

# DO-IT-YOURSELF SITE CHECKUP

by Bob McElwain

I hope you discover a couple of neat ideas for fine tuning your site for better performance. Or that will help you build a great site from scratch.

For each question, choose the comment you feel best fits your site, then check out the notes. If you tally the number of As, Bs, Cs, and Ds you select, I will show you how to rate your site when you finish.

Enjoy!

*Bob McElwain*

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NEXT ➤

## THE CHASSIS

### The Underlying Structure Of Your Site

Most of my pages, particularly my home page,  
load . . .

- A) Very quickly.
- B) Quickly.
- C) Fast enough.
- D) Graphics slow it a little.

A and B are good. But there is no such thing as a page that loads too fast. If graphics are slowing things down, see if you can reduce sizes. Try GifWizard.Com. Another trick is to arrange your page so graphics load to the left or right. Then important text content becomes available more quickly, if your image tags include the Height and Width values. Better yet, locate your graphics further down the page; they will load as your visitor reads. And be sure to delete any graphic that does not add significantly to your site.

If you do not know whether or not your pages load fast enough, visit similar sites and make a note of the download time on each. To compare, delete all files previously downloaded by your browser. This way you will download all from your site, rather than bring up some things from your disk which is much faster and spoils the timing.

My home page . . .

- A) Grabs attention quickly.
- B) Gets rave reviews.
- C) Contains lots of great information.
- D) Can not be improved.

A is best here. Rave reviews may mean it is beautiful, even spectacular. But if it does not grab attention, there is a better way. And while good information is a must, people will never get to it unless you grab their attention immediately. As for D, I can't speak for your pages, but I can say I have never created or seen a page that can not be improved.

All of my pages . . .

- A) Make visitors want to click for more.
- B) Contain lots of good stuff.
- C) Get lots of hits.
- D) Are perfect.

A is the goal. Always. While content matters most on any site, unless visitors continue to be drawn further into it, you will lose them. They will never see your good stuff. And you need to make it easy to get to your best ideas or products. If they are buried too deeply, people may not find them. The hit count means little, for visitors may have hit the Back button before the page finishes loading. As for D, this is deliberate repeat of the item above. This point is so fundamental, it needs maximum emphasis. A perfect page is a contradiction in terms. There is *\*always\** room for improvement, however slight.

Finding your way around my site is . . .

- A) A snap.
- B) Easy.
- C) Easy enough.
- D) Some people can't follow directions.

A or B work here, but A is best. A visitor who becomes lost will soon be gone. C may work for some, but it's not good enough if you are serious about your online business. While it's true some people do not follow directions, if they can not or do not follow yours, you are the loser, not the visitor who has moved on.

About graphics, I . . .

- A) Use them only if I must.
- B) Use a lot, but try not to get carried away.
- C) Feel more graphics is best.
- D) Load a lot of them right at the top of my page to grab attention.

A is clearly the best choice. The more graphics you have, the slower the page loads, and slow-loading pages are great site killers. The best approach is to use a graphic only when words alone can not get it done. The exception is to use them to add impact to the content or page in a significant way. C just isn't so. If a graphic does not serve a well defined need, don't use it. D is a common misconception. While a few people are turned on by graphics, the vast majority of your visitors will click off into cyberspace before the first fold (screen) loads. And lots of people surf with graphics turned off.

## THE ENGINE

### Things That Power Your Site

6) My site . . .

A) Has a single focus; I allow nothing else to intrude.

B) I sell or present three or four related products.

C) Would be a shopping mall if I could get it done.

D) Includes whatever interests me.

A and B are equally valid positions. In fact, given a site with a clearly defined focus, you may be able to improve it by adding a second product or service so long as it fits the focus. C is also a possibility, but it is very difficult to do. Please note, however, a set of a dozen unrelated products does not generally work well. D, of course, makes the assumption your visitors have your interests, but it also limits your return visitors to this specific group, usually quite small. Here, B should be counted as an A.

How important is content to your site?

- A) The most important feature, except for selling stuff.
- B) All that matters.
- C) Important, but I don't overdo it.
- D) People surf for fun; they don't want to read anything.



A is best. But many do well with B. It works for me. What I sell on my site is easy enough to find, but you will probably see a lot of good content first. C just doesn't make it. D is dead wrong.

How would you define the way in which your content is presented?

A) I try to keep it simple, easy to follow, but complete.

B) I give the essentials up front; those who want more can click a link.

C) I give every bit of information I can find.

D) Short and sweet works for me; visitors will ask if they want more.

A and B are both good. C is a maybe, but a better bet is to summarize in some fashion, with an option to click for more. A page that seemingly never ends, like some sales letters, will turn a lot of people off. Check out any of the news sites. espn.com maybe. They offer good information on the first page, and enough of each article for you know what it is about, but you must click to see the rest of it. A very good approach. If you chose B, count this pick as A. As for D, most people will not contact you unless compelled to do so.

I add a new page or at least new content to my site . . .

- A) Every week.
- B) Every two weeks.
- C) Once a month.

D) When I find new worthwhile information.

A and B work. Keeping content fresh matters more than many realize. While an About page seldom requires change, most containing content need to be updated or modified frequently. And new pages need to be added as possible. Fresh content encourages people to return to see what is new. Once a month is not often enough for most sites. While worthwhile content is a must, it's best to find some new stuff at least every two weeks, even if this means you work overtime.

How many errors per page in spelling or grammar are acceptable to you?

- A) None.
- B) 1.
- C) 2.
- D) I fix what I find.

This question was asked in a tricky way. The objective is always: None. But the fact is, it is very difficult to put up a page that does not contain an error or two. One thought is to have somebody else read it before uploading. Another, is to read it again about a week after uploading, when you are less in love with the words you wrote. As for D, you best find and fix them before your visitors do. People are different, of course, but some will just go away if they note what they believe to be too many errors.

The connection is to trust. People just will not trust anybody who can not write and spell correctly, even though they may not be able to do so themselves. Note the writing does not need to qualify for prizes. In fact simple is best. But it does need to be correctly written.

To what degree does your site encourage visitors to return?

- A) Many return repeatedly.
- B) Some return once in a while.
- C) I have no way of knowing.
- D) I either nail them on the first visit, or I lose.

Your choice here depends upon the objective of your site. A is generally preferred, but for some sites, B is fine. If you have no way of knowing, you need one. Search on log files and programs that read them. If you selected D, consider looking at some marketing information; you are passing up great opportunities.

## OTHER STUFF UNDER THE HOOD Things Your Visitors Do Not See

The HTML title tags on all pages are . . .

- A) Really great.
- B) Very good.
- C) Good enough.
- D) Seem okay.

A is the only acceptable choice here. Most search engines use your title as the headline in their listing. It must grab attention as does the headline of a good ad. And remember that when a visitor bookmarks your site, the title is what he or she will see in the bookmark file. "Welcome to Joe's ..." doesn't make it. If you are selling red peppers, try something like: "Red peppers guaranteed to make you cry!"

My description tags on every page . . .

- A) Sell the page very well.
- B) Explain page content clearly.
- C) Summarize my site.
- D) Are the same.

A is best, but B is acceptable. It depends somewhat upon the objective of the site. But most want more hits. Together with the title, this may be your only chance to get people to click on your link. Think of your description as the body copy of an ad for which your title is the headline. While some search engines ignore your description, many use it just the way you wrote it. So do all possible to draw a click. If you selected C or D, you are missing a grand opportunity for better search engine positioning. Look into the idea of optimizing each page for one keyword or phrase.

The number of words used in my descriptions is about . . .

- A) 15 - 25.
- B) 26-40.
- C) Under 15.
- D) More than 40.

A seems best, although a count of characters is also important. Those search engines that use your description will truncate it at some point if it is too long, which may make the listing look a bit odd, even silly. Under 15 is a good idea, but it is difficult to build a complete description in so few words. Anything more than 40 words is usually wasted effort.

The number of keywords in my lists is about . . .

- A) Less than 15.
- B) 15 - 25.
- C) 26 - 60.
- D) More than 60.



I can not choose any one of these as best without contradicting somebody who has had different experiences than I have had. There is an enormous difference of opinion on this topic. A year ago, I was holding to B. I now (06/01/01) include only those keywords repeated in page content, and usually only a few. Most search engines now ignore this tag because it has been abused so often. I continue to include it, for it may come to matter again later on. Whatever you chose here, give yourself an A if it works for you.

Most of my pages are optimized for . . .

- A) One keyword or phrase.
- B) Two or more keywords or phrases.
- C) As many keywords as possible.
- D) The same keywords on each page.

A is usually the best choice, but B is perfectly acceptable. C is not a good idea because then no keyword or phrase stands out. D misses the point. Pages that focus on 1-3 keywords or phrases will always rank higher than those with keywords for the site.

The most important keyword or phrase on each page is . . .

- A) Featured in headlines and in page content.
- B) Used often in the page.
- C) Mentioned in page content.
- D) Not included.

Again, A is by far the best choice. There is a catch-22 in this ranking business. Do you create a page for the robots in order to get a high ranking? Or do you create a page that grabs your visitors? The best approach is to try to do both, featuring different keywords on each page. I will force a featured keyword into content now and then, even at the risk of creating some odd constructions. But I write for my visitors, not search engine spiders.

In my title, description and keyword tags, the most important keyword for each page is located . . .

- A) As near to the beginning of the statement as possible.
- B) Near the beginning of two of the three tags.
- C) Included in each tag.
- D) Included in one tag.

A is the run-away winner here. How best to structure tags is continually debated in all I read and hear. One of the few areas in which there is a consensus is in positioning the most important keyword for a given page as close to the beginning of your tags as possible. The fancy word is relevance. The robots will consider the first word encountered as more important than the others.

## PERFORMANCE

How well it works

My position in search engines and directories is . . .

- A) Excellent (1-15).
- B) Good (16-30).
- C) Okay, I guess (30+).
- D) Don't know.

A or B is usually the best that can be said. If you selected C, you may want to load some new pages right quick, optimizing each page for an important keyword. If you were forced to select D, you need to find out. If you can afford it, there is software that will answer this question. But you can do it yourself. Go to the major search engines, search on your keywords or phrases, and see where you come up. As a general rule, if your site is not listed in the first 20 - 30 listings, people will not find you, for that's as far as most will go before trying a different keyword.

How many other sites are linked to yours?

- A) Over 200.
- B) Over 100.
- C) Less than 100.
- D) Don't know.

A is great and B may be the best you can do; it often depends upon the nature of your site. Even C may be good, if you have a specialized site to which few are interested in linking. About D, go to AltaVista and enter link:mysite.com in the search form, where mysite is the name of yours. This also works with Excite. As an aside, the number of links to your site matters with some search engines; the link popularity factor seems to be increasingly important for good positioning.

## WRAPPING UP

That's it! If you kept a tally of the number of As, Bs, and Cs, a rating for your site might go something like this. If you have . . .

Mostly As with some Bs, call it A+

About the same number of As and Bs and no Cs, call it A

About the same number of As and Bs, but some Cs, call it A-

Please don't take any of this too seriously. For example, it's easy to misunderstand a question, even easier to select less than the best response. Still, if your site doesn't fit into one of the above, you may be missing important elements which if added, would increase traffic and thus sales of your product or service.

Further, there are other factors that also matter a great deal. All was not covered here.

If you have a question, maybe about something not clear above, drop me a note at [bob@sitetipsandtricks](mailto:bob@sitetipsandtricks). I'll do my best to answer it!

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Tip Top Services | 5092A Tip Top Road  
Mariposa, CA 95338 | 209-742-6349

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