

Content Optimization Theory

Web page content should ideally only be organized for the human visitor, but technology has made it possible for people with visual disabilities and even machines to browse the Web and extract information. A well-designed Web page should therefore take every potential visitor into consideration. Content organization is sometimes confused with content presentation, but presentation is achieved independently of organization and optimization.

In the broader sense, content is optimized when it conveys its most important points first and then leads the visitor through a process of discovery that is both illuminating and compelling. Machines may abandon a page simply because it contains formatting errors that impede their ability to extract information, but people will also leave pages because they realize the content is not what they are looking for, or perhaps because they become bored with the content even if it is what they were looking.

Content optimization theory does not encompass either presentation or presentation. Well optimized content may be broken and it may be boring.

Internal Navigation

A typical Web site consists of several separate Web pages, each containing its own unique content. A Web site may divide its material about a single thesis into multiple pages to enhance readability, to improve user experience by distributing download and rendering delays across multiple accesses, or to organize extensive material by topic and sub-topic.

A multi-page Web site needs to present its information intuitively and logically to visitors. If the information covers a diverse collection of topics then visitors may favor random access to the data. Large glossaries and directories are common examples of sites with so much diverse content their users rely upon in-site search tools to find information.

Searchable resources such as product catalogues, directories, and encyclopedic information archives rely upon internal search navigation to help people find what they are looking. But the content must still be organized and presented in such a way that a visitor can return to an entry point by following links between pages. It therefore follows that a trail of links out from deep content should be traversable in reverse. And that is the challenge.

How does a large content site organize its link pathways so as to optimally provide random visitors with easily identifiable pathways? There are three preferred methods. Each of these page indexing methods also provides search engines with the pathways they need to find and index deep content:

- 1) Hierarchical site-mapping
- 2) Hierarchical intra-page navigation

3) Random external linkage

External linkage is only random in the sense that search engines will follow inbound links to deep content as they find such links. Random external linkage is the least efficient of the three methodologies, but some information archives do rely upon external linking sources to drive traffic to their data. External links may be constructed from RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication) data feeds, randomly displayed links, or other small collections of links exported to other Web sites or user aggregation tools.

Hierarchical site-mapping usually produces the fastest crawling and indexing by search engine spiders but a sole reliance upon hierarchical site-mapping for user navigation is inefficient and annoying.

Hierarchical intra-page navigation, usually presented in the form of “breadcrumb trails” leading back to a central topic page, is often employed by directories and large directory-like structures. Hierarchical intra-page navigation is easy to crawl but may require more time to crawl and index than hierarchical site-mapping.

The most efficient method is to employ all three methodologies, and this is usually the case to some extent with well organized large content sites. Site-mapping may be limited only to key topic pages, such as category and sub-category index pages from which users and spiders must follow individual links across breadcrumb trails. External links may be provided in the form of specific topic subscription services, such as services that notify subscribers of new additions to content. Such subscription alerts may be shared automatically on other Web sites.

Large content sites that prove to be useful resources often attract many inbound links from other sites that find specific deep content to be helpful to their visitors. Such links can help improve intrasite crawling and indexing if the deep content pages link back to the root URL, site map home, central topic page, and “sibling” pages that are located close by in the logical hierarchy.

Every page in a large content site should be regarded as a potential entry point to the site. The page should provide clear and explicit guidance through informative links to other parts of the site, particularly key pages on the site.

Topic Organization

Topic organization is closely associated with toponymy, the naming structures employed by large content Web sites. Many people ask whether they should divide their content across sub-domains, sub-directories, or both? The best answer tends to be “Whatever is best for your visitors”.

However, disparate topics may lend themselves to individual branding opportunities. If a specific topic on a large content site is so informative and interesting to a large audience that people will be interested only in that topic on many visits, it makes sense to isolate the topic to some extent from the rest of the Web site. Isolation helps to establish the boundaries of the “brand” for the topic section.

But topic isolation should not be complete. Instead, it should only occur within deeper hierarchical structures. Prominent, key navigation structures such as main page navigation and/or primary site map pages should clearly and informatively link to isolated topics.

The question of whether to use sub-domains or sub-directories should really be decided on the basis of what is feasible and easy to achieve, what works best for visitors, and what additional possible value either organization offers. For example, in search engine optimization, sub-domains may provide a slight advantage over sub-directories if search engines treat the sub-domains as separate and distinct hosts.

Cross-Promotion

Cross-promotion can help improve the performance of isolated topic sections without degrading the boundaries of their brand. Cross-promotion can take the form of intra-site advertisements and endorsements (promotional copy with embedded links). Cross-promotion is useful because it shares additional value with converted visitors (visitors who have found value in the Web copy) and because it helps improve crawling frequency for other areas of a popular Web site.

Cross-promotional content can be placed in margins (header, footer, and navigational bars) or directly embedded in main copy (as insert boxes, side bars, etc.). Other cross-promotional tools include advertising boxes (banners) and floaters, dynamic "headline" content, and embedded references that are part of the primary copy.

Cross-promotion respects the boundaries of brand while carrying visitors across those boundaries and building visitor confidence in the large content site's value. News Web sites, feature article Web sites, and entertainment Web sites rely extensively upon cross-promotion.

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