How to get started with SEO for your small business

Your business is nothing without customers. Whether you're running a restaurant, a beauty salon or a garage, you need to make sure people can actually find your business online. Social media is a great way to get the word out – but if you run a small business, it's easy to forget about SEO.

To get you up and running, here are the basics of SEO and how you can get started on making it work for your business.

First, what is SEO?

Search engine optimisation is essentially the practice of getting your website to appear higher in the list when people search for things relevant to your business on Google or Bing.

Whenever you search for something, the order of the list is determined by a number of different factors, such as:

- How relevant the website is to what you searched
- The quality of the website
- The number of other sites who link to that website
- How long the website has been around
- How quickly the website loads

There are many other factors involved but these are some of the main ones. SEO is all about trying to tick off as many of these things as possible.

Where do I start?

Get online

It sounds obvious but… have you got a website? If you haven't, you should think about getting one. Don't worry – you don't need a massive budget. Services like [Wix](#) and [1&1 IONOS](#) make creating a website really easy and they usually only set you back a few pounds a month.

You can start appearing in people's search without a website, by adding yourself to the local listings. Most search engines have them – for example, [Google My Business](#) and [Bing Places](#). They're free but they're only really for businesses which have local premises that customers can visit.

Identify your keywords

A keyword is basically what your customers will search in Google. An important part of SEO is to work out what your customers are searching. You need to know so you know where to concentrate your efforts when it comes to writing things for your website.

There are a few ways to find out what your keywords are:

1. **Have a look at your competitors' websites** – How do they describe what they do? What phrases appear on their website?

2. **Use Google's keyword research tool** – It's free but you might need to sign-up for a Google account first. You can find out how to use the tool in this guide from Razor Social.
3. **Ask a friend** – This sounds like a weird one but it can be insightful. Tell a friend who's not in your business what you do and ask them what they'd search if they were looking for a business like yours?

Once you know what keywords you need to go for, add them to a list and bear them in mind. Ideally, you'll have an idea of search traffic – basically how many people search those keywords on average each month. Google's keyword planner tool can give you that information.

You'll probably have a handful of keywords that get searched most often, depending on how many different services or products your company offers. Don't forget about the keywords that aren't searched as often, but concentrate on using the popular ones more frequently.

Start writing

Once you know what your customers will be looking for, you can start writing content for your website. Depending on what you do, your website will need:

- **A homepage**, giving a brief overview of your company with links to some of your most important pages (usually product pages and a contact page)
- **Product pages**, giving detailed but succinct information about your products and services
- **A blog**, so you can publish engaging content that's relevant to your business (this will become important later on)

When I say "detailed but succinct", make sure you include all the information your customers need to know about your product and services – but don't overload them! People get put off by too much text, especially if they just want to buy something or sign-up to something. Try to structure your content with:

- A brief overview at the top
- A call-to-action (basically a link or a button so they can buy your product or contact you)
- A more detailed description of your product or service

Another good thing to include are FAQs (frequently asked questions). Use your knowledge of what customers have asked you in the past to generate these. Or try to anticipate the kind of questions they may ask.

If you don't have the time or skills to write the content for your website, you can hire copy writers online. There are loads of websites where you can hire a freelance writer for a simple job. UpWork is a good one, for example.

A few things to bear in mind:

- **Don't 'keyword stuff'** – This basically means that you shouldn't overuse your keywords. Try to use them naturally in your writing. 'Keyword stuffing' was a popular SEO tactic that used to work in the past, but search engines are cleverer now. Search engines will usually penalise websites who use tactics like this, meaning you might not even get listed at all!
- **Don't copy anyone**! – Another big no-no is copying other people's content. Search engines are smart and they'll know if you're doing it, and they might kick you off of their listings. Make sure that what you write is unique. If you're going to quote someone else, make sure you link to them and don't quote too much!

Structure your website

You've written all your content so you're ready to publish it on your website. But you should pay close attention to the structure of your website. How your website is structured can have a big impact on your SEO success.

To understand what we mean when we talk about the structure of a website, imagine them as like an organisation chart.

Your homepage is the big boss, and everyone else sits below him. Directly underneath him, you might have a few middle managers – for example, your main product pages, your contact page and your blog. And underneath them, you have the staff – each reporting to different middle managers. And then they might have people reporting into them and so on.

For example, here's a structure for a florist's website – each blue box is a webpage:
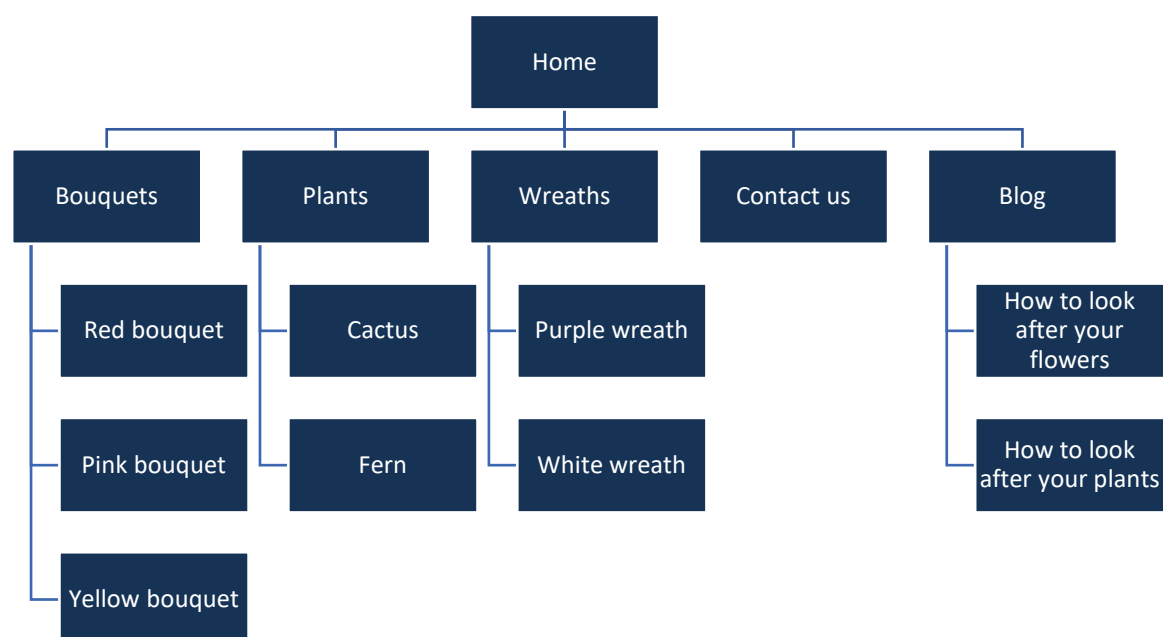
As you can see, each page has a place in the hierarchy. If you wanted to add a new bouquet, you'd add it as a "child" of the bouquets page. If you wanted to add a new product category, you'd add it as a "child" of the homepage.

Not only does a clear and logical site structure help your SEO, it also helps your users. If users know where to look for things, they'll have a better experience on your website (and will be more likely to spend their money!)

Website address/URL

The structure of your website has an effect on your website's address - or URL (uniform resource locator). Each page has its own URL.

A URL is made up of the following components:

www.florist.co.uk/bouquets/red-bouquet			
www.	florist.co.uk/	bouquets/	red-bouquet
Subdomain	Domain	Page	Subpage

The URL basically represents the hierarchy of your website – but it can be confusing because the hierarchy goes in opposite directions depending on the part of the URL.

In the example above, "www" is a subdomain (a child) of "florist.co.uk" – so the hierarchy goes from right to left. But "red-bouquet" is a subpage (a child) of the "bouquets" page – so the hierarchy goes from left to right.

The most important thing when it comes to your page URLs is to make sure they're descriptive. This is not only good for search engines – it's also good for your users. For example, www.florist.co.uk/blog/best-flowers-for-a-wedding is a better URL than www.florist.co.uk/blog/article?id=14567&category_id=456!

Verisign have a great guide on what a URL is and how it's structured. And Neil Patel has written a detailed post on why structure is important to SEO.

Make it easy for your customers to navigate your website

Search engines learn about your website by "crawling" across the pages, like a spider crawling over a web. They do this by following links. To make sure the search engine can get from page to page, you need to make sure they're linked together.

It seems obvious but the same also applies to your customers! They get from page to page by following the links.

Make sure you make it as simple and as logical as possible for your customers to get from page to page.

Menus

You can do this by including a clear menu at the top of every page so they can always get back to your homepage or find your most important pages. Base the design of your navigation on the structure of your website.

Contextual links

You can also include contextual links. This basically means including links in your text where you mention certain words you have pages for. For example, in your 'How to look after your flowers' blog post, you might mention bouquets – so link the word bouquets back to your bouquets category page.

You can find out more about contextual linking – why it's important and how to do it – in this guide from Webbee.

Breadcrumbs

Breadcrumb navigation is a great way to make your site easier to navigate. And they also have benefits when it comes to SEO. You've probably seen breadcrumb navigation before. For example, if you were on the red bouquet page on our imaginary florist website, you'd probably see something like this at the top of the content:

> Home > Bouquets > Red bouquet

The breadcrumb shows what page you're on now (at the end) as well as the pages that are higher up in the hierarchy. If you were reading the blog post on 'How to look after your plants', you might see this instead:

> Home > Blog > How to look after your plants

Most website builders include breadcrumb navigation in their templates automatically.

You can find out more about breadcrumb navigation and how it works in this guide from Big Commerce.

Page titles and meta tags

Part of SEO is making sure that if your website appears in a search, people are likely to click it. There's no point being listed if no one clicks on your results! You can do this by optimising your page titles and meta descriptions.

To show you what we're talking about, let's look at a search result from Google:

Springfield Florist of Chelmsford, Essex | Chelmsford Florist: Buy ...
www.springfieldflorist.co.uk/ ▼
At Springfield Florist we have a team whose enthusiasm for flowers speaks for itself. Our shop is based in Moulsham Street which is walking distance from ...

(Our office is based in Chelmsford and this florist is just round the corner!)

This is roughly what your website will look like when it shows up in a search. It's made up of three main elements:

- **Title** – This is what shows as the link for your listing. It's also used for the top of your browser window and for bookmarks that people make of your website
- **URL** – This is the address for the webpage in the listing
- **Meta description** – This is taken from the code that makes up the webpage – your customers will only see it on search engine listings and if they share your website on social media.

The key to optimising the page title and meta description is to make sure you include relevant keywords and describe as best as you can what your page is about. Be aware that page titles and meta descriptions get cut off if they're too long.

Most website builders let you update the page title and meta description for each page. Refer to the user guide to find out how to do it.

You can find out more about how to optimise your page titles and meta descriptions in this great post by Alexa.

Submit your website to the search engines

Now your websites ready, you'll need to tell the search engines it's live and ready to be crawled. If they don't crawl it, they won't be able to start including it in their listings. Submitting your website is free and usually only takes a few minutes.

To submit your website to Google, you'll need to sign-up and add it to their Search Console. You'll have to verify that the website is yours – usually by adding a piece of code to your site – but Google will give you instructions on how to do this.

You can also submit your website to Bing using their Webmaster Tools. The process is very similar to Google. Yahoo! uses the same results as Bing so you won't need to submit your website to them.

What next?

You've got a website, full of unique, relevant content, that's logically structured, easy to navigate, and crawled and indexed by the search engines. What else can you do to optimise your website for SEO?

Get links

One of the main ways for search engines to assess the value of a website is by how many other websites link to it. You can think of links to your website as like a vote – someone is saying that your website is worth visiting for some reason.

Over time, however, these votes have got more complicated. As search engines have got smarter, they've got better at understanding the nature of a link as well as including lots of other different factors in their ranking algorithms.

A popular tactic for getting your website listed higher up in the search engines used to be to pay other websites to link to you. The problem with this was that the links were no longer an indication of quality or relevance – just of how much money the company was willing to pay.

Now, most search engines devalue links that they think have been paid for or that look unnatural. They can do this in a number of different ways, usually by asking:

- **Is the link contextual?** Does it make sense for this link to be here?
- **What is the anchor text for the link?** The anchor text is basically the words that appear as the link itself. For example, the anchor text for this link is "this link".
- **Is the link surrounded by lots and lots of other links?**

If our imaginary florist suddenly gets hundreds of links on different websites pointing to their homepage with "Cheap flower delivery" as the anchor text, those links probably aren't natural – they may be paying for them.

If a search engine like Google notices this, it will first discount the links – so they won't pass any benefit to the website. If they keep it up, and look like they're continuing to try cheating the system, the website will be penalised. They could stop showing up in searches completely!

How do you get links naturally?

Getting natural links isn't easy, but there are many approaches that you can take to increase the changes people will link to you:

- **Write great content and promote it** – If you have a blog, write about things relevant to your business. Make it personal, make it funny, make it insightful, make it engaging. Basically, write stuff that people will want to read. Then promote it on social media or in an email newsletter to your customers. A few good ideas for content include:
  - 'How-to' guides
  - Lists
  - Infographics
  - Videos
  - Interactive content
  - Quizzes
  - Competitions
- **Get in the news** – This one can be tough if you don't have the budget. The best way to get in the news is to hire a PR agency but you can also signup to wire services, such as PR

Newswire, where you can submit press releases. If a publication writes about you, they may also link to your website. Links from reputable news websites can be really good for your website's SEO!

- **Build relationships** – Get in touch with other individuals or companies in your industry and build a relationship with them. Maybe you can work together on a project or contribute to each other's blogs.
- **Get your customers or clients to write about you** – Depending on your market, you maybe be able to get your customer or clients to write a review about your products and services if they have a blog or site of their own.

Just make sure you don't do any of these things or you could fatally harm your website's SEO:

- **Don't pay for links** – Just don't do it. It's tempting because it's so easy! But it's not a long-term strategy. It's also a lot less effective than it used to be as search engines are far cleverer these days. So you might just be flushing your money down the drain
- **Don't swap links on link directories** – A link directory is basically just a website full of links to other sites. If it's free to add your link to a site, it's probably a link directory. Because anyone can add any link they like, their quality can't be guaranteed – so search engines are likely to discount any links coming from them
- **Don't hassle people** – If you're contacting people and asking for a link, don't be a nuisance! Don't hassle people and don't be rude. If someone doesn't reply instantly, give them a few days – and then give them a gentle nudge. If you don't hear from them, they're probably not interested and you can do your business's reputation harm if you harass them

For more information on how to build links to your site, there's a great in-depth guide on Backlinko.

What if you don't have the time?

If you simply don't have the time to do all of this, your best bet would be to outsource to an SEO agency. SEO is big business, and there are tonnes of agencies and freelancers out there who can help. But be prepared to pay for it!

Here are a few low-cost SEO services that might be worth checking out:

- 123 Ranking
- Muffin Marketing
- WebCreationUK

Just make sure you stay vigilant – there are some SEO agencies out there who may try to cheat the system with techniques such as link buying. So check online reviews and do your research!

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