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Popular search engine optimisation techniques can usually be considered one of two broad categories. The concept of SEO is to improve a website's position in search term rankings so the search engines take considerable notice to how webmasters go about doing this and to ensure they keep their practices ethical.

Practices referred to as 'white hat' are ethical and because of their compliance with the guidelines of the search engines, have longer lasting effects on their search results. Activities referred to as 'Black hat' are usually discovered by the search engines which in turn can cause websites to get banned from their results. People who use these techniques do not expect longevity from their results.

An SEO technique is considered to be 'white hat' if it does not intend to deceive the search engine and ensures that the content the engine indexes and ranks is the same content that will be accessed by the user. The general ethos of white hat practices is to generate content for users, not engines rather than exploiting the algorithms and tricking the spiders.

'Black hat' SEO techniques involve the cheating of the search engine. It includes techniques such as using hidden text filled with keywords that is located off screen or in the same colour as the background and cannot be seen by humans. Some black hat SEO's will ensure a different web page is seen depending on whether it is being requested by a human or a search engine, giving the search engines exactly what they are looking for, this is known as 'cloaking'.

When search engines find sites using black hat techniques they will penalize them by either reducing their ranking or removing them from the results completely. This can usually be done by automated algorithms but sometimes it needs manual intervention. A good example of this would be in 2006 when Ricoh Germany was removed from Google results for using unethical techniques; they quickly apologised, fixed the pages and were eventually restored to Google's listing.

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