Keyword Basics Part 1: How Search Engines Work

by Ken McGaffin, 24 November 2006

One of the most frequently asked questions from website owners is, "Why can't my site be found on Google?" They know it's important to appear in search engine results but they just don't know why it doesn't happen to them.

Key points

The Spider software crawls the web looking for new pages to collect and add to the search engine indices.

The Index software catches everything the Spider can throw at it.

They may well be in awe of the 'black arts' of search engine optimization or puzzled by the complexity of it all. If they're unlucky they will have paid out money to some snake oil salesman guaranteeing to get them to the top in 48 hours - and been sorely disappointed with the lack of traffic that results.

Most search engine optimizers are highly ethical, professional people but they do tend to keep their cards close to their chest.

The Big Secret is There is No Big Secret

It's true: the 'big secret' of search engine optimization is that there is no big secret.

It is all about understanding what is going on, followed by the hard work and attention to detail that are common to many business activities.

This article is about understanding what is going on inside a search engine. It is just under 800 words in length but that is more than enough to give you what you need to know, albeit in simple terms.

Inside the Guts of a Search Engine

For simplicity's sake, let's say there are three pieces of software that together make up a search engine - the Spider software, the Index software and the Query software.

If you understand what these three do, then you have the foundation for getting your website to the top of the search engines.

Here's what the three types of software do:
The Spider software 'crawls the web looking for new pages to collect and add to the search engine indices'.

This is a metaphor. In reality, the spider doesn't do any 'crawling' and doesn't 'visit' any web pages. It requests pages from a website in the same way as Microsoft Explorer, or Firefox or whatever browser you use requests pages to display on your screen.

The difference is that the spider doesn't collect images or formatting - it is only interested in text and links AND the URL, (for example, http://www.Unique-Resource-Locator.html) from which they come: it doesn't display anything and it gets as much information as it can is the shortest time possible.

A spider loves links because they lead it to other web pages that have the things that it loves, guess what? Text, links and URLs!

The Index software catches everything the Spider can throw at it (yes, that's another metaphor). The index makes sense of the mass of text, links and URLs using what is called an algorithm - a complex mathematical formula that indexes the words, the pairs of words and so on.

Essentially, an algorithm analyses the pages and links for word combinations and assigns scores that allow the search engine to judge how important the page (and URL) might be to the person that is searching.

And of course it stores all of this information and makes it available.

The Query software is what you see when you go to a search engine - it is the front end that everybody thinks of as a search engine - familiar ground at last. It may look simple but it presents the results of all the quite remarkable search engine software that works away invisibly on our behalf.

The main feature of the query software is the box into which people type their search terms.

Type in your words, hit search and the search engine will try to match your words with the best web pages in can find through searching the web.

But this too is a metaphor and perhaps the most important one.

The query software doesn't search the web - it checks the records that have been created by its own index software. And those records have been made possible by the raw material the spider software collects.

**What You Need to Understand About Search Engines**

That is it. What you need to understand is that the search engine has done all the hard work of collecting and analyzing web pages, BUT it only makes that information available when someone does a search by entering words in the search box and hitting return.

The words people use when they search therefore determine the results the search engine presents. So search engine optimizers want to know the words people use when they search - we call them keywords - that might sound fancy but keywords are only 'the words people use when they search'.
And that's what Wordtracker provides. Use keywords in your website copy and you will prosper; ignore them and your online business will surely perish.
Keyword Basics Part 2: Discovering The Keyword Matrix

Key points
If you use the words people use when they search in your copy, page titles, descriptions and links, then you’ll score well in search engine results and more people will find your site.

The language you use will be appropriate to your audience. And as any seasoned direct marketer will tell you, speak to people in their own language and they will be more likely to buy from you.

A simple method for expanding your lists of profitable keywords. The secret of writing great online copy is simple: use keywords—the words people use when they search—in your copy.

The reasons for this are twofold:

1. If you use the words people use when they search in your copy, page titles, descriptions and links, then you’ll score well in search engine results and more people will find your site.
2. The language you use will be appropriate to your audience. And as any seasoned direct marketer will tell you, speak to people in their own language and they will be more likely to buy from you.

That of course begs the question, "How do you find your best keywords"?

Most people either just guess or do perfunctory research using one of the many free keyword tools that you’ll find online.

But if you want to succeed online, you’ve got to spend enough time and energy finding out the words your customers really use when they search. You'll need not just 20-30 keywords, you'll need hundreds—and many of the most successful online companies will have thousands of keywords.

The keyword matrix is a simple methodology that allows you to build a comprehensive keyword list using the Wordtracker database. Here are the 3 steps involved: you can also download the Excel spreadsheets we generated for this example—this gives you almost 5,000 relevant keywords using the full version of Wordtracker and 85 relevant keywords using the free trial version.

Step 1—Start with a common word or phrase that is appropriate to your business
Start simple. Your starting point does not need to be clever or creative. All you need is a common word or phrase relevant to your business—Wordtracker will help you find clever keywords later.
So in the example above, a good starting point would be the word 'chocolate'.

Using the keyword researcher at Wordtracker, you can find 1000 keywords that all contain the word, 'chocolate.'

Excellent. So far, so good. Now all you have to do is rush off and optimize your web pages for those phrases, right?

Wrong! That is what most people will do and as a result they will miss out on some very powerful keywords that are not immediately obvious.

Time to move on to step 2 and get inside the keyword matrix.

**Step 2—Find words that are related to your original keyword**

Here the task is not to find relevant keywords that contain the word 'chocolate': in fact, it is just the opposite— to find relevant keywords that do not contain the word 'chocolate'.

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Go to the related keywords feature on Wordtracker and enter the word chocolate. Wordtracker now searches 100 websites that score well on search engines for the search 'chocolate' and extracts the phrases that those sites use. From that you'll find relevant keywords such as truffles, cocoa, fudge, confectionery, gifts, gourmet and so on.

2. Chocolate
3. dark chocolate
4. cocoa
5. corporate gifts
6. reference
7. gourmet chocolates
8. science
9. chocolate gifts
10. wedding favors
11. chocolate truffles
12. gourmet chocolate
13. Chocolates
14. Truffles

Scan the list of related keywords and pick the ones that YOU feel are relevant to your business. Your input is required: Wordtracker is not a machine that churns out a list of keywords that will automatically bring you a fortune. If that was so, everybody would get the same results. Rather, Wordtracker is a tool that allows you to find your best keywords.

So from the list of related terms you might pick truffles, cocoa, fudge and candy.
Step 3: Use the related words to generate many more relevant keywords

Essentially, this repeats step 1 for each of the related keywords that you have chosen. Take each of your chosen related words and enter them into the keyword researcher in turn.

By following this methodology, you can quickly generate hundreds of relevant keywords that reflect the subtleties—and niche markets—within your marketplace.
Here’s what your final matrix may look like:
Final words

The average person will do their keyword research once and then forget about it.

But that is the way to get average results. Effective keyword research is an ongoing process and to get outstanding results you must work at it regularly.

Successful keyword researchers will:

1. Regularly check your keyword counts on Wordtracker—they can go up and down over time.
2. Continue to add more keywords to your matrix. The more effective keywords you have, the more profitable your online business will be.
3. Monitor how well your keywords do. Performance will always be a mixture of:
   - Keywords that bring good traffic and good conversions (these are the words people use when they are in buying mode)
   - Keywords that bring you good traffic but poor conversions (these are the words people use when they are in research mode)
   - Keywords that bring low traffic but great conversions (these are the words that represent buying behavior in niche markets).

Overall, there will be a mix of such keywords in any comprehensive keyword matrix.

In the next issue, we'll look at how you can pick the most competitive keywords from the sample matrix that we have developed for 'chocolate' and how you can use those keywords in your web site copy.

Reference URL

Keyword Basics Part 3: Choosing Your Best Keywords

by Ken McGaffin, 22 February 2007

You know how sometimes you make a list of say, three things and then by the time you get to the end of the list, you remember that there’s something you really must include and your list of three becomes a list of four.

Key points

- Include the most popular keywords in your website copy
- Use the most popular keywords along with 'qualifiers'
- Look for niche keywords or markets that others haven’t yet found

Well, that's happened to me with this series of three articles – I need to squeeze in another. So this article will be about choosing your best keywords from the many that can be generated using Wordtracker. The next article in this series will look at how to use your best keywords to create high ranking pages.

So how do you choose the best keywords, the ones you should concentrate on first?

In part 2, The Keyword Matrix, we developed two spreadsheets for chocolate and related terms, one of 85 search terms using the free trial and one of over 5000 terms using the full version (you can download both spreadsheets from the previous article).

The spreadsheets gave a prediction of the daily searches for each term:
The 'predict' figure is the first metric you should look at. High scoring keywords will be the most popular words in your marketplace - the words people use when they're searching for your products - so 'gifts' for a luxury chocolate site, 'cheap flights' for a travel site.

But of course there is a problem. Because the keywords are so popular, lots of sites will use them. You will face a lot of competition and much of that competition will be good at search engine optimization.

An experienced SEO will welcome this challenge and will apply skill and hard work over a number of months to compete effectively. But a novice SEO will find it virtually impossible to compete for these highly popular keywords. What then should the novice do?

**Strategies for a novice SEO**

I think there are three strategies you should follow:

1. **Include the most popular keywords in your website copy**, even though you may not rank well for them. Your customers will expect to see these keywords, and search engines will take note of them. By including them, you lay a foundation for the long term - slowly but surely as you add more content, your rankings will rise.

2. **Use the most popular keywords along with 'qualifiers'**, either geographic or sector specific. So while it might be difficult to rank well for 'chocolate gifts', it is not such a challenge to rank well for 'chocolate gifts Buffalo' targeting a geographic area or 'corporate chocolate gifts' targeting the business sector.

3. **Look for niche keywords or markets that others haven't yet found**. Such keywords have the magic combination of being relatively popular searches, but having little competition. Wordtracker provides a measurement for this - KEI or keyword effectiveness index. Many SEOs adopt this niche keyword strategy: John Alexander and Robin Nobles explain the approach in detail in this excellent article - [An Ingenious Way to Use Wordtracker](#).
Wordtracker provides you with a number of metrics to help in these strategies. You can see them here in the full version (similar metrics are available with the trial):

### Your keyword list

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Searches</th>
<th>Predict</th>
<th>Google</th>
<th>Google KEI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chocolate</td>
<td>6,706</td>
<td>11,927</td>
<td>128,000,000</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate and dessert recipes</td>
<td>1,618</td>
<td>2,053</td>
<td>31,700</td>
<td>82.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hot chocolate</td>
<td>1,371</td>
<td>2,417</td>
<td>2,070,000</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate chip cookies</td>
<td>989</td>
<td>1,744</td>
<td>1,380,000</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>charlie and the chocolate factory</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>1,608</td>
<td>1,690,000</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate chip cookie recipe</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>1,412</td>
<td>126,000</td>
<td>5.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate cake</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>1,215</td>
<td>1,660,000</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate phone</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>1,151</td>
<td>540,000</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ig chocolate</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>1,109</td>
<td>2,010,000</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate labs</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>1,063</td>
<td>56,000</td>
<td>6.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate booty</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>20,400</td>
<td>14.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate lab</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>922</td>
<td>471,000</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here's what each of these terms mean:

- **Searches** is the number of times the exact keyword appears in our sample of people's searches.
- **Predict** is the number of times over a 24-hour period that the exact keyword will be searched for over all engines.
- **Google** is the number of results that Google will return for the exact search term in quotation marks (you can also choose other search engines).
- **Google KEI (Keyword Effectiveness Index)** is a calculation of the "effectiveness" of each keyword, taking into account the predicted searches and the number of competing pages.

So let's look at our three strategies again using Wordtracker metrics.

1. **Include the most popular keywords in your website copy.** This means including the keywords that have a high 'predict' figure into your keyword strategy.
2. **Use the most popular keywords along with 'qualifiers'.** Look at the Google competition figure. If this is too high, add a qualifier to the keyword. So, instead of optimizing for 'chocolate gifts', optimize for 'chocolate gifts Buffalo'.
3. **Look for niche keywords or markets that others haven't yet found.** Pay close attention to the Google KEI column. By clicking on 'Google KEI' at the top of the table, Wordtracker will sort your entire list in descending order of KEI.
As with all things in search engine optimization you have to use a mixture of solid data AND human intelligence. Keyword research is not a simple one-off task. You will achieve much more if you investigate the tools, think about what they tell you about people, and develop your own ideas and methodologies.

**A final tip to expand your keyword list**

Today, if I did a search for 'chocolate gifts' on Wordtracker, I'd get a predict figure of 192. But that score is for the exact keyword phrase on its own - it does not count people's searches that include 'chocolate gifts' along with other words.

To find these additional keywords do this search in the full version of Wordtracker: Keyword researcher

![Keyword Research](image)

The results will show a prediction of 386 for phrases that contain 'chocolate gifts' - almost twice as many as for 'chocolate gifts' alone.
Please keep those comments coming. The next article in this series will look at how to use your best keywords to create high ranking pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Searches</th>
<th>Predict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chocolate gifts</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>custom chocolate gifts</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corporate chocolate gifts</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
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<td>hershey chocolate gifts</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>unique chocolate gifts</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>novelty chocolate gifts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gourmet chocolate gifts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personalized chocolate gifts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waterman chocolate gifts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hot chocolate gifts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>valentine's day chocolate gifts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate gifts delivered in south africa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serendipity chocolate gifts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roses and chocolate gifts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mail order chocolate gifts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Keyword Basics Part 4: Using Keywords In Website Copywriting
by Ken McGaffin

So you've done all your keyword research and you've found the best keywords for your website. How do you use these keywords to improve your website copywriting so that you rank well on the search engines and attract the type of customers that you are after?

**Key points**

- From the keyword lists you have chosen for your site, pick a primary and a secondary keyword that you'll want to rank well for with the article.
- Write the title of the article making sure that you include the primary keyword in the title.
- Write the description tag using both the primary and secondary keywords.
- Write the first paragraph which should be a summary of the overall article and should include both primary and secondary keywords.
- Map out the structure of the article, writing headings and subheadings that each contain keywords.
- Think about the internal and external links that you might point people to. The linking text should be keyword rich.

**Example of good website copywriting**
Well, let's start with an example of a well-written and highly ranked website in a competitive sector – digital cameras. I'll go to Google and do a search, say for “digital camera”: at the time of writing, here are the results:
See how the titles of the top organic searches all include the search term 'digital camera'. The words that appear in the title are completely within your control: the title tag is the most important place to put your primary keyword.

So the top organic result comes from www.dpreview.com who have succeeded against 63 million competing pages – a great performance. So what can we learn by following the link?

Let’s have a look:
Look at how the keyword ‘digital camera’ has been used in the title, the heading, linking text and the body copy.

This is a well optimized page. But have a closer look at the title – it contains another important keyword, ‘digital photography’. This keyword is also used well in the website copy:
So how does this page perform for the search ‘digital photography’? Does the page rank as well as it did for ‘digital camera’?

Here are the results from Google:
Top again with over 24 million competing web pages. A very nice piece of work and one you should try to emulate. The person writing this copy really knew what they were doing.

Using keywords in your web copy

Here are the steps I’ll go through to create a piece of web copy.

1. From the keyword lists you have chosen for your site, pick a primary and a secondary keyword that you’ll want to rank well for with the article.
2. Write the title of the article making sure that you include the primary keyword in the title. You can also try to fit in the secondary phrase but if you find it hard to do so and still maintain good English, then don’t worry about the secondary keyword in your title. I try and keep the title to around 50 characters in length.
3. Write the description tag using both the primary and secondary keywords. This should describe what the article is about and should be around 200-250 characters long.
4. Write the first paragraph which should be a summary of the overall article and should include both primary and secondary keywords. If you’re not sure about how to do this, have a look at my first paragraph here or study good newspaper writing. You’ll find that journalists tend to summarize the story in the very first paragraph.
5. Next, map out the structure of the article, writing headings and subheading that each contain keywords. Not only does this help you write good search engine copy, but it focuses your mind on what you really want to say and the quality of your writing will improve. In this article, for example, here’s the structure I’ve followed:
   - Using keywords in website copywriting
   - Example of good website copywriting
   - Using keywords in your web copy – 6 steps

© by Ken McGaffin
Improving your website copywriting skills

- Improving your website copywriting skills
- Internal and external resources to link to.

6. Finally, think about the internal and external links that you might point people to. The linking text should be keyword rich.

**Improving your website copywriting skills**

This article has given you some tips and a step-by-step process to follow. However, you’ll get nowhere unless you put some of this advice into action and then see what happens to your search engine traffic. Then build on what works and discard what doesn’t.

My favorite definition of an expert is “someone who has made more mistakes than anyone else”. So don’t be afraid – get writing, get publishing, measure what happens – and then do it even better next time.