

Site speed + more technical SEO pitfalls

With today's web filled with non-optimized sites and short-sighted design, all you have to do is click around, or tap on your smartphone, to find examples of sites that don't load optimally and aren't designed for a great user experience.

But users (your existing and future customers) still demand a LOT. It's the Internet's fault. We want instant gratification — or else your competitor's a few seconds away.



How important is site speed to SEO/UX? One study found that 40% of people close a website if it takes longer than 3 seconds to load.

This is not-so-great for website owners — particularly massive, clunky, [mobile-unfriendly sites](#) with thousands and thousands of digital assets to manage — but good news for SEOs. There's no shortage of work to do.

In 2016, the field can be pretty easily broken down into **on-page** and **off-page** SEO.

On-page essentially refers to site optimization for users AND search bots...

including content and HTML. (In fact, just about any strategy to improve your site's indexability, accessibility or keyword relevance can be considered on-page SEO.)

Off-page falls under the broad "digital marketing" umbrella — in essence, strategic efforts to build up your brand's online presence and site authority (link-building tactics like guest blogging and directory submissions are common examples).

Out of these, on-page SEO's a bit more vague, I think; but what's clearer to me at least is the basic SEO content, URL, and site structure (IA) optimization work that's required in the very early stages of building a website. Or should be. As a strategist, I've picked up lots of experience in this area thanks to [site redesign projects](#) for a few different clients.

But there's a whole 'nother skillset within on-page strategy that those in the SEO world, including myself, tend to refer to as [technical SEO](#). (A nice infographic breakdown in that link.)

It's definitely important. It's not as obvious.

What is technical SEO?

Do you need to be a developer or coder to "get" technical SEO? Not at all.

Sure, basic HTML knowledge, and the ability to see what's going on when you click "View Source" in Chrome, is quite useful. If you look at the source code, and can say "that's a ton of javascript," for example, it helps you to see why your site is loading slowly.... which negatively affects users' experience and (no coincidence) organic search rankings.

That's not you? Well, fortunately, for the less technically inclined of us there are some robust tools available to assist with diagnosing and fixing site crawl, indexability and performance issues.

Here are some critical technical SEO items I'd suggest checking using [Search Console](#), [GT Metrix](#), and plug-ins (if you have a [WordPress site](#)). By no means a complete list, but it can help you build basic some technical SEO proficiency and avoid common pitfalls that will have users quickly looking elsewhere.

- **Site indexing & .XML sitemap** (Search Console: Crawl. Is your site well indexed — meaning Google and other search engines can crawl it and interpret it as intended? Do you have a working .XML sitemap submitted? (Crawl > Sitemaps))
- **Broken links, or 404 errors** (Search Console: Crawl > Crawl Errors. For broken links spotted here that you want to be found by users and indexed by search engines, you should redirect one-to-one to the relevant URL address using 301 redirects. Here's a [301 redirect plug-in](#) I like.)
- **Robots.txt** (Search Console: Crawl > "Robots.txt tester". Here you can check and test your robots.txt set-up, which blocks parts of the site you don't want crawled by search engines — in other words, pages that don't offer value for organic search. Robots.txt is common for things like shopping cart and search result pages. If you see URLs that shouldn't be getting crawled in Search Console, you can modify robots.txt using Yoast SEO>Tools>editor.)
- **Rel="canonical"** ([Yoast SEO](#) (WordPress plugin). With a simple piece of code, you can properly identify to search engines the "canonical" version of a URL or domain — the version you want indexed. This is particularly useful to avoid duplicate content issues, like when you're [switching to "HTTPS"](#) or have an e-commerce page with lots of filters that can modify the URL.)
- **Duplicate titles & meta descriptions** (Search Console: Search Appearance > HTML improvements. This can help you locate more obvious, critical [duplicate content issues](#).)
- **Page loading speed** ([Page speed can get complicated](#) — more below — but I'd suggest checking out GT Metrix for a big-picture view of site speed and performance and any issues that are **clearly** slowing it down.)
- **Mobile-friendliness** ([Google Mobile-friendly Test](#) reports any technical issues with your site's UI on mobile devices.)
- **Multi-language sites** (Search Console: Search Traffic > International Targeting. For multi-language sites, check that your site's usage of Hreflang tags is correct. (For single-country sites, you can optionally specify your target country from here by clicking the "Country" tab.))

Site speed: quick tips to get faster

In a recent consulting project, in conversation with a large media site's developer about loading times for the media-heavy page templates, the term "micro-optimization" came up. Translation: only so much we could do with the time and resources available. Focus on the big picture.

You're not a massive site like Amazon that will gain benefits from a .10 millisecond difference in loading time, either?

Ok, great.

Using a tool like Google's PageSpeed Insights, you see that a broad range of suggestions will come up, from using caching solutions (yes, a caching tool IS recommended) to optimizing your images. But NO, you don't need to act on and address every single suggestion contained there. Discretion is key. Compressing an image to save 1kb, for example, won't impact site speed or your SEO. 5 MB? Different story.

Also, sometimes you'll have theme limitations or CMS hurdles that affect what you can and can't do with CSS and Javascript.

When you use 3rd party JS like a Facebook plugin, you can't affect the browser caching like the tool tells you to. Only Facebook itself can do this. And for the most common website situations, moving JS to the footer ("eliminate render-blocking Javascript") so it loads asynchronously isn't worth the effort, IMHO, unless you're a developer and know for sure that functionality won't break.

So, what *can* you do?

1) Don't go crazy with plugins. Not all plugin scripts add the same weight and complexity to your pages, of course, but in general it pays off for site speed to have simpler code, fewer HTTP requests, and selective usage of plugins. (There are WP solutions available to load Javascript asynchronously.)

2) Compress your images. Easy! You can cut the size of images by as much as 75% using online image compression tools like [tinyPNG](#). This will make a difference for nearly any type of website, since nearly any type of website has images.

3) Use GZIP and caching. [GZIP](#) is a type of file compression tool, while browser caching helps speed up page load by ensuring your browser doesn't have to re-load all of page resources if you've visited it before. Again, be careful with loads of plugin scripts (and do some basic research to make sure the plugin is stable and plays nice with others), but WordPress has plugins for both. I've been using [W3 Total Cache](#) on my site for a few months now with no complaints.

4) International site? Use a CDN. An obvious benefit for international SEO, but more locally targeted sites can realize [page speed benefits](#), too. CDNs (content delivery networks) store and serve your site from data centers that are geographically closer to your users, so they can provide more reliable and consistent load time and access across locations. CloudFlare's basic package is free, so it's the one I would tend to recommend first.

The bottom line is the bottom line

In other words: in SEO, your #1 concern is the same as your clients' concern: improve revenue and ROI. Tracking your SEO efforts with measurable, absolute goals, like conversion rate % — whether monetary or not — will help keep perspective so no one gets too overwhelmed by all the details.

You can't expect your clients to understand technical SEO in the slightest. It's great if they do. But as you go, the communication of progress towards clearly established goals will at least help make the work "feel" more concrete to them.

Especially if those goals include greater revenue. □