SEO for small business

A beginner's guide

A beginner's guide to SEO for small business

With tight budgets and limited resources, it can be tough for small businesses to compete against bigger brands, especially when it comes to the competitive field of digital marketing. At Funding Circle, we hear these challenges from our customers every day — which is why we've released a series of mini guides for digital marketing, designed specifically for smaller businesses, smaller budgets, and smaller teams.

These guides are filled with actionable tips and quick wins that will help you develop a digital marketing strategy to save you time, increase traffic to your website, improve awareness around your products or services, and ultimately generate more revenue for your business.

This guide, the first of our series, is about search engine optimization (SEO). If you're looking to improve how you rank in search results, consider this guide your one-stop-shop to help you learn how to fight your way to the top.

What is SEO?

SEO (search engine optimization) is the art of increasing the number of visitors to your website by securing a high-ranking placement in search engine results.

In other words, the goal of SEO is to make search engines interpret your site as more useful to consumers than your competitors' sites. That way, when potential customers are searching for information about the product or service you sell, a search engine is more likely to recommend your website as a good place to look first. If you're not listed on the first few pages of Google's search results, you're less likely to receive traffic to your website — so it's essential to push your way towards page one.

For example, if you run a business which sells bicycles online, you may want to rank for searches such as "buy bikes online." In this example below, eriksbikeshop.com is likely to receive the most traffic for this search term because it ranks in the first position.
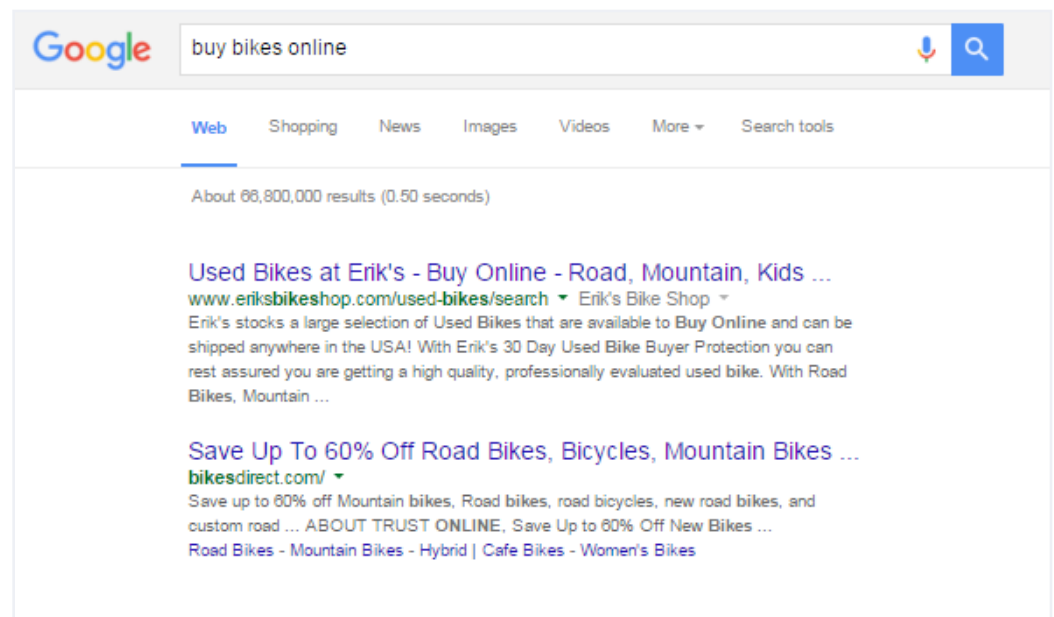
5 simple ways to improve your SEO today

There are many ways to improve your SEO. Here are a few places to start:

1. Dive into the mind of your customer and select your keywords

SEO keywords are key phrases and terms that you want to rank for when people search for topics related to your business. You need to find relevant keywords to help search engines (and therefore customers) easily discover your site and figure out what it's about — and the easiest way to do this is to do some keyword research.

Don't worry, though — this doesn't need to be a day-long research project. We know that as a business owner, the last thing you have time for is scrolling through thousands of keywords metrics! Keyword research is about thinking smart about what words and phrases someone might use to discover your product or service. Consider how a potential customer might phrase their need, and start from there.

There are free tools you can use, such as Google Keyword Planner, to help you in this process. For example, if your site is selling bikes, you could use the keyword planner to assess which keyword(s) would be most effective for you to target. As you can see below, keywords related to "buy bike online" include "bicycles for sale" and "road bikes for sale."

Search terms		Avg. monthly searches	Competition	Suggested bid	Ad impr. share	Add to plan
buy bicycle online		1,300	High	$0.56	–	»

Show rows: 30 ▾ 1 - 1 of 1 keywords

Keyword (by relevance)		Avg. monthly searches	Competition	Suggested bid	Ad impr. share	Add to plan
bikes for sale		40,500	High	$0.61	–	»
road bikes for sale		6,600	High	$0.64	–	»
bicycles for sale		9,900	High	$0.63	–	»

Google will also suggest new related keywords and terms that you might not have originally thought of as an opportunity for your business. This is an essential part of gaining search engine visibility: closely tying keywords to relevant content on your site.

2. Seamlessly include keywords in quality content

Content optimization is a fancy phrase that basically means using your chosen keywords on your website. Writer beware, however: both Google and customers heavily favor quality content over results with SEO terms shoehorned in. Compose your content with care — a few thoughtful uses of your choice keywords will work much better than forcing them in with abandon. Here are a few important places to include your keywords:

- **Title tags** tell search engines and visitors what the web page is about. They are short and sweet teasers that appear in Google's results pages, compelling users to click through to your site. Keep it short (under 55 characters), relevant, and use important keywords. Here is an example of a title tag:

- **Meta descriptions** also compel users to click through from the search engine results page (SERP), though they have no direct influence on rankings. Write the descriptions with your customers in mind, not Google. Keywords that users have searched for will appear in bold if they're present in your meta description, which helps boost interest and clicks. Here's an example:

As you can see, the words "online bike" are highlighted in bold from a search of "online bike."

Using a content management system (CMS) such as WordPress, you can change and update content with ease. (Bonus tip: if you're using Wordpress, download the plug-in Yoast to help you optimize the SEO of each post.)

3. Choose a relevant domain name

It's important to include either your brand name or targeted keywords in the name of your website (also called the domain name). For example, if your name is Paul Bloggs and you run a plumbing business, a good domain name to consider would be www.PaulBloggsPlumbing.com.

Google will rank websites with domain names relevant to their brand and content higher than those which bear no relevance to the actual content of the site. Think back to the keyword research you did — what terms are your customers likely to use when searching for you? Consider how you can work those into a descriptive (but not too lengthy) domain name.

Additionally, any URL related to your website should reflect the content and purpose of the page so Google can understand its purpose and rank it accordingly for related searches. It should be simple, descriptive, and easy to read. For example, this is an SEO-friendly URL: http://www.example.com/buy-bikes/. This is not an SEO-friendly URL: http://www.example.com/xyz12?78ghy.

4. Include alt tags in the images on your website

While a picture tells a thousand words to humans, images mean very little to search engines. That's why it's critical to describe the image to the search engines using alt tags (a textual description of the image) and file names (so manwithbike.jpg, not IMG04823.jpg). For example, the following image would be assigned the alt tag of "man with bicycle outside":

You can keep your alt tags and filenames fairly short, but be descriptive enough to express the general content of the image.

5. Make it easy to share

The more your content is shared on social media, the more highly regarded it will be by Google's search engine, which will help bump up your website's rankings. Make your content high-quality, with unique insights and easily understood writing that's clear, clever, and digestible. Also be sure to include social sharing buttons on your website — most CMS systems have an option to include Facebook or Twitter buttons — and include visual-friendly additions like photos and video.

Key SEO takeaways

- Use Google's Keyword Planner to find new, relevant keywords around which to curate your site
- Ensure your domain name is related to your brand and business
- Select a user-friendly CMS such as WordPress
- Cater each URL's title tag toward the most valuable search terms you find in Keyword Planner
- Use SEO-friendly URLs
- Use alt tags on images to highlight keyword relevancy
- Don't keyword stuff your copy. Write quality, engaging content

Now that you have started to lay the groundwork for a promising search engine optimization project, read our next guide to learn about local SEO to target customers in specific regions.

We hope this guide has been useful!

If you have any questions, please get in touch.

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