

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

# Optimize Your Website Content

## How to Drive Traffic to Your Website through Social Media—the Fundamentals

by David M. Freedman

**Y**ou invested time and money to develop your website. Now you need to help people find it. Specifically, you want to help your clients, prospects, and referral sources find it, and perhaps potential employees, the media, and other key audiences as well.

One of the best ways to help them is to put your website URL on your business card, hand them the card, look them in the eye, and say, “Please visit my website. There you’ll find the information you need—and call me if you have any questions.” Besides your business card, you can distribute article reprints and other useful literature, or even novelty items like pens and calendars, that bear your name and URL.

Another way to publicize your site is to send e-mail to your key audiences to alert them that you have a new website, or you have posted new or updated information that will help them succeed. Your e-mail message includes a hyperlink to the page of your site that bears this new information. Once they’re on that page, they have an opportunity to click through to your home page, and ultimately your contact info.

A third way to help key audiences find your site is Web optimization. That is what this article is about. Optimization involves helping audiences find your website through search engines and social media.

### J-LEVEL CONTENT

First you must create and post the information people need, so you can

refer them to it. There are at least two categories of information, or content, that websites provide. One is information about you and your firm: the services you offer, credentials of the firm’s professionals, clients or industries served, contact information, success stories, press releases, and “about us.”

The other category is what I call journalism-level content. It includes articles and white papers published under your byline, blogs, newsletters, transcripts and podcasts of your speeches, how-to information that helps clients succeed, and links to other Internet resources. In this article I will focus on optimizing J-level content.

Three good examples of sites that offer J-level content are:

- Mercer Capital’s ([www.mercercapital.com](http://www.mercercapital.com)) Knowledge Center, accessed via a top-level navigation tab.
- Michael Goldman Associates ([www.michaelgoldman.com/articles.htm](http://www.michaelgoldman.com/articles.htm)) features published, bylined articles in six categories, including fraud and valuation.
- The Grant Thornton website ([www.grantthornton.com](http://www.grantthornton.com)) features the Grant Thornton Thinking center, accessed through a top-level navigation tab, which offers newsletters, podcasts, white papers, reports, and other J-level content.

By the way, I found many financial advisory firms’ websites that provide long, chronological lists of their bylined articles, white papers, and PowerPoint presentations. To help visitors find the information they need, the lists should instead (or in addition) be organized by subject category, rather than date of publication.

### SEARCH ENGINES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The broad objective of Web optimization is to generate traffic to your website content. It involves two activities: search engine optimization and social media optimization. The narrow objective of search engine optimization (SEO) is to get your article ranked high in search engine results so that people find it quickly when they search for information on the topic. SEO is something you do once when you post an article to your website; it is not necessarily an ongoing process, although you might have occasion to tweak your SEO strategy. Social media optimization (SMO), on the other hand, is an ongoing process over weeks or months after new content is published on your website. The narrow objective of SMO is to spread the word “virally” through various online communities that your article has been posted, tell how it can help people who read it (its benefits), and provide a hyperlink to it.

### SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Each page of your website, including your bylined articles, should be optimized for search engine ranking. Search engines

rank J-level content primarily on the basis of (a) its relevance to the search terms, (b) its popularity in terms of visitor traffic and inbound links, (c) relevant outbound links, (d) the amount and depth of related information featured elsewhere on your site, (e) how often and how recently the content has been updated, and (f) the metatags (hidden HTML code that contains the article's title, description, and keywords) on the page, among other criteria.

Search engines love content that is narrowly focused. For example, a CPA friend of mine wrote an article on generation-skipping tax strategies for estate planners, got it published in a local weekly newspaper, and then posted it on his website (acknowledging the original publisher as an indication that the article was credible enough to get published). He updated the article whenever the tax law changed. The title of the article included the phrase "generation-skipping tax strategies." He wrote descriptive metatags that included the phrase "estate planning." And that was the extent of his SEO efforts. The article was very well written and practical, so it pulled in some traffic and a few inbound links. His website featured dozens of other articles that had been published, a few of which mentioned generation-skipping strategies. A couple years ago, before he retired, if you searched "generation skipping tax strategies" on Google, his article was ranked number one—it appeared at the very top of the first page of search results. If you searched for "Chicago accountant estate tax," or any other broad term, no page of his website would be ranked anywhere near the first dozen pages of search results. The lesson: a narrower focus generally improves ranking.

SEO is very important for companies that conduct business primarily online, such as e-commerce, commercial portals, and subscription-based news media and research sites. For those companies, SEO requires an understanding of search bots, ranking algorithms, key-word density, and

other complexities. But for advisers and consultants whose business is primarily people-to-people, SEO should be a lot simpler—hiring an SEO consultant would probably be overkill.

One hard and fast rule for optimizing J-level content: Write for your target readers, not for search engines. Readers must appreciate your content, and thereby consider you credible, or else optimization fails.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Internet technology developed mostly after the 2000 tech bubble made it not just possible, but easy and cheap (often free), for non-tech users to contribute (or "generate") content to various kinds of websites. Blogging sites, for example, let you post, comment, and discuss with other bloggers and commenters. Social networks let members post profiles and all manner of personal and business-oriented content. Anyone can write and edit entries for Wikipedia, or post book reviews on Amazon.com. Wikis and forums let groups collaborate on content creation. You can upload your photos to Flickr and your short videos to YouTube. You can rate, share, recommend, tag, and socially bookmark the content that others create.

In the early days of the World Wide Web, content flowed mainly one way: from websites to users. Now content flows every which way and back again—it's a conversation. Around the middle of this decade, the new Internet became known variously as the user-generated web, the social web, and Web 2.0.

Mainstream news and entertainment media have become increasingly social in the past few years. CNN's iReport and Fox's UReport led the way, letting "citizen journalists" post news stories on their sites, and of course allowed other users to comment, rate, share, etc.

As of mid-2008, more people depend on the Internet for news and entertainment than on any other medium, according to comScore. From a public relations

standpoint, it's no longer a question of whether your clients, prospects, referral sources, colleagues, employees, and job applicants are engaging with social media. It's a question of how you find them, appeal to them, and engage them via social media—whether they are at a desk, on the road, walking the dog, or almost anywhere else.

## SOCIAL MEDIA OPTIMIZATION

SMO is a set of methods for attracting visitors to website content by promoting and publicizing it through social media. SMO is a subset of social media marketing, which is promoting and publicizing all kinds of products and services, not just Web content, through social media.<sup>1</sup>

There are two kinds of SMO methods:

- Social media features that you "plug into" your website content, including RSS feeds, commenting fields (a function of WordPress and other CMS<sup>2</sup> software); and tools for sharing (ShareThis), rating (Digg), social bookmarking (Delicious), and polling (ConstantContact and ZapSurvey).
- Promotional activities in social media, including writing a blog, commenting on other blogs and news sites, participating in discussion groups, and posting status updates on social networking profiles.

Except for the cost of hosting your website, you can find plug-ins and services that let you do all those promotional activities free of charge. But don't be fooled by the word "free." Occasionally I hear someone say that SMO is extremely cost-effective because it's free, in the same way that I've heard it said that public relations is better than advertising because it's free. Not really. Effective SMO, like effective PR, requires time (which is, of course, money) and media relations skills that you don't acquire overnight. There are two components to cost-effectiveness: cost and effectiveness. Just because a technique is low-cost (or even

<sup>1</sup> This definition appears in the Wikipedia entry for "social media optimization" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media\\_optimization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media_optimization)). I don't think I am infringing on Wikipedia's copyright, as I am the original author of this definition.

<sup>2</sup> Content management systems (CMS) let you build dynamic websites (typically based on PHP programming language and SQL database) with a dashboard or "back end" that non-technical authors can use to design and build pages, and create and update content.

no-cost) doesn't guarantee that it's effective; first you need to learn the skills and spend the time required to make it effective.

### SMO METHODS

There are many ways to use social media to spread the word virally about your article. You probably won't have time to exploit all of them, so select a few that you feel most comfortable with, among the following:

- Join a professional network like LinkedIn or Plaxo, or a social network like Facebook (if that's where many of your clients, prospects, and referral sources hang out). Post a status update about your new content, providing a hyperlink to that page of your website. Post a status update every time you update content too.
- Join discussion groups in which your key audiences participate. Follow the discussions, and when you have some ideas or information to contribute, join in. Mention your website content, with a link to it, if it adds value to the discussion—not in an overtly promotional manner.<sup>3</sup> (LinkedIn and Facebook have tens of thousands of niche discussion groups and sub-groups. If you can't find one in your practice or industry area, you can start one.)
- Participate in LinkedIn's "Answers" feature. Any member can post a business-related question, and other members who work in a related field may answer the question publicly. Your answer may refer to, and link to, your own website content. The original question asker may select one of the answers as a "Best Answer," which wins acclaim for the person who posted that answer.
- Read blogs in your industry, field, or practice niche, and post a comment (in response to the original blog entry or to another comment) whenever you have some constructive ideas or criticism, or to correct a factual mistake. Mention

your content (with hyperlink) if it helps to illuminate the subject.

- If you write your own blog, post a summary of any new content that you add to your website. Link to your content whenever you post a blog entry on a related topic.
- Write or edit entries on Wikipedia, quoting from and citing your content if it is relevant.

If your content requires updating from time to time, do so assiduously—do not ever let it become obsolete or inaccurate, or you'll shoot your credibility. Add a note under the title that shows the date on which the article was updated. If the update is substantial, optimize it again.

Always, always, proofread your posts, comments, status updates, and answers before you press "send" or "upload." Keep your comments discreet—assume they will be read by clients, colleagues, partners, judges, and your parents. In some cases you are allowed to edit or clarify a comment after you send it, but not always. And in many cases, your comments are fixed forever—you can never take them back, and they will appear if someone searches your name.

### TRACKING AND ANALYTICS

To some extent you can measure the response from social media participation, using both human and electronic tracking systems and analytics. As in traditional marketing, ask clients, prospects, and other inquirers what prompted them to contact you, and how they found your website. Electronic tracking and analytics may have an aura of accuracy and certainty, but still leave a lot of room for interpretation. It's difficult to measure the improvement in name recognition and reputation that do not get measured by clicks, page visits, and responses.

But to the extent that you can analyze response to your SEO and SMO efforts, adjust your strategies (and topics for future content) accordingly.

Anyone with strong writing and PR skills

can do Web optimization effectively. If you do not have those skills on staff, you can hire a freelance journalist, editor, ghostwriter, media relations consultant, or PR professional. One final tip: not all journalists have expertise in optimization, and not all media PR pros are good journalism-level writers. So if you need help, be sure you hire an individual or firm with that broad range of expertise. **VE**

### Social Media Engagement Must Be Authentic

Your comments and contributions to online discussions should be authentic and sincere. Don't pretend to be someone you're not.

A few years ago, Whole Foods and Wal-Mart were pilloried in the blogosphere and business press for publishing disingenuous content online.

Over a period of a few years ending in 2006, Whole Foods CEO John Mackey wrote messages on financial discussion boards (including Yahoo! Finance) in which he disguised his identity and praised Whole Foods, and sometimes bashed its competitors. That may not have violated U.S. securities laws (the SEC probed it), but it created a serious public relations challenge for Whole Foods.

In 2006, a *Business Week* article revealed that a popular travel blog featuring a couple called Laura and Jim, who traveled the country by RV and camped in Wal-Mart parking lots (with a strong pro-Wal-Mart editorial slant), was funded by Wal-Mart through its PR firm Edelman. Embarrassing at best.

The lesson: Be authentic in blogs and online discussions (oh, and everywhere else). Such is the community-intensive nature of social media that your attempt to deceive may result in a blogstorm of reproach.

*David M. Freedman is the senior editor of The Value Examiner. He has worked as a financial, legal, and technology journalist since 1978. He reviews books about finance and economics on his blog, For Your Reading Pleasure: [www.4yrp.com/finance](http://www.4yrp.com/finance).*

<sup>3</sup> Network members tolerate a moderate amount of promotional messages if you are also contributing valuable information or insights to the discussion. But too much self-serving blather will earn you a bad rep very quickly and widely.