Search penalties

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Avoiding Search engine penalties

Since the launch of the first search engines, website owners have looked for ways to boost their position in the listings.

The early search engines used relatively crude indicators to calculate where a website was placed. As the popularity of search engines increased webmasters realised that to attract the most visitors you had to gain a high position in the search listings. Site owners began to work out by trial and error how search engines determined the position of any given site. They used this knowledge to modify their websites and “search engine optimisation” (SEO) was born.

Search engine operators soon realised their systems were being manipulated. To fight back they began modifying the complex calculations (algorithms) used. Each time they made changes site owners would work out the new formula and change their website accordingly. As a result search criteria constantly changes to prevent what they deem to be abuse of their systems. It is the secrecy surrounding these changes that has given birth to an industry based upon hearsay and misinformation.

When is SEO bad SEO?

There are still backdoors that allow webmasters and SEO consultants to abuse the system. These backdoors are well recognised by the all the search engines. The techniques used are known as “Black hat SEO”. Many webmasters use these techniques unknowingly, or are misadvised by SEO consultants who use these methods to artificially enhance a client’s website position.

One of the few guarantees in SEO is that if you use blackhat methods you will get caught. The penalty can range from a relatively minor drop in the listings to an outright ban. Either way any penalty is very difficult to remove can have a lasting effect

on your sites ratings.

What SEO methods are seen as blackhat?

Many of the methods that are now considered to be blackhat were once legitimately used to optimise websites. It has only been the abuse of these methods that has caused their use to be frowned upon. To ensure that your site doesn't get unnecessarily penalised it's important to understand what techniques are deemed as bad.

Although not exhaustive this guide explains the most common mistakes made by webmasters.

1. Keyword stuffing – Filling your pages unnecessarily with more keywords that is beneficial to the user to get found in the search engines for those terms. To stay on the safe side limit the number of times you use keywords to around 5% of all your text

2. Hidden/invisible text – Creating text very small or in the same colour as the background of your website. This prevents a user from seeing what's written but is still visible to the search engines. Webmasters often use this method to hide lots of keywords which would look out of place to the human eye.

3. Meta tag stuffing– Over abusing Meta tags by stuffing them with far too many keywords. Or keywords that are unrelated to the content of your pages.

4. Gateway or doorway pages – These are pages designed purely for the search engines to get a good listing. They hold no value to the visitor and are often stuffed with keywords.

5. Link farms – Companies that promise to provide you with lots of links for a small fee in return for providing links to other members of their group. A similar arrangement can also be set up whereby you pay a small fee to get lots of inbound links. Both are a sure fire way to get your website banned!

6. Hidden links - Hiding links in obscure places or by colouring the text the same as the background.
7. Blog spam – Creating comments on other blogs that are irrelevant or stuffed with keywords to get a link back to your website.

8. Mirror/Duplicate websites – Creating many almost identical websites with the aim of listing higher for more keywords.

9. Cloaking – providing the search engines with a different version of a website to the one a user sees. This requires technical knowledge of coding and access to the raw code of the website.

10. Duplicate content – Copying text from other websites or creating multiple occurrences of the same text across the internet. In these cases only one copy of the text will ever be listed and if prolifically used could result in a website ban.

11. Image alt tags- Using the ability to assign keywords to image alt tags to overly stuff them with keywords. Image alt tags should be relevant to the image and the content to which the image is displayed.

12. Title tag stuffing – Filling your titles with keywords with the sole intention of influencing the search engines.

13. Breaking search engine rules and regulations – All search engines have clear rules in place for webmasters. Its worthwhile familiarising yourself with these rules. They can prevent any penalties or bans being imposed for actions you were unaware were considered. You can view Google's website guidelines by going to http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=35769

Employing an SEO expert

Any SEO consultant that "guarantees" you a high rank in the search engines will almost certainly be using black hat techniques. Some companies use these techniques to inflate a sites placing for the period of their contract. This demonstrates to their client that their fees are justified. The effects of these methods are generally short term and could result in the site being penalised or banned completely.

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