

ENTRE MISSION

Search Engine Optimization: A primer for nonprofits

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The basics of search

What is search?

When you search the web, you type words or phrases into a search engine. The search engine scans hundreds of billions of web pages, then shows you a list of pages that match your search query. (A query is the word or phrase you typed in the search box.) The pages at the top of the list are the pages that are most likely to contain the information you seek.

What is a search engine?

When we talk about search engines, we are almost always talking about Google. There are other search engines, such as Bing and Duck Duck Go, but Google Search accounts for 89% of desktop search and 95% of mobile search.

What are search results?

A search result is the list of web pages that the search engine shows you after you type in some words or a phrase. The search result list does two things: it identifies pages that have information matching your keywords, and it ranks those pages according to how relevant you will find them.

> **Organic** search results appear when information on the website matches your query and the page has been optimized to appeal to search engines.

> **Paid** search results appear because the website owner paid the search engine to show their site when people search for certain phrases. Paid results are usually labelled as “ads” and appear just above the longer list of organic search results.

This primer focuses on organic search results.

Yawn. This sounds nerdy. Why should I care about search?

On average, 42% of nonprofit website visitors find you via organic search. They often form the single largest group of people visiting your website, meaning that they are an important group of people who are very interested in your work or issues.

If you want people to find you online and you don't have a lot of time, money, staff, or technical expertise, the most important thing you can do is make your website attractive to searchers.

So what is Search Engine Optimization (aka “SEO”)?

You can put a website on the web, but it doesn't mean that people will find it. If your website shows up 1,000th in the list of search results, very few people will ever know it exists.

Search Engine Optimization (“SEO”) is the process of ensuring that your website shows up in search results and, ideally, ensures your website ranks at the top of a list of search results.

When you optimize your website for search, you are telling search engines what queries (words and phrases) match the information and services you offer. You are also telling search engines how much credibility or value you offer, so that the search engine knows where to rank you in the list of results.

Do search rankings matter?

Search rankings matter **a lot**. The first search result typically gets 2x as many clicks as the second result, 4x as many clicks as the third result, and 10x as many as the tenth result.

Page rank matters, too – 75% of web users never even look at the second page of search results.

If your website doesn't rank on the first page of search results, most people will never see it. We tend to click the first links we see, rather than scrolling through pages of decreasingly relevant websites.

Just like newspapers put the most important stories “above the fold”, ranking near the top of a list of search results signals to people that your site is important.

An introduction to Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Two dimensions of SEO

Marketing experts will tell you that there are two dimensions of SEO:

1. On-page vs off-page
2. Technical vs non-technical

When you strip away the jargon, they are saying this: there are things you need to do when you are designing your website, things you need to do when you are creating and publishing content, and things you need to do after you publish the content.

In a small shops, these things might be done by the same person. More often, the “before” work is done by website designers and engineers wen your website is being built. The publishing work is done by editors and writers as part of the day-to-day communications. The post-publishing work is usually done by marketing, communications, or outreach staff and interns (when organizations have the resources to do it at all.)

We’ll explain the technical terms, and then focus on Entremission’s before-during-after formula (i.e., the jargon-free formula).

On-page vs. Off-page

The phrases “on-page” and “off-page” SEO are references to where you do your optimization.

On-page SEO happens on your webpage, for example in the content, the headings, the image captions, and other places you control.

Off-page SEO happens on other people’s websites. Off-page SEO is incredibly powerful, but it’s one of the activities many nonprofits skip.

Technical vs. Non-technical

Technical SEO refers to the way your website works and the things you do to make it easy for search engines to crawl (e.g., loading speed, security, mobile-friendliness, HTML structure). It doesn’t have much to do with the information you are sharing.

Technical SEO often focuses on setting up your website to appeal to search engines. Once you put the technical structure in place, it affects everything you publish from that day forward.

Non-technical SEO is usually done on a page-by-page basis. It doesn't have a lot to do with computer programming, and focuses on things like:

- > Deciding **what** to write about
- > Deciding **how** you want to present the information to engage people
- > Deciding **who** you are trying to engage and what searches should lead them to you
- > Identifying **where** you want to see links to your website published

You absolutely need to do both technical and non-technical SEO if you want people to find you online.

The strategic value of Search Engine Optimization

Thinking about SEO forces you to think about other important aspects of your organization's strategy. You find yourself asking important questions, like these:

- > What information and services do you offer people?
- > Which ones do you need to highlight online?
- > What is your area of expertise?
- > Who are you trying to talk to?
- > What's on people's minds when they find you?

Your website designer, your outreach team, and your content creators need to know the answers to these questions to do their jobs. (Heck, your board and your CEO and your fundraising team should know this, too.)

With 170,000 nonprofit organizations in Canada and trillions of web pages on the world wide web, why should you rank first? SEO forces you to clarify what you do that is unique and why your information is important.

How to do Search Engine Optimization

Before: Building (or re-designing) your site

Caution

You probably don't build new websites or re-design existing websites every day. For most organizations, this happens once every couple of years.

If you're thinking about a new website design, read this section. If you've tried everything in the next two sections and you are still invisible online, read this section.

Otherwise, skip to the next section about creating content. Start with the faster, easier, cheaper (free-er) steps, then come back here.

If you want a deeper-dive into technical SEO, see this backlink.io article.

Think about organization before you think about prettiness

Before you start thinking about what colours you like, think about the information you need to present and how you want to organize it. It's not as fun, but trust us – start here and your website project will go much, much, much more smoothly.

Search engines don't just look at the pages on your website in isolation; search engines also consider how those pages relate to each other. In a well-organized website, no page is more than 4 clicks away from the home page. Every page is connected to a "parent" that is connected back to the "Home", like a family tree.

The branches on your tree are categories. The categories you use often mirror the main navigation on your website (like "About" or "Donate"). When building a site or re-designing a site, you want to ensure that all the pages on your website fall into one (and only one) of your categories.

- > Examples of categories for nonprofit sites might be "News", "Events", "Campaigns", "People", etc.
- > Categories on a recipe website might be "Bread", "Breakfast", "Snacks", etc.
- > Categories on a news website might "Politics", "Entertainment", "Weather", etc.

If you're starting from scratch, you might find it easiest to start with the categories. If you have an older website with a lot of content, you may want to look at the content and find themes that tie the different pages together.

Once you have your category names and a flow chart of your pages, then you can move on to the design stage.

Content

Words matter. The categories you've just planned out should be labelled with words that closely match the phrases people will type into search engines. If you are trying to attract people online, your main navigation is not the place to get creative.

When you are first designing your site, it is helpful to create an initial list of keywords that are important to your organization. Clarify your areas of expertise and the most important information you want to provide people, then make sure your design pushes that information front and centre.

Use keyword planning and trend tools to help you pick the words that will make the most sense to your audience. Spend time fussing over things like comparing the relative popularity of "Donate" vs "Give" vs "Support" vs "Fund". The goal is to find the words and phrases that your audience is most likely to use, not to use the words that you like the best. The ideas and expertise come from you, but great websites transform that knowledge into information and tools that the audience feels comfortable using.

Make your site mobile-friendly mobile-first

Even if your core audience is desktop users, bear in mind that search engines put mobile first. They will scan the mobile version of your website and decide where to rank you, so design, test, and create content that works well on mobile devices.

This isn't just good SEO, it's good user experience. People look at more websites on their smartphones than they do on their desktops. Unless your organization caters to people who will be using your website at work, you should assume people are on mobile devices. When you start designing your site, design for mobile screens first (small, tall, thin) and desktop second (big, wide).

If your website isn't mobile-friendly, it will be pushed down in search engine results.

Make your site run fast

It's much, much easier to build a pretty website that loads slowly than it is to build one that loads quickly. Optimizing your site to run fast takes extra time, involves extra testing, and means focusing on finicky details. But it matters. Search engines like sites that load quickly because people like sites that load quickly. You can use benchmarks with (free) tools like [Ubersuggest](#) to get a sense of your website's load times. If you want something more technical, [Google PageSpeed Insights](#) will tell your developers exactly what is slowing a site down and what to fix.

Make your site secure

Search engines want to send people to websites that are reliable. In the last few years, secure websites have been bumped up in the rankings, above sites that aren't secure. The most obvious place you see this is in a site's URL. If your site starts with "http" instead of "https" there is a good chance it is being pushed down in the rankings. To figure out whether a site is secure, look for the little lock symbol at the start of the address. ([Read more on SEO and website security here.](#))

During: Creating your content

Decide what to talk about

If you haven't already created a list of your organization's areas of expertise, do it now. Be as specific as possible. Think about how you want others to talk about you. Think about when you want a friend to say, "oh, you should contact so-and-so, they are so good at THAT." Remember to think about topics (e.g., "climate change") as well as geography (e.g., "in Baltimore") and any other modifiers that help you focus.

Once you have a list, think about it from the perspective of people who will be coming to your website. What do they need? What are they looking for? Make sure the questions that are top of mind for them are included in your list.

Now look at your list again. In your heart of hearts, what do you know or what can you do that few others can do? Are those things in your list? Avoid the temptation to copy what other people are saying or doing online. When you want to be found, it's better to stand out.

By this point, your expertise list will be starting to come together. It's probably a bit long, so it's time to prioritize. Start ranking your topics in order of priority. These prompts can help:

- > If you could only be known for one thing, what would it be? What is the hero of your website?
- > Does that one thing match your strategic plan?
- > Does that one thing match your organization's programs or content?
- > What other topics do you need to be known for, in order to implement your strategy or for your programs to succeed?

Anything that doesn't serve a strategic purpose can be set aside for now.

Now compare your list of priority content to your website. Have you already published pages focused on these topics? If so, skip to the next step. If not, you need to decide what pages you can create and assign the work. People won't find you if you don't signal that you want to be found.

Tip: This is a good time to translate your areas of expertise into specific keywords and search queries. When you do this, you convert your words and ideas into the actual words that people will use to search the web. You can include these phrases in the instructions you give to people creating or editing your website content.

Tools like [Google Trends](#) helps you weigh the relative popularity of different phrases. This [Wordstream](#) article explains the difference between keywords and queries.

Create content that matches your priorities

When it comes time to creating content, make it count. Write or produce content that does your topic justice. A few pages that resonate with your audience will serve your mission much better than a dozen pages that quickly skim the surface or repeat information available elsewhere.

Use the keywords that match people's search queries.

Organize your content with headings. (For more on headings, [here's a great article from Yoast](#)).

If possible, use a built-in SEO optimization tool. Yoast is popular for Wordpress. Squarespace comes with its own tools built-in. SEO optimizers give you feedback while you are creating the page, so you know exactly what headings and paragraphs need tweaking to appeal to search engines.

Finish the job

Once your page is ready, you're not done! It feels so good so see the page come together and hit "save", but there are a few more steps to go. Most websites have additional information that needs to be filled in: search snippets, social post summaries, excerpts, etc.

This information is **just as important** as the main content that you created. Search snippets are the little blurbs that appear on the search results page (e.g., the Google page). They are the summaries that people see when they are looking at search results and trying to decide if your website will have the information they seek.

Social media summaries dictate what shows when people share your page on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. If you want your page to look relevant and interesting on social media, this is the place to make it happen. Eventually, those social media posts may also make their way into search results.

After: Spreading the word

Once your content is online, it's time for "off-page" SEO. Off-page SEO is mostly backlinks: links to your website that are found on other people's websites. (Sorry, the jargon returned.)

Backlinks tell search engines that your content is popular and relevant. Sometimes people will find your content and link to it themselves. If website traffic matters to you, don't leave it to chance. You need to reach out to people and ask them to link to your site, especially if you have a relationship and your work is related. For example, you might ask a long-time foundation funder to include a link to your website or a university research partner.

The more authoritative a website is, the more influential its backlinks will be. When your content is important, you need your network to talk about it.

This step is hugely important, but it takes time. Nonprofits are often hitting "publish" on a post as they are running off to start the next urgent task. It's hard to change the routine, but it's worth it.

Here's what to expect: Some people will be happy to put a link to your site on theirs. A simple email or phone call request is all it will take. Some will ask for a logo or image to go with the link; have those files ready to share so you can respond quickly.

Others may want content ideas or even pre-written content, so they can put the link in context relevant to their audience. For important content, have a few key messages or boilerplate language (similar to a press release) ready to share.

For more information about off-page SEO, [see Moz](#). To generate backlinks report, Entremission recommends [Ubersuggest](#).

Closing thoughts

Track your rankings

Groundtruth your work by searching for words and phrases you think should lead people to you: one obvious example is the name of your organization. Do you show up on the first page? Do you show up in the top five results? If you don't, you know where to focus. And if your rankings slip, you know you need to adjust.

At a minimum, you should check where you rank for your key phrases 2-3 times a year. If you rely heavily on online donations or engagement, you may need to track your rankings weekly. If your work is cyclical, remember to do your test during the right time (e.g., school year, season, election cycles, etc.) Log your results in a spreadsheet so you can track how they change over time.

When you run these tests, make sure to use a private browser or incognito mode. Search engines are designed to show people what they want to see. Your search history will influence the page rankings in your search results, so you won't get an accurate view of what the outside world sees. A private browser creates a clean slate for your test.

Check your analytics

Your website analytics will also tell you how you're doing. Check to see how much of your site traffic comes from organic search. Look at which pages are the most popular landing pages or points of entry, so you know which content is attracting the most people. If you've spent a lot of effort on SEO, you should see more people coming from organic search and more people landing on the pages that you prioritized.

If you don't see any change after a few months, it might be time to look at your website design.

The rules are always changing

For every nonprofit trying to get the word out about an important issue, there are a thousand sites trying to jump to the top of the results page with low-quality content or scams. That's one big reason that best practices for search engine optimization are constantly changing.

What works today won't work tomorrow. It's annoying, but it doesn't mean you can afford to ignore SEO. If you are too hard to find online, your work could be failing to reach the community you need to reach.

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