MedTouch

On-Page Search Engine Optimization
Best Practices Guide

This document is intended for use as a guide to ensure that our clients launch and maintain clean, optimized sites that are free of any Search Engine Optimization red flags. Gathered below are some of the most common pitfalls of on-page SEO, along with what steps can be taken to avoid these issues – and any resulting negative consequences.

Keywords are important, but don't forget that your page should be written for humans, first and foremost. When crafting your content, answer as many questions as you can. Place your important content in the most important sections. Avoid footers and sidebars for important content. Your most important content should go in the places where it is most visible and accessible to readers.

Focus on making your content thorough, relevant, and useful. Search engines are only getting better at identifying high-quality content, so investing time in creating something of real value will continue to pay off into the future.

HTML Page Titles

The title tag, which appears in the <head> of a page's HTML, defines the title of a document and is considered by search engines when ranking pages for a keyword. As a result, title tags are a great opportunity to tell search engines the key facts about your page, and therefore should contain three important pieces of information when possible:

- **What:** What is the most important keyword relative to page's content? Title tags have been around since the early days of SEO, but search engines still consider them to be the most important place for some variation of your keyword to appear.
- **Who:** Including your name will help both humans and search engines associate your brand with the right topics and terms.
- **Where:** As search engine algorithms have evolved, they have given increasing weight to the local relevance of search results. Including your location in the title tag helps to ensure you receive robust representation in local searches.

The most important keyword for the page should be placed at the beginning of the title tag. The benefit from following this practice is twofold:
1.) Users will be more likely to click on your site in the search results if the first thing they see in the title is the same term they just searched for.
2.) Search engines will take it as an indication that the term is important relative to the page's content.

There is such a thing as too much of a good thing, however, so avoid keyword spamming. Use a keyword more than twice in the title tag, and you risk a negative impact on your search rankings.

Title tags are displayed in search engine results and social shares. For this reason, it is a good idea to aim for a maximum title length of about 55-60 characters – in order to prevent having your title cut short when your page is shared or is shown in search results. Creating title tags to fit within this limit will make your pages more human-friendly in social feeds and search engine result pages – and therefore more likely to be clicked on.

Meta Descriptions

Meta descriptions, like title tags, are displayed on search engine result pages when your site shows up for a given search term. While meta descriptions do not factor directly into search rankings, they play an important role in getting users to click through to your site from search results. It is best to view meta descriptions as an opportunity to (succinctly) sell your page to potential visitors from search or social.

Focus on readability, appeal, and emotional impact, while keeping your meta description at or under the recommended maximum length of 155 characters. Anything longer than this risks being arbitrarily truncated by Google, Facebook, etc. Stick with alphanumeric characters when possible – If you use quotation marks, Google will cut off the description.

If you don't provide a meta description for a page, search engines may decide to display a random excerpt from your page underneath the title tag and URL.

Additionally, it is best to write unique, compelling descriptions for all important pages (pages you would like to rank in search) and avoid using duplicate and/or generic meta descriptions across multiple pages on the site.

URL Structure

The URL of a web page should be descriptive, yet concise. When creating new URLs, there are a handful of helpful points to remember:

- **Keep it short:** Strive for brevity – Ideally, a URL should be less than 90 characters in length. Don't use any words (or characters) that you don't need. In the example below, all of the highlighted text could be removed without losing any descriptive clarity.
- **Be descriptive, but don't keyword stuff:** A good URL will give a user a reasonable idea what the page is about before they ever click on it. Search engines factor keywords in the URL into their search rankings, so make sure to include them, but repeating your keyword multiple times in the address looks spammy and can result in a decrease in rank.
- **Use hyphens, but not too many:** The best method for separating words in a URL is to use a hyphen. Overuse of hyphens, however, can come across as spammy, so try to limit use to one hyphen per folder.
- **Don't be case sensitive:** URLs can accept both uppercase and lowercase characters. Always double-check that a page's URL is all lowercase to avoid confusion.

Optimal URL formatting looks something like this:

http://www.womans.org/services/breast-care/cancer/types

H1 Tags

H1 tags are heading tags that are considered by search engines when determining the content of a page. While not as important to search rankings as they once were, proper use of H1 tags (including relevant keywords) can still have a positive impact on overall rankings.

H1 tags are also important in that they are positioned at the top of the content and are one of the first things a visitor encounters when arriving on a given web page. For this reason, H1 headlines should reflect what a user would expect to find on the page after discovering your site in the results of a relevant search. Maintaining consistency between the title tag/meta description in the search results and the H1 tag on the landing page will help to avoid "pogo-sticking," which occurs when the user comes to your page and then immediately bounces back out to the search results by hitting the back button in their browser. If Google sees a lot of this behavior, it will interpret this as a signal that users aren't finding what they are looking for on your page, and you may experience poorer placement in search results because of this.

Note: While HTML page title tags and H1 headline tags should be consistent, try to ensure that they don't <u>exactly</u> match each other if possible.

The following is a good example of maintained consistency between the search results and landing page:

Finally, it is recommended that you adhere to a limit of one H1 headline tag per page. If a page has multiple H1 tags, search engines may end up devaluing the tags or focusing on the wrong terms.

Image Alt-Text Tags

Alt-text tags are placed in HTML code to describe images on a web page. Since search engines are unable to see and interpret images, they use alt text, along with other factors, to determine the content and relevancy of an image. In the example below, from the MedTouch website, you can see that the image has an alt-text tag with the value "Google AdWords."
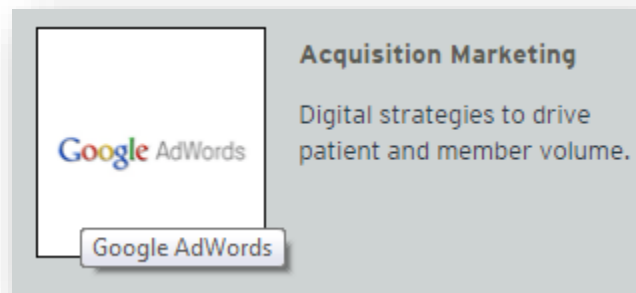
Alt-text is commonly overlooked, and the tags are often left blank, or have a generic value, such as "header1.jpg." Proper implementation of image alt-text tags can help improve a page's visibility to search engines.

Body/Content

While title, H1, and alt-text tags are great places to include your most important keyword(s), the body of the page is where you should focus on long-tail keywords (longer and more specific phrases, such as "gynecological cancer clinical trials"). It is tempting to use key terms as many times as possible, but this won't help the page rank better. Instead, use natural language and variations. If your page is about "mammograms," make sure you also include "breast cancer screening" and other natural variations within the body text. Google has said publicly that synonyms play a role in 70% of searches.

Avoid pages with thin content. While there is no magical count of words that should be on a page, there are indications that pages with 150 words or more have a better chance of getting indexed in search results. Also helpful are images and even embedded video; Google rewards more relevant content on a page with higher search ranking. Sometimes thin content is unavoidable; perhaps the page in question is simply a category links page. This is fine so long as it is understood that the page isn't likely to be found in search results.