Tight budgets often mean that companies have to do their own SEO work, and suddenly marketers are appointed in-house experts—a daunting responsibility if you don’t know where to start. Whether or not you’re new to the SEO game, you might be wondering how to optimize your site for the newest engine on the market.

By Duane Forrester

Microsoft Corp.’s new search engine, differentiated itself from leading search engines Google and Yahoo! by billing itself as a decision engine. While other engines return anything and everything even faintly related to your search term—at least according to Bing’s recent ad campaign—Bing’s search results are “directly applicable to what you’re looking for,” says Microsoft search expert Duane Forrester. “It’s almost like we’ve helped you with your first step of asking your first question, and that makes a big difference,” he says.

Forrester runs the in-house search engine optimization program for MSN products in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America. He also sits on the board of directors for the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMP0).

Marketing News recently caught up with Forrester to discuss whether marketers have to approach their SEO efforts differently to fit Bing’s search process, and to get general tips to help marketers improve their site’s search rankings.

Q: Bing’s webmaster blog says you don’t need to tailor your SEO tactics to appeal to Bing’s search bot, but I’ve also read on several other search-related blogs that Bing favors older domains or text-heavy Web pages more than other search engines do. What’s the truth?

A: Awesome. Now I get to dig in and debunk. I love it.

Age matters to all search engines—not just Bing, all search engines—because age is a factor of stability. The older you are, the more likely you are to have had continuous operation on that domain and the more stable you are in the search engines’ eyes. So they want that stability, they want that trust in you. … [And] you want age as a Web site operator because the longer you’re around, the more links you attract and the more quality links you build, which helps increase your rankings, …

For all of the SEO work that you do … if you follow best practices, they’re applicable across all search engines. … Bing crawls the Internet in a very similar fashion to [any other search engine]. It’s what happens with the data after it is brought into the actual search engine. That’s where things get a little bit different for Bing. Really, you can think of it as filtering. It’s kind of how we break down the layers and then understand the connections between pieces of content. That’s where the differentiation comes in … This is not rocket science. If people simply follow the best practices and build a better Web site, they will be rewarded from the search engines because the search engines want an easier-to-crawl experience. They want easy-to-find content that’s relevant to searches users make.

Q: Let’s talk about these best practices. What are some starter tips for marketers who now find themselves responsible for their company’s SEO?

A: You do not do a keystroke of work without performing keyword research first. That research is going to tell you exactly what users are searching for, so you will know in any given month, users searched twelve times more for the phrase ‘SUV’ than they did for the phrase ‘sport utility vehicle.’ That data, the volume of searches, gives you an indication as to where user interest is on the Internet.

There are tools online you can use for this [keyword research]. If you look at the ad center tools that Bing has online, there are keyword tools in there that give you some indication of volume of keywords. Google offers a similar tool. … Previously, I used a tool called KeywordDiscovery.com.

It’s a really good tool because … you type in the keyword and they’ll tell you how much volume in search it had over the last year. [Here’s] a critical point for people doing keyword research: It’s a trend. Don’t get hung up on the number. Look at the trend [in keyword popularity] … because everything in keyword research, all of the numbers you get, are basically estimates.

Editor’s note: For more on investigating keywords, see page 22.

Q: Once you’ve figured out which keywords pertain to your content, what’s next?

A: Your next step is you’re going to take a look at all of the title tags that you have on your pages. The title tag is the item that appears at the top of your Internet browser.

Whether it’s Firefox or Internet Explorer, at the very top, you will see words written in there. That is the title of your page … and you need to make sure that your keyword appears as close to the beginning of that title as possible.

With your titles, you want to make sure they’re unique to every single page on your Web site. And they need to be relevant as well. You can’t go in and just replicate one title across your whole Web site because when Bing shows up to look at a page, its job is to understand what that Web page is about. So you’re going to feed it a keyword in the title. … You will then use [the keyword] in the body copy on the page itself. You will use it within what we term the H1 tag, which is the heading tag—it’s generally used in styling to delineate an area and search engines like it because it helps them to understand. …

When you do this, the crawler, the spider, the robot, call it what you like, will come in and actually consume the entire page and will have a very clear picture that this page is [related to] that keyword. Its job, the crawler’s job, is to bring that data back and say to the search engine, to the algorithm: “Alright, here’s a page, this is the URL, this is the location, it’s unique. That unique URL has this unique content and it is applicable to this keyword. Please take it from me and figure out how important it is in the mix of all other Web pages on the Internet with this keyword.”

Q: What’s another basic tip for newly appointed SEO stewards?

A: Make sure that you name your images with keywords and you keep them relevant. If the picture is about—[I’ll use this example because it’ll date me incredibly]—Meg Ryan, then the name of the picture would be MegRyan.jpg or ‘girl’, whatever the file extension happens to be. … Be descriptive
in naming your image. It could be a picture of Meg Ryan having coffee, so you could label it Meg-Ryan-coffee.jpg. ...

The next layer of importance with this is to make sure that you fill in what’s called the alt tag. … By filling in the name of the image with keywords that are descriptive to the image and the alt tag with descriptive information, it gives the search engine a very clear understanding of what that image is about. ...

[Also,] put a caption below it explaining what you’re seeing in the image. … Whether it’s the title, using keywords properly in your H1 tags and in the body copy, optimizing your images and placing captions under them, all of this is what’s known as improving usability. And that is something that should be a guiding principle for people managing Web sites. … Integrating all these little touch points helps the search engine see that you are interested in a good user experience. That helps them rank you better because they are rated by users on how well they return their results. So better quality product in, better results back out.

Q: What should webmasters be aware of so that their SEO efforts don’t backfire?

A: One is called a robot.txt file. Most people don’t have them and they should. … The file is powerful enough that if you put the wrong character inside it, you can block the search engines from seeing your entire Web site. One keystroke and you can cease to exist. But it’s really important to have because it’s also the first spot that a crawler looks to for directions on how to interact with your Web site. It’s also the first spot that they go to look for a document that’s called sitemap.xml, and that site map is designed to have all of your Web pages listed in it. … And the search engines come along and go, ‘Hey, that’s easy!’ And they love it.

The next area that will dramatically hurt you is the improper use of rich media. … The search engines, when they show up, they have none of these technologies enabled. So if all of your content for your Web site is inside flash, your Web site is blank; there’s nothing for the search engine to consume. … So that makes it doubly important that you have a sitemap.xml set up for them because that’s the only way for them to find your content. It’s really important that businesses make sure that they use rich media very carefully. … [Also,] watch your URL structure. It generally looks like www.domain.com/folder/folder/file.html, something like that. Be very careful if you’re using a content management system, a CMS, that builds all of this dynamically for you. You can find yourself in a place with all kinds of crazy symbols and add-ons and little extras and number signs and whatnot. All of those things block a search engine from crawling through the URL. So you want to have as clean and keyword-rich a URL as possible.

Another thing: Make sure that your page load times are as fast as possible. That can help you with your search rankings. It all goes back to providing a good experience to the user.

Q: Can you recommend some SEO information resources?

A: The first one I’m going to recommend is the Bing webmaster center blog. It’s a great opportunity. … I know Google has a lot of stuff on its webmaster blog as well. The good thing about these is you’re getting information straight from the horse’s mouth … so it really does pay to keep an eye on them.

I highly recommend these [other resources] because this is how I started really ramping up my learning. One of my favorites [discussion forums online] is a place called SearchEngineForums.com. … Businesses should not be shy about going into these communities and saying, ‘Hey, I don’t understand this. Can someone point me in the right direction?’ Because you will get legitimate answers. There is no cost to it. No one is looking to sell you, so it’s a really great way for those internal resources to ramp up their knowledge and be successful for their businesses.