Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

To prepare for improving your search engine optimization, review your content according to your target audience's needs. Everything you share, whether on your website, photo, video, or social media, can increase your ranking in the search engine if you know how to reach the right people. This takes time and research to determine what your audience searches for, what else comes up in a similar keyword search, and what kind of content can be created that fits your brand and its niche.

Search engine optimization (SEO) means that you "optimize" how high you appear on the ranking (the hierarchy of websites that show up) of a search engine– like Google or Bing– when someone types in keywords or phrases into the search bar.

Some of the first things you will want to do to improve SEO are on your website itself: The most important part of a website regarding SEO is the titles for pages and posts. These are the first thing picked up by search engines because they usually describe most accurately what someone will find if they click to go to that section of the website. Note that the character limit of the title that appears in a search engine result is about 50-64 characters. Next comes the first paragraph (those first few sentences should be intentionally written with keyword phrases), and then subtitles (things in bold or italics).

The first paragraph sometimes becomes a meta-description—the first few sentences you see in your Google results followed by a blue hyperlink of the page title. The character limit of a meta-description is 160 characters before it is cut off. Choose the strongest sentences from the webpage or blog post for the meta-description.

Most websites have a plugin you can download (like YoastSEO) that allow you to manually type in a title, keywords, and meta-description for SEO on a topic area of your choice. You can see how well optimized it is by the color indicator at the top of the page: red needs work, green means you have a strong SEO presence with the keywords you chose.

The permalinks, or existing URLs: can also be changed to reflect keywords in the form of a slug, for example:
http://expandyourimpact.org/facebook-tips/.
In this case, "facebook-tips" is the slug that belongs to the full permalink.

WordPress is a wonderful platform for do-it-yourself SEO'ers who want to change the slug manually on a page or post. It is just below where the title is listed, and when you click, you can edit and update the words to have dashes between keywords like adding "best" to become "best-facebook-tips" in the hopes that someone who types in "best facebook tips" as a keyword phrase will find your article first.

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When you start working with SEO on a webpage, it is really helpful to first create a list of keywords that you will target. Create a document with the keyword list that you can copy and paste from. It will save time and energy, and keep your strongest keywords ready for use on the site. Pick five keyword phrases total that you feel will be received well by your audience. Throughout the webpage or blog you are optimizing, place the relevant keywords into the appropriate places—especially the page titles and first paragraph—and then use them as potential hashtags for social media sharing, as content of an online ad, in the name of an image file, and as the alt-text of images. The image file title is the .jpg or .png file name on your computer, before you upload to the website. Once it's on the website, you can't change the filename, but you can update the alt-text, which is very helpful. It's what generates automatically when someone shares your blog photo to Pinterest, so even a little work on Pin-optimization in the alt-text space will benefit your whole content marketing strategy.

Over time, you may notice that some people come to websites via Google Image searches, in which they see a photo they like on a topic they want to learn about, and they click and go directly to your site. Every time this happens, it increases your ranking, which is to say, it increases your likelihood of being found on the web.

When writing on the web, be sure to do internal linking to other related articles, pages, or topics within your site. For example, at the bottom of a page have a "further reading" or "next steps" or "related posts" section. Then link to the correct URL on your site. This is a sign to the search engine that you are providing higher quality information, and so they rank you higher. Search engines, by default, want to give people the highest quality and most relevant results.

Linking to other articles or websites that can provide further information acts as a helpful resource. Recommending something that may further help your audience shows search engines that you are genuinely trying to help people, and they reinforce websites who build connections with others in the field to get visitors the best information available. Just find a balance, and be aware of how many directions you are potentially sending people off of your site.

To stay on the good side of the search engines, don't copy and paste text from other sites, even if they are affiliated. This is the search engines' way of preventing plagiarized information from being used, and helps with copyright. If you are reusing content between sites that you own, try to rearrange them enough that it won't affect SEO, or let go and just share, knowing it might not rank as high.

The best tool to see how you are doing over time with improving SEO is Google Analytics. It shows you variables like number of page views, new site visits, and the length of time people spent on the page once they landed there. Reviewing Google Analytics helps you to see how you are doing to get found, and how well you do once people reach your site. You can also

see what search engine phrases are doing best, which ones to keep using or to change, and you may even see new phrases or words that bring visitors to the site.

After making changes to your site, it could take weeks for anything to be reflected within the search engine ranking. The reason is that search engines rank based on information collected and updated by something called a "site crawler." Site crawlers go through all the words and phrases within a website, and change the rankings based on the information they "crawl" through. It takes time for updated information or the SEO work you do to get processed by these crawlers. However, there is a plugin that will help. It is called an XML Sitemap.

PRACTICE EXERCISE:

Type into the search engine words that relate to the topic areas or questions your target audience might ask. Focus on rewording the phrases you would expect.

To identify what keywords to type into the search engine, think about how your audience might refer to different topics—try typing a few variations into a keyword search tool (like Google AdWords' Keyword Tool if you have an account) and look at what results come up. It's a great way to get started thinking in ways that are new to you.

Begin to get a feel, not only for what the audience is asking, but how they are asking it. Take notes as you practice the following:

- What keyword phrases are being used? Which keywords match the ones you use?
- How well have you related to the way that others describe what you have to offer?
- Do you see how different words and phrases affect the type of websites that come up in the search? If you open some of the listed pages, you will see that each has its own vibration. Be sure the phrases you want to use in your language are the phrases that have a similar vibration to websites in search results so that you capture the right audience. It is better for everyone when searchers and searchees are rightly matched.