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## **SEO Myths Dispelled: Flash Video**

by Nick Yorchak

By now, everyone has visited a website that utilizes Flash multimedia within its design. Since 1996, the use of Flash has grown in popularity thanks to its ability to add animation and interactivity to websites.

More recently, Flash has become an essential component in the prolific distribution of intrusive "pop-ups," or web-based advertisements. Flash also grants designers the ability to integrate video into web pages, and this has led many within the Web 2.0 space to use Flash to develop rich Internet applications. Many companies, including my own, Denver interactive agency **Fusionbox**, offer streaming [Flash Video Solutions](#) to clients in need of online video.

While the inclusion of Flash into websites no doubt enriches the user experience rendering it that much "flashier," search engine optimizers (SEOs) have long been wary of the use of Flash due to the fact that it's supposedly unindexable by the search engines. Key word here: *supposedly*.

As we all know, the search engine game changes daily. If it stayed the same, it wouldn't be called a game. The inherent beauty of it is that *no one* knows everything. Instead, we're all just players who know something, and we're all moving forward as we try to learn more, keeping up with developments happening in our space. One such development is the evolution of Flash and the impact it has had on the science of search.

Back in the day, Flash files were not indexable by search engines because the content was hidden from the spider's digital "eyes." The implications of this fact were dire from an SEO standpoint. It was no secret. Invisible content did not boost search engine rank or positioning. If anything, it held quality sites back because Google was blind to content found within Flash files, mistakenly convinced that there was no content at all.

Still, many web designers stuck to Flash (despite our SEO driven pleas) after falling in love with the allure of its interactivity and the attractive design capabilities it offered.

In those days, designers were confronted with a difficult choice. Give up on Flash in order to achieve better search engine rankings, or preserve the design and watch site rankings stagnate or plummet. Flash then, became a visually beautiful application that was literally empty beneath the surface, until now that is.

Today, Flash has changed dramatically from what it once was. The choice that once plagued designers is now extinct. Macromedia, the company responsible for creating Flash, now offers a product known as the Flash Search Engine SDK (Software Development Kit) that includes an application known as "swf2html." This application extracts both links and text from Flash files (.swf), returning the data in HTML form. This allows Google and other search engines to "see" Flash content that was formerly invisible.

Even with this development, the extracted text is nothing that appeals to artistic sensibilities. Yet despite its uninviting and often disfigured appearance, this text represents valuable content that facilitates [search engine optimization \(SEO\)](#).

I came across a great comparison of a Flash file and its extracted HTML text when researching this article, and I've included links below so you can see for yourself how this works.

### **[Example of Flash file](#)**

### **[Example of extracted text](#)**

Having seen this example, you're probably wondering, "How do I know if my Flash content is visible to search engines?" Luckily for you, a simple test exists which can show you how much of the text in your Flash presentation is extractable by the Google bots.

Begin by performing an "exact search" (bound within "quotes") using the Flash filetype operator (.swf) on a piece of text at the top of the HTML output generated by Macromedia's tool. Then perform the same test against text in the middle and at the bottom, comparing results to see exactly how much of your content is visible to Google.

Another way this problem has been alleviated is through the use of Flash CS3. Users can publish Flash CS3 with meta tags (meta descriptions, keywords, and more) that are then able to index individual Flash movie content. Links are also indexable, and from an SEO standpoint, that's great news.

Furthermore, with the implementation of XML and other external scripting languages (PHP and others) Flash can now run web sites at even greater speeds than their graphic-laden counterparts.

We've seen that although the popular misconception still exists that Flash content cannot be indexed properly by the search engines, the problem is *not* yet entirely solved. Rather, it's only been partially alleviated.

You've still got to watch out for a problem that might be encountered by Flash presentations which use dynamic content pulled from a database, XML file, or other related source generated through user input. This type of content is not part of the XML file itself and thus is not indexable by Google and other search engines.

Caution must also be exercised in the case of certain types of motion in which the Flash movie creates an extracted output that contains duplicated content. Another SEO issue to avoid.

Armed with this knowledge, you can now begin to test your Flash presentations for SEO indexability and friendliness. Yet keep these unresolved issues in mind or you may hurt your search engine positioning more than you help it.

In conclusion, many of you are probably wondering what the future of Flash has in store. In my opinion, we can anticipate Flash becoming the primary provider of the presentation interface in handheld devices. Numerous sources claim that Adobe (Macromedia's parent company) is aggressively chasing cellular phone and PDA vendors, hoping to create partnerships that will allow them to deploy "Flash Lite" as the user interface on those type of products.

Interestingly, the next version of Flash will have two new features designed to ensure online advertising gets noticed.

The first will require that users watch an ad (in full) prior to viewing the main video, which could make online video sites a lot less user-friendly if we're forced to watch an ad in its entirety.

The second feature is the addition of DRM, which will give companies the option and ability to link an ad to content, essentially ensuring that both are played and not modified.

As you can see, the evolution of Flash changed the online marketing space and will continue to do so. All indications seem to hint that Flash's major influence will transform the domain of search, facilitate the development of [custom web-based software](#) and rich applications, and create user-brand interaction on a level never before seen online.

We as [Internet marketers](#) must always be "on," at the ready to connect with customers across multiple platforms on *their* terms, not ours. As video becomes more and more the preferred method and focal point of [strategic web-based marketing](#) message distribution, we need to continue to "play" the game and stay one step ahead of the trends. Give customers the opportunity to choose you by positioning yourself where potential consumers of online media (video especially) already spend their time online.

The world becomes more and more a digital place everyday, and as the web evolves new opportunities to reach and influence consumers present themselves. Just make sure you're ready when such chances present themselves, or you've missed the boat entirely.

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