SEO IN CHINA:

How to Rank Higher on Chinese Search Engines with the Right Web Hosting

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is an important lead channel for businesses to drive traffic and grow their online presence. For companies doing business in China, a unique and localized SEO strategy is required, and web hosting is a major factor to improve search engine visibility.

With 21.1% share of the world's Internet users[1], China has an unmissable online presence. The Internet is tightly integrated into people's daily lives, and Chinese search engine portals are a popular starting point for people in China to access information about traveling, studying, investing, shopping and working overseas. SEO is, therefore, an important consideration for foreign companies to consider in driving traffic and reaching Chinese consumers.

However, the way Chinese search engines crawl and index website pages differs from the SEO algorithms we are accustomed to in the West.

This article will walk you through important steps to improve your SEO visibility, and help you understand the role that web hosting plays in developing a successful SEO strategy for China.

Overview of SEO in China

Baidu, 360 and Saigu- most popular Chinese search engines

The most popular search engine portals in Mainland China are Baidu (approx 54% market share), 360 (28%) and Sugou (14%). The aesthetics of Chinese search engines mirrors the appearance of their counterparts in the West, including a similar array of search filters for images, videos, maps, and news.

Search engines in China have the same goal as those abroad, and that is to provide relevant results to users, and reward content with a strong track record of user engagement. On-site SEO factors including keyword density, backlinks, bounce rate, and time-on-page are important SEO factors in China.

While Baidu introduced English-language search results in 2011 through a partnership with Bing, Chinese characters remain the first choice for Chinese netizens to search and digest online information.

Mobile Design

Chinese search engines cannot register responsive mobile design

One area in which Chinese search engines differ to overseas counterparts is the indexing of mobile design. Chinese search engines are unable to register responsive mobile design. This being the case, site owners need to upload two separate sitemaps to Chinese search engines to be indexed: one sitemap for mobile and one sitemap for PC.

Hosting Your Website in China

Chinese search engines can easily index and crawl locally hosted websites

Another major difference is how search engines in China index websites according to their hosting location. Chinese search engines typically allocate favorable search results to websites hosted in Mainland China. Hosting your website in China communicates to the Chinese search engines that your website is relevant to the China market.

User experience and load speed are two other important factors that Chinese search engine algorithms factor into their search rankings. Given that your website is hosted locally you won't have to worry about limitations to international bandwidth or high latency (caused by the physical distance between your server and end-users). As a result your website will enjoy superior load speed in China as well as high availability (which means that your website is less likely to go down). These two factors help to improve your overall search visibility.

Websites hosted in Mainland China are also easier for Chinese search engines to index and crawl on a regular basis.

Content Delivery Network

Use Content Delivery Network to deliver cached content

A Content Delivery Network (CDN) is an alternative option to deliver online content in China while still hosting your website outside Mainland China. A CDN is a network of nodes (or servers) distributed across different geographic locations to deliver cached content from your website to end-users in various locations. A CDN allows you to continue hosting your website in your home country and link it to CDN nodes in China or in proximity to Mainland China, such as in Hong Kong or South Korea. This will help to minimize latency, improve page load time and availability. However, this option will only bring marginal benefit to your SEO rankings based on improved load speed, and is not a substitute for hosting your website in Mainland China.

ICP Certification

Get an ICP License to host your website on a China-based server/CDN

In order to deploy your website on a China-based web hosting server or CDN, you first need to obtain a Chinese ICP License. An ICP (Internet Content Provider) License is a registration number that allows a website to operate on a hosting server or Content Delivery Network (CDN) node located in China, and is a mandatory legal requirement set by the Chinese Government. The requirements for acquiring an ICP License are relatively high and international companies without a business registration in Mainland China are not eligible to obtain an ICP License.

Hosting Your Website in Hong Kong

Consider hosting in Hong Kong

If obtaining an ICP License for your website is not feasible, you can look at minimizing problems associated with slow page speed by hosting your website in Hong Kong. By leveraging servers in close proximity to the Mainland, companies can reduce latency and improve the overall load speed for users in China. This strategy will also bring minor benefits to your China SEO rankings based on page speed.

Website Building Platforms

WordPress is the most popular website building option in China

Popular international website building platforms such as WordPress, Drupal, Wix, Strikingly and Shopify are all accessible in China. However if you are using a website builder with integrated web hosting, you will need to check that they provide a web hosting option for China. Shopify and Wix for example cannot be integrated with China-based web hosting, and are not recommended for the China market.

WordPress is one of the most popular options for building a website in China. WordPress can be used as a website builder and hosted on a third-party web hosting provider in China, including Alibaba Cloud.
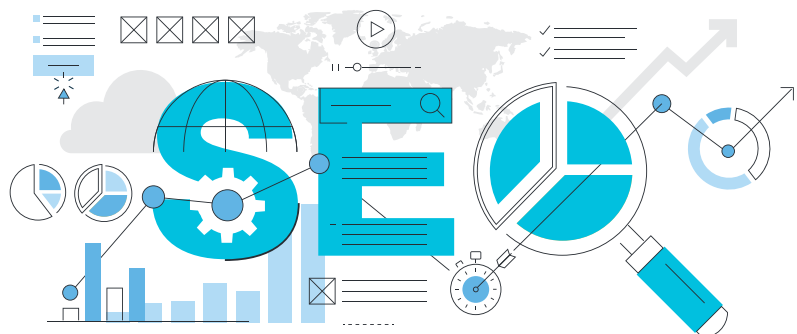
Page Speed

Page speed is critical for ranking webpages

As mentioned, load speed is a major factor that Chinese search engines take into account when ranking webpages. Load speed can be optimized in a number of ways, including deploying your website on a China-based Content Delivery Network, compressing image quality, and removing JavaScript installed for analytics such as heat maps and A/B comparison tests after testing.

It's important that you avoid website integration of social media platforms banned in China as this will adversely effect page load speed and user experience. Website themes that integrate Google Fonts[1] will also slow down rendering speed in China. WordPress has numerous plugins you can install to disable Google Fonts.

Competing with Domain Squatters

Mitigate the threat of domain squatters

The final reason to strongly consider hosting your website in Mainland China - and to purchase a Chinese domain name as early as possible - is to prevent other parties from acting on your behalf. Under China's first to file policy, any Chinese party with an ICP License can purchase an available domain name and link to their China-based web hosting account.

If the party - known as a domain squatter - has the appropriate domain name linked to a China-based hosting server, the site is likely to appear prominently in the results pages on Chinese search engines. Domain squatters are thereby able to drive valuable online traffic to their website that could be otherwise flowing to your site. This can subsequently lead to negative branding repercussions for your business.

A number of foreign companies are facing a costly uphill battle to remove parties with their business name featuring prominently on the results pages of Chinese search engines. Gucci, for example, has sought legal action to seize control of more than 100 domain names in China. Although only currently available in Chinese-language, Baidu does offer a Brand Protection portal to troubleshoot potential domain name abuse.

In order to minimize competition from other parties posing under your company name in the search engine results, it is recommended that you purchase numerous domain combinations of your business name.

Purchasing a Chinese domain (.cn) is relatively straightforward, and requires only passport identification. A Chinese domain name application takes approximately 2-3 days to process.

If possible, hosting your website in Mainland China will also help to mitigate the threat of domain squatters by boosting your own website's search engine visibility.

Host on Mainland China server for better SEO

Conclusion

While there are numerous factors to consider when implementing your SEO strategy for China, hosting on a server located in the Mainland should be a top priority. This will minimize the consequences of competition from other parties imitating your brand, improve load speed and website availability, and enable Chinese search engines to better index and crawl your website.

References

1. Internet Live Stats