

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION is critical if you want to get your website noticed, and your products in front of consumers searching for your brand online. But SEO is more than just

figuring out how your site can perform well in organic search rankings—it can also improve your site's overall performance.

How do you know you are taking the best possible approach to ensuring your brand and your site show up in search listings where and when you want them to? True SEO expertise is figuring out how to build websites that appeal to search engine spiders as much as they do people.

This Ad Age Insights white paper, written by SEO expert C.J. Newton, lays out important aspects to consider before you start rebuilding your website, from making sure HTML code works for you instead of against you to selecting keywords that will attract the right kind of users to your site.

REMEMBER THE FOUR C'S: CODE, CONTENT, CONNECTIVITY AND COMMITMENT

[Advanced Search](#)
[Language Tools](#)

Search

I'm Feeling Lucky

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 2
 - THE FOUR C'S

CODE 2
 - LEAN, MEANINGFUL AND W3C COMPLIANT
 - WYSIWYG DEVELOPMENT

CONTENT 6
 - HOW ARE CONSUMERS SEARCHING FOR YOUR PRODUCT?
 - PREMIUM, HIGH VALUE, MEDIUM VALUE AND MAGNET KEYWORDS

CONNECTIVITY 7
 - INTERSITE CONNECTIVITY
 - INTRASITE CONNECTIVITY
 - NAVIGATION AND ARCHITECTURE

COMMITMENT 16
 - PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

CONCLUSION 16

CHARTS

CHART 1: 10 DISCONNECTED WEBSITES 7

INTERSITE LINK POPULARITY

CHART 2: DICONNECTED WEBSITES 7

CHART 3: SITE A LINKS TO SITE C 8

CHART 4: SITE A AND SITE B LINK TO SITE C 9

CHART 5: SITE A LINKS TO SITES B AND C 10

INTRASITE LINK POPULARITY

CHART 6: HOME PAGE AND 15 SUBPAGES 12

CHART 7: HOME PAGE AND 5 SUBPAGES 13

CHART 8: HOME PAGE, 5 SUBPAGES AND 6 SUB-SUBPAGES 13

CHART 9: HOME PAGE, 5 SUBPAGES AND 10 SUB-SUBPAGES 14

CHART 10: NON-OPTIMAL SITE ARCHITECTURE 15

➔ MORE ON ADAGE.COM

This is one in a series of white papers published by Advertising Age. To see other Ad Age white papers and to obtain additional copies of this one, go to AdAge.com/whitepapers

Introduction

BY C.J. NEWTON cnewton@seologic.com

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION is more than just figuring out how your website can perform well in organic search rankings—it also can improve your site’s usability, accessibility and overall performance.

Hundreds of well-intentioned, and not so well-intentioned, companies and individuals offer search engine optimization services. Depending on the state of your website, the words or phrases you select as goals and the competitive nature of the battles for visibility you choose to fight, some of those companies may be able to make changes to your site that achieve some degree of success in organic search.

Most will suggest edits to the text on your pages, and to some degree, to parts of the underlying code, usually title elements and meta tags. Some will build new pages designed to win for specific pages, also known as doorway pages. Some will even perform a technical analysis of your site using software such as Covario Organic Search Insight, WebPosition Gold or Web CEO. Others will submit your site to thousands of other sites to increase your link popularity. A few have even developed their own network of sites that they can use to instantly add links to yours and boost its link popularity. But, of course, if your engagement with them ends, your link popularity drops as well.

While all of these services can be beneficial, true search engine optimization comprises a broader set of skills than simply copywriting or link building. It’s not just a matter of editing content, changing keyword density, building link popularity, or adding title elements or meta tags. True SEO expertise is figuring out how to build websites that appeal to search engine spiders as much as they do to people.

A typical SEO project involves an extensive analysis of your business, a review of your online and offline marketing efforts, and research into the actual searching behavior of your potential clients or customers. The goal is to learn how people are thinking about your industry by looking at how they search the internet. Once an SEO firm knows precisely how people are searching for information on the resources, products or services you have to offer, a detailed analysis of the competition can be started. This analysis is used to determine how much effort it

will take to win for each of the search engine phrases identified. Then, a decision can be made with full knowledge of the costs (time, investment in your site, investment in content and online resource development, investment in increasing your link popularity) and benefits (quality and quantity of visitors) associated with choosing any particular keyword phrase goal. At that point, you and the SEO firm can choose your targets wisely, focusing first on phrases that are highly likely to indicate a consumer or potential client is in buying mode.

After your keyword phrase targets are chosen, the SEO firm will do a comprehensive analysis of your existing site by reviewing the code used to generate it. You are most likely not interested in what happens behind the scenes on your site, but for search engines, what happens there is critical. Search engines don’t have “eyes” to “see” your site; they simply scan the code. For this reason, it is critical that the SEO experts you hire are also experts in standards-based web and application development.

The next step is to create a plan for rebuilding your site so that it includes the content your visitors are seeking (determined by the keyword research and analysis) and one that uses optimized, standards-based code. The SEO firm will either create the recommended content and resources, or work with you to make sure that it is created in a search engine-optimized fashion.

After your website has been rehabilitated, the SEO firm will work continuously to get it the recognition it deserves on the internet. By getting other websites to cite or reference yours, you build your site’s link popularity (a measure of the quality and quantity of websites that link to your site), and you provide more pathways for search engine spiders to follow that lead to your site. Also, an SEO firm will typically consult with you on an ongoing basis to ensure that your site is growing in search rankings and constantly updated with new content.

It is critical for any website looking to strengthen its SEO muscle that it creates a plan that leads to the site naturally attracting visitors by winning top ranking on the major search engines for terms and phrases most likely to be searched by customers and potential customers. The plan should take a fully integrated approach to web development by focusing on the Four C’s: Code, Content, Connectivity and Commitment.

Code

THERE ARE TWO key “visitors” to your site: people and search engines. And search engines “visit” and evaluate websites in ways that are very different from people.

■ HUMAN VISITORS

When a person “visits” a web page, he is really using a user agent (a human-operated user agent is called a browser; some popular ones are Safari, Internet Explorer, Firefox and various mobile browsers). That user agent sends a request to a server to retrieve a copy of a web page and to render the code in a special way, enabling a person to see the page and interact with the page by typing or clicking. Designers and developers focus on human-operated user agents (or browsers). The goal is to create a rich, effective interaction between the user and your website through the browser.

There are thousands of ways to code any given web page so that it looks and acts the way it does when you visit it. The choices designers and developers make are critical not only to the success of the site in human terms, but also in search engine terms.

■ SEARCH ENGINE VISITORS

When a search engine “visits” a web page, it uses a very different kind of user agent, called robots, spiders, bots or crawlers, among other names. When a search engine “spiders” or “visits” a page, it sends requests to your server to retrieve a copy of that web page, but not for display. The spider simply scans the copy and stores some or all of its parts in a database. Spiders have very limited interactive ability. For example, spiders do not fill out web forms, so for the most part, they cannot see the data buried in many databases. Because of the limited interactive abilities of their spiders, the major search engines rely on developers to create web pages in special ways that help their spiders access the information. Unfortunately, most designers and developers focus exclusively on human-operated user agents. So, many sites you would consider to be incredibly useful and valuable are practically impenetrable by search engine spiders.

Of the four C’s, Code is most often overlooked and not fully realized in search engine optimization efforts. It also is the most misunderstood.

Put simply, optimized code is code that is lean, meaningful and W3C compliant. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is the standard-setting organization for web developers. As a group, it publishes guidelines used by the likes of Apple, Microsoft, Google and Mozilla in the creation of web browsers (human user agents). Those guidelines enable browser creators and web developers to work together. Search engines also rely on the guidelines. For more information on HTML from the W3C, refer to the W3C HTML home page (<http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/>) and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 (<http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/>).

Even with the W3C guidelines in place, there are still thousands of ways developers can create code that will produce any given design or experience you see in your web browser. Developers have more choices than ever before, and companies are creating more web-development software every day.

When developers write code, they consider many factors—among them, ease of maintenance, ease of build, time to deploy and a company’s existing platform. Developers frequently make decisions about code that are optimal for some factors, but not optimal for search engines. Optimization is about undoing that.

How can you help your developers create code that is lean, meaningful and W3C compliant? Let’s look at what is meant by each.

LEAN, MEANINGFUL AND W3C COMPLIANT

LEAN

Lean code is exactly what is implied: code written with as few characters as is possible in order to achieve the desired visual and interactive effect. Keeping your code as lean as possible has several benefits, including improved speed, reduced overhead costs, reduced site-maintenance costs and improved search engine optimization.

Most obviously, lean code results in smaller file sizes, and that improves the download speed of your pages, increasing your visitors’ satisfaction with your site. Reduced file sizes that result from lean code also save you money on bandwidth and server storage. Lean code is also easier for a developer to maintain over time. Another benefit is that lean code leads to well-organized code, and the effort to create lean code forces the developer to create better code. Both make maintaining your website (adding pages and editing pages) much easier for your developers.

And what else does lean code do for you? It leads to improved search engine optimization, thanks to a higher content-to-code ratio, pages that are easier for search engines to “understand” and improved page speed.

A discussion of the benefits of a higher content-to-code ratio and a further explanation of what is meant by pages that are easier for search engines to “understand” will follow in the discussion of meaningful code below. For now, let’s explore the impact of page speed on search engine optimization.

Google recently introduced tools to help webmasters measure page load speed for their sites. Its Page Speed tool (<http://code.google.com/speed/pagespeed/docs/using.html>) analyzes web pages and measures the page’s score against a series of best practices for web performance, ranked by relevance and priority for that page. The scores are developed using a method that weighs a number of different factors, including difficulty of implementation, the “potential impact” of the fix (according to Google’s experience, that is) and how badly the page violates the best practice.

Google’s search maven Matt Cutts confirmed in an interview at a search engine marketing event in November 2009 that driving improvements in page speed is high on Google’s agenda. While Google has not historically used page speed as a ranking signal in its algorithm, Cutts said, “a lot of people at Google feel that the web should be fast”—and the feeling at Google is that if your site provides a good user experience and loads quickly, “maybe you should get a bonus.”

Larry Page is on record as saying that the web should be as fast

as flipping through a magazine, and that a faster web is good for Google's business. Early in December, Google launched Site Performance, described as "an experimental feature in Webmaster Tools that shows you information about the speed of your site and suggestions for making it faster." This feature gives webmasters another reason to believe that download speeds will be a significant factor in search engine optimization results in the future.

See <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2009/12/how-fast-is-your-site.html>. How fast is your site?

MEANINGFUL (SEMANTIC) AND W3C COMPLIANT

Lean code starts with meaningful code, or code that follows W3C semantic markup guidelines. For more information on semantic markup, see Semantic Web-W3C (<http://www.w3.org/standards/semanticweb/>) or visit the W3C Semantic Web Interest Group (<http://www.w3.org/2001/sw/interest/>). The basic idea is to separate the meaning from the markup, or the content from the design. This directly relates to an improved content-to-code ratio and makes pages more "understandable" to search engines.

FROM THE W3C

Mark up documents with the proper structural elements. Control presentation with style sheets rather than with presentation elements and attributes.

Using markup improperly—not according to specification—hinders accessibility. Misusing markup for a presentation effect (e.g., using a table for layout or a header to change the font size) makes it difficult for users with specialized software to understand the organization of the page or to navigate through it. Furthermore, using presentation markup rather than structural markup to convey structure (e.g., constructing what looks like a table of data with an HTML PRE element) makes it difficult to render a page intelligibly to other devices (refer to the description of differences between content, structure and presentation).

Content developers may be tempted to use (or misuse) constructs that achieve a desired formatting effect on older browsers. They must be aware that these practices cause accessibility problems and must consider whether the formatting effect is so critical as to warrant making the document inaccessible to some users.

At the other extreme, content developers must not sacrifice appropriate markup because a certain browser or assistive technology does not process it correctly. For example, it is appropriate to use the TABLE element in HTML to mark up tabular information even though some older screen readers may not handle side-by-side text correctly (refer to checkpoint 10.3). Using TABLE correctly and creating tables that transform gracefully (refer to guideline 5) makes it possible for software to render tables other than as two-dimensional grids.

Standard document structure matters. Search engines rely on the guidelines created by the W3C to help them "understand" the different parts of your web page. Search engines rely on webmasters to ensure that content that is marked up corresponds to the semantic meaning of the markup; e.g., an H1 should contain a meaningful header, a P should contain a paragraph (not function as a line break), and UL should actually contain a hierarchical list. HTML should be

used to structure a document, and CSS should be used to style it.

There are even document elements that define attributes but which have no impact on the visual display of the text: they exist only to enable user agents like spiders to make semantic meaning from the text. Common examples include the emerging microformats standards, by which Google and others identify information like addresses and phone numbers by examining the markup. Other examples are the phrase elements, including CITE (for a citation), DFN (indicating a defining instance of an enclosed term), ABBR (indicating an abbreviation) and ACRONYM.

COMMON MICROFORMATS

- hCard - contact data
- hCalendar - calendars or individual events
- hReview - opinions, ratings and reviews
- XFN - personal relations (to other bloggers...)
- rel-license - link to copyright info
- hAtom - news feed
- geo - latitude/longitude

These and all other standard coding elements matter especially to search engine spiders, and will matter more to future user agents. Coding only for visual layout ignores all of these standards and inhibits your website.

COMMON CODE ISSUES

Whether a site is static and HTML-only or a full-blown web application driven by dynamic, databased content, there are pitfalls to look out for during development to prevent problems with search engine optimization. While web development at most companies is considered the responsibility of the IT group, it is essential that the development team be fully versed on the overall SEO strategy, understands marketing goals for the site, and is aware of the impact of each technical decision on the performance of the site.

A guiding principle is understanding that just as marketing content has different audiences, the code driving the site has multiple audiences as well, including:

- **The development team today**, which must be able to work quickly and efficiently;
- **The development team in the future**, which must be able to understand each piece of code and the part that it plays in the overall site;
- **Web browser software** that is responsible for rendering the code and making the content visible; and
- **Search engine spiders** that will read the code to try to understand what a given page is about.

Given demands today for a quick turnaround and low overhead, development teams typically focus on their immediate needs, and use whatever tools and tactics required to make a site render appropriately in the most popular browsers. Unfortunately, this can often lead to brittle code that is difficult to read, difficult to change and difficult for search engines to understand. This is often the case no matter whether a site is hand-coded, built on an existing web application framework, or built using blog or content-management software.

HAND-CODING, OR MANUAL DEVELOPMENT

Manual coding is equal parts art and science, requiring a balance

between the elegant touch of a craftsman and the analytical, problem-solving approach of a scientist. When done correctly, hand-coding can create the leanest, most standards-compliant and most semantic code possible.

But manual development is not without potential problems. Developers who are not familiar with the principles of semantic

code may create markup that is inscrutable to search engines. They may also choose an application environment, such as Microsoft's .Net framework, that makes development easy but that brings with it a number of side effects impacting optimization, including poor URL design or session management code that bloats an otherwise lean page.

WYSIWYG Development

SOME SITES ARE created with little or no involvement from web developers, instead using web-design software to transform an illustration of a site into a series of HTML templates that can be populated with content. The basic paradigm of WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) development is a drag-and-drop, visual-layout, document-centric approach to the creation of an interactive site.

Such sites tend to have significant issues with code bloat. Rather than using optimized style sheets to handle the display of elements on a page, styles are applied multiple times in inline code, increasing the size and, therefore, impacting the load time of the page. What's more, these tools introduce general-purpose widgets that can be used to provide functionality for things like forms, drop-down navigation or search features. Such widgets typically contain much more code than is necessary for the task at hand, as they have been created to serve a variety of functions under different circumstances. Essentially, they are a sledgehammer brought to bear on anything that looks like a nail.

Most WYSIWYG editors also produce code that is semantically invalid, abusing tags to achieve cosmetic effects rather than creating a semantically sound document structure.

BLOGS AND CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Blog software and off-the-shelf content management systems (CMS's) suffer from many of the same side effects as WYSIWYG editors. Since the software needs to serve the needs of a variety of

individuals and organizations, the emphasis is often on providing maximum flexibility and ease of use in creating and editing pages—at the expense of the performance of the overall site, and the size and quality of the code that is generated by the system. For example, blog software typically separates the components of a given web page into multiple parts: user-created content that is unique to the page; the overall “template” for the page, often broken down into several files; and reusable widgets, such as navigation controls, that are shared between pages. While breaking the page down into smaller parts makes it easier to manage, assembling these pieces happens on the fly whenever a visitor requests a page, which takes both time and server processing.

Such systems also rely exclusively on a database to store all user-created content. While this isn't necessarily a problem in and of itself, how the databased content is accessed certainly can be. For example, if page content is indexed by a number, then the system may create a URL such as <http://www.example.com/pages?23>. This URL is meaningless to a visitor, and to a search engine; it may be considered identical to pages that end in 24, 25, 26 and so on.

Blog and CMS software also puts content management in the hands of people who are good at writing content but who do not understand the SEO implications of their actions. Such a system may allow an editor to easily create a page with paragraph tags for line breaks, broken links, links without title attributes, images without alt text and so on—but all of these negatively impact the readability of the page to a search engine spider.

Content

THE COPY IS part of SEO—but a much smaller part than you probably think.

Because of the importance of code, if you focus only on optimizing content, you are doing just part of the job. This isn't to say that content is not important, but without focusing on code, connectivity and commitment, edits to your content, title elements and meta tags won't have their full impact. In many cases, editing content will have no impact at all.

The key to the second C, Content, is to create useful, engaging content and to deploy content using Code that is optimal. But the real challenge to building an optimized website is starting with an optimized, hierarchical content plan.

FIRST, THE RESEARCH

There is great misunderstanding about how content impacts optimization. SEO, like a good marketing plan, starts with thinking first about what potential customers want from you and how they will find you. What types of products or services are they seeking? What terms are they using to find businesses that provide them? An optimized content development plan is one that first takes into account how people are searching for your products or services and then evolves into a marketing document (a website) based on a framework created by keyword research.

The process begins with research. WordTracker and Google both offer limited access to data about how people as a group are searching: what specific keyword phrases people type into search boxes. For example, using the Google Adwords: Keyword Tool, you can type in a single word ("cars," for example) and Google will return a list of phrases that include that word and will provide the search volume for each phrase. For "cars," Google reports, the most frequently searched phrases are "cars," "used cars," "cars for sale," "modified cars," "used car," "new cars," "car sales" and so on. The tool is rather imprecise, but useful for finding out how frequently a specific phrase is searched. The tool is also helpful in generating related terms or synonyms you might not have considered. WordTracker has sold that kind of information for many years and has developed several tools to make the process easier. But WordTracker relies on several second and third-tier search engines. For that reason, both sources should be used. By using the tools available from Google and from WordTracker, we are able to find out exactly how potential customers and clients are searching for you: i.e., specifically what language they use. That data is then used to create a plan for developing a site that targets exactly what your potential customers and clients are seeking.

As an example, let us look at a website listing automobiles for sale. A marketing team might suggest that people want to search for autos by make, model, year, mileage, color or any number of other factors, and ask developers to create a home page with a series of drop-down menus for selecting various options. Another team might suggest that the best way to organize vehicles is by

type (for example, passenger cars, sports cars, SUVs, trucks and crossovers). Or, they could be organized the same way rental car companies tend to (compact, midsize, full-size, luxury and so on).

To maximize SEO potential, one must analyze how consumers are searching for automobiles; tools can provide thousands of keyword phrases ranked by their search frequency. A competitive analysis could then be performed pertaining to each phrase, to determine the amount of effort winning each phrase will take. Finally, the stakeholders should identify the phrases that are most valuable to them based on frequency, competitiveness and overall quality.

When identifying the quality of a keyword phrase, break them into four categories:

- **Premium Keywords** are keywords with the highest strategic value to a company. These keywords typically include natural customer language combined with either a commercial or local qualifier. These searches clearly indicate buying intent on the part of the searcher.
- **High-Value Keywords** use terms that customers would typically use, but may be less commerce-oriented.
- **Medium-Value Keywords** may be related to the company's core business, but these terms tend to be academic, job-centered or very general in nature.
- **Magnet Keywords** represent search terms related to delivering useful resources and practicing good internet citizenship. While these keywords have a generally low quality, providing content related to these keywords attracts natural organic links from across the Internet, as people tend to share links to informative, high-quality, noncommercial content.

In the case of automobile searches, there are some obvious trends. For example, people rarely search using phrases such as "passenger cars," "red cars" or "compact cars." None of the marketing team suggestions above match up with what people are searching for in this case. What we find is that people largely search for cars by brand. The five most frequently searched phrases related to automobiles are "car," "cars," "Ford," "Honda" and "Toyota."

There is also a clear trend distinguishing those searching for new cars and used cars.

The optimal website organization is one that correlates as closely as possible with the actual searching behavior of a site's potential visitors. That way, the visitor finds exactly what he seeks, in the language he uses when searching.

So, the optimal organization for an auto website may be:

NEW CARS

- New Ford Cars
- New Honda Cars
- New Toyota Cars
- Etc.

USED CARS

- Used Ford Cars
- Used Honda Cars
- Used Toyota Cars
- Etc.

Connectivity

THERE ARE TWO types of connectivity that matter in search engine optimization: intersite connectivity and intrasite connectivity. Connecting with other sites through link building (intersite connectivity) has always been critical to getting traffic. This started with the search engine AltaVista, which determined how often it spidered your site based on the number of links to your site. Every time AltaVista found a new link to your site, it returned to spider it. The more interconnected your site was with other sites, the more frequently your site would be visited by AltaVista's spider. But the search engine basically relied on self-reporting to determine which websites were the most relevant to any given search, and webmasters quickly began to manipulate the process by stuffing their pages with keywords and resorting to other SEO hacks.

INTERSITE CONNECTIVITY

When Google launched, it used a new idea about intersite connectivity to improve its results. It ranked a site in its results based on information gathered from the site itself, just like AltaVista did, but introduced a new measure. Instead of relying solely on self-reporting (or spidering the actual page), Google attempted to measure the relative importance of a website by measuring the number and quality of links that point to a site, then factoring that information into its overall ranking algorithm. Google called this measure PageRank, also known as link popularity. Under this model, the more likely a random crawler is to find your site, the better chance your site will have of winning. Basically, the more links you can get from sites that have more links pointing to them, the better. However, it's not just a numbers game, and all links are not created equal. Google also judges the quality of a link based on several factors.

LET'S LOOK AT A TINY UNIVERSE OF 10 WEBSITES

CHART 1

Each of the sites below is completely independent and not connected to any other site

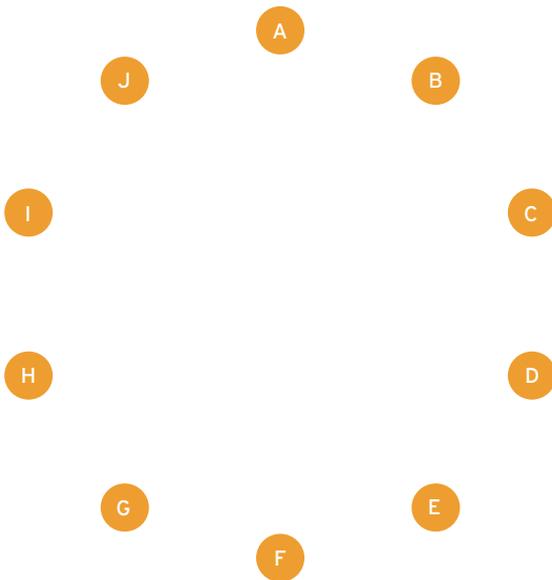
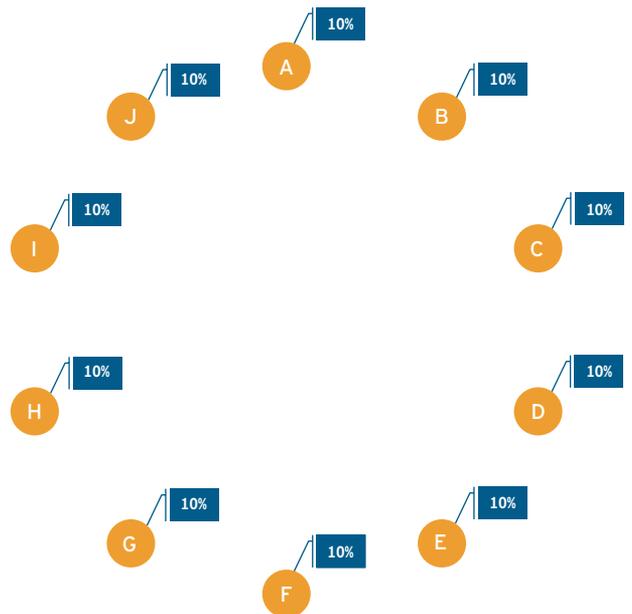


CHART 2

From a search engine's perspective, the chance of landing on any one site is 100% divided by the number of sites, or 10%



NOW CONSIDER WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WEBSITE A LINKS TO WEBSITE C

CHART 3

At that point, since the chances of a spider visiting A is 10% and the chances of it visiting C if it visits A is 100%, then the link from A to C adds all of A's chances of being visited to C's chances of being visited (10% from A plus C's 10%), resulting in website C having a 20% chance of being visited on any single crawl

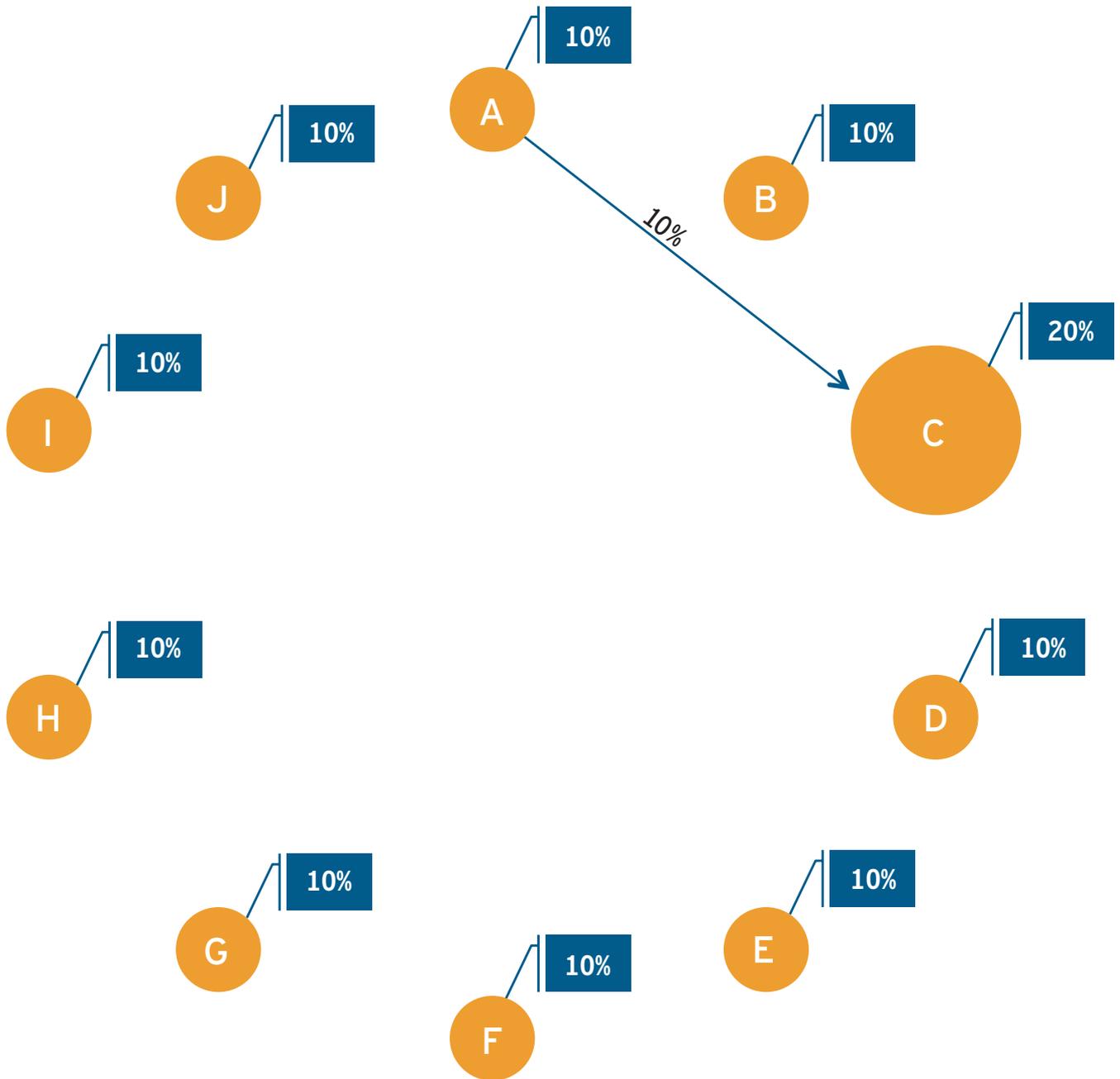


CHART 4

If website B also links to site C, then the chances of C being visited on a single crawl increases to 30% (10% chance from A and 10% chance from B)

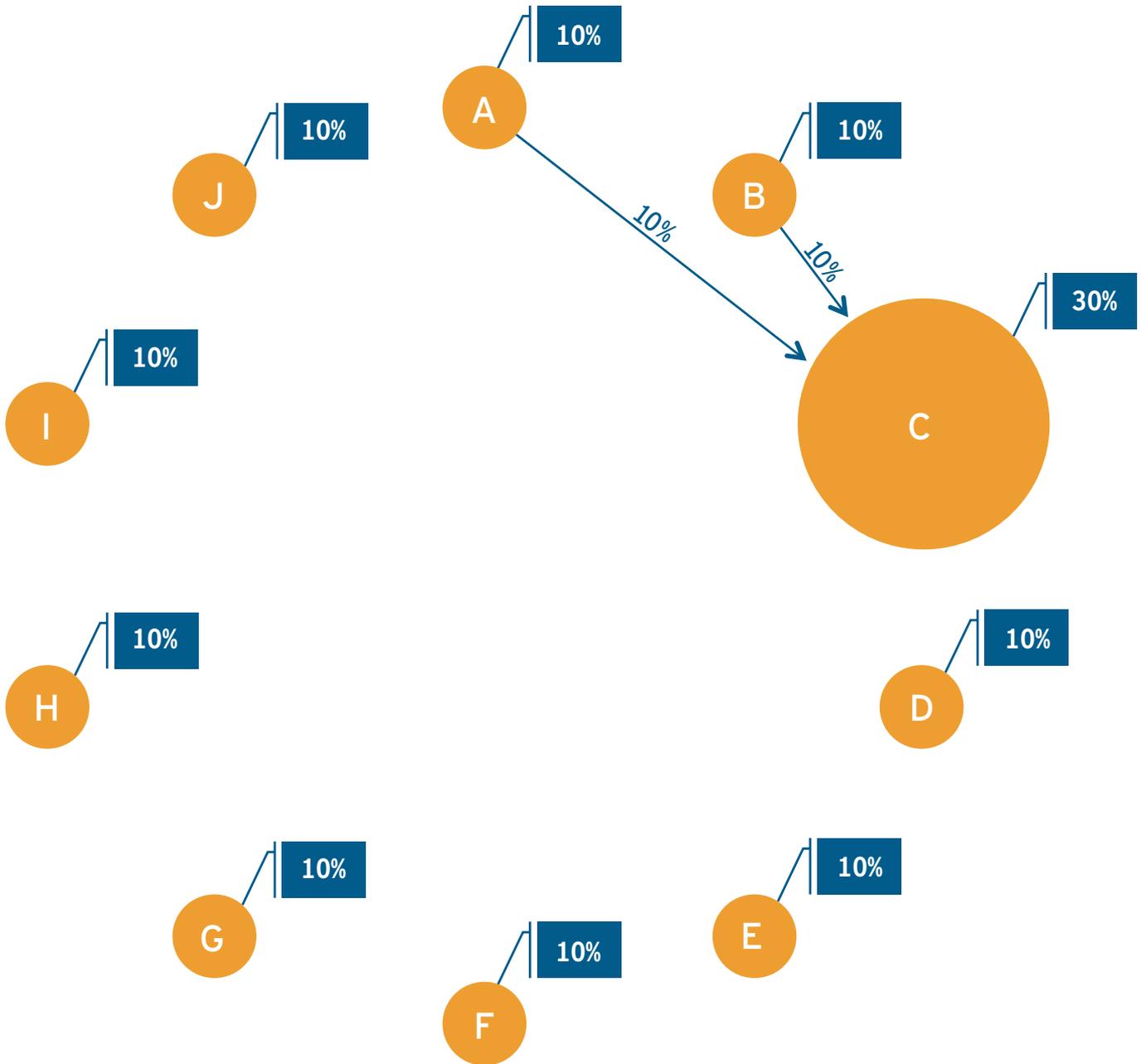
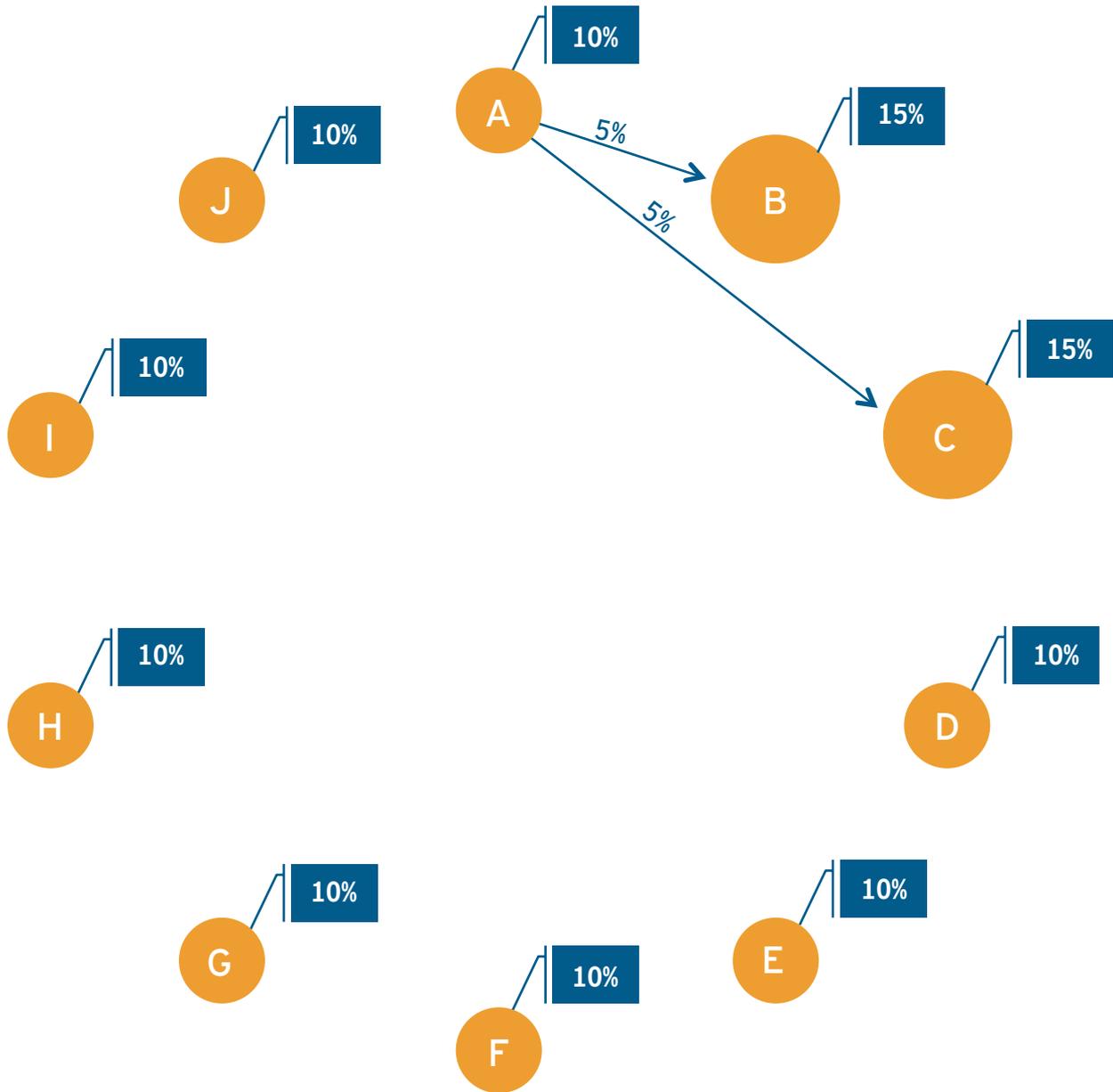


CHART 5

If instead, website A links to both B and C, there is a 10% chance of A being visited, and then a 50% chance of a spider visiting B after visiting A, and a 50% chance of the spider visiting C after visiting A, so the chance of a spider visiting B or C is 15%



In overly simplified terms, Link Popularity is the chance that a web page will be crawled in the very complicated universe of websites. Since Link Popularity is one of the factors used by all the major search engines to determine the ranking of websites, increasing the number of links to your site will help your site to rank better in organic search. But keep in mind that the quality of the site that links to your site will impact the value of the link, both the Link Popularity of the page linking to your page and the number of outbound links from that page to your page. In the examples above, site A started with a 10% chance of being visited. If instead it had a 30% chance of being visited, then the links to B or C would have had a much greater impact. By the same token, if A had linked to five or six of the other sites, the value of each link would have decreased.

To further complicate things, there are links, and then there are links. That is to say, when a person looks at a page, he sees any word or image he can click on as a link. But for the search engine spiders that determine rankings, only properly coded links will be seen as true links, bringing us back again to the critical nature of code.

What is a link?

```
<a title="..." href="...">anchor text</a>
```

What isn't a link?

There are hundreds of ways to make what you think of as a link using code. Here are two examples, neither of which counts as a link that contributes to your overall Link Popularity to Google:

```
<a href="/aclk?sa=l&ai=Bi2ivHaGuSqeTNJOW6AbI3oHeDtLdo5EB9KTOigrAjbcBsLePARABGAEgpa2DCCgDOABQ9dbG3v3_____AWDJ1oOI8KPsEqABxJHC_wOyAQI3d3cuYWxleGEuY29tugEKMzAweDIIMF9hc8gBAoBkMhOdHA6Ly93d3cuYWxleGEuY29tL3NpdGVpbmZvL2VtZXJpdHVzLmNvbYACAagDAegDqgLoA1ToA64C6AOJBfUDAAAABPUDBAAAA&num=1&sig=AGiWqtxE6u05mL5X5MikXMfKWe5Bbx9Yg&client=ca-amazon-alexa_js&adurl=http://www.aplaceformom.com/%3Fkw%3D3234-2083579%26distrib%3Dcontent%26sstest%3D1%26kws%3Dassisted" onFocus="ss('go to www.aplaceformom.com!'aw0)" onClick="ha('aw0)" onMouseDown="st('aw0)" onMouseOver="return ss('go to www.aplaceformom.com!'aw0)" onMouseOut="cs()"">Assisted Living Finder</b></a>
```

```
<a href="javascript:;" id="ContactLink" title="contact">Contact</a>
```

In general, the value of a link from another website to your site is determined by the following:

- Link popularity or PageRank of page linking to your site;
- Theme of page linking to your site—if your site is about automobiles, try to get links from pages about automobiles;
- Context of link—links within the body of the page are preferable to links in the navigation, sidebars or footer;
- Anchor text of link—the text underlined in the link that points to your site matters;
- Title attribute on link—the title attribute provides a more detailed explanation of your page to the visitor.

INTRASITE CONNECTIVITY

Just as important as building inbound links to improve your link popularity is how you distribute that link popularity throughout the pages on your site. That is done by optimizing intrasite connectivity, or optimizing the connectivity of pages within your site.

Think of PageRank as the chance that a spider will land on a page of your site by randomly following links throughout the internet. A page with lots of inbound links has a high chance of being visited, whereas a page with few inbound links has a lower chance of being visited. Of course, you have to factor in the links that point to the pages that link to your page, so it all gets very complicated. To keep it simple, let's assume a controlled universe: a website made up of a home page and 15 subpages. Also assume that the home page has a 60% chance of being visited in our much larger random universe.

CHART 6

In the first image below, each of the 15 subpages is linked directly from the home page, and no other links exist. Given that configuration, each subpage has an equal chance of being visited: 4%

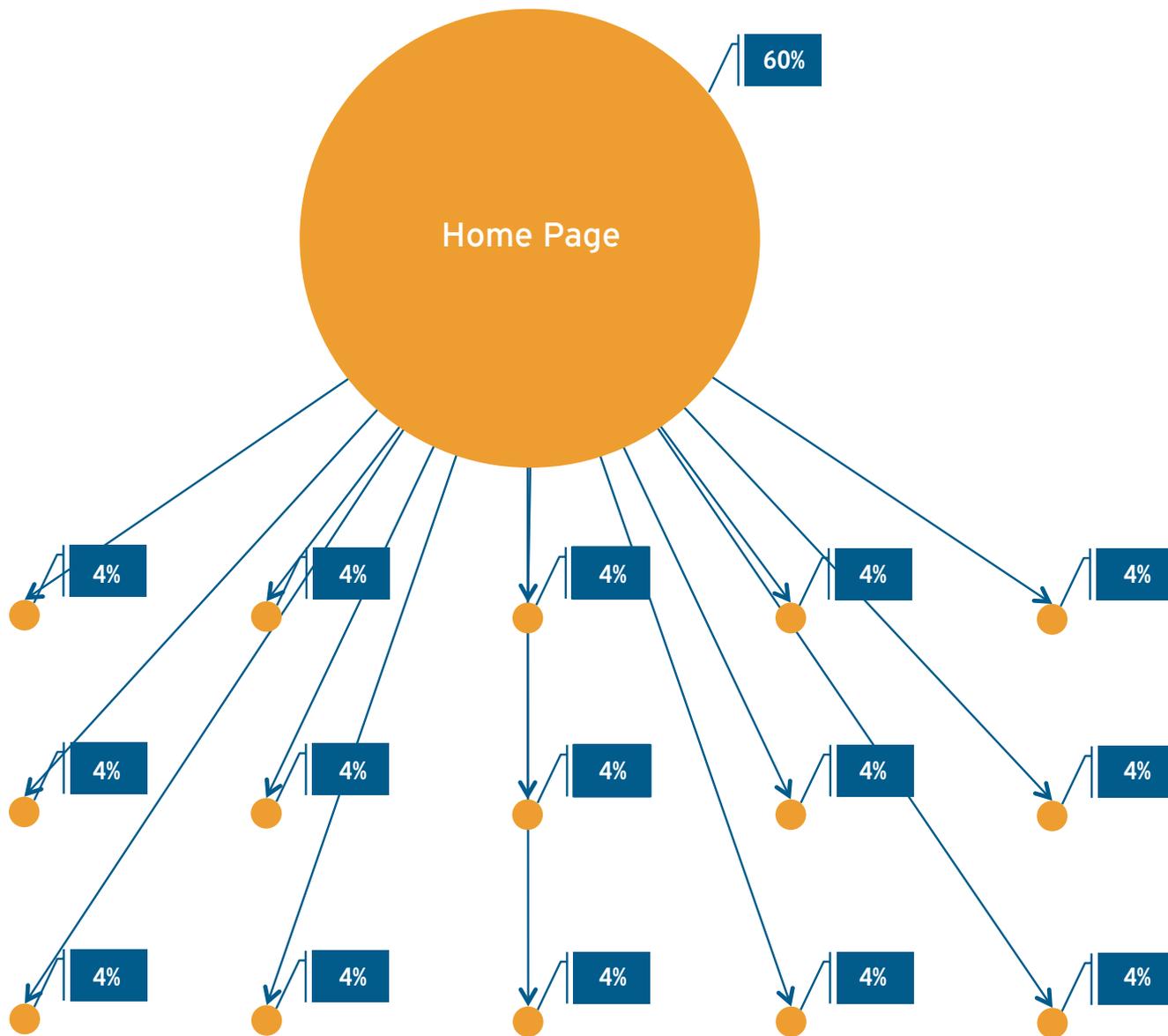


CHART 7

In the image below, instead of linking to all 15 subpages, the home page only links to five subpages, so each has a 12% chance of being visited

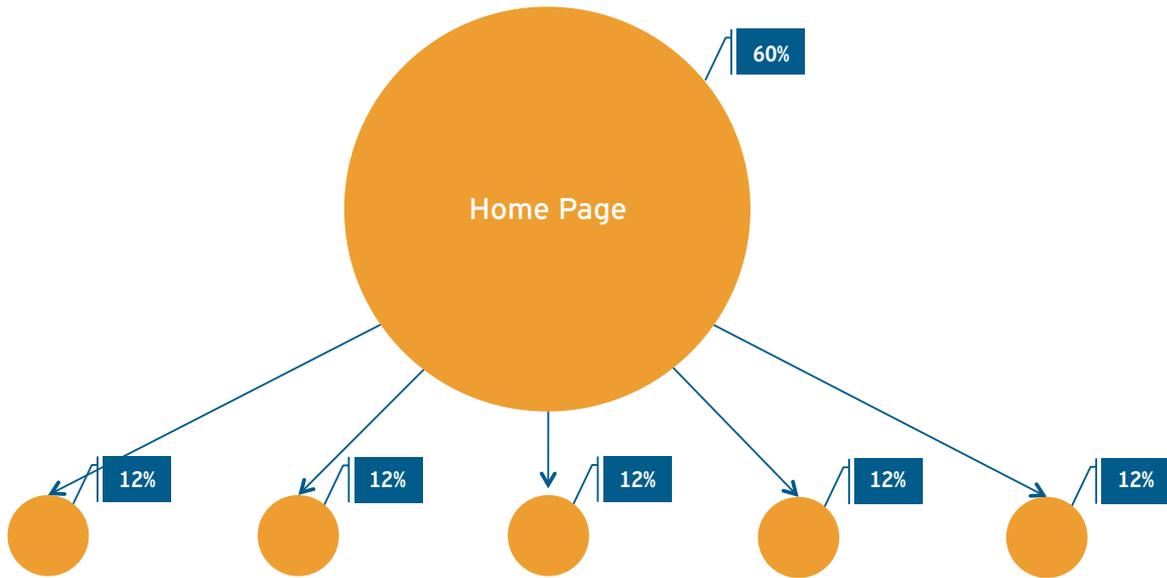


CHART 8

In the next image, three of the five subpages which have a 12% chance of being visited then each link to more subpages, giving each of the sub-subpages an equal 6% chance of being visited by a random crawler

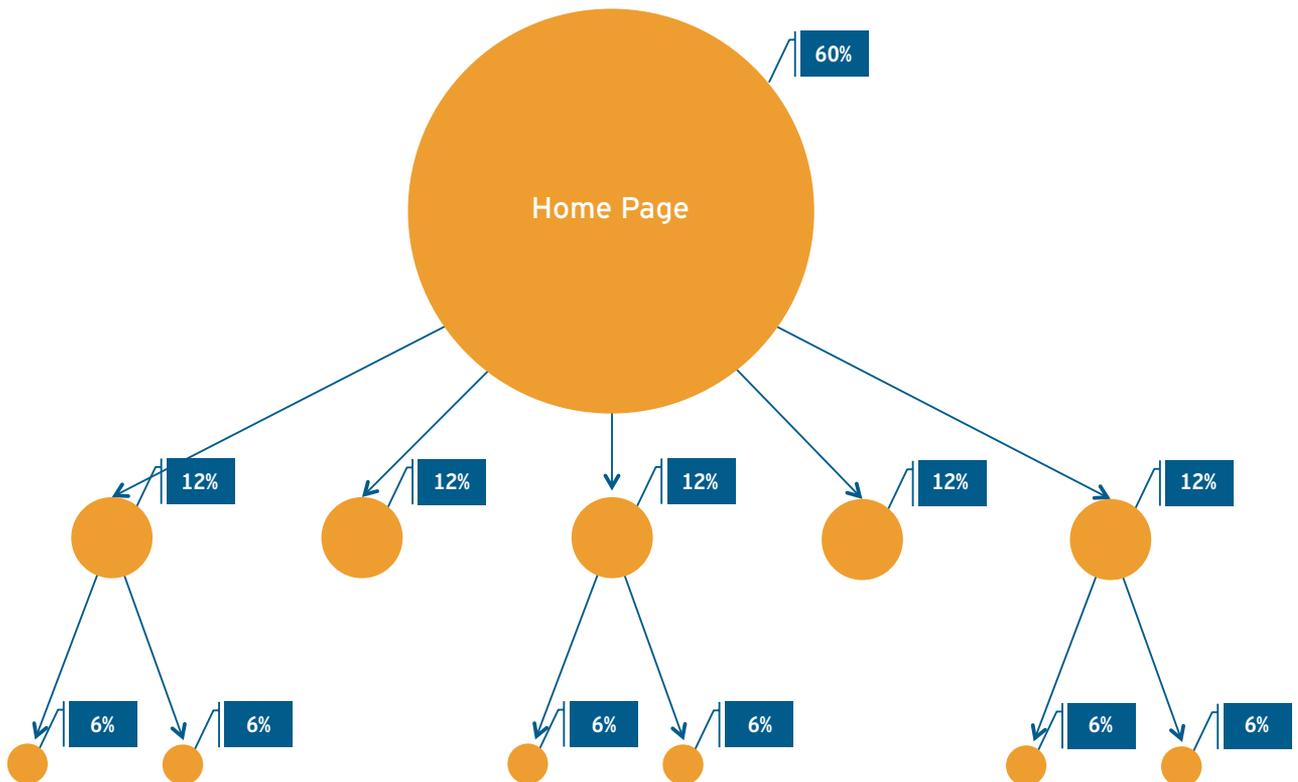
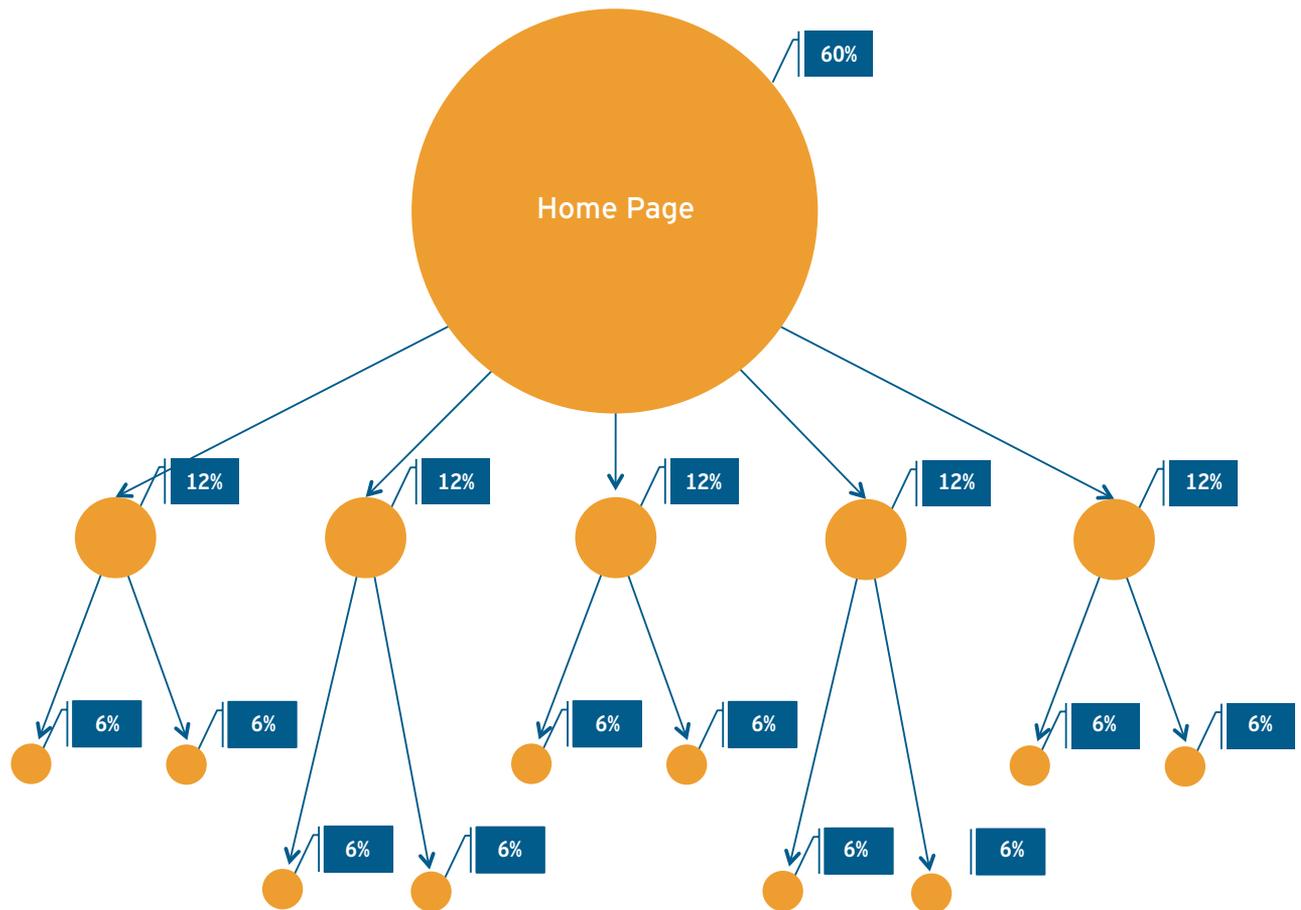


CHART 9

In the next image, the final two subpages which still have a 12% chance of being visited then each link to two more subpages, giving all of the sub-subpages an equal 6% chance of being visited by a random crawler



Taken together, these two scenarios illustrate how decisions about web navigation impact the flow of PageRank or Link Popularity throughout a website. We are able to increase the PageRank of all pages on our site by reorganizing the structure. In an SEO project, the goal is to optimize the flow of PageRank to those pages which represent the most difficult challenges in the battle for rankings.

A practical example might be a financial services company that offers: Life Insurance, Disability Insurance, Long-Term Care

Insurance, Annuities, Education Funding, IRAs, Cash Management, Mutual Funds, Employee Medical Insurance, Employee Group Life Insurance, Employee Group Disability Insurance, Employee Multilife Long-Term Care Insurance, Employee Dental and Vision Insurance, Business Retirement Plan Services, Qualified Benefit Plans and Executive Benefit Plans.

A typical approach to navigation these days is to organize all content into categories and to create drop-down menus so that all major sections are present at all times in the top-level navigation.

CHART 10 In that case, the site navigation and, thus, the architecture might look like this

HOME PAGE	COMPANY OVERVIEW	PRODUCTS AND SERVICES	CONTACT US
	Company History	FOR INDIVIDUALS	
	Our CEO	- Life Insurance	
	Management	- Disability Insurance	
	Board of Directors	- Long-Term Care Insurance	
	Board of Advisors	- Annuities	
	Annual Report	- Education Funding	
		- IRAs	
		- Cash Management	
		- Mutual Funds	
		FOR EMPLOYERS	
		- Employee Medical	
		- Employee Group Life	
		- Employee Group Disability	
		- Employee Multilife Long-Term Care	
		- Employee Dental and Vision	
		- Business Retirement Plan Services	
		- Qualified Benefit Plans	
		- Executive Benefit Plans	

That model is very much like the model illustrated in the first image above. All of the link popularity is equally distributed to all pages. Again, assuming a very limited universe of websites in which only this site exists and in which the home page has a starting percentage chance of 60%. Then, each of the subpages has a 60%/29 or 2.07% chance of being visited by the spider in one crawl because each is exactly one step away from the home page.

Since the actual products and services are most likely what the consumer is seeking, a much better organization would be as follows:

Home Page

- Our Company
- Life Insurance
- Employee Health Insurance
- Disability Insurance
- Long-Term Care Insurance
- Dental and Vision Insurance
- Retirement Planning
- Benefit Planning
- Contact Us

In this case, the PageRank is directed primarily to nine major subsections. So, in one crawl, each of the primary subpages has a 60%/9 or 6.67% chance of being visited. We have reduced the number of outbound links from the home page and qualitatively changed the nature of those links so that they now point to the most important sections. That gives a substantial link popularity

boost to the pages that describe the primary services offered.

Then, from the “Our Company” page, you can introduce a second level of navigation, perhaps arranged vertically down the left-hand side of the page as follows:

Our Company

- Company Overview
- Company History
- Our CEO
- Management
- Board of Directors
- Board of Advisors
- Annual Report

Since there are seven subpages in the “Our Company” section, which itself has a 6.67% chance of being visited, each has a 6.67%/7 or 0.95% chance of being visited.

In the “Life Insurance” section, which has an 6.67% chance of being visited, there are three subsections: Individual Life Insurance, Employee Group Life Insurance and Executive Life Insurance. Each of those three subsections then has a 2.22% chance of being visited.

By rethinking the overall organization of your website and starting with keyword research, you can optimize the flow of link popularity to your pages, focusing on the pages or sections that are fighting the most competitive search engine battles and significantly enhance your chances of winning.

Commitment

SUCCESSFUL SEARCH ENGINE optimization requires making a commitment to building a site that deserves to win. To do that, you must make SEO an integral part of everything you do online. Also required is a commitment to updating your site regularly and growing it over time.

You must remember that organic search is, and likely will continue to be, the most effective way to drive highly targeted traffic to your site. Three out of four search engine referrals come from organic search. In our experience, organic search is a powerful business driver and an extremely valuable long-term investment.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER.

One of the clearest points of intersection between code, content and connectivity lies in the navigation of a site via links between its inner pages, known as intrasite connectivity. Several factors matter. First, the structure of the navigation directly determines the flow of link popularity or PageRank throughout your site. Second, from a spider's perspective, the text in these links is of critical importance to "understanding" what information the site holds. In fact, Google has filed for a patent for a process enabling it to tell what a site is about without actually visiting the site. Instead, it analyzes the words in the HREF links that point to its various pages. But perhaps even more important to search engines is the code used to create these links. It is essential that a site is developed using HREF links that a spider can follow.

A spider's path through these links has an enormous impact on how the site is interpreted by the search engine, making the organization of the site key. A hierarchical organization of links will send spiders first to the most important pages of a site, distributing link popularity first to these critical pages. A truly optimized site combines such deliberate organization with optimal anchor text in each link for optimized navigation.

Conclusion

SUCCESS IN SEARCH engine optimization is a boon to those companies that can achieve it. Search engines can be the No. 1 referrer to properly built websites, particularly sites that have not yet established a large user base. At this point, organic search engine referrals make up approximately three out of every four referrals from search engines. And for well-optimized sites, that number is even higher.

To truly optimize your website requires a fully integrated approach to web development. Remember the Four C's: Code, Content, Connectivity and Commitment, and you will be well on your way to success in online marketing.

C. J. NEWTON is founder and chief strategy officer at SEO Logic. He has researched and consulted on organic search engine optimization since 1996, working with clients including the American Marketing Association, the Service Master Family of Brands (TruGreen, RescueRooter, Terminix, and others), The Wharton School, Experian, Heinemann Publishing, Life Fitness, Penske Truck Leasing and Emeritus Senior Living. He is also an executive board member of SEOPros.org, the standard-setting organization of SEO specialists.