

Ancestral Journeys

A Snapshot of SEO's

Understanding Search Engine Optimization and
How It Can Affect Your Genealogy Blog

Including a Step-by-Step Guide

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To learn more about the merger between technology and genealogy research, please visit www.ancestraljourneys.weebly.com. You can find discussion topics on technology usage, integrating apps and features into your research model and more. Working on research in the Rocky Mountains? You'll see that, too, as well as Jen's professional family history services.

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*My thanks go to Stephanie Pitcher Fishman of Corn & Cotton Genealogy
and Marian Regan.*

Ancestral Journeys

Telling the Story of the Rockies...

One Person At A Time

The Rocky Mountains hold many secrets. From the northern edge of Montana to the foothills of Central New Mexico, Ancestral Journeys can help you find your ancestor, and their secrets, wherever they lie in our valleys and peaks.



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SEO for the Genealogy Blogger

Writing a genealogy or family history blog can be extremely rewarding for researchers on all levels. From the professional to the hobbyist, and everyone in between, blogs have become a dynamic and exciting tool; not only in expressing our finds, but also in connecting with other people in our ever growing family.

If you are writing a blog, and want to expand your audience, this is for you! An easy to understand guide on how to use the power of SEO's to help your stories grow wings and take flight... directly into the search engine of your long lost cousin.

Am I an SEO expert? No. I'm a genealogist, first and foremost. There are thousands of articles, blogs, and books describing how to do this very thing; and all of those sources have one thing in common with the guide you are currently enjoying: no one can guarantee results. I can, however, give you a lesson in the basics, and put it into context that a family historian – at any level of experience – can understand and put into practice.

More questions? Please contact me; I would love to hear from you! You can find me via my website at: <http://ancestraljourneys.weebly.com/>.

I hope you enjoy this guide and find it useful.

~ Jen

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Introduction to SEO

SEO. If you cruise the internet, you may have come across this acronym. You may have thought it was not relevant to you, your blog, or your search for ancestors. It is, in fact, important.

SEO stands for "Search Engine Optimization", and no, it is not scary.

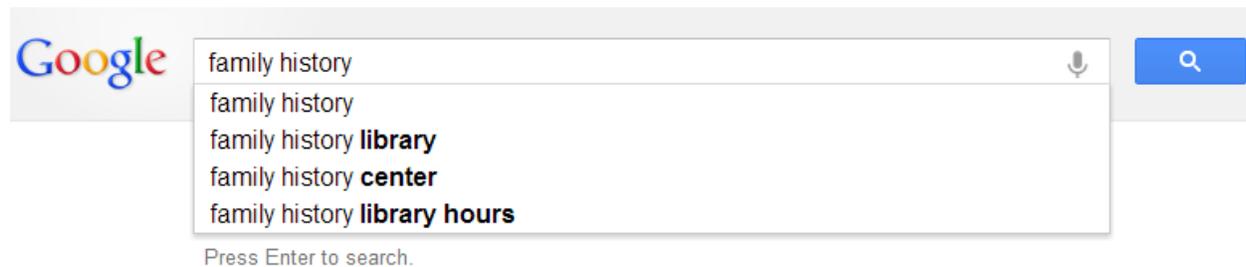
Definition: Search Engine Optimization. The methods used to boost the ranking or frequency of a Web site in results returned by a search engine in an effort to maximize user traffic to the site.

Abbreviation: SEO.

What is it, exactly?

Simply put, SEO is the way a search engine reacts to a website and lists it in your results page.

We'll use Google for an example. When you search for "Family History", you may get something like this:



Google Search for "Family History". SEO in a Picture.

Google automatically tries to generate a search term or combination of key words for you. Guess what? This is SEO in a picture, a snapshot. If you have a blog or a website, and you search for it in Google, *without using your company name or title*, what pops up in this list? Whatever those words and terms are, you need to make sure they are included in your SEO strategy.

We are going to refer to these search terms as “key words” throughout this guide.

Definition: Key Words. Words that are designated as important to the content of the site, and could be used as search terminology.

Searches can be conducted in numerous ways, and there are whole books on just how to make the most of Google. And that becomes part of the trick to simple SEO: using and taking advantage of any and all key words, terms, combinations and variations that you can come up with.

A typical simple search in my day might look something like this:

“Tolman Brown” + Michigan + genealogy

This format could be considered essentially universal, as more and more of us become better at using and manipulating search terms. Yes, there are other ways of conducting a search. Take this out of the genealogy world for a moment, and consider the last time you searched for a good idea for dinner. It may have looked like this:

"Spaghetti recipe" or "world's best spaghetti"

You do not always use a complicated search pattern to find what you are looking for, and neither does everyone else. The trick is to apply these terms to your unique site, and allow the search engine to identify what your site is about and related to. It makes it easier for the search engine to find topics, match them with how we all conduct searches, and the result is more traffic directed to your site.

Apply key words so search engines can find your site.

Search engines work by “crawling”, and then “indexing” the Internet. They work 24/7 to find key words on sites in order to give that site relevance. Therefore, the more key words you have associated with your blog, the more the search engine will be able to identify.

(Do all search engines' work the same? No. They all have similar processes, but vary in small ways. For the purposes of this guide, the differences between search engines are not the most relevant discussion point. So, unless you are going to be heavily involved in SEO, beyond the scope of this guide, you don't need to worry about it much.)

You have to remember that there is not a human on the other end of the search engine; it is all 1's and 0's, and that means that you have to tell the computer - the search engine - what to do. It is not intuitive. It can only see what you show it, and you have to open those doors for the search engine to see your content.

For example, if you have a blog about the Jones Family in Saskatchewan, Canada, then you need to use all of those terms in your SEO:

- Jones
- Family
- Jones Family
- Saskatchewan
- Canada
- Saskatchewan Canada
- Family History
- Genealogy
- Ancestry
- Etc.

Why should I do this?

Simple. You want people to find your writing. Don't you? Are you writing your blog to find other relatives? Well, they search for surnames, locations, photos, etc. Lead them to you with the right terms. Are you writing about your business, or general methodology? Use the applied terms to communicate what you are writing about. All we're doing here is laying down that trail of bread crumbs.

- "Why does it matter if your site is at the top of the results page or on page 42?"

Wouldn't a dedicated searcher find it either way? Well, yes and no. I recently read that the average user in the U.S. only looks through the first two pages of search results, and then either adapts the search terms or stops all together. On Google, that means that they look through approximately twenty results, and a hand full of advertisements.

- "So what? Genealogy is reportedly the second most popular hobby - they are still going to find it."

Eventually, yes, they *could*. Imagine that this long lost cousin finds you *today*, or finds you in *five years*. What have you missed out on? What kind of relationship could you have developed with this new branch of the family in that time?

There is a whole series of "what if's" here, and my favorite one is this: "*what if long lost cousin's grandmother is still alive today, but dies next year?*" The higher you are on that list of search results, the better off you will be.

*The higher you are on that
list of search results, the
better off you will be.*

Think about that for just a minute.

Convinced yet? Ready to start? I hope so.

The Simple How-To

(Here comes the technical jargon. Please refer to the Glossary on page 14 for more information.)

Simple SEO can happen very easily, and very naturally, once you understand that you are telling the search engine what to look for. There are some great tools out there to help you, from incredibly straight forward to complicated algorithm's designed for programmers.

Use Google's [Keyword Tool](#) (a part of their AdWords program) to identify the best, and most common, search terms for your blog. Just putting my blog and my webpage through this one tool, and it proved to be incredibly useful. When you go through this process, be sure to put in multiple search combinations. You have the option of putting in a word or phrase, a specific website, or a category.

Try each one separately, but then try a combination search, then another one. The more you combine and rearrange the search, the more variety you will get in your results. Why is variety important? Remember, this is how other people search for your topic, so the more key words you incorporate, the better results you will have, leading to more traffic on your site.

You are trying to locate the words other people use to search for your blog.

Here's an example. The first search I conducted listed only the web address of my personal genealogy blog: [Ancestral Breezes](#). Most of my results looked something like this:

“Free genealogy sites”
“My family history”
“Family history websites”
“Free ancestry sites”
“Free family tree search”

Notice the trend? Nearly half of my results included the word free. Keep in mind, I am trying to incorporate stories and research methodology for my *genealogy business*, Ancestral Journeys. From this, I can conclude that it might be a good idea to have a “free” tool of some kind on my site, available to all and sundry, so that search results once again point to me.

Additionally, I have included many regional stories and reviews of repositories in my blog to generate traffic to my business website. I want Google to identify those as related key words, and to index my “focus area” topics, like Rocky Mountains, Colorado, and western United States. This is not a tool that “crawls” your site, it works from the web address you search with, or the category you use. Once again, you have to open the doors for the system to work for you.

I adapted the search to include the key word “Colorado” in addition to my blog address. The second list of results included items such as “map of Colorado”, “Colorado Mountains”, and “facts about Colorado”. Now I know: I can combine the results of both searches to expand the likelihood that search engines will associate my site with this region.

The list would then look something like this:

- Colorado family history
- Colorado genealogy
- Ancestry sites in Colorado
- Family tree search in Colorado

One more time.

Utilizing the Word or Phrase and the Category options only, I searched for “Rocky Mountains” and “Ancestry & Genealogy”. The search came back empty. Zero results. What does this tell me? That combining those two specific phrases will do very little, if nothing, for my website. Google, at least, has not identified those two terms together. (You can suggest terms to Google, and they can in turn either accept it or deny the suggestion.) Over time, it may help, because I might be the only website out there that put those together, but it also may take years to see those results, as someone would have to enter that specific search, and the crawling process would have to identify it.

Use Keywords... and That's It?

Is it enough to just “assign” key words to your blog format and walk away? Well, no. There are a few other things that matter, that truly make a difference in the amount of traffic to your site.

1. Use keywords in the title of your post, and chose that title carefully.

Many writers use very powerful, emotional words in their title to attract readers. It's important to consider that search engines are also crawling the *title*. They literally look at every single word on the site.

If you are writing a post about your search of the 1860 Census for John Smith in Michigan, your title should reflect that in some way. An example might be, “Exhuming the Smith's from the 1860 Census”. In the first one or two paragraphs, you need to rephrase that somehow, using the same or similar key words. You should use them lightly throughout the entire post, and you should certainly use them as your post “labels”. (Don't overlook this feature on your blog posts; use it to its fullest capacity.)

2. Title and content need to match... but be balanced.

In the previous paragraph, I stated that you need to repeat your key words throughout your post. But be careful! If you use the same word over and over, the search engine will “know” that its being done intentionally. The computers may not be intuitive, but programmers have built them to recognize repetition, and too much in this case is a bad thing. It will assume you have done this to “trick” the search, and will dismiss your post as irrelevant.

3. Photographs and images deserve to be categorized, too.

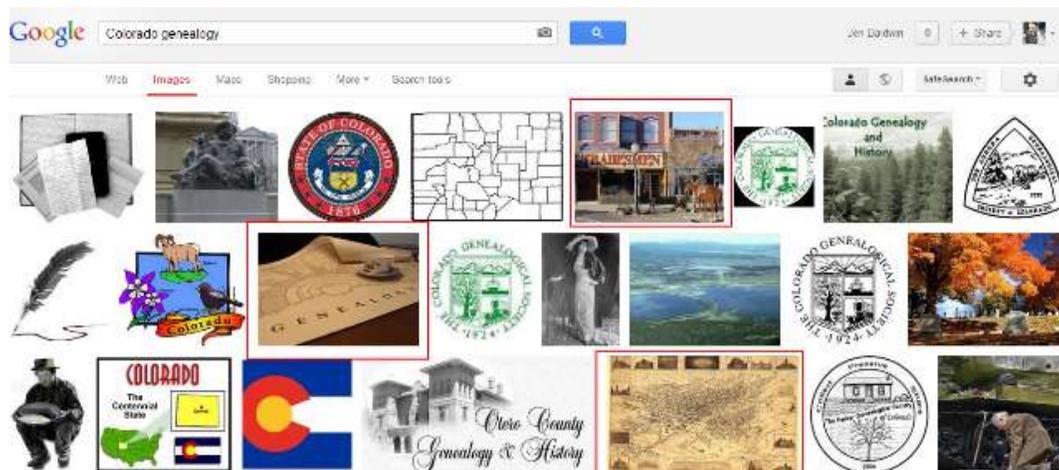
Most of us know the common “rule” that blog posts should contain at least one or two images to attract attention. It's the flash that attracts readers to scroll beyond your title or tag line. It's the... “Oh, look! Shiny thing!”

There are ways to embed key words into your image, and most blogging platforms make this fairly easily. You can determine the process for your site, but make sure this is done every time. Why? Have you ever conducted

a Google Image search? It's essentially the same as a standard Google search, but it brings images back to you, instead of a results list.

When you produce a post on your blog about Great Uncle Albert, and his life in rural Ohio, those images make a strong impact. Perhaps a distant relative is looking for his face, his farm, his team of horses. Whatever you have, it can be a strong tool in linking back to your blog. Once readers' arrive at your site, they realize the image was just the appetizer, and the content is truly the gourmet meal they were hoping for!

(This is technically referred to as AltText, but for consistency purposes, I have remained with "key words". Don't let this confuse you as you implement this process in your own blog.)



Google Images Search for "Colorado Genealogy".

Note, at least three of the images at the top of the results page are from my blog: it works!

4. Make Connections!

Connect your site to anything else that you can. The more your site is associated with other sites, the more "reliable" it appears to be to the search engine.

I have a blog, a website, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, LinkedIn... the list is probably familiar. All of those profiles and pages should link back to each other, but most importantly, to *your blog or website*. That is where you are trying to drive traffic, and you need to pick one. Yes, just one.

All links should go back to one primary site. Just one.

One primary site to push everyone towards. Think of this site as your corporate office, and all the connections to social media sites, blogs, websites or other locations on the internet, are your franchise offices. As good as they might be, those branch locations have to come

back to the main headquarters for marketing campaigns, national sales, standard operating procedures, etc.

From there, you can provide links and images and fun graphics to get to the others. If we assume that the overall goal is to gain more traffic to your genealogy blog, then that should be your “corporate office”. Somewhere on that page, you need to have links to all those other sites, and vice versa. Your Facebook profile should include a direct link to your blog. Your Pinterest account should include a direct link to your blog. You get the idea.

Networking will go a long way. If a friend or colleague also writes about genealogy, then exchange logos or pictures and link to each other’s sites. It will only add value to both sites, and in return, you will both gain leverage in the SEO game. You can do the same thing on varying pages in your website; this is referred to as Cross Linking.

The other factor. (Yes, one more.) When people click on your links via social media or email, the same effect takes place. Search engines pick up on the history of your site, and the more readers you have – unique or regular – can improve your ranking on the list. Frequent traffic communicates to the search engine that the site has credibility, it has substance. As the popularity of your site increases, so too will your standing in the search results.

One Hour A Month

Once you establish your basic SEO process, you are generally good to go. For a while.

This is something you should look at on a regular basis, but it is up to you to determine that schedule. If it is truly important, and you really want to get big numbers, then add an SEO trend checkup to your monthly calendar. Make sure you are still using the correct key words, and all of your links are working. If this is a “take it or leave it” situation, then every six months or so will do. I have found, after that initial investment of time that it requires *less than an hour* of my time to ensure that everything is still properly in place.

Just as with anything else that involves technology of any kind, SEO’s are constantly changing and best practices change along with them. “Experts” offer a myriad of reading material in their own blogs and websites, each one designed to lead you directly to them. The basics, however, will not change, at least, not right away.

Search engines are designed to “crawl” and “index”, and will do so for the foreseeable future. People will still naturally be inclined to use certain key words in internet searches, and they will also be naturally persuaded by the “ease” of auto-fill when conducting those searches. Genealogy will always be genealogy.

Don't worry; genealogy will always be genealogy, no matter what happens with technology.

If you feel like you need more... more content, more education, more work on your site; resources are abundant, and so are consultants. This is definitely something that can be outsourced, and is truly a top contender for that kind of service. You’re supposed to be researching, anyway, remember?

Step by Step: How Do I Do All of This?

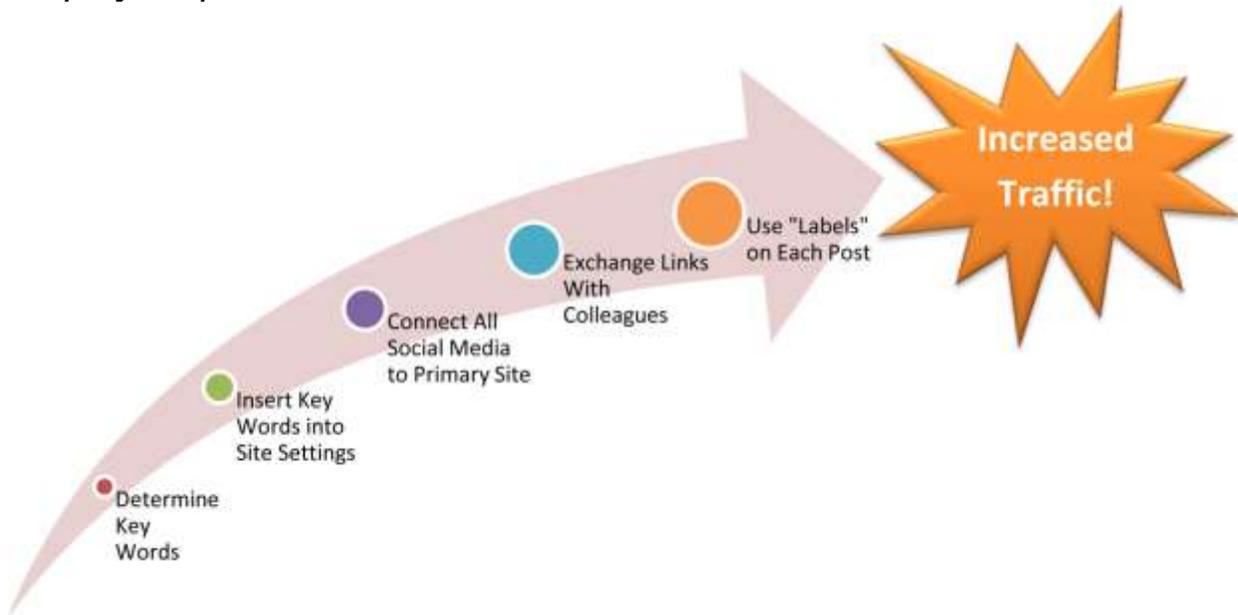


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1. Determine key words. Use Google AdWords, a search engine that auto fills terms for you as you type, or simply your imagination. Be as creative as you can, and come up with as many different combinations as you can. Make a list.
2. Insert key words into your site settings. Each blogging or website platform does this differently. Find the settings options for SEO and fill in the blanks. Use a tutorial if you need to, or refer to the Q&A for the site host.
3. Connect all social media to primary site. Make sure you have links to each of your Social Media profiles on your primary site, and make sure that all roads lead back to one destination: your primary. Use the same email address and web address for *everything*. This includes leaving comments on other blogs!
4. Exchange links with colleagues. Go to your local society meeting and ask other bloggers if they are willing to trade logos. Email me. Email or comment on posts from other bloggers that you follow.

- Connect with digi-mags, free genealogy web rings like RootsWeb or Trails to the Past. Connect with any and all websites you can find that relate in any way to your topic, your geographical research focus, your brick wall ancestor.
5. Use labels on each post. Never publish a post without them! These labels will in many ways mirror your SEO key words.
 6. Increased traffic! It may take time, and results are, of course, “not guaranteed”, but the more time you spend learning about and developing the back end of your blog, the more results you will eventually see. This means better chances at connecting with that long lost cousin that just may have the document you need to solidify an ancestral line or disprove a residual theory!

Final Word

The most important thing to remember, always, when it comes to blogging, and really any writing, is that *content is King*. Work towards your voice, create stories and engage your audience. Keep them coming back. Use some, or all, of these SEO tricks in the background. But always, always, always, put out quality over quantity. Create an environment that encourages return visits, that draws people to add you to their list, their email, their feed. Convince them that they simply cannot wait for your next post.

When you have accomplished that, they will share. And share some more. Then their friends will share... and well, you get the point.

Glossary

- AdWords (by Google): A PPC program where web masters can create their own ads and choose keywords.
 - Key Word Tool: A tool provided by Google to identify related words that are used in searching the internet.
 - Within AdWords are, Word or Phrase, Website and Category: three search options to explore the Key Word Tool.
- Algorithms: A set of instructions for solving a problem.
- AltText: Alternative text allows the content and function of an image to be understood by text-only readers.
- Cross Linking: the process of hyper linking pages within one website, or linking to external sites, often used in regard to search engine optimization.
- Labels, within blog posts: Easy way to categorize your blog post by topic or subject. Using these labels allows readers to quickly identify other, similar posts within your site.
- Ranking (within search engine's): the order in which a list of search results is compiled

About the Author



Jen Baldwin, Genealogist and Family Historian, is the owner of [Ancestral Journeys](#), a genealogical research company based out of Breckenridge, Colorado.

Her personal research journey began over a decade ago, and life experiences have led to an expertise in the Western United States, specifically focused on the Rocky Mountain corridor. Her recent work has led her to collaboration with the [Breckenridge Heritage Alliance](#), the Girl Scouts of Colorado, and as a volunteer site coordinator for the internet based Trails to the Past.

As a writer, she contributes a monthly column to the digi-mag, [The In-Depth Genealogist](#), as well as feature articles in publications such as [Irish Lives Remembered](#); and writes as the “[Breckenridge Genealogy Examiner](#)”.

Additionally, Mrs. Baldwin maintains [Conference Keeper](#), a listing of all genealogy and family history related conferences around the world.

You can find all of her information, and her social media connections, at www.ancestraljourneys.weebly.com.