

Managing Your Website: Get More Visitors

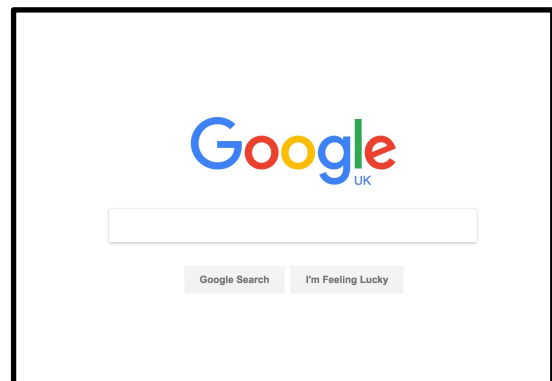
Often jargon is used by experts when referring to things to do with the internet, which can make it hard to understand. Here are some translations, which should help to demystify some of the scary terminology:

“SEO”

This stands for Search Engine Optimisation. It refers to the work of doing what you can to make your website more likely to appear on the results page when people search for relevant words. There are experts who make a living charging to help with this, but there is a lot you can do to help yourself.

“Search Engine”

Search engines are the main way that people will get to your site. By far the biggest and most-used search engine these days is Google. The search engine’s job is to match the search terms that people enter, with the content that those people want to find. That’s really all there is to it, but as you can imagine, given the size of the world wide web, it’s quite a complex task.



“Algorithm”

This is basically a set of rules (admittedly, quite a complicated set of rules) that drives the process by which the search engines decide which websites to suggest on the results page when someone makes a search. The algorithms are constantly developing, and sometimes they are given names, such as “PageRank” and “Hummingbird”, which can also sound like specialist jargon words!

“Search engines use spiders to crawl the web”

The search engines need to index all of the content on the World Wide Web. They do this by using pieces of software (spiders), which gather information (crawl) about all of the words that are used on websites (the web).

“Improve your search rankings”

Make your site more likely to appear higher on search result pages.

“Keywords”

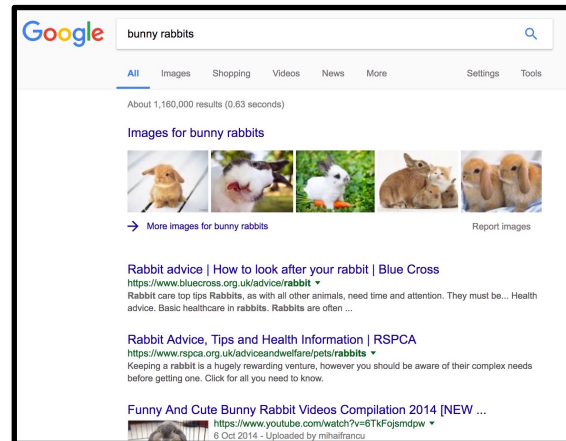
This means using words that the search engines are likely to see as a connection between your content and what people are searching for. For example, if you want people to find your church when they search for ‘where to worship on Sunday?’, it would be a good idea to make sure you use the words ‘worship’ and ‘Sunday’ somewhere in your site.

“Spamming”

You may be familiar with the term ‘spam’ to mean junk, unsolicited email – that stuff you really don’t want. When speaking about SEO, ‘spamming’ usually means when websites include lots of words, not necessarily relevant ones, to try to manipulate the search results in their favour. Search engines are getting better at spotting this bad behaviour and avoiding using it in deciding which sites to offer on the results pages.

“Results Page”

This refers to the list of websites that is offered to you in response to a search you have input into a search engine. For example, if you were to go to Google and type “bunny rabbits” into the box and click ‘search’, you might end up looking at a screen a bit like this one.



What does all this mean for your website?

It means that, in order for new visitors to be able to find your site, you need to make it into something the search engines will offer when people search for relevant terms. The good news is that it’s not a mystical dark art – we generally know how to get the search engines to notice your site, and as they have become more sophisticated over the years, they have got better at understanding ‘human language’.

However, you can’t just ring up Google and say, ‘please move my site up to the top of the search results’ – your site is in competition with all of the other sites for that sought-after top spot on the results page.

So what do you need to do?

There are several manageable things you can do to help improve your ranking:

1. **Post content frequently.**
New material attracts the attention of the spiders, so your site will be indexed more accurately and more frequently.
2. **Use relevant terms.**
This is really important: the search engines, and therefore potential site visitors, can’t possibly know what your site is about unless you use the right words. For example, if you want your church website to help attract weddings to the church, then make sure you use words such as ‘wedding’, ‘marriage’, and ‘vows’ somewhere in your site.
The easiest way to do it is to have a page explaining that you offer weddings; you could additionally have reports on weddings that have taken place, or a blog article discussing something relevant, such as ‘things to consider when you are getting married’, for example. Beyond the most obvious words listed above, you could also get a bit more creative and include other associated terms such as ‘reception’, ‘bridal’, and ‘ushers’, for instance, in

your article – but don't shoe-horn them in – that would make your content less appealing to the human visitors to your site, and therefore less engaging, which could damage your search rankings.

For ideas for relevant, engaging content, you could have a chat with someone you know who's getting married, and find out what's important to them. The same principles apply to other content, so if you are wanting to attract more children's birthday parties to use your hall as a venue, for example, why not have a word with some parents of young children, to find out what they are looking for? That could give you some really useful clues as to what words to use on your site – because those are the terms that those people will be entering into the search engines.

3. **Post engaging material.**

Search engines tend to favour sites that have traffic – so if people are visiting your site, and sticking around long enough to read your posts (Google is able to track a lot of web use data), that suggests to the search engines that other people will want to visit your site too.

4. **Get visitors.**

Just like with a popular restaurant, having visitors can help you to attract more visitors. You can send people direct to your site by giving them the web address (and by having a website address that is easy for them to remember). It is a good idea to get your friends and church members to have a look at the site – not just because they will enjoy all your brilliant content, but also because it can help the search engines notice you.

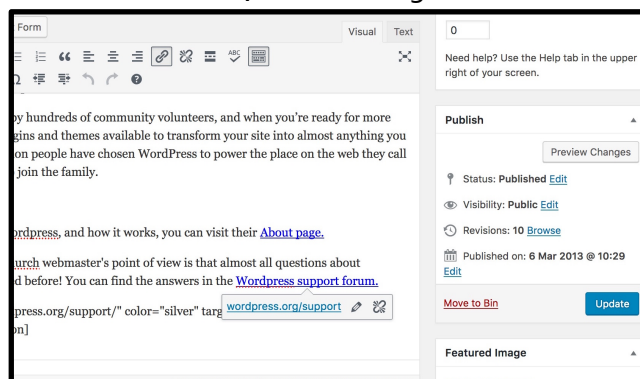
5. **Keep your site fast and light.**

Sites that take a long time to load are not popular with human visitors or with search engines. Quick ways to ensure your site doesn't take too long to load are: avoid unnecessary gimmicks (eg sliders, animations etc); ensure image file sizes are no larger than necessary (you can resize images for free on sites such as picresize.com); and have as few plugins running on your site as possible.

6. **Have other relevant, credible sites link to you.**

Search engines see a hyperlink from another site as a recommendation, so it's good to have other sites link to yours. However, as with keywords, it's important not to spam – the search engines will spot if you have lots of meaningless links, or links from dummy or irrelevant sites. A good example for a church would be to ask for your site to be linked to on the sites of your Synod/District/Diocese, of other local churches, and on things like the local Churches Together

group's website. It's also fantastic if you can get included on someone else's blog, for instance if they had visited for some reason and really enjoyed it, or if a blogger includes you on a list of 'examples of great church websites'.



7. **Use relevant words in important places.**

The search engines gather information about not only what words are used, but also where they are used, as different locations have different significance. Make sure that key relevant words are used in: page and post titles; image titles, alt text and descriptions; links (eg if the word 'church' is linked to your site, it is far more meaningful to search engines than if the words 'find out more' are the ones that are linked); and if you use tags in your news or blog posts, then make sure they are useful ones.

8. **Make use of SEO plugins.**

The standard iChurch set up includes an SEO plugin that helps your site be seen by search engines. If you are using an SEO plugin, it may include space to for you to input keywords relating to your content – it is a good idea to make use of this, as the plugin is there to help boost your site's visibility to search engines, so the more information you give it, the more it can help you.

Where can you find out more?

1. Google in particular provide lots of information about how their search engine works. Here's a good place to start:

- <https://www.google.co.uk/insidesearch/howsearchworks/thestory/>

2. Other iChurch webmasters sometimes discuss the subject, and we try to provide links to useful resources, on the iChurch support site:

- <http://forumurc.org.uk/support-forum/>

3. You could search for it! Lots of marketers, web designers etc. write blog posts about SEO. If you do a search for something like 'how to improve my search results', you will turn up thousands of articles – but please take care only to trust the ones that come from credible, independent sources, that are not pushing to sell you their SEO services – you can get enormous amounts of good advice for free. A couple of good ones are:

- <http://www.wpbeginner.com/wordpress-seo/>
- <http://searchengineland.com/>
- <https://www.elegantthemes.com/blog/tips-tricks/wordpress-seo-best-practices-in-2015>

