

FLASH OPTIMISATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
2. THE SEO DISADVANTAGES OF FLASH.....	3
2.1. Search Engine Saturation of Flash Sites	3
2.2. Un-spiderable content	3
2.3. Bandwidth and Download Time	4
3. SEO SOLUTIONS FOR FLASH WEBSITES	4
3.1. Solution to Flash Search Engine Saturation.....	4
3.2. Solution to Un-spiderable Content	4
3.3. Metadata	5
3.4. Solution to Bandwidth and Download Time.....	5
4. CONCLUSION	5
5. RESOURCES	6
6. CONFIDENTIALITY	7

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document provides an overview and sheds light on the issue of optimising Flash websites for the search engines. It will tackle various persistent issues which plague current Flash websites. In doing so, solutions and SEO techniques will be revealed.

THE SEO DISADVANTAGES OF FLASH

Flash websites present an alluring alternative to standard HTML driven web design. The effects, animations and general layout and design of Flash, provides flexibility and is considered aesthetically pleasing. Yet, these aspects usually come at the price for search engine rankings. The reasons for this sacrifice include poor search engine saturation, un-spiderable content (trackable changes), bandwidth and download time.

Search Engine Saturation of Flash Sites

Flash websites that contain multiple pages are viewed as singular entities. This is due to the frame structure of Flash, which search engines cannot crawl. Hence a 100 page Flash website is only given the "credit" for a singular page by the search engines.

In turn, smaller websites tend not to achieve the same high quality rankings as extensive sites. In part, this can be attributed to the inbound linking value that search engines, such as Google, assign to sites. The more external and internal links, the more "votes" the sites is viewed as having.

Un-spiderable content

When a search engine spider enters a website, it can only read the attributes specified to it within HTML tags. Flash, is usually specified as a singular object within the HTML.

Despite the amount of textual, video and graphical content embedded within Flash, it is still only seen as one entity. This presents a challenge to most Flash driven websites as the content cannot count towards providing a greater "quality score"¹ of that site. In turn, this means that search engine rankings are sacrificed.

Another major implication of search engines being blind to the content of a Flash website is the fact that dynamic content is seen as a sign of quality by search engines, particularly Google. However, the only traceable evidence of changing content on a Flash website is usually the size of the file, which is insignificant to search engines.

¹ The value of relevance attributed to web pages that are used by search engines to gauge search engine rankings.

Bandwidth and Download Time

Another challenging SEO facet of Flash web viewing stems from usability complications. Specifically, the extensive bandwidth requirements needed to view most websites, and the prolonged waiting times necessary for the graphically orientated pages. These factors often prove to be inhibiting for users with diminished internet processing ability.

The other important fact overlooked is that search engine spiders tend to decrease revisit frequency for websites that take extended periods of time to crawl.

SEO SOLUTIONS FOR FLASH WEBSITES

In order to overcome the crawling and indexing complication that are aforementioned, there are three main techniques that are recommended to be implemented on Flash websites. These include the utilisation of "FlashVars"², implementation of XML and unique metadata implementation for individual Flash web pages.

Solution to Flash Search Engine Saturation

FlashVars allow individual pages of a Flash site to be identified under a unique URL. By assigning a URL to the link FlashVar the URL will append to the FlashVars file. In this way, FlashVars allow for multiple web pages to be generated from a singular Flash file.

This Flash optimisation technique requires that the Flash variables are placed within the Object (ActiveX) and/or Embed Tag (Netscape and Macintosh Internet Explorer). The property "FlashVars" is used to import the root level variables to the Flash file, where the variables are created before the first frame of the SWF is played. The format of the string to be used can be referenced from TechNote tn_14143. The FlashVars property must be assigned in both the OBJECT and EMBED tags in order to work on all browsers.

An example of the Object Tag and Embed Tag structure can be found at Kingpins SEO Blog's – "How to Optimise Flash".

From an SEO perspective, the extended amount of pages for a particular website will help improve saturation with the search engines. Effectively, the more pages which are visible to the search engines will yield for better rankings in the search engine results. In addition, an optimised internal linking structure and metadata strategy will account for improving the relevance and pertinence of specific keywords associated to each web page.

Solution to Un-spiderable Content

Textual content and links are often un-spiderable within Flash. Extracting this information to external XML files is an excellent method to facilitate spidering and visibility of content.

² FlashVars is a property of Macromedia Flash which allows for properties of a Flash movie to be appended to the URL.

By using external XML files, a change in textual content will be recognised by the search engine bot. In addition, the newly visible content will attribute to greater overall relevance of the site.

Metadata

Unique metadata is an essential optimisation technique for Flash sites. The meta title, description and keyword tags are instrumental in determining the key terms for which a website ranks.

Unique metadata should be applied to individual Flash pages, especially newly created ones.

Solution to Bandwidth and Download Time

The time needed for users and search engine bots to parse Flash can be minimised by reducing the quality and perhaps size of individual images. Developers may be hesitant to undertake this practice with major images such as the logo. However, background and border images are excellent mediums for this sort of optimisation.

Additionally, neat and concise coding practices will also assist in reducing the download time for the end user and the crawling time of the search engine spider.

CONCLUSION

Flash components are an excellent vehicle for the presentation of graphical and animation images. Ideally Flash should be used as part of an HTML based website, where the content is maintained in plain text. However if a website is constructed in complete Flash, by implementing some of the techniques suggested above, many of the SEO and usability drawbacks of Flash can be circumvented.

RESOURCES

Support and Blogs

http://www.maani.us/xml_charts/

<http://blog.deconcept.com/2006/03/13/modern-approach-Flash-seo/>

http://www.jeroenwijering.com/?item=embedding_Flash

<http://www.zedia.net/2007/seo-and-Flash-part-2/>

<http://groups.google.com/group/swfobject/msg/0a9523fb4cdf0b02>

<http://probertson.com/articles/2005/02/14/Flash-databases-urlvars-FlashVars/>

<http://www.completeseo.com/Flash-seo/how-to-optimise-Flash>

CONFIDENTIALITY

This document is commercial in confidence and has been prepared by Outrider for the purposes of reviewing by our clients only. Viewing or copying of this document by any other party other than our clients and their immediate staff is restricted.

Any questions regarding this document should be directed to:

Outrider
15-19 Parraween Street,
Cremorne, NSW 2090, Australia

Phone: +61 2 8968 4000
Fax: +61 2 9904 5055
Email: consult@outrider.com
Web: <http://www.outrider.com.au>