Search Engines and Your New Website

One of the questions we are often asked is "How do we get our site listed in the search engines?". Unfortunately the answer to this question is not a simple one. This article discusses some of the facts and myths surrounding search engines and provides some advice on getting a listing in the major search engines.

Who are the players?

There are plenty of services that pronounce that they will submit your site to hundreds or even thousands of different search engines. The reality is that these services are essentially a scam and are likely only to subscribe you to a thousand spam email lists. In this age there are only a handful of significant search engines: Microsoft, AllTheWeb, Inktomi, AltaVista and, of course, Google. The last of these has over the last few years become by far the most significant of the bunch and is said to be responsible for about 75% of externally driven referrals for most websites. That's not to say you should concern yourself with nothing but a good listing in Google. The internet has time and again shown itself to be a wildly dynamic and rapidly evolving entity - what the #1 search engine will be in five years' time is anybody's guess. So consider taking a long-term approach: make your site readily discoverable and easily indexable by any search engine. How do you do this? Keep reading...

Think Like The Search Engines Think

Search engines have evolved tremendously over the last few years. It's no longer a simple matter of throwing in a few metatags overloaded with your favourite keywords. Search engines have become pretty smart. They read your whole site, they look at the way your site is constructed, they look at the way your pages are ordered, they look at the formatting of your text and they look at which other pages are linking your site. The specific way search engines work is kept a tightly-held secret - if anybody knew how they worked, they could almost certainly be manipulated and exploited. Indeed, the modern search engines are forever changing the way they work - not just to get more relevant search results, but to specifically combat any methods that have been discovered by webmasters to influence the results. Having said that, Google does actually provide a webpage for webmasters which does provide some useful guidelines. The WebWorkshop also provides some very informative articles on how Google indexes and ranks websites.

Getting Discovered By The Major Search Engines

Ironically, the submission pages on the search engine pages themselves are rather ineffectual at getting your site listed. Presumably the tremendous amount of automated submissions the search engines receive, have basically rendered this source of new sites as being largely useless, or at best, low priority. Instead, search engines find their own data through sites that are already listed. Moreover, search engines such as

Google will crawl popular or what it considers highly relevant websites more frequently than others and will crawl the links from these sites with higher priority. So the most effective way to get discovered by the major search engines is to get your site listed on other websites, preferably "good quality" websites.

So Where Do I Start?

Failing any contacts at the BBC or CNN, if your site has New Zealand-based content of any sort, then some of the New Zealand search engines and directories are a good place to start. A reasonably comprehensive list of NZ search engines is maintained by Attitude. Getting your site listed in the relevant categories on a few of these serves as good bait for the major search engines. It's a bit like throwing bread off the wharf to get the fish biting.

Final Comments

Getting listed on the major search engines is not something that can be acheived immediately. However, by getting listed on other sites, your site will almost certainly get indexed within about six weeks. It is not necessary (or even recommended) to pay for any search engine submission service. Apart from being linked by other sites, the most important factor to influence your listing will be the content and structure of your website. Prepare a logically designed website with plenty of content and your site's relevance in response to particular keywords will follow. Good luck!

Frequently Asked Questions

Will transferring my website affect my search engine rankings?
Absolutely not. No modern search engine discriminates a website on the basis of the server the site is hosted on. Search engines track their information through your domain name and the content of your site. Providing you keep your site and domain name the same, the search engines won't notice (let alone care) if you transfer your site to a different server.

I've heard that I can set the keywords in my webpages that the search engines will read. How do I set this up?
In the <head> region of the HTML of your webpage, you can set metatags for your site, including the Title, Description and Keywords. Metatags are worth setting up, but bear in mind that they only form a small part of what a search engine considers when indexing your site. For more detailed information about metatags and how to implement them, see this tutorial.

I've put all the relevant keywords into metatags

in the HTML of my webpages, but my website still doesn't show up in the search engines. What am I doing wrong?

Modern search engines take into account a lot more than just the keywords - in fact, some don't even look at the keywords. The single best thing you can do is provide written content on your website that relates to the topic you are wanting the search engines to recognise you for.

Is there a quick way for my site to get listed in the major search engines?

In our experience, not really. Submitting through the websites of the major search engines themselves is essentially fruitless. The fastest way to get listed in the major search engines is by getting indexed on a site that the search engines frequently visit. If you're really desperate for visibility in the search engines, you could consider advertising - basic ads can actually be set up and activated in real-time.