Best Practices in Search Engine Marketing and Optimization: The Case of the St. James Hotel

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Abstract
The website redesign for the St. James Hotel in Red Wing, Minnesota, provides a test case for the best practices relating to website optimization for search engine marketing, using Google search as an example. The goal of search engine optimization is to ensure that a hotel’s website appears at or near the top of search engine results pages—in the area sometimes called the Golden Triangle. Although the case focuses on Google, the principles are similar for all search engines and meta-search engines. Search engine optimization is based on the idea of making sure that your hotel’s site appears near the top of the listing when a would-be guest types a keyword query into the search engine. The goal of search engine algorithms is to present the most relevant pages for each query. To make sure that your pages are included in the “relevant” group, your website must include a logical presentation of appropriate keywords on each page. Tags for page headings and photographs should align with keywords for each page’s topic. By including a site diagram, a hotel can assist Google’s web crawlers in locating and indexing all pages on a website. Further authority is added when outside agencies link into a page and when a hotel is listed on the webpages of local tourism agencies. Finally, a hotel can purchase keywords or position on the search results page, in a section clearly labeled as sponsored results. This area does receive users’ attention, but not as much as the “organic” search results do.

Keywords
hotels, search engine optimization, website design

Disciplines
Business | Hospitality Administration and Management

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Cornell Hospitality Report
Vol. 10, No. 16, November 2010

by Greg Bodenlos, Victor Bogert, Dan Gordon, Carter Hearne, and Chris K. Anderson, Ph.D.
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Cornell Hospitality Reports,
Vol. 10, No. 16 (November 2010)

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Cornell Hospitality Report is produced for the benefit of the hospitality industry by The Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University

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by Greg Bodenlos, Victor Bogert, Dan Gordon, Carter Hearne, and Chris K. Anderson

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The website redesign for the St. James Hotel in Red Wing, Minnesota, provides a test case for the best practices relating to website optimization for search engine marketing, using Google search as an example. The goal of search engine optimization is to ensure that a hotel’s website appears at or near the top of search engine results pages—in the area sometimes called the Golden Triangle. Although the case focuses on Google, the principles are similar for all search engines and meta-search engines. Search engine optimization is based on the idea of making sure that your hotel’s site appears near the top of the listing when a would-be guest types a keyword query into the search engine. The goal of search engine algorithms is to present the most relevant pages for each query. To make sure that your pages are included in the “relevant” group, your website must include a logical presentation of appropriate keywords on each page. Tags for page headings and photographs should align with keywords for each page’s topic. By including a site diagram, a hotel can assist Google’s web crawlers in locating and indexing all pages on a website. Further authority is added when outside agencies link into a page and when a hotel is listed on the webpages of local tourism agencies. Finally, a hotel can purchase keywords or position on the search results page, in a section clearly labeled as sponsored results. This area does receive users’ attention, but not as much as the “organic” search results do.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Greg Bodenlos joined the Fairmont Hotels & Resorts family as manager of internet marketing for The Fairmont Southampton in Bermuda. While at Cornell, Greg was president of the HSMAI Collegiate Chapter, director of student affairs for the Cornell Hotel Society, Collegiate Chapter (CHS), and also supported two core curriculum classes as a teaching assistant. Greg has also worked at Mandarin Oriental, New York, the Hilton Fort Lauderdale Marina, and the Professional Development Program at Cornell University, in a variety of roles.

Victor Bogert is a recent graduate of the School of Hotel Administration hailing from Toronto, Ontario. During his time at Cornell University, Victor concentrated in revenue management. From his current base in Hoboken, New Jersey, he works for the IT Finance group of HSBC’s investment banking arm.

Daniel Gordon holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. He currently works in New York City for Morgans Hotel Group as a revenue management analyst for the northeast region. His expertise also includes social media marketing, search engine optimization, and the application of revenue management to other industries.

Carter Hearne moved from her hometown of Greenwich, Connecticut, to West Hollywood and joined the Expedia Inc California team as one of two Los Angeles Market Managers. In her new role she works with mid-scale hotel properties to identify areas of opportunity for revenue growth and otherwise remains an active member of HSMAI and CHS.

Chris K. Anderson, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration (ckaan@cornell.edu). Formerly on faculty at the Ivey School of Business in London, Ontario, his main research focus is on revenue management and service pricing. He actively works with numerous industry types in the application and development of RM, having worked with a variety hotels, airlines, rental car, and tour companies as well as numerous consumer packaged good and financial services firms. He serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Revenue and Pricing Management and is the regional editor for the International Journal of Revenue Management.
The St. James Hotel in Red Wing, Minnesota, is an independent 63-room hotel with a downtown location and a view of the Mississippi River. Although the St. James is a member of the Historic Hotels of America and is owned by the Red Wing Shoe Company, it lacks a large marketing budget. As I explain in this case study, a property like the St. James can make use of the web to market itself to a large pool of potential guests through strategic applications of search engine marketing (SEM) and search engine optimization (SEO). Typical of the hotel industry, the St. James is by no means the only hotel that seeks to deploy this approach, because it is inexpensive to implement and can help drive measurable direct bookings. Thus, to be competitive on this virtual field, hotel marketers must have a clear understanding of how to apply both search engine marketing and its subset, search engine optimization. In this report, I explain the tactics involved in maintaining a dynamic and competitive search engine marketing stance. This case involves Google search, but the principles are the same for other search engines, online travel agents, and meta-search engines.
The main goal of search engine marketing and optimization is to increase visibility of your webpage, which will increase click-through and drive direct bookings. This requires an understanding of Google's search mechanisms. Using a proprietary algorithm Google ranks websites based on their relevance to specific search queries. Because Google wants to return useful search results, it lists webpages containing the keywords most relevant to the words in the original query. Thus, if the user types in “Minnesota hotel,” Google will look for webpages containing those words. Since Google is looking for relevance, you want your website to be most relevant to the specific keywords that the user is searching for—which involves more than just using the keywords in the text.

Google shows its webpage hits in two lists, unpaid “organic” hits on the left and paid listings on the right. (There is also a paid section above the organic list.) Based on eye-scanning studies, Exhibit 1 shows where the user actually looks when they are viewing a Google search results page. The eye-scanning technology shows the brightest color where users’ eyes land on a page. Basically, if your link does not appear near the top of the first page of a Google search results page, nobody will see it. You want your link to appear at or near the top of the organic search listings on the left, or at the top of paid search results on the right hand side of the screen. This is the “Golden Triangle,” a term marketers use to describe this phenomenon of where Google users look when they view a search results page. To improve your position on the left side, in the organic search results, you can apply SEO, as I explain in this case. I’ll also discuss the considerations that apply to the other critical area of the search results page, the paid search results.

Your Ticket to the Golden Triangle
To appear in the “Golden Triangle,” you need to focus on the correct website keywords and proper “promotion” of your website, both on the site and off site. Let’s first
Finding Keywords

To determine appropriate keywords, you can use two tools, Google Adwords Keyword Tool and SEO Digger. Google’s keyword tool is effective at determining search demand for specific keywords, as shown in Exhibit 2. The tool provides information on keywords related to either a URL or, in this case, the keyword phrase “red wing hotels.” Exhibit 3 shows this same information exported to Excel.
Competitors are also seeking hot keywords, and Google indicates how intense competition is for particular keywords, as well as provides data on the number of searches (monthly) for these keywords. SEO Digger (Exhibit 4) is useful for finding out which keywords drive traffic to a specific website. This allows you to analyze not only the keywords that link users to your website, but also the keywords that link users to your competitor’s websites.

### On-Site Promotion

On-site promotion is about making sure that your website communicates a clear message about your property and uses keywords that consumers are searching for.

**Alt-tags.** Alt-tags are an example of meta-data that users are not likely to see unless they delve into your page’s source code. In brief, these tags provide a description of pictures on your site. Google’s crawler will be able to “read” the pictures as relevant, even if they fail to load, based on the text you use to identify the pictures in the source code. Google’s algorithm puts a high value on using keywords in the alt-tags that make the photos highly relevant to the webpage where they appear.

**URLs and title tags.** The best approach to page URLs is to keep them organized in clear directory-like paths, as such organization enhances crawler content recognition and more easily describes a preview to site users. Title tags are what appear at the top of your browser as the main title description of any specific website. Since these are visible to site users it is best to find a balance of page content-specific material and relevant keywords in their composition. Common practice is to keep these uniquely representative of each specific page while still representing your brand—and keeping the content to less than 160 characters.

**Body content.** It is important to optimize your website’s body content because this is the text that the user actually sees. Google wants to see that the text on any particular page in your website is relevant to what that particular page is all about. Best practices indicate that 3 to 5 percent of the words in your body content should be “keywords” relevant to the page’s content.

**Site map.** A logical sitemap assists greatly with search engine optimization. An HTML sitemap, which should appear on your webpage, is essentially a range of relevant links, which is useful to both the potential customer and
to Google’s crawlers. The crawlers will recognize the sitemap and use it as a guide to travel through all of the links. Properly executed, this increases the chance that all of your relevant web pages will be indexed and available for a Google search.

You would be astounded at how much of a difference the presence or absence of a sitemap makes to Google’s PageRank. Even if you have a relevant “authority” linking to one page of your website, that does not mean that all pages are linked, or that they will all show up on a Google search—the crawlers have to find them first. This is especially crucial because the products that a marketer would like to sell should be logically separated into disparate components to increase relevance, even if Google’s crawlers index them. Indeed, one way to catch the attention of Google's crawlers is to create an updated site map. You can submit a newly created sitemap to Google using “Webmaster Tools.” Such an approach may overcome one of the problems with Google’s algorithms. If your website is not popular to begin with, Google is likely to index your information less frequently than it does a heavy-traffic page.

**Off-Site Promotion**

**Inbound links.** Google puts considerable weight on “authority,” based on the number and type of webpages that link into yours. Relatively unrelated linking pages and outbound links do not carry this authority. Thus, to drive Google’s crawlers to your webpage you should limit the outward or reciprocal links that a webpage has to external sources, especially if they are not highly relevant to the content on your page. Just as the crawlers follow the links into your webpage with a sitemap, they will follow the links outward on your outbound links. Realizing that some outbound links are necessary out of courtesy to your customers, efforts should be made to ensure that outbound links have a reciprocal link inward as well, resulting in a mutually beneficial scenario.

**Google Local.** Google Local listings quite often appear at the top of the page during a keyword search or a search using Google maps. Exhibit 5 shows the search results for a Google search—the crawlers have to find them first. This is especially crucial because the products that a marketer would like to sell should be logically separated into disparate components to increase relevance, even if Google’s crawlers index them. Indeed, one way to catch the attention of Google's crawlers is to create an updated site map. You can submit a newly created sitemap to Google using “Webmaster Tools.” Such an approach may overcome one of the problems with Google’s algorithms. If your website is not popular to begin with, Google is likely to index your information less frequently than it does a heavy-traffic page.

**Paid Search versus Organic Search**

Next, let’s look at paid search, primarily found on the right side of the Golden Triangle, but also in a special paid section on the left part of the page. Paid search should be used for the following situations:

- Building awareness of special offers,
- Seeking short term revenues,
- Marketing during a specific timeframe,
Rolling out a new URL or website, and Ensuring complete control of the listing.

Unlike organic search, paid search offers more controlled and customized results. A paid search strategy focuses tightly on keywords, which are organized by theme. You need to define key buckets of keywords, and create an Adgroup based on this structure. Most campaigns will consist of geo-target locations, niche groups, or specific events.

A key goal is to make sure Adgroup, key-words in the group, and ad copy are all matching and pertinent to one another. In addition to identifying positive keywords, Google's ads also allow you to formulate lists of negative keywords—which are words and descriptions that you do not want associated with your website, such as “cheap” for a luxury hotel. When a user specifies a keyword that you have specified as negative your site does not appear.

Paid search strategy also entails the determination of the prices to pay or bids for keywords. Google employs a second-price auction, where if you “win” you pay the price stated by the second highest bidder. Essentially you pay the price that the ad placed below you bid. In the context of paid search, typically the more you pay the higher your position in the list of ads. As you might expect, the dynamics of keyword bidding are nonlinear, as a function of this second-price auction.

Here’s how this strategy works. Typically the click-through rate (CTR), or the percentage of time your displayed ad is clicked, increases with your bid. However, the CTR approaches a maximum, because at some point your placement on the list stops changing. Similarly, your cost-per-click (CPC) will increase faster with your rising bid but then CPC also will level off. The problem is that conversion rates (CR), that is, the percentage of ad clicks which convert to a sale, tend to decrease with your bid (as shown in Exhibit 7). This is because those who are interested in booking a room at your hotel usually look for your property regardless of where it is positioned in the list. As you bid higher (and
your listing appears higher on the list), your ad is seen by more people who are less predisposed to purchase from you. As a result of this we see a decrease in expected return in bid values.

If you think about your expected return per booking (on a per-impression basis) as:

\[
\frac{\text{CTR} \times \text{CR} \times \text{Margin} - \text{CTR} \times \text{CPC}}{\text{CTR} \times \text{CR}}
\]

where CTR*CR are your converted bookings at some average margin, with CTR*CPC as your total cost then divided by your number of bookings CTR*CR. Again as shown in Exhibit 7, this return probably steadily decreases as you increase your bid. At some point the return becomes negative.

As a firm you will need to manage a portfolio of keywords and campaigns. These bidding dynamics are further complicated because Google does not simply employ a bid-for-position approach but rather one which maximizes its return. Consequently, similar to organic search, the results page that your ad lands on has a ranking or quality, and Google combines this ranking with your bid. Google’s goal is to display ads with high CTRs, as their revenue is CTR*CPC.

Conversion: The Click Behind the Mask
The point of all this activity is to drive consumer traffic to your site and, more critically, convert those clicks to reservations. Conversion is greatly facilitated by use of a booking
mask, which is a portal that a potential customer can use to book a room at any point in the research process (see Exhibit 8). The user doesn’t have to click a separate reservations tab and get linked off the page. Instead, the booking mask is always at hand, allowing a user to book on any page at any point in time. For example, if you are on the Romantic Getaway package page, that is when you are hooked and that is when you are going to want to book. If you can look at the packages’ features and can book the reservation simultaneously, you are much more likely to actually convert than if you are forced to click off the page and then don’t have all the information that is included in the package right in front of you. Milestone Internet Marketing has found that adding a booking mask will increase conversions about 15 to 20 percent.

The St. James Hotel—A Case Study

With that background, let’s return to Red Wing and the St. James Hotel. The property’s management was interested in re-evaluating their SEO initiatives after the launch of their updated website. To get a better feel for the St. James and meet their management team, our Cornell student team traveled to Red Wing in mid-March 2010. Opened in 1875 and owned by the Red Wing Shoe Company, the St. James has stayed true to its roots and is truly a unique historical landmark in the town of Red Wing. Located about a block from the Mississippi and the train station, it is also home to a variety of restaurants frequented by guests and locals alike, including the Port and Jimmy’s Pub.

In discussions with the management team, it became clear that the original website had been modified to be search-friendly but much of that work was lost in the re-launch. Our impressions of the new site were that we liked the aesthetic design and social media efforts but saw room for improvement with coding and off-page promotions. We identified groups of travelers who would be potential targets of a pay-per-click campaign (such as a motorcycle group which travels through Red Wing annually). The management team was extremely enthusiastic to act as a sounding board for keywords to be used in developing site content.

In discussions with the management team, it became clear that the original website had been modified to be search-friendly but much of that work was lost in the re-launch. Our impressions of the new site were that we liked the aesthetic design and social media efforts but saw room for improvement with coding and off-page promotions. We identified groups of travelers who would be potential targets of a pay-per-click campaign (such as a motorcycle group which travels through Red Wing annually). The management team was extremely enthusiastic to act as a sounding board for keywords to be used in developing site content.

The St. James Hotel desired the following three outcomes from this project: (1) to optimize its online marketing initiatives for the property using proven best practices, (2) to provide analysis on the St. James’s competitive set and develop performance benchmarking index recommendations, and (3) to use paid and organic search and advertising methods to drive relevant traffic to the website and increase conversions. The following is an account of the SEO action plan recommendations and techniques we utilized for the St. James project.

Implementation

We began implementing changes to the St. James’s website in coordination with their on-site IT staff. Our St. James IT contact granted us direct access to the website content managers for the St. James’ various websites to change html code after our initial visit. To implement the changes, we used Adobe Dreamweaver to make a local copy of St-James-Hotel.com and cascaded the changed web pages on the website. This was a good learning experience for all hands, since Dreamweaver was unfamiliar and our team also was new to html coding. We read up on various websites and in-software help guides to figure out the proper technique for updating the website.

SEO Campaign Action Plan

In conjunction with this code optimization, we set out to achieve four additional SEO-based enhancements for the St. James web initiatives. Those are: (1) develop a site map, (2) add content to the home page, (3) logically regroup package information, and (4) explore off-site promotions.

Develop a site map. By posting a site map, pages on your site that search engine crawlers cannot find are made accessible (see Exhibit 9). Adding this “table of contents” feature allot’s more site space for relevant content. Along with that improvement, we recommended a booking mask, which turns “lookers into bookers,” as the saying goes.

Add content to the home page. We also used keywords from our research to update homepage title tags and alt-tags—increasing searchability and relevance. We started
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modified our recommendation by categorizing the package deals by relevant keyword search terms (e.g., romance, wine and dine) so they can be more easily searched. We also recommended including additional elements of flash to convey a story or fresh social media content such as Flickr or reviews on these specific pages.

**Explore off-site promotions.** Local listings and directories are often aggregators of information that online searchers use to find out more about a product in the market. If your hotel is listed in these directories, search engines will determine that your page is more relevant. At the onset of the project, the St. James needed to add more content to its local listing as well as enhance its Google Local Business Center Listing. Accordingly, we suggested enhancing the listing with additional content, including videos, coupons, special offers to be submitted directly to Google, and links to online coupon sites.

Moreover, we recommended that the hotel work with additional local promotion outlets to improve the St. James’s web-based marketing initiatives. While we were not able to execute these suggestions due to time constraints, we left the property’s management team with the suggestions to collect e-mail addresses through promotions such as “E-Mail to-a-Friend,” as well as use Access for organizing potential future data mining and business intelligence efforts. Finally, local websites, LinkPopularity.com, and the websites of the local Convention Visitors Bureau and Chambers of Commerce all are additional sources that could provide more visibility for the St. James.

**Ten Lessons From the Golden Triangle**

Upon completion of this study, we left the St. James Hotel and its management team with the following ten key lessons and suggestions for building on our foundation of SEO and SEM enhancements:

1. Use a booking mask to offer a consistent booking presence and provide seamless click-through to conversion.

2. Create a logical sitemap to allow Google to crawl the entirety of your site—be sure to submit the sitemap to Google Webmaster Tools and others.

3. Find a balance of page content-specific material and relevant keywords in composing your title tags—keep them unique and less than 160 characters.

4. Keep page URLs logically organized into clear paths and directories to enhance crawler content recognition and more easily describe a preview to site users.
Keep unique and relevant body content placed closer to the top of the page—logically divide your text into headers to further segment content.

Utilize free outlets such as Google Local Search for more than just contact information—use Web 2.0 technologies to share media and interact with customers.

Limit outward and reciprocal links unless a mutually beneficial or favoring decision is reached—speak with property staff about local businesses to involve.

Explore off-site promotions. Online coupon sites such as retailmenot.com provide great market reach and listings—remember to submit directly to Google.

Add relevant alt-tags to help your media increase your page relevance. Keep alt-tags relevant to picture-specific content.

Logically split and group content into separate pages for separate classes of products and services; disparate products listed together return less relevant results for Google’s crawlers, meaning that your results may not appear in the Golden Triangle.

Exhibit 11

Google results for search on “hotels in red wing,” showing the St. James’s high position

Outcomes

As readers probably have noticed, our focus at the St. James was largely on organic search optimization, rather than paid search. We did develop and launch a short PPC campaign after our initial recommendations were implemented. The PPC campaign deployed a relatively small budget but was designed to increase traffic the website and improve the page rank. Exhibit 11 shows a sample Google search result on “hotels in Red Wing.” As the figure shows, the St. James is now prominently displayed in the Golden Triangle, both in Google local as well as in general organic search. This search was done towards the end of the PPC campaign with both organic and paid search results displayed prominently showing the hotel. The St. James has since ceased the PPC campaign as their webpage continues to receive prominent first page organic display!
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