloes/rhinos/lions/amphitheatre etc. out of the page unless absolutely necessary. People even in Cleveland know what a lion looks like.

And, people don't want to stay in the Marie Celeste. If you are including photos of your place, add some people enjoying themselves – on the deck, in the pub, in the lounge and in the pool. People like to see other people. Visitors are not buying your place, they are holidaying in it.

Use photos only where absolutely needed. Don't simply fill a space with a photo - it will detract from the nearby content.

Keep them small – around 200 pixels. I hate these 'Click to enlarge' thumbnails. Nobody ever bothers. Rather use good quality photos at around 200 pixels so you won't need it. If you want to show off the area or your place, use a Gallery page.

If you're short of space, use a slideshow with a few photos.

15. Domains

Usually the very first mistake made.

'www.grantley.co.za' means nothing.

'www.grantleyguesthouse.co.za' means a lot more.

'www.durbanguesthouses.co.za' means a huge lot more.

Try and include a keyword such as 'durban' or 'hotel' in the domain name.

If you have a well established domain, you can purchase additional domains that have names more friendly to search engines. For instance, the first and second domain names above can point to the third, which is where all the pages will be and which will be searched by search engines more efficiently because the domain name itself tells the search engine what the site is about. 'durban guest houses' is what visitors looking for this type of accommodation in this area will tend to put in search engines.

Want to find a .co.za? Go to <http://co.za> and click Whois. Enter your text and click – it will tell you whether that domain is available and if not, who has registered it. Also look at the domains that are due for suspension because the annual fee has not been paid and those recently suspended because you can find some beauties in there.

Rather use a .co.za than a .com because it tells visitors you are in the area in which they are interested. There are also problems searching .com sites that are hosted in RSA.

16. Metatags

You can't see them but they are at the top of most web pages. Click 'View' and then 'source' in your browser and you will see a Notepad window open. Look at the top and there will be lines of text. Look for TITLE, DESCRIPTION and KEYWORDS. See what's in your own site.

Keywords is largely ignored by most search engines because of the possibility of abuse – keywords for insurance company but the site sells fishnet stockings for instance.

However, twenty choice keywords should be in there because some search engines do look at the tag to see what the site is about.

TITLE is very important and Google looks at it carefully. It should describe the business of the site.

'Self catering | St. Lucia, Natal | St. Lucia Wetlands Park | Fishing, game viewing and snorkelling | St. Lucia Wilds'

and that's about the length you have. The TITLE is the blue text in Google.

The DESCRIPTION is an amplified version of the TITLE and you are allowed twice as many characters – 256.

'St. Lucia Wilds self catering chalets in St. Lucia, Natal are located in the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park and ideal for angling, snorkelling, game viewing, whale watching and birding'

The DESCRIPTION is often the text under the blue TITLE text.

Customize these tags for every page, making sure that your core keywords – 'carewords' stay in every page.

17. Site Maps

Make it easy for search engines to index your site with a sitemap. Your web developer should do this for you.

18. Hosting Your Website

Wherever you host the site, make sure you have a Control Panel.

This is a piece of software that will tell you how much disc space and bandwidth you've used, enable you to set up your emails, and set virus scanning.

Very importantly, it will provide you with statistics related to your site – 'server logs'. Every time a visitor's browser asks for a page, a photo, a script, the server notes when it was requested and (approximately) who requested it.

Your statistics will tell you how many visitors you have had and how many returned to your site, where visitors entered and left your site, browsers/operating systems used etc. etc.

The most important statistic is what search words and phrases were used to find your site – in other words, what were visitors expecting to find on your site. There will be some strange entries but if there is a trend of words that you don't provide on your site, think about adding a section.

We offer a hosting package that includes all this plus site updates and search tuning for R10 a day.

19. **Horizontal Lines**

Avoid them – they signal visitors that they shouldn't go beyond them.

20. **Colours**

Use pastel/muted/unsaturated colours for large areas and bright colours where you want to draw your visitor's eye – Specials for instance.

Use no more than three colours.

21. **Navigation**

Make sure that the navigation through the site is entirely logical and that the visitor knows where he is going. Do not use Javascript 'rollover' buttons that will slow the page. Do not use Dynamic HTML navigation that is separate from the page because search engines will not follow the links.

Use CSS navigation that is quick and will change colour once visited, aiding the visitor.

22. **Big No No's**

Splash pages consisting of a single picture as your home page – very slow and went out with the ark.

Flash – big no no too because it is almost invariably abused – and search engines can't follow it.

Animated gifs like the waving flag and rotating email icon – went out with the ark too.

23. **Code Cues**

In addition to helping search engines as above, the code can be augmented with search terms that search engines will read. Things like tables, headings, links and pictures can all have search terms attached.

Even the links can be search friendly:

not: 'contact.htm'

but: 'contact_grantley_guesthouse.htm'

24. **Reciprocal Links**

Google loves these because it says to itself – 'If all these sites are willing to link to this site, it must be an important site and I will add extra weighting to it in my index'.

Other sites linking to your site is very good but make sure that the site that is doing the linking is part of your industry. Butchers in Glasgow are not and Google knows it.

Further, the link should be contest for maximum efficiency.

not: '[Grantley Guest House](#), Ballito'

but: 'We recommend that when on the north coast of Natal, you stay at the luxurious [Grantley Guest House](#) for your vacation'.

You will need to link to the people who are linking to you of course so do that on a Useful Links Page.

25. Testimonials

Use them sparingly and wisely but they can be very effective.

26. Newsletter

Add a Newsletter page with around 400 words on recent events – new staff, services, local events, parties etc.

Advertise the newsletter by email so use a 'Subscribe' link on the home page. Traffic always goes up after a newsletter. Make sure you have something newsworthy to say even if you only send out two a year.

27. Specials

Always have Specials that are well advertised. One of the most searched for terms is Specials and Cheap Offers – put them both in as keywords.

28. Gallery

A gallery page can show off your premises or can include visitors' photos. Use a CSS gallery that can show 50 photos in a single screen.

29. Follow-ups

Email your visitors when they get back and direct them to a page where they can critique their time with you. It shows you care about their opinion.

30. Email Addresses

Grab them by whatever means because they can be hugely profitable for newsletters and special offers.

You can use a login system to harvest email addresses. The login will require an email that will be used to issue a password. Once logged in, visitors can go to a special discounts page. When you have specials, you can email all visitors on your email list or who have logged in at some time.

31. Page Rank

Google uses a variety of criteria to establish a Page Rank for web pages. No-one can get a Page Rank of less than one but a Page Rank of 5 is very good.

However, a good Page Rank doesn't necessarily mean a good search position.

32. Page Count

Don't think that you can get away with three pages.

Search engines need a certain amount of 'meat' to decide what a site

does. For a tourism site, 10 pages is about right. More than 20 pages doesn't help any more.

33. Page Length

Do not let pages get more than three screens deep. Rather divide the pages up – it will help search ranking because you can customize the page code and headings to the content.

34. Finally

Search position is not everything
Search position is not everything

Its worth repeating.

Your site has to be seen in the competitive tourism business.

But, once seen, your site has to satisfy a bunch of other criteria that will convert your visitor into a customer.

Summary

- Quick pages with small, search friendly, functional header;
- Use Heading and paragraph hierarchy
- Use lots of keywords throughout the site

Some of our Tourism Websites (go to www.durban-website-designers.co.za – our current Google rankings are on the home page near the top).:

	Search Terms	Google Position
Blue Haze Country Lodge, Estcourt	guest house natal battlefields	1
	guest house natal drakensberg	2
	guest house natal midlands	7
	bed and breakfast natal battlefields	1
	bed and breakfast natal drakensberg	1
	bed and breakfast natal midlands	20
	functions natal battlefields	1, 2
	functions natal drakensberg	1
	functions natal midlands	5
	accommodation drakensberg natal	10
Ghost Mountain Inn, Mkuze	guest house zululand	3, 4
	accommodation zululand	9
	functions zululand	3, 4
St. Lucia Wetlands Guest House	guest house st. lucia natal	1
	accommodation st. lucia natal	5
Santa Lucia Guest House, St. Lucia	guest house st. lucia natal	2
Minivillas Chalets, Blythedale Beach	self catering natal north coast	3
	self catering dolphin coast	3, 4
Kings Walden, Tzaneen	accommodation tzaneen	7
	accommodation magoebaskloof	12
	guest house tzaneen	6
	bed and breakfast magoebaskloof	6

