

The Beginner's Guide to Social Media Optimization

There's a great sense of relief when you finally admit to yourself that, though it sounds cool, you have no idea what it means to Digg, Stumble or Spurl. That you spell delicious without random periods and that, in your world, Reddit is two words and not at all spelled like that. As an average Web user, you don't have to be a fan of social media optimization. However, as a site owner, you do need to know that it exists and be aware of the effects and potential benefits it could have on your site.

Social media optimization has become the hot new buzzword over the last 12 months, similar to the way "the long tail" dominated conference speak before that. If you're a frequent blog reader or conference attendee you've probably heard about sites like Wikipedia, Digg, and del.icio.us, but you may not know why getting there could be crucial to the success of your site. Who cares about Furl and Reddit anyway? Well, your customers might. And if they do, being there will keep your brand name in the front of their mind and could send you thousands of new visitors.

What Is Social Media Optimization

If search engine optimization is about breaking down crawling barriers to help the engines fully index your site, social media optimization is about knocking down site walls so content can be easily found, distributed and shared by the community. This process may simply mean embedding a "Digg This" button on your site blog or it may mean spending hours to create a piece of compelling content, aka linkbait, that could either drive thousands of visitors to your site or have no effect at all.

The right link magnet, presented at the right time, to the right audience can bring an unimaginable amount of traffic to your site. For a company just starting out, getting on the front page of Digg can offer instant visibility and credibility. For an establish company, it can strengthen your brand and turn you into a household name. The key to social media is knowing how to leverage it. And your ability to leverage it depends on your ability to attract, engage and convert new visitors.

Reaching out to social communities to bring attention your brand isn't a new concept; however, thanks to today's technology, when done right, the power, effect and benefit of social media optimization is huge. In a recent article entitled Anatomy of a Super Digg, Daniel Tynski shared his company's experience with a client who spent ten minutes creating a throwaway article specifically targeted towards social media. The article was submitted to Digg and in 7 days the client was rewarded with more than 3,000 backlinks, 532 links from del.icio.us, an enormous swell in Alexa rankings, and an impressive (though temporary) surge in rankings for many of the client's targeted keywords.

What's the benefit to SMO?

The benefits of social media vary depending on what you're looking to do. For some sites, the greatest benefit to SMO is the instant exposure and influx of inbound links it creates. With any luck, a significant portion of your new links will be coming from quality sites in your field. However, if not, these effects are often short-lived and traffic alone doesn't equal conversions and increased revenue for most sites. You need to be able to capture those first-time visitors and convert them into loyal site community members.

The real benefit to optimizing your site for social media is it inspires you to create excellent, keyword-rich content, which in turn can help build your online and offline brand, increase quality inbound links over time, make you a subject matter expert, and expose your content to thousands of new visitors. It reinforces what you should be working towards through your search engine optimization campaign.

Getting Started and Establishing Your Goals

As with SEO, most sites can benefit from some form of social media optimization but your strategy needs to be designed to compliment the specifics of your site.

When determining which site/s are right for you, you need to consider the type of site you're trying to market. If you're a technology company with a great blog, submitting posts to Digg may be beneficial for you. However, don't assume Digg is automatically a match simply because it's the only social media site you've heard of. If your Web site specializes in customizable baby apparel, the college-aged, tech savvy crowd at Digg is not your core demographic and your post will be buried. In this scenario, you're probably better off tagging your content at one of the social bookmarking sites or creating a community profile on Flickr.

Without knowing your audience there's no way you can offer them a great tool or a compelling piece of content. You need to consider what actions will produce the strongest reaction and use the least amount of resources. Take into account what your desired outcome is. Are you looking for increased conversions, traffic, links, industry credibility, brand recognition, something else? All of this will be vital in helping you plan your attack.

Planning Your Attack

Once you know your goals you can start deciding which sites are best geared towards helping you meet them. Right now the three sites that seem to be driving the most traffic are Digg, StumbleUpon and del.icio.us, respectively. Is it worth spending a few thousands of dollars to develop a great industry chart to get it on the front page of Digg? If you do it right and can manage the traffic, it might be. Take time to understand the focus of each individual site. It's often better to create campaigns geared toward one social media site rather than create one campaign and shoot it over all over the Web. If you're looking for links and your content fits with their audience, submit to Digg. If you're looking to create some sort of viral marketing campaign, MySpace may be more effective.

Here is a very short list of some of the most popular sites for social media optimization:

- Digg: Digg is a user-driven content site where members can vote, bury and comment on stories submitted by other members. Getting onto Digg's front page often results in thousands of visitors flocking to your site and can have lasting ranking effects.
 - Digg Tip: The same story can only be submitted once, so craft your titles carefully. Also, don't forget to embed the "Digg This" button on your site so users can easily submit content for you.
- Del.icio.us: Del.icio.us is a Yahoo-owned social bookmarking site. Del.icio.us allows members to publicly save bookmarks using tags. Don't be afraid to tag your own content.
 - Del.icio.us Tip: All links are nofollow so you're not getting link love, but you may get click throughs and direct traffic when users find your del.icio.us bookmarks through the search engine's index.
- YouTube: Well-known video upload site. Recently acquired by Google, so look for YouTube videos to start appearing in Google's index.

- YouTube Tip: The five sites that bring the most traffic to YouTube receive a link back from the site. This probably won't help with your Google rankings, but it may help your rankings in the other engines.
- Newsvine: Another social news site where members can submit news stories, comment on other popular stories, create connections with regular users.
 - Newsvine Tip: Your Newsvine user name becomes your own subdomain, so make sure to use keywords in your profile.
- StumbleUpon: StumbleUpon acts as a discovery/recommendation engine and match users with Web sites, videos, images, etc. based on their interests that they may have been previously unaware of.

Other social media sites to consider utilizing are Wikipedia, Flickr, MySpace, Reddit, Spurl, Blinklist, Shadows, Simply, Yahoo Answers, Ning, 43 Things and Frappr.

Be Linkable

Phase One: Once you know your goals and where you want to submit, your next objective is to be linkable. This is by far the most difficult and the most important step in any SMO campaign. To be linkable, you must create content that is worthy of being linked to and make that content accessible to users.

One of the quickest ways to make your content more accessible is to allow tags and to add a "Digg This", "Add to del.icio.us" or Technorati chicklet to your Web site and RSS feed. By making tagging and bookmarking easy for users, it encourages readers to submit the content for you. This not only helps to increase readership, but it also builds your site-wide community.

Phase Two: The second part of the linkability process is the hardest part of SMO. You must create something unique, compelling and worthy enough of being submitted and linked to. One reason why this is so difficult is because you can do anything. There are no boundaries.

Don't think that just because you're a company that sells paper cups you don't have the opportunity to create irresistible linkbait. You do. Any subject is linkbait-able, regardless of how mundane it seems on the surface. Maybe you feel that creating an article about paper cups won't be exciting enough to bring in new visitors, but how about creating a tool that counts how many water-filled Brand X paper cups it would take to fill the Mississippi river. Or creating a Flash game where users can practice their entrepreneurial skills selling fruit punch in your paper cups. Or encourage users to create and submit their own videos explaining what they love about the paper cup. The more ridiculous the idea, the more it will excite visitors, and the greater success you'll have with it.

Link magnets don't have to be flashy. If creating a showy Flash video doesn't fit within the theme of your site, try authoring a valuable educational resource for your industry. Compile a list of the best sites/bloggers in your field to make it easy for those in your network to find information. Write the most well-researched, in-depth article on How To Do [X]. Create a tool that solves a common problem for members in your field. The possibilities are endless. It just takes a little thought and creativity.

Whatever you do, resist the temptation to spam the social media sites. The only way your SMO campaign will be successful is if it's genuine. Don't submit content that doesn't fit with the community you're entering. Sites like Digg or Wikipedia are very good at seeing through blatant self-promotion. Make sure you're offering a clear benefit to the community, otherwise prepare to be flamed and tossed out. The backlash from "abusing" a community like Digg could turn into a PR nightmare for your company, completely voiding any goodwill you had hoped to create.

If you're going to submit content to sites like Digg, Reddit or Newsvine, write a personalized email to a dozen or so relevant bloggers before you submit in order to get some early links. A little work upfront could help get the ball rolling and have a big impact on your overall success.

It's also recommend that site owners use a common username among all the different social media sites. This helps establish yourself in the various communities and makes it appear like you're a trusted member and not just out for quick links, even if you are.

Accept Failure and Try Again

The truth is, even after you've followed the rules faithfully, your first dozen (or two) attempts probably won't work. It takes time to create the momentum you need to establish yourself in the various communities. However, once one of your items does hit, you'll understand what all the fuss was about and why social media optimization is worth all the hard work.

You also can't let up once you get that first taste of success. If you want to maintain the traffic you are receiving, you have to continue to participate. Your success in social media will wholeheartedly depend on user engagement.

Adopt Social Media But Don't Forget SEO

Social media gives site owners a way to gain visibility to their sites without relying strictly on the search engines. It's a powerful tool for building brand recognition and increasing visibility but don't mistake SMO for a substitute to search engine optimization. Social media optimization just gives site owners another set of tools to add to their marketing toolbox. Keeping abiding by the optimization tactics that have proven to be successful for the long-term and experiment with new methods to help give your site a boost when needed. Together social media optimization and SEO pack a power punch, both for you and your users.