PDF Documents and SEO

Quality PDF documents can enhance a company's website, and there are basic ways to optimize PDFs that will improve their internet search engine ranking. This article describes many techniques for applying SEO methods to PDF documents. Listed first are techniques to use when building PDF documents. Second, additional ways to optimize PDF documents from within a full version of Adobe Acrobat are described. Listed last are a few general suggestions.

PDF Optimization When Building the Document

1. The PDF document must be text based. This, of course, is a basic requirement since search engines cannot read image-based PDFs such as scanned documents. To give search engines better access, much of the document should contain text that is formatable. The document has formatable text if the text can be selected, copied, and pasted or if it can be exported in other text formats such as rtf.
2. Optimize the Text in the PDF document for search engines. Text in a PDF document is treated no differently than text in an HTML web page. A keyword-rich opening paragraph and descriptive headings will support SEO objectives for the document. As always, do not use deceptive SEO tactics such as adding hidden, invisible, and tiny text.
3. Add links to the PDF documents from other pages on the company website or from other sites that link to the PDF document. Build the anchor text of these links to support the keyword strategy of the PDF. In addition, the PDF document itself should contain active links to appropriate pages on its own company website. Almost any text or image within the PDF can be made into an active hyperlink. Not only will these back links help to promote the company site, they will also provide a return link if the document is downloaded or attached to an email message. Do not forget to verify all of the links.

PDF Optimization Within Adobe Acrobat

1. Add a descriptive title with keywords into the PDF document properties. The title is like the HTML title tag; it is the most important document property for optimizing PDFs for search engines. If the PDF does not have a title defined, its file name will be used.
2. Fill in other document properties, such as the subject and a few keywords. The subject serves as the meta description for the PDF. Other metadata properties such as author name and company name appear to have limited value for SEO ranking, but can be entered as desired.
3. Optimize the PDF file size. If a file is too large, search engines may abandon the indexing of its content and users may abandon their intention to view it. To compress a PDF, newer versions of Acrobat have a configurable PDF Optimizer option. Because the latest PDF version, 1.7, was released back in 2006, search engines do not need updates in order to read the most recent PDF compression. Optimizing the size of images in the document can be an effective way to reduce the PDF file size and speed the load time.
4. Verify the document reading order. The order in which a search engine reads the PDF document is important in determining which phrases are shown on the listing. To access and adjust the actual document reading order in Acrobat use the menu option: Advanced>Accessibility>Touch Up Reading Order.
5. Add tags to the PDF content just as in an HTML document from the Acrobat menu option:

Advanced>Accessibility>Add Tags to Document. This option enables the document creator to tag headings, alternate text for images, and other text as desired. Use this option to see if tags created in other programs are actually included in the PDF document.

Other PDF Optimization Suggestions

1. Keep the PDF document page close to the root or main website page. This applies to all web pages designed for SEO or having links. Search engines may not index pages if they are buried deep within a website's architecture.
2. When changes to the PDF document are complete, save it using Save As command and overwrite the document. This will eliminate modification that can be appended to PDF by the Save command and remove unused objects.
3. Before posting any optimized PDF, recheck its properties. Even small changes can have a big impact on both the optimization and the user view. Important properties such as the reading order or the version of the saved document could be affected. Especially risky is modifying the PDF in different applications or modifying the document on two different computers by the same application having different defaults or preferences.

Certainly, SEO methods are not required for all PDFs and some documents could be converted to HTML, but applying these basic techniques to optimize PDF documents for higher search engine rankings should give companies additional options.

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