

## "What's The 'Secret' To Optimizing Your Website for Yahoo and MSN?"

In the last year Google has found itself thrust in an unfamiliar position. First, it has had to contend with the loss of half of its market share after Yahoo! dropped Google as its SERPS provider and began focusing on its own modified version of Inktomi. Additionally, the rise of MSN Search has further evened out the search engine playing field.

Second, while Google is still the de facto leader of the search engine world, it is now a leader people love to hate. Google's meteoric rise to fame and its hypnotic hold on the search industry have led some observers to compare Google to Microsoft.

The end result? Google occupies only an estimated 35 to 40 percent of the search engine market share. With Yahoo and MSN taking over another 40 to 50 percent, webmasters have had to readjust and consider optimizing their websites Yahoo and MSN as well.

But really, do we need to do anything different?

### SEO theory – General SEO vs. SE-specific SEO

When it comes to search engine optimization, webmasters generally flock to one of two camps:

- Forget about optimizing specifically for each search engine and concentrate on general 'best' SEO practices.
- Find out what each search engine is looking for, and optimize your web pages accordingly.

Both are with their problems, but surprisingly, once you get to the bottom of the argument

### Both sides are essentially saying the same thing!

How? Let's find out.

General-SEO proponents say that since search engine algorithms are constantly evolving, today's optimizations may not work in tomorrow's search engines. So, to optimize for search engines individually is to keep playing catch-up all the time. Another argument often posited is that eventually, all search engines aspire to the same goal – to provide quality results that are most relevant to a user's search term. If that is the ultimate goal, the Holy Grail of search engines, as it were – then if you were to optimize with only the generally proven SEO practices, you would rank well in all search engines and continue to do so even through various algorithm updates.

Search Engine specific proponents claim that as every search engine gives a different level of importance to different factors, it pays not only to know which search engine is looking for what in your web pages, but to also know how to optimize your web pages so they rank as well as possible on different search engines such as Google, MSN, Yahoo and others.

To me, that's like saying the same thing in two different ways. Since all search engines, leaders or not, are generally measuring the same factors (and just giving them a different weight), the key to constant high rankings across the search engine world is this:

### Optimize your web pages for ALL factors – in other words, cover all your bases.

This means not only to espouse best practices for SEO, but to also ensure that you optimize your web pages for all the search engines – because eventually, as long as you don't do anything that a particular search engine penalizes (keyword spamming is bad, and if Yahoo doesn't catch it now, it will soon enough), any optimization that you do will help your web pages rank better.

Having said all that, it stands to reason that we should find out more about the 'other' 40- 50 percent of the search engine market, Yahoo and MSN. Surprisingly, both Yahoo Search and MSN Search are quite similar to each other in their differences with Google.

Let's look at both on-page and off-page factors.

### On-page factors

Whereas Google has giving a primary importance to inbound links and the quality and theme of your web page's inbound links, Yahoo and MSN both tend to favor on-page optimization a lot more. That's not to say that they don't consider off-page factors; it's just that both MSN and Yahoo give far greater importance to on-page factors than does Google.

Here's a quick check-list of the important factors you **MUST** cater to in order to rank highly in MSN and Yahoo:

### **Keyword Density**

This is given far greater importance in both Yahoo and MSN – in fact, their keyword density tolerance is slightly higher than that of Google. The trick here is not to over-do the keyword density (lest you get punished by Google or even MSN for keyword spamming).

A good benchmark is to keep your keyword density at 3%. More can possibly help, but it's not necessary, and generally a range of 2% to 4% is fair enough. Contrary to some experts, keyword density in itself is only as important as the other on-page factors, namely the title tag and the Meta tags (keywords and description both).

When trying to optimize your content, ensure that you follow this pattern:

- Include your keyword phrase in the first sentence of the paragraph for each header (the paragraph after each major heading).
- In your final paragraph (for each header), use your primary keyword phrase again. Preferably twice.
- In between, use combinations of your primary key phrase by splitting it up and using individual words, and throw in semantic uses to vary the nature of the content.
- Avoid using the keyword phrase too much – some SEO experts say that your keyword phrase should be used once in every paragraph and twice in your first and last paragraphs.

As always, these are guidelines that have come about after experience with several websites. Your own experiences may differ. The key is to understand the general principle:

**Mix up your content with your keyword phrase, and to use as many variations as you can without compromising on readability (a criteria that can assure a keyword density below 5%).**

### **Title Tags**

Ensure that your Title tag contains your keyword phrase at the very start. It's common practice to stuff your company's name or website's name at the beginning of each page's title tag. This is a definite no-no. Put your primary keyword phrase for that page first, followed by your name.

### **Meta Tags**

Whereas Google seems to ignore Meta tags (especially the Meta keywords tag), there is no reason you should exclude them simply because other search engines continue to give them some importance.

Keywords tag – keep this to less than 15 keyword phrases, and to avoid keyword spamming, only include those keyword phrases that are part of your web page content. Otherwise, you run the risk of being penalized by Yahoo and MSN.

Description tag – important even in Google, ensure that you include your primary keyword phrase (just once), and make it unique (i.e. a proper description instead of keyword stuffing).

### **Content tags (H1, H2, bullets, italics, bold)**

As in Google, use your primary keyword phrase in H1 tags, and if possible, use variations of your secondary keyword phrases in H2 and H3 tags.

Also, use your keyword phrase and it's variations in bold and italics as well – minor steps but your intention here is to 'cover all the bases' and these tags always help.

Remember to use bullets – not only do they help readability, but they give increased importance to the content in them – ergo, use keywords and variations.

### **Clean code**

Yahoo and especially MSN have placed a strong emphasis on clean code. Some experts say that MSN

Search spider significantly downgrades sites that have badly written code, but the reasons could also be related – sites that are badly designed are also liable to subscribe to 'bad' SEO strategies such as keyword spamming and Alt tag spamming and thus could be punished because of them.

In any case, make sure that your website code is clean and W3 compliant. It's easier to maintain and in might prevent your website from being punished.

### **Internal linking**

Internal linking is very important to MSN and to a lesser extent Yahoo as well. Whereas Google has eventually reduced its reliance on internal linking as a sign of a page's importance, MSN considers all incoming links from the same source to have value, and assigns them value accordingly.

Be sure to link extensively throughout a site, and to use strong keyword rich and thematic anchor text relevant to the page with the incoming link. While anchor text is important in both search engines and Google as well, the difference lies in how they differentiate between the different sources for incoming links – within a site, MSN and Yahoo seem to favor internal linking a lot more. In any case, having a site-map is a must for any search engine, and placing thematic links on each page always help your SERPS.

### **Off-page factors**

Yahoo and MSN have both placed a lot of emphasis on the anchor text and quantity of incoming text, but their emphasis on thematic links does not match that of Google.

As always, links to a particular page should have that page's primary keyword phrase in it's anchor text, and across the board ensure that you use several variations of your anchor text (to avoid making it look like link spamming).

Other than that, off-page optimization for Yahoo and MSN run pretty much like your normal off-page optimization for Google. There is less emphasis on thematic links so there's the possibility to gain search engine rankings by just getting a lot of links from the same IP Address (i.e. sitewide links) - not a best SEO practice, but for new websites it's a quick-start option. Yahoo and MSN have also shown little affinity for Google's penchant with domain and site link-aging.

### **Recap – Playing the balance game**

The differences between Google on one side and Yahoo and MSN on the other are reminiscent of how Google has evolved over the past few years. Google's emphasis on onpage optimization has gone down over the last three, four years and it's entirely plausible that keyword stuffing may become the norm again for websites trying to rank highly in these two search engines.

What then? Does this mean that Yahoo and MSN search engine algorithms are less developed, or in the same place as Google was a few years ago?

Not exactly. Some of the techniques used by both MSN and Yahoo to sniff out keyword spamming are quite advanced (and based on their spam-filtering experiences in their respective email programs), yet you get the feeling that optimizing for Yahoo and MSN might involve adopting those same practices that webmasters used for Google in its early years.

In any case, Yahoo and MSN do own a significant portion of the search engine market and factoring them into your search engine optimization strategy is critical to winning with the search engines.

Now get out there and start focusing on that other 50% of the search engines!

All the best,



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