BY APRIL WILSON

Ways to Optimize Your Website Navigation

In the new world of SEO (search engine optimization), it's becoming more about what you say than all of the technical ways that you say it. The new post-Panda and post-Penguin Google rankings, for example, are focused on finding subject-matter experts on certain topics who are asked to write about that topic across multiple websites. The search engines are looking for rich, varied content on your core subject within the body of your website.

In our series about SEO, we've focused on how to pare down your expertise to one of a handful of keywords (or topics). Now it's time to optimize your website navigation to help your audience—as well as the search engines—find your valuable content more easily.

What Is Navigation?

Your site navigation is how you choose to organize the content on your website. Most of us understand the concept of creating folders and directories to help organize our offline files. Organizing your website is no different. The catch is that most business owners create their website navigation directory structure before they've thought strategically about what their

Illustration: courtesy Social Biz Solutions

core focus areas for that content will be. For example, navigation for many sites is organized into these standard categories:

- Home
- About Us
- Products and Services
- Contact Us
- Blog

And there's nothing wrong with this structure from the standpoint of user experience, but it isn't optimized for a specific product or service that a visitor to your site may be interested in or how that visitor may have arrived at your website. Someone searching for "wicker patio furniture," for example, may need four or five clicks—Products and Services, Furniture, Outdoor, Patio, Wicker—to get to the section they want).

And it's not much clearer to a search engine. Nowhere in your navigation process do the words "wicker patio furniture" appear in one string. (In the example above, the last page with all the search results might be called http://randomstore.com/products-and-services/furniture/outdoor/patio/wicker.) If you had searched for "furniture outdoor patio wicker," this page might have appeared on the first page of search results. But that's not how people normally search.

Content Marketing Changes Everything

These days it's more about how helpful you are to your end audience than pushing out your products and services. Does your content answer their frequently asked questions? Does it inspire or inform them about key industry trends? Does it position you as a trusted adviser rather than just a product brochure? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then it's time to rethink how you approach what the purpose of your website really is. You may not want to change anything to optimize for SEO and content marketing, but I promise that your competitors will.

You will always want to keep about half of the core elements in your navigation: Home, About Us, Contact Us—these are always universally used and are helpful to your audience. However, the other navigation areas should be about your core subject-matter expertise and keywords. They should clearly indicate what you want your business or your staff to be known for.

The Business Approach

If you want to focus on your business, try creating two or three areas in your navigation that sum up the core offerings that you know more about than anyone else. In the example we've been using, you might select:

- Home
- About Us
- Outdoor Living
- Dream Kitchens
- Clean Garden Spaces
- Contact Us

Once those decisions have been made, you will want to move all of your content under the most relevant section. The wicker patio furniture content, for example, moves under Outdoor Living, and you would continue to make sure that all subfolders also follow a more "semantic" or natural flow (outdoor living/patio/furniture). You would take any blog articles or photos that were posted on the website in this area and feature them in this new Outdoor Living content section as well.

The Featured Expert Approach

You can also build your website around key personalities who have deep expertise in your subject matter. With this approach, the risk is that unless those people are the business owners, they may build their own personal brands with your company, then leave to start their own company or to work for a competitor. Think of Ty Pennington, who started out as a support carpenter on the reality TV show *Trading Spaces*, and ended up creating a strong personal brand.

With this approach, your site navigation might change to:

- Home
- About Us
- Jane's Outdoor Living
- Dream Kitchens with John
- Gary's Garden Sense
- Contact Us

In this scenario, blog content will be more prominent in each of the subsections of your site. You'll also want to supplement written content with rich media, such as video or project photos. The products that you sell will be recommended by your experts, and you'll even want to go so far as to have each product include a short endorsement or story about why it's recommended.

How This Helps SEO

Organizing your content based on keywords that reinforce subject-matter expertise infuses them throughout your website. So if "outdoor living" is one of your most important keywords, then by default every page in that section of your site will contain http://randomstore.com/outdoor-living in the URL.

The old days of worrying about meta tags and keywords are gone. Search engines want to see your level of commitment to basing URLs on your subject matter.

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