Black hat, Grey hat, and White hat SEO techniques

Google hates SEO. It believes that all websites should have an equal chance of getting to the top of Google, and those sites which are at the top have the best content that you are looking for. In a perfect Google world, when you search for 'best cheese in the world' you should get the most authoritative resource dedicated to the world's best cheese, written by the world's leading cheese expert with lots of backlinks from other authoritative cheese websites saying this is the best page for cheese.

In the real world, competition for the top spots is fierce. For some keywords, the difference between position 1 and position 2 could mean millions of dollars' worth of business, so the attraction of SEO is huge. Google realise this, and imposes 'webmaster guidelines' (https://support.Google.com/webmasters/answer/35769?hl=en) designed to make sure that website owners are on their best behaviour. The guidelines fall into 3 areas:

1. **Content and design guidelines** – rules about how your site should be organised, and structured. Using text instead of images, having a reasonable number of links, have descripting <title> elements, no broken links etc.
2. **Technical guidelines** – covers site loading speed, use robots.txt, making site appear correctly in different browser and mobile devices and a few other technical things
3. **Quality guidelines** – do not copy content from other websites, do not include keyword stuffing or spammy text, do not use cloaking, hidden text or doorway pages (see black hat SEO below)

Any deviation from the guidelines means your website is looked upon more suspiciously by Google. In a worst case scenario you could find your site blacklisted. And when that happens it's very difficult to get it back in the index to the position it was in before the penalty.

White Hat SEO

The terns 'white hat' and 'black hat' come from the old black and white westerns where the hero always wore a white hat, and the bad guys always wore black hats. So anyone who practices 'White hat' SEO is someone who abides by all the rules of the webmaster guidelines and who doesn't try to use tricks or sneaky tactics to manipulate their search engine rankings.

Good white hat SEO focuses on the content and accessibility of the website, making sure that the content is as rich and useful as possible, while at the same time, making it easy as possible for people to find and read the information on their website.

Interestingly, what Google decides as white hat or black hat is influenced by how much it trusts your website. An authoritative website with a high trust rank can get away with more than a fresh new website with few backlinks.

Black Hat SEO

What is considered Black Hat now was almost certainly allowed in the old days of the internet. When there were few rules and SEO cowboys reaped the rewards. Over time, these practices have become outlawed and breaking the rules can lead you in Google prison (metaphorically speaking of course). Although there are cases where the CEO of black hat SEO companies have been sent to prison. Matt Marlon who ran an infamous black hat SEO firm Traffic Power was sent to prison in 2008. Turns out the sort of companies that employ black hat tactics are also the sort of companies that runs other fraudulent scams.

So what types of activities are likely to land you in trouble? Well, here's a few of them:

1. **Hidden text on pages** – hiding text on a page using comments or using CSS or layering other content over the top. In today's html5 rich environment, it's difficult to say when text in hidden. For example, in a regular drop down menu, the sub menu links are initially hidden on the page until you mouseover the parent menu item.
2. **Cloaking and redirects** – if your website redirects visitors to a different version of the site from the one that Google sees, then you can optimise the Google version of the site for specific keywords while making the non-Google version of the site show different content. Sometimes the different content is displayed on the same page. This method is called 'cloaking'. Sometimes you might want to use redirects based on IP address, e.g. to deliver local content. In this instance it's better to present a link to that page, or better still, optimise a different webpage for the local content.
3. **Keyword stuffing** – repeating the same keyword too many times in your content – in title tags, in link tags, alt tags, everywhere. This is relatively easy to avoid if you are writing content in normal everyday language. But if your keyword stuffed text and keywords are really stuffed with lots of keywords then the keyword here is don't stuff your keywords. See what I mean? Reading spammy stuffed content is difficult to understand and is difficult to do accidentally.
4. **Doorway pages** – this is different from landing pages. A landing page is a page specifically designed to be a destination for a marketing message. For example, an email containing links to a special offer might go to a special landing page which has call to actions and more information. A doorway page is simply there to funnel traffic through to another page via a high Google ranking. This type of page would be focused on a specific keyword, e.g. 'shiny kid's bikes for 6 year old'. And then the black hat person would create more doorway pages, e.g. 'shiny children's bikes for 7 year olds'. With each focused doorway page, you could potentially funnel a lot of traffic. Often, doorway pages would be keyword stuffed and contain hidden content, spammy backlinks and custom JavaScript redirections to the main website which would not redirect search engine spiders, just normal web visitors.
5. **Content swapping** – this occurs when a page is optimised for a certain keyword, e.g. 'men's health' and then after it is indexed for this phrase, the content is changed to something else e.g. 'Viagra pills'. Often redirections or hidden text are used so the search engines still think the page is about 'men's health'. Google spiders are very clever though. They check your site using different 'user agents' some of them simulate real web browsers so if your content looks different to different spiders, then you are going to get found out. And banned.

6. **Parasite content** – If a hacker can place a webpage on a trusted domain then any links from this web page will have higher value. The page itself will also benefit from higher rankings. Generally if the parasite page is on a different subject to the main site, this will flag warnings in Google's systems. A couple of years ago, there was a lot of link injection attacks after an exploit on WordPress was found. The spammers managed to place links into the victim's site databases which made the parasitic links appear on existing web pages and in existing content. This attack affected many thousands of WordPress websites before it was patched.
7. **Google Bombing** – this involves creating software to automate the process of creating links on other websites. It's relatively easy to create automated backlinks on blogs and other types of user generated content sites. If you create millions of backlinks in a few days, this would help rankings very briefly, but damage your website greatly. This tactic can also be used for negative SEO which is covered in chapter 7.
8. **Paid links** – a big fat NO-NO in Google is paying people to put links back to your site. However if you make a donation to a charity and they put a link back to you saying that you support their cause, then this is ok.
9. **Duplicate content** – copying someone else's content and meta tags to get high rankings. If the page is already indexed by Google, then your site will be flagged as a copy and your content will not appear in Google at all.
10. **Link farming** – put lots of back links on lots of link farms and spammy link directories and you will be punished. You have been warned!
11. **Map spamming** – pretending to have offices local to people then registering with Google maps.
12. **Domain grabbing** – buying up expired domains just for the sake of taking advantage of their backlinks.
13. **Article spinning** – involves getting a few articles from other sites on a particular topic, mashing bits of them together and posing as unique content on your site. You can also use this method to submit articles to other sites.
14. **Optimised anchors** – use the same keyword targeted anchor text for all your backlinks used to be a powerful tactic. Now it is deemed black hat. Instead you should use more varied text or better still the URL of the page.
15. **Social media spamming** – a relatively new thing but you can get companies offering you hundreds of twitter followers and shares or hundreds of Facebook shares. These tools work by creating spam social media accounts and automating the process of sharing content. Some Indian companies actually hire hundreds of low paid workers to create fake accounts to bypass the security restrictions on Facebook and twitter, and then sell followers and shares to companies for a few pence per account. This is not officially black hat yet, so can probably be counted as grey hat for now.

Grey Hat SEO

Somewhere between black hat and white hat is the murky grey area. Grey Hat SEO is the practice of using technically legal methods to improve your site rankings, but which are ethically dubious, and could one day become black hat. Think of it like legal highs. They might be legal today and get you high, but in a couple of years' time you could get punished for using them when the law changes to catch up with the new compounds.

It's very easy to use Black Hat SEO and get found out. It's a bit harder to get caught using grey hat SEO for example, it's difficult sometimes for Google to know whether you have paid for links.

Grey hat SEO involves much more creativity than Black hat SEO. The reason Grey hat SEO is less known about is that as soon as the search engines become aware that people are using these techniques, they take steps to prevent them, which turns a grey hat technique into a black hat technique.

At the risk of exposing Grey hat SEO here is a list of some of the things that are technically legal, but outside the realms of white hat SEO:

1. **SEO Squatting:** buy up expired domains which are relevant to your keywords and then add some pages of content with a few well-placed backlinks to your site. Make sure that the new content is good quality and not too different from what the website hosted before. Put some AdWords on the new content and then do some satellite SEO on it to keep up its trust rank.

2. **Create Social media accounts for your pets**. Really this works. Get some cute stories and pictures, then one day your pet suddenly develops an interest in power tools, or mobility aids, or whatever website you are trying to promote. This will then create social search links back to your website. Not against Google's rules to do this, but could contravene the social media that it is hosted on. Then again, who's going to sue a dog?

3. **Redesign your website at regular intervals** - even if the content is more or less the same, because the code and text changes, Google thinks that this is fresh content.

4. **Add a comments box to your site pages and invite anyone to comment**. Sure it could get you 9 million spammers to put their links on there, but if you only approve the less spammy ones and then replace their links with a rel=nofollow tag, this means that you get no backlinks bleeding your page rank, but what you do get is lots of fresh content with hopefully relevant text for no effort on your part.

5. **Link yourself higher**. Whenever you put a comment on any blog, always make an excuse to link back to yourself. While you're at it, get into the habit of being very helpful. Join forums where you can post solutions to other people's problems. Moneysavingexpert.com is a great one as it gets lots of traffic and has a plethora of relevant topics.

6. **Use those sharing buttons unashamedly** - add Google+ Facebook like and tweet this buttons everywhere you can. Then click on them yourself a few times. Get your dog to click on them too (see tip 2 above).

7. This is a really sneaky one- **set up a targeted paid directory** specialising in one field - e.g. if you are trying to promote power tools, call it a 'power tools review website'. Then add all your competitors to the directory. Add some content over the next few weeks, then after a few weeks, change the website to say that all links on the site require a $199 inclusion fee, and then report all the competitor sites on the directory as paying for links. This is an example of negative SEO which is difficult to ban you for.

8. **Use the free AdWords vouchers** that you get in computer magazines. Every month I get PC Pro magazine and every month it has a £50 AdWords voucher in it. Generally I set up new temporary AdWords accounts, whack in the 50 quid code and set them going. Bosh. Easy traffic for free.

9. **Fabricate news** – news websites are desperate for content, and quite a few of them have very lax authentication procedures. If you can fabricate some news and maybe get yourself a few backlinks or twitter shares on the back of it, then you can potentially get a lot of traffic.

10**. Charity links**. Select a few relevant small charities, make a small donation and write an article about the good work that they do with a link to their donation page and then ask them to link back to you as thanks: paid links but without the Google penalty.

11. **Use Negative SEO** - this is a collection of techniques which you can find out more about in the Negative SEO. Essentially this is forcing other websites above you down in the rankings to help your own ranking. There are 11 techniques on this page:

- Promote non offending content - "Insulation"
- Google Bowling
- Site Infection
- Tattling
- Guilty by Association
- False duplicated content
- Denial of Service Attacks (DOS)
- Click Fraud
- AdSense Banning
- Black social bookmarking

Read the relevant chapter on Negative SEO for more details on these tactics.

12. **Use Keyword Association Manipulation** - this is when you associate two unrelated keywords together to try to fool bots into thinking that they are related or synonymous. This is quite an advanced technique and takes a lot of work to achieve on highly competitive keywords.

13. **Use a subscription based service to hide non relevant content** - a bit like cloaking, you are showing different content to spiders, but if you have a subscription based service - even if it's just a 'click here to prove you are over 12 years old' button, you can get away with having one set of content for spiders (and people who claim to be under 12 - in which case they would get a less interesting set of pages about the joys of power tools) and another set for most other people.

14**. Pay another site to put the Google authentication html file on their website**. Then add the site to Google webmaster tools and use the 'change of address' tool to redirect linkjuice back to your

website. This is not paying for links because there are no direct links that go back to your site which are paid for, so you are just paying for the link juice. The webmaster that you are paying will be aware that this is what you are doing and if they agree to it, it's not against the webmaster guidelines (yet).

15. **Spun content** - this is copying content from another site but changing some words around so search engines cannot automatically spot the plagiarism. Another method is to take content from more than one page- like they say, "copying from one source is plagiarism, copying from more than one source is research" A good way to do this is to use lists like X SEO techniques then steal some items from other peoples list and compile your own. If you add a few extra ideas in, it becomes your own. See how I recopied this paragraph from the black hat SEO section above?

16. **Write negative reviews** - when people are researching products or services they are much more likely to read negative reviews than positive ones so they know what to look out for.

17. **Link chaining** - In the old days of the world wide web, before search engines became ubiquitous, there were a lot of 'web rings' - these are sites that join a group or 'web ring' and each site puts a bit of JavaScript code on their page. The web ring hub site would then write links into this code so that each website in the ring had links to the next one. In this way you could cycle between all the sites in the ring. Link chaining is a similar method whereby you create rings of sites and each links to the next one in the ring. None of the sites themselves have more than one chained link and they all have different IP addresses, so cannot be associated as a 'bad neighbourhood'

18. **Pay for reviews** - there are plenty of people out there who write reviews on websites in exchange for money. The blogwhores will write about any old subject as long as they are getting paid, and this is perfectly legal.

19. **Free Stuff**! Everyone likes getting something for free, so why not put voucher codes for relevant products on your site. You can get plenty of codes from online voucher code websites (Just Google 'voucher codes') and pop a 'voucher of the day' feature on your website. Technically this is not plagiarism or duplicated content, but if you push this feature on twitter, Facebook etc. You'll attract lots of traffic.

20. **Content repositioning** – The premise is thus: most people only read the first few sentences on a page before they lose interest. Therefore, having call to action at the top of the page is very handy. On the downside, the more keyword themed content which is better for search engines is less likely to grab someone's attention. Therefore, you should move your content on the page itself so the SEO friendly stuff but lower conversion text is at the top of the code, but bottom of the page. This can be achieved by various means such as using CSS floats, CSS absolute positioning, jQuery append() methods or many other ways. You can also create jQuery animations to change content position, or possibly ajax to insert content. All of which is technically allowed (for now)

For balance, it must be pointed out that the concept of Grey hat SEO is a contentious issue. Some people believe that Grey Hat SEO is just a less obvious form of Black Hat SEO, and some argue that there's no such thing as Grey Hat SEO, just lucky people who get away with it for a while.