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Introduction

As a website owner, you've likely at least heard the term "Search Engine Optimization" once or twice (or hundreds) of times. Equally likely, you've probably never heard the term "Search Engine Friendliness." That's OK.

Before we can delve deeper into these two terms and what they mean for you and your visitors, let's take a look at a hypothetical real-world scenario of how these two relate to your website:

Bob of Bob's Business hires a website agency to update his 10+-year-old website. The agency talks to Bob about the importance of not just updating the look of the site, but that the quality of the *markup* is top-notch and written with the industry agreed upon best practice standards for *best visibility*. They work together over the course of a couple months and Bob is left with a site that looks more modern, speaks to the nature of his business, and is written with the industry's agreed upon best practice standards. The site was built with a Content Management System, so Bob can update his website any time. He and the agency part ways with Bob happy about his new website.

Six months after the new site launches, Bob is approached by a Search Engine Optimization agency to give his website more visibility when potential customers search for the services Bob's Business provides. Eager to maximize his site's traffic, Bob hears them out. This agency talks to Bob about the importance of writing a website with the industry's agreed upon best practice standards as well as doing *keyword research* to constantly tweak his *content* for what his potential customers are searching for. Bob knows this is important, and the SEO agency certainly makes a convincing case, so he signs off on another relaunch of his website.

They work together over the course of a couple months and Bob is left with a site that looks slightly different than the first relaunch, still speaks to the nature of his business, and is (again) written with the industry's agreed upon best practice standards. This site was also built with a Content Management System, so Bob is still in control of his website's content. He signs a long-term contract with the SEO agency to perform research for Bob to help improve his *keywords* used throughout the site. The research is performed daily and is applied to the site on an ongoing basis to help Bob's site find his *optimal position* in search engine results.

Bob relaunched his website twice within a year. What was different about the two sites?

Apart from a couple aesthetic differences, nothing was really different about the website Bob launched with the website agency and the one he later launched with the SEO agency. Both were written in accordance with industry best practices, both had a Content Management System.

Essentially, Bob paid for the same website twice with two different companies. This definitely wasn't his goal, however he didn't know better and felt the terms and jargon being thrown around were "over his head." In the end, Bob has a website he is proud of and feels is performing well, however the road to get there was both longer and more expensive than it could or should have been.

Believe it or not, this scenario plays out all the time.

How could Bob, and you, avoid this scenario?

Neither agency was necessarily taking advantage of Bob, however Bob is a victim of not having enough information. Both the website and SEO agencies went over the specifics of his website's relaunch with Bob, but Bob isn't in the website industry and some of this information either was forgotten between meeting the two companies or went over his head. He didn't stop to ask the companies to explain what they meant by some of these

terms, because either he had heard them before and thought he knew their meaning, he didn't want to seem difficult, or he didn't want to slow down the process with long-winded explanations of information that **he felt he didn't need to know**.

Regardless, Bob could have saved himself quite a bit of time and money by arming himself with certain information either before or during the first relaunch of his site, with the website agency.

True, a lot of the terms that come up during conversations for a website (re)launch are "inside" terms and technical in nature. Also true is that it's not necessary for a website owner to know *how* to build a functional website—that's why a professional agency is hired! There are some **key bits of information** that website owners DO need to know however, in order to make **smart decisions** about their websites, as well as **manage and maintain them effectively**.

One of the biggest areas of confusion for website owners—as well as one of the biggest that it is important for them to understand—is **how the site itself is written**. Around here, we term an effectively written website "**Search Engine Friendly**"—in other words, it is ready at the time of launch to continue the process into Search Engine Optimization without the SEO company worrying about the quality of the HTML.

This eBook aims to arm website owners with the knowledge of what makes up a Search Engine Friendly website, why it's important, and how it relates to eventual Search Engine Optimization. It serves as a reference for business owners and website administrators so they can know for sure when a site relaunch is necessary to improve visibility and performance in online searches, as well as with users, or when it is simply desired to update the appearance.

Chapter 1

What is Search Engine Friendliness?

Upon being engaged for a site launch or relaunch, many website developers will mention things like *the W3C, standards-based HTML, validated markup/code*, or *semantic HTML*. These are important phrases to explore with prospective developers when qualifying them as potential candidates to work with you on your website. While they may not term the site specifically "Search Engine Friendly," it is these terms that hint to a developer who is writing website markup in a way in which search engines prefer to read it.

Search Engine Friendliness (SEF) is the way in which your website's markup is written so that it offers the most visibility to search engines (e.g. Google).**SEF-1** It is concerned with the *structure and quality of the HTML* of your website so that the *content* is easily accessible when a search engine *crawls*, or reads, through the site. If you view the website's content as the interior of a house, then the markup serves as its windows. The bigger and better the windows, the better everyone can see inside.

How is that different from Search Engine Optimization?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is improving the visibility of your website in a search engine's *organic*, or unpaid, search results.[SEO-1] While it can include updates made to the *HTML*, or markup, of your website, it is often used to refer to the *content* of the site to include keywords and phrases that potential visitors are searching for. True SEO can involve timely research and ongoing tweaking of the website content in order to stay within the desired search results range. A commitment to SEO often has no logical end, because once the efforts cease, the "results" cease as well.
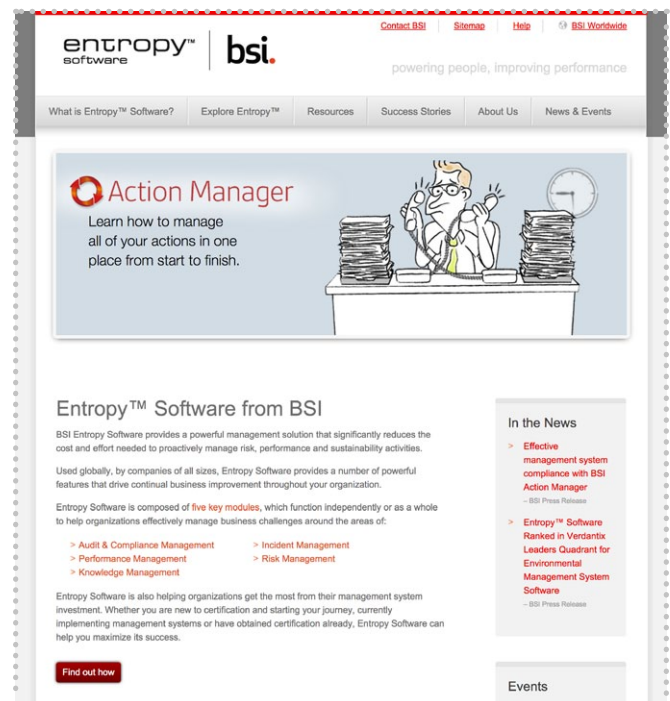
Admittedly, there is overlap when it comes to Search Engine Friendliness and Search Engine Optimization. In general however, the way to best remember how the two typically differ is to think of them this way:

## SEF = code   SEO = content

Above are examples of HTML markup and the visible content from the same webpage. While it is key to optimize both, the markup will have a greater impact on the visibility of the content than vice-versa. This makes it essential for website markup to be as Search Engine Friendly as possible.[FIG-1]

Can they work together?

Yes, and in fact they should. Without SEF, the work put in for SEO will not be as effective or could be **ignored by search engines completely**. Plus, as previously mentioned, overlap between the two practices exists.

One example of this overlap is the use of *meta tags.* Remember, when it comes to SEO, site content is not limited to just the words that display on the page. There are additional opportunities for keyword and phrase optimization that are not obvious when viewing your site, but become so in search results. These include what are known as *meta tags* in the HTML.
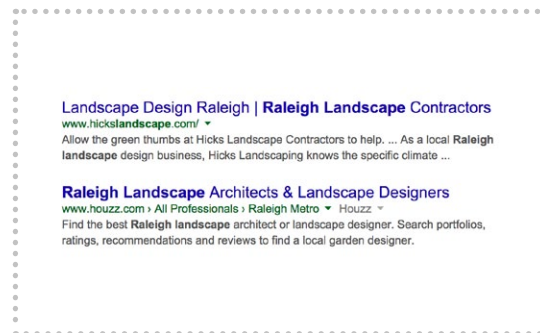
Which result is more enticing? The top one, which is pulled together by the search engine from content on the page, or the second with a tailor-written title and description for the search term? FIG-2

Some of these tags tie directly to search results—such as what are known as the *title and description tags*—while others communicate with your browser and search engines behind the scenes, telling them things like how to display typographic characters or when they should look for a new version of this page (typically related to how often the site content is intended to be updated).

Even though meta tags contain *content*, because they are for the most part invisible to visitors ON your website, they are considered to be part of the *markup.* SEO and website agencies BOTH work with meta tags.
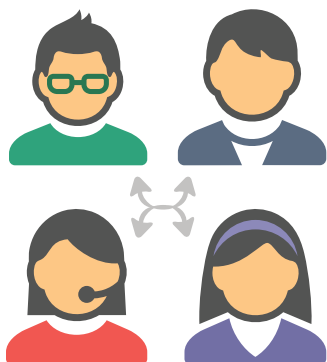
This is one example of the importance of keeping your entire website team—developers, SEO professionals, marketers, and content creators and editors—in communication with each other so this overlap is working in *your* best interest.

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Why Does Search Engine Friendliness Matter?

As a business owner, you expect certain things from your website.

Like all marketing efforts, your website is an investment. It's only reasonable that you expect certain things—namely a return—on that investment. What that return looks like depends on the *measurable goals* you set forth for your website either when establishing your business model or when working with a website agency. Typical returns are direct sales (*e-commerce* websites), qualified leads of prospective clients (*lead-generation* websites) or actual clients or customers.

Once these have been established, the question becomes, "How do I make sure my website accomplishes these goals?" Often, website owners will come to us looking for a site that looks good, is easy to use, and performs well in search engines. **A Search Engine Friendly website is engineered to accomplish all of these.**

How your website is written can affect a search engine's ability to *index* your site and have it turn up in a relevant search, regardless of the keywords or phrases that appear in your site's content.

Consider two competing websites. Neither is paying for a targeted SEO advertising campaign and both have been optimized using the same keywords and phrases in their content. The first site has been written and maintained using established best practices and downloads on the first visit within 3 seconds. The second site has been consistently maintained, but the markup contains unnecessary HTML—including tags that are no longer considered proper to use—and downloads on the first visit within 8 seconds. Which site is more likely, based on these factors alone, to receive a better ranking in a search result?

If you thought to yourself, "The first one," you are correct.

Why? The first site is an example of a Search Engine Friendly site. The qualities described are among those that are recommended as what works with search engines so they can more efficiently *crawl* and *index*—or *read* and *remember*—the site.

True, this example only takes into account a few factors that search engines consider when determining how to rank search results (commonly referred to as *the algorithm* in web development circles), but they are also factors that enhance your user's experience. Attracting users to your site is the first in a multi-step relationship they will have with it. This means that **enhancements that can be made that appeal to both users AND search engines** are among those that should be of the highest priority to include for your website's (re)launch.

When written properly, your site will be optimized for search engines to index it, SEO content updates to make use of it, AND your end users to efficiently and effectively navigate it.

Engaging users through Search Engine Friendliness

Your website, and how visitors interact with it, reflect on you or your company as a whole. This relationship is a multi-step process—the more steps a user completes, the longer the relationship lasts. Let's examine these steps now chronologically, and how SEF factors in along the way:

1. **Search:** *Prospective visitors of your site are looking for products or services you provide. They perform a search using a search engine.*

   At this stage in the relationship, prospective visitors don't yet know that you could be who they are searching for. They just know they are looking to fulfill a need or desire and will select whoever looks to be the best candidate for the job.

SEF Opportunities

Having a site that is well-written, downloads quickly[SEF-2] and contains relevant content in highly visible *tags* increase your position in a search's results.

2. **Locate:** *The search engine has suggested your website to a prospective visitor as a possible match for their needs.*

   Having passed the first stage in the relationship, your website is among the results returned. Now, potential visitors are viewing the content available to them in the search results to decide which website best suits their needs.

   Growler Grlz - It's not a bar - it's
   www.growlergrlz.com/ ▾
   Growler lineup - enjoy 42 different beers to g
   Durham, NC 27707; Hours of Operation: Mon

   Growler Grlz - **Durham**, North C
   https://www.facebook.com/**growlergrlz** ▾
   Growler Grlz, Durham, North Carolina. 700 I
   GROWLER GRLZ Beer Growler Filling Statio

SEF Opportunities

Making proper use of *title and description tags* is key to this stage of the relationship. Without them, your result will be populated with content randomly pulled from the page of your site that matched the search.

Instead of relying on this automatic method, which could return content that is confusing and taken out of context (and possibly cause your site to show up in an unrelated search as a result), using the title and description tags allows you to control what is presented, providing clear overview information that is more accurate and appealing to a prospective visitor.

Remember: Visitors won't be enchanted with irrelevant results and stick around. They want to find what they are looking for.

3.   **Download:** *The prospect has selected your site as what they are looking for and has become a visitor.*

This is the point in the relationship when a user has clicked on your search result and is loading the page in their browser. Now they wait to see if they were right in choosing your site among the others in their search. But, how long?

SEF Opportunities

This is the moment when speed truly becomes important. More than a piece of *the algorithm,* speed enhances a visitor's experience and can be a major deciding factor in converting that visitor into a user, or if they will *bounce back* to the results and pick a different site.

4. **Navigate:** *Visitors are looking for something specific when they are on your site. Do their goals align with yours? Can they find what they're looking for?*

The page has loaded and the visitor is anxious to find what led them here. Your site now has a handful of seconds to either deliver the goods or provide a clear trail that leads them to what they were looking for. Like the previous step, this one plays a large role in determining if this *visitor* will become a *user* or a *bounce rate statistic.*

SEF Opportunities

A well-organized site is key to this step of the relationship. Is the navigation clear to follow? Does the content lead with the main point? Is it easy to read? If a visitor clicks a button or link does the anticipated action occur?

Visitors like to be able to anticipate what a website will do when they perform certain actions. Keeping your site simple, easy-to-follow and predictable is by far preferred over a "unique experience. Unless your site is in a very niche market, visitors will get frustrated by an "exploratory experience, give up and leave. It will not entice them to stick around so they can solve the puzzle—they'll look to your competitors who offer what they are looking for with much less effort.

*"Where the hell is the About Us page!?" was a common cry during the early 2000's, when many websites tried to get visitors to click around by being intentionally vague. Unfortunately for visitors to Pope John Paul II's website, that problem persists today.*FIG-3

5. **Success OR Failure:** *Visitors will either find what they are looking for quickly and convert to **users**, or they will give up and go elsewhere.*

    Even if your site passes the "first impression test," users can still walk away at ANY moment, even partway through conversion. Their experience needs to be simple and straightforward from start to finish.

SEF Opportunities

Consistency in the user's experience throughout every page they visit on the site is crucial to both conversion and repeat traffic from the same user. Not to mention, the starting point is not clearly defined as the homepage. Particularly if a user arrives on your website as the result of a search, "start" could be **any** page on your website. ALL Search Engine Friendly qualities come into play at this step of the relationship.

Before we dive in to these qualities however, let's first examine how you can tell if your site is Search Engine Friendly or if a relaunch is in your future.

You Own a Website. How Can You Tell if it's Search Engine Friendly?

Do you need a redesign?

More often than not, when we are approached by business owners interested in a redesign or relaunch of their website it is for aesthetic reasons. A common thought is, "There's nothing structurally wrong with the house—but a new coat of paint sure would brighten up the place."

The truth is, however, that there are other factors that are as, if not more, important than the graphics and specific color palette. In reality, a site's true need for relaunch is determined when looking at ALL these factors together, not just the outer layer.

Even if a graphic update is desired or deemed necessary (branding updates, new campaign launches, refinement of audience, etc.), **taking the time to evaluate the organization, HTML and current Search Engine Friendliness is highly recommended**—whether your site is currently receiving ongoing maintenance or not. Depending on the state of the existing site's *markup quality*, a full relaunch—as opposed to a *re-skinning*—could be easier to achieve, provide a boost in *usability* and overall experience for site visitors, and greatly impact the

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visibility of your site in search results. **In other words, in these instances the investment is worthwhile because a proper relaunch that addresses these pain points will yield better performance.**

On the flip side, knowing your website's underlying markup quality is already Search Engine Friendly is empowering and will allow you to make informed decisions on where to spend your time and resources. **In either case, it greatly benefits you to be in the know when it comes to your website's SEF qualities.**

How can you tell?

If you're still in contact with the group that designed and built your original site, it's certainly worth asking them for their honest take on your site's SEF (hopefully they won't sense your request as an opportunity for more work if none is needed). In addition, engaging a web design and development agency in an *web assessment* of your site is an excellent first step in determining if your site is truly in need of a relaunch for reasons deeper than just the look.

Web assessments look at the whole picture of your website. The agency will examine the site in detail and analyze the following areas:

1. Architecture

Architecture of a website refers to how the pages are organized in your navigation. Are similar pages grouped together into *categories*? Is the navigation clearly presented and easy to follow? Does it provide *visual cues* to visitors that help them determine where they are in relation to the homepage? Are *breadcrumbs* present? Is a *sitemap* available? A 'yes' to any, ideally all, of these questions increases search engine visibility.
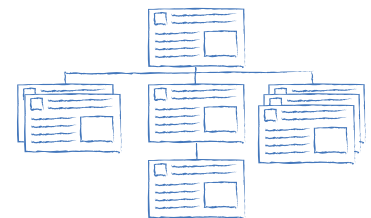
2. Layout

Layout is an extremely important—and at times hotly debated—factor to a Search Engine Friendly website. This encompasses the core of the design of the site, **not the color palette, icons or other graphics**, but where pieces of information (referred to as *elements*) appear on the page in relation to each other. In other words, the arrangement.
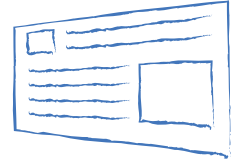
The debate over layout usually comes into play in regards to an inconsistent point on a page known as *the fold*. The fold takes its name from how traditional print newspapers (remember those?) place the edition's top story above the fold of a paper sitting in a newsstand. It used to carry the same weight with online audiences who almost exclusively viewed websites on a standard desktop monitor and were unaccustomed to scrolling a mouse to read more information.

*Newspapers are folded in half in order to fit on newsstands, but at what point on the page does the screen end on a mobile phone? Tablet? Laptop? Scrolling is inevitable and expected by your site's visitors.*FIG-4

Nowadays, differences in screen sizes (users are viewing the web on everything from mobile phones to multiple wide-screen side-by-side monitors to flat screen televisions) and increasing user familiarity with how to interact with online content has made the fold impossible to determine and a **non-issue when it comes to making content accessible to your audience**. Instead, emphasis should be placed on ordering page elements based on priority top to bottom on the page, instead of cramming as much information as possible in an impossible to determine, not to mention small, area.

Search engines and users alike enjoy a better experience when employing this practice.

3. Typography

In conjunction with layout, *typography* makes up the other half of an overarching quality of Search Engine Friendly websites known as *hierarchy*. Users read websites in a unique way when compared to how they read printed materials—it is still left to right, top to bottom, however **they skip over words, sentences and whole paragraphs and take in just a very high-level overview** of the whole content. The typography of the website should match the behavior of the users, making it easy for them to *scan* instead of *read* the website.

Large Headline

Paragraph text that is kept short and sweet. Odds are, visitors will sort of skim over this. Keep it very high-level toward the top.

Subheading to Break Up Blocks

• Bullets are easy to read online
• They communicate points quickly
• Even skimmers are likely to read them

4. Usability

Usability looks at the ease at which users can complete *objectives* on your website. Providing the agency with a list of your established *goals* for the site, if defined, will allow the agency to find the paths users may take in order to accomplish these goals and pinpoint any roadblocks that could be causing users to *drop off* before completion.
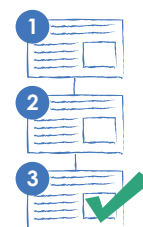
If no goals are established, the usability section of the assessment will only focus on the ease at which users can find *information.* It is recommended that all website owners establish goals for their users to accomplish. **After all, determining your return on investment is only possible if users' actions can be measured and assessed.**

5. Quality of Markup

Quality of markup examines the HTML of the website. Simple, well-written and *validated* HTML are signs of a Search Engine Friendly website. The agency will also look for the use of outdated HTML practices and inclusion of tags that speak directly to search engines, making recommendations as necessary.

<html>

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6. Graphics

Lastly, the agency will examine the *graphics* used on the website. Are they appropriate for the content? Are they appropriate for the *intended audience*? Do they enhance or detract from the *message*? Though it is only one factor of several when determining the overall state of a website, **graphics are important for a user's experience on the site and should be used with intention**, rather than just "what looks good."
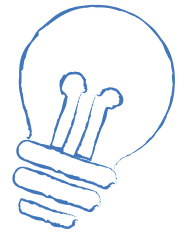
At the end of the assessment, you will receive a report from the agency with a description of where your website stands on each of these factors, along with recommendations for improvement. This report can, and should, be shared with your web design and development team as a point of reference during your relaunch conversations and discovery session.

Knowing the information contained in a web assessment allows you to focus time and resources during a relaunch on specific areas of improvement for your website. It prevents the recurrence of bad practices and brings to light currently under- or unused opportunities. In short, a web assessment provides a roadmap of how to make the most of a site redesign or relaunch.
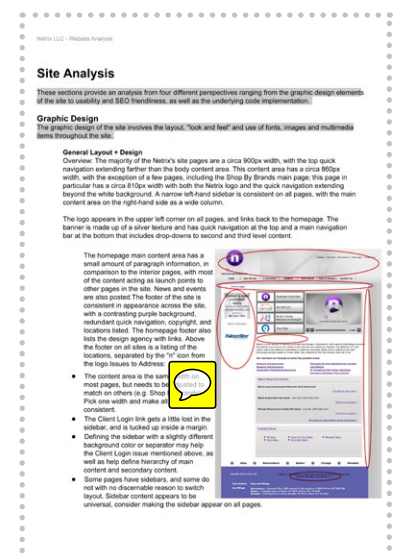
*An example of a typical web assessment document. We've completed many of these for both existing clients as well as website owners looking to understand where their current needs lie.*FIG-5

Chapter 4

Does Your Site Have Search Engine Friendly Qualities?

Now that we've covered *how* your existing site can be assessed, let's go over the specifics of *what* makes a site Search Engine Friendly.

The following are best practices that your web agency should be aware of when either updating or (re)launching your website. These are the technical recommendations for a Search Engine Friendly website.

What to look for either in your website or in a web assessment report:

1. Validated HTML

HTML that is termed *validated* avoids many of the common traps that prevent a site from being Search Engine Friendly. Web developers should be writing markup that uses established standards for best website performance for users and search engines.

*Above is an example of one **optional badge** available to display on sites that are written with validated HTML. Use of this badge is not required, though many like to.*FIG-6

W3C®

At the beginning of this eBook, I mentioned the term *the W3C*. This term relates to validated HTML. The W3C is an organization responsible for standardizing website markup practices.

There is more to keeping the HTML of a website validated than simply the bragging rights of "doing it right." **HTML that follows the established standards downloads faster in web browsers, *renders*—or *looks*—more consistent across them, and makes it easier for search engines to crawl and index.**
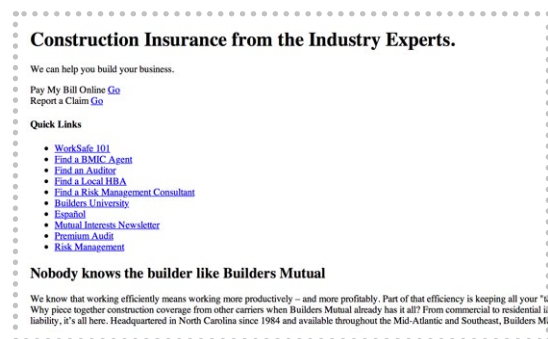
2.   Simple HTML

In addition to following established standards, web developers should write your website's markup in as simple a manner as possible. For your developers, this means using the minimum number of *tags* necessary to properly organize your content.

Besides being easier to update down the road, less markup keeps page file sizes at a minimum. Remember, **smaller file sizes mean faster download times and less extra information search engines need to read through to find your content.**

3.   Semantic HTML

Your website's HTML should be written with purpose. Each tag that makes up your site's HTML was created with specific content types in mind. Web developers should be using the appropriate *tags* for the job (e.g. `<h1>` or `<h2>` tags for headlines, `<p>` tags for paragraphs, `<ul>` or `<ol>` tags for lists, etc.) with as little "structural" (e.g. `<div>` or `<section>`) tags as possible.

Construction Insurance from the Industry Experts.

We can help you build your business.

Pay My Bill Online Go
Report a Claim Go

Quick Links

- WorkSafe 101
- Find a BMIC Agent
- Find an Auditor
- Find a Local HBA
- Find a Risk Management Consultant
- Builders University
- Español
- Mutual Interests Newsletter
- Premium Audit
- Risk Management

Nobody knows the builder like Builders Mutual

We know that working efficiently means working more productively – and more profitably. Part of that efficiency is keeping all your "e Why piece together construction coverage from other carriers when Builders Mutual already has it all? From commercial to residential liability, it's all here. Headquartered in North Carolina since 1984 and available throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast, Builders M

Above illustrates how some HTML tags display by default (i.e. without any additional styling added to them). Note how the `<h1>` tag is the largest—this is to show that it should be the most important, or main headline, for a particular section. Following this established intention is what search engines expect. FIG-7

An old-fashioned means of writing websites was to use *table tags* for providing layout and structure to pages. This method was popularized by the fact that developers could control the look of a site without needing to learn a then-emerging additional markup language, called *CSS*.

Search Engine Friendly websites never follow this convention, leaving table tags to data that is meant to be presented as just that—data in a table. **Because of the way table data is read, search engines will not easily or correctly index a site's content if table tags are used for layout.**

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4.   Meta & Other Informative HTML

Meta means *information*. In regards to your website, this refers to information that is not readily visible to your site's visitors, but is visible in either search results, to search engines, or to your users in unique scenarios (e.g. visually impaired users "viewing" your site with a screen reader or with images turned off).

While not all available meta tags are useful or even read by search engines, there are several recommended meta and other informative HTML tags that DO provide additional information to browsers and search engines on your behalf:

1. **Page Title**—the title of the page, as displayed in a search result.

*The Page Title and Description tags, as they appear in a search result. Note that each of these have a limit on how many characters will display.*FIG-8

2. **Description**—a general description of the content contained on a page. This appears beneath the page title in search results.

3. **Content Type**—a declaration of the type of content on the page AND the set of typographic *glyphs*, or characters, that the browser should display to the user, when called for.

4. **Robots**—directions, or a link to an external file that contains directions, on areas of the site that search engines should ignore. Examples of such pages and resources include Privacy Practice pages, account login pages and some types of images.

5. **.htaccess**—the only one in the bunch that is NOT an HTML solution, this is actually a separate file that can contain multiple directions for your website's server. Common uses for .htaccess files are to establish *permanent 301 Redirects*—the recommended and Search Engine Friendly way to redirect one URL to another—and *Refresh Headers*—expiration dates for *cached* (or saved copies of) pages of your site on user's computers.

6. **Alt**—a descriptive add-on to image tags that are visible to search engines, screen readers and general users when images do not display (either by the user's choice or by a broken reference link). It is important to note that **images are invisible to search engines without the alt add-on**.

*The above image is not showing, however visitors can still get an idea of what information it added to the content because it has a properly labeled alt tag.*FIG-9

7. **Title**—a descriptive add-on to link tags that provide more context to the information found at the link, or where the link will lead the user. This add-on is visible to users when they hover over a link.

5. Separate CSS File

When written properly, a simple website is made up of at least two types of files: HTML containing the content for each of your pages and a separate single file known as the *Cascading Style Sheet* (CSS).

A Search Engine Friendly HTML page without a CSS file linked to it looks very plain to the user. It is made up of black text on a white background, with only the images that are referenced directly on the page visible. This content also takes up all available

space on the page—meaning it will fill the width of the browser window, which is set by the user.

While this method of displaying content is optimal for search engines, it does not provide a pleasing or highly functional experience for your users. Instead, the CSS file is created to communicate only with the browser, telling it how the site should be *displayed* to visitors. **This method keeps the content as readable as possible to search engines** (which cannot read CSS), **while providing an optimized visual experience to your users.**
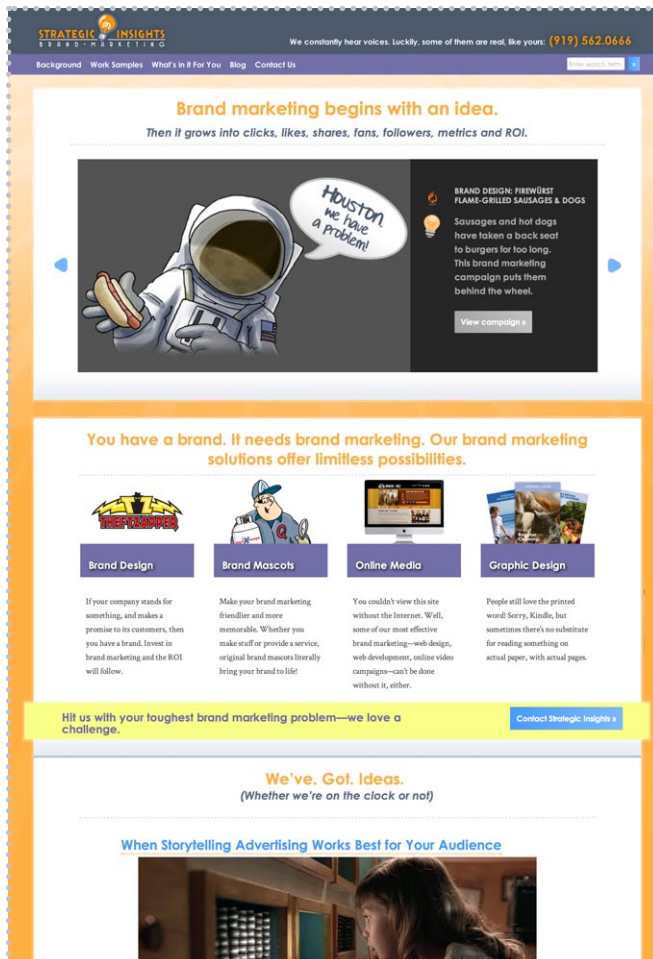
With CSS   ## Without CSS

The Strategic Insights homepage is displayed above, both with and without its CSS file visible. The image on the left illustrates how we intend visitors to view the page. The image on the right illustrates—more or less—how a search engine views the page. This underscores the importance of how a well-organized, well-written site impacts Search Engine Friendliness. FIG-10

6.   Separate Script Files

In addition to CSS to enhance the visual experience, most websites make use of *scripting languages* to enhance user functionality and visual organization of content. Javascript, including jQuery libraries, is one example of a common scripting language used for this purpose.

Like CSS files, script files should be linked to from your website's pages instead of embedded directly on them whenever possible. These also communicate with the browser, but are not readable by search engines. Keeping these sorts of files separate from your content allows the best possible experience for both users and search engines.

7.   Limited Background Images

The web is visual, that is an indisputable fact. That said, however, images that are not used for *illustrative purposes*—to better explain or support your written content—should be used minimally. Visually striking websites do not necessarily need complex, layered background images in order to be appealing.

Remember:

The fewer outside resources that need to download to render a page in full, the faster the page will load. Speed is definitely a factor when it comes to both search engines and user's opinions.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, however **for most websites, less is more when it comes to background images.** You and your web designer and developer should work together to weigh the importance of a certain look with the time needed to download it.

8. Links to Your Site and to Relevant Outside Resources

Search engines value websites that connect related information. An old standard (that quickly became abused) for Search Engine Optimization was to focus on soliciting other websites with information related to yours to link to your site. A better practice employs the following tactics:
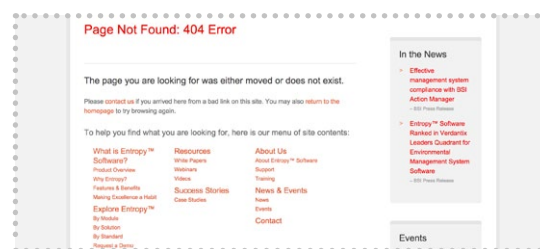
- **Write compelling, factual and relevant content for your website's pages.** If your content is truly worth linking to, and is highly visible, it will be referenced.

- **Reference related sources when possible.** This may seem like a backwards practice—why work to attract visitors just to lead them off your website again?—but in actuality linking to outside sources can help prove your information is *relevant*. Relevant content is rewarded with **better search engine rankings**.[SEO-2]

9. No Broken Links

Anyone who has tried to revisit an old browser bookmark knows that the web is constantly changing. Pages, articles and entire sites move from one URL to another often with no warning. With that comes the responsibility to check your links—both internally and to other websites—and fix any that no longer load.

10. Sitemap

Drop-down navigation has become the de facto means of organizing website navigation into a relatively small space. In the past, this meant that the main navigation of a website was, for the most part, invisible to search engines. Current web standards and refined markup and

A 404 page with a sitemap helps both users and search engines by linking all (or on large sites most) pages from a single source in a straightforward manner.[FIG-11]

scripting techniques have improved visibility by leaps and bounds, however a *sitemap*—one page (such as the *404 page*) or section of your site (such as the footer) that includes

simple text links to every single page on the website—acts as a cheat sheet for search engines to index your site quickly.

Search engines also stay up to date faster with a well-maintained sitemap, since they can index all the links within your site in a single location without re-crawling the entire site. Both **Google** and **Bing** offer website owners the option to upload their sitemaps directly to them as an indication that something has changed and the site should be re-crawled and indexed. This should be one of the steps taken by your web developer during a site (re)launch.

11. Helpful 404 Page

The *404 page* is the page on your website that shows up when the desired page can not be found. By default, all web hosting servers have a 404 page that they will display if one is not created for your website. The downfall to this however, is that the same generic message is displayed for every website on the Internet, so no specifics are included to help your site visitors find what they were looking for.

*Visitors who arrive at a default 404 page run the risk of leaving the site altogether.*FIG-12

A custom, helpful 404 page with direct links to common "starting points" on your site—the homepage, contact page, about page, etc.—or even your entire sitemap greatly enhances your visitor's experience. Even if you are constantly combing your site to repair broken links, a helpful 404 page serves as a good backup for instances when broken links occur internally, meaning within your website. It will also assist users who follow an indexed search result to a moved or removed page between search engine crawls.
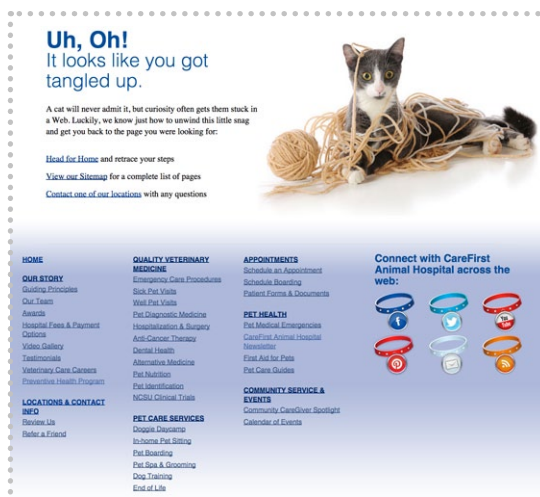

*A custom 404 page provides helpful next steps for visitors to get back to what they were looking for, as well as a more consistent visitor experience.*FIG-13

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Chapter 5

What's Next?

You're now armed with information about an aspect of your website that is often discussed in web design and development circles, but can be misunderstood or glossed over by website owners. Information is powerful, but what you do with it is even more so.

Owning a website means constantly asking yourself, "What's next?" **As a living and breathing marketing tool, your website is in need of constant attention in order to consistently perform for your business.** Like any other organic being, if it is not continuously tended to and nourished it will cease to thrive.

That said, in regards to Search Engine Friendliness there are some clear next steps to take. Where to go next depends on where you are now, however these ideas should keep you going in the right direction:

Starting Points

1. **Assess your website.** Using your existing web developer and/or hiring a separate agency, the best place to begin is to find out where you stand now.

2. **Check your analytics and establish a benchmark.** Finding out how and where your website is currently performing is the only way to know when this performance is starting to improve...or not.

Fixing Existing Problems

1. **Clean that markup.** Now that you know the pain points of your website, you can engage a developer to resolve them. If a site relaunch is in your future, it is a perfect opportunity to resolve current issues.

2. **Establish standards.** Work with your developer to create a *Maintenance Guide* and distribute among everyone who will regularly be making website updates. Marketing professionals, content editors (including bloggers) and your ongoing developer should all be working together in a consistent manner when it comes to your website to avoid undoing the work done to make your site Search Engine Friendly.

Maintaining Consistency

1. **Use standards.** More important than having standards for making website updates is *using them.* Take the time to train everyone who will be making updates—regardless of how small—to your website on the methods and practices that should be used.

2. **Continue checking your analytics.** Don't be compulsive about it, but routinely checking analytics of your website keeps you informed on how it is performing over time and can alert you to both what works and what should be tweaked.

3. **Schedule maintenance.** Even with standards employed, old habits can find their way in. Schedule routine maintenance for your website so that the markup is constantly being reviewed for inconsistencies or search engine blocks. Keeping the markup clean as you update your site will ensure your site is ready for optimization, maximize performance of existing optimization, and will allow future aesthetic updates to run more smoothly.

SEF Cheat Sheet

Hopefully now you have an idea of what questions to ask and what pieces of information are critical for you—the website owner—to know in order to run the most effective, Search Engine Friendly website possible. Just don't forget to ask those questions! An informed website owner spends his/her money more wisely and knows the return he/she is getting for the investment. It costs less to be informed!

Below is a handy cheat-sheet of the high-level topics covered in this eBook. Feel free to print this page out and have it handy for your next discovery session or web assessment.

- **Website agencies and SEO companies should be a tag-team** that work off each other with their specific skills, not independently.

- Visitors go through many steps from finding your website to making a purchase or filling out a contact form. **A Search Engine Friendly site eliminates many of the common potential obstacles that prevent them from completing these actions.**

- Establishing goals for your website gives you specific actions to measure so you can **determine how well the site is performing** and what to focus on moving forward.

- Before starting a redesign, **ask for a web assessment** to determine the current issues (if any) visitors encounter on your site to **make the most of your redesign**.

- Insist on working with a website agency that is concerned with **markup standards and best practices** to avoid needing a separate (and costly!) relaunch with an SEO company.

- Create and share a **Maintenance Guide** with all employees and developers who will be working with your website once it is launched.

- **Invest in website maintenance** to keep bad practices from slipping in and taking over. It could be the difference between a future total site rewrite or a simple design update!

Appendix

References

Search Engine Friendliness

SEF-1. [Search Engine Friendliness vs. Search Engine Optimization](#) *Strategic Insights—We've.Got.Ideas*

SEF-2. [Using Site Speed in Web Search Ranking](#) *Google Webmaster Central Blog*

SEF-3. [Webmaster Guidelines](#) *Google Webmaster Tools*

Search Engine Optimization

SEO-1. [Search Engine Optimization](#) *Wikipedia*

SEO-2. [How Google Search Works—The Story](#) *Google*

SEO-3. [How Google Search Works](#) *Google Webmaster Tools*

SEO-4. [Google Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide](#) *Google*

Image Sources

FIG–1. [BSI Entropy™ Software: Homepage and Source Code](#)

FIG–2. [Google Search Results: "raleigh landscaping"](#)

FIG–3. [Vatican.va: Pope John Paul II](#)

FIG–4. [Strategic Insights Brand Marketing: Original Brand Mascots](#)

FIG–5. Excerpt from Web Assessment for Netrix, published August 2010

FIG–6. [W3C: HTML 5 Badge for Semantics](#)

FIG–7. [Builders Mutual Insurance Company: Homepage Source Code](#)

FIG–8. [Google Search Results: "strategic insights brand marketing"](#)

FIG–9. [Strategic Insights Brand Marketing: When Storytelling Advertising Works Best for Your Audience](#)

Recommended Further Reading

1.   [Web Designer vs. Web Programmer vs. Web Developer](#) *Strategic Insights—We've.Got.Ideas*

2.   [The Ultimate Guide to Google Analytics](#) *Fast Company*

3.   [Google Analytics Interface Tutorial](#) (video) *Google*

4.   [Website Goals: Why Being Specific Works Better Than Simply "Contact Us"](#)
     Strategic Insights—We've.Got.Ideas

5.   [How to Create Google Analytics Conversion Goals](#) (video) *Search & Conversion Marketing*

6.   [Advice for CMS Users](#) *Boagworld*