

## Leveraging SharePoint to Optimize Your Search Engine Rankings

The myriad ways that businesses are leveraging SharePoint clearly demonstrate that in today's Web 2.0 world, the Web site is no longer simply online "brochure-ware." Indeed, SharePoint-built corporate Web sites act as virtual stores, online communities and portal destinations where users visit, buy and interact. Using SharePoint, it's easy to create wikis, blogs, and portals to enable groups to collaborate and personalize content based on the user's profile and needs. In addition to sharing and managing content, SharePoint allows businesses to deploy search functionality as well as analyze important corporate data. It is a little known fact that SharePoint is also being used more and more to optimize search engine rankings.

### Utilizing SharePoint to Drive Traffic to Your Site

The importance of the search engine has increased in parallel with the value of the corporate site. Unless your site is Google or CNN.com, or otherwise holds global brand recognition, a significant amount of visitors arrive at your URL via search engines. Not surprisingly, businesses are investing more and more in Web marketing campaigns to drive traffic to their sites, and an important component of this effort is in improving search engine optimization (SEO).

Optimizing search engine rankings is governed by certain rules that most search engines follow, and it's a little more technical than it may initially appear. For Web developers and administrators using SharePoint, we present here a number of practical and fairly easy steps that can be taken at the beginning of the design process to optimize these rankings:

**Semantic Code** – Semantic code is a way of writing HTML in a structured and meaningful way, while adhering to Internet standards. For example, use <h1> to <h6> in headers. Use the "list" element if you need to group information in a list: organized <ol>, disorganized <ul> or defined lists <dl>.

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Abiding by correct HTML practices not only helps your pages load faster, but also generates improved SEO. Search engines may judge your site by looking at your code and determining what's important, including picking out keywords. The less clutter and the cleaner the formatting, the easier it is for the search engines to find what's important on your page.

To further advance your SEO efforts, take advantage of the benefits that the SharePoint image libraries can offer. To improve your page rankings, it's important to use the ALT and TITLE attributes on the site's images. SharePoint provides this through its "Picture Libraries," as shown in the image below.

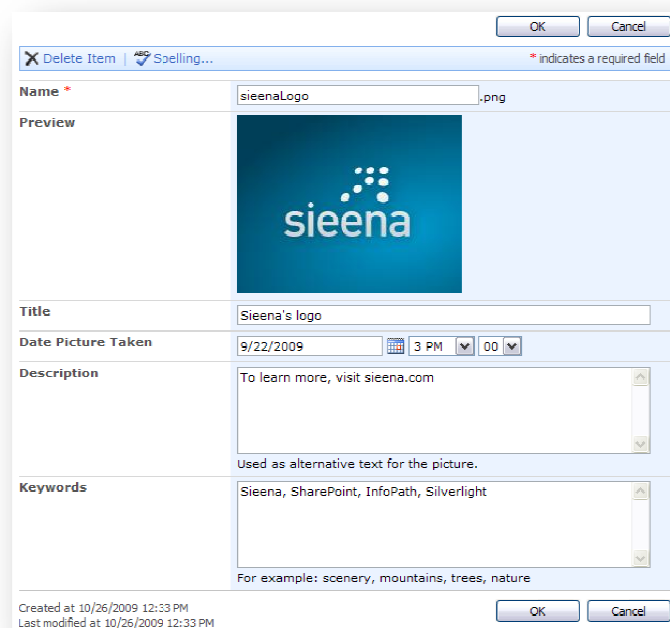


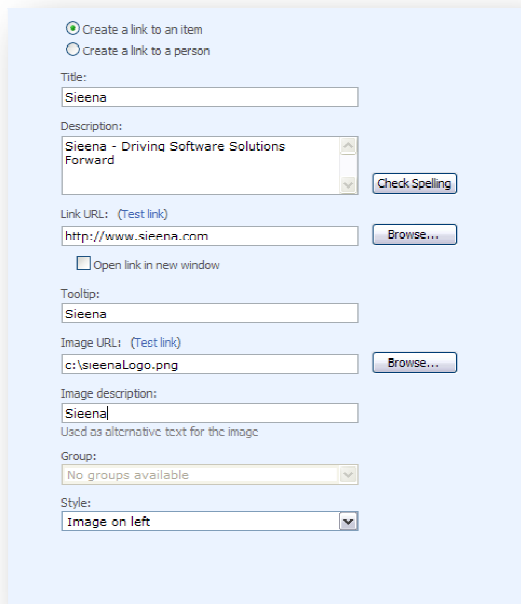
Figure 1 – Editing a Picture Library

**Keyword Density** – Keyword density is the percentage of times a keyword or phrase appears on a Web page in comparison to the total number of words on the page. For example, 10 percent keyword density is achieved when 10 keywords appear in a body of

text totaling 100 words. In the SEO world, keyword density plays a role in determining whether a Web page is relevant to a user's search for a specified keyword or keyword phrase. To improve search engine rankings, a site's keyword density must not be too high or too low. But identifying ideal keyword density is not a simple process. Experts suggest that the optimum density is more of a range than a specific figure, and most agree that a keyword density of one to seven percent is preferred. It's important to avoid "keyword stuffing" wherever possible. This refers to the use of more than 10 percent keyword density. There are a number of easy-to-use tools available that simplify the process of determining keyword density.

Adding meta keyword and meta descriptions to SharePoint pages can also enhance SEO, offering a method for improving a search engine's likelihood to identify your content as relevant to a particular search. A post on the Mtelligent Solutions blog provides a streamlined and timesaving alternative for incorporating meta tags into SharePoint pages. Meta tags can be used to detail the page description, keywords and other data not contained in the head elements of the page. As the Internet has evolved, some

experts say that search engines now place less value on meta tags. Nevertheless, they should not be ignored and they should continue to be addressed in a public-facing SharePoint site. When adding meta keywords and meta descriptions, it's very important that the words they contain actually exist on your Web site.



The screenshot shows a SharePoint dialog box for creating a link. It has two radio buttons at the top: "Create a link to an item" (selected) and "Create a link to a person". Below are several input fields and buttons: "Title:" with "Sieena" entered; "Description:" with "Sieena - Driving Software Solutions Forward" entered and a "Check Spelling" button; "Link URL: (Test link)" with "http://www.sieena.com" entered and a "Browse..." button; a checkbox for "Open link in new window"; "Tooltip:" with "Sieena" entered; "Image URL: (Test link)" with "c:\sieenaLogo.png" entered and a "Browse..." button; "Image description:" with "Sieena" entered and a note "Used as alternative text for the image"; "Group:" with a dropdown menu showing "No groups available"; and "Style:" with a dropdown menu showing "Image on left".

Figure 2 – Creating Meaningful Titles

**Create Meaningful Titles** – Meaningful titles tell both the search engine and the site visitor what a page is about. Experts say that every page on a site should contain accurate and unique titles, which can be easily done through use of the TITLE and Tooltip attributes in SharePoint. SharePoint also provides a very useful Web Part ("Summary Link Web Part") to

accomplish this. As shown in the image below, it simply requires that you fill in the attribute fields, and then you are set.

**Search Engine-Friendly URLs** – A simple piece of SEO advice is to make sure your site’s URLs are descriptive: avoid code or meaningless identifiers. Why? Because having

descriptive URLs makes it easier for search engines to identify and categorize your site, and drive relevant traffic to it. It has been documented that search engines prefer pages that appear to be hand coded, existing on a non-dynamic URL. Such pages are less likely to be computer generated and more likely to serve a real purpose.

Ensuring that your site URLs are handled by SharePoint navigation control is one way to improve search engine friendliness, as well as search engine visibility. It also ensures that site visitors can find all the pages on your Web site in the manner in which they expect. The good news is that SharePoint 2007 can automatically keep your navigation current, based on your site’s “Navigation” settings. The figure below provides an example see Figure 3 (to the left).

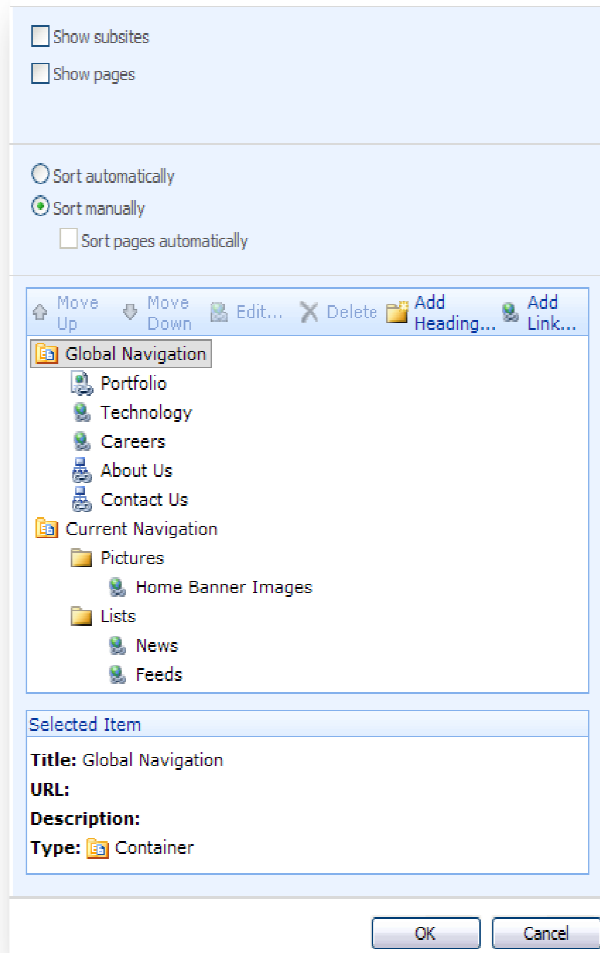


Figure 3 – Site’s Navigation Settings

There is a great downloadable solution on [CodePlex](#), which you can install on your public-facing SharePoint site to allow for easy changes to blog post URLs to make them more descriptive. The image below demonstrates a highly descriptive blog URL, performed using SharePoint and the CodePlex download:



/blog/archive/2009/07/10/setting-up-wcf-services-to-work-with-large-amount-of-data-.aspx

***Use of Robots file to Control Search Engine Spiders*** - A robots.txt file is a simple file that establishes what is known as the “Standard for Robot Exclusion.” When placed in the main directory of a Web site, it advises spiders and other robots which directories or files they should not access. Even though the file is merely advisory, most major search engine spiders will read it and follow the rules contained within the file. The robots file should be placed at the root of the Web server (<http://www.domain.com/robots.txt>).

This is important because SharePoint generates many sub-folders, and some should be excluded from robot access, otherwise they impact keyword density. For example, the `_layouts` folder includes all the settings of your site, such as look and feel, user permissions, workflows, page layouts, masterpage files, search settings and more -- none of which is appropriate for public display. On a publishing site, the `Pages/Forms` folder contains the list of all your pages (published or not), so you don't need to expose that kind of information to the search engine spiders. Examples of SharePoint folders that should be also excluded are:

```
/_layouts/  
/_catalogs/  
/WorkflowTasks/  
/SiteCollectionDocuments/  
/SiteCollectionImages/  
/Documents/Forms/  
/Pages/Forms/  
/ReusableContent/  
/Reports List/  
/Search
```

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Adding the “search” folder is particularly critical, otherwise when users leave a search page (on Google or other engines) they will arrive at another search page (inside an organization’s Web site). This slows down the search process and leads to frustrations for the user. It’s also important to note that robots.txt should not be used to secure content because search engines can choose to ignore it. Also, if you use sub-sites, you need to exclude the same folders on the sub-site. For example, for the Blog sub-site, exclude: /Blog/\_layouts/, /Blog/\_catalogs/.

***Workflow to Update Your Sitemap*** – The use of this file is very common: it lets search engines know when your pages have been added, removed or modified. You can build your sitemap using xml to add nodes for each page on the site, incorporating information such as last modification date, title of your page, etc. Right now, the exact formatting of the XML file can vary depending on which search engine it is tailored for (Google, Yahoo, Bing), so read about each engine and choose the one that best suits your site, or try to use properties that all of them can handle. SharePoint can help, with tools for building controls that automatically update your sitemap file when a public facing page is published to a major version, or by using workflows for the pages library, so that when you update, delete or create a new page, the sitemap file will be automatically updated with the new information.

## Site Building Practices to Avoid When Using SharePoint

When planning and building your Web site in SharePoint, there are some practices you should AVOID because they detract from SEO:

***Page Titles*** - Never name the page titles with the core functionality (for example, don’t name your home page title just that -- Home). Because search engines examine the “title” property of a page, it’s best to name your page titles using important keywords. This will deliver far better SEO results.

***Overuse of Keywords*** - Never overuse a keyword throughout your site. It may cause search engines to identify your page as “suspicious,” which could detract from SEO.

*Hidden Fields* - Do not use hidden fields with keywords visible to the search engine, but not to the user. This is like trying to fool the search engine, and can backfire, thereby negatively impacting SEO.

*Inline JavaScript* - Do not use styles, or “inline” JavaScript. Inline styles typically cannot be indexed or ranked by search engines with regard to content or unified keyword relevance. A Web site using an external style sheet has less code for the search engine spider to go through, so it is more likely to index your content faster.

## Want to Get the Most Out of SharePoint?

Clearly utilizing SharePoint can deliver significant value to your business by empowering your employees with an efficient way to collaborate and share knowledge, manage content across the enterprise, and create customizable Web services. By taking advantage of existing tools within the suite, you can now optimize your search engine rankings and bring more traffic to your site.

## About Sieena

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Since 2004, Sieena a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner has provided comprehensive IT support and comprehensive software development services, including customized SharePoint deployments. The award-winning Sieena development staff has built and maintained SharePoint platforms for SMBs up through large multi-national corporations. In addition to providing keen insight into SEO, Sieena specializes in meeting the specific collaboration requirements of

critical business areas, such as HR, finance, marketing, customer service and operations. To learn more about how Sieena can help build or enhance your SharePoint deployment, please contact us.



### Contact Us

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