



SEO BIBLE

The Essential Guide To Getting More
Traffic And Outranking Your Competitors

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1. Introduction

BigCommerce SEO Bible 2012 is a collection of posts from our [BigCommerce blog](#) regarding basic principles that need to be applied when optimizing your BigCommerce store to rank better in the SERPs (search engine results page).

If you are looking for a collection of tricks or techniques that will magically propel your store to the first page of the SERPs for competitive keywords then this guide is not it. There is no magic potion that can do that for you. However, it is our hope that this guide will help you understand three things about search engine optimization:

1. if you ignore it, you do this at your own cost;
2. it has to be continually refined / tweaked;
3. it isn't rocket science, you just have to put in a lot of work;

With the above guidelines you can start and maintain a successful SEO campaign that will deliver measurable results for your BigCommerce store and the bottom line. Straying from these principles and looking for shortcuts might work in the short-term but will most certainly cause issues later down the road.

Each chapter is separate from the rest, so you do not have to read things in order. We found that it is best to scan the entire document and highlight important sections / concepts that you can later go back to and read in more detail.

Happy reading,

[The Spring Merchant Team](#)

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2. Common Terms, Misconceptions and Tools

SEO is one of the most misunderstood activities an e-commerce store owner has to deal with. Search Engine Optimization is an art and science in its self, but not something you should necessarily spend a fortune on.

2.1. Common terms and misconceptions

SEO with Bigcommerce is not as easy as it seems, but with a little documentation you can optimize your store to get better positions in SERP - the search engine results page.

Here is a list of misconceptions:

- 1. Having a BigCommerce store will bring you in the first page of Google** - This is not the case. Bigcommerce offers you the possibility to fill in SEO title, description and keywords, but you won't rank if you let them blank as many do. When editing a product do not forget to go to **Other tab** and fill in those details to reflect the main topics about your product.
- 2. To get better rankings use as much text as you can** - Google's Crawlers can crawl images, JavaScript and Flash content too. The study has been published recently when [SEOMoz asked how smart the search bots really are](#). That means that text is still the main focus, but you need to make a priority from giving your customers the best experience they can have. And that may include images too.
- 3. I have a small PageRank, my online business will die** - Also not true. PageRank is only one of the 200 signals/metrics Google uses to see the importance of your store. More important is the domain authority, age and backlinks. So, stop running after PageRank and start working on getting high quality links from big sites that are well respected. Why PageRank is not so important can be seen in this [video](#).
- 4. Domains do not have PageRank, pages do** - True. When you hear somebody telling you that a given domain has a big PageRank simply fire that guy or send him packing to learn some more. PageRank is for pages only. So when you see that store.com has a big PageRank then you know that the index page of that site has that given score.
- 5. Once you have the first position you're all set** - False. In a highly competitive keyword fight you need to continually stay on top of things to maintain your current ranking. You cannot just set it and forget it. This means you need to continually work on getting good backlinks, posting new content, tweaking the navigation etc. SEO means that you need to constantly work and fight your way to remain in the best positions. It is not something that you do once then you can forget about it.
- 6. I have to spend a fortune on SEO work** - False. Basic SEO, like the one we will discuss here, can be done by everyone who understands the core functions of this activity. Yes, that means

that you will have to learn a LOT, but you'll save thousands of dollars (we make the assumption here that you want to learn SEO and have the time for it).

7. SEO is too complicated - False. The core function of SEO activity is to optimize your pages in order to get the best rankings possible. At the most basic level you need to see what are the main topics that your product applies to. If you sell inkjet printers then you can see that the main topics for them are: inkjet printer, office printer, home printer, small office inkjet printer, cheap inkjet printer, high quality printer. These words define your printer, and guess what: these words ARE your keywords that you will be using during SEO for your products. This is where it all starts!

8. Having a ton of backlinks will save me - There is some truth to this. If those links come from sites with authority then you are in a good position. On the other side, if you get thousands of links from low quality sites then you won't get better rankings. A link from CNN values way more than 50 links from an unknown site, regardless of the PageRank of the page that link is located on. We do not recommend using automated tools for backlink building or link exchange. They do not offer value. Instead, if you get too many links in a short period of time Google may sense that something is not right and drop you from your position.

9. I've done SEO by the book, but nothing has changed - True. Doing SEO won't bring you in the best positions right away. It may take even weeks or months before you will be able to show up in pages 3, 2 or 1. And that means that you need to constantly work on your optimization.

2.2. SEO documentation and sources everyone must have

In order to understand what to do to rank well in Google we need to read and learn about the methods and actions that need to be done in the line of SEO.

I will list below some of the most important sources - documents and websites - we all need to have bookmarked:

[Google SEO Starter Guide](#) - If it's about getting traffic from Google we must ask it first in order to get some relevant information on how to do make things happen. This PDF guide has to be your first stop in the world of optimization for search engines.

[Basic Webmaster guidelines](#) - You will submit your sitemap to Google and most of details about your site will come from your webmasters account. The pieces of advice from that page are basic, but many store owners do not follow them.

[Simple pieces of advice from Google regarding SEO](#) - It's all about getting organic traffic and answering some of the most basic questions. You will find them by clicking the link.

[What is PageRank good for?](#) - If you use it as your primary metric, don't. Stop. It was seen as a pillar of SEO some good years ago, but now it's only one of the 200 signals Google is using to compile search rankings.

[SEOMoz beginners guide to SEO](#) - This guide is visually appealing and easy to understand. You won't become a SEO guru but surely you will be part of the few who really understand what optimization really is about.

Easy steps for Keyword Research - SEOMoz presents a few easy steps in keyword research, the activity that lets you find out what keywords/variants to use to get better rankings.

Aaron Wall's SEO Book blog - Aaron Wall gives a lot of free advice on his blog so you need to subscribe to it in order to get up to date information on SEO.

Search Engine Land - Another respected site I am subscribed to. It offers news from SEO world and trending topic in this activity. A must for every SEO wannabe.

SEOMoz Blog - They have developed some interesting SEO tools and have the MOZRank in place. Good to have them close when you need an expert opinion about search engine rankings.

Google Webmasters Help on YouTube - Matt Cutts answers your questions in one minute long videos. You need advice directly from Google. This YouTube channel has lots of instructional videos. It will not explain all the things in detail, but you will find out what Google wants us to think in regards to the world of search.

2.3. SEO Tools to help you easily decide how to choose your keywords and optimizations

Keyword Research guide and tools - SEOMoz has gone above and beyond and built a very nice guide which lists keyword research tools and how to use them. Read it multiple times if you have to as the information is pretty dense.

Chrome Extensions for SEO - among them **WooRank** is the easiest to use and understand. It shows over 50 metrics and gives even SEO rating.

SEO doctor for Firefox - You will get loading times, usage of tags, and a nice diagnosis for webmasters.

Google Insights for Search - here you will be able to see the trending keywords for your business or for the products you sell. You can even see an animated timeline with trends for search on a particular keyword. Also, rising searches gives you a heads up and lets you take into account other variations too.

Google AdWords Traffic Estimator - Google takes your money, but it won't do this without letting you know what you get in return. This tool will highlight the amount of traffic you might get when advertising with Google.

2.4. Bigcommerce SEO Bible Intro conclusions

These sources, documents and tools are very important so do not forget to check them all and understand the basic principles of how Google indexes the web, how SEO works or how we can save money by doing most of this job ourselves taking into account that you want to learn SEO.

In the next chapters we will be using what we've learned here and apply it in our stores, step by step. From choosing the right URL for your domain to using parameters to refine the store crawling we will discuss many of the issues that BigCommerce has on the SEO side and we will solve them together.

3. Prepare Your Store for The Big Fight of Ranking

Getting your BigCommerce store online and showing up in Google isn't only a few clicks away. There are some things that need to be done while preparing to get organic traffic.

Traffic from Google is very important but please consider alternatives. You will need to be creative and get customers using other ways too. In this post I'll write down a few basic steps to help you prepare your shop.

3.1. Choose your store's domain name carefully

The first and most clever SEO thing to do is to choose a domain name that has the keywords for your business in it. Domains with keywords in their name rank higher (still) for that given keyword.

If you name it like this: myawesomeshop.com you won't help Google much in deciding what your store is all about. Truthfully, everyone thinks that their shop is awesome, so that won't help at all. These days it's harder and harder to get a piece of the pie if you are a newcomer.

Google gives higher priority to established brands because they are big and have some years behind them. Being in the game for a long of time gives them authority. And authority is what Google likes. Yes, the rich get richer and it isn't that fair, but there are still businesses that are riding along.

In order to have better rankings you must choose domain names like best-french-cheese.com, if you sell french cheese, or cheap-reconditioned-cars.com, if you sell cars that have been reconditioned.

If you have a brandable business / domain name then you should be careful with this tactic. It's better to register keyword rich domain names and use the domains as "feeder websites" to send the traffic over to your brandable domain.

Domain name convention:

1. longtail keywords are nearing their end - [SEO Book warns that Google has killed longtail keywords](#) simply by using suggestions and word replacement. The infographic they show there explains clearly how Google shifted the focus to more common terms used in our language. If you have a store with a longtail domain name do not worry too much because you are online for quite some time and established a position. It's harder for the newcomers to use that kind of domain names. So, instead of using cheapcars.com use cheap-cars.com.

2. avoid stop words and names that are too long - stop words are words that are too common. If you want a domain name like this-is-best-site.com, you are wasting your chances. This and is are seen as stop words and are ignored by the search engines. Try instead best-site.com. Also, if you'd like a domain name like thebestproductsyouwilleverfindandloveontheinternet.com then you need to shorten it to less than 60 characters and no stop words. For a list of stop words not to use in domain names or as keywords please [see it here](#) Please note that best is a stop word too. I have used it only to give examples so please avoid it. Cheap is fine, though.

Do keyword research and find out what keywords fit best for your products and choose a domain name accordingly. For a guide to help you run these searches please [read this post](#).

Whatever you sell please keep in mind that you need to be different from them, starting from the domain name. If you sell hats, and especially summer hats, then the first step you need to do in this research is to Google summer hats.

The stores that sell summer hats are your competition. Study those stores. What domain name did they choose? Look at the source code of the page and see the description they chose, the keywords. Spend a few days doing this and going back and forth those sites to see what you could do different and what name you should choose.

When you feel you are ready use tools like [Panabee](#), that combines the words you insert there and create new names. Tools like that also check if a given domain name has been already taken. Use it as much as you can.

3.2. While on trial use disallow in robots.txt

Most BigCommerce store owners know that they can have a free store for 15 days during which they can understand the platform better, test the integration or create products.

Many do not know about a danger that lies with robots.txt file during this time. The standard lines of instruction from that file let crawlers index the pages and products you create while on trial.

That is an issue. Because during trial you create products, list your store in Google and the indexing begins. With the url to the trial store you have.

And when you buy a domain name and use it for the store you will see a lot of errors in Webmasters Tools which state that Google didn't find your product or you see your products listed in the index with the old URL's.

This is not an incredibly big issue, but still it's a waste of time because you need to wait until the new links are crawled and then showed in Google. And this takes time.

In order to start well you need to go to **Tools - Edit Robots.txt** and remove the lines from there in a text file. Save these lines in a separate file on your computer, as you will need them after you go live.

Then, in the empty Robots.txt file simply put these lines of code:

User-agent: *
Disallow: /

This way, while on trial your store will not be indexed. It is easier to have the pages indexed right from the first time, than to go and clean up the old links.

Make sure to undo the changes after your store goes live!

3.3. Choose a variant of WWW/No WWW Redirect and stick with it

Decide from the start if you want your links to have WWW in front or not and stick with that decision for the duration of the project.

After you have chosen the redirection type simply give people the appropriate link to your store. If you like to use www.store.com, then don't hand over store.com. The reverse is also true. If you use store.com then do not link using www.store.com

If you change it after the links have been indexed in Google, then the sitemap will change to the new link type and it will take a while until new links are indexed in Google.

3.4. Conclusions regarding preparing your store for SEO

These simple steps require a lot of initial attention but it is well worth it. Starting your online store the way you should will help you devote more time on marketing and creating a relationship with your customers.

Much better than just working overtime to patch things up. How did these pieces of advice help you?

Tell your friends about this guide and share the love on Twitter and Facebook :



4. Links, URL Structure and Sitemaps

Links indicate the path to a product in your Bigcommerce store and also send relevant messages to visitors and to search engines too. Here I will outline some basic principles of how links should be treated and used. Also, the tips I'll give here should be used from the very beginning and store owners should know not to make changes unless they really know the consequences.

4.1. Links tell a story about you and your store

If you have read the [Basic Google SEO Guide](#) then you know that links send a clear message to the search engine regarding the content of the page.

Yes. Even before the page can be loaded crawlers and people alike will know that at link <http://store.com/desktop-fan.html> they will find fans for your desktop computer. Easy as cake, you would say, but there are many who do not give the proper importance to this small detail.

Before even importing products and deciding what URL the product pages should have you need to understand some basic principles of links:

1. ALWAYS use lowercase - technically a link like [../this-link.html](http://this-link.html) is very different than [../this-link.com](http://this-link.com). Thankfully the servers are very clever and know that they need to serve the lowercase version (canonical). Still it is better to play the safe card and use only lowercase letters.

2. use ONLY alphanumerical characters - I know some people like to have links like [../this-\(may-be\)-is-best-link/](http://this-(may-be)-is-best-link/), but that is not a good idea. Notice that the link before has brackets in it and some spaces. Because of them you will have issues in the store, in Google Product Search and even on some social networks. Do not try to insert TM (TM - Trade Mark) or ® (® - Registered) or © (© - Copyright) because a link like [../monorailTM.html](http://monorail.html) will be converted to [../monorail%99.html](http://monorail%99.html) in some of the networks and you may get an error. Use only clean, nice alphanumerical characters in link and you will be safe from the horrors of the character sets. A list of URL encoding characters can be found [here](#).

3. hyphens are used to separate words - a link is easier to understand and you can better use keywords in it if you use the hyphen as a word separator. The link [../myasweomestoreisawesome.html](http://myasweomestoreisawesome.html) is very hard to understand and, if you want to rank for awesome, then you are out of luck, because that string over there refers to some other keyword. A link like the one before is better used like this: [/my-awesome-store-is-awesome.html](http://my-awesome-store-is-awesome.html). Much, much better. People can memorize it and crawlers understand that you have several keywords in it. A big win. As a side note please do not use underscore (_) in your titles, unless you want to link two words into one. Google sees [../this_awesome_house.html](http://this_awesome_house.html) as one thisawesomehouse, and because of this it is better for SEO to use hyphens. Like Matts Cutts, from Google, [explains here](#) it is much better to use [../this-awesome-house.html](http://this-awesome-house.html) instead.

4. when importing products do fill in the best URL for them - I know that if you import thousands of products using a CSV file it is a pain to insert for each one the URL and thus many just import the product with only their names, category and some other details. Please take

into account that if your product titles have special characters in them then you will receive errors upon import. It tries to create URLs from them (sometimes it even manages to do that) and you will see a message that links should only have alphanumeric, /, - or _. Not more than that!

5. do not forget the trailing slash / - most people do not give importance if the links they send out are with a trailing slash (/) or not. Well, they should. The link /awesome-product is not the same as /awesome-product/ , but the servers are, as always, clever enough to send to the canonical version, if you set that up. Consider adding the trailing slash when you add the URLs in the CSV file for import. A complete explanation of the importance of the trailing slash has been given by [Sebastian](#).

6. use keywords in the URLs - this is not specific to BigCommerce, but it helps for general knowledge. Do NOT to use links like store.com/products.php?id=22. Your store may know what that page is about and where it is. However, as a customer I do not know what that page means, and neither will the crawlers. Text, words, keywords are much better. If that page is about services then simply use **store.com/services-pricing-plans**. I can even remember the page's URL that way. This is good.

4.2. URL structure in BigCommerce

BigCommerce has done a nice thing letting you choose what URL structure you like and even having custom URLs by using [placeholders](#) like %productname%, %category%, %categoryname% or %sku%.

Following the rule that the URL needs to be as short, but as descriptive, as possible I would suggest you use the SEO Optimized short version for products, categories and webpages.

In Settings- Store Settings - URL Structure you can choose these settings. Alternatively you can choose a custom URL and use placeholder to have another type of links in the store. Using %productname%/%category% will show the product first in the URL and then the category it's in. Use this if you do not repeat a given keyword in the title and in the category name.

For example, if the product is named Womens Dress Beige Paris Luxury and it is in the category Women Dresses, better use the short URL version. You do not want to repeat womens dress all over the URL.

4.3. Sitemaps and submitting to search engines

One thing to know is that in BigCommerce if you choose to hide a page from the menu it will not show up in your sitemap as well. Still, you need to have all those links submitted to Google Webmasters Tools.

You can see your sitemap by typing /xmlsitemap.php after your store's URL. So, you will access it at: http://store.com/xmlsitemap.php . Be careful not to insert an extra / after the store's URL.

Knowing this you can test your self which links get hidden from sitemap when you hide them from menu.

In order to submit the hidden pages too there is a workaround. Normally, when you hide them you are still able to get there by typing the URL in browser's address bar.

So, the workaround has a few steps:

1. generate the XML sitemap - use services like [XML Sitemaps](#) or [WebSite Map](#) or see a list of such tools in [Google's Wiki](#).
2. download the XML sitemap and the upload it via FTP to your /content/ folder
3. go to your Webmasters Account- Site Configuration - Sitemaps - an insert the link: /content/sitemap.xml. It will take a bit but the links will be submitted. As a side note, you can have the sitemap in whatever folder, but it has to be in your site.
4. enjoy having those other links submitted to Google too.

Please note that submitting a sitemap to Google does **NOT** mean that it will index those pages, all your pages or ANY of them. Usually it will index most of the pages, and in the first place it will look at the canonical version of the links.

If you haven't done that already, do not forget to add the following line in your robots.txt file:

Sitemap: http://[your-store-url]/xmlsitemap.php

That file is located in **Tools- Edit Robots.txt**.

That line will show the major search engines where they can find the sitemap. Even is you do not submit the sitemap to Google your site will still be indexed, but with a slower pace. So, submitting will accelerate the process.

4.4. Conclusions regarding SEO links and nice URLs

With this the second part of preparing your site for SEO is completed. As I said in the previous articles these are only basic things we need to understand and do in order to be ready to fight our way into the ever changing world of SEO.

The next articles will outline the importance, or lack thereof, of meta tags, keyword driven titles, Panda updates and, of course, original content.

5. Canonical Links and Proper Use of Meta Tags

After preparing your BigCommerce store to enter the world of SEO you will be ready to work hard on different modifications to the templates in order to get as much as possible from them.

Some of the modifications are simple, other are not modifications, but are fields that need to be filled in without questions. Today we'll discuss a bit about the importance of canonical links and the proper usage of meta description and some short info about meta keywords.

5.1. Use clever canonical links

Canonical links are simply put, the “original” version of the links, the link that you create for the page or product in your store. They are defined in the head of the page and are used as a fallback method for search engines to know which links they should crawl and give more importance to.

In BigCommerce there are canonical links setup for products, categories and brands, but none for the home page. That is a flaw that hopefully will be corrected in some future versions of the template.

We have tested and creating a custom template in order to insert the canonical link for the home page didn't work because that meant to delete some lines of code from HTMLhead.html that would otherwise been useful for the entire site.

A canonical link looks like this:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://mystore.com/" />
```

After href, in the definition above comes the link that you define for products, categories and brands so make use of it the best you can. That means that you will have to use links the way I have described in the previous [tutorial about SEO links and sitemaps](#).

5.2. Meta tags may help boost your store's ranking

The use of title and meta description is important in the first place because it tells the different types of crawlers what the page is about. Most importantly, they are useful in the SERP where the user can decide based on the title and the description if you have the answer to his or her question.

Although they have smaller importance than the content they still have to be concise and relevant to the products you are selling so that a prospective client will click on the link in the SERPs based on the description.

In order to fill in these details just go to any product, edit it, then go to the tab named Other Details and search the section for Search Engine optimization.

There you have the ability to input:

Page Title - this can be different than your product title or the same. Do not insert titles like: HP Deskjet P25. Instead use something like this: Colorado Home printer HP Deskjet P25, if you sell only in Colorado. Make them descriptive and try to think what a possible buyer would ask if he were in front of the computer using Google to search for products.

Meta description - use here the keywords too and keep it at max of 160 characters long. Example: "The home printer HP Deskjet P25 can be bought in Colorado at a cheap price and it's easy to use and install." -

Meta Keywords - you need to know that Google does not give any importance anymore to meta keywords. This means that you could redirect the effort to some other areas, like creating better content or descriptions.

There are many cases in which the BigCommerce store owners do not fill in these details and therefore all the products will have the same meta keywords and meta description defined in **Settings- Store Settings- Website tab**, under section Search Engine Optimization. A big FAIL.

Google likes freshness and diversity. If you have the same keywords, description and even content on every possible page in your Bigcommerce store then do not expect to rank higher than ecommerce sites that have fresher, unique content.

A thing to keep in mind: Google does not see an ecommerce site any different than any other website in the world and therefore it will hit hard in the stores that have the same description/page content for their products.

This is why even if the manufacturer says that you must leave the product specifications untouched you should add content to each of these pages. Given the fact that other hundreds or thousands of stores have the same content you will need to create a different content from them in order to have better rankings.

5.3. Conclusion

These Bigcommerce SEO tips come from the bad experiences some store owners have had because they didn't spend enough time on optimizing and tweaking descriptions and content. You do not want to have a bad experience so you'll need to check if you have those fields blank and fill them on the spot.

6. H1 Heading and All the Goodies Above the Fold

BigCommerce stores don't have by h1 tags by default and this could hurt your SEO, but luckily there is a fix for this. Headings are used to organize the content in the page and using the proper tags search engines can see which parts of the content are more important.

Also, headings (h1...h6) make the site look better. How would you like to read a book if the titles look the same as all the text in the book and are lost somewhere between the lines?

6.1. Fixing the h1 issue - easy as cake, almost

You can see in the image below that by default the h2 tag is used for the titles. when instead it should be used h1.



The fix has already been found and [ShoppingCart Strategies has nailed down the SEO fix for the h1 issue](#).

What you will need to do is to find the occurrences of h2 for the titles and then change them to h1. For this you will need to locate the following template files:

1. Panels/ProductDetails.html - find

```
<h2>%%GLOBAL_ProductName%%</h2>
```

and change it to

```
<h1>%%GLOBAL_ProductName%%</h1>
```

2. Panels/CategoryHeading.html - find

```
<h2>%%GLOBAL_CatName%%</h2>
```

and change it to

```
<h1>%%GLOBAL_CatName%%</h1>
```

3. Panels/BrandContent.html - find

```
<h2>%%GLOBAL_TrailBrandName%%</h2>
```

and change it to

```
<h1>%%GLOBAL_TrailBrandName%%</h1>
```

4. Panels/PageContent.html - find

```
<h2>%%GLOBAL_PageTitle%%</h2>
```

and change it to

```
<h1>%%GLOBAL_PageTitle%%</h1>
```

5. Panels/NewsContent.html - find

```
<h2>%%GLOBAL_NewsTitle%%</h2>
```

and use this instead

```
<h1>%%GLOBAL_NewsTitle%%</h1>
```

Shopping Cart Strategies lists a few other mods in their tutorial. I would suggest that when you create the product description to insert there one or two h2 tags. Also, it is a good idea to create descriptions for categories and use h2 tags there too. Try to make them meaningful and see how they could fit in there.

When Google crawls a page it looks first at the h1 heading and the first phrase under it, and then at h2 heading and their corresponding phrases. Try to use keywords in the heading and in the phrases right below them.

Another thing to take into account is that the home page does not have h1 headings. Only if you choose to have the logo as text then you will have that on front page, but it is not an ideal solution.

One way would be to use a banner in which you insert text with h1 heading. The banner could be top or bottom banner. With this you can see that you have these heading on each page and they all are very different.

6.2. Insert your most important elements above the fold

Above the fold is the term used for the upper part of the page where you do not need to scroll down. Simply put, above the fold is a screens height, the first part you see when you land on a page. In this first part you need to have the most interesting elements.

It is not SEO advice as it is a UX (user experience) advice. They both come together when creating content for the user, your customer. The most relevant information is always in the place where is gets easier to the customer, thus Google knows .

Usually it is a good practice to have contact info above the fold, even in header. Google has made an interesting heat map in regards to where people should put the ads on their pages. As [seen here](#) the main focus is on the upper left part of the site. People move their attention and eyes following an "F" path.

Try to put the Facebook like box (if you have one) in the right column right on top to have more people clicking on the like button. Also, put in the same area the chat window too.

6.3. Final thoughts about h1 headings and above the fold

As I stated in the first post from BigCommerce SEO Bible here will be outlined only basic steps and actions regarding changes or workflow in order to help you get better rankings. Having a nicely structured website will help Google better understand what your message is and placing important elements above the fold will help search engines and customers alike.

These pieces of advice will not throw you in the first page of Google, but every bit counts. Remember to have always original content, because Google does not make any difference between normal sites and e-commerce sites.

The fact that you have to write the product specifications as they came from the manufacturer is not an excuse. You need to add value, and by that I mean to add extra text, even photos or video. Something that makes it different than the other 100 sites that sell the same thing as you. Content is King and SEO is knight.

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7. Original Content and Basic On-page Optimization

Year 2011 was the year of [Panda Updates](#) in the world of SEO and many sites that had duplicate content simply dropped in SERP rankings. Those updates were targeting specifically websites that had a lot of copied content in their pages.

[Content farms](#) lost rankings and some of them needed to delete parts of their websites in order to comply with the changes. Here I will outline only very basic tips to help you understand the work you have to do.

7.1. Create original content to bring more value to the web

I'll start from saying that Google does not see a difference if you are an e-commerce website or a presentation site. It demands original and value added content in your store. You need to follow BigCommerce's advice regarding your work on optimization for search engines by adding more and different content, especially when using meta keywords and description.

Following many complains that BigCommerce store owners have filed in the forum I wanted to find out a probable cause of their mishap.

You can read the entire discussion in the [Google Webmasters forum thread](#) I opened regarding brand footprint and explanations regarding Google's Updates.

The conclusion from those replies is very clear: it doesn't matter that you, as a store owner, need to specify the exact product specifications as mentioned by the manufacturer. You need to have some value added content, which means that you have to add text, images or video to your product pages.

If you have hundreds or thousands of products this can be a very challenging task, but you will need to do as much work as you can to get original content on those pages. Even when we speak about SEO, original content is king.

You could explain how and where a product applies, use YouTube videos, add some other images. In all this focus on the description area.

The main question you should ask your self is this: among the other tens or hundreds of stores that sell the same products like me what do I do different than them?

7.2. Basic on page optimization

After original content, on-page and off-page optimization activities are very important. On-page optimization means that you need to be careful at the keywords used in the content, using proper attributes and having the right elements and structure.

Usually when you publish a page you want to rank in the search engines for some keywords.

Those keywords should show up in:

1. URL of the page - ../buy-home-printer-hp-deskjet-victoria/

2. title of the page - Buy home printer HP Deskjet Victoria from our store

3. meta description of the product - here put only a phrase that contains the keywords: printer, home, deskjet, making a short description of the product

4. title of the product - this should be in a h1 tag

5. alt attribute of the images - when adding images to products you can insert a descriptions. Those descriptions are the alt attribute of those images.

6. content - of course you need to have them here too.

Do not simply create a long string of keywords and copy them in your meta description and keywords. Descriptions need to be clear and understandable. It will show up under the link to your products in the search engines.

In your content try to target keywords that are more general. If your page has a reading level for PhDs then you will have to make it easier to read and understand. Google looks at the reading level too.

While setting up the keywords in meta keywords do not use misspelled versions. Google's suggestions work very well and often people, if they misspell a word, will choose the right form from the drop down menu below the search box.

Search suggest from Google has made the usage of misspelled keywords pretty much useless. You can find more details about this in the [infographic about longtail keywords made by SEOBook](#).

An interesting [study about search engine basics presented on SEOMoz](#) revealed that Google might not work as some of the SEO gurus out there have thought. Particularly it was about the fact that they were saying that you should not use a particular keyword more than a number of times (3-4-5) in your content.

If you want to rank for several keywords, as it is in many cases, you will need to keep a balance between how many times one keyword shows up over the other. If you mention "blue" many more times than "printer" the crawlers might "think" that you have a page about colors and not blue printers.

First think at what you would like to see in a description page of a product. Create that text for the customer, keeping in mind to make some less annoying changes from place to place in order to keep the search engines happy too.

Make use of h2 tags (because you used already a h1 in the product title) and keep in mind that the most important phrase is the one right after the h2 heading.

If you ask yourself if using tabs for the product pages will hurt your ranking then you do not need to worry. Google is able to see the content in those tabs and won't drop your links in the search engine results page.

One thing you could do there is to link to other products, but use an optimized anchor text. If you have another printer that needs mentioned, do not use phrases like: another great product can be found [\[link\]](#)here~~[/link]~~.

Instead use an anchor text like in the following phrase: please do not forget to see [\[link\]](#)this great Printer HP LaserJet~~[/link]~~. This way you will tell the crawlers beforehand what they will find in that link and help that product page rank better for the terms: "great printer" and "Printer HP Laserjet".

Also, use as many links are necessary for the context. Linking to trusted sources is an indirect way to tell Google that you are trustworthy too.

7.3. Basic optimization and original content always wins

It is true, but you need to know that these are only part of the entire process called search engine optimization. If you depend on the customers that come from the search engines original content (that adds value) and basic SEO tips need to be applied to have the right start.

It is hard to do it right from the first time, but you need to keep on doing until it feel natural to use keywords wherever you need and insert rich content in your product pages. Learning is an ongoing process and with SEO learning never stops.

8. Social Signals and SEO in 2012

Already being in 2012 we look back at the fact that search engine optimization saw a big turnaround in 2011 due to Panda update which had as collateral victims some of BigCommerce stores. Duplicate and poor quality content made those stores fall down like rocks and even made clients think that there is something wrong with the templates.

We outlined in our [BigCommerce SEO Bible](#) series that there are some issues with the templates, but those are NOT the cause of such dramatic drops in rankings.

Since our company deals with tech support and [template design and modifications](#) we know for a fact that you can have the best design possible, but if you don't have valuable content then no effective SEO can be done on that site. Regarding design and ranking it is good to know that if you change abruptly the look of the store from one design to another then you will get hit and drop in rankings.

8.1. The social web and Bigcommerce stores

[Search Engine Journal presented five SEO facts for 2012](#) and being part of the social web is a requirement if you want to have your store listed as high as possible in SERPs.

A known fact is that if you first publish a page in your store and then promote it in Facebook or Google+ wall you will see those statuses showing up sooner and ranking higher than your original page.

It is now a year since [Matt Cutts said that social signals will be used in rankings](#).

That doesn't mean that if you have Social Shop enabled in your BigCommerce store you will get more traffic coming. Social Shop is for selling within Facebook. It was build on the idea that you go where the customers are and thus help them find and pay easier for your products.

What is important about social signals for SEO is the fact that, during the process of creating your Social Shop, you create a page.

That Facebook page is valuable for several reasons:

you get feedback - this is the most important reason to have a Facebook page. Feedback helps you create better products and bond with the customers

links to your store count towards SEO - link posted by you in the page's wall will be indexed and help you rank better

viral aspect - if you have an interesting product people might like it and share it a lot. More shares bring more visitors, but also increase the authority of the site.

Since we have now pages in Google+ and in Twitter it is a good idea to spread as far as you can, but you need to know that you will have to be active in those pages. The simple fact that you are on social networks won't help if there is no engagement.

In your store you can enable usage of social sharing by going to Settings - Store Settings - Sharing. These will help spreading the word. The more shares the better, but try not to spam with too many shares.

While having a Facebook page can be good there are still some tips and tricks to be learned. This is why you need to check out [Facebook Pages Insider's Guide](#).

Also, Google+ pages are another side of the story. Build on the same model as Facebook pages the [G+ pages have their own guide to start with](#).

8.2. 2012 is the end of the world for poor content and zero social engagement

Yes, it is a known fact that search engines need to refine their results. However, you need work on creating value added content and following the basic SEO rules outlined by Google themselves then you will have a winning stance.

I like the way Search Engine Journal showed us [the future of SEO for 2012](#):

1. **content rules** - it is not about content itself. We talk here about original content (no copy&paste here), fresh content (freshness is a factor taken into account by Google) and rich content (images, videos and javascript that enriches user experience will get you a better chance in rankings)

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2. organic backlinks are awesome - like how SEJ said that these type of links will always win. Google can detect if you buy too many links and can simply not take them into account or drop you in search results. The conclusion: do NOT participate in link building schemes. You will lose.

3. personal search - search results given by Google are already presented in a filtered format and you can have different results for a keyword than your colleague. This is a bit tricky and we need to see a bit more the development to find out how store owners can use this to their advantage.

4. be everywhere - BigCommerce has mobile versions of the store so this point is covered. Given the fact that people search and buy more and more from mobile devices being where they are is definitively a good idea. For now BigCommerce does not offer access to the mobile templates, so we cannot do any changes. In the fight for better rankings on the mobile web we will need to test tactics and guide to rank better in SERPS on mobile.

5. be social, exist - at this point I think it is pretty obvious that being social gives results not only on SEO part but also increases your brand's awareness and can get you loyal following. Remember, engagement gives you authority. In return authority brings you devoted clients and better rankings.

The question still remains: since you offer the same product as hundreds other sites, what do you do to be different?

8.3. Still not enough? It never is. Not with SEO.

SEOMoz has a nice series of videos named [Whiteboard Friday](#) in which Rand Fishkin outlines some of the best SEO practices and pieces of advice that you can employ in the very minute you see those videos.

2012 will be harder, faster and tougher in regards to rankings and store owners need to be very careful at even the slightest details if they want to get people knocking at their store's door.

This is why we, at [Spring Merchant](#), hope to see you ranking well. I will leave you with a very useful video about [advanced on-page optimization](#)!

9. Bonus chapter: Quality Content in Bigcommerce Stores and Interesting SEO Development in 2012

The New Year started with Google in the middle of a scandal where bloggers have been SEO spamming while promoting Google's Chrome browser. As soon as [Aaron Wall posted about the issue of these sponsored](#) posts Google shoved [Chrome down in search ranking](#).

As the story and the year 2012 unfolds we will see some more interesting facts and I mentioned the above things to point out to Bigcommerce store owners to avoid link building schemes [like this one](#). It is about buying backlinks from sites in order to help with rankings. No one can guarantee that they will help since most of these inbound links come from untrusted or low quality sites. Avoid that.

9.1 . Quality or value added content is a strong pillar for organic search

There are still complains about spam sites ranking higher than they should and the concern always exists that Google might not be able to catch them all. This is true, but search engines evolve and we should not look at what these spammers do and adopt their practice. Never.

If you still fear that the one who's outranking you may be a spammer [SEOMoz has a nice guide for this situation](#). In your store you must rely on always using meta tags and giving an accurate and quality description for your products. Of course, you need to be careful at many other details outlined by me in our [Bigcommerce SEO Bible series](#).

Value added content is a key requirement for 2012 too so simply inserting the canned descriptions provided by the manufacturer won't help you at all. Many stores are doing the same so you'll have to come up with a better solution.

Fighting to get to the top of results is not an easy task and no one can guarantee that your online store will be on 1st position for ever, nor that you'll even get there. For those who want to get the most out of their sites in regards to rankings they need to know not to fall into [The Made for SEO Website Trap](#). This kind of site tries to get (steal would be the better word) visitors by employing tactics like pages created for products that are not on site, slicing of search phrases and ignoring user experience by providing low quality content.

9.2. Be social, be everywhere

If at the beginning of 2011 people were asking themselves if social signals will be taken into account, we start this year by knowing that the number of likes, shares, retweets, in one word the viral factor, have an importance in rankings. Google says that they take into account these signals, but does not give a percentage in regards to how important they might be. Given the harsh environment in which many online stores are every small change here and there can help. Better be safe than sorry.

Being social and having Facebook, Twitter and/or Google+ pages is not enough. You will need to actually be there and interact. This way optimization and internet marketing are hand in hand as outlined in the post published by [Search Engine Journal about data for 2012](#).

As you can see in the infographic below, created by Go-Gulf, being on the internet and not only in your online store is a requirement, not an option.



In 60 seconds many things happen on the internet: 1500 blog posts are published, 600 new videos see the light in YouTube, 98 000 tweets on Twitter and 70 domains are registered. The web is dynamic and online stores need to keep up the pace.

Although content is still king getting an account in the main social media networks help you get your links shared easier. It is important to enable the sharing buttons in your BigCommerce store by going to Settings - Store Settings - Share.

Being social also means that you need to have a blog to communicate your ideas and only sometimes link back to your products. Blogs on Blogspot or WordPress (my favorite) are indexed in a very short time and can be used to drive traffic back to the store.

9.3. Google gets aggressive and pushes product search items above organic results

Yes, you heard that. If you do a search in Google.com for "video card" you will see the image below. It may vary depending on the geographical area you're in, if you're logged into any Google account or not and many other factors, but the truth is this: less organic results in SERP.

The screenshot shows a Google search for "video card". The search bar contains "video card" and the results show "About 131,000,000 results (0.43 seconds)". On the left, there are filters for "Everything", "Images", "Maps", "Videos", "News", "Shopping", and "More". The main content area shows "Related searches for video card:" with links to "Stores: Geeks.com, Newegg, Tiger Direct, Best Buy, Dell" and "Brands: Nvidia, ATI, HP, Alienware, EVGA". Below this is a link to "Video card - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia" with a brief description. A red box labeled "google product search" with a red arrow points to the "Shopping results for video card" section. This section displays five product listings, each with an image, a link to the product page, a star rating, and a price.

Product	Price
eVGA GeForce GTX 550Ti Graphics card -	\$128
XFx Radeon HD 6970 Graphics card - 2 GB -	\$340
eVGA GeForce GTX 560 Ti Superclocked	\$240
Gigabyte GV N560OC-1GI Graphics card -	\$226
MSI N560GTX-Ti Twin Frozr II/OC Graphics card -	\$243

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If you are in the US you may get the results Rand Fishkin got when he searched for "espresso machine": only one organic result on the first page and the rest were either ads, either Google Product Search. Read about this in section #5 in this [**SEOMoz post about SEO 2012 predictions**](#) and you will see that Google means business, not only search.

If BigCommerce has done a great thing thinking at the future of SEO for store owners then the integration with Google Product Search is definitively a big win for them.

So, as soon as possible prepare your products to be listed in Google by following [**this tutorial**](#). Also, please read about the [**importance of mapping your products**](#) the right way.

As SEOMoz states, [**organic results gather 80% of clicks**](#) and will drop with the passing of time. This is why you might need *ahem* some help from AdWords from time to time. [**Just saying...**](#)

Google+ is starting to grow in importance. You don't like social networks and use Facebook only for your Social Shop? Then you're missing the bandwagon. Google+ is a service (soon to be platform) that is pushed in almost every aspect of Google's services. The top floating horizontal bar will guard you (and your search results) wherever you go.

That being said a Google+ account and a page will be a requirement in the very near future. You can now see Google+ brand pages, circles and +1s in search results. It is good to know that Google profiles will have priority when [**using the rel=author tag**](#) on their site. Alternatively [**use this method**](#) to verify authorship of your site. You can test is the implementation of rel=author is good [**on this page**](#).

10. It never ends

Rest assured that the recipe for success (once it is known) will be changed before you blink so if you rely solely on organic searches to drive traffic, then you need to be all eyes and ears to make any small change needed to push you in front of the competition.

Hard work doesn't have to be a LOT of work, although it often times is. Still, SEO is a field that gets more and more challenging for all of us as the days go by.

Hopefully this small guide has shed some light on this ever interesting field called search engine optimization. Knowing the basics and **[fighting the misconceptions about SEO](#)** will result in a better understanding of your business and your customers.

The Spring Merchant Team
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