

Search engine optimisation for trade unions

**How to make your union's messages
go further and reach the right people**



Contents

Introduction	3
Search engine optimisation – the basics	4
Domain authority, metrics and tools.....	6
Creating a content strategy.....	8
Onsite optimisation.....	11
Some more practical steps.....	14

Introduction

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the art of getting web pages to rank near the top of the results displayed in search engines like Google and Bing. SEO focusses on the natural - or 'organic' - search results, not the paid ads that appear in prominent positions on search engines.

SEO is a big topic, but this report concentrates on why unions need to understand the importance of SEO and the advantages it can bring. We also look at some of the basics of SEO but recommend further reading if more help is required.

Why is Search Engine Optimisation important for unions?

There are several reasons unions should invest time and effort in optimising for search:

1. **It gets your message to potential members.** Search engines are an effective way for unions to use quality content to reach new people. For example, a new audience in workplaces and sectors that have yet to organise, or younger workers who wouldn't necessarily be aware of unions as an option for them.
2. **Greater influence for your union.** By getting the union's message to appear higher in results for your key topics, unions can influence the debate and ensure their members' points of view are competing effectively for attention in comparison to employer or media voices.
3. **It's more cost effective than advertising.** Spending money for recruitment adverts in search engines is a useful tactic but can be very expensive. While it takes time and effort to see results, it's often more cost effective to use SEO in the long run. With returns on investment harder to calculate for unions than for commercial or charity organisations, effective SEO can be something you do once, to benefit in the longer term.
4. **Optimised content has staying power.** Once your content is ranking well, it usually continues to rank well and bring in visitors for no additional cost.

Major drawbacks of using SEO are that it takes time and needs a constant focus to retain the greatest benefits. Paid for adverts are instant but creating and seeding quality content and making sure your website is up to the job requires effort, know-how and patience.

Search engine optimisation – the basics

This report doesn't cover the details of SEO practices in depth. It's a large subject area and there are already some great resources online. However, we aim to give a quick overview of the basics to help better understand the practice and to work with specialists if you want to take these ideas further.

Onsite and Offsite SEO

Search engines take a range of factors into account when deciding how high to rank a web page in the results listings for a user's search.

These can be split into two areas, onsite and offsite SEO.

Onsite is related to how well your website has been configured to perform in search engines and the quality of content. Examples include:

- Good quality content using keywords that reflect users' likely search terms.
- Effective use of meta data - information about the content embedded inside the page code that provides additional data to search engines.
- A well configured website that uses things like 'Header' tags, search engine friendly URLs and avoids duplicating content.

Offsite SEO relates to your website's backlinks (incoming links from other websites, social media etc.). For this, both quantity and quality count. The more often your webpage is mentioned and the more authoritative the link (for example, a feature on the BBC news website will carry more weight than one in a personal blog), the more likely a page is to rank higher in search engine results.

This part of SEO can be more of an art than a science, and common tactics include:

- Using social media to promote website content to help to build backlinks.
- Creating content to target specific keywords in search engines results (for example around a particular sector, employer or job role).
- Link baiting, for example creating provocative content or interesting research that you know people will want to read.
- Buying links from other sites, for example paying influencers to write a blog post that links to you.
- Encouraging news outlets to link to the website with more detail that enhances a story they are covering.

Avoid quick fixes

There aren't any reliable short cuts here, and you should beware of anyone offering them. There is also a darker side to SEO, practices that attempt to 'cheat' the search engines into ranking websites higher.

It could involve hijacking comments to post spam links, or even hacking reputable sites. Others publish algorithmically generated, low-quality content in bulk across a network of bot-controlled websites to gain more backlinks. Tactics like this will likely backfire on you in the long run.

There are also more grey-area methods that it's best to avoid, such as paying for links to appear on other sites. That can help build links but can, in certain circumstances, be considered suspect by search engines.

Search engines are always evolving their algorithms and will crack down on practices they think are trying to game the system. In general, if something feels like cheating, it probably isn't worth doing in the longer term. The damage to your reputation with search engines could be severe if you fall foul of this.

You can leverage relationships you have with other sites. For example, where media articles mention one of your campaigns, getting them to link to helpful campaign content is a win-win. Their readers find useful links and you get the reputation. Writing unique content for partner organisations (don't just duplicate your own pages), which features useful further information links can also help.

Link building strategies that focus on creating great content that people want to read and share are the surest ways to build reputation.

Domain authority, metrics and tools

There are several useful tools that help measure the backlinks a website has and the perceived 'authority' of a website.

One of the leading metrics is called [Domain Authority](#), compiled by Moz.com. This is a well-established metric that looks at the number of links, the 'importance' of the websites providing those links and other factors such as the age of a website and if it has reports for hosting spam content.

Domain Authority is calculated as a score from 0 to 100. Higher scores signal a website that's more likely to rank higher in search results for any given keyword.

There are also other tools can analyse and track how well your website ranks for various keywords, monitor progress and capture any mentions across the publicly visible web. Well known providers include [Moz.com](#), [Ahrefs.com](#), [Semrush.com](#), [Majestic](#)

How do unions compare for Domain Authority?

We compared a small selection of middle to higher scoring union sites with a selection of other membership organisations.

Organisation/union	Domain Authority
National Trust	82
Greenpeace UK	73
ACAS	68
British Dietetic Association	68
CBI	66
TUC	66
Unite	66
Scouts	64
CAMRA	63
UNISON	62
Ramblers Association	60
GMB	59
Countryside Alliance	56

Police Federation of England & Wales	56
PCS	55
Chartered Institute of Building	51

Source: Moz.com Domain Authority January 2022.

The National Trust has the highest score. This site could be helped by the number of links going to the various locations and 'days out' that are featured.

The British Dietetic Association has been the highest-ranking TUC affiliate for Domain Authority in the last few years, with their free online guidance encouraging highly specialist backlinks to the site.

The CBI, TUC and Unite have the same Domain Authority of 66, and this can be compared to other membership organisations with similar scores, such as the Scouts and the Ramblers Association.

[Info.com](https://info.com) compiles an annual league table of the SEO metrics of TUC affiliates, with the latest update available at info.com/blog/trade-union-website-league-table-2021.

Creating a content strategy

One of the most effective ways to improve a website's search engine performance is by creating good quality content, focused on a defined topic and audience.

This will make it more likely that the content will be shared on social media and linked to from other websites, helping rank the webpage higher when search area made for keywords that match the topic.

Having a content strategy to refer to when developing new content will help ensure it is optimised to perform better in search engines and bring in a larger audience.

Here are some steps to take when creating a content strategy:

1. **Determine your target audience.**

Identify the target audience that you want to attract. For example, is it for existing members, policy makers or staff at an employer which could be a target for union recognition?

2. **Select the topic.**

Try to find a subject that the audience wants to read, but which also enables the union to demonstrate its knowledge and relevance to the audience.

3. **Target the right keywords.**

Use your union's expertise and carry out research to identify the best keywords for the topic and audience. Test out possible keyword searches in Google to see the existing content you'll be competing with, and to identify any new approaches to the topic that you could use. Use keyword tools to identify popular and related searches.

4. **Develop and optimise.**

Use SEO best practice to ensure the content you produce is as SEO-friendly and targeted as possible. For example, choose the page title carefully, including keywords, whilst also ensuring it's a title that will encourage clicks if people see it in a list. Use properly defined subheadings within the content (search engines place greater emphasis on keywords appearing in headings and subheadings) and include an image that will help promote the content when shared on social media, tagged with helpful alt-text metadata.

5. Update as necessary.

If the content performs well then keep it up to date. Search engines look at how often a page gets updates, and this will help ensure they continue to view it as a very relevant resource and keep it in a high position.

There is more information on content strategy for unions in [this Digital Lab workshop write up blog](#).

Keyword tools

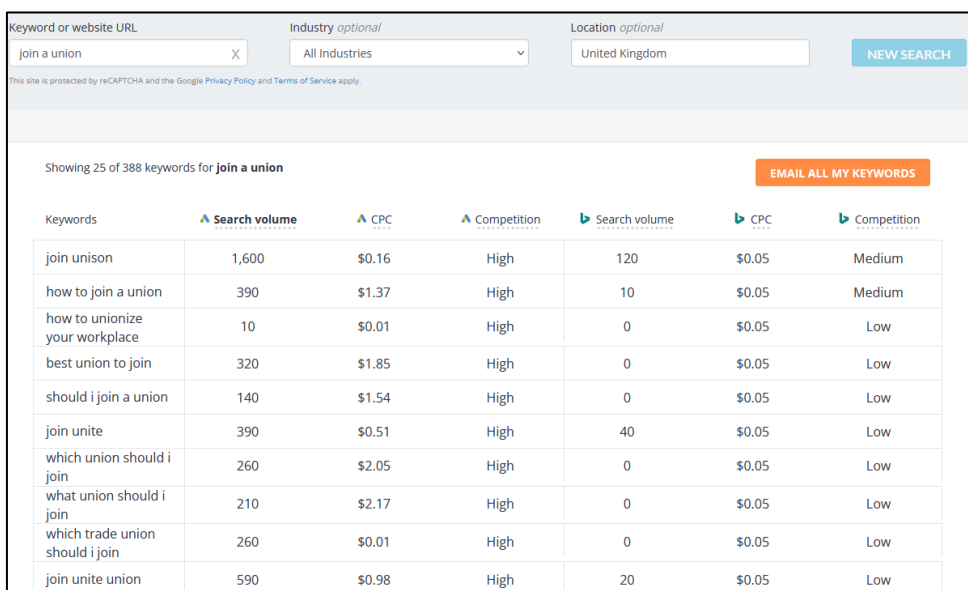
Keyword tools can be very useful when researching potential content and topics. They can show how popular certain terms are and display related searches. This helps when targeting the topic and approach to a new piece of content.

One of the most useful has been the Google Keyword Planner. This is Google's own tool, built into Google Adwords, and shows an estimate for how often selected keywords are searched for and popular related searched.

This used to be the most useful tool, but Google now restrict access to the most accurate data to those organisations who spend significant amount on advertising via their Adwords accounts.

Other providers for keyword tools include Moz, Ahref, Semrush and keywordtool.io. They often offer free trials but will require payment for ongoing use.

A useful, free keyword tool is the one provided by ad optimisation company WordStream. This offers data on search volume and related terms.



The screenshot shows the WordStream Keyword tool interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text 'join a union', a dropdown menu for 'Industry optional' set to 'All Industries', and a dropdown menu for 'Location optional' set to 'United Kingdom'. A 'NEW SEARCH' button is visible. Below the search bar, there is a table of keywords with columns for 'Keywords', 'Search volume', 'CPC', and 'Competition'. The table shows 25 of 388 keywords for 'join a union'. An 'EMAIL ALL MY KEYWORDS' button is located to the right of the table.

Keywords	Search volume	CPC	Competition	Search volume	CPC	Competition
join unison	1,600	\$0.16	High	120	\$0.05	Medium
how to join a union	390	\$1.37	High	10	\$0.05	Medium
how to unionize your workplace	10	\$0.01	High	0	\$0.05	Low
best union to join	320	\$1.85	High	0	\$0.05	Low
should i join a union	140	\$1.54	High	0	\$0.05	Low
join unite	390	\$0.51	High	40	\$0.05	Low
which union should i join	260	\$2.05	High	0	\$0.05	Low
what union should i join	210	\$2.17	High	0	\$0.05	Low
which trade union should i join	260	\$0.01	High	0	\$0.05	Low
join unite union	590	\$0.98	High	20	\$0.05	Low

A screenshot of the WordStream Keyword tool

Specialist and general unions

Specialist unions and general, multi-sector unions face different challenges with regards to content.

General unions need a more fine-grained approach, putting more effort into differentiating between key content for their different sectors and audiences. A risk for them is that in trying to optimise all content for everything, they may end up underperforming on specific pieces.

Specialist unions will usually find it easier, as the audience will have more common interests and search engines will already recognise their websites as being related to their sector, due to much more specialised back links. This does limit the range of topics on offer, but the Domain Authority rankings on Infobo.com's annual surveys demonstrate that specialist unions usually out-perform similar sized general unions with regards to SEO metrics.

Onsite optimisation

Optimising your website to be as search engine friendly as possible usually provides the greatest return on investment from an SEO budget. A few simple tweaks can often significantly help increase traffic.

Major open-source Content Management Systems (CMS) like WordPress and Drupal have really improved their default SEO settings over the last decade, though they can still often benefit from fine tuning.

The biggest issues can often lie with bespoke or proprietary website software created by a single website development company. They may not have the scope to keep up to date with the speed of developments in this field.

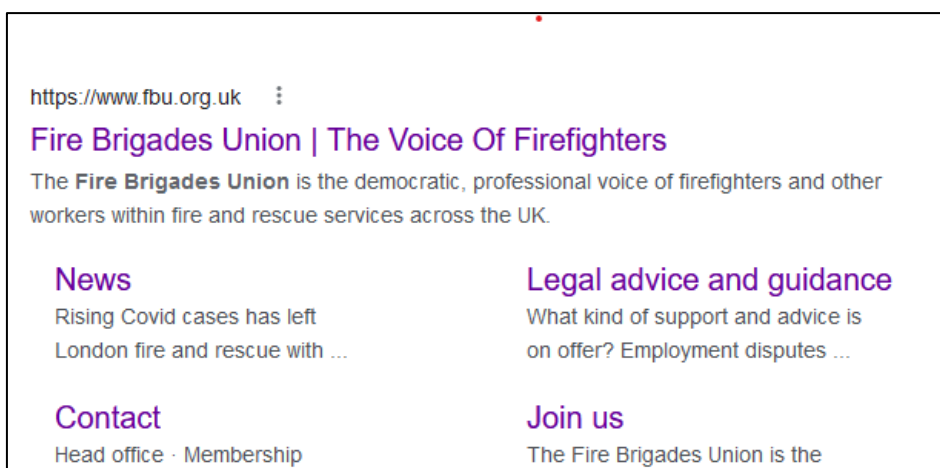
The below is a short summary of some of the key things to consider.

Meta data and semantic markup

Meta data is the core information about a web page, which is hidden inside the HTML markup. This is read by search engines. The most important part of this is the page title, which can differ from the heading written on the page.

Along with the description, this helps convince users to pick your page from all the others displayed on the first page of results for their search.

It helps to know when to define a meta description and when not to. For example, a meta description is recommended on your site's home page to provide a website description when displayed in search results.



The screenshot above shows the Google search listing for the FBU. The meta data page title and description on the home page define the title "Fire Brigades Union | The Voice

of Firefighters" and the curated description below. Both have been optimised for length, close to the maximum character limit for each, to keep everything legible on screen.

If you see your search results displaying some less user-friendly text taken from the home page as the description, then the meta data has not been optimised.

Duplicate content

Duplicating or having similar content on a website can confuse search engines. It's not clear which page should be the one that should be prioritised, which can result in both pages ranking lower in search results.

Try to design the website to avoid the need for a page or content to appear on two different addresses. For example, if content is both a news item and a blog, ensure it only shows with a single URL.

If your union has a landing page for health and safety but also has a content category page, displaying the latest health and safety resources, tags can be added to the site code that tell search engines not to index the page that just lists the latest resources.

This will prioritise the main health and safety landing page and ensure it ranks higher in search.

Semantic markup

Semantic markup is a way of structuring and tagging web pages so that they provide more information to other applications, such as search engines, social media and apps.

For example, if you search for a film in Google, and see a website's rating for the film in search results, this is powered by semantic markup dedicated to film ratings.

One of the most common issues reading semantic markup is encountered when sharing content on social media. If you find that when you post content from your website onto Facebook, the main image is not automatically displayed, or the default description is wrong, then this indicates that you should improve the semantic markup on your site.



For example, this GMB tweet links to their website, automatically displaying the image and title of the content, because the GMB's semantic mark-up tells Twitter this is the image and title to use in a "Twitter card" display.

Website audit

Onsite optimisation is a broad subject that can get very technical.

While some website developers understand SEO, many only have a limited knowledge. It's quite common for sites to have some basic configuration errors that prevent the content reaching its full potential. If you're unsure how well your site has been configured, commissioning a specific SEO audit can help clarify the situation.

This will help highlight any shortcoming and should result in practical recommendations on how you can work with your developer to improve the site.

It may be worth repeating every couple of years if you can, as good practice is evolving all the time, as the search engines refine they ways they operate.

Some more practical steps

Here are some practical steps that can help your union improve its visibility in search engines.

Track usage

This is something all websites should really do anyway but using website analytics will allow your union to track not only the number of visits, but also how many come from organic searches, and what terms are being used when people arrive at your site.

You may find that visitors are coming to you for very different reasons than you expected, which can either lead you to optimise for the visitors you want, or to find ways to better serve the new visitors you are getting.

Google Analytics is free and the most popular analytics tool, but the open source Piwik software is another alternative.

The personalised search results trap

Google and other search engines personalise search results. For example, if you visit a website regularly, or even if your colleagues do (via a shared office internet connection), that website will be artificially boosted in your search results.

As you will likely be regular users of your own website, this can give you the impression that your site ranks higher than it actually does.

Using a different browser or internet connection can reveal what others see. There is also way to negate this affect by [adding the text 'pws=0' to the search results URL](#).

Avoid fragmenting websites

Search engines focus on the website domain when deciding how authoritative a site is. For example, www.tuc.org.uk.

One issue unions often have is how to present the different groups and structures that make up the national union.

If you have separate websites with different domains for union branches, regions and UK nations, these will be seen as separate domains, which could negatively impact on their search performance. Also, any links to these separate sites will not benefit the core union domain.

Aligning web pages into one website domain will generally help all pages rank higher. For example, if possible, unions should allow branches to create pages on their main

domain, such as union.org.uk/branchname, rather than setting up their own sites e.g. unionbranchname.org.uk

Often, you'll have reasons for needing a separate site identity in different situations, but it's worth being mindful of what you could be losing in terms of overall SEO.

Be aware, subdomains do not gain all the benefits of the main domain, so a branch website located at branchname.union.org.uk will perform less well in search engines than the previous example.

Redirects

Redirects are instructions you give to your website to forward on traffic where pages have changed. If you ever change the address of a webpage, or even a website, without putting in effective redirects, the ranking built up in search engines will be lost.

For example, if a campaign landing page changes its web address because of a change in the campaign name, make sure the right type of redirect is put in place (a 'permanent' redirect is required) pointing to the new address.

This not only ensures existing backlinks from other websites/social media continue to work but also tells search engines that this is the same page, just with a new address.

Redirects are especially important if a website is going through a major redesign, or if two unions are merging, as this often involves changes in the URLs of lots of your content. It's surprising how often web developers fail to implement redirects during redesigns, resulting in less traffic to the new site once it launches.

Targeting pages to make them more visible

One effective SEO strategy is to examine which of your most important content pages are ranking on page two of Google, or just below the top three positions on page one and target these pages for a boost. For example, promoting the content on social media, or linking to it more on the website.

Webpages on page one of search results get far more traffic than other pages, and those in the top three attract by far the most attention. Getting just a few more backlinks to these borderline pages can result in a dramatic increase in visitors.

Mobile friendly

Having a mobile friendly website is established best practice given smartphones are now the most common way for people to access the internet. However, it's also important for SEO.

Search engines look at how well a page is designed for mobile and consider this as a ranking factor for search results, especially for searches made on mobile devices. If you have an older site design that doesn't rearrange to display more legibly on a

smartphone (called a “responsive” design), you are being penalised already by search engines.

Make your website faster

The speed of your website is a ranking factor for search engines, which try to avoid giving their users a bad experience with slow to load pages.

Website tracking service Pingdom has a useful [free website speed test](#), which can show how quickly your pages load and give recommendations that you or your developers can use to improve this.

Make sure to use quality web hosting and consider using a Content Distribution Network (CDN) to further improve speeds. CDNs cache data like images and PDF on their own server networks, making websites load faster.

Services like [CloudFlare](#) provide a CDN alongside many additional security benefits, and their core CDN is provided as part of their free, basic plan.

This report was written by Simon Parry of [infobo.com](#) in collaboration with the TUC Digital Lab.

The Digital Lab project supports the TUC’s affiliate unions to develop and share good practice in all aspects of digital transformation.

You can find resources and events at [digital.tuc.org.uk](#), and subscribe to regular email updates.

