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What is SEO and How to Set it Up
Brand + Design Scoop ep. 008
Podcast Transcript

Welcome to Brand + Design Scoop, where I share practical, relatable tips on branding, design, and building a business for people-centric entrepreneurs

I'm Kelly, a brand strategist and Squarespace website designer and founder of AKS Design Studio.

Today I'm going to be talking about what SEO is and how to set it up. I'm doing this topic now because next week I'll be interviewing content creator Ling Wong on writing content for search engine optimization.

SEO stands for search engine optimization, of course. If you've got a website, then you know the term, and you know that you've got to make your website search-engine-friendly.

So, let's get into the details.

Optimizing your website for search engines means that you're making your website easier for search engines to find your site organically. That is, without paying for ads. The easier it is for search engines to find your site makes it more likely that your site will rank higher on search engine results pages. Of course, the ultimate goal is to make it to page one on Google. Obviously, not everyone will. Ending up on pages two or three is really awesome.

How do search engines find your website?

They find you when someone types a query into the search bar. That is, they type in a question that contains keywords or phrases. It's the keywords that search engines are using to find you.

So, what are keywords? I hate to make a circle with my answer. **But keywords are the important words that someone types in when they ask a question in the search bar**.

For example, someone may type in, "How to attract your ideal client." "Ideal client" and "attract" are keywords. You'll find articles about "how to" and "what is." Though including "how to" or "what is" can result in some variation on the results page.

So, what do keywords mean for your website?

When you use keywords strategically on your website, you increase your chances of boosting your search engine ranking. This isn't just a one-time thing. Nor does it mean repeating the same keywords over and over again. What I mean is, this doesn't mean putting a keyword or phrase on your website just once, but it also doesn't mean overdoing it in the content of every single page.

I know. Very frustrating.

Let me give you an example. For my main service, Squarespace Website Design, it turns out that most people actually search for "Squarespace WEB design." So, the title of that page is "Squarespace Web Design." And the URL of that page is AKS Design Studio dot com forward slash Squarespace web design. That gives search engines two opportunities to find that key phrase — in my title (which is a header), and in the URL. I also use that phrase in the description of that page. I'll talk about using titles, headers, and URLs in just a bit.

So, that brings us to: How do you know what are the best keywords and phrases to use on your website?

First, your name and business name are keywords. Whichever one is the title of your website will automatically be found by search engines since that's your URL — unless you're using some other words or phrases as your URL, which I've seen people do. If your name or business name was already taken as a URL, and you're using some other phrase as your URL, you're going to be using your name and business name in other SEO settings, which we'll get to in a minute.

Second, look at what your services are about and come up with topics. If you're a small-business coach, two topics are "small business" and "coaching." I'm a Squarespace website designer. For me, "Squarespace," "website," and "design" are topics.

Third, from your list of topics, come up with keyword phrases. If you're a small-business coach, that is actually a keyword phrase. Then, the services you provide become keywords, such as "how to start a small business," "how to create work-life balance," and "time management for small-business owners."

For me, "Squarespace web design" is a keyword phrase. So are "how to start a Squarespace website," "website design for beginners," and "how to set up SEO on your website."

Fourth, you'll want to research your keywords for intent and related search terms.

What do I mean by intent?

For me, I share information in my podcast and on my blog about podcasting. So, "podcasting" is a keyword. I use that as a hashtag on social media. But it's a really weak keyword. When I google "podcasting," the first thing that shows up is a definition of podcasting. The rest of the first page of results contains articles about how to start a podcast. I'm actually about to do a video blog about that in January. I'm also doing posts and podcasts about why you should do a podcast, best practices for running a podcast, and creating content for a podcast. So, those posts and episodes give me more keyword phrases.

When I search "podcasting," the related searches that come up are for podcast streaming services: Libsyn, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, and Amazon. Those actually aren't relevant to me, except that I tend to mention them in my posts and episodes about podcasting.

So, now that you've come up with a bunch of keyword phrases, how do you choose which ones you're going to use?

First, make sure that your keyword phrases are relevant to your site. If you're a small-business coach, if you randomly start writing about recipes—no matter how popular a particular food trend becomes—this just isn't relevant to your business and likely won't help you rank higher. For me, suddenly writing a blog post about yoga isn't going to help me rank higher. It's just not relevant to Squarespace website design. Now, this doesn't mean that we can't ever write a post outside of our field. It just means that we can't expect those posts to boost our ranking.

Second in choosing keywords to use, try to become an authority in your field before you expect your posts or your site to rise to a high rank in search engine results pages. Google gives preference to the most authoritative sites. For example, I just googled "how to start a small business." After the ads, the first-page results are from Shopify, the Small Business Administration, USA dot gov, Business News Daily, Nerd Wallet, How to Start an LLC dot com, Hubspot, Mailchimp, and IRS dot gov. All of these sites are well-established and deep authorities on the subjects. No coaching websites come up on the first results page.

This doesn't mean that you shouldn't create content on this topic. It just means that you shouldn't expect to get on the first results page. You really can't compete with the sites I just listed. But it's certainly possible to get on the second, third, and fourth pages. All really awesome positions.

For me, since I deleted my old website from when I was doing business and life coaching and started fresh in Squarespace website design, I lost all of my SEO ranking. I used to rank in the first two or three results pages for several topics in that area after a few years. (Yes, it takes time.) Now, I'm starting all over again in a new area. So, it's going to take some time. Keep that in mind for your own search engine optimization.

Third in choosing which keywords to use, keep in mind the number of times a keyword is being searched. At the pop culture podcast I co-host, Geek Girl Soup, the keyword search that we get the most impression for is "checkers menu." I don't even know what that means! What shows up is an episode from our Em City Podcast, about the HBO series "OZ." Even though we gets lots of impressions for it on Google, we don't get any hits for it. That means that no one clicks on our link. So, it's possible to get lots of impressions and show up high in the rankings. But, if not many people are searching those keywords, you won't get many, or any, clicks.

Fourth, use specific keyword phrases instead of generic keywords. As I mentioned above, "podcasting" is too generic. Too many results come up that just wouldn't help my ranking. So, I need to use specific keyword phrases, such as "how to start a podcast" and "best practices for running a podcast."

Fifth, check what keywords your competitors are using. You can do this manually by searching your competitor and seeing what they show up for. You can search your keywords and see if your competitor shows up. Or you can use a service such Ahrefs (that's A H R E F S dot com) to search your competitor directly to see their keywords. They have a 7-day trial for $7. They're quite pricey. But you could do the 7-trial to do keyword research then cancel. Or, if you want to monitor your SEO over time, reviews indicate that they are an excellent service. I recently started using them, and I'm digging the service so far.

Okay, now that you have your keywords, how do you use them?

There are 7 places on your website where you're going to use your keywords: In your URLs, your titles, your headers, your page descriptions, your image titles, your image alt text, and your content.

First are your URLs. As I mentioned earlier, You ideally want your name or your business name as the URL of your website. And you want your page URLs to be clear. So, my about page is AKS Design Studio dot com forward slash about. And blog post URLs should always be the title of the post. An example for me is AKS Design Studio dot com forward slash blog forward slash how to identify your ideal client. Check your post settings to make sure that the URL for the post isn't just a random string of numbers and letters.

Second are your page titles. So, you're setting up your page titles in two places: In the settings and in your headers, though I'll discuss headers separately in a moment. I don't mean headers, as in, where your navigation menu is. I mean headers in the body of a page.

When you open up settings for a page, you can change how the title of page shows up in the navigation bar of the browser. The title that shows up on the page can be different from the navigation bar title. So, on my homepage, the title of the page in the H1 header (that's the main header) is "Customized Squarespace Website Design." But the navigation page header—what shows up in the navigation bar of the browser—is AKS Design Studio Squarespace Web Design. Here's what this does. When someone googles AKS Design Studio, Google can find me easily because of my URL (AKS Design Studio dot com) and because I have AKS Design Studio in the navigation title. Google can also find me by "Squarespace web design" since it's in the navigation title.

But that's not what I want people to see as the title of the homepage. They see the business name in the header where the navigation bar is. My logo is there. What I want them to see first is what I do: Customized Squarespace website design. So, I wrote that in the h1 header.

So, that's next: Putting keywords in your headers. By headers, I don't mean the top navigation bar. I mean headers in the body of the page.

After URLs and the page titles in your settings, the next thing search engines look for are headers. Websites have four header types: H1 through h4. In addition to the header types, you have paragraph types, usually p1 to p4. If you're doing your own website, you see these options when you choose the text type when you're writing. People often choose a header when they want to make the text bigger and more prominent to emphasize a new section or idea.

But, here's the thing, search engines prioritize h1 headers. And search engines can get confused if you use more than one h1 header on a page. Headers are hierarchical. So, save h1 headers for page titles. Use h2 headers for really important sub-sections. Use h3 and h4 headers only for short, important text that contains keywords.

When you want to make paragraph text look different, try making it bold or italicized. Or make it a different color. Or, you can put the bulk of the text in p2 and then put accentuated text in the bigger p1.

I use h4 headers sparingly for single sentences that contain important keywords to highlight key ideas. I do this to help the reader and to help Google.

The fourth place you're going to put keywords is in the short page description in the SEO settings of each page. This goes into the description section under SEO settings for each page. This is what will show up under the title and URL when your page shows up on search engine results pages.

So, the description for my homepage is "AKS Design Studio by Angela Kelly Smith is a Squarespace web design boutique in Pittsburgh for small-business owners who want to attract more ideal clients through a beautiful, strategically-designed website." This contains my business name, my name, Squarespace, "web design," "small-business owners," "ideal clients," and "website"—all good keywords for what I do. It also contains "Pittsburgh" to help me show up in local searches, even though I'm certainly open to national clients.

The description for my blog reads: "News and tips about branding, web design, and building a business from Angela Kelly Smith at AKS Design Studio." This contains the keywords "branding," "web design," "building a business," my business name, and my name.

Also, both descriptions tell exactly what those pages are about. They give the visitor a clear understanding of what they'll get on that page when they click on the link.

The fifth place you're going to use keywords is in image titles. So often we upload photos and don't change the image titles. The title may be something like dsc 487 dot jpeg. That does nothing for SEO. So, if you're uploading a photo of yourself, make the title your name. If you're uploading a thumbnail for a blog post, make that title the same as the post.

Sixth, use keywords for image alt text. Image alt text is used by website readers when people people have a disability, such as a sight impairment. Website readers can't "see" images, so they read image alt text. If you leave this blank, the readers skip images. Also, search engines pick up on image alt text. This gives you another opportunity for search engines to find you. So, be very short—just a few words—with your image alt text. But use a few keywords.

Seventh and finally, use keywords in your content—that is, in the body of your pages. This one is pretty obvious. I mean, you're not going to title a post "how to start a small business" then never mention that phrase again. However, be careful not to overuse the keywords. Search engines view that as junk and then won't rank your page as high.

If I were writing this podcast as a blog post, I would have to repeat "SEO" and "search engines" many times, otherwise, the post would be confusing. I can't just write, "it" and "they" without giving the context first. But I can't keep writing "what is SEO." That's unnecessary and would end up looking like junk.

Remember, it takes time—months and months—for your search engine ranking to go up. So, try to be patient. You're competing against websites that have deep authority and have been around a long time. You need to be consistent about creating free, informative, and valuable content and then follow the guidance here about setting up your SEO. Google also has a great starter guide for beginners on search engine optimization. I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

That's it for today.

Next week I'll be back with an interview with content creator Ling Wong. We'll be talking more about search engine optimization. Specifically, we'll talk about creating content to optimize your search engine ranking. Ling will also discuss how ranking works and how long it can take to get a high-ranking page.

Thanks for listening!

See you next time on Brand + Design Scoop!

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Links

Google SEO Starter Guide for Beginners

This episode on the website

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Angela Kelly Smith provides custom Squarespace websites, branding strategy, and marketing instruction so freelancers and entrepreneurs can run a successful business while spending more time focusing on the work they really love doing. Check out her website design + marketing strategy services.