



ePages 6

and

Search Engines

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Introduction

Making your site easy for search engines to find, search engine optimisation (SEO), and search engine marketing (SEM) are key parts of e-commerce.

In this document, we will show you how ePages is designed to work with search engines and show you what you can do to improve your ranking in the search engines. This has to do both with appearing in the search engines and with placement and weighting (for example, PageRank).

It is important to mention that some of the methods used by search engines for indexing and rating are not publicly known and change with time. The topics here therefore do not claim to be complete. The aim is to present relevant concepts and their implementation and introduce some basic things that a shop or website operator can do. However, no guarantee is provided that you will achieve a top ranking if you follow these suggestions.

We consulted a large pool of experts and attended a number of workshops with SEO specialists such as eprofessional (<http://www.eprofessional.de>), Alan Webb (<http://www.abakus-internet-marketing.de>) and consulted diverse sources about this topic (such as <http://www.suchradar.de>) to create this document.

To learn about the technical details of ePages 6, consult the Technical White paper. Further information about the administration of your shop can be found in the online Help and the corresponding user guide.

What ePages 6 offers for SEO out-of-the-box

In this introductory chapter, various SEO techniques will be discussed, most of which you as a user cannot directly influence. You can read about what you can do to optimise your shop for the search engines in the next chapter.

The URL

Session IDs often generate long chains of letters and numbers in the URL, (starting with "ID=" or "session=") and include a number of parameters (represented in the URL with question marks "?" followed by characters interspersed with ampersands "&"). These do not work well with search engines.

- » ePages 6 does not use session IDs in the URL¹.
- » In addition, the ePages 6 URL usually uses only one URL parameter.

¹ Some areas of the shop do not need to be indexed in a search engine. At times, indexing could also be undesirable, examples being the shopping basket or the My Account area. ePages 6 prevents indexing of these pages by using the `rel="nofollow"` link attribute.

The URL has been made as short as possible to make it easier for a user to understand the results a search engine displays. In order to change the link, a special "Short URL" entry field is available (6.0.6 or higher) for all products and categories (see page 9). Here are a few examples:

Home page: `http://<domain>/epages/<ShopName>.sf`

Category page: `http://<domain>/Jackets`

Product detail page: `http://<domain>/Family-Tent-XYZ`

The position of the search term in the URL and whether it is included as a parameter are both unimportant. However, the URL is clearer if the search term is included (see above). You can read about URL settings you can change beginning on page 4.

Sitemap.XML

ePages 6 (after 6.0.4) automatically creates a file called Sitemap.xml every night. The <http://www.sitemaps.org> project is sponsored by Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft—operators of the leading search engines on the internet. The existence of this structural overview on an online shop or website makes it easier for search engines to analyse the site and provides information about timeliness and the relative importance of specific pages, for example.

Keywords and tags

HTML provides for sections (tags) in a web page which are not displayed in a browser but can be evaluated by a search engine. Some are ignored by search engines because they were often misused in the past.

It is generally true that search terms should be spread over the entire page.

The TITLE tag

The TITLE tag is a very important element for SEO. It is automatically filled with the product name followed by the shop name. The detail page of the family tent from our example content has the following TITLE tag

```
<title>Eureka El Capitan IV - Milestones</title>
```

It starts with the possible search term. The company name comes afterwards. This also fulfils the requirement that every subpage has a unique TITLE tag so that the shop can be found using many different search terms.

META tags

The application supports two META tags (these start with <meta> in HTML). These have varying relevance for search engines. The short description of the product is automatically written in the description attribute:

```
<meta name="description" content="Dome tent for four persons" />
```

Search engines evaluate the DESCRIPTION tag. The ranking is most positively affected when the relevant search term is found at the start of the page and then again somewhere near the end. When the search results are displayed, the description is printed highlighted and bold if it contains the search term.

At time of writing, almost all search engines (including Google) ignore the keywords META tag:

```
<meta name="keywords" content="Camping" />
```

This may change. Other search engines (for example, MSN) evaluate this attribute. For this reason, it is possible to fill out the Keywords for search engines field in the product description. Even if Google does not use this field at the moment, it is still important for the internal product search. For example, if your product is a vacuum cleaner, you can enter Hoover as a keyword. The product will now be found by the ePages product search, although the word Hoover does not appear in the product name or in the description.

The TITLE and the META tags are found at the top of the HTML document inside the head tag.

H tags

H tags are used for headings in HTML and are important for search engines. The application uses the levels H1 to H3. Examples:

```
<h1>Eureka El Capitan IV</h1>
```

```
<h3>Link to categories » Link to tents » Link to family tents » Eureka El Capitan IV </h3>
```

The product name is automatically filled in in the H1 level. H2 contains that table with additional product attributes—primary search terms can be entered here for search engines as well. H3 contains the navigation history, meaning the path of the product within the hierarchy.

Although the entries are displayed at the top of the page in the browser, they are in the middle of the body area of the HTML text.

ALT attribute of the IMG tag

ALT attributes are used to provide more detailed descriptions of images. The product name is entered automatically here as well.

```
ALT="Eureka El Capitan IV"
```

Search engines consider ALT attributes important if the graphic is found within a link. This is so in ePages 6 as pictures of categories and products are always links. Keywords in the ALT attribute of images are assigned by Google to the target linked page and not to the page on which the images are placed.

Google PageRank

Google PageRank does not affect the order of the search results. It is a value which represents the general "importance" of the page. Primarily, the PageRank is affected by the number and quality of back-links (see External links).

What you can do

Unfortunately, ePages as a software vendor cannot perform the entire search engine optimisation for your site. There are some important aspects which can only be set by the shop owner—the most important one being of course the content. In addition, you must also consider the speed at which the search engines add new pages and update old ones. If the domain is brand new, it may take a few weeks until it is indexed.

External links

Google takes into account that your shop is part of the internet and regards how your shop is linked to other web pages. If you do not have any incoming links, Google will not find or index your "island", even if you register the URL of your home page with Google manually!

How to link

Back-links have the most important effect on your site's relevance for search engines. These are links to your shop from other web pages. These not only includes links to the home page of your shop but more importantly, links to subpages such as categories and products. Every link to your site's pages signals to the search engine that your shop contains a relevant offering and deserves a prominent place in the search results.

The link text plays an important role. If the search term is contained in the link text, the search engine assumes that the target of the link—your shop or web page—contains content which is relevant to the search term. This means that an external web page should not link to your shop like this:

```
<a href="http://<domain>/epages/ShopName>.sf/en_GB/?ObjectPath=Categories/Tents/FamilyTents">click here</a>
```

But rather like this:

```
<a href="http://<domain>/epages/ShopName>.sf/en_GB/?ObjectPath=Categories/Tents/FamilyTents">Family tents</a>
```

or:

`<a href="http://<domain>/family_tents">Family tents`

The link text is "Family tents" and forwards to the relevant category page in your shop when clicked. To pass links on, use the "Links to external" beneath the "Short URL" field.

Embedding the link in a small text message or advert is even better. These increase the relevance. The text message should include relevant content and use the required search terms. This has the advantage for the search engine that the search term and the message text are both contained in the link text and are close to each other on the page. This proximity is considered in the ranking:

Find equipment for camping holidays at Milestones. Our special offer for the month:

`<a href="http://<domain>/epages/ShopName.sf/en_GB/?ObjectPath=Categories/Tents/FamilyTents">Family tents`

Good places for links of this sort are busy forums where the content is changing constantly to stay up-to-date. These are visited often by search engines. Blogs are also good for this. However, some blogs and forums do not allow posts to contain links or use `rel="nofollow"` to bar these.

Portals which contain lists of links are less efficient. Cataloguing services such as DMOZ (<http://www.dmoz.com>) help when searching for link partners. An entry in the catalogue however does not improve rating more than any other back-link. Additional such possibilities are: <http://www.freeindex.co.uk>, <http://www.applegate.co.uk>, <http://www.yell.com> or directories for specific sectors.

When buying banners and text adverts, make sure that the link does not contain a `"ref=nofollow"` attribute (search engines are stopped here) and also that the link does not forward over an ad server or a link script. Take a look at the existing adverts of the provider (does the link in the advert point to the customer's page directly?) or, if in doubt, ask. The position of links on the page is also crucial. A link in the footer or at the bottom of a sidebar does not help as much as one higher in the content area. Convince the operator of the other page about the long-term nature of the offer—the older the link, the better. Google assumes that "older" links are more honest.

It is generally true that if you do not want to pay for all back-links and do not want to be excluded from forums because of adverts for your own shop, you must provide good reasons for voluntarily linking to your e-commerce site. Offer content other than your products or services such as information pages and specialist articles about general topics in your line of business or an archive of past newsletters. This increases the chance that other users will link to you from their pages. The search engine will then notice your increased popularity in the internet. Your creativity and sector know-how is required here. No one will simply link to your product pages without a reason. Other content-based incentives must exist to encourage this in order to receive links to informational pages. Then, at least the user will visit your site. You can find examples of how to get links like this under the term Link bait on the internet.

And: search engines regard links which are created "naturally", better.

Of course, you should use the export of your products to various product portals (for example, Pangora, Shopping.com, Google Base) that you find in your shop administration under Marketing.

Link source

The source of the link accounts for 50% of the rating. It is important who links to your pages. (Don't buy 20 million links at eBay for 19.95. That does not help and actually hinders your site!) Important is the domain from which the back-link comes. Back-links to a British shop should come from a British domain (.uk). Even if you own a .com domain, if the server is in England this will have a negative effect on the American Google index. Google works internally with the IP addresses assigned to the domains. The first three number blocks of the IP addresses must be different. Differences in the last number block (the D block) do not count: 123.456.789.xxx (You can find out the IP address of a domain by entering ping <domain> in the command prompt). Google rates multiple links that come from one domain the same as a single link. Therefore, you need as many links as possible from different domains.

Links from .edu domains have an especially positive effect. Perhaps you can sponsor them and receive links in return.

"If you link to me, I'll link to you" isn't really a worthwhile practice. One-way links are evaluated more positively than links in both directions. Use a "triangle of links" instead: A → B, B → C, and C → A.

Look at the cache date for a page where you buy a link (view with cache:URL). If the date is older than a month, it is not very valuable.

To increase the quality and number of links, you must plan in enough time. It is not likely that massive progress will be seen within a few days or weeks.

Press releases

Even if you do not know the editor of a trade journal for your sector, press releases can get the attention of bloggers and journalists. In addition to fee-based online portals for press releases, there are also free portals, although these must fulfil the requirements above as well (for example, links have to have rel="nofollow" attributes)—the press release should of course have a link to your pages. You can link to your home page, or, if it fits the text better, to one of your sub-pages. Online press portals have a relatively high page rank and are indexed often by the search engines because of their continual updates. But do not expect many visitors from press portals. Note that the same press release at multiple portals can be rated as duplicate content, which is negative. Perhaps you can change the release a little bit for each portal. Examples of online press portals (at some, registration is necessary) are:

- <http://free-press-release.com>
- <http://www.prlog.org>
- <http://www.1888pressrelease.com>

- <http://www.i-newswire.com>
- <http://www.freepressreleases.co.uk>
- <http://www.pr.com>

Link farms and other unfair methods

Google has a number of strict rules for the owners of web pages including shop owners. Link farms, link purchases, hidden links (using CSS), and doorway pages are prohibited. Although an automatic method to recognise these does not exist, competitors often report unfair methods to Google using the spam report button. Often, links to pages which have been reported like this are not evaluated. In exceptional cases (for example explicit spam pages), web sites are downgraded or even removed from the index as a punishment. Be careful when dealing with dubious "page optimisers". You should not link to a link farm yourself, of course.

Before buying expensive back-links, make sure to find out as much as possible about them, for example in SEO forums. Examples of these are:

- <http://www.seochat.com>
- <http://forums.digitalpoint.com>

Web pages which are predominantly linked to from pages with a high PageRank (>5) or demonstrate a sudden, unnatural increase in links (for example 2,000 links at once) are looked at suspiciously for "unfair methods" by the "eyes" of the search engines. In these cases, Google checks manually for possible legitimate reasons for this, such as an article on www.bbc.co.uk with a link to a previously relatively unknown page. However, if the suspicion is confirmed, the page is downgraded in the ranking as a punishment. A natural link network usually consists of a large number of pages with a low page rank and a small percentage of pages with a high page rank.

If the back-links contain identical link texts, this can also arouse suspicion. This does not happen in a natural link network—there are always variations.

Check up on it!

Check regularly to see which of your pages have been indexed by a search engine. Go to the search engine page and enter the following in the search field: `site:yourdomain`. The search results will contain all the pages in your shop (maximum 1,000) that are contained in the search engine's index. If you would like to confirm whether a specific page is in the index, you can do so using `info: URL`.

You can also check to see which external domains link to your pages and how many of these the search engine is aware of.

In Google: `link:your domain` (however, Google deliberately only includes some back-links. In the Google Webmaster tools, you can get a more detailed overview.)

For Yahoo: Use the Site Explorer (<http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/>) and enter your domain. The site explorer offers many services and filters that can be used for your domain, for example with linkdomain:www.xyz.com -site:www.xyz.com

Various SEO tools which you can use to analyze your domain can be found at: <http://www.linkvendor.com> as well as an add-on for the Firefox browser at:

- <http://www.seoquake.com>
- <http://tools.seobook.com/firefox/rank-checker/>
- <http://www.quirk.biz/searchstatus/>
- <https://addons.mozilla.org/de/firefox/addon/9022>
- <http://wordcountplus.mozdev.org/>
- <http://chrispederick.com/work/web-developer/>
- <https://addons.mozilla.org/de/firefox/addon/590>

Your own domain

It is crucial for your web site to have its own domain (<http://www.MyShop.co.uk>). The search engines are just one reason why you should do this. Ask your provider how your domain can be linked to your shop or web site.

The link to a product could then look like this:

<http://www.demosite.co.uk/ProductXYZ>

The important thing for the search engines is that the link from your domain (<http://www.demosite.co.uk>) goes to the actual URL of the platform. This should be done technically with HTTP code 301 (moved permanently). In no case should Javascript, META refresh, frame, or splash pages be used for forwarding. These are not liked by search engines. Discuss the technical details with your provider.

The forwarding of your domain <http://demosite.co.uk> to the actual home page cannot contain any changes (for example, <http://demosite.co.uk/epages/demosite.sf>). Search engines downgrade the link even if the WWW is missing.

Shop content

Something which has a large effect and is under your control is the content of your web site. Search engines appreciate change and frequency of updates. Shops which remain the same for 6 months will be ignored by the search engines. In particular, the home page and the pages linked from it should be updated regularly. Search engines reward this with more frequent visits and in-depth indexing.

Page optimisation

Individual pages (not the entire web page or shop) should be optimised for two or three search terms at the most. The search terms should constitute two to three percent of the

entire text. Although there is no maximum value, a long list of search terms looks like spam. Check which keywords your competitors that are listed before you in Google use.

Product number, name, descriptions, attributes, and keywords.

Either the product number is used in the URL (see

<http://www.demosite.co.uk/epages/Demosite.sf/?ObjectPath=Products/ProductXYZ>) or (better!)

you can use the short URL. There is another entry field for every language that contains a suggestion based upon the product name. Note that when you change this suggestion, it cannot contain any spaces, underscores, or umlauts. (The short URL is only available if your shop uses its own domain).

Make sure that the URL does not become unnecessarily long through the short URL. The total length should not be longer than 100 characters, with a maximum of 200 characters. So, if you already have a very long domain name, you must rein yourself in with the short URL.

Of course, the product name is very important as well. As mentioned above, the application automatically places the product name in the H1 tag, the TITLE tag, as well as in the ALT tag if there is an image of the product. Because Google indexes a maximum of 65 characters from the TITLE tag, you should not use too many words in product names. However, associating the product manufacturer with the product name is recommended (for example "Canon EOS 300D"). Pay attention to legal issues such as restricted trademarks, however, when using them.

The product description will appear in your shop for the search engines at least twice. Once will be a text on the category page which contains the product, and also on the product page itself in the META description tag. Search engines allow a maximum of 255 characters for this tag. However, fewer are definitely better. About 13 words has been shown to be the optimal number. However, do not only enter keywords here. This looks like spam and can discourage potential customers. Note that you have a Description field as well as a Long description field (the long description is shown as text on the product detail page). Both of these texts can and should be different, but both should be optimised for the correct search terms. Optimize your texts a maximum of 2-3 keywords per page. At the moment, Google users are looking for an average of 2.2 words per search. Use numbers as well as question marks and exclamation points ("available only for 24 hours" or "do you need cheap pencils?" or "Don't miss these pencils!")

Don't copy the texts from your competition or your vendors. If this content is older than yours in Google, then Google will recognize the duplicate content and will not index it. Also small changes are not enough. 60% is enough to be marked by Google as duplicate content. Create original content.

As mentioned above, the product attributes you assign to a product are displayed in an H2 tag. Use the ability to organise product attributes into product types (for example the "Pack size" attribute in the "Tent" product type in the demo content).

Although the Keywords for search engines are not evaluated at the moment (see previous), you can still add alternative search terms here which you do not want to use in the description. You can use misspelled or variant versions of the product's name. For the example of an umbrella: Umbrella, umbrella, parasol, umbrala. Note that the search function in ePages 6 will also inspect these keywords to help your customer to find the product he is looking for.

Remember that your customer may use the plural, alternative terms, or even misspell (for the example of a mobile phone "cellphone, cell phone, mobile fon"). You can also enter the search terms in a different order, for example: "mobile phone, phone mobile". Mark specific keywords bold in the page text. This will help search engines and customers to find them more easily.

You can use the search statistics (in the **Products** menu) to analyse the search behaviour of your customers in the shop. There you can see which search terms were used and how many hits were generated. If search terms occur very often without results, you should revise your descriptions.

Another tip: Yahoo! Search, Google AdWords, and several fee-based services have keyword databases. There you can get an overview of how often specific keywords are used. Another good service is: <http://www.keywordspy.com>.

Delete products?

A URL which has been indexed by Google should never disappear! If this is a product that you can no longer deliver, label it as "Not available". To do so, set the attribute **For sale on** the **General** tab on the product detail page of the product in the **Description** section to **no**. This will remove the link **Add to shopping basket**. Because you will surely have alternative or next-generation products, note and link to that product in the product description.

Do not forget the category entries

The examples of the previous chapter apply to products, but the same is true for categories.

Every category has an ID (Alias), a name, a description, and a long description. You can also provide keywords for categories. Always upload an image for each category. Not only does it look better, it also provides search engines with an additional ALT tag.

Do not use abbreviations for category names. Avoid abbreviations such as "Heavy Mach. and Equip.". Use the full name instead ("Heavy Machinery and Equipment").

Category depth

You have surely thought about the structure of your pages. Make it easy for your users and the search engines by not using many sublevels. No search engine will go deeper than 6 levels.

The higher in the hierarchy the indexed pages are, the better.

Videos

Product videos are becoming more and more common for marketing. In order for Google to "see" this video, you can create a site map for it. Place it in your Google webmaster area. Google video search will then find your product videos under the key words provided. Repeat this with other portals such as AOL, MSN, and Yahoo.

Include informational pages

Remember that a shop should include more than categories and products. Inform your customers by using a blog (it would be best if the boss blogs himself) and use freely-designable pages and content pages to inform your customers about news in your sector, attract interest with product usage information, and provide handbooks, past newsletters, and press releases as well. A "frequently asked questions" (FAQ) section should contain useful tips about your services and shop usage. For everything on your site: Update regularly, at least three times a week! And remember: Even PDF, Word, and PowerPoint documents are recognised and indexed by Google and other search engines. So use the function which allows you to upload file attachments for your products. Note, however, that Google often ranks PDF documents higher. Since you would like your product pages at the front, not every PDF must appear in the index.

The copyright trick

A copyright notice is usually displayed at the foot of the web page. The system includes defined page elements which you can place in the footer. You can add a search term for the entire shop as the contents of a navigation element next to the copyright notice. The search engine will always see this at the foot of the page. For example:

Copyright Demo Site Ltd—We have everything you need

To create additional internal links, you can also link the copyright notice to the shop home page or to a prominent content page (see the next chapter).

Internal linking

Google increases the ranking if internal linking is used. Internal linking increases the keyword density and web pages further away from the home page are detected more reliably and visited more often. You can link between pages in numerous ways.

Normally, a product should always be assigned to at least one category. You can create products without categories, but an "island" like this is not good. Use cross-selling and also link from the blog or forum you are operating from the shop. Each page should be linked to internally at least eight times.

Navigation history

When a user navigates through your pages, the current path is always displayed at the top of the page (for example: Categories » Tents » Family tents » Eureka El Capitan IV). The higher levels

are links for quick navigation. That also helps the search engines. The navigation history is created automatically and coded in the HTML text in an H3 tag (see page 3).

Cross-selling

The application offers multiple possibilities for cross-selling (using links to similar, higher-value, or accessory products). You can also use automatic cross-selling ("Customers which bought this product also bought..."). The search engines use these links as well to analyze contextual connections and contexts.

You can and should also link to other categories. To do so, use the description or the long description of the category or the Link element. For example, there are two ways to link from the Tents category to the Equipment category. The first way is to generate a link element in the Tents category and enter the web page:

?ObjectPath=/Shops/DemoShop/Categories/Equipment

You can find the correct link by opening the category page in your shop and copying the URL. You only need to use the part after the question mark.

The other way would be to open the WYSIWYG editor for the category description and add the example text "Get great deals on equipment as well." Then select the word "equipment" and click the "Add/edit link" icon in the text editor. Enter the URL mentioned above as the link.

Logo

Usually a logo is displayed in the header. Here, the shop or web site name is used in the ALT tag (see page 3). You should create the logo with a link to the shop home page. The application automatically links the logo to the home page. If you would like this to be another page, you can change this in the Quick design area. Move the mouse over the logo and click on the pencil icon.

Loading speed

Google now pays attention to the loading time of pages and uses it as part of the ranking. So make sure you use the cache feature (Settings >> General settings >> Page cache). More information about this is available in the online help as well as at <http://www.epages.com/en/blog/index.php/2008/05/09/increase-online-shop-performance/#more-64>.

Summary

Search engine optimisation is a very complex and confusing topic. You can find many books and articles about it in book stores or on the internet. Therefore, only a few basic principles of SEO as well as more specific things you can apply to ePages 6 shops have

been discussed here. Nothing is better than a detailed analysis. SEO is a continuous process.

Operators must do their part to optimise their site for search engines. ePages will of course continue to apply our experience and that of experts and partners to provide you with constantly-improving SEO techniques. We are grateful for any tips, suggestions, or experiences you would like to share. Please send them to pm@epages.com).

More information

Reports to analyse linking of web pages: <http://www.seomoz.org/linkscape> or <http://www.urltrends.com/>

Studies about AdWords and search results (Google):
<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>.

Semantic analysis: <http://www.latentsemanticoptimization.com>