The role of anchor text in SMME websites: higher visibility?

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the role that anchor text plays in SMME websites, and to see if it can increase website visibility to search engines. By considering past and present research, the author attempts to answer this question. The Internet consists of a huge collection of information and the more visible a website, the more likely it will be found by the appropriate users. The author also examines Google and the role anchor text plays in this major search engine. It is found that anchor text can definitely increase website visibility, but it must be used in the correct way and certain steps need to be taken to effectively use anchor text.

Introduction

The billions of webpages on the Internet that contain information are not of any use if the users who are searching for specific information cannot easily find it (Park et al/2004). Exploring the idea that anchor text can increase website visibility can be beneficial to SMME website owners so that their websites can be found by these potential clients.

The purpose of a commercial website, according to Weideman (2003), is to encourage visitors to buy goods or services offered by the website owner. This author also claims that the main aim of a website owner is to attract visitors to his/her website.

According to Thelwall (2003), web links represent both anarchy and order. This author states that few people would argue against the claim that Web linking is essentially an unregulated phenomenon. The author also states that there is order in the chaos and that search engines like Google and AltaVista successfully use the link structure of the Web to optimize search results.

So how does Google and other search engines rank webpages and does anchor text play a role in increasing website visibility? This is just one of the questions the author attempts to answer.

Anchor text

The exact wording of anchor text does carry some weight with search engines. For example, if a website is selling books on the Internet, a hypertext link to the site might read “Click here to buy books online”. A common error is to make the “Click here” part of the sentence the hyperlink, which is not using anchor text to its fullest potential. The “buy books online” part should be the hyperlink, since it describes the content of the destination webpage better. The sentence will then read, “Click here to buy books online”, where the underlined part of the
sentence is the anchor text and is pointing to the home page of the online book store (Roy 2003, Jantsch 2005).

According to Weiss (2000), there are two reasons why the “Click here” icon should not be apart of the hyperlink sentence. Firstly, only people using a mouse do in fact click, whereas users with a touch-screen or other alternative device do not click. Secondly, the words “Click” and “here” do not describe the contents of the page that it is linked to. The author also suggests using a similar method as described above.

Another author claims that the word hypertext (anchor text) was coined by Nelson who, in the 1960s, designed the first ever hypertext system called project Xanadu (George 2005). Apparently his inspiration came for an essay written by Bush in 1945 titled, As We May Think. In the essay Bush described a machine where the user could navigate a non-linear path through a trail of documents linked by concepts and represented by words.

**Google PageRank**

Google is one of the most popular search engines on the Internet. One reason it is so popular stems from the fact that it can direct large amounts of users to a specific website (Sullivan 2003). By collecting the content of webpages and parsing the content, Google uses hyperlinks among webpages to calculate a PageRank score. The PageRank calculation includes the number of incoming and outgoing links from a webpage, and favourably weights incoming links from webpages that have high PageRank scores (Brooks 2004). This in turn proves the importance of anchor text, or as it is more commonly known: hyperlinks, to the Google search engine algorithm.

**Past website studies**

The literature review is presented in order to identify current and ongoing research on anchor text and the role it plays in website visibility.

The World Wide Web is rapidly emerging as an important medium for the distribution of information related to a wide range of topics. There are more than 80 billion pages on the Internet today and the Web has doubled in size over the past three years, according to a Web Server Survey done in April 2006. According to most predictions, the majority of information will be available on the Web in 10 years. But, it is widely believed that 99% of the information on the Web is of no interest to 99% of the people (Zhang & Dong 2000). The authors also claim that looking for something valuable in this excessive share of information is as difficult as looking for a needle in a haystack. Considering these findings, there is a definite need to increase website visibility.

According to research done by Eiron & McCurley (2003), the suitability of anchor text stems from the similarity between anchor text and the queries users use in search engine searching. It is stated that anchor text is a very short summary of the document that it is pointing to and search queries are similar in
structure. Search queries are also just a few words and they express a summary of a subject that the user is interested in.

The study that Eiron & McCurley conducted consists of an experiment ran on a combination of documents on the internal and external sites of a large corpus intranet. In this experiment, approximately 20 million URLs were crawled. The authors state that, aside from the obvious content differences, the large intranet appears to mirror the commercial part of the Internet in many ways. The authors produced a graph showing the similarities between anchor text and search queries users typically submit to search engines, represented by Figure 1.

Figure 1: Anchor text vs. search queries (Eiron & McCurley 2003:4)

Figure 1 indicates the distribution of the number of terms in queries and anchor text. The authors also included the distribution of the number of terms in titles, as well as the number of distinct terms from all anchor text to a page.

If the user searches for a specific website on the Internet and his search query are similar to the anchor text of that page, the chances of him finding the website are high, according to the authors. This similarity between anchor text and search queries provides an unmistakable advantage in website visibility when using anchor text in a website.

Chambers (2005) developed an effective visibility strategy by means of a model, which provides a solid basis to ensure website visibility. The author states that there was no guarantee in increase in visibility, but that a large number of visible e-commerce websites use these elements in their company’s websites. After analyzing 144 of the leading e-commerce websites the author produced a graph, represented by Figure 2.
This graph proves that all of the websites that were analysed by Chambers had made use of anchor text, and that 90% of hypertext used in websites described the product or services being sold by that website. Furthermore, the author also developed a model which contains the leading visibility elements found in these websites (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Leading Visibility Elements</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Inclusion of meta-tags</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hypertext / Anchor text</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>No Flash or fewer than 50% of content</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>No Visible Link Spamming</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Prominent Link Popularity</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>No Frames</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Prominent Domain Names</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Prominent Headings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>No Banner Advertising</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Prominent HTML Naming conventions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Elements of visibility (Chambers 2005:128)

The lower the rank (last column) of the element, the more important it is. Chambers illustrates the importance of anchor text in this table by ranking it second.

The word ‘cloaking’ is defined by Brooks (2004) in the following way:

"The term 'cloaking' is used to describe a Website that returns altered Webpages to search engines crawling the site. In other words, the Webserver is programmed to return different content to Google than it returns to regular users, usually in an attempt to distort search engine rankings."
This can degrade the accuracy and quality of search results. With hypertext, the
text description represents the destination of a link, this description can
therefore affect the perception of the user if the link and text are dissimilar. This
resemblance makes it difficult for spammers to manipulate search engine
results by making use of inadequate hypertext links (Chambers 2005).
A study by Cheng and Patterson explores the proper use of iconic hyperlinks on
e-commerce websites. Iconic hyperlinks are similar to normal hyperlinks but it is
represented by a small picture instead of just words. In their first experiment
they tested the quality of icons by studying the ability of users to easily identify
the functions of the icons. In their second experiment, an empirical study was
designed to explore the actual effects on functional performance time of using
certain icons, icons plus text and just text. This was done with the idea in mind
to provide website designers with suggestions for improvement (Cheng &
Patterson 2006).

Three different formats were used in the experiment, 'identifiable', 'medium' and
'vague'. Identifiable being icons, text plus icons and just text links that are easily
recognisable. A medium link is less recognisable and largely vague links are very
hard to identify and link to the task it must perform. The results of their
experiment are depicted in Figure 3.

![Chart showing performance time vs. icon category.](image)

*Figure 3: Performance time vs. icon category (Cheng & Patterson 2006:4)*

Performance time was measured in milliseconds (ms). Although text links and
icons had the same result in the 'identifiable' category, ordinary text links had
the best overall performance, making them the best choice when creating a
website.
George (2005) describes a scenario where, if the word *cycles* is used as keyword in a search on Google, it returns approximately 7 million search results. The top result is:

http://www.raleighbikes.com/

According to George if the page source is analysed neither the word *cycles* nor the stem word *cycle* can be found on the page. The site has a page rank of 6. By investigating further, if a special Google option is used for searching for:

Allinanchor:cycles

The raleighbikes.com page is again the top site. The special Google option ‘Allinanchor’ ranks sites on inbound links containing the anchor text with a specific keyword, in this case the keyword is *cycles*.

George (2005) also states that, according to the example given, it is not necessary for the target page to contain the anchor text. It would seem reasonable that the anchor page is at least related to the target in some or other way. In the example, many of the sites linked to the raleighbikes.com page were cycle related. Table 2 describes the relationship between anchor text versus page rank, as it was captured by George.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Keyword Density</th>
<th>Page Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><a href="http://www.raleighbikes.com/">http://www.raleighbikes.com/</a></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sevencycles.com/">http://www.sevencycles.com/</a></td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><a href="http://www.evanscycles.com/">http://www.evanscycles.com/</a></td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><a href="http://www.intensecycles.com/">http://www.intensecycles.com/</a></td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><a href="http://www.yeticycles.com/">http://www.yeticycles.com/</a></td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><a href="http://www.salsacycles.com/">http://www.salsacycles.com/</a></td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bontrager.com/">http://www.bontrager.com/</a></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><a href="http://www.aardvarkcycles.com/">http://www.aardvarkcycles.com/</a></td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><a href="http://www.chainreactioncycles.com/">http://www.chainreactioncycles.com/</a></td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><a href="http://www.universalcycles.com/">http://www.universalcycles.com/</a></td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Anchor text vs. Page Rank (George 2005:13)

George (2005) further claims that examining the first 100 sites returned by Google shows that there were a few sites with page of rank seven and at least a dozen other sites with a page rank of six. From Table 2, keyword density (the amount of times the keyword *cycles* is found on the page) ranges from 0 to 13.33%. Anchor text is more significant than PageRank as the top sites, shown by Table 2, are ranked higher than some sites with a PageRank of seven. George also claims that anchor text carries more weight than on-page factors such as high keyword density.
Conclusion

To summarise, the Internet is rapidly evolving and it is an important medium for distributing information and services, according to a web server survey (Web Server Survey 2006). The Internet has a vast amount of information but finding the correct information for your specific needs can be a problem (Zhang & Dong 2000).

The similarity between anchor text and user queries provides an unmistakable advantage in website visibility. This is only true if the anchor text is used in the proper way. By following a few simple steps, a website can increase its rank in a search engine. It must also be remembered that anchors are not only there for the benefit of the search engines, but will direct visitors to your site.

Some search engines are starting to adopt the link anchor method of finding information on the Internet. Anchor text can now be included in a website to make it easier for search engines to find the website. If the owner of the website knows what the easiest way for the search engine is to find information, the owner just makes it easier for the search engine and points it in the right direction. Anchor text is not just easier to find, but also faster when it comes to functional performance, as proved by authors Cheng and Patterson (2006).

Google is one of the most popular search engines on the Internet today because of its ability to direct large amounts of visitors to a specific website. In an article by the founders of Google, Brin and Page state that anchor text is treated in a special way in Google and that it plays a part in linking webpages (Brin & Page 1998). Using anchor text it makes it difficult for spammers to manipulate search engine results and increasing the probability that the intended query results will be returned.

Of all the ways of linking webpages together - by icons or icons and text, the most effective and reliable way still remains hypertext (Cheng & Patterson 2006).

References


