Search Engine Optimization and Web 2.0

Bloofusion

Introduction

Web 2.0 is a fairly recent phenomenon whose predominate features are composed of a high level of user or community participation as well as leading-edge technical features such as AJAX. Because of these elements, many sites aren't optimized well for search engines and thus are missing out on a large cut of potential online visitors.

In this white paper we will tackle the usual issues that have arisen and still are current when advising and working with Web 2.0 web sites. The best strategy is usually one that is able to both attract visitors and appeal to the search engines. These two facets are very much parallel endeavors and often don't require major resources to accomplish.

This white paper will cover the following challenges and solutions:

1. Content
2. Technological Issues
3. Structural Issues
4. Inbound Link Structures

1. Content

One of the most vital factors enabling successful search engine optimization is fine-tuning the web site content according to your search terms. If the content is written by an editorial staff or internal copywriters, this usually doesn't pose a problem. But what if the site content is created by the actual visitors and users of the web platform or community?

Within the framework of Web 2.0 this falls under the term *User Generated Content* (UGC). The slogan "Content is King" is sufficiently popular for traditional site SEO. But by the same token, "User Generated Content is King" doesn't necessarily hold the same weight.

Even if a web site contains large amounts of content, it isn't necessarily optimized for search terms. Thus a dating web site could consist of over five million personal profiles (name, description, etc.) but if nobody is searching for the specific name of a member, these data don't serve much purpose in helping visitors locate your site.

1.1 Detailed Content

It is especially important to motivate the community to create content that is both meaningful and detailed. Here is an example: A web site allows the creation of groups of similarly-minded members, i.e. Jeep enthusiasts in San Diego. If you encourage the creator and owner of this group to give it a reasonable description it will probably end up fairly short and meaningless.

A more effective strategy is to offer a template of partial questions to frame the description more effectively. These questions must then be answered and these answers will make up the group description. Here is an example of the process:

Question	Answer
What is the point of this group?	The group *San Diego Jeep Enthusiasts* is for absolutely everybody who enjoys driving Jeeps.
What can I expect in the group? What sorts of events are organized? How often do they take place?	We have monthly meetings where all members get together at private homes in the greater San Diego to plan exciting quarterly events.

A few encouraging words for newbies who are considering joining the group.	We welcome all Jeep enthusiasts of driving age or younger. The only requirement is that you love your Jeep.

From these partial answers it is then easy to create a compelling group description. To make sure the author is aware of this and to ensure that the answers fit together seamlessly, a preview should be generated and signed off on before the description is finalized.

All in all, it makes sense to be fairly specific about what you want your content to focus on. Not only for the search engines, but especially to offer your visitor comprehensive as well as cohesive information on your site.

1.2 Optimizing the Content

Often it might not be possible to exert much influence during the content creation stage. In that case, these pages as a whole must be optimized as much as possible. Elements that you have direct control over need to be tightened up. These are the page titles, headers and elements of navigation, etc.

By the same token, it is very beneficial to filter out less relevant text and focus on content that addresses the search terms more effectively. Here is an example: A hotel site has a database that consists of over 50 guest reviews regarding a certain hotel in Palo Alto. If the page featuring these reviews is to be optimized for “Palo Alto Hotel” it is beneficial for future rankings to first cover the reviews that actually contain this keyword in the post, then list the others. Your data need to be organized according to your own value ranking system for the algorithms of the search engines to take notice. And, of course, your visitors will also appreciate this organization.

2. Technological Issues

Many technological problems that exist for standard web sites also exist for Web 2.0 sites. Some examples are dynamic URLs or the use of frames or iFrames. In addition to these, some of the most touted Web 2.0 features can cause serious challenges. Here are the most important technological features that could turn into serious long-term hurdles.

2.1 AJAX

AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) represents the dynamic reloading of certain areas of a web page. This technology helps redraw pages more efficiently and ultimately leads to a better user experience. In general the reloading of content via AJAX isn't an issue, as long as the content in question isn't relevant. If AJAX is used to sort a list of results or to redraw a stock chart, this has no potential impact on search engine results.

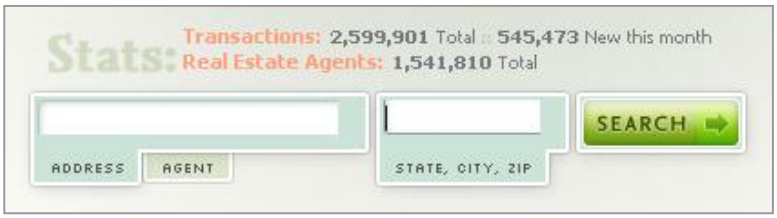
But if AJAX is used to display relevant content, i.e. content that hasn't already appeared somewhere else on the web site, then the search engines generally won't be able to spider and index this content. Here is a relatively simple test to determine if your site is in trouble. Take a look at your source code: Are you able to find relevant content snippets within this source code? If yes, the search engines will be able to do so as well.

In case of a site where massive implementations of AJAX are preventing the search engines from indexing content, it is recommended to limit the deployment of AJAX as much as possible. Some AJAX sites have resorted to duplicating certain areas of the structure in HTML specifically for the search engines. This has two disadvantages: Such tactics can be interpreted as search engine spamming and might cause a de-indexing of the site and it is extremely complex to design this optimized site in such a way that the visitor starts out on the HTML (search engine-friendly) section but ultimately ends up on the AJAX-centered (user-friendly) area of the site.

AJAX attacks the bare foundation of every search engine since search engines function based on a page-centric model. In a search engine's index you will only find pages that posses their own URL. Similar to the pitfalls when using frames, AJAX can engender certain page conditions for which there is no unique URL. Even if search engines are aware of AJAX, the challenge of indexing content that does not appear on a unique URL would be insurmountable.

The simple advice here is to limit the implementation of AJAX to non-relevant areas of a web site. In the end you will be forced to determine whether the improved user-friendliness of AJAX is more important or the fact that search engines could stumble when indexing the content of your site.

2.2 Forms



Forms aren't necessarily a Web 2.0-specific issue but since they are implemented frequently as a data management feature, they can cause severe problems. A good example is a large real estate agent platform that is organized via a central search box where you would input your local ZIP code or city name to get an appropriate data listing. Search engines aren't able to input data into search fields when traversing a site. They lack the ability to initiate intelligent searches to generate reasonable results.

Thus all content of a site must be available as part of the actual site structure. If a site platform provides data to over 100 different cities behind a form, there must be a directory in which these cities are listed and linked to the appropriate sub-pages for these cities.

2.3 Links

Not every link can be detected by a search engine. In some cases links are represented via JavaScript, or worse, the HTML code that contains the links is generated via JavaScript. Similar to the AJAX challenge discussed previously, links must be clearly visible in the HTML code ().

3. Structural Issues

Many Web 2.0 sites aren't optimized well structurally when it comes to sharing relevant search terms with the search engines.

3.1 Optimization for Search Engines

For standard sites as well as Web 2.0 sites it is fundamental that the relevant search terms actually exist within the content of a site. It is most effective to target each search term with a page or even a section. All pages must be embedded within a site structure that is built upon the top-down approach. This means that more general content is at the top of the structure while more specific information is farther down.

For Web 2.0 sites this point is often neglected since they are developed with other aspects in mind. So it is intrinsically vital for a Web 2.0 company to research the relevant search terms and then establish an effective site structure that targets these keywords.

3.2 Public vs. Private Content

Countless Web 2.0 sites have a fundamental dichotomy to resolve: On the one hand they want to attract as many new member accounts as possible – this can be encouraged by locking "sacred" or private content behind a login. On the other hand, the fact that you need to register to access the "golden nuggets" of a site without any means to preview them can be a turn off to visitors.

But this will not only turn off visitors. In dealing with search engines it is even more fundamental to carry as much open or public content as possible. If a search engine can't access your content, it won't be indexed and the site cannot rank. Analogous to the forms issue, search engines can't submit a questionnaire in order to access a member database.

The best approach to this problem is a hybrid solution that has worked well in the area of social networking: Users can define an opt-in public profile with certain data that is openly shared. This model ensures that enough content can be accessed by the search engines while still encouraging visitors to register as members to gain full access.

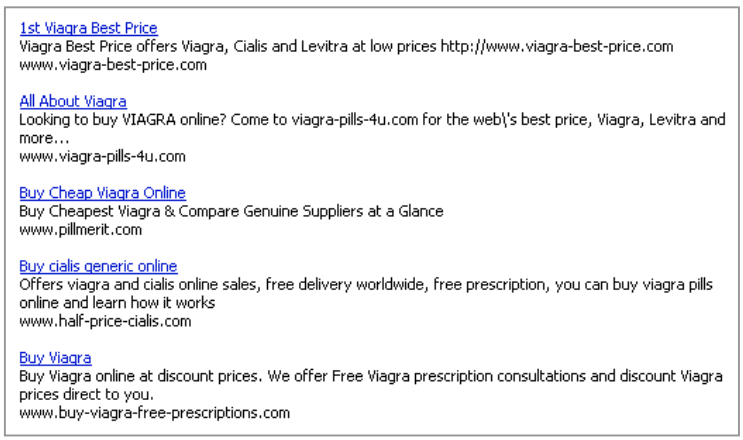
4. Inbound Link Structure

One of the most important criteria for search engine algorithms, especially Google, is the link structure of a site, especially the so-called inbound links. External web sites that are relevant and well-linked should link back to your own site. For most web sites it makes sense to become proactive about these links and define a link strategy that encourages clients and partners to link, especially if the site is brand-new.

The Web 2.0 platform contains certain features that can simplify this level of link strategy. An RSS feed can help improve links since it is easier for other web sites to link to up-to-date content of your site. Within a Web 2.0 structure it is also relatively easy to provide HTML code so visitors or members can link back to their personal profile from their own sites, for example. It only makes sense to proactively promote the improvement of your inbound links by offering your community simple tools to help them achieve this.

But don't forget your outbound links. If your members are able to insert any number and quality of arbitrary outbound links into their profiles, the door to a serious link spamming problem has been opened and soon links of dubious nature will freely proliferate.

The problem for your web site will be that search engines such as Google won't view the site as trustworthy anymore because the outbound links that get analyzed are pointing to "bad neighborhoods."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The simplest solution is to mark these links in the membership profiles with the "rel=nofollow" attribute. This way the search engines won't include them in their link analysis and your assets are protected.

5. About Bloofusion

Bloofusion is an Online Marketing Agency that enables companies to take advantage of Search Engines, turning web sites into effective sales and marketing channels. By focusing on Search Engine Marketing as a long-term strategy we will help your company attract potential clients.

Our teams in the US and Europe work for clients of all sizes, from small, innovative startups to public companies.

Bloofusion, Inc.
7960 B Soquel Drive, Suite 219
Aptos, CA 95003
USA
Phone: 1-831-688-7188
1-877-BLOOFUSION
Fax: 1-866-329-6488
www.bloofusion.com
info@bloofusion.com

Bloofusion Germany GmbH
Pablo-Picasso-Str. 5
48282 Emsdetten
Deutschland
+49 (25 72) 80 91 10
0800-BLOOFUSION
+49 (25 72) 80 91 12
www.bloofusion.de
info@bloofusion.de