



Optimize for Visitors First, Search Engines Second

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The ultimate role of a search engine is to optimize result ranking by:

1. Satisfying user intent in the shortest time possible (i.e., high relative result ranking).
2. Assigning a high result rank to sites that provide the best user experience.

Search engines have come a long way in predicting visitor intent, and their ranking criteria now approximate visitor experience by incorporating sites' ease of navigation. Ranking algorithms, such as Google's, don't care about the causes of a site's quality. To capture quality of content and design, they rely on massive data extracted from Web sites and visitor behavior. When there are multiple sites satisfying a user's intent, the search engine should assign a higher rank to the one that provides better user experience.

A site that is designed only with search engines in mind is not a site that makes users welcome.¹ For example, artificially increasing word density can make a site's text harder to read, and readability is basic to the visitor experience. Expect the same problem if you try to foster [long tail](#) marketing by sticking in key words that have nothing to do with the services provided. Moreover, ranking results do not necessarily correlate with high conversion rate of visits to purchases. If a site's design is unfriendly, the conversion rates tend to be low.

If a domain name gets its traffic through direct navigation, the Web site developer shouldn't have search engines uppermost in mind when it comes to design. Of course, if your site doesn't show up on the non-sponsored, organic, results, you can increase visibility without compromising visitor experience. The options, which you can find in popular books, include:

1. Site marketing through [Google AdWords](#), reciprocal links, etc.
2. Personal marketing through presentations, articles, etc.

In the end, it's a question of balance. Search engines do's and don'ts should indeed be implemented, but they should not be the main criteria for site content optimization. ■

¹ For a more general discussion, see Christopher Meyer and Andre Schwager, "[Understanding Customer Experience](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007.