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## Black Hat SEO Techniques to Avoid

**Don't be a knucklehead!**

**Desperation, ignorance, and a moral compass that doesn't point due north often get perfectly logical, good people and companies in trouble with search engines. Because being listed high in search results is such a desirable goal to attain, many people search for **shortcuts** to the front of the line—which can land them in **serious trouble**.**

In 2006 BMW's German site (<http://bmw.de>) was blacklisted from Google's search results for dishonest SEO techniques intended to trick search engines into believing the site had content about used cars. For a company as large as BMW, being blacklisted from search engines can mean thousands of dollars in lost revenues.

Although they've since been reinstated into Google's index, the moral of the story is that there are no shortcuts to top search listings, at least not any worth the risk.

## **Black Hat SEO**

*Black hat SEO*, sometimes called *spamdexing*, is the practice of using any dishonest measures to try to dupe search engines into incorrectly indexing and ranking a website.

Make no mistake, black hat SEO techniques will get you banned from search engines. Blacklisting isn't something that usually happens by accident. Employees at Google, Yahoo!, and other search engines review suspected black hat sites and remove them from their indices. They're wise to all black hat tricks and they can spot them a mile away.

Reviewers will also recognize an honest mistake when they see one. They're probably not going to dump your site from the index if you've made a simple error, but they may penalize your rankings slightly—so it's important to know what techniques to avoid.

You should also be aware that some techniques fit into the grey hat category, which is to say that they are sketchy but currently not getting people banned from search engines or incurring penalties. But be warned that today's grey hat is tomorrow's black hat. Just because a technique doesn't get your site in trouble today doesn't mean it won't tomorrow.

If a technique seems questionable, it's much better to take the safe route and avoid it. There are some techniques that will unequivocally get you into hot water, and here are the most popular ones in no particular order.

## Keyword Stuffing

*Keyword stuffing* is a simple trick by which you fill your page with keywords. Even if those keywords are relevant to your content, if the keyword order or density appears to be unnatural then your site runs the risk of being perceived as using a black hat trick.

Natural language includes grammatical elements like articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and other words that aren't usually target keywords. If your content doesn't contain these types of words, which would be the case if you're simply listing keywords, search engines will recognize that the language is not natural.

If you feature a keyword so many times that it accounts for more than seven percent of the words on a page it can also appear to search engines that you are trying to stuff your page. As pointed out in Chapter 4, "Creating Content that Drives Traffic," you can build and evaluate your keyword density, but don't overdo it. Stay below seven percent to keep your content honest.

## Invisible Text

Adding keyword-rich text to a page that search engines can read but users cannot will also get you a one-way ticket to Bannville. Text is made invisible by setting it in the same color as the background or by using the `display:none` CSS property. Although there are certainly many legitimate uses for `display:none`, be aware that it is a technique that has been dishonestly employed by spammers and therefore can give off the wrong impressions.

As illustrated in Chapter 7, "Preventing Findability Roadblocks," you should by default keep elements visible and then use JavaScript to change the element's style to `display:none`. Since search engines don't parse JavaScript they can't misconstrue the `display:none` property as a dishonest technique. Use this knowledge for good, not evil. Make sure you're not showing a different message to search engines than you are to your users.

Don't mistake honest image replacement for an invisible text trick. The image replacement techniques discussed in Chapter 2, "Markup Strategies," are absolutely legitimate methods that let Web designers create beautiful designs while supporting the accessibility needs of search engines, disabled users, and users on alternate platforms.

## Doorway Pages

A *doorway page* lists keywords in strategic places to attract search engine traffic, but all of the keywords featured in it are unrelated to the site to which it leads. This is how BMW.de got blacklisted from Google. A page filled with keywords misled search engines into incorrectly indexing the site—that is, until Google employees recognized the scam and removed the site from the index.

Doorway pages often employ redirection using JavaScript. Users who arrive at the site will pass right through a doorway page without even seeing it. Because search engines can't parse JavaScript, they land on the page and index it.

Avoid redirection of any kind, whether it uses JavaScript or a meta tag redirect. Both can appear very spammy. If you need to redirect for any reason, simply show users a message letting them know why they need to be redirected, then provide a link so they can navigate there themselves.

For sites or pages that have moved, use a 301 redirect, which occurs server-side, and is a search engine–condoned practice. See Chapter 3, “Server-Side Strategies,” for examples.

## Cloaking

*Cloaking* is a technique in which the user's IP address is detected in order to serve different content to search engines than to normal visitors. Search engine spiders all have an IP address of origin, and if you knew it you could detect when to show a keyword-stuffed page and when to show your regular site. That's the idea with cloaking, and it will get you banned from search engines quickly.

## Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self

This listing of black hat SEO techniques is by no stretch comprehensive, but it does include some of the most common ones. The best way to make sure you're not using any questionable techniques is by running your URL through the spam detector (<http://tool.motoricerca.info/spam-detector/>). It's free, prudent, and a whole lot better to be safe than sorry!

## OK, You're a Knucklehead. Now How Do You Get Re-listed?

If you've made a genuine mistake and have unknowingly done something on your site that appeared to be dishonest and resulted in a de-listing of your site, you can try to make amends with Google by filing a reconsideration request.

There are some situations in which a mistake may have been made honestly. Maybe you hired a sketchy SEO firm that used questionable practices to boost your site's ranking. Maybe you had a security breach and hackers took over your site. Maybe you were just using black hat SEO techniques out of sheer ignorance.

Regardless of what happened, if you want to get back into Google's index you'll have to get back in their good graces. The path to forgiveness is through a reconsideration request. Here's what you'll need to do:

1. If you haven't done so already, register an account on Google Webmaster Central (<http://www.google.com/webmasters/>).
2. Log in to your account.
3. Click the "Request reconsideration" link.
4. Provide as much detailed information as you can about what you think caused the de-listing, a timeline of events, and some concrete reassurance outlining why the offense won't happen again.

Your request goes into a queue to be reviewed by experts who've seen every knuckleheaded trick and heard every excuse. If they are convinced that you've learned your lesson and it's not going to happen again, your site will be re-listed.

Even if you do convince Google to take you back, your site will have to start back at a PageRank of zero. You'll be in the index, but you won't be climbing to the top rankings you might have once enjoyed. With time and honest practices you can get back to the top for good.

## Jettison the Domain, Captain

If all else fails and you've thoroughly botched your reputation with your affiliates and the search engines, you might have to give your domain a 21-gun salute and register a new one.

Republishing your site under a new domain name starts you from scratch, but at least you can shed your questionable past to build a brighter future. Remember that young domain names tend to rank lower for just this reason. Many people buy up domains, abuse them with every black hat trick in the book, then let them die—only to do it again with another domain.

Dropping your domain is, of course, expensive because any print collateral or design work you've done or paid for will need to be redone to reflect the new URL. This is a last-ditch effort. Don't push the eject button until you're absolutely sure there's no hope for your existing domain name.

## Summary

I hope you're not reading this chapter. I hope you got the message in all of the pages leading up to this one that prescribed this simple formula for long-term findability success:

- Use Web standards and accessibility best practices to build your sites.
- Keep your HTML semantically meaningful by inserting keywords relevant to your audience.
- Write content that serves the needs of your audience and will inspire others to link to your site.
- Remove all obstacles that might prevent search engines from accurately and efficiently indexing your site.
- Use your moral compass as you plan and build your site, treating search engines like the valued users that they are.

Stop looking for the SEO silver bullet. If you've read the chapters leading up to this one, you already know how to reach your audience without resorting to dishonest measures.