

How to improve your **SEO**

Locking in that **top-spot in Google** is where you want your website to be - unfortunately so does every other agent in the country. Here, Martin Smith explains how to improve your website's performance, quicker than you can say 'search engine algorithm'.

words by **Martin Smith**



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Optimising websites for search engines can be tough enough in any industry, but the spending power of the major property portals make it doubly so in estate agency. It goes without saying that delivering value on marketing spend is hugely important to estate agents, perhaps now more so than ever. However, hundreds (if not thousands) of people are using Google, Yahoo and Bing each month to find the local estate agents in your area. With a little work, your website can attract your share of that audience very cost effectively. Whilst this is really a job for you or your web development company to do right at the start of your website project, it's never too late to get started.

A website only ever performs as well as its search engine ranking!

Begin by looking at how people might be searching for you. What phrases might they use? Understanding your potential (and desired) audience will help you to shape the content of your website accordingly. It's a good idea to start with a blank sheet of paper and write down your initial ideas. Consider what questions people ask you day in and day out about areas of your town, transport links, types of property, typical prices, etc.

Using Google's Keyword Tool

(<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>), you can then use these initial ideas to find other keywords people are using - and most importantly, how many people are using them. It may be that you are surprised by the results! For instance, take a couple of typical queries that an agent in our home town of Crawley might wish to target:

- Houses for sale Crawley (1,000 broad local Google searches in November 09)
- Flats to rent Crawley (1,600)
- Crawley estate agents (2,400)

For the first of these, the top 10 organic search results are monopolised by the property portals, with FindaProperty in number one position. In fact, the first estate agent listed is back in 29th place.

The rental side is little different. Rightmove are at the top and the first letting agent result is back in 21st spot. However, for "Flats to rent in London", Foxtons are top (pushing Zoopla into second place), so

we're not talking impossible dreams here. We always tell our customers that their website should be a vendor attraction tool first and foremost. Fortunately, the vendor focused keywords are considerably simpler to rank well for. Portals do not target these search terms with the same enthusiasm, so the competition is limited to estate agent directory websites and other estate agencies in your area. So, what is the secret that allows estate agents to improve their ranking for these important searches?

Content, content, content!

Along those lines, my top six tips for improving your estate agency website's performance in the search engines are:

Ensure you have an individual web page for each property and consider what phrases people might search for when describing a property. Make particulars appropriate to both your human and search engine visitors.

Of course, having a page for each property also means that you can drive visitors from traffic forwarded by property search engines, such as Globrix.

Keep all of your content within your own domain name. Don't allow your website to link to photos and property descriptions hosted on your estate agency software provider's website, or use free off-domain hosting services such as Picasa.

Add local area information pages to your website and offer area-specific property search pages. Discussing typical types and values for properties in each area offers a valuable resource for out of town house hunters.

As well as ensuring that the meta tags, page titles and header tags on each page reflect your search phrases, well constructed links (using appropriate keywords) will make navigation logical to your visitors and give pages appeal for search engines.

Write a blog about your local market knowledge and use the search phrases you have identified to write relevant content. Target less popular 'long tail' search terms, as well as the most popular keywords.

Like your local area guides, this useful content will naturally attract links from other websites and blogs. This helps you reach a new audience and validates your expertise in the eyes of the search engines.

It's worth saying that paying for inbound links on largely irrelevant sites is against the rules and risks damaging your website's reputation. You are better off providing your visitors easy ways to promote your pages to social bookmarking services, using tools such as AddThis (<http://www.addthis.com/>).

Links added to bookmarking sites are often indexed very quickly by search engines, so creating your own account with the likes of Digg can be a useful exercise.

Consider making extra use out of the work you have done by using the search phrases that you have already identified to run a pay-per-click (PPC) marketing campaign. Google, Yahoo and Bing all have tools to allow you bid for traffic associated with certain keywords and you may achieve more immediate coverage than with your SEO efforts.

If you target your less competitive 'long tail' search phrases, it is realistic to attract new visitors for just pennies each.

Use Google Analytics (<http://www.google.com/analytics>) to track how your website is performing and provide visitor statistics to help you monitor your progress. The reports will also to give you an indication of your most popular pages and any search terms that people are already using to find you.

You should find that the reports also give you ideas for other new pages and blog articles.

It's generally accepted that around 25-50 per cent of all Internet search queries are completely new. The number of variations on the example keywords that we listed above is simply massive. When writing your copy, you shouldn't feel that you have to try and match the terms exactly, but rather be human and generate content regularly. Do it properly and the search engines will do the rest. Google's Ben Wood agrees: 'Optimising websites for Google is quite straightforward. The best advice I can give is to have valuable content, tag your web pages correctly and make use of Google Webmaster Tools (<http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/>) and Google Analytics.' As a bonus tip, I would also recommend adding your business to Google's Local Business Centre (<http://www.google.com/local/add/>). These listings power the business location maps that appear at the top of some location based searches, giving your estate agency extra coverage. ■