

Basic SEO for linguists

A website is just the start. How can you make sure people find you online? Judy Jenner has the answers with her beginners' guide to search engine optimisation (SEO)



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Assuming you already have a professional website, you have laid the groundwork for search engine optimisation. If you do not yet have a website, creating one might make for a good New Year's resolution. Unfortunately, just because you have a website doesn't mean that someone will find you. The internet, or, as I like to call it, the Wild Wild West, is a very big space. The challenge is making sure that people who don't know you or your URL, such as Jane Doe who is looking for 'French translators in San Sebastián', find your website. How do you do that? While I am not an expert, I've managed to establish a fairly good web presence for our company, Twin Translations (www.twintranslations.com), with the help of my IT guardian angel. Here are 12 things that I have learned that you should also know about search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM).

1 No one really has the answers, except maybe the people at Google, Yahoo and MSN, and they're not telling. When I worked in e-commerce, my company spent exorbitant amounts of money on search engine marketing consultants. Sure, they are quite good at what they do, but major search engines don't really like search marketers. Search engines constantly try to improve their algorithms to enhance user experience and provide good results to the users, not necessarily to advertising companies. This means that some days your site might come up on the first page of results, sometimes on the third, because sometimes, variable X has more weight than Y in the search algorithms. Search engines don't publish their variables and their weight, so no one really knows how it all works. If you know, please share. If someone tells you that for a minimal fee (say, £50), they can guarantee you a top 10 ranking, it's not true. However, for thousands of pounds, it is possible to get your page to the

top of the rankings (via either pay-per-click or by buying links to high-profile pages, which are both prohibitively expensive for small businesses) in the short term.

2 If you don't want to spend money, you'll have to put in the work. There are two ways to achieve a high ranking: paid search and organic search. Paid search is the ads that the customer sees on the right-hand side of the search results, which are easily identifiable as ads. This is an option if you have some extra money to spend. However, research has shown that customers are frequently weary of ads and like to look at the organic results, which are all the results in the centre of the page. For paid search, the specific price you will have to pay for a keyword depends on an auction. Keywords that generate very high traffic (think 'hotels', 'airline tickets', or in our case, 'translation', 'localisation', etc) are very expensive because large multinational corporations buy them. Keywords in niche markets are much less expensive (think 'technical French translator in Brighton'). I believe most of us are better off trying to rank high on the organic searches. How do you do that? By having relevant, frequently updated content, by writing a blog, by leaving insightful comments on other people's blogs, by having articles written about you, by updating your websites and your social profiles, etc. See points 4 and 5. **3** Remember that the internet has a mind like a steel trap – it won't forget. That innocent comment that you left on a blog that could be misinterpreted if read out of context? It will most likely be indexed and found if a customer searches for your name to learn more about you. Be careful what you say – everything is public.

4 New, updated content is key. You need to make a commitment to update your social profiles, do a few blog entries a week, upload new information to your website (eg new customers, new message about availability, update on what you are working on), publish articles in online newsletters (www.eHow.com, www.knol.google.com or other online platforms), etc. This is a never-ending project, and you won't achieve a high ranking in a day. The internet essentially rewards hard work, and with few exceptions you get out of it what you put into it. No pain, no gain. **5** Create relevant content about yourself and place it where it will be seen. Blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Xing et al are your friends. And they are jealous friends, so keep them happy by feeding them new content. There are many fantastic blogs written by fellow linguists. I pen Translation Times (<http://translationtimes.com>).

WHAT YOU NEED

Time: 1 hour to infinite hours a week/day/month/year

Cost: Free, unless you want to pay for ads

Equipment: A computer, preferably a laptop with a wireless connection

Prerequisites:

1. A website, even if it's just a basic, one-page site with contact information.
2. Willingness to put some time and effort into this.
3. Understanding that there is no quick fix.

blogspot.com), and I really enjoy Corinne McKay's Thoughts on Translation (www.thoughtsontranslation.com), Sarah Dillon's There's Something About Translation (www.dillonslattery.com), Michael Wahlster's Translate This! (www.blog.wahlster.net), BJ Epstein's Brave New Words (<http://brave-new-words.blogspot.com>), Alejandro Moreno-Ramos's hilarious translation-related cartoons (<http://mox.ingenierotraductor.com>), Kevin Lossner's Translation Tribulations (<http://simmer-lossner.blogspot.com>) and many others. When you visit these blogs, you can look at the other blogs that they link to, and you will be on your way to learning from others and to perhaps increasing your online presence by leaving insightful comments. Also, update your information on the professional networks, such as LinkedIn and Xing.

6 Write online press releases. There are plenty of free online press release services, including www.openpr.com and www.free-press-release.com. You can submit your press release for free (some sites will repeatedly suggest an upgrade, which you don't need), and it will be released online immediately or after review by the editorial team. Many times, your HTML links won't be live unless you pay a fee, but the idea is getting information out about yourself that's relevant and that you can control, even if the links aren't clickable. Your press release won't get you a feature article in *The Times*, but they get indexed fairly high in search engines. Write one relevant release per quarter. Some ideas: 'Company XYZ Announces Expansion into Environmental Translations' or 'XYZ Wins Prestigious Translation Award.' You can also add your details to a wide range of free business directories such as Google Local: www.google.com/local/add. Stay away from fee-based business directories: they are usually not worth the investment.

7 Don't overdo it. If you don't have anything to say, don't say it. Be careful not to dilute your brand, especially with press releases, by sending out irrelevant or unimportant information too frequently. Also, don't register for 50 social and professional profiles that you can't maintain. Keep it interesting and fresh, and start small with only a few profiles and a limited online footprint.

8 Yes, do it: search for yourself and see where you rank. While it is certainly narcissistic, you have a legitimate business reason to Google yourself. Search for yourself, or better, search for 'translator + your language pair + city' and see where you rank. Are you on the first two pages? Do this often, but don't be surprised if one day you are on page one and the next on page ten: I told you the algorithms were a mystery. If you search for your name, it will give you a good idea which tools are working: check which sites come up first if you search for your name and keep on investing time in them.

9 Develop keywords and integrate them into your HTML code and text. Don't know which keywords to use? Try these three tools for keyword research. The Google Adwords keyword tool (<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>) is remarkably good at finding related keywords and phrases for you. The second tool is the free research tool from Wordtracker

(<http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com>). Last but not least, there is KeywordIndex, (www.keywordindex.com), a new online keyword suggestion tool that helps you to find good keywords for your website. It is available in English and in German. If you have found the right keywords to describe your services, put them into the meta title of your page and into the body of your page. But don't overload the page with keywords, which makes it difficult to read. Your customers are human and you should create a well-written, easy-to-read text, including occasional keywords where they make sense. Don't become obsessed with constantly tweaking title tags, headings, and on-page content. I also recommend the site www.highrankings.com, which focuses on how to write for search engines and your customers.

10 Don't cheat the system. You will get penalised for duplicate content. Search engines are smart enough to recognise if someone buys two domain names, eg www.spanishwizards.com and www.spanishwizardusa.com, and puts the exact same content on both sites, hoping to score a higher ranking. Most likely, the search engines will penalise you by not ranking one or both of your sites, so play fair. If you have several websites, a good rule of thumb is to make sure that at least 60% of the content is different between the sites, and that doesn't mean just changing the syntax. You can also create a redirect from www.spanishwizardusa.com to www.spanishwizards.com, which will not get you penalised. For more information about this read a Google article about 301 redirects: www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=93633.

11 Get someone else to do the work. Is there a community newspaper in your neighbourhood or town, a special publication about female entrepreneurs, small businesses, Hispanics in business, etc? Strive to get something published about your business. Many editors from smaller publications struggle to find interesting content, so pitch to them. You can simply repurpose one of your press releases or develop a short pitch letter to the editor. Don't be discouraged if the answer is no: sometimes you just don't match what the publication is looking for. If you do get some coverage: congratulations! Ask permission to use the article in your clippings and on your website. Hopefully the publication will have an online version, which means instant credibility when a client searches for you and finds an article about you. In addition, don't forget to add your information (and most importantly, the link to your website) to ITI's directory.

12 Take it in your stride. SEO is very important, but you also have to continue to build your reputation far away from search engines, in something as traditional as – gasp! – conversations, meetings, emails, phone calls, and so on. Once your potential client knows your name and/or your company name, you won't need to worry about search engine optimisation. If you have a catchy business name, if you've handed out enough business cards, if you generate enough word of mouth, people will already know where to find you. Look at SEO as the online version of traditional networking on steroids, but don't forget the basics.

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