

10-Point Guide to SEO for Retailers

Top tips for cementing your place on the search engines and increasing sales from your organic search

Following our webinar with Internet Retailing, Ian Harris, CEO of Search Laboratory has put together a handy 10-point guide to SEO for online retailers. These useful yet digestible SEO tips provide a step-by-step guide to help get you started on cementing your place on the world's search engines like Google.

Natural search is the largest driver of traffic and revenue for online retailers and this guide will help you improve your natural search rankings and attract more customers online.



RETAIL SEO – AN INTRODUCTION

SEO done properly blends elements of technical SEO (also known as on-page SEO) with online website promotions, content creation and link building (known as off-page SEO). It is critical to tackle both elements ethically in order to get sustainable results – the 10 tips below should guide your long term SEO strategy.

The major search engines, such as Google, all have their own algorithms which they use to rank web pages in relation to the variety of search phrases that someone might type and the site's relevance to that query. The search results can be likened to a delicate 'eco-system'. It is Google's job to maintain balance and judge the sites within its ecosystem fairly to determine where they sit in the SERPs.



In the past unethical companies have tried to trick Google in to ranking their sites higher than they deserved and this has caused Google to massively tighten up its algorithms in recent years. It can now detect manipulation and dishes out heavy penalties to those trying to tip the balance with spammy techniques.

Finding your rightful place in the search engines requires you to think of your end customers and not the search engines when tackling both technical SEO and your website promotions. By using customer-centric, content-driven techniques, retailers will avoid incurring Google penalties and still improve their visibility in the search engine results pages (SERPs).

You can use off-page SEO to increase your organic position in the SERPs by increasing the 'authority' of your website in the eyes of Google. To do this you are looking to build relevant links back to your website from high quality and authoritative third party sites. Usually this is done through content creation, competitions and other online promotions that encourage **natural** backlinks AND social engagement about your site and brand among your target audience.

The most valuable links from an SEO perspective are the most difficult to obtain such as links from university, major news or governmental sites. These can only be built by offering up useful, unique, newsworthy and interesting content. This customer-centric viewpoint is labour intensive and time consuming but it is proven to deliver long-term results and will ensure harmony is maintained in the search 'eco-system'.

Here are our top 10 tips for getting your SEO strategy off on the right foot:

TIP #1 | BE HONEST IN YOUR APPROACH

As with any other form of marketing good SEO relies on building relationships, which in turn rely on honesty. It is imperative that you are open and honest with bloggers, media publications and journalists about who you are, why you are contacting them and what you are hoping to achieve.

SEO is an extremely prevalent avenue of digital marketing. Bloggers, webmasters, universities, newspapers etc. are all used to receiving email and calls from agencies and in-house SEOs proposing guest content or chasing up links for existing mentions. It is important to therefore always be up front and honest. They will appreciate it and it might also help you build rapport with that person and stand out from a crowd.

TIP #2 | BE PERSONAL



Just as honesty is critical to the relationship between a publication and a retail site, so is using a personal angle in all correspondence. Mass emails beginning 'Dear webmaster' or, heaven forbid, 'To whom it may concern' are going to be hastily redirected to the recipient's Junkbox.

Take the time to look at the website you are contacting. Read some of the recent articles or posts that have been published, find something you like and then use this knowledge to form your email to the webmaster. If you are contacting the author of a particular article or the editor be sure to tell them what you liked about their article and exactly why you think they should either host your content or link back to relevant content on your site. This again goes back to relationships: it's a two-way process and it's important that you offer something in return for their cooperation. [Don't just take our word for it though...](#)

TIP #3 | GIVE SOMETHING BACK

Bloggers and publications generally want one thing: readers. So if you can persuade them that your content will help them achieve this goal the chances are you'll find the backlinks will start stacking up.

But how do you help them attract readers?

- **Exclusives:** Give the publication a story or feature no one else has. This may seem like a daunting proposition, but as retailers you will have product launches, events etc. that can all be packaged as exclusives.
- **Specialised content:** Whether you're a fashion retailer or selling a service B2B you are the expert in that field. This means you are ideally positioned to write specialised, expert content on your subject matter, and while some industries are by their nature going to have a greater level of interest than others there are still link opportunities regardless of whether you're selling luxury shoes or internet cloud hosting.
- **Provide products to review:** This type of content leans itself more towards B2C retailers and is a great way of not only achieving links but of also gaining invaluable feedback on your products at the same time.

TIP #4 | GET INVOLVED

As you're desperate to soar up the search engine results and links are one of the major expedients required, it's easy to lose track of the balance of the relationship between retailer (or the agency representing) and the blogger or publication. Yes you want links but blogs and websites also want great content. The relationship has to work both ways so you can't be afraid to get involved.

To help our retail clients build stronger relationships for example, Search Laboratory's team went to German Fashion Week earlier in the year to attend blogger events and meet with the writers who we've been working with on international campaigns. This helped us, and our clients establish new networks and opened up a wealth of opportunities that mutually benefit both parties. Bloggers enjoy this level of personal engagement and we enjoy it too! It helps us build credibility and trust amongst some of the most important online influencers in the industry.

TIP #5 | GET CREATIVE

Now we're not talking ideas to rival Damien Hirst when we say creative, so before you take a hacksaw to a cow you should know that there are numerous tried and tested methods to satisfy this brief.

- **Competitions:** These work best when hosted on your site and if done correctly will achieve a high number of natural links. The premise of the competition must be related to your company or the products you sell, but you can think outside the box as to how. There is a huge scope for creative brainstorming that will help you come up with compelling competitions you can run through out the year.
- **Discounts:** Everyone loves a bargain, and more importantly everyone loves boasting about finding a bargain – a tendency which lends itself towards cultivating links. Make sure you promote your discounts to the appropriate bloggers directly and to your wider customer base via social media.
- **Events:** Again, don't be shy. If you're hosting an event make sure you tell the appropriate people. Journalists are suckers for free events so find out which reporters cover your industry and invite them to your event. Be realistic though, if you're a company that sells garden furniture you're probably not going to succeed in getting the retail correspondent for *The Times* to attend your annual summer range launch – but there are plenty of garden trade publication journalists who will definitely be interested.



TIP #6 | FIND THE RIGHT WORDS

Terminology is a common pitfall for many online retailers when it comes to their websites. Luxury brands are especially guilty of this, with left-field terms employed to reinforce exclusivity at the expense of generic words which are more commonly searched.

This is a simple problem to correct/avoid: just label your product by its most common name. So don't say '*picture*' when you mean 'TVs' or '*sleeps*' to advertise your 'hotel rooms'. Google will have no idea what it is that you offer, and it's unlikely to have any significant impact on customer conversion rates.

TIP #7 | THINK SUBSTANCE RATHER THAN STYLE

There is the temptation among online retailers to prioritise website aesthetics and use images to display text. While this may look very pretty it does not help your SEO as Google can't read the text, therefore it has less content and context to understand what subject pages are about. You can change how HTML text is displayed and also adhere to your aesthetic standards by using CSS. After all it doesn't matter how pretty your website is if nobody can find it.

TIP #8 | SPEED UP

Google places a huge amount of importance on a website's usability when it comes to ranking it, and page load speed is one of the most critical components of a user's experience. No one wants to sit staring at a loading screen for ages, and Google feels the same way so don't let speed bring you down.

There are several reasons why your site may be slow to load but the two of the most common reasons are:

- **Images:** Photos and pictures are a major cause of slow websites. You can potentially make a big difference to your website's speed by using tools such as Jpegclub.org that compress your image to a smaller, optimal size.
- **Site migration:** Changing your website can often play havoc with your site's speed as typically both the server and design will be simultaneously updated.



If you think your site speed is slower than it should be speak to your site developers and your hosting company about possible solutions.

TIP #9 | LOSE WEIGHT

Similarly to tip #8 above, any pages laden with too much code are going to weigh your site down and slow your site speed. This problem can be addressed using tools such as [Minifier](#) which allows you to minimise the code on your website without compromising the quality of the pages. Simply copy your HTML, CSS or Javascript code into the Minifier and it will trim off any excess code.

TIP #10 | MAP IT OUT

Ecommerce sites by their nature typically have hundreds if not thousands of products sitting on a similarly large number of URLs in their site. These need to be crawled in order to be indexed – otherwise you're in danger of missing out on longtail traffic, which does in fact convert at a higher rate than head term traffic.



It's crucial that you make all your product URLs as accessible as possible to Google. The best way to do this is using an XML sitemap. This can be a daunting task but it can be made easier by splitting your sitemaps into different categories and then bringing them all together using a sitemap index file.

Useful sites that can help you create SEO friendly sitemaps include [Sitemap generator](#), [Sitemap index schema](#) and [Sitemap schema](#).

GOT QUESTIONS?

If you would like to discuss your site in more details please get in touch with one of our team. We would be happy to help answer any questions you may have:

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