HostGator

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

A Beginner's Guide to Search Engine Optimization

Table of Contents

Chapter

01

What is Search Engine Optimization (SEO)?

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER ONE

What is Search Engine Optimization (SEO)?

ABOUT FIVE SECONDS AFTER YOU LOOK into setting up your first website, you'll run into the term SEO, and then you'll start seeing it everywhere. SEO stands for "search engine optimization," which is the process of improving your site's rank in search results to get more site visitors, particularly visitors who are likely buy from your site, read your blog, or watch your videos. SEO matters because most people who search for something online never look past the first page of results. If you want to have a shot at getting more people to your visit your online store (or your brick-and-mortar shop), you need to appear on that first page of results for the niche you're in, whether that's anime-inspired smartphone covers, online Swedish tutoring, gluten-free bakeries in St. Paul, or whatever your target customers will be looking for.

Until recently, SEO was shorthand for creating and sharing useful content, making sure relevant search keywords, and linking to high-quality sites. These activities still have a big impact on search results

compiled by Google, Bing, and other search engines. But as consumer habits and technology have evolved, SEO has come to include more actions that help sites earn the best possible search result positions.

Google Search now uses roughly 200 algorithms to rank search results. Keywords and links are among them, but not every factor is something site owners can control. For example, the location and search history of the person searching will influence the results Google delivers. So a search for *affordable braces* by a man in London who regularly buys his clothes online will deliver results showing what we in the US call suspenders. The same search, undertaken by the mother of tweens in New York will show her local orthodontists with discount payment plans.

Some of the newer (or newly important) SEO criteria are things that you can influence, and they matter as much or more than link-building and keywords, thanks to the changing ways people use the internet. In the rest of this guide, we'll introduce you to traditional SEO tactics like keyword use and link-building along with newer tactics such as mobile-first design, proper use of schema, and more. Let's get started!

Keyword Research and SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER TWO

Keyword Research and SEO

KEYWORDS (AND KEYWORD PHRASES) ARE THE WORDS people use to find what they're looking for via Google, Bing, and other search engines, which means they're the terms you need to include in your site copy, tags, and descriptions to earn a decent spot in search results. However, it's not enough to describe your business using general keywords. There's simply too much competition for you to rank well in search results if you're pinning your SEO strategy on keyword phrases like *day spa* or *auto parts*. Remember, if your business doesn't show up on the first page, searchers probably won't see it.

So get specific. Think about how customers search for *exactly* what you offer, then write a handful of keyword phrases around that. For example, *day spa bridal showers in Madison or vintage BMW auto parts online* are very specific phrases that most internet users will never search for. But they're the phrases that people will use when they're ready to buy what you're selling. They're also typically phrases with less competition, so you can rank more highly in search results and get found more easily. If you've seen the term *long tail keywords*, this is what it means. Long tail

describes the long arc of a search-phrase graph that tapers off gradually as search phrases get more specific and narrow down to a particular product, experience, location, and more.

Long-tail keyword phrases have another benefit besides making your site more visible in search results. People who are searching for day spas might want to learn more about what a day spa is. Even if they find your site via search they might never book a visit. But the person who's looking for day spa bridal showers in Madison is probably planning to book an event soon with several guests at a local day spa – why not yours?

You can use Google's Keyword Planner to see how many people search for your keywords, to collect keyword ideas, and to fine-tune your keyword phrases. You can also search for your chosen phrases in different engines to see what kind of results you get. For example, our vintage BMW parts shop's keyword phrases should return results for similar small to midsize businesses selling reclaimed BMW parts, not big auto-parts manufacturers and chain stores. If your searches turn up your local or niche competitors, your keywords are on track.

Once you have your long tail keyword phrases chosen, use them in your site copy as well as in your site and image tags and descriptions. We'll explain how to do that in a bit. First, we're going to get a little bit technical, but not for too long.

On-Site SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER THREE

On-Site SEO

O N-SITE OPTIMIZATION IS BEHIND-THE-SCENES WORK that affects how your site looks in search results, how it ranks, and how useful it is to visitors. Here are three basic on-site SEO steps to get you started.
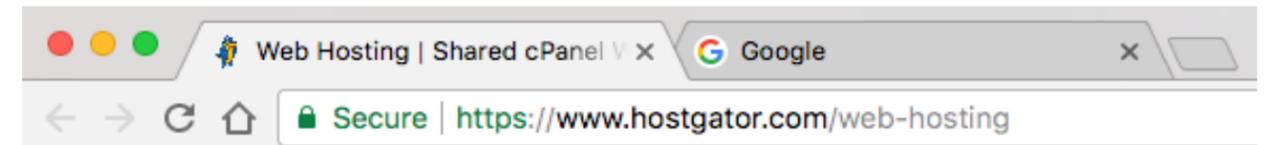
Title Tags

Every page on your site needs a descriptive title tag for SEO. These tags are part of your site code and will display in search results, browser tabs, and on social media shares. HostGator.com's main page title tag looks like this in Google search results:
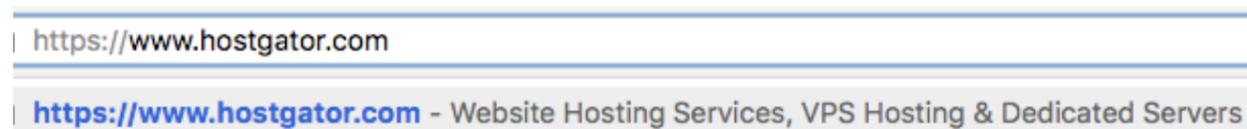
Example of a search for "HostGator.com" in the Chrome browser.

Our web hosting page has its own title tag: www.hostgator.com/web-hosting. On a browser tab, it looks like this, so it's easy to spot when a user has several tabs open:

Example of a title tag for HostGator.com in the Chrome browser.

And the title tag for the HostGator cloud hosting page looks like this when the link is shared on Facebook:

Example of a Facebook post with a shared link.

To set up or change your title tags in WordPress, select the page you want to tag and look for the permalink under the title field. WordPress will automatically use your page title as the title tag, but you can change it by editing the permalink if you wish.

On the home page, WordPress handles tags differently. Your page title will not become part of your main URL. To add a descriptive title, select your main page for editing and scroll down to your SEO settings. There, you'll find a Document Title field. What you write there will appear above your URL in Google search results. You'll also see a field for your site's meta description.

Meta Description

The meta description is a section of text up to 320 characters long that you can (and should) include in your site code or WordPress site template to give searchers a preview of what your site's about. For example, HostGator's meta description gives a contact number, lists services, and establishes trustworthiness:

HostGator: Website Hosting Services, VPS Hosting & Dedicated Servers
www.hostgator.com/ ▾
HostGator (866-96-GATOR) is a leading provider of web hosting, VPS and dedicated servers. Discover why over 9000000 websites trust us for their hosting needs.

Example of a meta descriptions on the Chrome browser when Hostgator is searched.

The meta description itself is not a factor in Google search rankings, but a good meta description can get more searchers to click through to your site—and that increase in click-through rate can improve your search ranking. Include your keywords, your location if it's relevant, and get right to the point in your meta text.
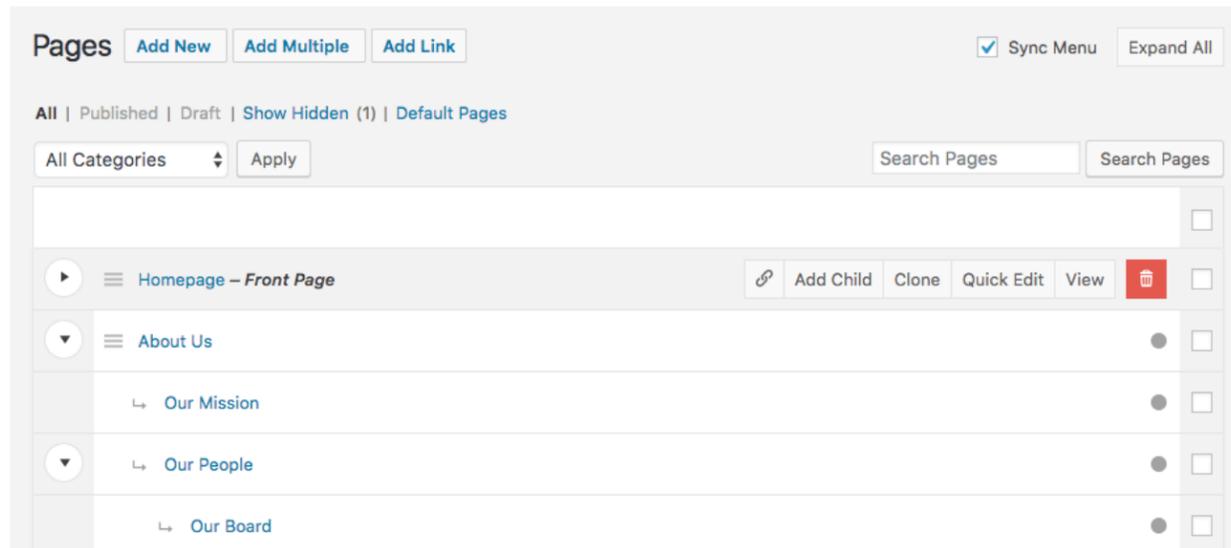
URL Structure

Structure is how your site is organized. As with most things, better organization gets you better results. You'll need your pages and their URLs to fit into a clear hierarchy so that searchbots and visitors can make sense of your site.

For example: Let's say our vintage BMW parts dealer sells parts for automobiles and motorcycles. It's going to make things easier for customers – and help with SEO – if there are separate categories for each. Those category pages will have URLs with tags that help define the site structure:

vintagebmwparts.com/cars
vintagebmwparts.com/motorcycles

In WordPress, these pages can serve as "parent" pages, and each subcategory in cars and motorcycles can be designated as a "child" page by selecting cars or motorcycles as its parent page.

Example of a page structure within WordPress

The result is something like this, for each type of part for cars and for bikes.

vintagebmwparts.com/cars/bumpers
vintagebmwparts.com/motorcycles/struts

This can help each page rank better in specific searches, like *vintage BMW bumpers*. Just don't create too many layers of categories, subcategories, and sub-subcategories. We'll explain why in the next section.

Chapter

04

Technical SEO Basics

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER FOUR

Technical SEO Basics

SITE ARCHITECTURE, SITEMAPS, AND ROBOTS: This is the stuff that makes most of us non-technical people a little nervous, but these basics matter for SEO. They're also pretty straightforward to deal with once you understand their purpose.

Site Architecture

This is related to URL structure, which we looked at in the previous section. You want your URLs sorted into easy to understand categories and subcategories, but experts say you should have four or fewer total levels within your site. What that means in practical terms is that a visitor to your homepage should be able to find anything on your site in four clicks or less.

Why so few levels? Frustrated site visitors tend to leave and not come back, while visitors who find what they need tend to come back, which can boost your SEO standing. Well organized, "flat" site architecture also helps web crawlers search and index your site more easily, another SEO plus.

Sitemaps

Your site needs an XML sitemap so Google will send a crawler out to index your site sooner rather than later—important for SEO when you're starting out and whenever you update your site. The easiest way for new site owners to manage their XML sitemap is with a WordPress plugin like Google (XML) Sitemaps Generator, which formats XML sitemaps to meet Google, Bing, and other search engines' standards. The plug-in also pings search engines whenever you update your site.

Your sitemap can also help you see your site architecture clearly. If you access your plugin from your WordPress dashboard you can see if there are problems with your sitemap and, if so, suggestions for fixing them, You can also check your sitemap with Google by entering your URL plus sitemap.xml into your search bar.

Robots.txt

This sounds complicated, but it's basically a program in your site's code that tells web crawlers which parts of your site to avoid crawling and maybe how long to wait before crawling after site updates, both of which can impact your SEO. There's a lot of detailed information out there about how to adjust your robots.txt file for optimal SEO—information that's aimed at experienced users and owners of large sites with hundreds or thousands of pages.

When you're just getting started, know that WordPress will automatically generate a robots.txt file for your site. For now, you most likely don't need to make any changes to it. You can, however, use Google's robots.txt tester if you want to check your file for errors.

That's enough tech talk for now. Let's move on to how images can help your SEO.

Chapter

05
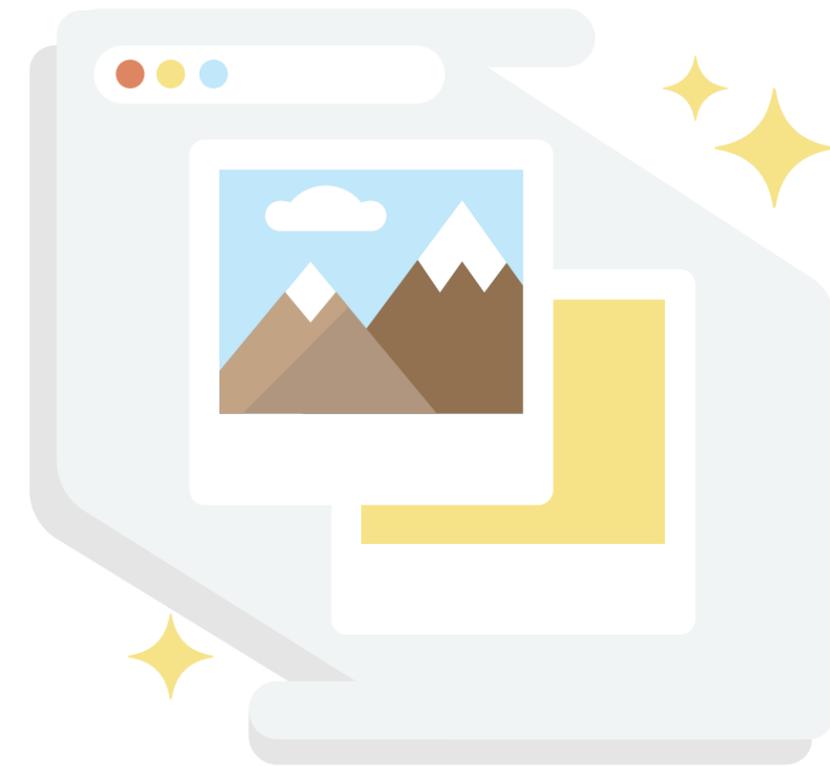
Images and SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER FIVE

Images and SEO

THERE ARE TWO BIG REASONS to treat each image on your site as a potential SEO asset. First, fast-loading images help your pages load faster, and page-load speed counts for SEO—so much that we'll devote the next section to optimizing your page loads. Second, search-engine web crawlers read text better than they identify images, so keyword tags and descriptions for images can boost your SEO.

Let's look at two basic ways to create faster-loading images: formatting and compressing, as well as some simple tips on naming and describing your image files for better SEO.

Formatting images for SEO

Finding the right balance between image quality and size is important. Smaller files load faster, but poor image quality can damage your brand and cost you sales. That's why each of these three main image formats is right for some situations, but not others.

- **JPEG** is the compressed file format used most often for photos and detailed

images. Why not use the JPEG format all the time? JPEG doesn't for transparent image backgrounds and it's a "lossy" format, which means the images decline in quality as you copy and resize them.

- **PNG-8** is handy for copying and resizing images without losing quality. It's a good choice for simple and transparent images, line drawings, and word art or logos with small text. (PNG-8's sibling, PNG-24, provides more color and detail but makes bigger files.)

- **GIF** format is good for very small images with only a few colors, like clip art and charts. It's not a good choice for photos or detailed images.

Compressing images for SEO

Changing your images from one format to another is easy with Adobe Photoshop or a free alternative like GIMP. You can also install a WordPress plugin like EWWW Image Optimizer to automatically compress your images.

Tagging and describing images for SEO

Use target keywords in your image file names. For example, if your landscape business serves Orlando, your main photo might be *Snappy's Landscapes Residential Lawn Care in Orlando FL.jpeg*.

When you upload the image, you'll see space to enter alternative text, which describes images for low-vision users and pops up labels when a

user mouses over the image. Use specific keywords in your alt text, like *weekly lawn care services for Orlando homes.*

Finally, if you add captions under your images, include relevant keywords. For example, instead of captioning your staff photo as "our team," write *Our team provides great lawn care for Orlando homeowners.*

Once your images are properly formatted, compressed, tagged, and described, it's time to speed up your site.

Chapter

06

Page Speed & SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER SIX

Page Speed & SEO

NOW MORE THAN EVER, the time your site takes to load affects your search result rankings. Page load times have been a factor in search rankings since 2010, so it's not new that slow-loading sites rank lower in search results. But now Google gives page speed a higher priority, in part because mobile users don't like to wait and they're the people doing the most searches these days. Check out the section on mobile and SEO for more details.

For the record, computer users don't like to wait, either. Whatever device your visitors use, if they have to wait more than 2 or 3 seconds for your site to load, you have problems. Your visitors are likely to navigate away to another site that loads faster, and search engines will bump you down in search results in favor of faster-loading sites. That's doubly bad for your blog or business.

An easy way to head off many page speed problems is to use a fast, reliable web hosting service along with WordPress site templates and plugins or a good site builder tool. Regardless of how you put your site

together, it's a good idea to check your page speed when you're just getting started, after updates, and whenever you add new features to your site.

How can you tell if your page-load speed is good? Use Google's PageSpeed test.

When you enter your site's URL, you'll get numerical results (0-100) for your desktop and mobile load times. If you score well in both categories, well done! You can move on to the next section. If your site didn't make the grade, you'll see a list of suggestions to help you optimize your page speed and raise your site's scores.

If you're moderately technically skilled and comfortable working with code, you may be able to make some of the suggested changes yourself. But if instructions like "remove render-blocking JavaScript" makes you feel uneasy, you may need to call in a developer to help. And if your hosting service is delivering slow response times, it may be time to transfer your site to a faster host.

Now that you're up to speed, it's time to make it easier for Google to show your content in the best possible light with schema.

Schema, Rich Results, and SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER SEVEN

Schema, Rich Results, and SEO

YOU KNOW THOSE INFO BOXES THAT POP UP at the top of your Google results when you search for the best apple pie recipe, dance events in Austin, or washi tape on sale? Those boxes, filled with ingredients, event details, or product prices and photos, are called *rich results*. They look good, they help sites rank better in search results, and they earn more clicks than non-rich results, which also boosts search engine rank. If rich snippets fill you with awe and envy, know that with the right *schema*, your site can deliver similar results.

Schema markup is HTML code that's standardized by Schema.org, a group run by the biggest search engine companies, to display specific types of content in the most useful way possible in search results. The types of content that can be coded with schema markup to deliver rich results range from news and scholarly articles to blog posts, recipes, menus, events, job postings, flights, theater groups, tourist attractions, products, and lots of other things. Does your website feature a volcano? There's a schema for that.

Most of us aren't in the volcano tourism business, but a lot of sites do feature products for sale, product reviews and ratings, recipes, and events. If you know how to code, you can include the HTML for each schema on the relevant pages of your site. Or you can use a WordPress plugin like All In One Schema Rich Snippets, which makes it easy to add markups for events, reviews, recipes, products, and a few other common schema. Once you're done, you can use Google's structured data testing tool to make sure your schema markup is error-free.

In addition to sharing all kinds of helpful information in desktop searches, schemas make mobile searches more user-friendly, too. That's critical for site owners, because as we'll see next, your site's mobile usability plays a big (and soon to be bigger) role in SEO.

Mobile-First Site Design and SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mobile-First Site Design and SEO

If you've been seeing the phrase "mobile first" as you set up your site, here's why: Google has been rolling out a mobile-first index, adding sites a few at a time, since late 2017. This change will take a while to fully implement, but when it's done, Google will prioritize mobile-friendly sites in search results. That means sites that aren't optimized for mobile users will be at a disadvantage.

Why is Google sending out the Smartphone Googlebot and reworking the way it ranks sites? It's because more than half the world's online searches are now done on mobile devices. That means most search-engine users want to find sites they can use easily on their phones, with clean design, simple navigation, and easy-to-read text.

You can make your site mobile-friendly pretty easily, whether you're building your own site and using a web hosting service or you're going with an all-in-one site builder/host. If you're setting up your own site, a quick search for WordPress themes and templates will give you hundreds of free and paid options for mobile-optimized designs. Want to use a drag-and-drop site builder instead? Look for one that has mobile-friendly tools built in.

Once your site is up and running, how do you know for sure if your site meets Google's standard for mobile usability? Enter your URL on Google's mobile-friendly test page and wait a few seconds for the tools to scan and evaluate your site. If Google says your site is mobile-friendly now, you'll have the option to submit it to for inclusion in the new mobile-first index, although it may take some time before your site is added.

Along with your test results, Google will also give you a site-wide mobile usability report with suggestions to boost your site's mobile friendliness. There's also a guide for getting started with mobile optimization that links to a basic step-by-step guide to making your WordPress site more mobile-friendly.

When you've got your mobile mojo working, you can turn your attention to another important element of SEO: your site's reputation.
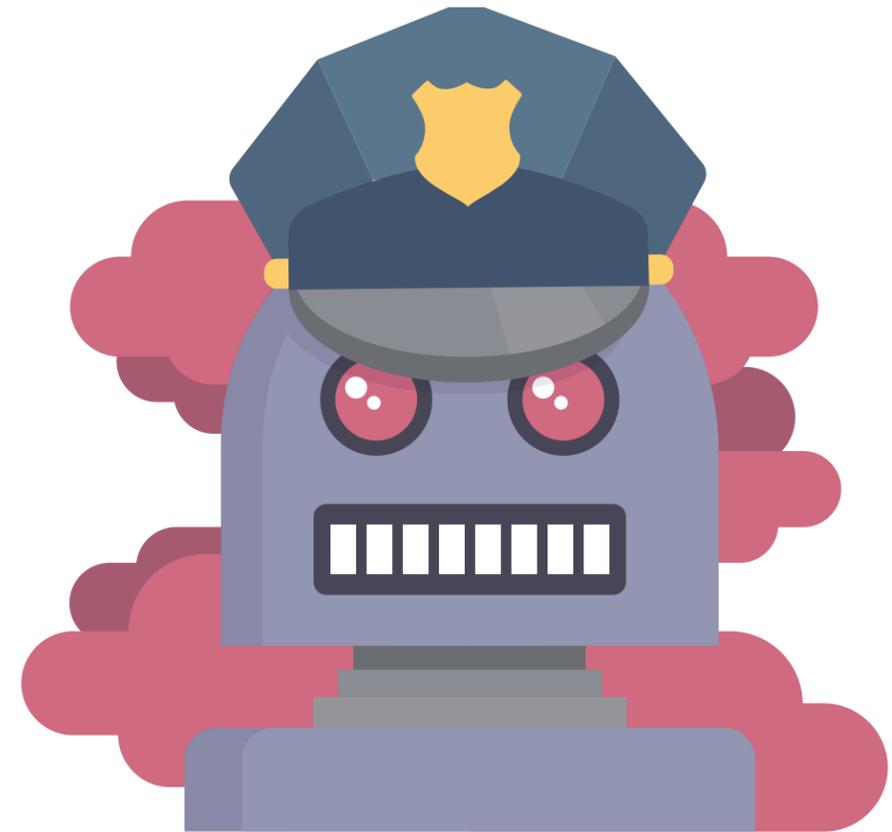
Link Building, Authority, and SEO

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER NINE

Link Building, Authority, and SEO

Your site's reputation matters, not only to your audience or customers, but also to search engines. Google wants to deliver useful, trustworthy sites for its search users, so its crawlers and algorithms give more weight to sites that seem credible and authoritative. They do that in part by looking at your site's backlinks to see who trusts your content.

A *backlink* is simply a link to your site on another site. Links that point to your site are also called *inbound links*. The more backlinks there are to your site from other high-quality sites, the more highly Google will rank your site in its search results. The best backlinks come from trusted editorial sources like news sites and popular blogs that choose to link to you in an article or blog post. These links are free publicity and help your search ranking. They're also the hardest links to earn when you're starting out, but they can and should be a long-term goal.

At the other end of the backlink quality spectrum, spammy links can harm your site's reputation and rank. For example, pasting your site's URL into dozens of unmoderated comments threads or forums can lead Google to downgrade your ranking because the quality of the backlink sources is low.

So how do you get good backlinks? You have to work for them, especially when you're just launching your site. There are entire books, sites, and industry niches devoted to the art and science of link building, but for now you can start by using these five basic link-building strategies.

1. **CREATE LINKABLE CONTENT.** This is the hardest of the strategies in this list, and it's the most valuable. Give the internet what it wants: useful, reliable information. Our vintage BMW parts seller can blog about how to do specific repairs or maintenance issues to watch for in older BMWs. That's content that other early-model BMW fans and writers are likely seek out and share, which delivers those coveted editorial links.

2. **GUEST BLOGGING.** Posting on someone else's blog doesn't deliver the same SEO punch as editorial links, but it can give you a boost and get your business a wider audience. Post only on high-quality sites and write something that your audience or industry peers will gladly use and share. Day spa etiquette might be a good topic for our hypothetical business in Madison.

3. **DIRECTORY SUBMISSIONS.** Are there a reliable business directory sites for

your niche or location? Do they review links before adding them to screen out spam? If so, submit your site information for inclusion.

4. PRESS RELEASES. When your business is up to something newsworthy, like launching, adding a location, or debuting new products, a press release can raise your profile and give you a small SEO boost if you do it right. This step by step guide can help you craft a press release that gets results.

5. LOCAL CITATIONS. If your business sells locally, claim your Google My Business listing and other local profiles (Yelp, Eater, etc.) for better performance in local search results. This post walks you through optimizing your Google My Business profile.

The most important thing to remember about link building is that it's a process. Creating good content, building relationships with potential guest blogging outlets, and crafting press releases when you've got news are habits that will serve your SEO and your business well.

Chapter

10

What's Next for Your SEO Program?

The ABC's of SEO for Brand New Businesses

CHAPTER TEN

What's Next for Your SEO Program?

W e've covered a lot of SEO basics in this guide. We hope you feel like you have a better understanding of how much SEO matters and that you feel ready to start following SEO best practices for your site.

If you want professional help to implement your SEO program and keep it up to date—and to free up more of your time to run your business—contact HostGator's SEO services for expert keyword research and reporting, on-site optimization, and content creation to boost your site's visibility and traffic.