Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Best Practices

Eight Ways to Increase Reach and Exposure
Through Higher Natural Search Rankings

A WordStream White Paper

WordStream®

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Search marketing is a powerful and cost-effective means of expanding reach and acquiring new customers, but the world of search is getting more and more competitive and harder to master. Gone are the days when it was easy to rank via "keyword stuffing" and other quick-fix SEO techniques. Not only do today's search engines have more sophisticated algorithms, but webmasters and search marketers are also getting more sophisticated. More widespread knowledge of search engine optimization techniques stiffens the competition in the SERPs (search engine results pages).

In this cutthroat environment, developing a sustainable, defensible SEO strategy—and using the right tools to help you along the way—is crucial to your success in search. Equally important is ensuring a proprietary advantage that your competitors will be hard-pressed to duplicate.

In this white paper, we'll outline a long-term strategy for creating a powerful SEO roadmap specifically tailored to you and your business. We'll introduce eight proven methodologies for maximizing return on time and money spent optimizing your website for organic search, and introduce WordStream for SEO, a powerful keyword management solution that enables users to implement these processes simply, efficiently and successfully.

Understanding the Basics: What is SEO?

What exactly *is* SEO? Search engine optimization is the process of *optimizing* a website, in terms of content, design and other factors, to improve search engine rankings, with the ultimate goal of increasing the volume and quality of traffic to the site. Engaging in SEO puts the millions of potential customers who use search engines like Google every day within your reach, and offers a number of benefits to your business:

- Greater brand exposure and awareness

- Inexpensive, scalable advertising

- An avenue for sales and qualified leads

In other words, neglecting search as a marketing channel is a major missed opportunity. It's vital to your business interests that you familiarize yourself with the following search engine optimization best practices and incorporate them into your SEO strategy.

One: Build a comprehensive keyword database
Your greatest asset for SEO

The first step on the road toward better search engine optimization is keyword discovery: developing an extensive taxonomy of words and phrases relevant to your business. Why? Because you need to know how the people who are looking for the products or services you offer are searching for them. If you and your potential customers aren't speaking the same language, you won't be able to connect in the search engine marketplace.

That common language of words and phrases will form the basis of your keyword database. To fully embrace SEO, realize that your keyword database is more than a list of words. It's a *valuable, proprietary marketing asset* that should be private and managed with care.

How do you build up the value of your database? This starts with keyword research, of course — but not just any keyword research.

Two: Execute personalized, data-driven keyword research
Why public tools don't make the grade

Traditional keyword research is flawed from the get-go because it relies on the wrong tools — usually a handful of free, publicly available keyword tools that provide a very basic starting point but fall way short of producing an extensive, high-value keyword taxonomy that is specific and relevant to your business.

These tools fall into one of a few basic categories, all with significant drawbacks for SEO:

- *Keyword suggestion tools:* These return a limited number of high-volume keywords with dubious estimates of search traffic. Because they favor historical popularity over relevance, the keywords may or may not be relevant to your offering. Additionally, such popular keywords are extremely difficult to rank for even with extensive optimization efforts.

- *Competitive keyword tools:* These tools are based on the questionable premise that your competitors' keywords will be useful to you too, but you don't know how successful those terms are. Plus, they are not tailored to your unique business and what sets you apart.

- *Keyword generator tools:* These tools return mashed-up keywords that bear little resemblance to real searches.

The above keyword tools are a logical starting place if you're just beginning to optimize a new website or expand into a new keyword niche. But it can be dangerous to rely too heavily on public keyword sources alone. You can greatly enhance the value of your keyword research through *keyword aggregation,* supplementing these tools with search query data from actual site visitors.

To attain a fuller, more complete keyword picture, your research should make use of private data sources — such as keyword reports from Web analytics applications and data from your Web server log files — ensuring relevant, up-to-date lists. WordStream for SEO is an *advanced* keyword research platform that goes beyond basic keyword suggestions, allowing you to build on public data with private sources that offer multiple advantages:

- *Relevance:* These keywords are practically guaranteed to be qualified and relevant to your business, since they're based on actual visitors to your site.

- *Privacy:* Your competitors won't have access to these keywords—this data is completely personalized and private.

- *Accuracy:* The traffic and conversion numbers associated with your keywords are 100% accurate, so you can make informed decisions instead of relying on fuzzy numbers.
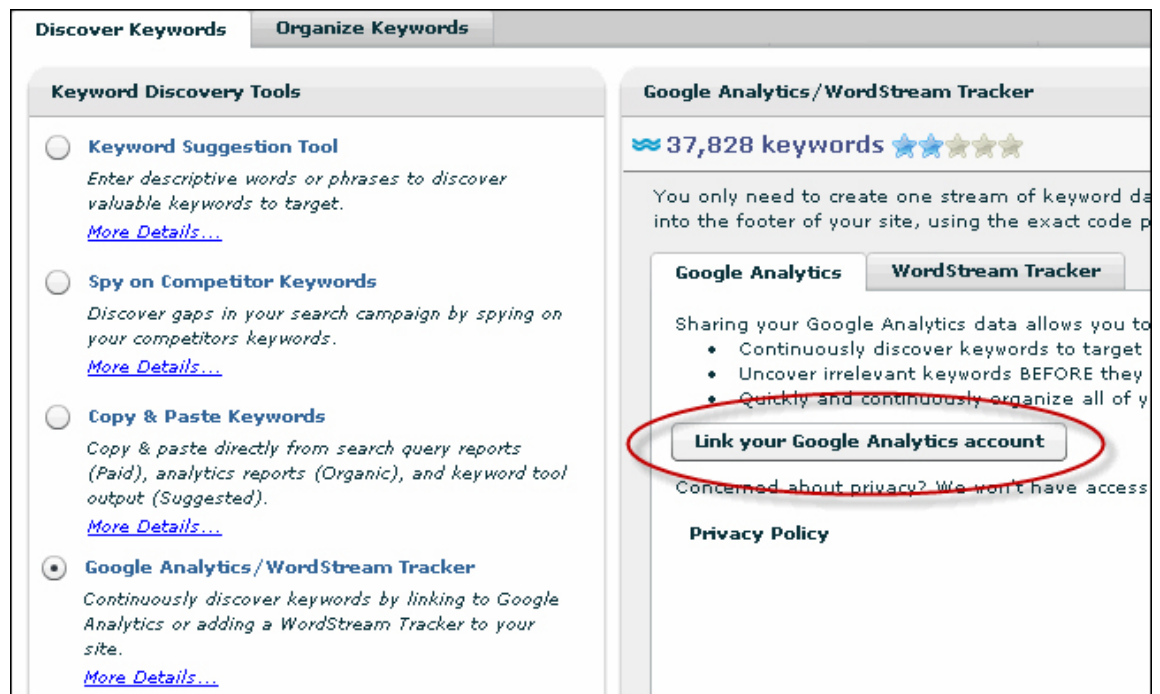

Figure 1: Mine your private, personalized Web data for keywords with WordStream.

You won't just be dealing with "historical" data. With WordStream, you can always keep your keyword database fresh and up-to-date. How?

Three: Perform SEO on a continuous, iterative basis
Doing it over and over again

SEO is not a one-time activity; it's an ongoing process. If you try to optimize your site based on a short, static keyword list, your SEO results will remain static as well — or worse, degrade over time. *Improving* your results requires keyword expansion. You need to grow your list over time to keep up with changing customers and a shifting market. But with so much on your search marketing plate, it's very difficult to find the time to update your keyword research even every few months, much less every week or every day.

WordStream allows you to discover new, highly relevant keywords *every day*, quickly and simply. It's as easy as installing a small JavaScript tracker on your website's footer, or connecting WordStream to your Google Analytics account. This step allows WordStream to track new visitors to your website and automatically import those keywords to your database daily. Reviewing these newly added keywords is as easy as checking your email, so continuous keyword discovery becomes an element of your regular SEO routine.
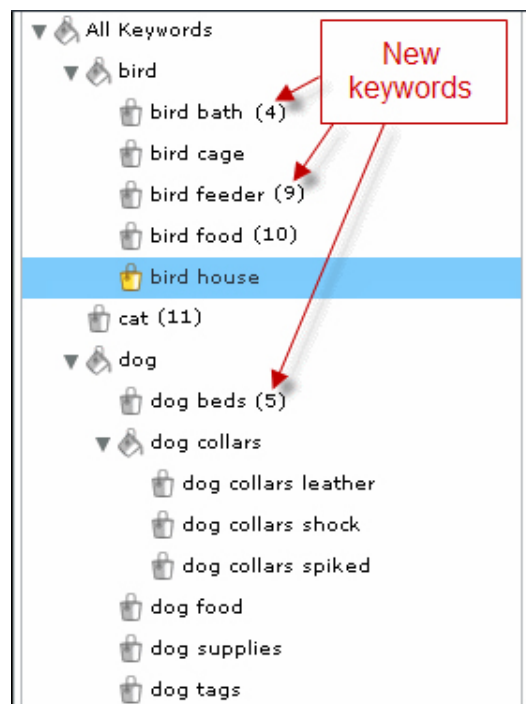

Figure 2: WordStream imports new keywords into your database every day.

Frequently updating your keyword database also encourages iterative performance of other important SEO tasks—which we'll explore in greater detail over the rest of this paper.

Using WordStream for SEO, you'll begin to accumulate a very large number of high-quality keywords. The sheer volume of keywords would quickly become unmanageable in a spreadsheet application. How do you manage such a huge and growing database?

Four: Group and organize your keyword database
Get organized and get results

Keyword grouping and organization are *absolutely critical* to long-term SEO success. In fact, keyword grouping is the key step that differentiates top-ranking sites from the rest. Take Wikipedia: One of the reasons it ranks on the first page for so many keywords is its meticulous organization.

But this best practice is often short-changed or ignored by search engine optimizers. You end up with a long, sloppy list that is difficult to update and full of duplicates and errors, with no clear plan of action in sight. You can't just cram all your keywords on a page and hope to rank for each individual keyword — this will never work. You have to organize similar keywords together and create focused content for each thematically related set.

Keyword grouping turns an unwieldy list into a meaningful, useful taxonomy. You can use WordStream's keyword grouping tools to break your database down into groups of related keywords, then further segment those groups into subgroups. At the lowest level, your keyword groups will be small, manageable and tightly related, even if your total number of keywords runs into the hundreds of thousands.

Figure 3: WordStream's grouping tools take the heavy lifting out of keyword segmentation.

An intelligently segmented keyword database will benefit your SEO efforts in a number of ways. For example, the resulting taxonomy suggests a natural, logical information architecture for your website, which makes it a more user-friendly destination. And well-structured, easily navigable sites aren't just more appealing to search engine users; they're also favored by search engines. If search engines can more easily crawl your site architecture, you'll enjoy better rankings in the SERPs. So let your keyword hierarchy inform your site design.

More importantly, segmenting your keywords will improve the quality and relevance of your website copy, since it's much easier to write specific, informative landing pages, blog posts and other marketing content around close-knit keyword groups. The WordStream SEO for Firefox plugin helps writers apply their keyword research in targeted, optimized copy.

This feature gives you quick access to your keyword research (as well as our Free Keyword Tool) and works alongside your content management system, such as Wordpress or Blogger, to help you select a topic and find relevant keywords and long-tail modifiers. The plugin keeps a running count of how many keywords you've used, so you stay on track and focused.
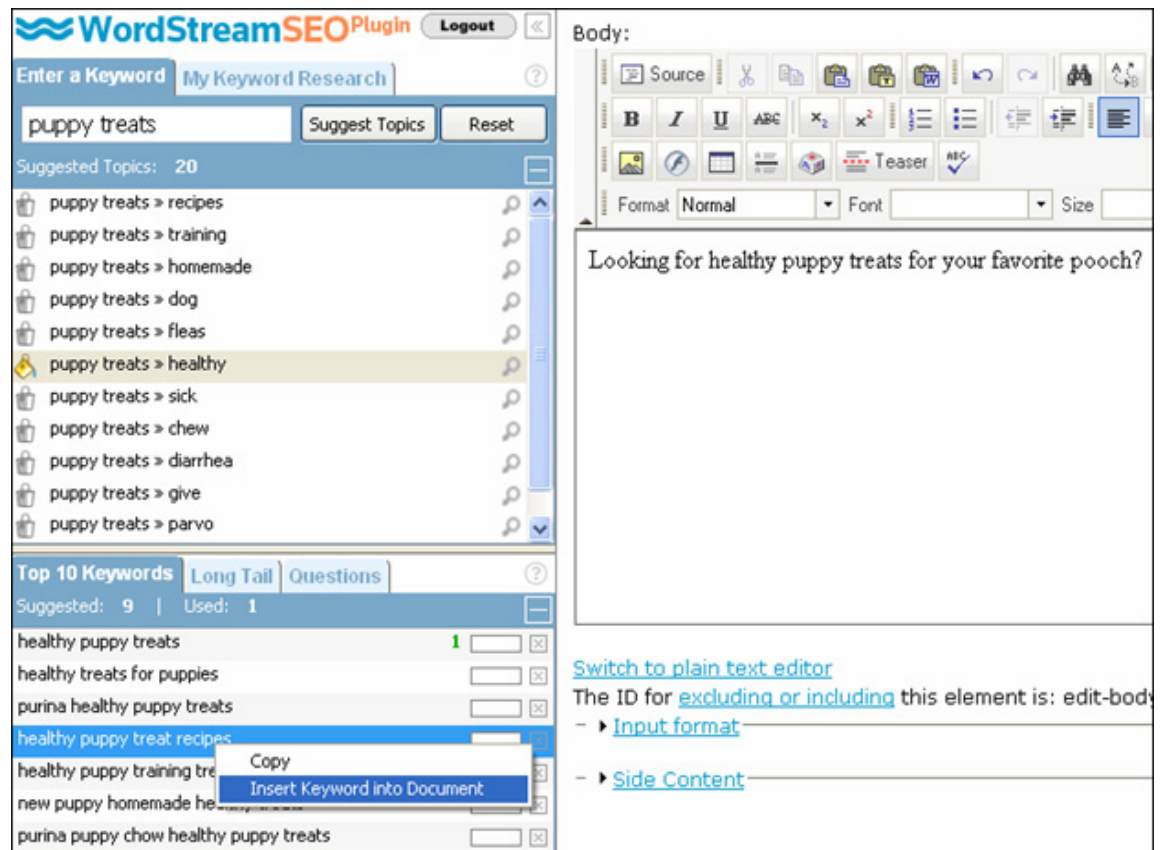

Figure 4: WordStream SEO for Firefox helps you write keyword-optimized content for your site.

Creating a specific and unique page for each keyword group will provide a destination for searchers. Search engines reward pages that offer what users want, so your rankings will improve and your traffic will climb—bringing *compounding benefits and value* to your site.

In addition, unique, informative content that draws users in is more likely to attract outside links. Link-building is one of the most significant factors in *off-page SEO*. The more links you can acquire from quality, authoritative websites, the better your rankings will be. While WordStream isn't specifically a link-building tool, it will enable you to create a host of targeted, high-quality Web pages, and content is still king when it comes to links.

Five: Act on your analytics
Don't just sit there; do something!

SEO is an active endeavor, requiring constant experiments and adjustments. But your actions need to come from somewhere—namely, they should be driven by your most accurate and up-to-date analytics data. Analytics applications offer a wealth of valuable insights into your website's performance and your prospective customers' wants and needs. So don't just sit on your SEO discoveries; make them work for you by turning them into actions.

Of course, that's easier said than done if, like most search marketers, your analytics dashboards and your SEO workbenches have nothing to do with each other. That disconnect creates a huge bottleneck, whereby a potential goldmine of information just lies inert, and your SEO returns flatline. (Holy metaphors, Batman!)

WordStream for SEO in an integrated platform that connects analytics with action to give you *actalytics*. With actalytics, those data-driven insights are actionable and can be put to use to optimize your website. You'll not only know at a glance which keyword groups are driving the most traffic, you can take instant action on those groups to further capitalize on that traffic.

For example, you can associate Web content with keyword groups, so you can see your degree of coverage and prioritize content creation as necessary. In addition, larger, broader keyword groups can quickly be segmented into subgroups to capture more targeted traffic with a more granular information architecture. You can also weed out junk keywords with WordStream's negative keyword tools.
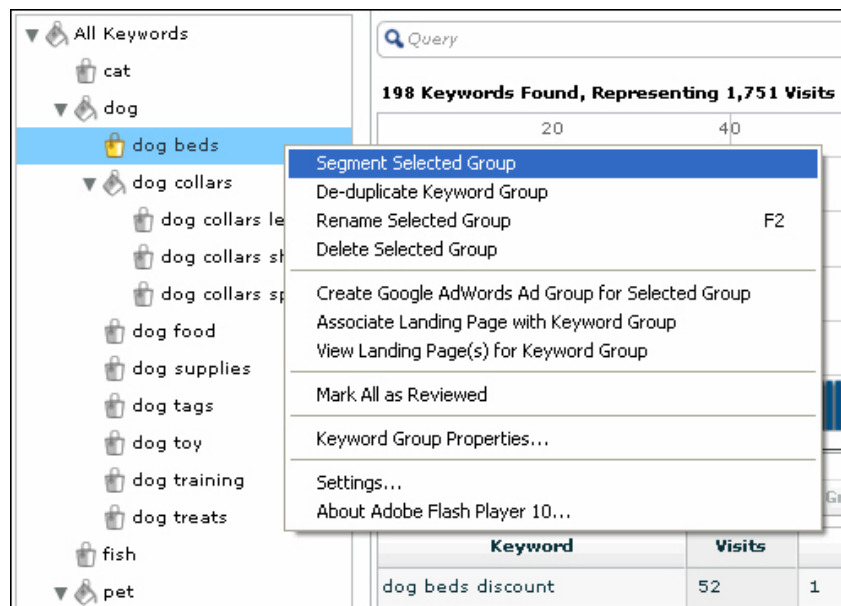

Figure 5: Right-click a keyword group to take quick SEO action.

Keyword research and analysis become pretty exciting when you're empowered to turn them into immediate SEO gains. Of course, with so much information at your fingertips, you might be a bit bewildered about where to start. But WordStream has a solution for that too.

Six: Prioritize your SEO to-do list
Find your flow with workflow tools

There is literally an endless number of things you can do to optimize your website. But heaven knows you don't have endless hours in the day. Everyone's working with tight schedules and limited resources. And despite what you may have heard, SEO isn't free! It takes a lot of time and resources to author, review and publish good content. Given these costs, it's vital to determine which SEO tasks are most high-priority and accomplish those first.

WordStream offers a powerful answer to this everyday problem: a set of workflow tools that help you prioritize SEO workflow. You'll have a virtual, evolving to-do list so you can always stay on top of what you need to do next. This task list is sorted by relevance to your SEO goals, so you can focus your time and attention on the work that will provide the most immediate return on investment for your business. You'll know exactly when to segment your keyword groups, create optimized landing pages and take other data-driven actions to increase traffic and conversions from search.

Task	Keyword Group	Relevance	# Visits	# Keywords	Group Size	AdWords	Landing Page	Filthiness
1	All Keywords	0	257393	22631	⚠	✔	✔	⚠
2	dog	0	45954	3249	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠
3	cat	0	22711	2453	⚠	⚠	✔	⚠
4	pet	0	25380	2005	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠
5	fish	0	10446	1094	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠
6	dog food	0	5841	429	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠
7	dog training	0	4410	279	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠
8	dog toy	0	1845	272	⚠	⚠	⚠	⚠
9	dog collars	0	1954	223	✔	⚠	⚠	⚠

Figure 6: WordStream's workflow tools keep your SEO priorities in order.

One way to prioritize SEO work is to look to your pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns for guidance, which leads us to the next best practice.

Seven: Use SEO to inform PPC, and vice versa
Don't take sides in search marketing

There's no need to silo your SEO and PPC activities. In fact, doing so squanders a big opportunity. SEO and PPC are complementary, and can and should inform each other for mutual benefit.

Because WordStream is seamlessly integrated with your Google AdWords account, this information sharing is not only possible, but quite natural. WordStream closes the gap between PPC and SEO efforts, so the two areas can gain from each other.

Your PPC campaigns can benefit natural search engine optimization in several ways:

- Tracking your PPC results gives you fast answers on which keywords perform well for your business, with no wait for pages to index and gain authority. Use these keywords to prioritize content creation for your website, so you can rank organically for those searches as well.

- The keyword group hierarchy you create and maintain for your PPC campaigns also suggests a natural, branching information architecture. Well-organized, user-friendly sites are favored by search engines.

- WordStream helps you author highly relevant text ads by pointing you toward the keywords in an ad group that drive the most traffic. You can use those same suggestions to generate titles, URLs and meta tags — important factors for on-page SEO.

The reverse is also true — SEO efforts can inform PPC. For example, keywords and landing pages that attract a flow of organic traffic may be good candidates for full-fledged PPC campaigns. Ranking in both natural and paid results tends to encourage brand trust and increase conversions. Plus, pages that are well-optimized for organic search also make strong destination URLs for paid ads and have a positive impact on your Quality Scores.

You'll see better results all around when you allow PPC and SEO to work together. And everyone on your team—from those focusing on SEO to those concentrating on PPC — can easily work together with WordStream.

Eight: Coordinate your SEO team with collaborative tools
Getting everyone on the same page

Just as SEO and PPC should work together, various members of your team should be able to work together on optimization efforts. This won't be fully possible if you're not using collaborative SEO tools. Take Excel — Excel isn't designed to be collaborative. If you have multiple people working on the same account or project, it's quite difficult to keep a spreadsheet updated so that everyone sees the same "version of the truth." This is a major obstruction to workflow.

Unlike Excel, WordStream offers a single, shared workspace for multiple users so that SEO efforts can be coordinated and streamlined. All the members of your team, from marketers to developers to copywriters, will be on the same page. WordStream's workflow tools identify the areas that need immediate attention (according to rules *you* specify), ensuring effective division of labor.

When your SEO tools are collaborative, work isn't duplicated. For example, creating multiple pages targeted for similar keywords can produce suboptimal results, since search engines generally won't display more than two pages from a single domain on a search results page. From an SEO perspective, you're better off authoring unique content from different angles. Getting all your team members on the same page helps you avoid this kind of blunder, so your team wastes less time. When you use a collaborative keyword solution, everyone has a shared knowledge of SEO best practices as well as specific objectives and targets, improving collective productivity.

Try WordStream for SEO Free

WordStream for SEO is a complete keyword management solution, offering all the functionality of traditional keyword research tools but layering on advanced organization, analysis and content authoring abilities—all for a similar or lower price point. WordStream helps you accomplish every step of the SEO process more efficiently and effectively. Sign up for a free trial of WordStream for SEO, and start seeing the benefits:

- ■ *Find your best opportunities* for traffic and profit

- ■ Identify and *eliminate wasteful spending* and efforts

- ■ *Maximize return on investment* for organic search campaigns

About WordStream

WordStream is a provider of innovative, integrated keyword management solutions that simplify complex search marketing processes. Our patented software provides search marketers with a private, scalable online workbench for efficiently and continuously conducting PPC and SEO tasks including keyword research and negative keyword discovery; search query analytics; keyword grouping and organization; search marketing workflow and prioritization; and relevant ad copy and Web content creation.

WordStream believes that organizing, prioritizing, coordinating and executing PPC and SEO efforts around a comprehensive, well-researched and up-to-date taxonomy is the key to achieving search marketing success. The benefits of using WordStream solutions include increased productivity and greater relevance, enhancing the value of both paid and natural search marketing efforts. For more information about WordStream keyword management solutions and to sign up for a free trial, visit http://www.wordstream.com.