

WHAT THEY SEARCH, WHAT THEY FIND: IMPROVING YOUR GOOGLE RANKING

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Understanding how Google ranks a website is the first step to improve the position of this website. Often the problem is only a lack of focus on the keywords that people use to reach the content provided over the Internet. The site name, the titles and the content are the most important tools to improve the ranking. They have priority, like references from important websites. A common mistake is the lack of common words in favour of academic terms, which are used much less by users. Being the first with a keyword that nobody uses is a failure. Mobile content needs special attention so as to attract users.

1. SCENARIO

This is not a SEO (Search Engine Optimization) crash course. It is more about strategies and some techniques—and most of all it is about awareness. You have to realize what your potential is in promoting your idea or your message. I am not dealing with product marketing, since the majority of you are in charge of communication offices in Catholic institutions: you are not selling anything, rather you want to spread words related to the Word. The present hype is all about social networks. However, many forget that we are still far from abandoning the traditional way of accessing information over the internet—a search engine that outputs web pages.

In the early nineties, I started using the internet without the browser: gopher was the primary means to find something. Later, with the browser, within the World Wide Web, AltaVista changed the landscape because it was so easy and fast, but the results were often disappointing. Then Google came and stayed—no one has yet beaten its incredible speed and

accuracy. It was much more difficult to cheat and promote a site to the first positions with a different topic than the searched word meant.

We were—and are—all happy with its democratic page ranking system, where only who is really famous and quoted by others reaches the Top of the Pops. You may say that there is a lot of criticism about Google, but you have to admit that it manages the great majority of web searches all over the world.

Living in Italy, my examples will be Italian based, but the ideas may apply to any other language. In this country, Google is a monopolist: some experts say 97% of Italian surfers use it primarily, some others say “only” 90%. We are used to seeing Google understand our desires in real time. Sometimes it fails—when I start typing “God” in Italian, *Dio*, I get Christian Dior’s website in the first place.

As you know, Google tries to adapt its results to your profile. It can detect the language of the operating system and the browser, the location of the IP through which you are connected, as well as your cookies—all this in order to discover your preferences. Let us start from this.

2. PROFILING

Analyzing my searches and the websites I browse, Google says that my interests are about computers and travel and that I am between 35 and 44 years old (it is nice to be ten years younger!). I can change this value, just delete the option, or completely avoid the profile detection. Is that better? It is privacy versus convenience. I prefer to read ads that refer to my interests instead of getting random subjects, even though they are always related to the page I am reading. That is the way Google earns money, by placing the paid content in the most successful place.

Through Google+ the habits of my friends are affecting my search results—Google thinks that what they like is something I like, too. Therefore, nowadays if many people search a keyword, each one of them gets a different, personalized result. It seems a nightmare for all experts who are trying to promote websites: how can they achieve the first positions for everybody?

Never say it all: we are always dealing with language and country oriented results. Within this framework, websites with higher ranks—because they are more cited by other ones when talking about the topic of the keyword—are always on top. They may lose a couple of positions for different users.

By the way, keep in mind that anything over the fourth has very low chances to be visited and that very few people go after the first page.

3. SEARCHING

Most of the people who ask me to help them in improving the Google position of their websites are not able to answer the simplest question about it: which search word (keyword) do you think users should type to reach your site? Sometimes they answer in a naïve way, saying for example “school”. They mean that their small countryside school should come out as the first result when typing on Google the word “school”. Nonsense!

They never examined the statistics of their website through such a powerful tool as Google Analytics. Free of charge, it tells you almost everything you would like to know about the traffic on your site. One of the most important information is the list of the keywords people used to get to your pages. Are they the ones you expected?

Some time ago, the Google doodle (the modified logo) was on Steno. Clicking on the doodle showed the Wikipedia entry in the first place. The Italian entry of the Interdisciplinary Dictionary of Science and Faith disf.org—even though it is one of the most popular sites on the topic—was not among the first results, because it uses the real name of the revered scientist, Niels Steensen. This article mentions also the Latin Nicolaus Stenonis and the Italian Niccolò Stenone, but they are not in the page title or in the chapter titles (the H1, H2 HTML tags). Therefore, for Google they are not important.

In the same site, I have my article on the Star of Bethlehem, called *Stella di Betlemme*. Some people get there while searching “Betlemme”, but nobody reads it when searching “stella cometa” which is the popular way of saying it in Italian. It was Giotto’s fault to paint it as a comet—it definitely was not a tailed object. I should have talked more about the comet in my paper, but I wrote it when the Internet was at the beginning and the dictionary was not supposed to be published on the web.

Let us try to avoid these mistakes. The Italian *Movimento per la vita* is the most prominent pro-life organization in this country. Its site mpv.org is clear and neat, and full of precious information. However, it has one drawback—the homepage does not mention abortion. This is because their approach is positive and life oriented. But girls are actually looking for words like “aborto”, “voglio abortire” (I want an abortion) or “non voglio abortire” (I do not want an abortion). If you do not talk about it in a somewhat of a rough but straightforward way, you miss your goal.

The Google AdWords Keyword Tool tells you how many people are searching the keywords you choose. In the above case, in a month 590 people looked for “voglio abortire” while only 58 “non voglio abortire”. You might save more lives every day if your pro-life website comes out first on Google.

Another important source of information for search engines is the meta tag Description in the HTML of the web page. Google normally shows its content as a snippet below the site name in the search results. If you have written a very short but effective description in the tag, you are likely to have people click on the link. If you do not use it, Google will use the description it finds on dmoz.org, the old and somehow stuck Open Directory project (and this is the case for mpv.org), or build one on the fly (such as in mpvrroma.org, the Roman branch of the pro-life movement), surely not the best summary you could get.

The problem is therefore focusing on search words. You have to choose some keywords that characterize your website and go to the Keyword Tool to check how many people are searching them.

Recently in Italy catering schools changed their name from "Istituto Alberghiero" (Hotel Operators) to "Istituto Servizi per l'enogastronomia e l'ospitalità alberghiera" (Service Operators for Hotel Hospitality and Wine and Food"). Anyone would judge this decision as foolish because it only makes it more difficult to name them. However, it is compulsory. One of these schools is in the educational centre that I am directing. In the early years of the Internet, I promoted the SAFI ELIS Institute on search engines and until last year it was among the very first in Google ranking with the words "istituto alberghiero". When we changed the legal name in the homepage, we lost many positions on those words. We are not even within the first 100 results! Pushing on "istituto enogastronomia" or "istituto enogastronomico" was easy and we are the first or the second. However, it is useless: nobody is ever searching those words, at least so far, while thousands of people search for "istituto alberghiero" every month! We should have kept the old name along the new one—formal correctness is not always the best choice. We have an easy solution. We can buy the words and appear in the ads section. There is a low competition on the term and we can afford the 30 cents per click that are necessary to jump to the first positions in the ads when people search the two words "istituto alberghiero" and nothing else. AdWords has a very useful traffic (and expense) estimator.

Moreover, we can use Google insights to discover which are the months in the year in which those words are more requested. Words are important. Google makes suggestions, corrects typos, deals with synonyms, plurals and other variations. Study them in relation with your keywords. Very few use the Verbatim option that produces only the precise word occurrence.

4. NEW SITES

I had the opportunity of taking part to the first meeting of the promoters of Cathopedia, in Rome. Their goal is to build a Catholic encyclopaedia based on articles written by experts and has no anonymous postings. My first reaction was sceptical: all the attempts to set up a peer reviewed or a trusted wiki-encyclopaedia failed. Citizendium has only 16,000 articles, Google Knol is closing down, and Scholarpedia is ranked the 240,000 site in the Alexa popularity rank. I believe that many people wanting to write on a *wiki* do not have the time to reach a high level of accuracy on a single topic. It takes too long to write a full article. It is much easier to contribute anonymously with a paragraph or a chapter to something that is growing day by day. Many fear the judgment of the readers, others seek their personal interest. This is why a lot of those who wrote on Knol were physicians in search of personal promotion.

However, Cathopedia is not a general-purpose encyclopaedia. Its aim is to address Catholic topics with reliable sources. It may become a valuable resource for Catholics who want to know the "official" opinion of the Church. Its authors are supposed to be keener to dedicate time for the cause. Unfortunately, it seems that high-level theologians do not contribute, maybe because their time is precious. They want to spend it in scholarly level publications. Anyway, there are many priests and professors who have time enough to gather traditional literature and produce a synthesis of a topic, writing a good article. They could join the group of authors.

Some of the members of the promoting group of Cathopedia proposed to enrich it by copying and correcting Wikipedia articles. I firmly opposed this strategy. Most likely, if Google realizes that Cathopedia has almost the same content as Wikipedia, it will not show it high in rank. Instead, if Cathopedia has a completely different content on the same subject, it will be considered as a different source and will gain its ranking through its popularity.

Moreover, people will not want to link to articles on the Cathopedia if they are just a copy of the Wikipedia. They will refer to Cathopedia if its contents are original, different from any other source. I suggest you to contribute to Cathopedia. It would be very nice to have Google produce a result on keywords like "Duns Scoto" with the Wikipedia first (as usual) and Cathopedia second (it is currently eleventh in Italy). A Catholic would probably choose the second as its primary source.

5. WHAT'S IN A NAME

Let us go back to the Star of Bethlehem. Now you can reach the page through the English inters.org website, which unfortunately, by (wrong) design does not change the URL when browsing. Therefore, you cannot easily get the page address. If you reach the page starting from the disf.org/en, that is the English version of the full portal, you can read the URL but it does not tell you very much. It shows a reference number, 35.asp. The near future is to have the inters.org site with full "talking" URL: <http://inters.org/star-of-bethlehem>. Google will surely appreciate it. You may have noticed that online news use this system of full title in the URL, sometimes a bit too long. Please do not do replicate or use the Italian tax agency website—the page names are impossible to read and write!

In ELIS Centre, we recently promoted a course for domestic helpers. When we had to choose the name, we looked for an acronym that was not on the results of Google, at least in Italy—people will use that name and always find our website. We did even more. As the course is not yet a school, we bought both the domain name of the course and the future name of the school. CIFAFA is the Centro Italiano Formazione Assistenti Familiari and the domain is cifaf.it, while sifaf.it is for the future Scuola Italiana Formazione Assistenti Familiari.

If had to start an association, a company or any other entity today, I would call it with the full domain name I intend to use, so that no ambiguity would ever rise with any other institution. The MyEntityName.org association would always appear in the first place of any search engine when looking for its name. Moreover, it would be easy to mention it in an interview on the radio without having to mention a difficult to remember URL.

There are many free tools for studying the Google ranking for your keywords, like <http://www.sitemapdoc.com/serp-rank.aspx>. If you want more tools, maybe <http://www.webmaster-toolkit.com> is your choice.

5.1. Graphics, No Thanks

Qumran2.net is one of the most accessed Catholic sites in Italy, with a lot of texts and audio on catechetical topics. It is a bit of a chaos in terms of usability and readability, but the quantity and quality of content is high and that one is its winning points. I am not saying that you should not take care of graphics but, when you plan a new site, begin with the content, then build the logical structure and then dress it with graphics. Unfortunately, in many cases I saw people going the other way round, ending with a very nice empty website. They spent money for design, but with zero results.

After ensuring that your content is valuable for the users you intend to address, work on usability. Read the Jakob Nielsen useit.com suggestions—they are simple and straightforward and can improve a lot your sites. They seem to have a positive influence also on Google ranking.

6. MOBILIZING

There are more mobile phones in Italy than Italians. Most of them now can browse the Internet and we are approaching the break-even point between non-mobile and mobile browsing. In many developing countries, mobile phones are the only means to connect to the net.

While iPad and other tablets may read traditional websites with no major problem, small devices need a special setup of web pages. In most cases, you have to build a new site from scratch, changing the content to be more concise. Moreover, people tend to write less on mobile keypads and therefore you need to carefully choose short keywords to promote your mobile website.

You may also evaluate whether to build a special app for your content, especially if the site you are managing is supposed to be a frequent resource for your users. It is costly because you need at least three versions: iOS, Android, Windows Phone. Apps are now regarded as being more effective than mobile websites, but this may change in the future with a wider use of HTML 5.

7. FINAL REMARKS

As I said at the beginning, this was not a SEO crash course. Neither are the lessons, in Italian, that you find on my web page <http://www.crudele.it/lezioni>. Nevertheless they may be useful, to learn why and how to use Google tools to improve your websites. Mastering all those services is not for the faint-hearted, but you need to know of their existence in order to invest in some of them.

Young people can be a good help for you in these activities, but do not exclude the older generation. How many retired teachers are losing their time surfing the web without a goal? What about training them to assist you in promoting your cause? You may spend some money to find a good trainer for them but you will save euros or dollars later by harvesting the fruits of their volunteer work.

If you want to reach ambitious goals, you have to invest time and resources, professionally, as you are doing now while attending this seminar. And keep in mind, in 2005 John Paul II wrote in the Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*: "Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank

'among the marvelous things' which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth, also the truth about our dignity and about our destiny as his children, heirs of his eternal Kingdom."