

TECHNICAL SEO ON THE HOTEL WEBSITE

WHY IT'S ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT
ONLINE REVENUE DRIVERS



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OVER 30% OF HOTEL WEBSITE BOOKINGS COME AS A DIRECT RESULT OF ORGANIC SEARCH TRAFFIC

In hospitality, technical SEO is one of the least understood and very much ignored digital technology and marketing disciplines. Technical SEO plays a major role in influencing Google and the other search engines to rank your hotel website higher in search engine results pages (SERPs), which results in qualified website visitors and bookings.

Good technical SEO on the hotel website sends Google multiple “signals” used by the Google search algorithm Hummingbird to determine how to rank your website pages in response to various searches and directly affects the PageRank score of the webpage. For example, if a webpage is determined to be mobile-friendly, this is a signal that is registered by the Googlebot and used in determining the page ranking.

Google’s Hummingbird search algorithm consists of a multitude of component “modules” with a single objective to serve the most relevant results, including RankBrain, an AI-powered component designed to determine the user’s true intent and serve the most relevant results using factors such as location of the user and personalization. Mobile Friendly was designed to reward mobile-friendly pages, Payday to fight spam, Pigeon to improve local results, Top Heavy to demote ad-heavy pages, Panda to reward high-quality websites, Penguin to punish websites using link farms, and Pirate to fight copyright infringement.

Google has frequently stated that it is using more than 200 major ranking “signals” with many thousands of sub-signals and variations. The following three categories of major ranking signals are well within hoteliers’ control, and if the hotel website is optimized to communicate these signals to the search engines, will achieve higher ranking in SERPs and reward the property with significant organic revenues:



- **Content:** unique, highly relevant and enticing website content that is professionally written, informative, useful and of travel guide-level quality.
- **Links:** links to the hotel website from highly authoritative non-paid websites like CVBs, online magazines and newspapers, blogs, social media, etc.
- **Technical SEO:** an ecosystem of technologies, configurations and processes, implemented to the website and server designed to optimize the hotel website and enable the search engine bots to access, crawl, interpret and index your website, which ultimately results in increased search traffic and revenue. Technical SEO has both a direct or indirect impact on search engine crawling, indexing, and ultimately ranking.

ACTION PLAN TO OVERHAUL YOUR HOTEL WEBSITE'S TECHNICAL SEO

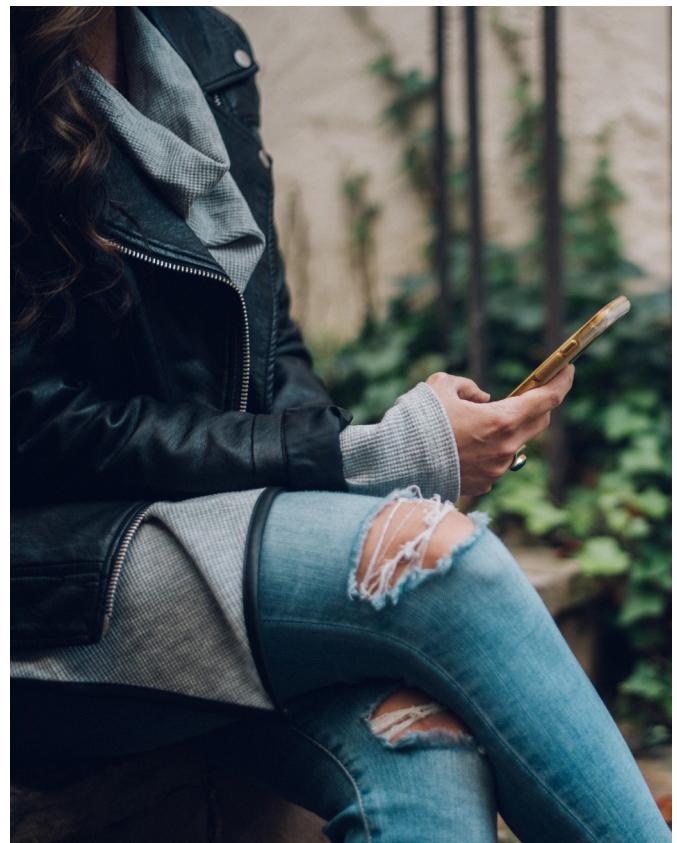
1. GET READY FOR GOOGLE'S MOBILE-FIRST INDEXING

We already live in a mobile-first world. Mobile devices dominate the travel planning journey: 40% to 50% of desktop bookings worldwide are preceded by a click on a mobile device, and 94% of leisure travelers use multiple devices (mobile, tablet, desktop) when planning and booking travel (Criteo).

The massive shift from desktop to mobile and tablet devices continued its rigorous pace in 2018 and today over 60% of web visitors and more than 52% of page views are generated from mobile devices (HEBS Digital Client Portfolio Data).

This dramatic shift to mobile is the reason why in March 2018 Google announced that it was switching to “Mobile-first indexing,” meaning its crawlers will begin using the mobile version of the webpage for indexing and ranking in order to help mobile users find what they are looking for.

Google made good on its promise: Since July 2018 website pages that are slow-loading (read: desktop and not-up-to-date mobile pages) perform “less well” for both desktop and mobile searchers, i.e., are ranked lower or not at all.



2. LAUNCH A MOBILE-FIRST WEBSITE

The hotel website must be mobile-friendly to improve technical SEO and boost search engine rankings. No doubt, hoteliers need to keep the property website, which is the foundation of their digital marketing and distribution strategy, up to the mobile-first standards demanded by both Google's Mobile-First Indexing and today's travel consumers. With 60% of website visitors now coming from mobile devices, a mobile-first website design is a must.

There is a very simple litmus test to determine how good your property website is in this mobile-first world: Invite friends and family to visit the property website on their smartphones and get their feedback on its user-friendliness, the usefulness of its content, and its overall mobile-readiness. Another approach is to simply ask: How old is the website? If it is older than two years, it's due for a re-design. Websites older than two years often have not implemented the latest best practices in technology, design and UX.

You can easily check how mobile-friendly your website is using Google's own [Mobile-Friendly Test](#)—just enter your website URL.

Here are some recommendations for achieving your best mobile-first website strategy:

- Your mobile-first website must be backed by a mobile-first website technology platform/CMS that includes mobile-first functionalities specific to the hoteliers' needs, such as:
 - Advanced merchandising technology platform for pushing specials, including last-minute offers for mobile users as well as automatic time-based offers, promotions driving awareness of nearby or on-property events, and promoting specific aspects of the property, etc.
 - Personalization capabilities to target users with one-to-one marketing messages and promotions, based on the device they are currently using (mobile vs. desktop), their demographic information, geo location, feeder market origin, loyalty member affiliation, and more.
 - Website promotional banners with live rates providing real-time availability and rate information for both mobile users with shorter booking windows and desktop users with longer booking windows.
 - Advanced content management functionality to create and manage complex mobile-first website content layouts.
- Utilize mobile-first website design, ensuring an optimum experience across devices and that travel consumers are able to easily access the information they need no matter what device they are on.
- Use a highly secure cloud hosting platform, featuring a full stack of automated download speed-enhancement tools and bandwidth, specifically designed for mobile users.
- Leverage a best-in-class UX (user experience) strategy to ensure that customers can easily complete a booking across devices.
- Keep on top of website design and content trends. Remember that you are selling a dream, an intangible object and the more you can bring the experience to life, the better.
- Audit your website strategy frequently, at least every six months. Review technical SEO, merchandising, personalization strategies, your content and copy, and your website technology platform (CMS).
- Website accessibility and ADA compliance must be taken into account when launching a mobile-first website.

3. SWITCH TO A HTTPS-ONLY WEBSITE



Effective July 2018, Google Chrome marks all non-HTTPS websites as “not secure,” which is already scaring users away from non-HTTPS websites and destroying non-secure sites’ conversion rates and revenues. Keep in mind, Google Chrome is the most popular web browser with 59% market share, followed distantly by Safari 13.75%, Firefox 5.17% and IE 3.12%.

Switching to a HTTPS website not only improves users’ trust and website conversions, but it sends a powerful signal to the search engines, which improves rankings in the SERPs.

Google itself has admitted on many occasions that it uses HTTPS as a ranking signal, and many SEO researchers report that Google tends to give prominence to HTTPS-enabled websites.

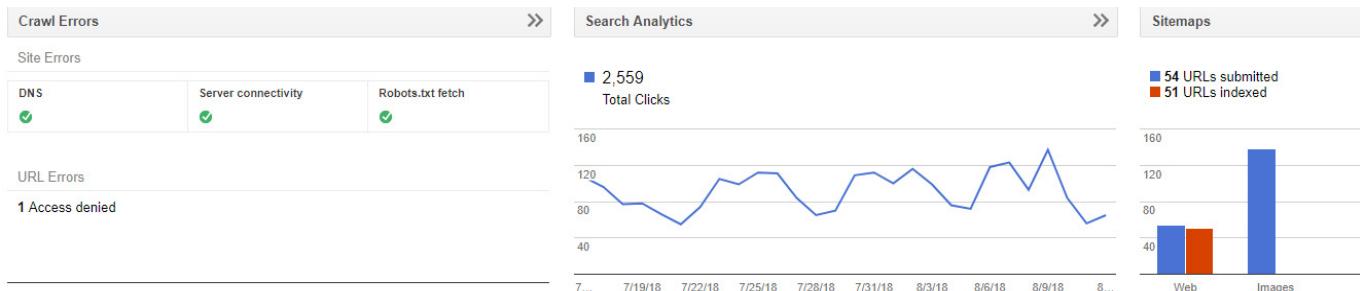
Recently SEO Hacker reported a 480% increase in keyword rankings on its site after enabling HTTPS compared to its closest competitor during the same period.

Interestingly enough, there are still many hotel websites that have not switched to HTTPS, which means that either their IT department or their website vendors are not up to par. And remember, after switching to a HTTPS website, make sure the SSL certificate has the correct information and that you monitor its expiration date to renew it on time.

4. MAKE BEST USE OF GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE (FORMERLY GOOGLE WEBMASTER TOOLS)

The Google Search Console is one of the most important technical SEO tools out there. It is a free service offered by Google that helps your IT department or website vendor monitor and maintain your site's presence in Google Search results and get notified about technical issues related to your website, such as crawling issues, 404 errors, website security, mobile usability issues, duplicate content, or missing H1 and H2 tags.

Make sure that your IT department or your website vendor monitor your website presence via the Google Search Console and provide you with monthly reports to determine the health of your website. For example, here at HEBS Digital we provide most of our clients with Monthly Ongoing SEO Consulting Packages, which include a robust continuous monitoring of our client websites' Google Search Console dashboards and proactive technical SEO maintenance, as well as search engine rankings and competitive set insights via BrightEdge, the most advanced SEO analytics platform on the market today.



5. LAUNCH GOOGLE ACCELERATED MOBILE PAGES (AMP)

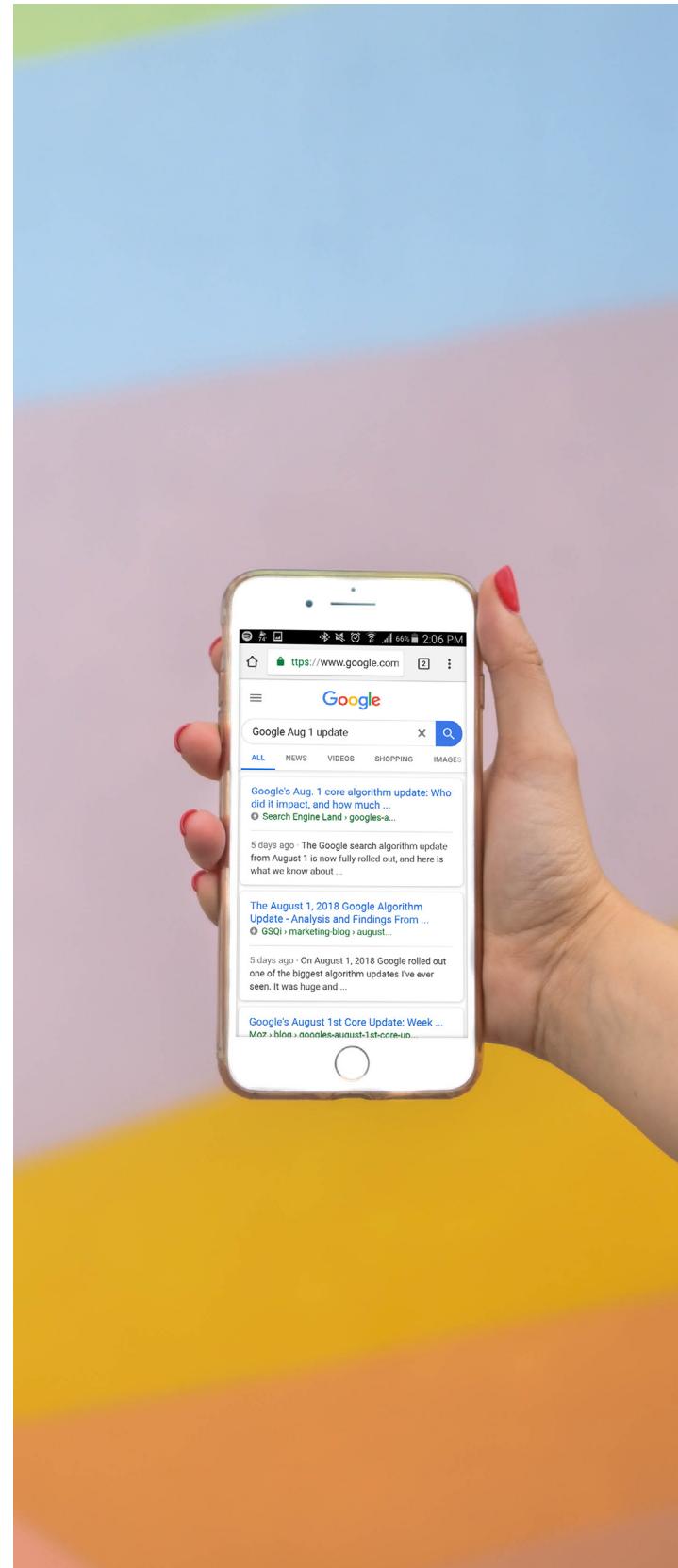
Introduced in 2016 as Google's response to other mobile publishing platforms like Apple News and Facebook Instant Articles, Google's AMP (short for Accelerated Mobile Pages) is an open platform aimed to help content publishers create mobile content (news articles, quick postings, announcements, etc.) that download fast on mobile and wearable devices. AMPs are featured as news and info "teasers" in the Google AMP teaser section in mobile SERPs, with a link to the source of the news or info, i.e., the hotel website.

AMPs are characterized by stripped down, mostly textual content and simple, no-clutter page layouts, and are hosted by Google to ensure fast downloads. Google has restrictions on what type of content can be included on AMPs, utilizes special HTML and coding, and allows only basic styling of the page.

The benefits of Google AMP for hotel websites are significant: AMPs increase hotel visibility and create another entry point to boost mobile visitors and bookings, as well as provide another opportunity to outshine the competition that is asleep at the wheel.

Google AMP is not meant to replace the hotel property's mobile-first website, but rather provide an additional "tentacle" of the hotel website in the AMP teaser section on Google's mobile search results. Industry best practices require launching Google AMP as part of the website CMS technology platform, and NOT a separate AMP website, in order to allow ongoing AMP enablement of website content and landing pages so that more AMP teasers are created, indexed and featured in the Google mobile SERPs in real time.

For example, HEBS Digital's award-winning smartCMS website technology platform features the Google AMP Enabler, which allows for AMP-ifying an unlimited number of content and landing pages, ongoing AMP enablement of content and promotional pages, and pushing fresh AMP content to Google. This may include news-worthy content pages about hotel amenities and services, maps and directions, or destination info.



6. BOOST YOUR WEBSITE DOWNLOAD SPEEDS

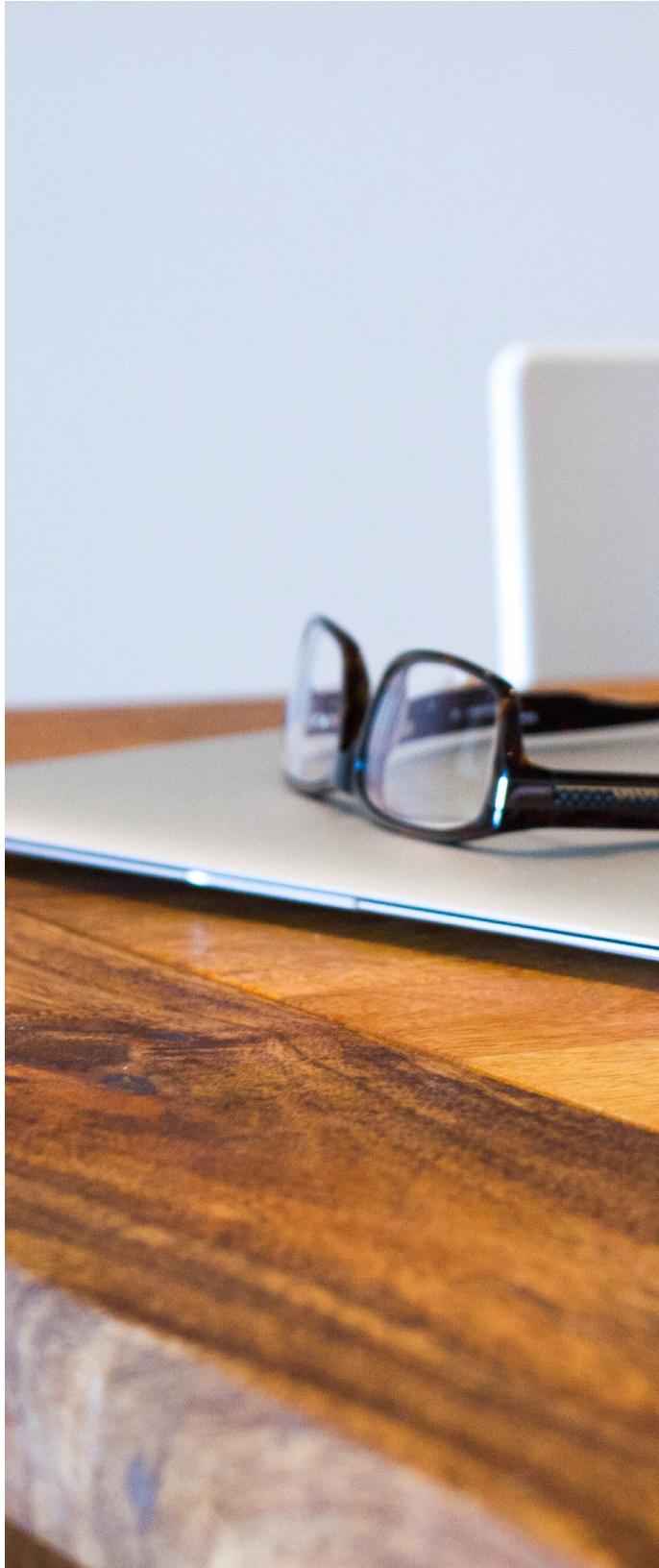
In July 2018 Google implemented another algorithm update, "The Speed Update," which affects webpages that deliver slow experience to users. This update is part of Google's mobile-first centric approach and takes the ranking of websites according to their speed to an entirely different level.

Google is all about the user experience: fast download speeds drastically improve the user experience and increase the user's desire to transact on the site. According to Google, 53% of visits are abandoned if a mobile site takes longer than three seconds to load.

Achieving ultra-fast website download speed is technical SEO 101. A well designed and architected mobile-first hotel website with cloud hosting and CDN (Content Delivery Network) provides far better server response times and faster download speeds across geographies, and not only complies with Google's mobile-first obsessive focus, but also inevitably affects conversion rates on the hotel website.



7. SWITCH TO CLOUD HOSTING



While website hosting discussions often take a back seat, it is important to remember that how and where you host your website have serious implications on the overall health of your website, its search engine rankings, and ultimately its revenue performance. This is why website hosting is a very serious technical SEO consideration.

Website hosting typically affects performance via server downtime, server security and website download speeds. By extension, your web host affects your rankings [in so many ways](#). For one, website speed is another technical ranking factor, and your server specification and configuration, determined by your web host, will influence your site speed. A Server being down can also affect your rankings. While an unusual one-day downtime won't have a huge difference, downtimes caused by a poor host will. It is extremely important to [avoid having bad hosts](#).

A hosting solution that does not deliver lightning-fast download speeds compromises the user experience and website revenues. When choosing a hosting solution, ask whether it's a cloud hosting solution with a CDN (Content Delivery Network) to bolster download speeds. This will inevitably boost conversions on your hotel website by drastically improving the user experience as well as the search engine rankings that are increasingly dependent on fast download speeds.

For over a decade, HEBS Digital has provided hotel clients with a highly-secure and ultra-fast cloud hosting platform, backed by robust CDN, featuring a full stack of automated download speed-enhancement tools and bandwidth, specifically designed for mobile users.

8. USE AUTOMATED SCHEMA MARKUP ON THE HOTEL WEBSITE

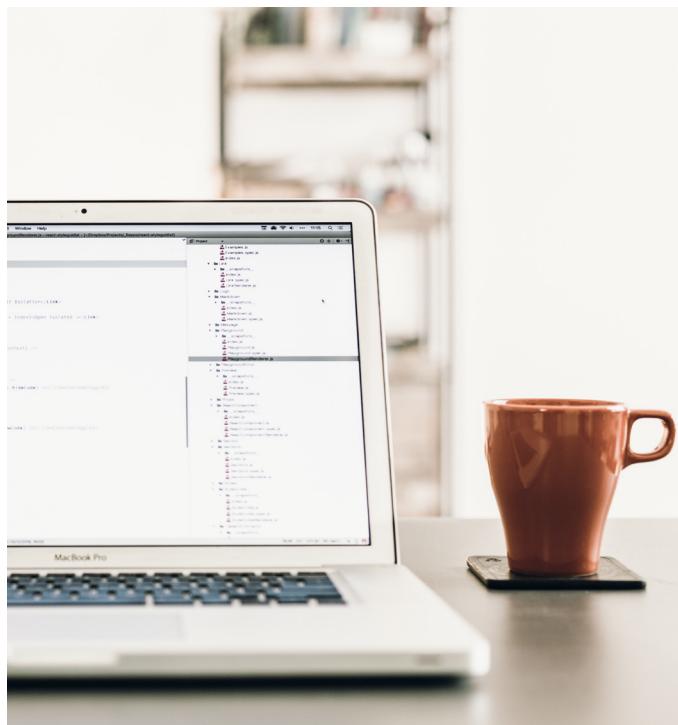
Schema markup helps search engines understand the content and intent of websites, especially dynamic content elements many hotel websites have such as events and happenings, special offers, opening hours, and star ratings. These rich snippets make hotel webpages appear more prominently in SERPs, thus improving visibility of a hotel website's overall SEO, SERP click-through rates, and more.

One of the important benefits is the Featured Snippets, which Google creates dynamically based on the content of your website and places on top of the search results.

Schema markup is also becoming increasingly important as the popularity of voice search increases, pointing digital assistants towards the information that is needed to answer a user's voice request.

Voice queries depend heavily on implied context, and Schema markup can help give that context to an otherwise ambiguous page of text.

For example, the Schema Markup Module, one of the 30-plus innovative modules of the HEBS Digital's smartCMS v7 website technology platform, automatically generates rich snippets to make the property website pages appear more prominently in SERPs, taking advantage of the most popular uses of schema:



- Website navigation for sitelink extensions
- Special offers
- Hotel price
- Events/happenings from the Calendar of Events
- Business information: opening hours, star ratings, etc.
- Accommodations information

A recent implementation of the Schema Markup Module for a luxury hotel in Philadelphia generated a 285% increase in organic impressions, 42% increase in organic CTR (click-through rate), and 296% increase in organic website bookings within 6 months of utilization.

These rich snippets drastically increase visibility of the hotel website, improve user engagement and qualified website visits, and conversions on the site.

9. AVOID DUPLICATE CONTENT ON THE HOTEL WEBSITE

Duplicate content (website copy and descriptions, meta descriptions, etc.) confuses the search engine bots, makes them waste time to analyze which page with duplicate content has higher authority and is more relevant, and forces them to make a choice, all of which could be detrimental to the website search engine rankings.

A recent SEMrush study found that more than 65% of sites had duplicate content issues in some form or another.

Make sure your technical SEO team or vendor perform regular audits of your website and remove duplicate content, paying special attention to the following:

- Textual content on the property website versus textual descriptions of the property on the OTA websites. Quite often hoteliers feature the same “canned” property amenity, services and accommodations descriptions on the property site as well provide the exact same content to the OTAs, travel and hospitality directories, and GDS.
- A branded hotel vanity website must feature textual content that is significantly different from the property mini-site on brand.com (the hotel brand website). In other words, the branded hotel has to develop new content for the property’s stand-alone website—either in-house or by hiring an outside copywriter.

Duplicate meta descriptions should be avoided at any cost. Each page on the hotel website should have unique page titles and meta descriptions that fit within the appropriate container limits (600 pixels for titles, 160 characters for descriptions).



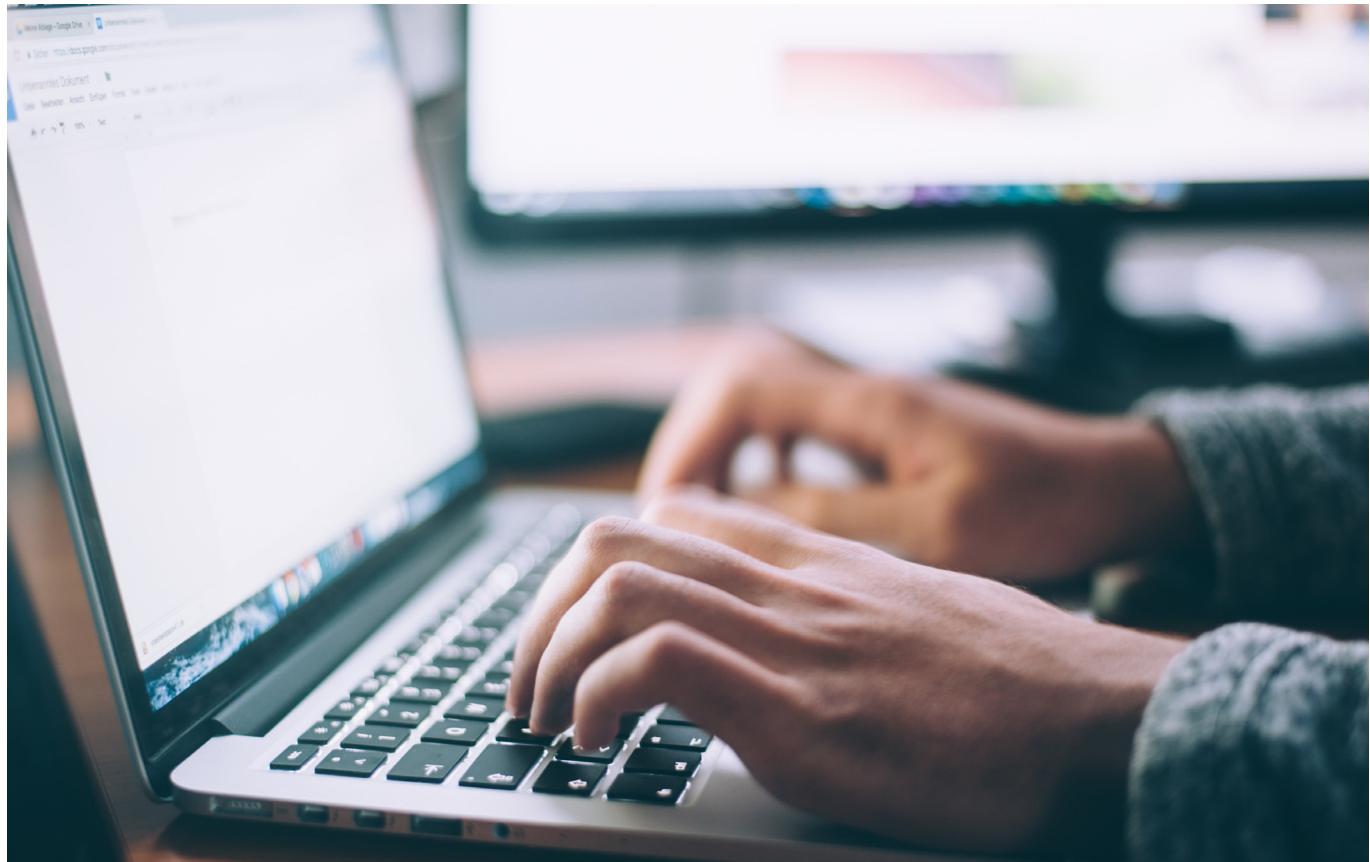
10. AUDIT LINKS ON YOUR WEBSITE

Any broken link on your site send the wrong signal to the Googlebot, creates unpleasant user experience, and leads to lower search rankings. A recent SEMrush study showed that over 80% of websites examined had broken link errors.

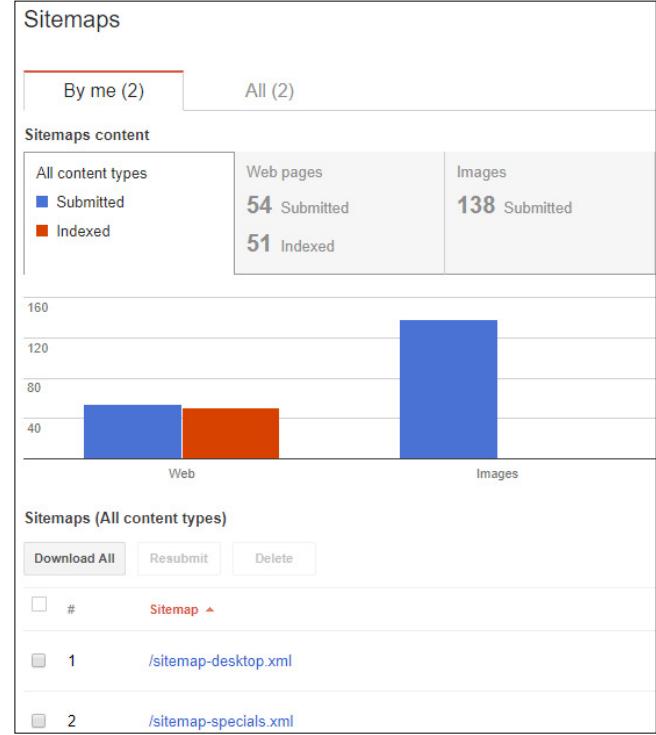
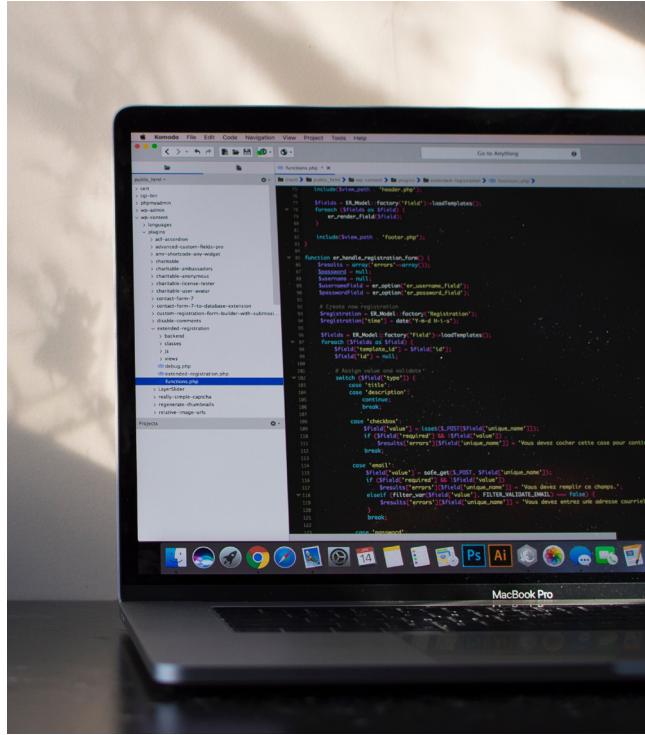
Identifying, fixing and preventing broken links from happening is an important technical SEO objective.

The Google Search Console provides your IT department or website vendor with a detailed crawl report that identifies each URL with a broken link. Your website technical SEO and maintenance team should perform regular audits of both internal and external links on your website to:

- Remove dead links
- Fix broken links
- Use proper redirects
- Identify and remove “floating” pages on the website, i.e., pages that are not linked to any other page on the site, which makes them uncrawlable by the search engine bots



11. IMPLEMENT AN AUTOMATED XML SITEMAP



The search engine bots have become exceptionally sophisticated in crawling websites, but the explosion of online content is clogging their bandwidth and attention to detail, thus creating a scenario where the bots may miss a big chunk of your website content. This is where an XML sitemap comes into play: It helps the search engine bots find your webpages, as well as crawl and make sense of the page content, so the bots can rank these pages accordingly.

One of the important objectives of technical SEO is to create a sitemap that presents to the search engine bots a website index of pages in a dynamic, real-time fashion.

For example, HEBS Digital's smartCMS v7.0 website technology platform features an Automated XML Sitemap Module that automatically indexes new pages on the fly as they are being created, and formats the sitemap as per Google's XML sitemap protocol thus creating a real-time full webpage index of the site.

12. COMPLETE IMPORTANT TECHNICAL SEO OBJECTIVES

Make sure your technical SEO partner is on top of the latest SEO best practices and completes the following technical SEO objectives, and provides ongoing monitoring and maintenance:

Page specific meta robots directives (index, follow)

Search engine spiders and crawlers follow instructions set by the domain owner on which pages to visit and index in search results. This eliminates the potential for unwanted or unremarkable pages entering search results and focuses the target audience in organic search. For example, setting a meta robots tag to “index, follow” on a page indicates to a crawler that this page should be indexed and all links should additionally be crawled unless otherwise stated. Proper meta robots directives will ensure that your domain’s index is clean, filled with useful content, and utilizes a spider’s bandwidth effectively.

Alt-image customization

Alt-image attributes are text values assigned to images on your domain. The objective is for these values to accurately describe the content in a sentence or less. These attributes serve a dual-purpose. The first is aiding visually impaired users and complying with ADA guidelines. The second is that search engine crawlers will crawl these values and use them as on-page ranking factors. This can assist in improving a page and domain’s presence in search rankings.

Add/delete re-directs, transfer lost equity

When a page is deleted or carried over to a new URL, it is critical to place proper re-directs on the host server to pass built link equity. Equity is accumulated over a page’s lifespan and grows by gaining inbound links from other domains and high user experience metrics, such as time spent on page or bounce rate. This equity will pass through to the new URL to indicate to search engine crawlers that this will be the new version of that content. Otherwise, that equity is lost and the page will suffer in its individual rankings.

Set rel=Canonical/Alternates

These page elements suggest the primary and alternative versions of pages to search engine crawlers. These are especially important for domain owners that utilize query and tracking parameters in their URL structure, and websites that utilize an adaptive strategy with separate mobile pages. These elements guide crawlers to index and pass link equity to the primary page version and present the appropriate version in organic results.

Robots.txt, ability for crawl directives

Similar to meta robots tags, a robots.txt file instructs search engine spiders with crawl directives, except on a domain level. Many directives can be placed in robots.txt files. Disallowing URL parameters is the most commonly used directive, followed by introducing crawlers to your domain’s sitemaps or complete URL hierarchy.

Technical SEO is one of the website revenue drivers with growing importance, giving hoteliers the opportunity to improve the hotel website rankings on Google and the other search engines, bring travel consumers to the property website, and hopefully “convince” them to book. Technical SEO is yet another tool in hotelier’s arsenal to increase direct bookings, lower distribution costs, and improve profitability.

Partner with a hospitality-focused digital technology and marketing firm with in-house content and technical SEO teams, and best-of-class website technology to benefit from content-technical SEO-website technology synergies, boost website search engine rankings, and maximize website organic revenue.





ABOUT US

Founded in 2001, the firm is headquartered in New York City and has global offices in Las Vegas, Tallinn, Munich, and Asia-Pacific. Through its Smart Guest Acquisition Suite, including the smartCMS®, Smart Personalization Engine, Smart Data Marketing, and full-service digital consulting and marketing solutions, HEBS Digital helps hoteliers drastically boost direct bookings, lower distribution costs, and increase the lifetime value of guests. Its diverse client portfolio consists of top-tier luxury and boutique hotel chains, independent hotels, resorts and casinos, franchised properties and hotel management companies, convention centers, spas, restaurants, DMO and tourist offices.

Part of NextGuest Technologies, HEBS Digital and Serenata CRM, the most comprehensive Hotel CRM Suite today, are the creators of the hospitality industry's first Fully-Integrated Guest Engagement & Acquisition Platform.