

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO



A COMPLETE GUIDE TO GETTING STARTED IN SEO



A complete guide to getting started in SEO.

Produced by



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Chapter 1

SEO Fundamentals: Your Guide to SEO Success Factors in 2020

Ready to learn the secret to search engine optimization (SEO)?

Well, I hate to break it to you, but there really is no secret.

There is no secret sauce.

SEO isn't about magic tricks or gaming the search algorithms.

What you really need is a thorough understanding of what people want when they search – and why they want (or need) it.

The fact that there is no big secret is what makes SEO so hard. It's also a constantly moving target.



Danny Goodwin

Executive Editor, Search Engine Journal

Danny Goodwin is Executive Editor of Search Engine Journal. In addition to overseeing SEJ's editorial strategy and managing contributions from a team of 60+ industry experts, he also writes news and articles about SEO, PPC, social media marketing, content marketing. Danny has been a professional editor, writer, and ghostwriter in the marketing industry for 10 years, creating content for SMBs to global brands, spanning all things search and digital. He formerly was managing editor of Momenology and editor of Search Engine Watch.

And we don't make the rules – the search engines do.

That said, organic search is one of the most profitable marketing channels there is – if you're willing to invest in it.

Where Search Is Heading

If you're brand new to the world of SEO, I highly recommend you start with our guide, [SEO 101: Learn the Basics of Search Engine Optimization](#), before going further.

Already have a grasp on the SEO basics? Great! Let's continue.

A [complete guide to SEO](#) – and where search is heading in 2019 and beyond – is too hard to fit into one article.

Many factors impact your SEO success, including:

- **Technical:** This includes anything that affects the performance of, visibility of, or how search engines access your site. This includes indexing and crawling, schema, page speed, site structure, URL structure, and much more.
- **On-page:** This is your content – both what is visible to users on your web pages (text, images, video, or audio), as well as elements that are only visible to search engines (HTML tags, structured data).
- **Off-page:** This is anything that's not on your site. Ultimately, off-page factors are about growing and demonstrating your website's [authority, relevance, and trust](#) and building an audience. Think link building, social media marketing, PPC marketing, reviews, and user-generated content.

In this chapter, we'll start exploring the world of SEO in three of the most important areas that will help set you up for success:

- **Search experience optimization:** What opportunities you have to be more present to your customers/audience.
- **Content strategies for actual people:** The importance of content and what it means to be relevant.
- **The impact of voice search on SEO:** We'll look into the not-too-distant future and show you why the time is now to optimize for voice search. So don't wait!

1. Search Experience Optimization

When you hear the acronym SEO, it usually means Search Engine Optimization. And, as you'd expect, SEO in this context means optimizing your website for search engines (or, far less likely, optimizing a search engine).

But Search Experience Optimization is a newer way to think about the term SEO. Some have even called search experience optimization the “new SEO.”

Search experience optimization is optimizing for people in all the places your brand and content could possibly appear. It goes beyond the nuts and bolts of optimizing for search engines – although those nuts and bolts are still incredibly important!

Search strategies require us to create brand experiences, using the search results to build relevance.

Ninety-three percent of online experiences begin with a search engine, according to a 2006 Forrester study. That means a search engine is the biggest billboard there is for brands.

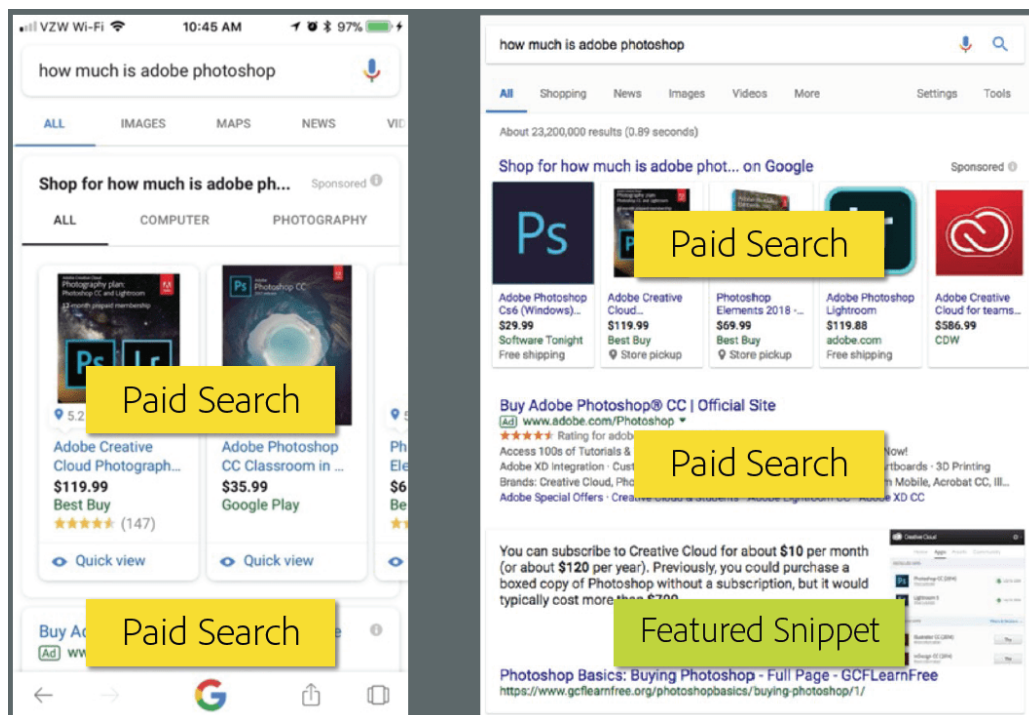
Search engines also travel with us wherever we go. Google refers to these search experiences as **moments**, with four of the biggest being:

- I-want-to-know.
- I-want-to-go.
- I-want-to-do.
- I-want-to-buy.

Contemporary SEO strategies require us to be creative to get visibility.

Ranking Above the Fold: Desktop vs. Mobile

Check out these results. What do you see?



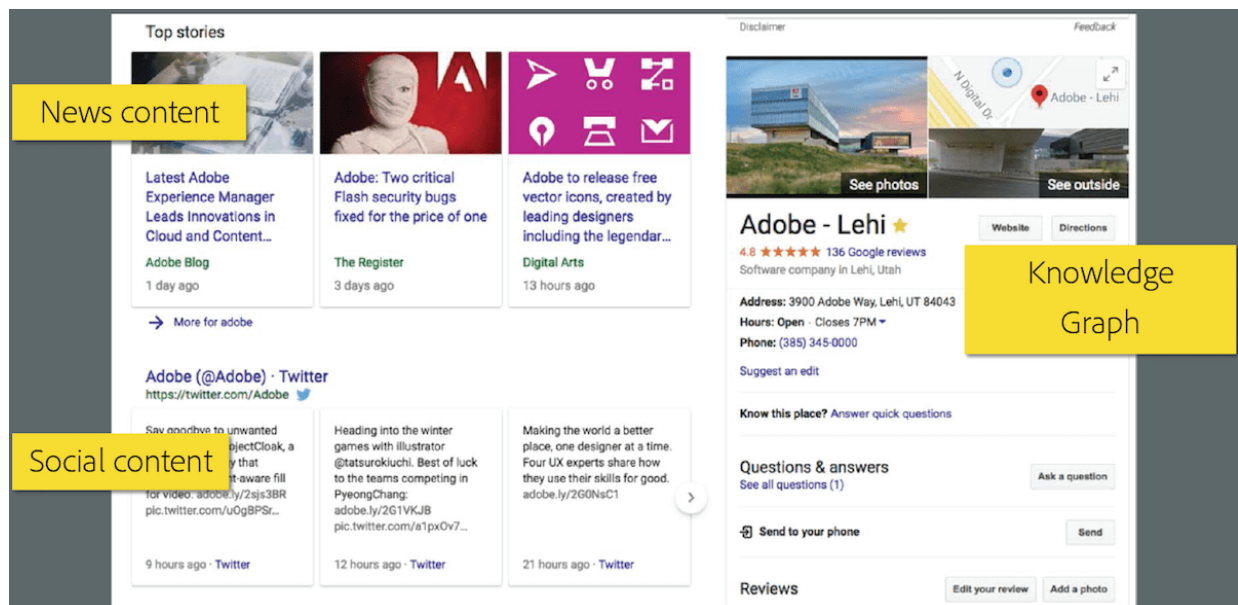
On mobile, there are no organic results above the fold.

On desktop, the only organic result you see is a featured snippet.

On Google, aside from paid search ads (which can supplement organic visibility in search results), you also have to contend with prominent search features, which vary depending on the query.

You have to optimize in every way you possibly can to improve visibility of your brand. Sometimes ranking “number one” in organic search won’t even matter because the page you’re trying to rank won’t even show “first.”

Let’s look at just a few of these search features that come before the first organic position:



News & Social Content

Google News and social content are areas where your content can gain great visibility. But news and social are wholly dependent on the freshness of query (how current/hot the topic is).

In order to rank/appear in these areas, you need a good understanding of your space and how Google responds to a query. Not every query will show news or social content, so it's important to understand how keywords react in different ways.

Knowledge Panels

Google's knowledge panels, which are powered by [Google's Knowledge Graph](#), display the basics about a business. This includes things like:

- Location.
- Phone number.
- Ratings.
- Hours of operation.

This is a huge way to build trust in your brand. Searchers have been conditioned to look for certain parts of search results, such as knowledge panels, to get the trusted information they want or need.

Getting these panels is important if you're a brand (or any other type of entity). If you aren't in the Knowledge Graph, you might be in a little trouble.

People Also Ask

People also ask is another search feature in which content is directly pulled in line with results. These are real terms people are searching for and content from websites is pulled in to populate these results.

You can use this search feature directionally to identify content optimization opportunities or additional new pieces of content you could create to help target the audience you want to reach.

Apply SEO to Different Platforms

In addition to optimizing for different parts of search results, you can apply SEO methodologies to any platform someone can search on.

These optimization opportunities, each of which is essentially a discipline unto itself, include:

- **App store optimization.**
- YouTube channel and video optimization.
- **Google My Business optimization.**
- Social media optimization.
- Third-party sites and vertical search engines (e.g., Amazon and Yelp).

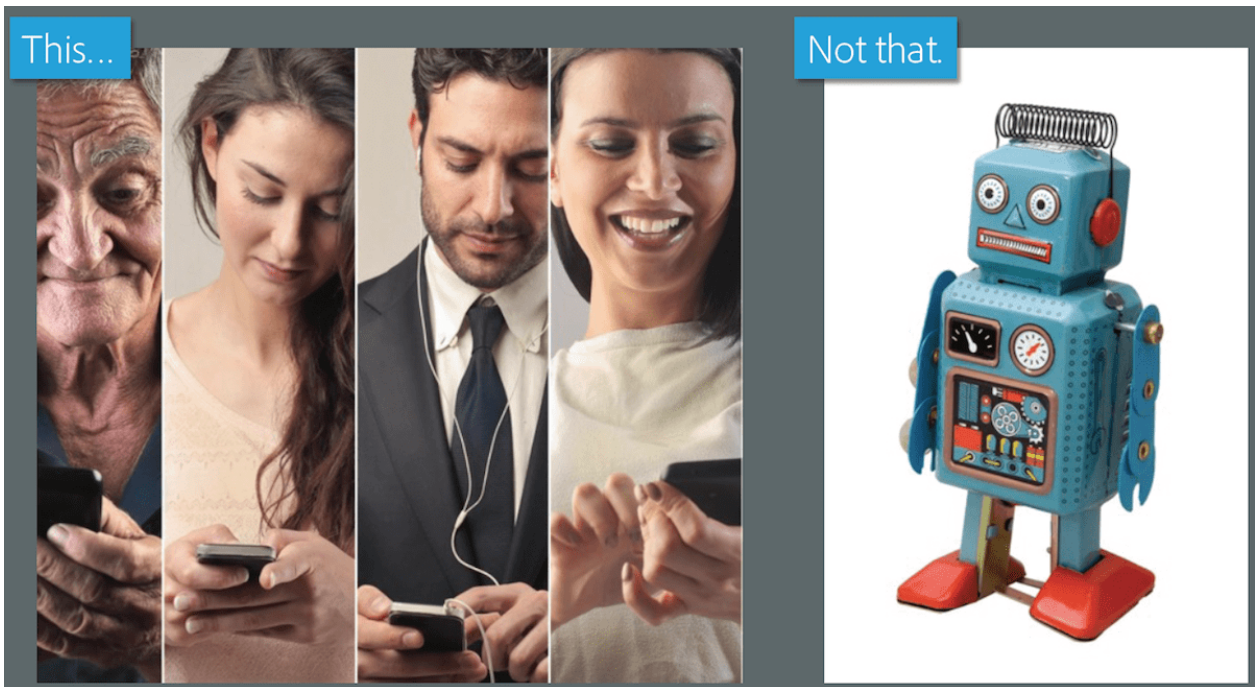
All of these searchable platforms are completely adaptable to the principles of SEO and provide opportunities for you to gain additional brand visibility.

Plus, when you optimize for other search experiences, content about your brand may be pulled into traditional search engine results (Google, Bing, etc.) as well.

Takeaways:

- Be visible as much as you can. Use every part of the results to create search experiences.
- Optimize beyond the search engine. This will ultimately lead to additional real estate occupation in the search engine results themselves.
- SEO assumes a much larger context when the goal is search experience optimization, not just search engine optimization.

2. Optimize Content for People



It's sometimes easy to forget that it's all about optimizing for people – your customers, readers, or subscribers.

So always optimize for people, not search engines.

Create content for customers, not for the sole purpose of ranking higher.

When you put people at center of your content strategies, chances are you'll be way more successful in search engines.

Content, Keywords & Search Algorithms

Google has made several [algorithm updates and changes](#) over the years.

Two key algorithm changes are extremely important in terms of how we think about content and [keywords](#):

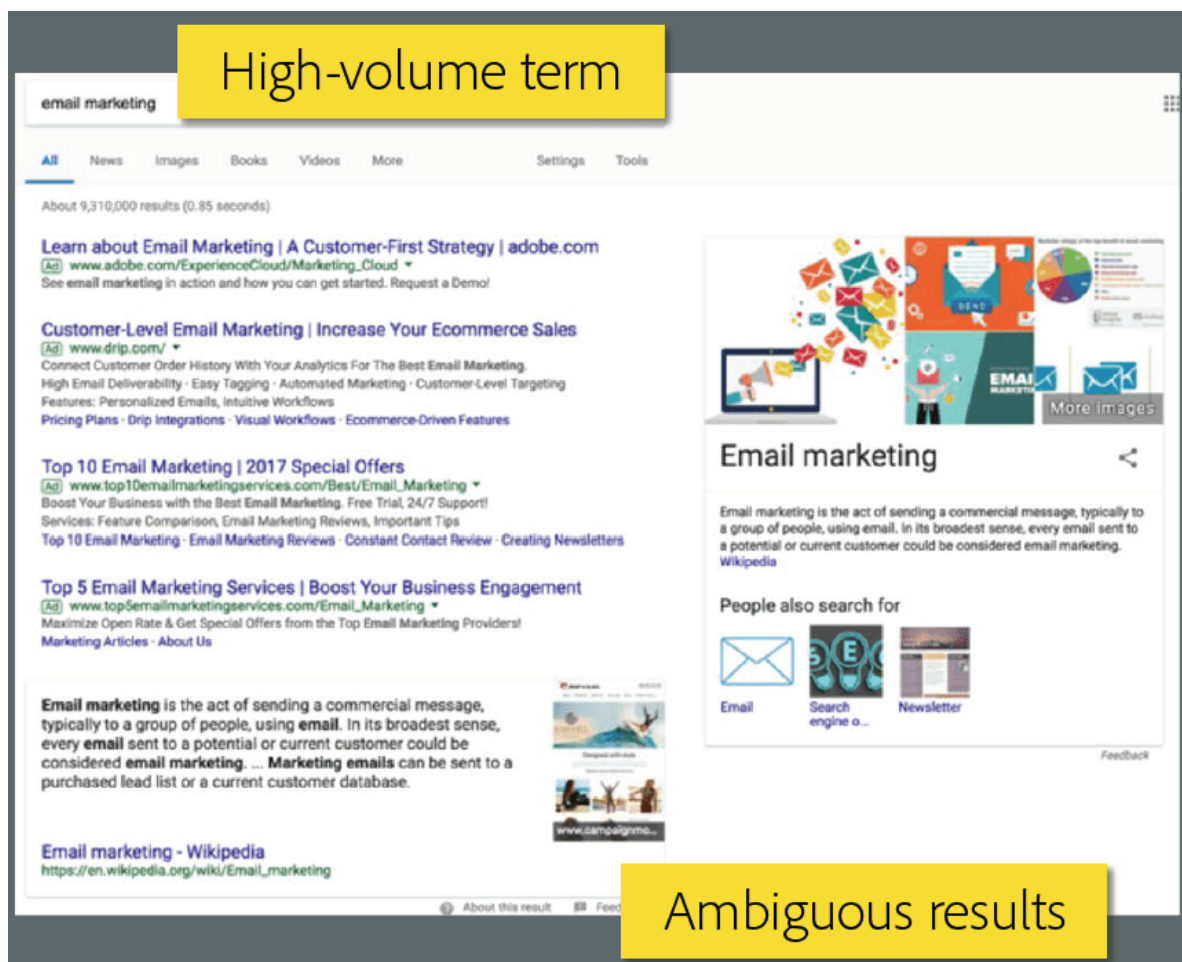
- [Hummingbird](#): This update gave Google the ability to understand full queries, not just individual keywords as part of a search. It also introduced the concept of semantics, or different keywords surrounding a main topic. Optimizing your pages for a single keyword from top to bottom is no longer a viable SEO tactic, nor does it look natural to people.
- [RankBrain](#): This update gave Google the ability to understand queries it had never processed before and create associations necessary to be able to decipher the full meaning of query to deliver results through machine learning. It is one of the top three ranking factors, along with content and links.

So how do these two algorithm updates impact content strategies?

You don't want to focus too narrowly on keywords. While rankings are important, ranking isn't the only thing that matters.

Keywords can sometimes betray you. Keywords may have a high search volume but can lack specificity and value.

Take this search for [email marketing] for example:



The search volume for this particular keyword is roughly 18,000.

Even if you were to write content well enough to rank for this keyword, how much of that traffic will be relevant? How many conversions will you be able to generate? Probably not a lot.

The term “email marketing” is very generic. This is why Google shows ambiguous results.

There’s a clear difference in a term like “email marketing” and “enterprise cross-channel marketing platforms”.

What’s the difference?

Intent.

One keyword is informational, while the other is transactional. Transactional queries are more valuable to conversion-driven businesses.

You can optimize for more transactional queries by targeting long-tail search keywords. This specificity of keywords (even if the keyword has low search volume) will help you create more relevant content and get more qualified traffic to your site.

At a tactical level you have to get creative with your topic and [keyword research](#). Really understand [how people search](#) for what they search for.

Why Content Matters

There’s no denying the importance of content.

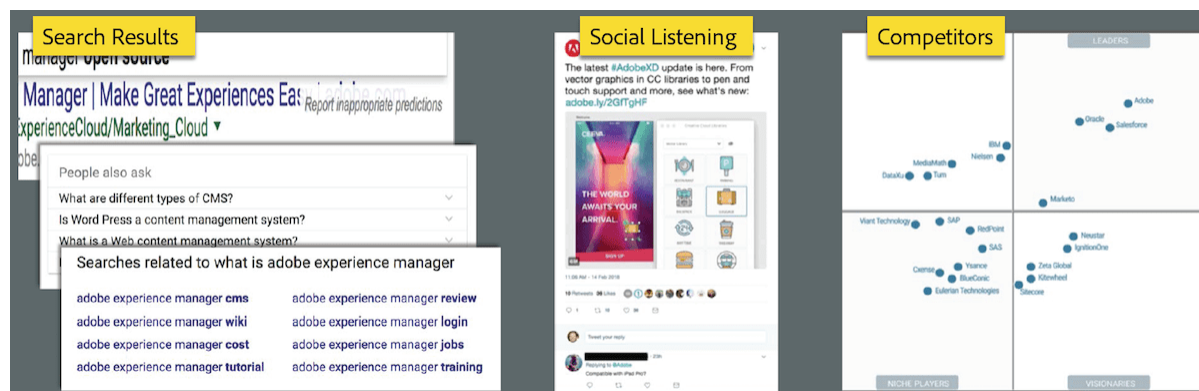
Without content there is no visibility.

To underscore how important content is (and how important the selection of keywords can be to the effectiveness of content), consider this:

- 60 percent of queries are four words or more.
- The average word count for a first-page result on Google is almost 1,900 words.

This begs the question: how do we know what people want? How do we know what people are going to search for?

Give People Content They Want



If you pay close enough attention, your audience will tell you what they want.

Some of the best audience tools are contained right in the Google search results:

- Autocomplete
- People also ask.
- Related searches.

Those are all queries/questions that people ask when they search. This data presents real opportunities for additional content.

Addressing pain points and directly answering questions will help you deliver the right content in a time of need to searchers. That's fundamentally what a search is – a need. It will also help you understand your customers better.

Social Listening

Social platforms also provide ample opportunities to learn about people and listen to needs.

Many people use social media to complain. A lot. Use it to your advantage.

Use your own or competitive comment sections. Pick up on common topics/themes.

Monitor conversations on every social network you're active (and anywhere your brand is discussed).

What are people complaining about? Maybe it's:

- Customer service issues.
- Being unable to find out when your business is open.
- Your product(s) or service(s).

You can turn any of these into content.

Competitive Research

Analyzing the sites in search results for competitive topics reveal a lot about what is working, and what isn't, about your business. Do a **content audit** and find **content gaps**, or areas you want to emulate.

No matter what you choose, the end goal is always same: gain more context. Expand on topics your audience needs you to show up for.

This type of research can be uncomfortable. You may have to face some hard truths when you take any of these routes. But it's worth it as you'll understand the needs of people you want to reach.

Make It Mobile-First!

Great content means optimal accessibility, regardless of device. Truly mobile-first experiences that load as fast as possible.

One way to do this is using Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP), especially if you rely heavily on mobile organic traffic. Having content that loads lightning fast is just plain good user experience (and good business).

Slow loading pages can potentially impact your SEO performance – and your bottom line. Always be testing and optimizing!

If you're unsure about your mobile experience, test all your pages. Use any tool you can to optimize the user experience.

There are many great tools, including Pagespeed Insights. Use them to identify problem areas, such as how quickly your pages load and render.

Fun fact: In 2012, Google figured out that they would lose 8 million searches per day by slowing down results by just four-tenths of a second. While that may not seem like a lot, considering Google delivers results for more than 3 billion queries per day, that's 8 million searches Google can't serve ads on. That means less revenue for Google. And advertising is primarily how Google makes its money.

Be Prepared for the Mobile-First Index

Google has been telling everyone to go mobile-first for years but now it's happening with the [mobile-first index](#).

What this means is Google will crawl mobile sites at a higher frequency than desktop versions of sites. It also means that mobile is more critical to SEO than ever before. Watch developments in this area closely.

Make SEO Part of Your DNA

Optimize your content from the start. It will save you a lot of headaches in the end.

SEO is a process, not a goal. SEO is never done. You're never done optimizing.

Every page can be optimized because there's no such thing as a perfect website. You need to become "least imperfect."

In other words, you don't need the best website in the world. You just need a website that's better than your competition.

Being consistent with the SEO basics is the perfect way to do that:

- Optimize your [titles](#) and [meta descriptions](#).
- Use readable user and [search friendly URLs](#).
- Optimize video content (if you have it).
- Optimize header tags (H1, H2, H3, etc.).
- Link to deeper content within your site.
- Create and optimize topically-relevant content.

All of these items might seem like no-brainers to seasoned SEO professions. But you'd probably be surprised to see how often sites don't have the most basic things (e.g., title tags on their most important pages).

Your [navigation](#) and internal linking structure is the thematic backbone of your site. Use it to signal to search engines the topics of your site – what you want to be known for.

Takeaways:

- **Embrace long-tail keywords.** Don't limit yourself with a strategy that only targets generic/ambiguous keywords.
- **Understand audience intent and create content for it.** Listen to your audience. They will tell you what content you need to create.
- **Optimize from the start.** Build your foundation and cover all the basics (technical SEO and on-page optimization).

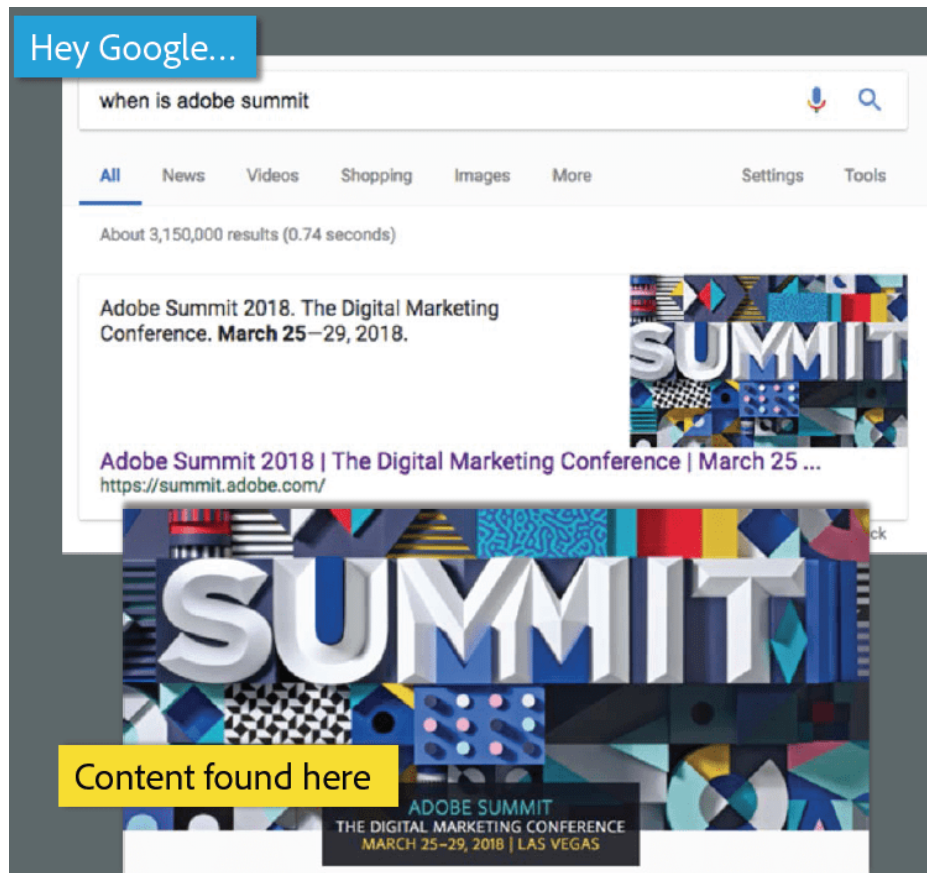
3. Voice Search Optimization

[Voice search](#) is closer than you think.

Pay attention to changes in search behavior and shifts in search results. Gather insight now to prepare for the future.

A whole new generation of people is coming. Their primary relationship with a search engine is to speak to it – not to type or tap. This is a huge change.

With a proliferation of voice-assisted devices that are easy to use (even for older generations), we're fast approaching a voice-first shift in search behavior.



Position Zero

Featured snippets are already starting to play a critical role in how Google provides search results. This is the new field of play in SEO.

Google's featured snippets appear above the first organic search result, so it provides a huge boost in terms of traffic, visibility, and trust. People trust featured snippets so much that they often won't click on any other organic results.

Position zero is largely question-driven. Google provides direct answers to questions, pulling an excerpt of content directly from a website into its featured snippet feature.

Optimizing for Voice Search

Voice search has one result. Position zero is the only result spoken back to you.

To have success, it's important to know the content and context of search:

- Identify common questions and queries your audience has.
- Create content to directly address those questions and queries.

Turn Content Into Actions & Skills

Google takes a few types of published content and makes it voice searchable for:

- News
- Recipes
- Podcasts

Alexa skills also make content searchable:

- Web-based services
- Information searches

The Future of Voice Search

There's a lot we still don't know about voice search.

- **Voice search data isn't available:** Google doesn't show voice search data in the same way it does for desktop and mobile search in the [Search Console](#).

- **How search behavior is changing:** When mobile was becoming a thing, we had data to show “near me” type searches, reflective of those on the go, were exploding. We don’t yet know the voice search equivalent to “near me” searches.

What do we know?

We know voice search consists of 10 percent of all searches, and that number is increasing. Just like mobile 6-7 years ago, voice search is coming.

So here lies the SEO opportunity. How will we define the methodology of voice search experience to continue to be present with relevant content when people need it?

Takeaways:

- Prepare for a voice-first world.
- Optimizing for position zero is optimizing for voice search.
- Make content searchable on voice-enabled devices.

Summary

As you approach SEO, especially in terms of content, make sure your strategy takes these three areas into account:

- **Creating search experiences is the new SEO.** Optimize for every opportunity you can. Take ownership of the search results, including outside of traditional organic search. Be present. Be relevant. Build trust in the people who are searching for your brand, wherever that is.

- **Create content for people, not search engines.** This is how you deliver great digital experiences and understand your customers better. Focus on the topics people want rather than worrying about keywords as much. Use your content assets to listen to your audience and create content that directly addresses their questions and pain points. Build a foundation you need for good SEO going forward.
- **Voice search is coming.** Don't wait. Aim for position zero in search results and make content voice-searchable.

Chapter 2

5 Things Every SEO Strategy Needs

In this industry, we spend a lot of time trading SEO tactics and ideas with each other for mutual benefit.

It's a wonderful thing. Not every industry does this.

Unfortunately, we invest less time in talking about how to develop our own SEO strategies.

While every SEO strategy is – and should be – different, there's an underlying strategy to developing strategies.

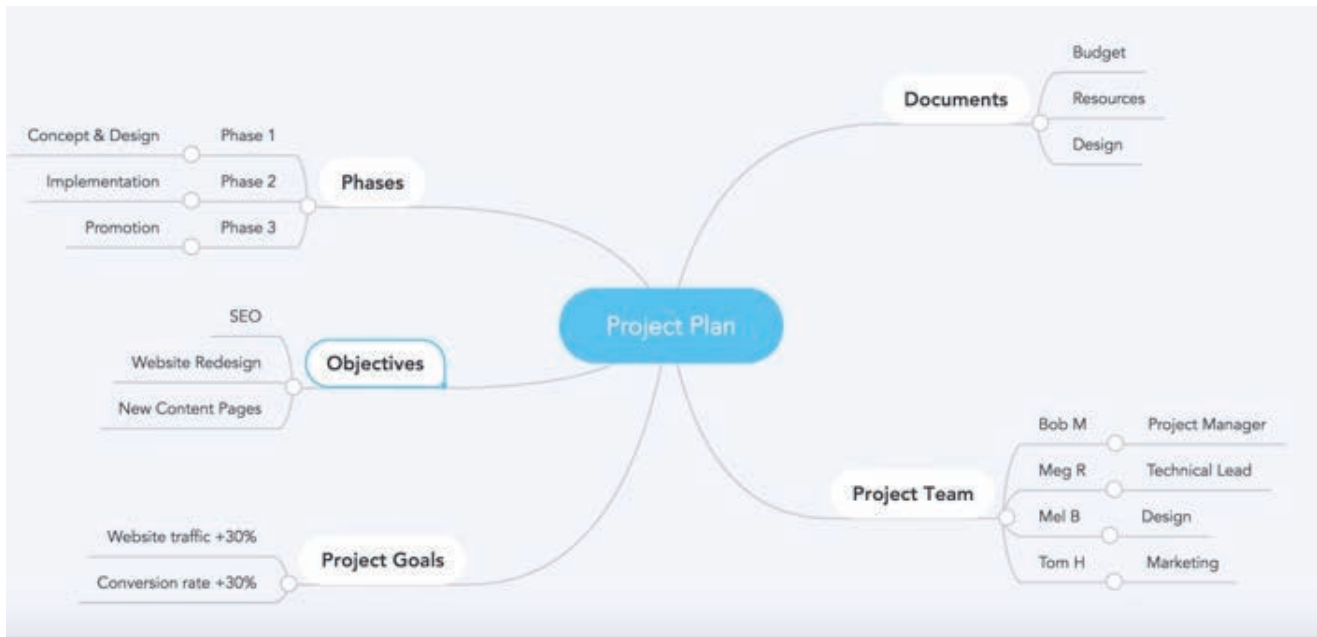
Here are five things every SEO strategy needs.



Pratik Dholakiya
Founder at The 20 Media

Pratik is the Founder of The 20 Media, a content marketing agency specializing in content & data-driven SEO. Pratik has been featured on sites like Forbes, Moz, SEW, The Huffington Post, KISSmetrics, Entrepreneur and Fast Company to name a few. Hit him up on Twitter @DholakiyaPratik for a quick chat

1. A Mind Map



A mind map is a place to build your strategy from the ground up. A mind map is simply a branching series of categories, usually reaching out from the center, moving from more general to more specific categories, with ideas becoming more granular.

It isn't a visualization of your final strategy. A mind map exists not to help you present your plan, but to help you think about it.

Mind maps are tools that help you envision your thinking process in a way that makes it easier for you to combine ideas by helping you see how they fit together as a whole. They help reduce the load that your strategy imposes on your working memory so that you can focus on thinking and brainstorming.

You can use a tool like Mind Meister, or you can simply jot down your ideas as they come to you in the visual format.

The primary benefit of using a mind map is its ability to help you think in nonlinear fashion.

Using a mind map allows you to see everything at once, in a structure that resembles the networked way that your real brain works, so I highly suggest using one as you develop your SEO strategy.

2. A Visual Representation

Once your strategy becomes more concrete, you will need a more in depth and professional document than your mind map.

Keep in mind what a strategy is: a plan.

That means you have goals, specific tasks attached to those goals, some tasks that have to come before others, recurring tasks that will need to be iterated and honed, and subtasks that will become more numerous and specific as time goes on.

You need to be able to present all of this quickly and easily to your client and your teams, and you need to do so in a format that is simple enough for all parties to understand, as well as edit.

You can use Google Sheets, Trello, Workzone, Basecamp, or whatever you prefer. The specific tool isn't as important as your method for using it.

It must be immediately clear to all parties about how to read the plan and make changes if needed. It must also be clear:

- Which task is assigned to whom.
- Which tasks follow the first.
- Which tasks are recurring, planned, in progress, and finished.

3. An Understanding of the Company

Whether you're an in-house or outsourced SEO, you need to have a solid understanding of the company in order to make any SEO strategy successful. You need to know what strengths you can leverage in order to get the most SEO value, what tactics will work best for the brand identity, and what is standing in your way.

Here are some of the most important factors you should consider as you develop your strategy:

What is the product's unique selling proposition?

We may be referring to a line of products or a single product, but whatever the case may be, we need to know what makes our company different in order for any strategy to work. This will strongly impact the types of outreach that will make sense, the type of audiences we will want to cultivate, the type of keywords we will be tracking, and much more.

What is the company's vision?

We may be referring to a line of products or a single product, but whatever the case may be, we need to know what makes our company different in order for any strategy to work. This will strongly impact the types of outreach that will make sense, the type of audiences we will want to cultivate, the type of keywords we will be tracking, and much more.

Where is the company really hurting right now?

This is one of those things that might seem like you can avoid early on, but will always creep in and decimate an SEO strategy (or department, or partnership) if it isn't annihilated. Understand what the company really needs to see and really can't accommodate before you commit to a strategy.

4. An Understanding of the Audience

You need to know who your audience is, and that means a great deal more than just what keywords they're searching for.

Here are a few things you need to determine, either by **talking to your client**, **surveying your audience**, browsing some relevant internet hangouts, or all of the above and more:

How accepting are they of marketing, upselling, and so on?

If you've ever consumed anything in the self-help industry, you might have noticed how comfortable "gurus" in that industry are willing to upsell their audience, even spend a dedicated portion of a paid presentation for advertising their other products. Alternatively, if you've ever spent any time trying to link to anything of your own on Reddit, you know that they are hypersensitive to any kind of promotion at all. This is something you need to be highly aware of as you develop your strategy.

What is their level of knowledge?

Are you talking to people who know everything about their subject matter and will laugh off anybody who try to share introductory material? Are you talking to people who are completely oblivious to industry jargons?

How close are they to the industry?

Is your audience consumers (B2C) or businesses (B2B)? Will these people be intimately familiar with your industry, or almost entirely outside of it? Are they interested in understanding more about the industry, or do they care solely about how your products can benefit them?

5. Precise Goals

For a goal to be useful, it needs to be precise, and for it to be precise, we should be focusing more on the working parts and how they fit together than on a particular dollar amount.

We need to be deliberate when we choose our metrics and KPIs.

Yes, we want revenue to go up faster than costs, and yes, it can be useful to set a financial goal. We certainly should be setting goals that have time limits.

However, a strategy is about achieving goals that have a specific impact on the company, its direction and future, and the way that the business itself functions. That means our metrics should reflect what is happening with the working pieces themselves. This could mean links and authority, it could mean rankings, or it could mean organic search traffic.

The point is, everybody should agree on what metrics make sense and why.

I strongly believe in the value of task-oriented goals over KPI goals. This is because, especially when it comes to inbound marketing and SEO, our impact on KPIs is indirect. For this reason, I believe in setting goals for projects, living up to those goals, then measuring the impact and adjusting the strategy in response.

This is an approach that is more likely to lead to knowledge and actual optimization, as opposed to finding ways to manipulate the KPIs while losing sight of the long-term impact.

Conclusion

Nearly every SEO strategy can benefit from these five elements. Build them into your framework and make them a part of the way you do business.

Chapter 3

How to Know Your Audience to Master Your Marketing Campaigns

Keywords. Conversion. User experience. Search engine optimization.

What do all of these words and phrases have in common?

They all relate to how you will attract, engage, and convert your target audience.

The crux of any good digital marketing campaign is to identify the specific characteristics of your ideal customers, including geographic, demographic, and psychographic variables.

The more you know about your audience, the more powerful your digital marketing efforts will become.



Mindy Weinstein

Founder & President at
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Mindy Weinstein is the founder of Market MindShift, a digital marketing training organization. She is also the Director of Training and Strategic Advisor for Digital Current and a marketing professor at Grand Canyon University and University of Denver. Mindy is an experienced speaker and has presented at conferences across the country. She has co-authored two books: *Rich and Thin: Slim Down, Shrink Debt, Turn Calories Into Cash* (McGraw Hill) and *Money Trouble: Surviving Your Financial Crisis* (Beacon Hill). Mindy is currently working on her PhD in psychology with an emphasis in technology.

At some point, whether it was in a Marketing 101 course you took or from self-learning, you've probably heard that getting to know your audience is incredibly important.

What this really means: it isn't enough to know the demographics and location of your prospects. You have to know as much as possible about them, including their:

- Personality traits.
- Interests.
- Values.
- Opinions.

Knowing all of this will help you:

- Come up with an accurate list of topics and keywords to target.
- Set up your pages to convert more effectively.
- Create a great user experience.
- Optimize your content.
- Craft the perfect message to cause your readers to take action.
- Find key influencers in your market.

Below is a step-by-step approach you can use to get to know your audience, which will, in turn, help you create a successful digital marketing campaign and turn you into a marketing rock star.

Step 1: Conduct Market Research

When you want to know more about your target audience, you need to conduct good old-fashioned market research.

The goal of market research is to get as many details as possible about the group you're targeting, which you can later use to build personas.

There are many ways you can gather this information, including the following five methods.

Reach Out to Other Departments

Many times, we work in silos, meaning we stick within our own team or department and don't reach out to anyone outside of our group.

When you are in digital marketing, you need to take advantage of the wealth of information that exists among other departments.

For example, the sales team will know the types of questions that prospects ask and will also know their interests and desires.

If your company has a customer service team, they will be able to provide insight into the words customers use (i.e. possible keywords for SEO) and what concerns are commonly brought up.

Even if your company isn't that large, there are still people on the frontlines who are fielding questions and comments both from prospects and customers. Take the time to sit down with them and ask them questions about your target audience.

Gather Data Using Tools

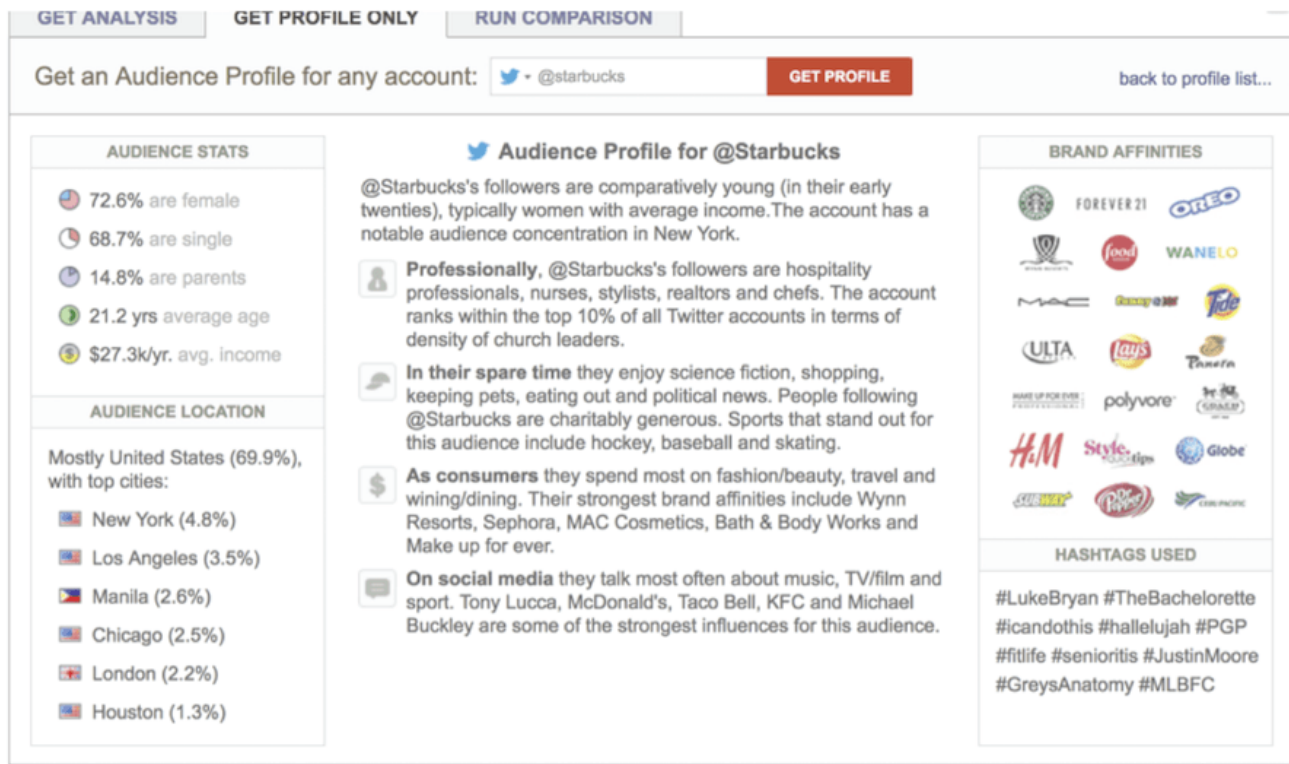
Plenty of tools can help you gather data about your target audience. These tools range in price, but can provide assist you in building a foundation of information, ranging from basic demographic data to specific habits and interests.

Two of my favorite tools are:

YouGov: The free version will give you a nice sketch of your target persona, which is pulled from a database of more than 200,000 consumers in the U.S. To get the right data, you need to identify a brand, activity, book, movie, celebrity, etc. that you know aligns with your audience. Type the information into YouGov.com's search box and you will see something like the following:



Demographics Pro: This tool will analyze Twitter and Instagram profiles to give you insight into the followers. If your company doesn't have a large following, you can analyze your competitor's profiles. You can glean a ton of great data for your personas after analyzing a profile, as seen here:



Research Social Networks

If you ever wanted to read your customers' minds, social media is the closest you will get.

This concept is known as **social listening**. It consists of monitoring the various social networks to discover what is being said about your brand, your competitors, and topics relevant to your business.

You can even identify trends in your audience's interests and problems.

Also, you can determine what social networks your target audience is the most active on, as well as the influencers in that space.

Instead of asking your audience questions, you can listen to their social conversations and determine what type of content will be the most valuable and relevant to them.

Create a Quantitative Survey

You will need to gather more information about your audience than general demographics. However, that doesn't mean you are going to dismiss demographics, such as age, gender, income level, education, employment, etc.

To gather this information fairly quick, you can take a quantitative approach. This research method is ideal for surveying a large population of interest, such as your existing customer base or potential market.

The easiest way to go about this research is to use an online survey. The data is then quantified, giving you statistical results about your population.

You will be able to see general characteristics about your target audience.

This approach won't give you specific insight into individual experiences. Instead, it reflects trends and commonalities among your audience. Tip: SurveyMonkey is a great surveying tool.

Conduct Interviews

Interviews are considered a qualitative research method, which delves into motivations, thoughts, and even opinions. It is a way to get to know your audience on a more personal level.

Because interviews are a time-consuming process, the population you research will be smaller. Generally, you will aim for 10 to 20 interviews.

One of the simplest ways to go about qualitative research is to conduct interviews with several existing customers and prospects. The questions should be prepared in advance and designed in such a way that they reveal the respondent's:

- Personality traits.
- Buying preferences.
- Interests.
- Motivations.

The interview itself should be treated as a conversation. There should be a lot of listening on your end.

Be careful not to put words into the respondent's mouth. Instead, take the time to allow the person to get deep into his or her thoughts.

One tactical piece of advice: ask permission to record the conversation. Doing so will ensure you don't miss important insights. It will also allow you to capture the exact words used.

If you truly listen to these interviews, you will discover a wealth of information that you can use to successfully market and sell to your potential customers.

Step 2: Build Your Personas

Now that you have collected detailed information about your target audience, you can start to build buyer personas.

Marketers who use personas achieve **73 percent** higher conversions, according to Aberdeen Research.

A persona isn't a simple buyer profile. A buyer persona is a representation of your ideal customer, based on market research and actual data about your existing customer base.

Step one helps you put together this information to discover your target customers' demographics, motivations, interests, and behaviors.

Personas offer a voice from your ideal target customers that tie right back to your digital marketing efforts.

Think of and refer to your personas as real people instead of an abstract audience. That will help you engage in genuine conversations with your current and potential customers.

Below are some tips to help you build personas for your digital marketing campaign.

Identify All the Personas You're Targeting

After conducting your market research, there is a strong chance you identified more than one buyer persona. That's OK. In fact, it's pretty common.

All of these personas should describe different target customers. You will tailor your content and SEO efforts to connect with each of these customer segments.

For example, if you identified millennials as one of your buyer personas, you will develop a content marketing strategy that speaks directly to them. You will also consider what words they use and the websites they frequent.

Write a Detailed Description of Each Persona

After conducting your market research, there is a strong chance you identified It isn't enough to jot down a "type" of a persona you have identified. Instead, you want to describe, in detail, each one.

You would include basic demographic data, but also other pertinent information, such as the person's:

- Interests.
- Pain points.
- Priorities.
- Goals.
- Concerns.
- Personality traits.

Be very detailed in your persona description. Include real quotes for your personas, which should be taken from the interviews you conducted during your market research.

You might consider including a picture of your persona and even a name or archetype, such as Frugal Freddy, Motivated Mary, etc.

If you need a little guidance in describing these personas, there are plenty of free persona building templates out there, including HubSpot's [MakeMyPersona](#).

Put Personas Into Action

Once you create personas, you should regularly refer back to them when you are working on any facet of digital marketing, including SEO, content development, and social media marketing.

For instance, if you are thinking about redesigning your website, creating a social media strategy, or targeting new keywords, refer to your personas.

View them as your real customers and focus on how you can best connect with them. You should also map your content to the various personas you identified.

Step 3: Identify Influencers of Your Target Audience

Once you've done your market research and defined your personas, it's time to consider the influencers who can help you grow your brand's visibility.

You need to identify the people who have a direct influence on your target audience. These are the people who can significantly impact your customer's purchasing decision.

While influencers can include celebrities, journalists, and even industry analysts, the focus here is on social influencers. These individuals are the ones who have built a substantial social following and engage with their audience on a regular basis.

Social influencers are going to be different in each market.

For example, if you are trying to reach young mothers, you might want to find and reach out to a popular mom blogger. Or, if you are trying to reach teenagers, look at popular Snapchat celebrities or YouTubers.

Unsure who is an influencer in your market? You can use tools such as BuzzSumo or Followerwonk.

When you are looking for one of these influencers, consider the following.

Pay attention to engagement: The number of social followers is a metric to view when considering an influencer, but just as important (if not more) is the level of engagement. You want to work with an influencer who has a high engagement with followers. Social influencer Zach King is a great example. King has more than 21 million followers on [Instagram](#) and 2.3 million subscribers

on [YouTube](#). In an interview, he talked about the importance of an engaged audience and a strong collaboration between the brand and influencer.

Make sure the influencer likes your brand: You want the influencer to be a genuine brand advocate. This genuineness will come through in his or her messaging. Consumers are savvy and can often identify when an influencer is truly a fan of a brand. Trying to fool consumers has the potential to hurt your brand image.

Know how much the influencer is worth: When you involve an influencer, expect to pay money. According to GroupHigh, 85 percent of influencers accept monetary compensation for posts. GroupHigh also revealed that 70 percent of influencers would rather have monetary compensation per post than ads on their blogs, affiliate partnerships or product trade. Keep in mind that the FTC requires you to signal to consumers if a post is sponsored. Make sure you are abiding by the law. GroupHigh reported that even when a post is labeled with “sponsored” or “paid,” it doesn’t affect how much the consumer trusts the influencer’s brand recommendation.

Reach Out to Influencers

When you determine the influencer(s) who are relevant to your target audience, you can start your outreach.

Take the time to get to know the influencer, just like you would take the time to get to know your target customer.

Read or view his or her posts and get a feel for what is important to the influencer. Tailor your message to each particular influencer, but at the same time, be sure to clearly communicate your brand objectives and deliverables.

You should also explain your expectations. As mentioned in the previous section, you will likely need to compensate the influencer, so start that conversation right away.

Final Advice

The majority of the information shared up to this point has to do with marketing.

You have to apply tried and true marketing principles to have a great SEO or digital marketing campaign.

While some of these principles have evolved over time, what hasn't changed is that you are still marketing to people.

It is trendy to talk about the evolving consumer, but a good marketer should also be focused on what has remained unchanged: human instincts, motivations, desires, and needs.

The more you know about your audience, including your target customers and key influencers, the greater success you will achieve through your digital marketing.

Chapter 4

The Three Pillars of SEO: Authority, Relevance, and Trust

For just a moment, remember a time before the Internet and search engines.

What did we do if we needed information?

In most cases, we began our own quest for a source to supply the needed information.

Let's say you wanted to know the difference between Einstein's General and Special Theories of Relativity.

You could ask your next-door neighbor, but you probably wouldn't – unless you happened to know that your neighbor was a physicist, a science teacher, or was at least well-read on the topic.

If you had access to a nearby university, you might seek out a physics professor to get your question answered.



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Alternatively, you could go to a library and ask the librarian to recommend the best book on relativity.

In each of those cases, you're making a decision about authority.

You know the closer the connection of your information source to deep knowledge about physics, the more likely you are to get a good answer.

In other words: You want the most authoritative answer, which will come from the most authoritative source.

Of course, we need more than information. Sometimes we need stuff!

Say you're looking for a new dishwasher. Before the web, you might have picked up a copy of Consumer Reports. Or you might have asked friends or neighbors if they were happy with a particular brand. Unlike the physics example, in this case people you know might actually be good authoritative sources.

As soon as it was apparent that the World Wide Web was going to become the major repository for human knowledge – not to mention the primary source for products, services, entertainment, and much else – the need for search engines was obvious.

Search engines help connect us with authoritative sources for our questions and needs, whether that's a physics professor's blog or dishwasher reviews by real users.

There were a **few early attempts** to do human indexing and categorization of webpages, but it didn't take long to realize that effort would never keep up with the growth of the web.

Modern search engines use complex algorithms to find, read, and ascertain the topicality of webpages. They can then match those pages with search queries looking for the information they contain.

In other words, search engines are trying to find the most authoritative (and relevant) sources to match the query.

For any given query, there are typically a great many pages that potentially satisfy that query.

Users expect the search engine to take the role of the knowledgeable librarian and direct them to the best pages for the query.

That's a judgment, then, of the relative authority for the topic of the query of all the possible pages, so search engines must be able to assess that relevance and authority at a huge scale.

How Search Engines Evaluate Authority

In reality, modern search engines such as Google use hundreds of factors (or signals) when evaluating the authority and relevance of webpages, but we can boil them down to two main categories:

- Content (relevance).
- Links (external citation authority).

First, a search engine must read and analyze the actual content and other features on a page.

From this, the engine associates relevant topics with the page.

In the early days, on-page assessment pretty much ended there, but now search engines are much more sophisticated in being able to analyze a page's language, structure and other features to determine things like how completely the page addresses a topic and how useful it might be to a visitor.

Once the search engine understands the page and adds it to its index, it turns next to external signals that help validate and gauge the level of authority of the page for any given topic.

Ever since the invention of [PageRank](#) by Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, links have been the primary signal used for such assessment.

Search engines use links much like we might treat scholarly citations. The more scholarly papers relevant to a source document that cite it, the better.

The relative authority and trustworthiness of each of the citing source comes into play as well.

In the next two sections, we will go into more depth about how search engines use content and links to assess authority, as well as what you need to do to gain such authority for your own site.

Why Links Still Rule the Roost

The big innovation that made Google the dominant search engine in a short period was that it used an analysis of links on the web as a ranking factor. This started with a paper written by Larry Page and Sergey Brin called [“The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine.”](#)

The essential insight behind this paper was that the web is built on the notion of documents inter-connected with each other via links.

Since putting a link on your site to a third-party site might cause a user to leave your site, there was little incentive for a publisher to link to another site, unless it was really good and of great value to their site's users.

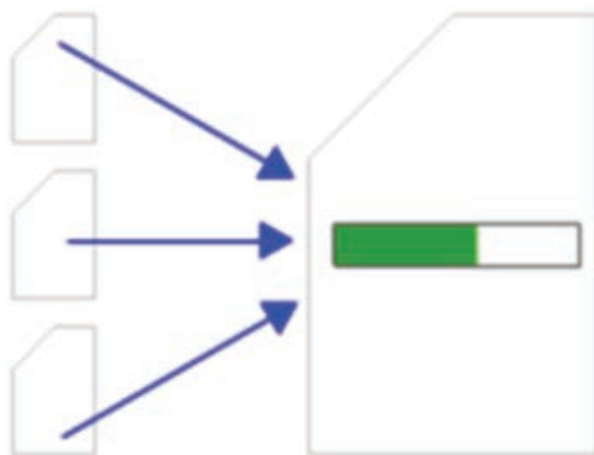
In other words, linking to a third-party site acts a bit like a “vote” for it, and each vote could be considered an endorsement, endorsing the page the link points as one of the best resources on the web for a given topic.

Then, in principle, the more votes you get, the better and the more authoritative a search engine would consider you to be, and you should therefore rank higher.

Passing PageRank

A significant piece of the initial Google algorithm was based on the concept of PageRank, a system for evaluating which pages are the most important based on scoring the links they receive.

Pages Gain PageRank When Other Pages Link to Them



So a page that has large quantities of valuable links pointing to it will have a higher PageRank, and in principle will be likely to rank higher in the search results than other pages without as high a PageRank score.

When a page links to another page, it passes a portion of its PageRank to the page it links to. Thus, pages accumulate more PageRank based on the number and quality of links they receive.

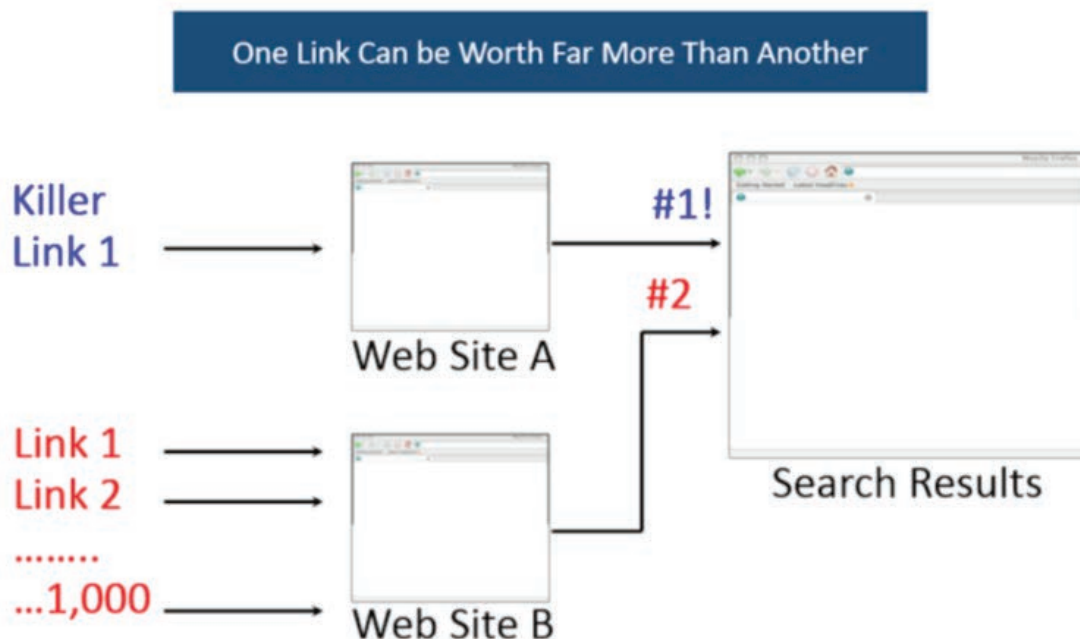
Not All Links are Created Equal

So more votes are better, right?

Well, that's true in theory, but it's a lot more complicated than that.

PageRank scores range from a base value of 1 to values that likely exceed trillions.

Higher PageRank pages can have a lot more PageRank to pass than lower PageRank pages. In fact, a link from one page can easily be worth more than one million times a link from another page.



Let's use our intuition for a moment.

Imagine you have a page that's selling a book, and it gets two links. One is from Joe's Book Store, and the other one is from Amazon. It's pretty obvious which one you would value more as a user, right? As users, we recognize that Amazon has more authority on this topic.

As it turns out, the web has recognized this as well, and Amazon has a much more powerful link profile (and higher PageRank) than any other site involved in selling books.

As a result, it has much higher PageRank, and can pass more PageRank to the pages that it links to.

It's important to note that Google's algorithms have evolved a long way from the original PageRank thesis.

The way that links are evaluated has changed in significant ways – some of which we know, and some of which we don't.

We'll discuss the role of relevance in the next section.

The Role of Relevance

You have to be relevant to a given topic.

If you have a page about Tupperware, it doesn't matter how many links you get – you'll never rank for queries related to used cars.

This defines a limitation on the power of links as a ranking factor, and it shows how relevance also impacts the value of a link.

Consider a page on a site that is selling a used Ford Mustang. Imagine that it gets a link from Car and Driver magazine. That link is highly relevant.

Also, think of this intuitively. Is it likely that Car and Driver magazine has some expertise related to Ford Mustangs? Of course, they do.

In contrast, imagine a link to that Ford Mustang from a site that usually writes about sports. Is the link still helpful? Probably, but not as helpful, because there is less evidence to Google that the sports site has a lot of knowledge about used Ford Mustangs.

In short, the relevance of the linking page, and the linking site, impacts how valuable a link might be considered.

Google Doesn't Publish PageRank, So What can We Do?

Google used to make a version of PageRank visible to users of the Google Toolbar, but they no longer do that. Instead, many SEO professionals use third-party metrics, such as:

- Domain Authority and Page Authority from Moz.
- Citation Flow and Trust Flow from Majestic.
- Domain Rank and URL Rank from Ahrefs.

Each of these metrics does a good job of helping you evaluate the merits of a page and offering a working estimate for how much PageRank it has to pass.

Still, you should understand that these are only back-engineered estimates of how authoritative Google sees the domain or page, and not actual representations of PageRank.

It's also important to be aware that none of these tools provide a complete picture of all links on the web.

Unlike Google, these tools do not have the infrastructure required to crawl the entire web, so they instead focus on discovering a significant sample of the links to a given site or page.

The Role of Anchor Text

Anchor text is another aspect of links that matters to Google.

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“Anchor Text” is the text that appears highlighted in a link and that can be clicked to open the target web page

The anchor text helps Google confirm what the content on the page receiving the link is about.

For example, if the anchor text is the phrase “iron bathtubs” and the page has content on that topic, the anchor text plus the link acts as further confirmation that the page is about that topic. Thus the links act to evaluate both the relevance and authority of the page.

Be careful, though, as you don’t want to go aggressively obtaining links to your page that all use your main key phrase as the anchor text.

Google also looks for signs that you are manually manipulating links for SEO purposes. One of the simplest indicators is if your anchor text looks manually manipulated.

The Concept of Trust

You may hear many people talk about the role of trust in search rankings and in evaluating link quality.

For the record, Google says they don’t have a concept of trust they apply to links (or ranking), so you should take those discussions with many grains of salt.

These discussions began because of a Yahoo patent on the concept of [TrustRank](#).

The idea was that if you started with a seed set of hand-picked, highly trusted sites, and you then counted the number of clicks it took you to go from those sites to yours, the fewer clicks the more trusted your site was.

Google has long said they don’t use this type of metric.

However, in April 2019, Google was granted a patent related to evaluating the [trustworthiness of links](#). But the existence of a granted patent does not mean it’s used in practice.

For your own purposes, however, if you want to assess the trustworthiness of a site as a source of a link, using the trusted links concept is not a bad idea.

If they do any of the following, then it probably isn't a good source for a link:

- Sell links to others.
- Have less than great content.
- Otherwise don't appear reputable.

Google may not be calculating trust the way you do in your analysis, but chances are good that some other aspect of their system will devalue that link anyway.

Fundamentals of Earning & Attracting Links

Now that you know that obtaining links to your site is critical to SEO success, it's time to start putting together a plan to get some.

The key to success is understanding that Google wants this entire process to be holistic.

Google actively discourages, and in some cases punishes, schemes to get links in an artificial way. This means certain practices are seen as bad, such as:

- Buying links for SEO purposes.
- Going to forums and blogs and adding comments with links back to your site.
- Hacking people's sites and injecting links into their content.
- Distributing poor quality infographics or widgets that include links back to your pages.

- Offering discount codes or affiliate programs as a way to get links.
- And, many other schemes where the resulting links are artificial in nature.

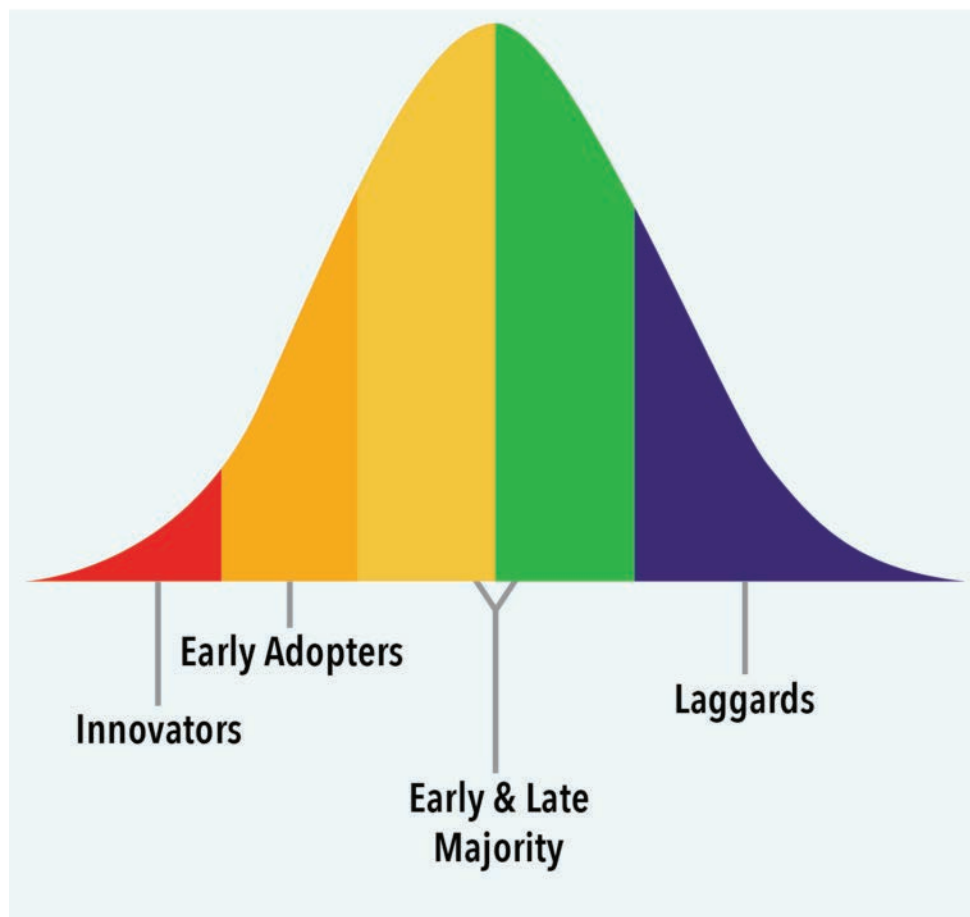
What Google really wants is for you to make a fantastic website, and promote it effectively, with the result that you earn or attract links.

So how do you that?

Who Links?

The first key insight is to understand who it is that might link to content that you create.

Here is a chart that profiles the major groups of people in any given market space:



Who do you think are the people that might implement links?

It's certainly not the laggards, and it's also not the early or late majority.

It's the innovators and early adopters. These are the people who write on media sites, or have blogs, and who might add links to your site.

There are also other sources of links, such as locally-oriented sites, such as the local chamber of commerce or local newspapers.

You might also find some opportunities with colleges and universities if they have pages that relate to some of the things you're doing in your market space.

Create Expert Content

Now that we know who the potential linkers are, the next step is to create content to which they want to link.

The problem?

It's pretty easy for them to find better content than yours on the web, if it exists.

The best way to cope with that reality is to [create expert content](#). If you can do this, your chances of getting people to link to you go way up.

People want to be part of sharing expert content with their friends and their followers online. And, if they write on a media site or on a blog, some of them will want to write about it as well.

If you want this to have a huge impact on your SEO, then start thinking about creating "Elite Content" or ["10X Content"](#) (i.e., content that is 10 times better than anything else ever published on the topic before).

This is content that causes you to be seen as a [thought leader](#), and it's the best type of content to create to boost your online reputation, visibility, and SEO.

Trust & Relationships

This all sounds good, but it's not enough to publish great stuff.

If people don't trust you, or if they're not willing to take a chance on you, progress will be much slower.

It's important to realize that any given marketplace represents an ecosystem. If you're seen as only looking out for yourself, people will be slow to support you.

Instead, find ways to work the ecosystem.

- Help others out on social media.
- Respond to comments in your social media feeds, and on posts that you publish online.
- Go to conferences and make completely non-commercial presentations that inform the audience on topics of interest in your market.
- Go to local events and share advice and counsel.

Become an active and contributing member of the community (that forms your marketplace), and actively share the smart advice and contributions of others.

If you share and link to great content that others publish, the chances that they will share and link to your content goes way up.

Bylined Articles (Guest Posts) & Publishing on Third Party Sites

Publishing content on third-party sites (a.k.a., [guest blogging](#)) can be a smart thing to do, too.

Consider trying to get a column on a major media site that covers your market niche. This will certainly contribute to your reputation as an expert and help with your reputation and visibility.

Also, most media sites will give you an attribution link at the bottom of each article, or they'll give you an author bio page that links back to you as well.

These types of bylined articles can be invaluable in driving SEO benefits.

Be careful, though, to focus on the high end of potential target sites.

If 100 sites cover your market, then there are no more than 20, possibly 30 targets, that will do, and it's the top 20 or 30 sites in your space.



How do you get there?

Ah yes, we're back to your ability to create expert content again!

Obtaining good results from social media depends on creating the right types of content.

A **study** by Moz and BuzzSumo analyzed 1 million articles to try to determine the correlation between shares and links. This study showed that across the complete article set, there was almost no correlation at all.

However, a deeper analysis showed that certain types of content performed far better.

In particular, opinion-forming journalism from recognized experts, and data-driven research studies showed a strong correlation between shares and links.

This ties in well with the idea of writing content for innovators and early adopters and recognizing this should be a cornerstone of your overall link-earning/attraction strategy.

Once you have established this position in the market, the role of social media becomes easy. You use it to create exposure to great new content, and the rest takes care of itself!

One final word about social media and link authority:

It is highly unlikely that any major search engines use links in social media posts as an authority signal. They realize that links from social media posts are nowhere near as clear a signal as links from regular websites.

Also, most major social media platforms use a nofollow attribute on outbound links, which tells search engines not to pass any PageRank through the link.

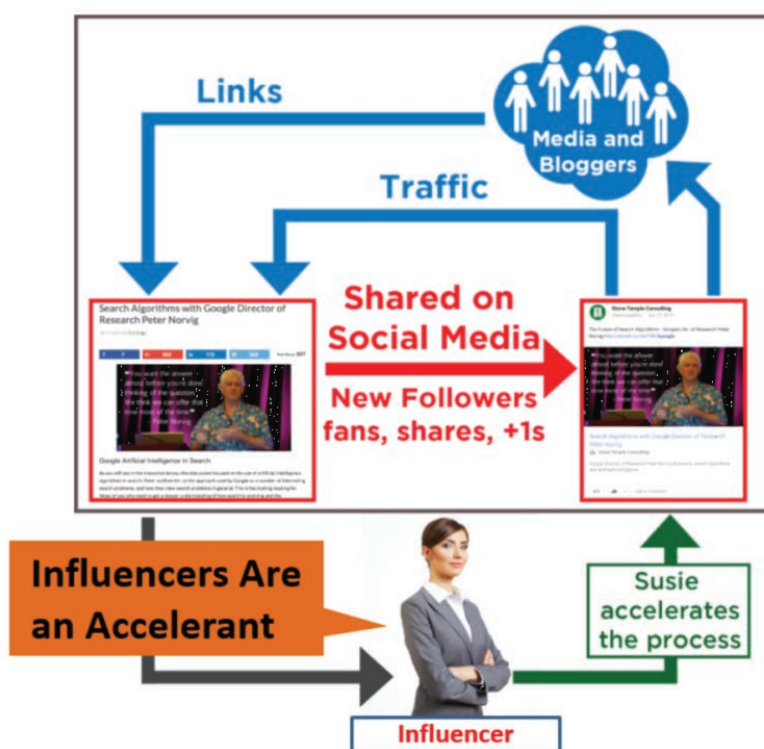
Make use of social media to build your personal and brand authority and trust and to build relationships with relevant influencers, both of which can lead to more opportunities to earn links.

Influencers

Earlier, we spoke about the role of innovators and early adopters.

Another term people use for these two groups of people is influencers, because others (including your potential customers) are influenced by them.

So social media can help provide visibility for your content, and potentially result in links, but this goes even faster if influencers are involved in sharing your content. Once that starts happening, the growth of your reputation, visibility, and links will accelerate.



Getting influencers interested in sharing your content depends heavily on:

- The trust and relationships you build with them.
- Your willingness to share/link to their stuff.
- The quality of the content you create.

Building a Content Marketing Plan

Last, but certainly not least, create a real plan for your content marketing.

Don't just suddenly start doing a lot of random stuff. Take the time to study what your competitors are doing so you can invest your content marketing efforts in a way that's likely to provide a solid ROI.

One approach to doing that is to pull their backlink profiles using Link Explorer, Majestic, and Ahrefs. With this information, you can see what types of links they've been getting and then based on that figure out what links you need to get to beat them.

Take the time to do this exercise and also to map which links are going to which pages on the competitors' sites, as well as what each of those pages rank for.

Building out this kind of detailed view will help you scope out your plan of attack and give you some understanding of what keywords you might be able to rank for.

It's well worth the effort!

In addition, study the competitor's content plans.

Learn what they are doing and carefully consider what you can do that's different.

Focus on developing a very clear differentiation in your content for topics that are in high demand with your potential customers.

This is another investment of time that will be very well spent.

Putting It All Together

In a Google Hangout sponsored, Google engineer Andrey Lipattsev was asked what the top ranking factors are for Google. He replied that the top two were links and content (but not necessarily in that order).

It's easy to misunderstand that statement (in reality both links and content are probably made up of and influenced by a great many particular factors), but the import of the statement is clear: To do well with search engines, you must have high-quality content and authoritative, relevant links.

Remember where we began this chapter: Search is the quest for authority.

Search engines want happy users who will come back to them again and again when they have a question or need. The way they create and sustain that happiness is by providing the best possible results that satisfy that question or need.

To keep their users happy, search engines must be able to understand and measure the relative authority of webpages for the topics they cover.

When you create content that is highly useful (or engaging or entertaining) to visitors – and when those visitors find your content reliable enough that they would willingly return again to your site, or even seek you out above others – you've gained authority.

The search engines work hard at continually improving their ability to match that human quest for trustworthy authority.

As we explained above, that same kind of quality content is key to earning the kinds of links that assure the search engines you should rank highly for relevant searches. That can be either content on your site that others want to link to or content that other quality, relevant sites want to publish, with appropriate links back to your site.

Remember what we said above and treat your SEO as part of an ecosystem:

- Serve your audience.
- Build relationships (especially with influencers).
- Increase the reputation of your brand.

Focusing on these three pillars of SEO – authority, relevance, and trust – will increase the opportunities for your content and make link-earning easier.

You now have everything you need to know for SEO success. So get to work!

Chapter 5

Why Your SEO Focus Should Be Brand Building

Google **has always given** brands preferential treatment.

They get better rankings with fewer links. They get “penalized” for improper conduct, only to resurface a few weeks later.

Small brands, on the other hand?

Never get the benefit of the doubt. Need to earn twice as many links. And never resurface. Ever.

And this is only accelerating. It’s only getting more pronounced.

So much so, that there’s virtually nothing else you should focus on in 2019, besides building a brand. Big brands will get showcased in the SERPs. And small companies will be left in the dust.

Here’s why.



Brad Smith

Founder at Codeless

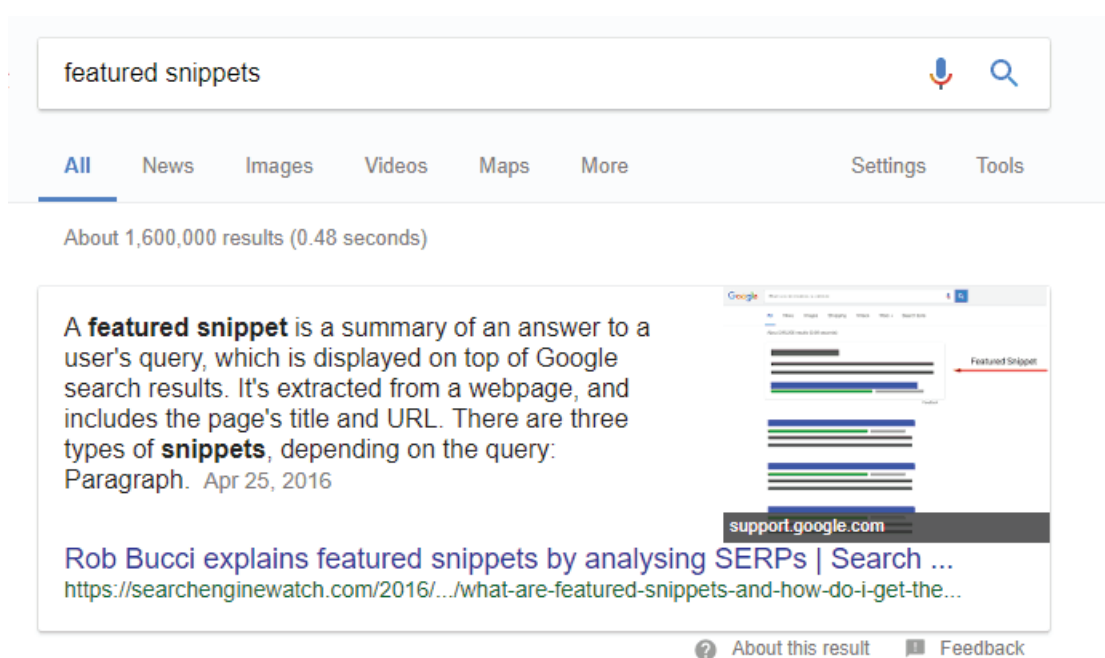
Brad Smith the founder of Codeless, a B2B content creation company. Frequent contributor to Kissmetrics, Unbounce, WordStream, AdEspresso, Search Engine Journal, Autopilot, and more.

SERPs Are Changing Dramatically

Google is known for tinkering. Thousands of times a year.

But it isn't just the algorithm updates we should pay attention to. The cause and effect of layout adjustments also changes user behavior.

For example, featured snippets have been on the rise.



Moz found that they've risen from 5.5 percent to 16 percent in just two years. But they recently saw a 10 percent decrease in featured snippets in a matter of four days.

So, what happened?

The knowledge panels got a serious boost in visibility, for starters. Search terms like "Graphic Design," that once had featured snippets, now have gone full knowledge panel:

Graphic design

All Images News Videos Maps More Settings Tools

Web design > People also search for > Graphic design

Design
 Graphic design
 Website
 Search engine optimization
 Marketing
 Web hosting service
 Web development
 Photography
 Advertising
 Illustration
 E-commerce
 Digital marketing

Graphic Design - Realize Your Vision - artinstitutes.edu
 Apply to The Art Institute of Dallas and Earn an AS in Graphic Design.
 Open House 12/9 - Non-Profit - No Application Fee - Art Grant
 Courses: Typography, Advanced Layout Design, Advertising Concepts, Digital Illustration

Culinary Programs
 Develop Management Skills Needed to Succeed in the Culinary Industry.

Study Online
 The Art Institute of PittsburghSM Online Division. Apply Now.

Fiverr Graphic Designers - Hire Top Rated Designers - fiverr.com
 Find The Perfect Freelancer For Your Graphic Design Needs - Unbeatable Value!
 24h Delivery - +100,000 Sellers - Millions of Gigs® - Professional sellers
 Fiverr helps you hack the growth of your startup - entrepreneur.com
 Sign Up Now - Five-Star Logo Designs - Fiverr Pro

PAVLOV Graphic & Web Design - Full Service Ad Agency
 Award Winning Graphic and Website Design for Local and International Brands.
 Strategy - Results-Driven - Award Winning - Google Partner
 Contact Us - Our Work - Services - News & Trends

Graphic Design projects on Behance
<https://www.behance.net/search?field=44>
 Graphic Design projects from the latest top online portfolios on Behance.

Graphic design

Field of study

Graphic design is the process of visual communication and problem-solving using one or more of typography, photography and illustration. Wikipedia

People also search for

Design
 Art
 Photograph...
 Illustration
 Web design

View 15+ more

Feedback

And all those related searches above have it now, too. Even a generic search for “travel” will net you this:

Travel

Travel is the movement of people between relatively distant geographical locations, and can involve travel by foot, bicycle, automobile, train, boat, bus, airplane, or other means, with or without luggage, and can be one way or round trip. Wikipedia

Feedback

Moz also found a 30 percent increase in knowledge panels for SERPs without a featured snippet in the first place.

So what's happening?

Google is trying to answer the query. With content from other people. Without requiring them to click to view the source.

Where searches for “travel” would once net travel-based blog posts or definitions on branded sites, Google now pulls data directly into the SERPs.

And most of that content is coming from huge brands and definition-based sources like Wikipedia.

That means the pool of helpful content is narrowed down to a few big players.

People don't have to click on an organic listing to get information anymore. And currently, only one brand is being featured in a given knowledge panel.

Spoiler alert: It probably isn't you.

Less and less people are clicking on actual search engine listings now. We're currently at a 60/40 split.

Only **60 percent of searches** on Google results in a click. That's 40 percent generating zero clicks. And smarter people than me expect that to hit 50 percent soon.

And for smaller fish trying to swim past the reef, that's bad news.

Google's implementation of the Knowledge Graph is solving user problems without the need to click. And the majority of brands ranking in the knowledge panels are the big ones.

That means less traffic, fewer clicks, and more importantly: less organically-driven sales.

Brand Recognition Is Critical to Getting Clicks

Do me a favor real quick:

Perform a basic test right now on Google. Perform an obscure, long-tail search for an industry keyword and analyze the SERPs.

What do you see? What sticks out instantly?

Specific brands.

HubSpot. Search Engine Journal. Marketo.

bestmarketingblogger.com? Not so much.

Even if bestmarketingblogger.com is ranking #1, you're probably going to skip right over it to a familiar site.

Just like you'd choose Coca-Cola over your local grocery store's generic version.

Brand recognition is a powerful thing. Powerful enough for you to skip on Google's top ranking post. Powerful enough to drive a more expensive sale.

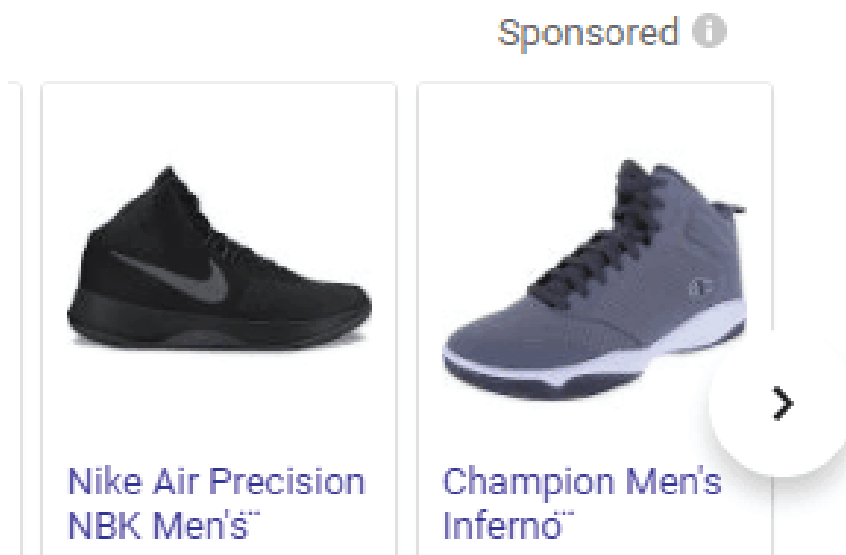
We can't help it. We're creatures of habit.

We do what feels comfortable. What we know and what we can trust.

For example, a [Nielsen study](#) found that global consumers are far more likely to buy new products from brands that are familiar.

Sixty percent of consumers would rather buy new products from a familiar brand that they recall, rather than switching to a new one.

Take this “basketball shoes” sponsored search result for an example:



Which shoe would you buy? Probably Nike.

They're a familiar brand that's known for producing high-quality basketball shoes. Plus they've got LeBron and Kobe and Jordan.

Champion on the other hand? C'mon, son.

The Champion shoe could be cheaper. And you're still more likely to click on Nike, first.

Trust is one of the most important factors in making a purchase decision. And it's no different when it comes to organic search results.

You're going to click on what you know and trust. And that all comes down to branding.

For example, check out this Google SERP for [\[small business SEO\]](#):

Small business SEO: Your questions answered - Search Engine Land

<https://searchengineland.com/small-business-seo-questions-answered-276500> ▼

Jun 26, 2017 - I will share everything we have learned working on hundreds of **small business SEO** projects. My intention is to arm you, as a business owner, ...

Ultimate guide to small business SEO • Yoast

<https://yoast.com/seoblog/eCommerce> ▼

May 22, 2018 - This ultimate guide covers **small business SEO**. Want your site to rank high in the local search results? Read about it here!

10 SEO Tools for Small Business - Business News Daily

<https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/6948-seo-tools.html> ▼

Jan 3, 2018 - As a **business** owner, investing in the right search engine optimization (**SEO**) strategies can be the difference between a well-known, successful ...

Small Business SEO | Best SEO Company | Boostability

<https://www.boostability.com/small-business-seo/> ▼

Boostability is the best **SEO** company to help attract new, more and better customers for **small businesses**. Look to us for complete onsite optimization.

Small Business SEO \$99 No Contract

<https://www.smallbusiness-seo.com/> ▼

Quality **Small Business SEO** Packages from \$99 - USA Based Company No Contract Affordable Marketing.

[SEO Packages & Prices](#) · [About Us](#) · [FAQs](#) · [The Difference](#)

6 Local SEO Strategies For Small Businesses - Forbes

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveolenski/.../6-local-seo-strategies-for-small-businesses...> ▼

Apr 3, 2014 - I recently wrote about 7 Reasons Why Your **Business** Should Invest in **SEO**, which generated a fair amount of views and shares. I thought I ...

The content is virtually the same.

Meaning clicks are going to come down to one thing:

Brand recognition.

Does Forbes instantly stand out in your mind as a popular source of information? They get the click. Even though it has nothing to do with their content quality (another spoiler: It's not good).

Research from [Search Engine Land and Survey Monkey](#) again proves this underlying trend. They surveyed over 400 consumers on one specific question:

What is most important in helping you decide which results to click on in a search engine search?

According to their data, nearly 70 percent of U.S. consumers said they look for a “known retailer” when deciding what search results to click on.

The stronger the brand recognition, the higher the odds of generating clicks. Which means the higher the odds of getting the sale.

SERP CTR Is Beginning to Outperform Rankings

Ranking number one doesn't mean what it used to anymore.

Historical SERP click-through rate graphs are beginning to lie. You know, the ones that say ranking first on Google [gets you 30+percent of clicks](#) for an unbranded search.

The stats I referenced above prove that's not the case anymore.

If nobody knows who you are, you aren't generating 30+ percent of the organic clicks. The content might be amazing. But you're a nobody. So nobody's giving you a chance.

SERP CTR is becoming more important than traditional rankings, too.

And in fact, SERP CTR likely has an impact on rankings.

While **links and content** are the top two direct ranking factors, SERP CTR is creeping up as an indirect factor.

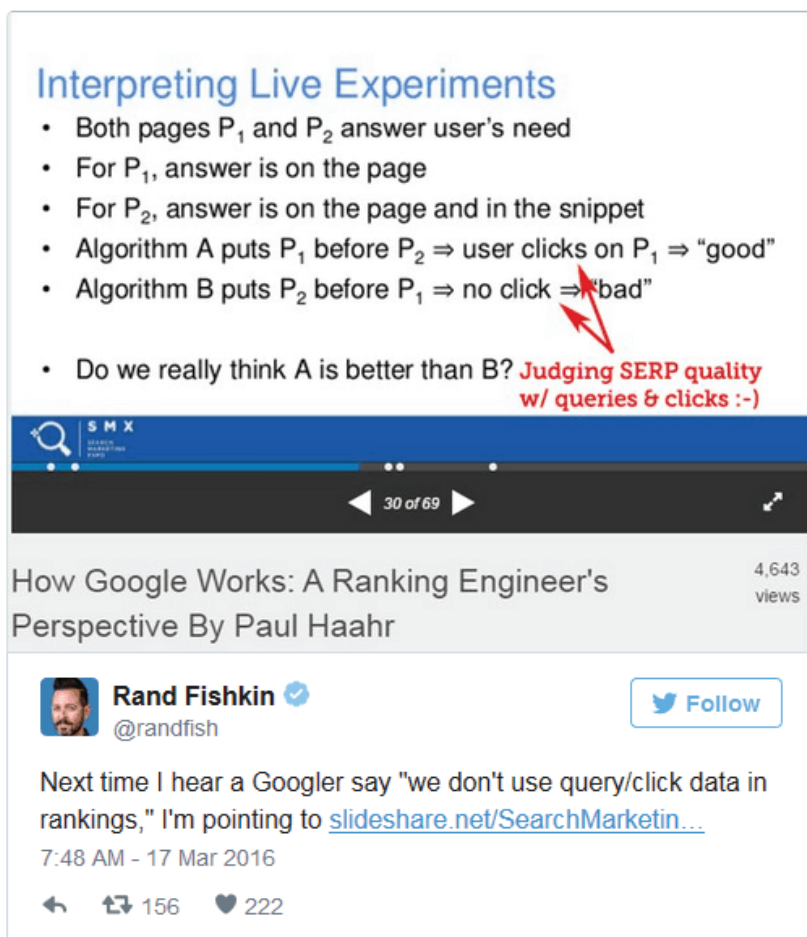
Check out **this tweet** from Rand Fishkin of Moz:

Just like you'd choose Coca-Cola over your local grocery store's generic version.

Brand recognition is a powerful thing. Powerful enough for you to skip on Google's top ranking post. Powerful enough to drive a more expensive sale.

That's evidence of Google analyzing search queries and clicks to see what content users preferred.

No click on the first position? That's a signal to Google that it's not performing like a top piece of content.



Interpreting Live Experiments

- Both pages P_1 and P_2 answer user's need
- For P_1 , answer is on the page
- For P_2 , answer is on the page and in the snippet
- Algorithm A puts P_1 before $P_2 \Rightarrow$ user clicks on $P_1 \Rightarrow$ "good"
- Algorithm B puts P_2 before $P_1 \Rightarrow$ no click \Rightarrow "bad"
- Do we really think A is better than B? **Judging SERP quality w/ queries & clicks :-)**

How Google Works: A Ranking Engineer's Perspective By Paul Haahr 4,643 views

Rand Fishkin @randfish Follow

Next time I hear a Googler say "we don't use query/click data in rankings," I'm pointing to slideshare.net/SearchMarketin...

7:48 AM - 17 Mar 2016

156 222

More clicks might, in fact, result in a rankings boost.

And **WordStream data** backed this up, finding that the more your pages beat the expected organic CTR for a query, the more likely they are to appear higher in organic listings.

But when you don't have the luxury of brand awareness, people don't see your content until they click. So they really don't know how amazing it is.

And sadly, they probably never will:

The vast majority are clicking because of brand recognition, not content strength.

similar content, better brand strength

A Complete Guide to SEO | Search Engine Journal

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/seo-guide/> ▼

A Complete **Guide** to getting started in **SEO**. Everything you need to know about search engine optimization is in this comprehensive **guide**.

SEO is Not Hard — A step-by-step SEO Tutorial for beginners that will ...

<https://medium.com/.../seo-is-not-hard-a-step-by-step-seo-tutorial-for-beginners-that-...> ▼

Aug 5, 2016 - Note: This one of one of the chapters of Secret Sauce: A step-by-step growth hacking **guide**. Secret Sauce breaks down every channel just like this one, so if you think this is valuable check it out...

It's the same with digital advertising and purchase behavior, too.

Brand aware users are **2x more likely** to purchase from you.

If HubSpot is two spots below you, you can bet that the lion's share of "your" traffic is being stolen.

Those fancy headline hacks and meta description tweaks can improve your CTR, sure.

Going against the grain and producing clickbait-esque headlines might get you a 1-2 percent increase:

[Content Marketing Is Dead! Long Live Marketing! - Forbes](https://www.forbes.com/sites/.../10/.../content-marketing-is-dead-long-live-marketing/)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/.../10/.../content-marketing-is-dead-long-live-marketing/> ▼

Oct 16, 2017 - **Content marketing** has been all the rage as a discrete discipline within marketing. But it's time to quit developing **content marketing** strategies and start developing plans for how content supports marketing strategies. The difference is not just semantics.

But not enough to have a big impact.

Not enough to take your traffic and double it.

Small changes won't net massive results.

If they did, we'd all be dominating the competition, and I wouldn't be writing this post.

Simply A/B testing or changing a button color won't do it either.

Large-scale changes are needed to produce better SEO results.

Branding is the only way to do it, and it's the most viable SEO strategy on the market today.

Focusing on branding will help drive higher click-through rates in organic SERPs, which correlates with [higher conversion rates](#).

A fantastic, cheap way to put this into practice is using cheap social ads to drive brand awareness.

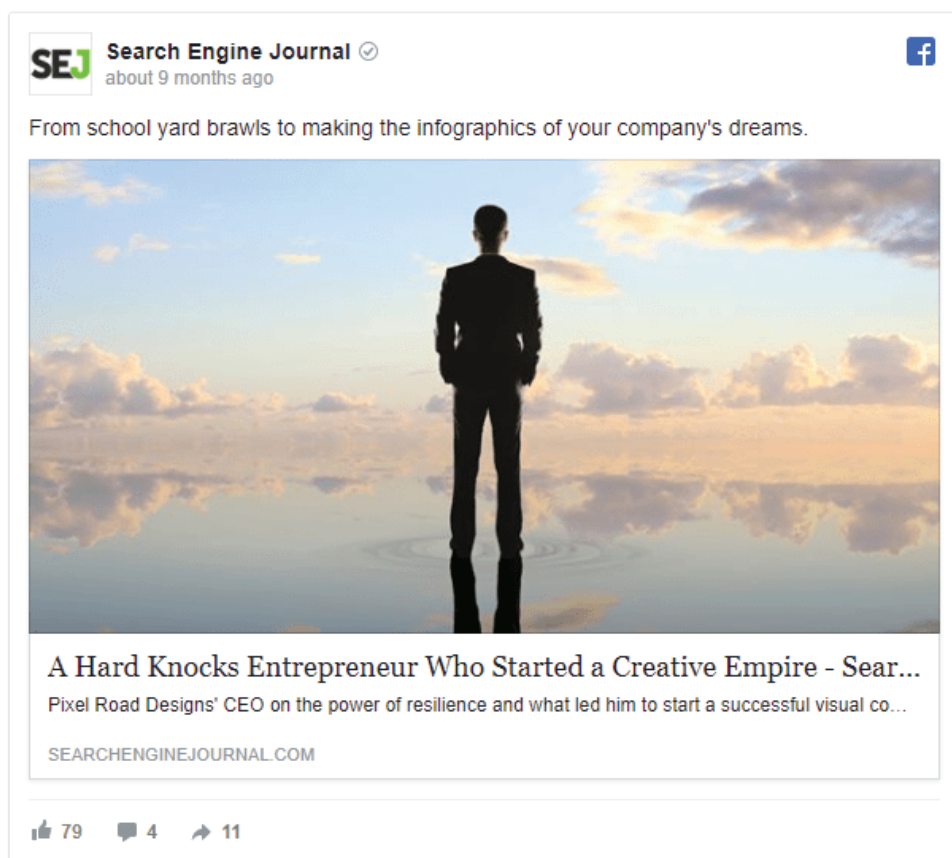
Facebook has the cheapest CPM out of any advertising platform ever created.

You can get away with spending \$1 per day, reaching up to 4,000 new users with brand awareness ads.

That's roughly 120,000 new faces coming across your brand monthly for just \$30.

There's no cheaper way to build brand awareness than with social ads.

Use them to drive traffic to your latest content and build a brand reputation in the process.



Branding is an investment in your company's future. Sure, the effects won't be instant.

But when your organic traffic is declining, and brands are starting to overpower you, you'll wish you'd invested in it sooner.

Conclusion

Google has given brands preferential treatment for years now.

And that preferential treatment only increases with each minor and major update.

It's a vicious trap where the rich keep cruising, and the poor keep drowning.

Branding is our only hope for conducting better SEO in 2019.

The vast majority of consumers cite brand recognition as driving clicks and sales.

And that means those typical organic CTR graphs are a heaping pile of BS.

Brand recall drives more clicks and sales than positioning.

As Google SERPs shift more toward favoring big brands, it's time for smaller brands to invest more of their SEO budget and strategy into building a memorable brand.

Chapter 6

Why & How to Track Google Algorithm Updates

Google updates its search algorithm thousands of times a year.

Some of [Google's algorithms](#) are quite well known – some have almost taken on legendary status (e.g., [Florida](#), [Panda](#), [Penguin](#), [RankBrain](#)) and have had a major impact on the [history of SEO](#) and the rankings (and revenue) of websites.

But most changes are much smaller. Some updates even go completely unnoticed.

In just the past two years, we've seen roughly a dozen significant updates – many of which were “quality updates,” as well as:



Danny Goodwin

Executive Editor, [Search Engine Journal](#)

Danny Goodwin is Executive Editor of Search Engine Journal. In addition to overseeing SEJ's editorial strategy and managing contributions from a team of 60+ industry experts, he also writes news and articles about SEO, PPC, social media marketing, content marketing. Danny has been a professional editor, writer, and ghostwriter in the marketing industry for 10 years, creating content for SMBs to global brands, spanning all things search and digital. He formerly was managing editor of Momen-tology and editor of Search Engine Watch.

- **March 9, 2018:** [Broad Core Algorithm Update](#)
- **December 12, 2017:** [Maccabees](#)
- **March 7, 2017:** [“Fred”](#)

Some of these recent updates have been confirmed or announced by Google.

However, other periods of volatility in the SERPs (believed to be due to an algorithm update) have been observed and reported by algorithm watchers and tracking tools, but Google has never officially confirmed an update.

Why You Should Track Google Updates

You're in the profession of optimizing websites and content for search engines.

So it makes sense to keep track of big and important changes that could impact your SEO strategy and tactics.

An algorithm change or update can either help or hurt your:

- Search ranking and visibility.
- Organic search traffic.
- Conversions.
- Return on investment (ROI).
- Revenue.

Most people tend to think of an algorithm as a way Google punishes websites.

But really, algorithms are a way to reward websites for providing a good user experience and relevant content.

Search is a zero-sum game. For every winner, there must be a loser.

Google wants to provide the best possible answer for the user's search query.

All that said, it would be kind of insane (and impossible) to try to keep track of every little Google search update.

Think about it like this:

If Google is updating its search algorithm thousands of times per year, that means Google is changing its algorithm around three times per day, on average.

To paraphrase [Roger Montti](#): If you pick any day of the week and declare a Google update happened, you'd probably be correct!

So track those big updates. Just don't obsess over them or you'll make yourself crazy.


So how do you track Google algorithm updates?

Places to Track Google Algorithm Updates

There are many great [SEO blogs](#) that cover all types of search updates.

But here are a few resources you can use to specifically to keep track of Google algorithm updates.

Search Engine Journal: History of Google Algorithm Updates

Choose a Year **All** 

All Updates

March 9, 2018

Broad Core Algorithm Update

On March 12, Google confirmed via [Twitter](#) that a "broad core algorithm update" had rolled out the prior week. While Google was light on details, Google said the changes were meant to "benefit pages that were previously under-rewarded," and advised everyone to "continue building great content."

Read: [Google Confirms Algorithm Update Occurred Last Week](#)

Read: [Google's Broad Core Algorithm Update Examined](#)

December 12, 2017

Maccabees Update

Some in the search community reported their websites being hit by update between December 12 and 14. Google confirmed several minor changes to the core algorithm during the timeframe, but downplayed the significance of the period of flux.

Want to know the names, dates, and impact of any major algorithm changes or updates?

Search Engine Journal has you covered – from 2003 to today.

We have an entire page dedicated to Google algorithm updates that includes the following information:

- Algorithm name.
- The rollout date(s).
- A brief overview of the impact.

- Whether it is confirmed or unconfirmed.
- Links to official announcements (blog posts and tweets), as well as news stories and analysis (from SEJ and other credible external sources) so you can deeper dive and understand the changes.

Also, you can [sign up for Search Engine Journal's newsletters](#) and follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). We'll keep you posted on every major algorithm update.

Google Webmaster Central Blog

Google Webmaster Central Blog

Official news on crawling and indexing sites for the Google index

Continuing to make the web more mobile friendly

Wednesday, March 16, 2016

Getting good, relevant answers when you search shouldn't depend on what device you're using. You should get the best answer possible, whether you're on a phone, desktop or tablet. [Last year](#), we started using mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal on mobile searches. Today we're announcing that beginning in May, we'll start rolling out an update to mobile search results that increases the effect of the ranking signal to help our users find even more pages that are relevant and mobile-friendly.

Though not so much recently, the Google Webmaster Central Blog used to be the place to find out about major algorithm changes as they happened, whether it was the rollout of Panda, Penguin, or the [Page Layout algorithm](#).

However, Google still uses the blog to announce upcoming big changes, sometimes weeks or even months in advance (such was the case with the [mobile-friendly update](#)).

Definitely keep an eye on this resource to stay up on the latest changes, straight from Google.

Twitter

A few years ago, Matt Cutts was the best person at Google to follow as he regularly kept the SEO community informed about changes to search.

Nobody has completely filled this role, which means Google is no longer very good about confirming algorithm updates.

However, there are a couple of Googlers who might announce or confirm updates, and possibly even share a few salient details:

- **Danny Sullivan:** [@dannysullivan](#) and [@searchliaison](#)
- **John Mueller:** [@JohnMu](#)

Barry Schwartz

Barry Schwartz ([@rustybrick](#)) is always on the lookout for news about algorithm changes. He regularly reports on Google updates at [Search Engine Roundtable](#); however, there is a fair bit of rampant speculation based on industry chatter that sometimes doesn't amount to anything significant (seen in headlines ending with a question mark).

Marie Haynes

Marie Haynes ([@Marie_Haynes](#)) is another avid algorithm watcher. In addition to sharing info and insights about algorithm updates via Twitter, she also has published interesting blog posts and case studies on [her blog](#).

Glenn Gabe

Glenn Gabe ([@glenngabe](#)) regularly shares data when he sees disturbances in the algorithm, both on Twitter and on the [GSQi blog](#).

8 Tools to Track Google Algorithm Updates

Google isn't particularly fond of any third-party tools that monitor changes to Google's algorithms.

Officially, some Google spokespeople have warned SEO professionals that such tools are inaccurate most of the time.

This is true – some of these tools pick up on “changes” to Google's search results that aren't really algorithm updates at all.

Fluctuation? Sure. But volatility in the SERP results isn't always due to a Google algorithm change.

All that said, these tools can provide an early warning that an update might be brewing and you should check your analytics.

Here are a few tools you can use to track Google algorithm updates.

MozCast



Get the MozCast
Weather Widget

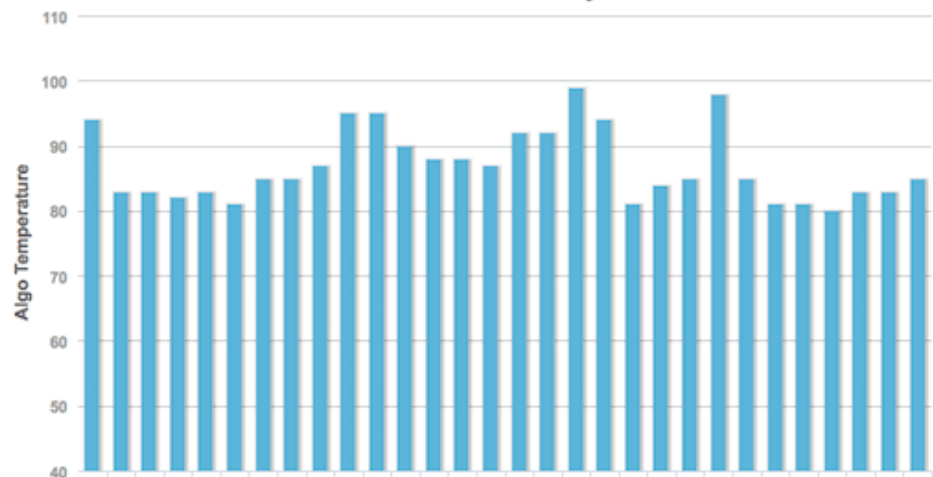
Weather for Wednesday, June 27

MozCast is a weather report showing turbulence in the Google algorithm over the previous day (or see the 5-day history on the left). The hotter and stormier the weather, the more Google's rankings changed.



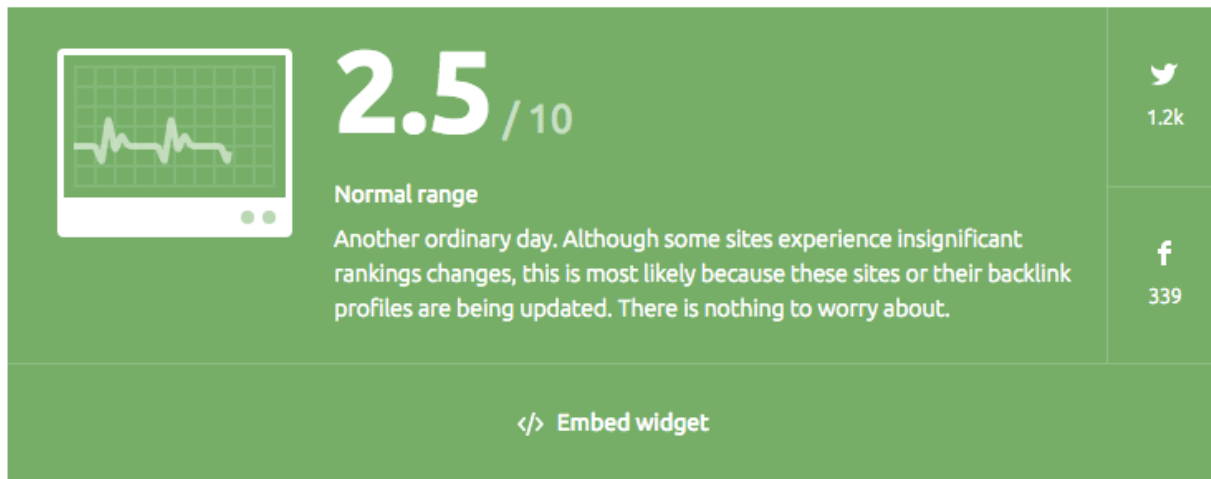
85°

Weather for Past 30 Days



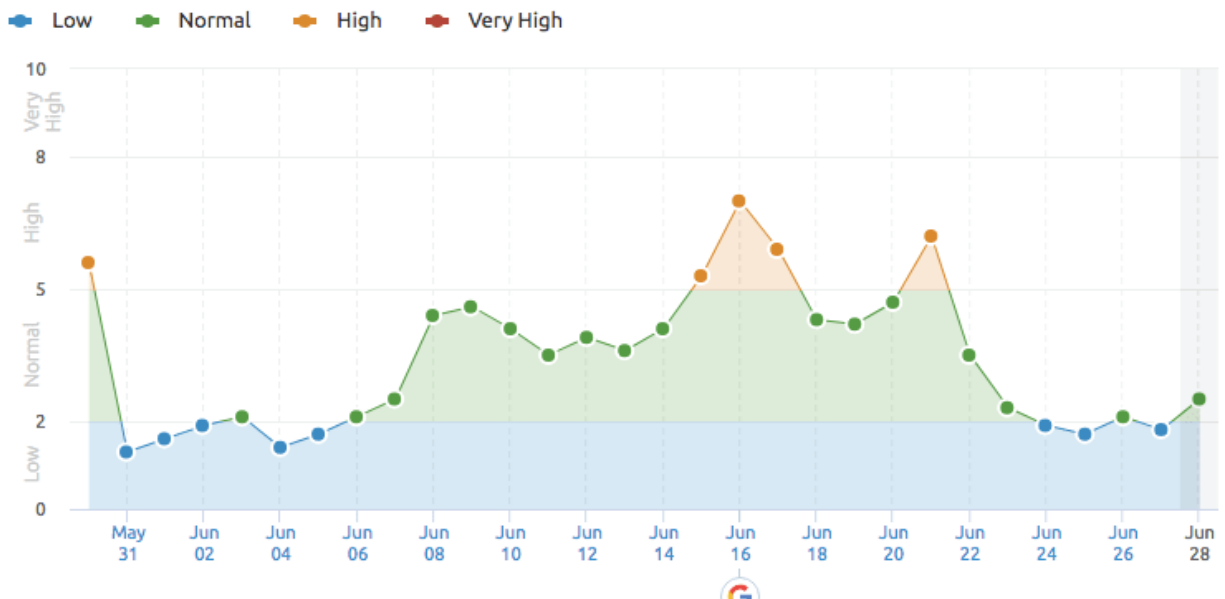
MozCast, in the style of a weather report, provides a “temperature” that represents how turbulent Google’s algorithm has been every 24 hours over the past 30 days. Hotter and stormier means Google’s rankings are very much in flux.

SEMrush Sensor



SERP volatility for the last 30 days

Compare with... ▼



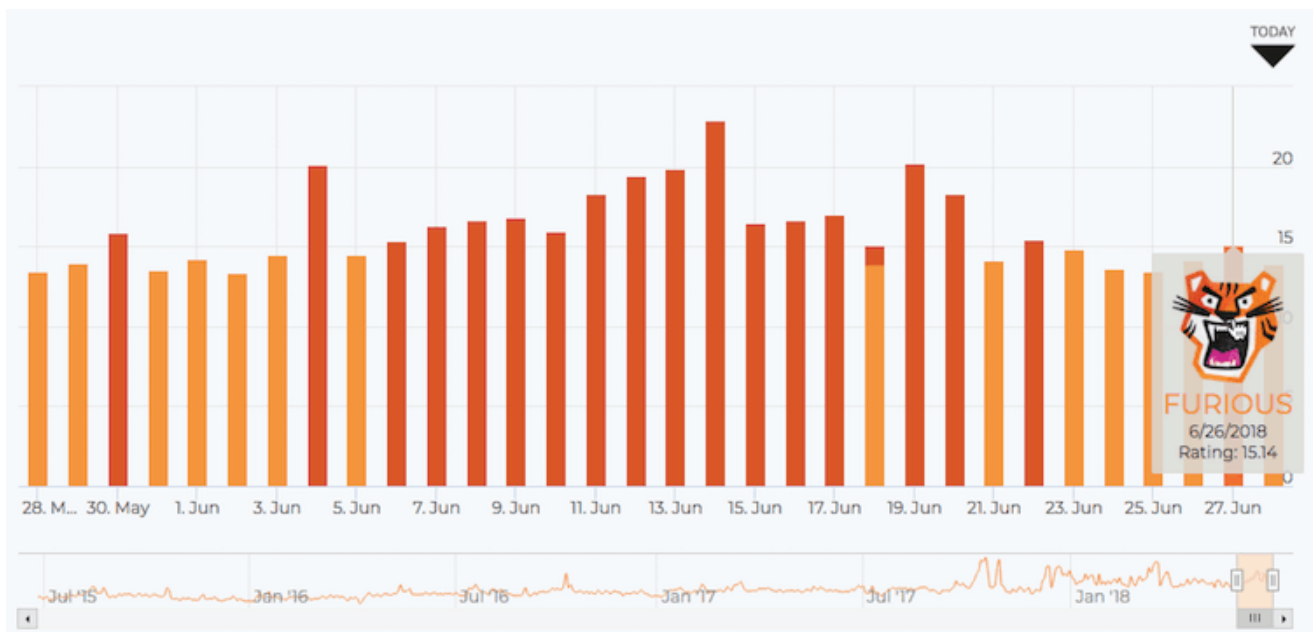
SEMrush Sensor is one of the more impressive algorithm tracking tools. You can see ranking changes (desktop and mobile) broken down into more than 20 categories, as well as by device, SERP feature, and location. Plus you can check out overall SERP volatility (and domain winners and losers) for the last 30 days.

Rank Ranger Rank Risk Index Tool



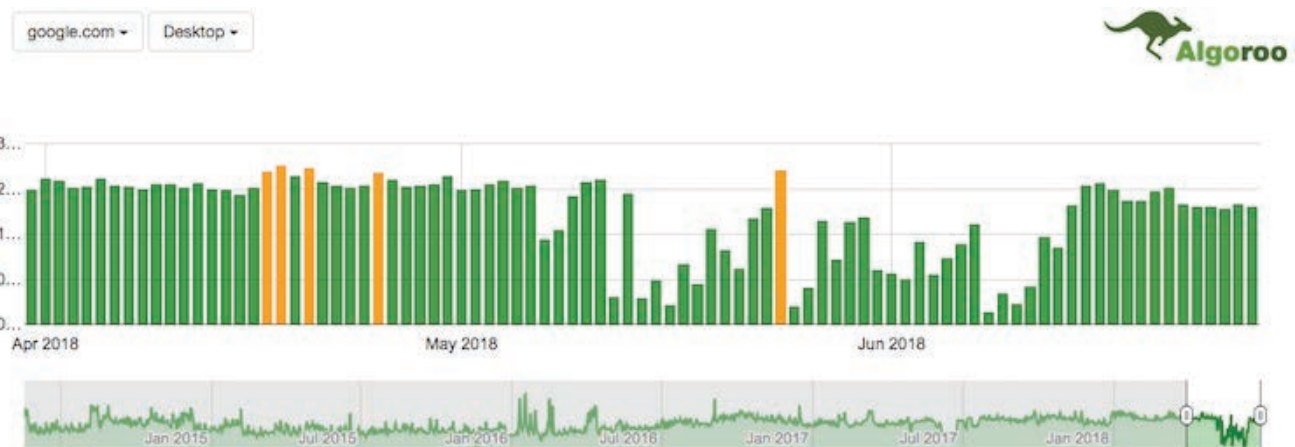
RankRanger monitors more than 10,000 domains and keywords daily to identify ranking patterns and track volatility in Google's desktop and mobile search results.

Accuranker 'Grump' Rating



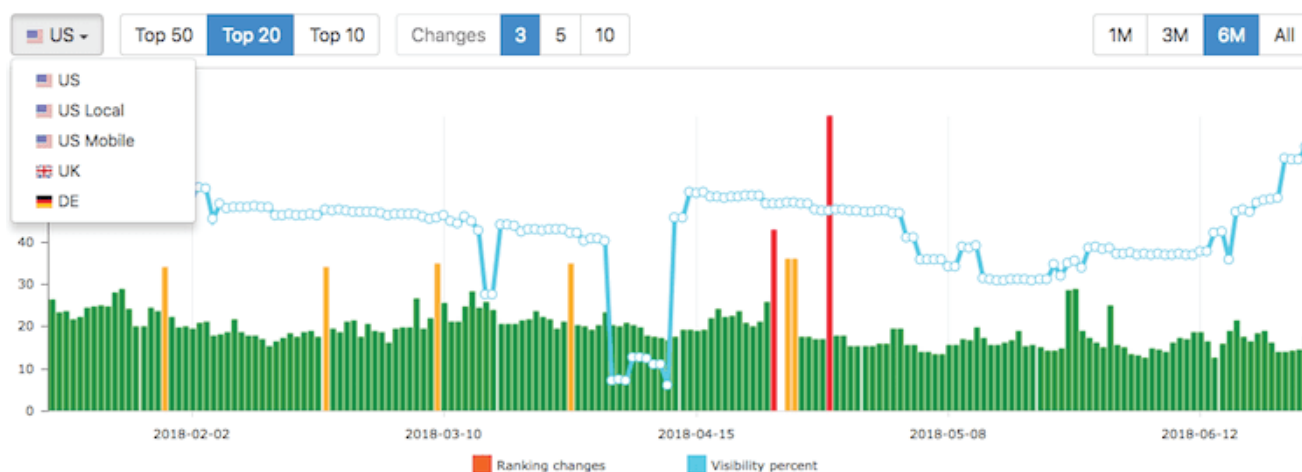
Is Google Chilled, Grumpy, or Furious? Find out Google's "mood" with Accuranker's 'Grump' Rating, which highlights fluctuations in Google's algorithm. You can also track by country and device and sign up for alerts via email.

Algoroo



This Google algorithm tracking tool monitors fluctuations for about 17,000 keywords (desktop and mobile) using a flux metric called a "roo". A higher roo value means high volatility, while a low roo value indicates it's a fairly ordinary day. Algoroo also highlights weekly winners and losers.

Advanced Web Rankings Google Algorithm Changes



AWR's Google Algorithm Changes tool monitors 11,000 keywords and 500,000 URLs across various industries to highlight fluctuations and show changes in position.

Panguin Tool

Panguin Tool

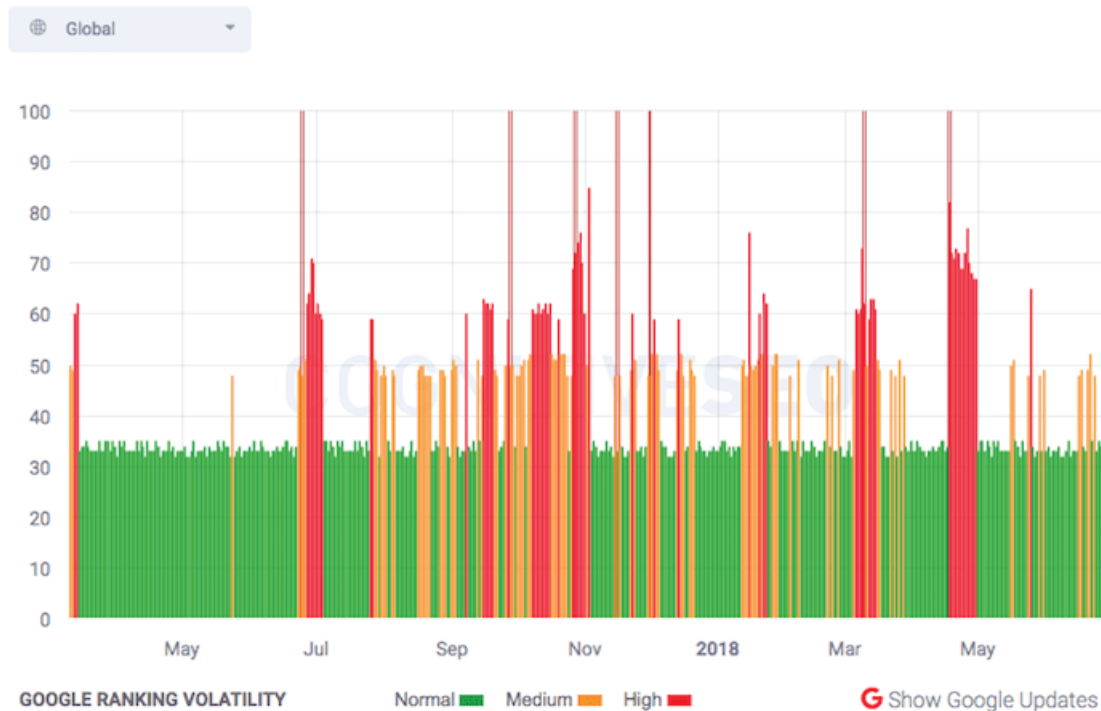
EUROPEAN 2018
SEARCH AWARDS
SHORTLISTED

A free SEO tool to help you investigate whether you've been impacted by Google's algorithm updates. Technology brought to you by digital marketing agency, Barracuda Digital.



This free SEO tool will help you figure out whether a Google algorithm update has impacted your organic sessions. Panguin uses various filters to overlay known algorithm updates on top of your Google Analytics data to make analysis a breeze.

CognitiveSEO Signals



This tool monitors more than 100,000 keywords daily to track ranking fluctuations in desktop, mobile, and local search results. You can sign up to be notified when Google is particularly volatile.

What to Do After an Algorithm Update

There are five things you should always remember after an algorithm update (whether confirmed or unconfirmed):

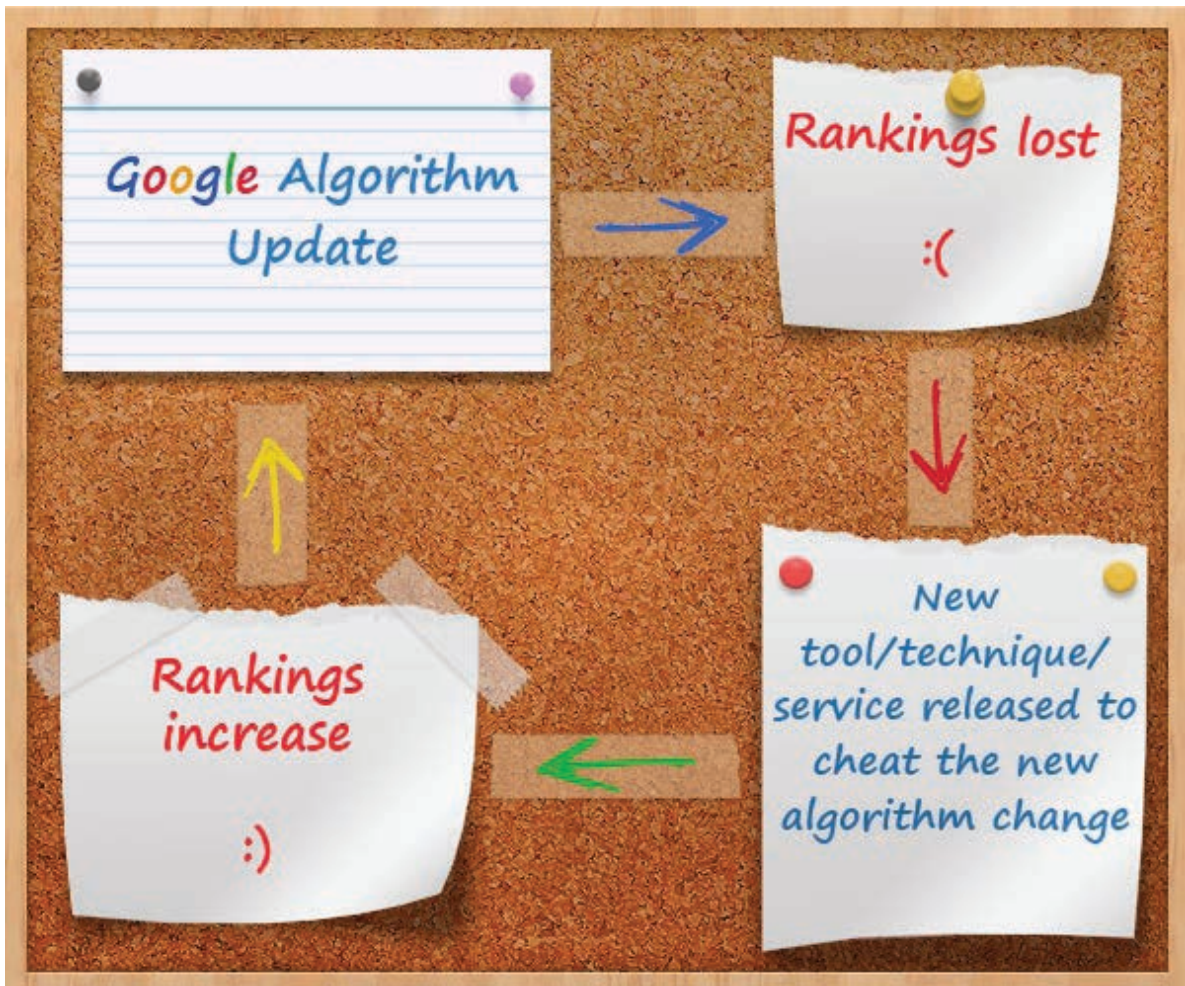
- Don't panic.
- Make sure you were actually impacted by the algorithm change and not something else (e.g., a [website change](#), [technical SEO](#) issue, or [manual action](#)).
- Don't rush to react – be patient and collect data.
- Read credible sources (like Search Engine Journal) to gain insights and see what the [SEO experts](#) are saying.

- Make adjustments to your [SEO strategy](#) and tactics as necessary.

It's also important to remember that Google's algorithms are constantly changing.

What impacts your rankings today could change in a few days, a week, or in a month.

[Chasing Google's algorithm](#) can be dangerous, as shown in this classic illustration:



If you come through a big Google change unscathed, celebrate!

If, on the other hand, your traffic and rankings plummet, look at it as a blessing in disguise. Google has detected some flaw in your website. So get working to fix it.

You can minimize your chances of avoiding a huge impact by always focusing on the **SEO fundamentals**. Avoid any shortcuts or spammy tactics that may have short-term gains but could create disaster in the long term.

You're far better off **understanding your audience** and creating content that builds your **authority, relevance, and trust**.

Summary

You can use many tools to monitor Google's constantly changing search algorithm. Most of these tools make it fairly easy to understand the relationship between the update and your organic traffic.

While it isn't necessary to monitor every update that Google launches (especially since there are thousands of changes every year), it is important to understand the big changes and adjust your strategy accordingly as they happen.

Chapter 7

Top 7 Ranking Signals: What REALLY Matters in 2020?

Every year it seems Google gives us a new ranking factor.

In 2014, [HTTPS](#) became a ranking signal.

In 2015, [mobile usability](#) became a ranking signal.

Then, 2016 shifted content development as [RankBrain](#) came onto the scene.

And, in 2017, there was a more significant push for more HTTPS websites.

In 2018, [mobile page speed](#) looks to be the next big ranking factor to focus on.

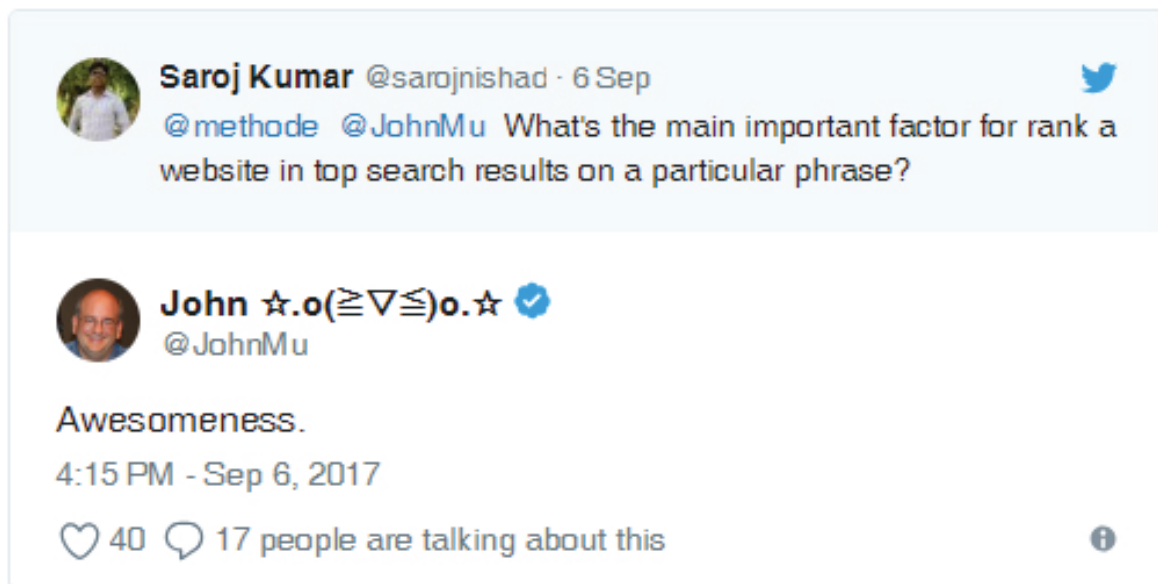
All that said, John Mueller assures us that “awesomeness” is the key to ranking in Google.



Anna Lea Crowe

Features Writer at Hello Anna & Co.

Anna is the Features Writer for Search Engine Journal and an SEO-whisperer at Hello Anna & Co. Over the last 5 years, Anna has successfully developed and implemented online marketing, SEO, and conversion campaigns for 100+ businesses of all sizes; from the Fortune 500, to startups, and nonprofits. In her spare time, she moonlights as a volunteer soccer coach.



But, with over [1 billion websites](#) online today, how do you create awesomeness?

One thing I know for sure is that all of these ranking factors are all shaped to create a better, more awesome user experience.

With Google evaluating sites based on hundreds of ranking factors, knowing where to aim your SEO strategy in 2019 for the biggest bang might seem impossible.

But good news: Ranking signals are going to continue to adapt to the user.

This means that new [SEO trends](#) already surviving have roots in the current algorithm — and with a little creativity and SEO savvy, it's entirely possible for you to rank well in 2019.

While ranking signals are far from limited to just seven, the factors highlighted in this post are ones I consider to be the most important for this year.

Here are the ranking factors that will really matter in 2019, and why.

1. Publish High-Quality Content

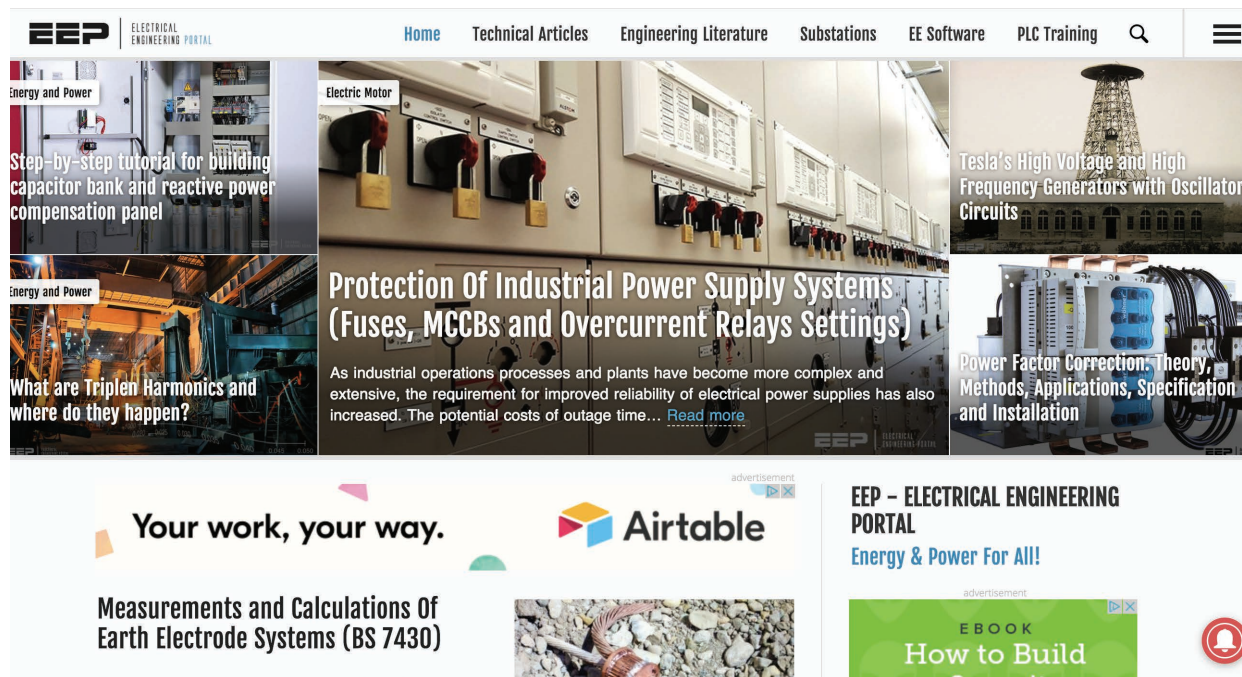
“I don’t need quality content on my website to rank,” said no one ever.

The quality of your website and blog content is still crucial for 2019. Content still reigns as king.

As Rand Fishkin pointed out in a [Whiteboard Friday](#), content that is optimized for keywords still holds valuable SEO power.

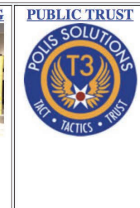
Your content needs to provide valuable information. Creating pages with no real value can come back to haunt you, thanks to Google’s [Panda](#) and [Fred algorithm updates](#).

Pages like this portal site.



Or, [this](#).

POLICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY TRAINING

[HOME](#)[COURSES](#)[TRAINING CALENDAR](#)[TRAINING GROUPS](#)[CONTACT US](#)[HISTORY](#)

Even big names like [eBay](#) and [Apple](#) aren't worthy of the content crown. Thin content hurt both brands.

High-quality content is about creating pages that increase time on page, [lower bounce rate](#), and provide helpful content for the user.

Blog pages like [this](#) and guides like [this](#) are the type of high-quality content search engines, and users want.

High-quality content pages must do more for today's SEO than just be well-written and long-form. They also have to cover the following areas to increase their presence in SERPs:

Search Intent

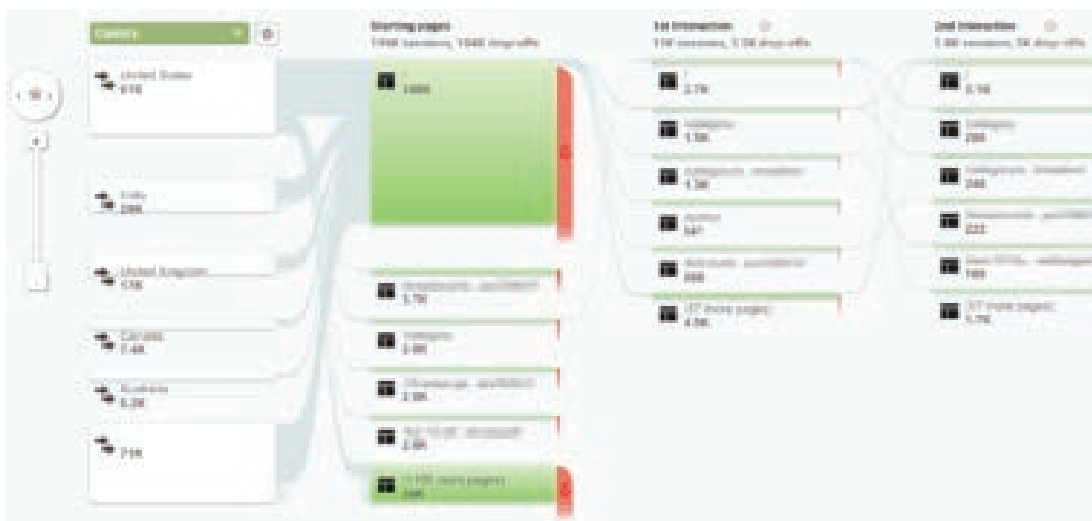
Knowing users' search intent is essential to creating pages that drive organic traffic.

CoSchedule saw a **594 percent** increase in traffic by reshaping their SEO content strategy to be more aligned with searcher intent.

And, Google has even updated the search results with a new featured snippet that is designed for **“multi intent” queries**.

To understand what your target searchers intent is, you need to dive into your Google Analytics to see what users are looking for.

Reports like **Site Search** and User Flow can give you an idea of what your customers are searching for.



You can also view **Search Analytics report** in Google Search Console. This report will give you insights into what people are clicking on the SERPs to get to your site.

Keyword Research

Despite the word on the street that [keyword research](#) is not needed to rank, keyword research still supports quality content creation. Unlike traditional keyword research, today, keywords serve as a content creation roadmap.

Through [competitor research](#) and data mining, you can uncover keyword gems that have average search volume, but a high click-through rate for your audience.

Check out how Chris Hornack, founder of Blog Hands, saw an [80 percent](#) increase in traffic after performing keyword research.

So, as the industry continues to whisper about the negative impact of keyword research, you need to identify your primary keywords and bucket them into topics suited for your searcher.

For instance, [a Google study](#) found that mobile search queries such as “brands like” and “stores like” have increased by 60 percent over the past two years. This study explains the need to adapt your keyword strategy for the mobile consumer.

Andrea Lehr, Brand Relationship Strategist at Fractl, shares insights on how she buckets her keywords [here](#).

Voice Search

According to Google, [72 percent](#) of people who own a voice-activated speaker say that their devices are often used as part of their daily routine.

It's evident that since the growth of AI assistants like Siri, Alexa, and Cortana, a new way of searching is coming.

Optimizing for the way people speak can feel like going to your first yoga class.

You're looking around at what other people are doing, trying to breathe deeply while holding your lotus cup above your head, meanwhile, you're just waiting for savasana. #Awkward.

I get it. And, Dawn Anderson does too. She offers some awesome tips on [SEO for voice search](#), including thinking about how people ask questions and understanding local queries and intent.

And, Brian Dean recently shared his insights into optimizing for voice search after [reviewing 10,000 Google Home results](#).

Rich Snippets

Rich snippets use schema to markup your text and data for better visibility in Google search results.

Rich snippets could mean photos or ratings on your result (which is standard for recipes) like this.

Practically Perfect Pineapple Cake - Mom On Timeout



<https://www.momontimeout.com/practically-perfect-pineapple-cake/> ▼

★★★★★ Rating: 4 - 3 votes - 30 min

Feb 14, 2017 - This Practically Perfect **Pineapple Cake** is loaded with **pineapple** flavor! Made without butter or oil, it's incredibly moist and topped with a delicious **pineapple** fluff frosting! Let's be friends! Sign up to get my new **recipes** in your inbox! Follow me on Facebook and Instagram too!

Easy Pineapple Cake Recipe - Allrecipes.com



[allrecipes.com/recipe/15857/easy-pineapple-cake/](https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/15857/easy-pineapple-cake/) ▼

★★★★★ Rating: 4 - 144 reviews - 1 hr 30 min - 219 cal

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C). In a large bowl, mix together the flour, sugar and baking soda. Bake for 45 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into **cake** comes out clean. To make the frosting: in a medium bowl, combine cream cheese, butter, confectioners sugar and 1 teaspoon of vanilla.

Pineapple Cake Recipe | Taste of Home



<https://www.tasteofhome.com/recipes/pineapple-cake> ▼

★★★★★ Rating: 5 - 22 votes - 40 min

"I often prepare this moist golden **cake** at Easter, but it's wonderful just about any time of year," relates Linda Sakal of Biloxi, Mississippi. **Pineapple** frosting provides the fast finishing touch.

Rich snippets can increase your click-through rate and lower your bounce rate because it gives users more of a preview of your content before they click on it.

If SERPs are the front door to your business, your content pages are the interior, showing users that your website (and therefore, your products or services) are worth their time.

By building high-quality content for your website, you create a warm and inviting place for your users and search engines to make themselves at home.

Google's John Mueller **won't reveal what the ranking factors are for featured snippets**, so we can only use **Google's featured snippet guidelines**.

Rob Bucci, CEO of STAT Search Analytics, shares his insights on how to gain featured snippets at SearchLove 2018 in San Diego. Check out his **full presentation here**.

2. Make Your Site Mobile-Friendly

Remember when a mobile version of your website, hosted at m.URL.com was the recommended thing to do?

While it won't always harm you now, more websites are moving away from this mobile website method and toward building **responsive websites** instead.

Even though **Google has said** they don't publicly favor any one set way of doing mobile websites (whether it's responsive, dynamic, or separate URLs) when it comes to rankings, a **responsive website is their recommended format**.

Google has stated that responsive design helps their "algorithms accurately assign indexing properties to the page rather than needing to signal the existence of corresponding desktop/mobile pages."

In the age of the [mobile-first index](#), your mobile website is the lifeblood of your existence in the SERPs. To stay alive, [follow Google's guidelines](#) and make sure your content matches identically on your desktop and mobile.

Whenever you can make it easier for a search engine to improve its results, do it!

3. Create a Secure Website (HTTPS)

Almost a year ago, Dr. Pete J. Meyers wrote that [30 percent](#) of page 1 Google results were using HTTPS.

While not switching to HTTPS won't necessarily harm your website, there have been several changes since Google first announced HTTPS as a [ranking signal back in 2014](#).

In 2017, Google announced that its Chrome browser (which 45 percent of us use) [would begin to flag sites](#) as “not secure” in the URL bar when they aren't HTTPS. And, after [their final warning announcement](#) you could start to see a rise in bounce rates if you don't make the transition.

Here is what Chrome will look like when you implement HTTPS:



All of this shows that Google thinks HTTPS is essential.

However, switching to HTTPS (and SSL, as they work together) can also bring a lot of canonicalizing issues to your site if not done correctly.

To learn more, check out [HTTP to HTTPS Migration: The Ultimate Stress-Free Guide](#) by [Aleh Barysevich](#).

Even though it hasn't been shown to make a significant impact on SEO by itself, the Chrome update may mean that switching your site over (by experienced people) is worth it.

4. Improve Your User Experience

User experience (UX) has an impact on SEO.

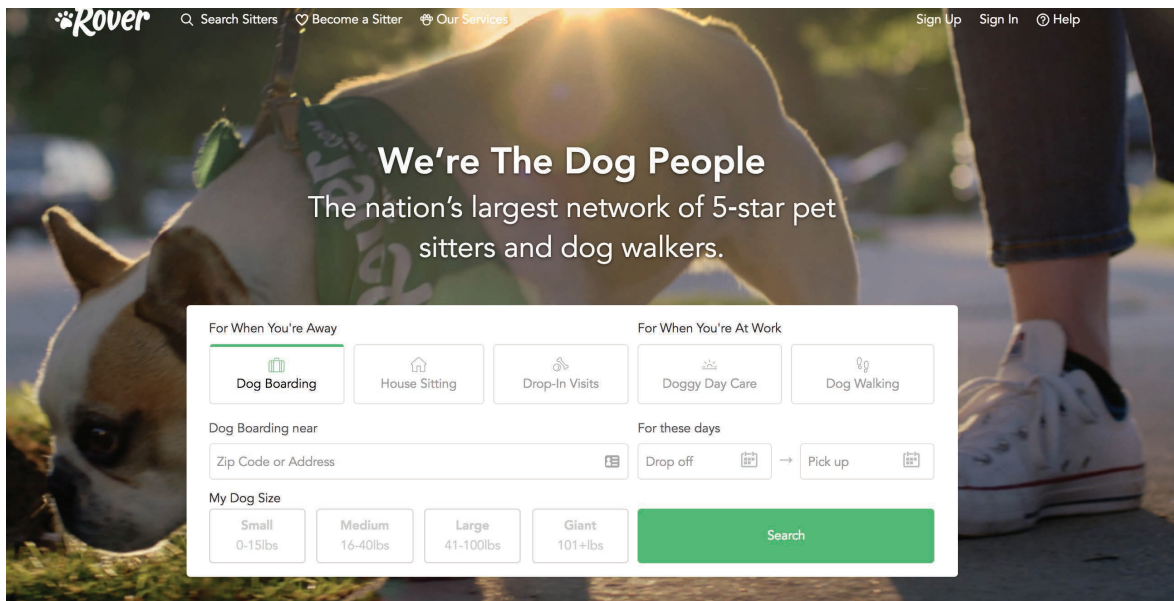
If you don't think about UX, your website will end up in the trash next to the TV dinner and mushy peas.

In fact, **38 percent** of people will stop engaging with a website if the content and layout is unattractive.

Main Street Host, a digital marketing agency, saw a **66 percent** increase in page views to their attorney profile pages by updating the content and optimizing call-to-action buttons.

And, Ezoic saw **186 percent** increase in earnings per 1,000 visitors after creating a better UX.

Rover is a good example of a solid user experience:



Search engines look at **dwelt time** as a signal to see the amount of time a user spent on a site before clicking the back button to return to the search results.

Designing a user experience that pairs nicely with your SEO is vital if you want to succeed in the SERPs. It's like choosing which Backstreet Boys song you want to sing karaoke to. Even if the performance is good, if the song off, no one will sing along with you.

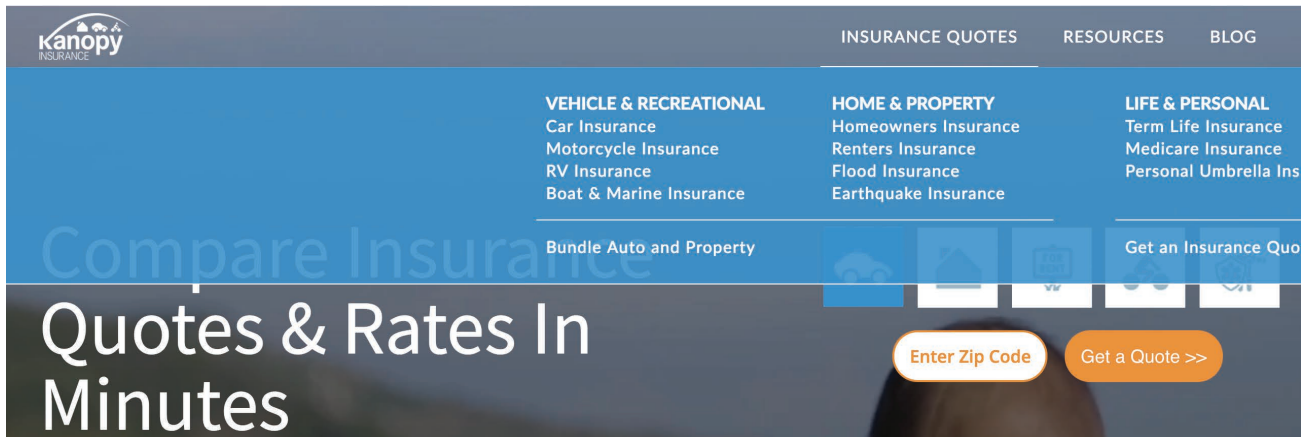
Site Architecture

Site architecture is a related component of user experience and has a significant impact on SEO.

John Doherty of Credo **claims**, "One of the biggest changes I can make is fixing their site architecture."

He goes onto to discuss a website where he switched the URLs from a tag page to a subcategory page to link higher in the site architecture. He was able to increase organic sessions by 74 percent and pages per session by 41 percent.

Here is an example of proper site architecture:



Not only does site architecture help users find what they are looking for with [better website navigation](#), but it can also help search engine crawlers find more pages on a website.

In a nutshell, your websites should be dead easy to use.

All pages and navigation should be laid out as simple as possible.

It should take a user only three to four clicks to find any page on a website. While this isn't always possible to large sites, there are ways to help users search and find pages internally that can ensure they find what they need.

5. Optimize Your Page Speed

Finally, page speed is officially now a [Google mobile ranking factor](#).

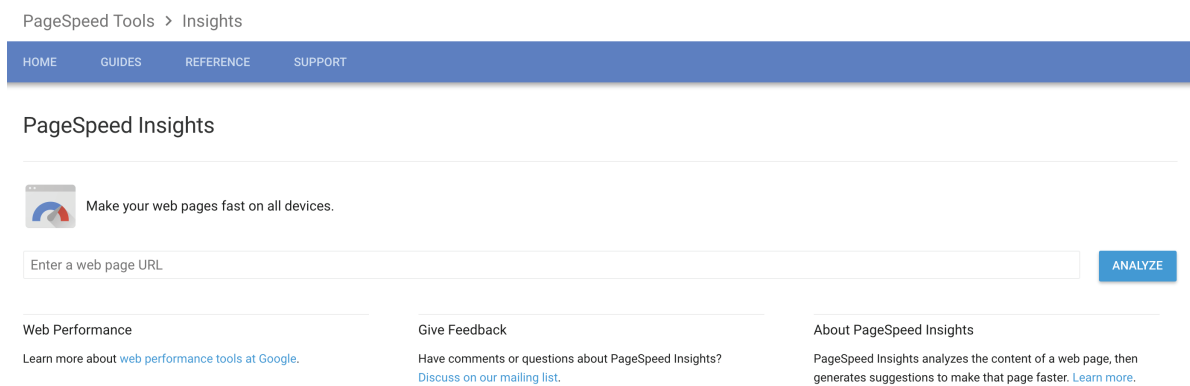
With Google's mobile-first index also slowly rolling out this year and last, mobile continues to be Google's new preference.

The slower your sites load, the more visitors and revenue you'll lose out on.

For Amazon, just one second could cost it [\\$1.6 billion](#) in sales each year. And, The Telegraph, a British publication, found that a four second delay reduced page views by [11.02 percent](#).

Why take that risk?

There [are tools available](#) to test a website's average page speed. And, many fixes are relatively easy if they are done by someone who knows what they are doing (e.g., not everyone knows how to “minify JavaScript”).



Faster loading pages lead to a better overall website experience, hence Google's move toward making it a mobile ranking factor.

6. Master Your On-Page Optimization

Closely related to user experience is the on-page optimization, which deals with the technical “behind the scenes” components of SEO. These facets have been around for years and still make a significant impact on your website's visibility and SERP position for your target keywords.

Mockingbird saw a [62 percent](#) increase in organic traffic by merely updating H1 tags. And, Brand New Copy increased organic traffic by [48 percent](#) by cleaning up metadata and internal linking structure.

Worth it? I think so.

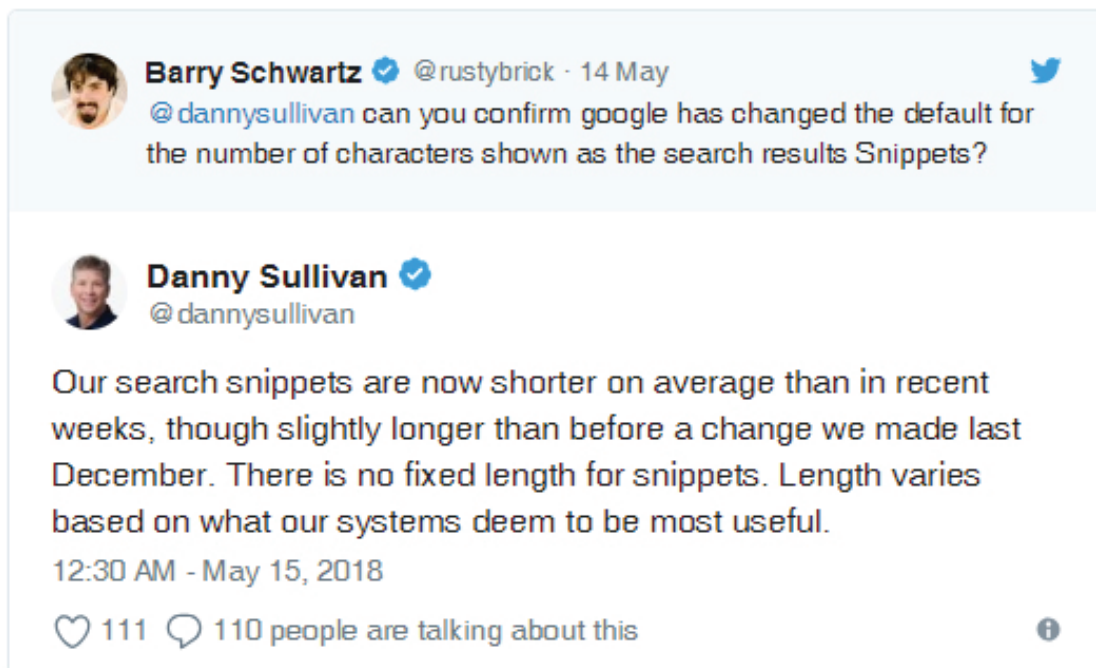
Optimizing your website can help your existing high-quality content get found faster by search engines and users.

Below are some of the ways that on-page optimization will still make a major impact in 2019:

Metadata

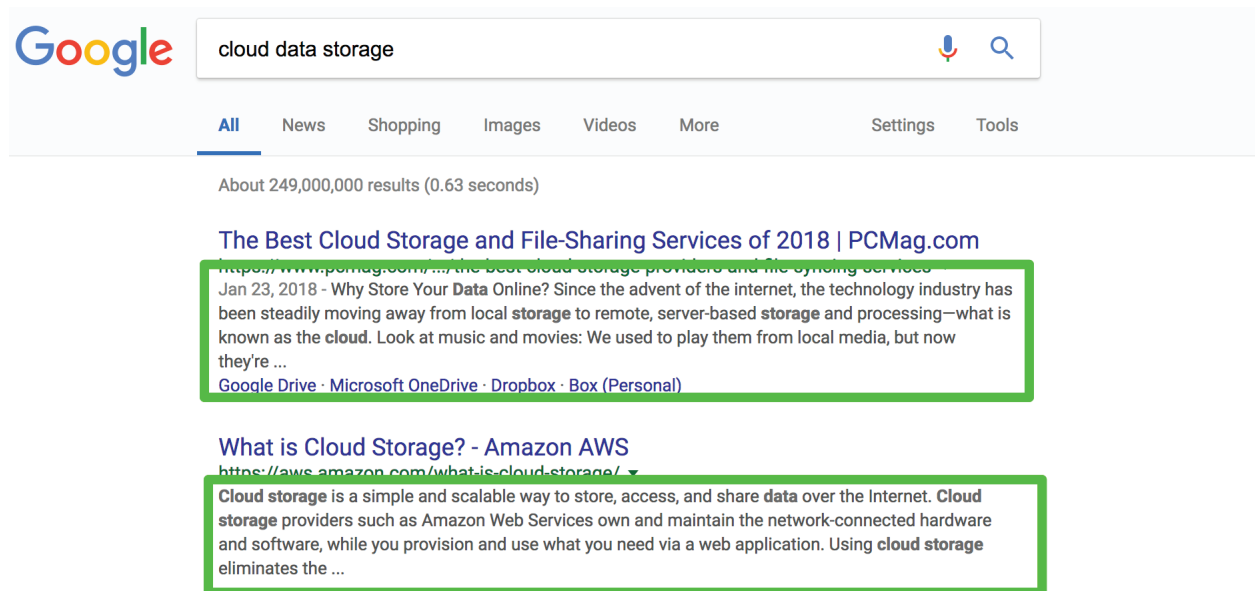
This information includes your [title tag](#) and page descriptions – the information about your sites that users see in the SERPs.

As SEJ reported in December, Google [increased the length of snippets](#). But, more recently, Google's Danny Sullivan [confirmed Google reduced the length of snippets](#) and that they don't have a fixed length.



Either way, I don't recommend a full rewrite all of your existing descriptions.

Google sometimes pulls content from the page and dynamically inserts it as the description in SERPs when it better matches the user's query. Here is how that might look:



As it stands, write the best titles and descriptions for your pages that you can, but keep in mind that it won't always be used.

Schema

Schema markup is another “hidden” component of a website that tells search engines more about your content.

Created in 2011, there are now **almost 600 different types** of information you can include.

Schemas make it easier for search engines to identify the essential information on a website. For instance, there your schemas for a local business might look like this:


```

<!-- FOOTER -->
<div class="footer left">
  <div class="footer-top left"></div><!--/footer-top-->
  <div class="wrapper">
    <div class="footer-widgets-content left">

      <div class="footer_box left">
        <div class="footer-widget-holder"><h2>Get to Know Us!</h2> <div class="textwidget"><div itemscope
itemtype="http://schema.org/LocalBusiness">
<a itemprop="url" href="http://www.toybraryaustin.com"><div itemprop="name"><strong>Toybrary
Austin, TX</strong></div>
</a>
<div itemprop="description">The Toybrary is a toy lending library and kids' birthday party venue that
also offers drop-in
childcare in Austin, TX</div>
<div itemprop="address" itemscope itemtype="http://schema.org/PostalAddress">
<span itemprop="streetAddress">2001 Justin Lane</span><br>
<span itemprop="addressLocality">Austin, </span>
<span itemprop="addressRegion">TX </span>
<span itemprop="postalCode">78757</span>
<span itemprop="addressCountry"> USA</span><br>
<span itemprop="telephone">5127654174</
span>
</div>
</div></div>
</div>
</div><!--/footer-widget-->

```

In a session, [“How to Stand Out in Search with Structured Data”](#) at Google I/O, Andrew Valente of Google shared a sample of the case studies that show how Schema markup and rich results help increase engagement and clicks online.

Rotten Tomatoes saw 25 percent higher click-through rate on pages with markup. And, the Food Network saw 35 percent increase in visits for recipes with markup.

Schemas are what help Google display rich snippets in search results, still making them an important part of SEO in 2019.

You can now add schema to a page’s header using JSON-LD. Use a generator like [this one from Hall Analysis](#) for basic markup needs.

Internal Link Structure

Internal link structure helps users and search engines better find pages.

Corey Morris, Vice President of Marketing for Voltage, talks about [prioritizing your internal linking](#) structure in five different areas:

- Helping users.
- Managing link flow (e.g., where the traffic goes once it gets to your site).
- Building a roadmap around specific content topics.
- Canonicals.
- Prioritizing indexing of particular pages.

What this means is your strategy for how you are linking to different pages on your site should be user-centered first, then you can focus on how to drive traffic to a fundamental set of pages.

Think about how internal link structure can help guide users toward completing a conversion from signing up for your newsletter to completing a request for a live demo.

7. Earn Relevant & Authoritative Backlinks

Links will continue to be one of the [leading SEO components](#) if you want to rank well in 2019.

Ignore those who say you can achieve success without backlinks. While some sites absolutely can and have, it would be silly not to pursue these powerful link building strategies:

Client case studies: These are shared by the client and can include exciting information about how they achieved their results, which can help others.

Expert roundups: These can sometimes be overdone, so focus on valuable information that isn't found anywhere else

Infographics: These still get shared heavily online and are a great way to provide an instant view of data on a specific topic. It can be fun and informative, and usually, are republished on other blogs and shared on social media.

Other content that highlights influencers: This could include podcasts or video interviews.

Industry surveys: Many publishers do annual industry surveys, which have become well-known (and well-cited) each time they are released. Content Marketing Institute's [reports on B2C and B2B](#) content marketing are frequently linked to by other publishers and writers wanting to illustrate their points.

Free content or tools: This could include long-form content such as [ebooks](#), or useful tools like quizzes and personalized reports that give users the helpful information they didn't know before. A good example of free tools are all the [calculators on Dave Ramsey's site](#).

While backlinks may lose their value over the next few decades, they are still an active ranking signal.

Summary

Ranking signals all flow together to help SEO marketers create awesomeness. This means a more comprehensive, sophisticated SEO strategy for better SEO in 2019 and beyond.

As the mobile-first index, page speed ranking factor, and other changes continue to roll out this year, rest assured that SEO which focuses on quality over short-term gains is what will help you move up in the SERPs.

More SEO Ranking Resources:

- [Google: Top Ranking Factors Change Depending on Query](#)
- [Top 17 Organic Search Ranking Factors \[STUDY\]](#)
- [10 'Hidden' Ranking Facts, 1 Is A Lie](#)

Chapter 8

A Beginner's Guide to SEO in a Machine Learning World

When thinking about the rise of machine learning as it relates to SEO, we can be faced with a frightening scenario, depending on the type of SEO professional you are.

SEO pros, like myself, who are logic-based and have historically worked relying on an understanding of the signals at play and how they fluctuate may be chewing their nails more than the marketers who have relied more on serving the users rather than the engines.

Where I once used to scratch my head wondering how the “build great content and they will come” approach was even conceivable, those who subscribe that SEO approach are the ones who are likely less worried today.

And they should be.



Dave Davies

CEO at Beanstalk Internet Marketing, Inc.

Dave Davies founded Beanstalk Internet Marketing, Inc. in 2004 after working in the industry for 3 years and is its active CEO. He is a well-published author, host of a weekly radio show on Internet Marketing and has spoken on the subject of organic SEO at a number of conferences. Dave writes regularly on Beanstalk's blog and is a monthly contributor here on Search Engine Journal.

Sort of.

It's still not:



Before we dive into what's changing let's first answer the question:

What Is Machine Learning as It Relates to SEO?

We won't get into a big lesson around all that is machine learning here and we won't have time to actually cover how it impacts us and what our future

[SEO strategy](#) needs to look like.

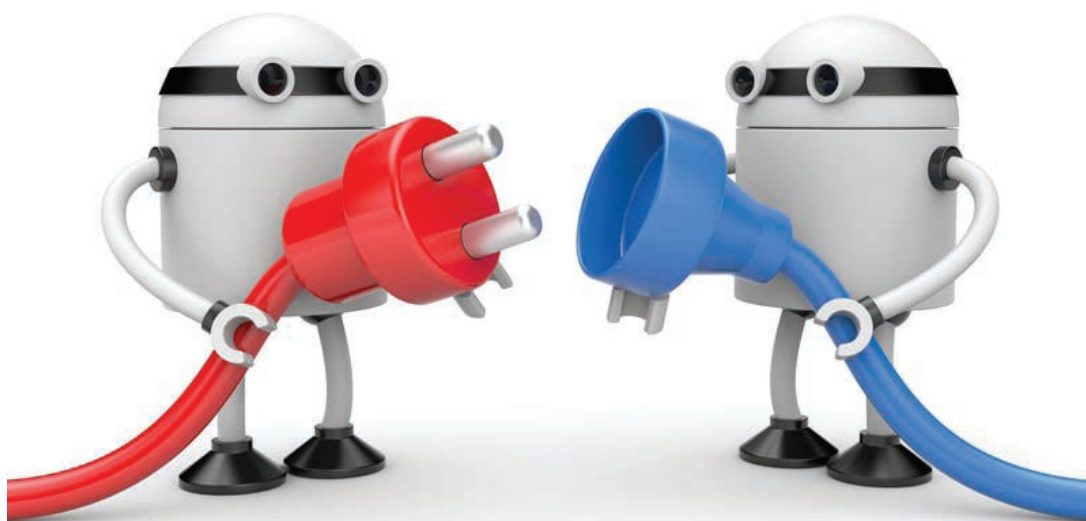
From a 30,000-foot view, all we really need to know is that it adds to Google's capabilities an incredible speed of:

- Data accumulation.
- Interpretation.
- Reaction.

For more on this, check out my post: [How Machine Learning in Search Works: Everything You Need to Know.](#)

And if you really want to know what machine learning is, Google offers a free crash course [here.](#)

How Machine Learning Impacts Links & Link Building



One of the easiest examples of an area machine learning can greatly increase Google's capabilities is in links.

Looking at a small example, machine learning can play a role in one of the key aspects of link evaluation: filtering spam.

Google is already using machine learning in Gmail, reaching a 99.9 percent success rate and only yielding a false-positive 0.05 percent of the time.

Carry this over to link evaluations and you've got a very successful model.

Previously, Google engineers would have to:

- Create lists of poor quality sites and block their link equity flow manually.
- Program specific characteristics of a bad link based on what they'd seen prior.
- Set up devaluation functions into link calculations and hope that it didn't include too many false positives.

With machine learning, the world opens up.

Yes, there is still a primary starting point – a list of known bad domains and another of presumed bad signals.

But these are training grounds a machine learning system can use to:

- Learn how to apply these signals to other links they encounter.
- Develop their own signals for what appears to be spam (or good for that matter).

Rather than simply relying on this hard-and-fast set of criteria, the machines can teach themselves by watching patterns.

Observing sites with presumed-bad signals (in either their linking-out or linking-in) will profile the machine.

Then, once the determination of bad is confirmed, it can start reverse engineering patterns for faster detection in the future.

- What type of sites do spam sites link to?
- What types of links do spam sites get?

- Is there a link growth pattern?
- Do pages that sell paid links also tend to link to other specific sites (they do) and if so which sites?

The system can then add those to the metrics it applies.

This is really touching on less than the tip of an iceberg on how machines can simulate what humans can do and amplify it.

Want to know how Google could announce they are devaluing sites with spam links as opposed to manually penalizing them?

It's made possible by machines that can learn and apply devaluations at incredible speeds with far lesser false-positives.

Add to that, machines can also understand the content quality and relevancy of a page and supplement that understanding into the equation both individually and en masse.

A machine that can ask, "Should this link hold a high weight for your individual site?" and then further, "Is there a high likelihood that the link is paid or otherwise problematic?" in the context of data from other links found and analyzed on that page and domain.

These are extremely limited examples of where machine learning can be applied to links.

Spam patterns are, and will be, detected with an increasing degree of success, while quality links will be understood and rewarded at a higher rate.

This means an increased focus on quality, relevancy, and legitimacy – unless you feel that you can come up with systems to fool Google faster than a machine can figure it out.

How Machine Learning Impacts Content SEO



While we used the example of links above, there are few other areas of SEO that will be impacted more by the rise of machine learning than content.

To illustrate this point, we need only look at Google's work in translation.

For 10 years they worked on the problem using phrase-based machine translation – mainly matching known phrases and spewing out a result.

We all remember the results. It got the job done, but was incredibly crude.

In September 2016, they switched to a machine-learning system ([Google Neural Machine Translation system](#)) and in the 24 hours after it was rolled out, the system had improved translation more than in the decade prior.

Basically, machine learning can accomplish an efficiency in understanding language more in 24 hours than human editing, even with machine assistance, can in 3,650 times that.

What does this mean for SEO professionals?

The holy grail of digital marketing is coming – that time when our only job will be to put out the best content that we can and a breadth of content wide enough and in enough formats that it satisfies more user intents and preferences than the next one. And if these are completed, there's a very good chance Google will understand this as well.

This isn't to say that machines aren't flawed or that there won't be a role for SEO professionals.

In fact, I think there will be a larger role for us to play, but it won't be in keyword use – it will be in formulating how the user can be satisfied.

Wil Reynolds gave one of the best summaries of what I believe is to come. He suggests we ask ourselves:

“What would happen if Google improved to just showing the best answer?”

This is the question we need to ask.

What makes this more interesting is that what is “best” is subjective.

I personally hate video instructions for how to accomplish most tasks – just give me a list with some pictures if necessary.

But not everyone is like that. Some want video and some might prefer a PDF download they can print out.

On top of that, it would be task dependent. For example, I hardly want my tablet under the car with me as I change the oil so a printout is probably better there.

So, what I will consider “best” in regards to a result Google might give depends on a whole array of factors related to my own personal preferences – the specific task I’m trying to accomplish, when and where I am, the type of device I’m on, etc.

This can’t be programmed by a human.

Some decent attempts have been made toward personalized results in the past but they were limited – until machine learning.

A human can’t tailor an experience for you.

Humans can’t dedicate the resources to understanding what you specifically like at specific times, based on what device you’re accessing or where you might be.

Machines can.

A machine can keep track of all that and learn over time not just what results you like but what types of results fulfill your intent and eventually pull the best result for you from their current index.

In short, we now need to think less about fulfilling global rules and more about fulfilling the intent of our targeted audience.

On top of that, if we want to rank for more generic terms like ‘laptops’ and not just ‘buy dell laptops’ with our ecommerce site, we need to fulfill the intents of the users who aren’t just interested in buying one to fulfill the intents of all those visitors. Perhaps, we should also provide that data in various formats so we are the winning answer regardless of the device.

Prior to machine learning, we didn't have to worry about this. Any attempts at understanding what a bounce or time on site might mean on Google's side were rudimentary, to say the least.

Now, with machine learning assisting in understanding language context and what user-generated signals might mean this is not just possible but deployed.

Think about a great video you've produced to address a common question your target demographic has.

Now imagine your target audience is asking their question on a Google Home or other [voice-first device](#). You may not need to provide content in every possible format as your audience may not request it, but you need to be aware.

How Machine Learning Impacts Technical SEO

When it comes to technical SEO, there is one person you need to follow right now: [Cindy Krum](#). Pay attention to what she has to say because she's on the right track.

In a conversation on [mobile-first indexing](#), she coined a term that I personally believe sums up the future of technical SEO brilliantly. She referred to "mobile-first" as an incorrect term naming the proper one to be "portable-first".

The idea she put forth was that content should be easily separated from your design and technical structure (i.e., portable) so that it can be accessed anywhere at any time.

She is exactly right.

As we head into this brave new world of machine learning, the goal is to give the user the information that will fulfill their intent.

Our job is to make sure that content can be easily understood and extracted from the construct it exists in – either via markup, XML feeds, or just structuring the content on a page in a manner that is clear and easily interpreted.

So What Do You Do Now?

What should you do with this information?

We're talking about machine learning and Google's ever-increasing capability to understand the world around us, as well as our own personal needs and wants. This is its power and this is what defines what we all need to do next.

While I would be remiss to tell anyone to cast away their SEO efforts based on the tried-and-true metrics that still seem to work well, those metrics are **evolving and eroding rapidly**. I don't see them surviving for more than two or three years.

Your task is this:

Make sure that your content is portable to whatever device it may be accessed from by your target demographic and that it speaks to that audience.

If you have **multiple audiences** with multiple needs, you must also ensure that either your content applies and appeals to all of them or that there is different content for each and potentially in different formats.

As an SEO professional in a machine learning world, you need to view keywords more for the question and intent that they imply rather than as a blunt instrument to include on a page and in anchor text.

Machines will help us understand what our visitors want so we can figure out ways to provide it.

Why?

Because that's what the machine will be looking for – a satisfied user. They'll have all the metrics they need to know whether you – or one of your competitors – is doing the best job in delivering one.

Chapter 9

How to Do Keyword Research for SEO: Everything You Need to Know

Search engines have been minimizing the importance of keyword relevance signals for ranking for many years.

It's a fact that keywords are no longer necessary or mandatory to be present in the title tag or in heading tags (H1, H2, H3) in order to rank in the top five of the search engine results pages.

Even using the exact keyword phrases within the text of a webpage is no longer required.

Should you abandon keyword research and focus more effort on content creation?

Surprisingly, the answer is no.



Roger Montti

Owner at Martinibuster.com

Roger Montti is an independent web publisher of popular websites, a consultant and a Moderator of the Link Building Forum at WebmasterWorld.com since 2004. He has presented at Internet marketing conferences such as SES, SMX, PubCon and Affiliate Summit.

Keyword research is still important, but in a different way than has been practiced in the past.

For example, the different meanings of a phrase and the popularity of each meaning is vitally important.

The skillful use of words continues to be important, and this guide will show you how to research keywords in a manner that is appropriate for the way search engines work today.

The goal of this guide is to:

- Show how keyword research continues to be useful.
- Shine a light on numerous misconceptions.
- Show you how a scientific understanding of how keywords are used by search engines today can help you rank for high traffic/high conversion keywords.

The principles outlined in this guide apply equally to mobile content and is appropriate regardless of how textual content is delivered to the consumer.

Define Your Goals: What Do You Want to Accomplish with Search Traffic?



The biggest mistake you can make is to define success as more traffic. But more traffic should never be your goal.

Increasing sales should always be the goal.

Traffic is simply a means to solving the sales problem. Traffic is never the end goal. Increasing earnings should always be the focus.

When developing a keyword strategy for an ecommerce website, the first step is to define the sales problem the business wishes to solve. These are your real goals.

Examples of Typical Ecommerce Keyword Goals:

- Sales.
- Feeding different segments of the sales funnel.

- Ad clicks and ad impressions.
- Building awareness of your site, services, and products.

That last one, building awareness, is of major importance because it will help you rank for major keyword phrases in addition to driving direct sales. (More on this strategy a little later. Keep reading!)

Once you define the keyword goals you can then develop keyword categories to address those goals, and begin categorizing your keywords in order to build a content and marketing strategy.

The first two categories are directly sales related; they solve a business problem directly.

The second two categories (Feeding research levels of the sales funnel/building CPM traffic) can be seen as consumer-related because they generally revolve around solving a problem for consumers.

Money Phrases



The sales category focuses on what the SEO industry calls “money phrases.”

Money phrases are keyword phrases that are associated with a high level of sales (e.g., “cheap widgets” and “where to buy widgets”).

Money phrases are important (and competitive!) because they almost always result in a sale. Money phrases are also important to ad-supported sites because the site visitor, being predisposed to making a purchase, is also more likely to click an ad unit and earn revenue for the web publisher.

Advertising associated with money phrases usually have a higher cost per click, resulting in higher advertising earnings. That’s why these keywords are called money phrases!

The Problem with Money Phrases

Money phrases are highly competitive and difficult to rank for. That’s a given.

A more important consideration that many are unaware of, is that pay-per-click (PPC) ads will siphon off traffic that is (arguably) more inclined to make a purchase, with the rest of the traffic distributed to the organic results.

A sizable portion of the money keyword traffic is skimmed off through the PPC ads.

I’m going to show you how to solve this problem. Stay with me because the solution I am going to share is not entirely well understood in the search marketing industry.

Anatomy of Money Phrases

Aside from the obvious phrases containing words like “buy” in them, there are an additional set of keyword phrases that indicate a user intent to make an

immediate purchase. These are so-called long-tail “money phrases” that are important to rank for.

I have categorized long-tail money phrases into five categories. Each category represents a multiplicity of keyword phrases and their variants (singular and product name variants).

Top 5 Money Phrase Keyword Categories

1. Competitor comparison
2. Discount price searches
3. Product reviews and ratings
4. Coupon code searches
5. Searches for sales

I have developed many spreadsheets of valuable keyword phrases in a variety of industries. While I can't publicly share them, I have shared the five categories I use so you can develop and categorize your own list of money phrases.

Money Phrase Keywords & Site Architecture

Now here's the important thing to understand: There are good reasons to not use the list to build a site architecture that revolves around the money phrases. Why? Because that is the way to build a site tuned for keyword relevance.

But if you read [Google's Quality Raters Guidelines](#) you will see that Google (and presumably the algorithms) aren't ranking webpages for their keyword relevance signals. They are ranking webpages for their:

- Expertise.
- Authority.
- Trustworthiness.

This is an important point that I will return to later. But for now, understand that many sites that the search engines are ranking today are not built with a site architecture that revolves exclusively around money phrases.

The Value of Non-Money Phrase Keywords

Money phrases are so-called because visitors using those phrases tend to convert and put money in the till.

These are the most important keyword phrases for making immediate sales on a regular basis.

If your company isn't ranking for money phrases, then someone else is. So it might as well be you that ranks for the money phrases, right?

Not always.

There is another keyword path to building online sales.

Often the barrier to entry for a competitive money phrase is too high. The established companies in the search results have a seemingly insurmountable lead in terms of backlinks, content, social media reach, and other factors that can't be easily copied (at least not without years of work).

There is another way to build traffic – and that's with non-money phrases.

It may sound counter-intuitive that the way to attract buyers is with keywords that do not convert. But it's a viable path toward eventually ranking for the money phrases.

Here is how it works:

The Advantage of Being Comprehensive



Most money phrases are awarded to the most authoritative sites.

Yes, quantity and quality backlinks play a role.

However, content is a highly important ingredient. But not just any content.

You need comprehensive content.

A site that is comprehensive is authoritative. Authoritative sites are the kind that search engines prefer to rank.

Google's Search Quality Raters Guideline states in section 3.1:

"Page Quality Rating: Most Important Factors

Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness: This is an important quality characteristic."

Later on in section 3.2 the guidelines states:

“The amount of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness... that a webpage/website has is very important.”

An Alternate Money Phrase Ranking Strategy

Although visitors to an authoritative site may not convert via the non-money search queries that the site ranks for, the authority strategy does have the effect of:

- Cultivating awareness.
- Building goodwill.
- Stimulating word of mouth referrals, links, and ultimately money-phrase ranking and sales.

This is one of the secrets to ranking for money phrases.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the money phrases focus on the authority building long-tail phrases.

The old way of ranking for money phrases was with a full-frontal attack on those phrases. Over the years it's become increasingly evident that comprehensive sites tend to rank for the best phrases.

Focusing exclusively on keyword relevance has been showing diminishing returns for the past 10 years.

Focusing on the depth of content, expertise, and authority is a solid path to ranking for money phrases.

Keyword Strategies for Building Awareness & Ad Impressions

In general, if you want to rank well for the high traffic, two-word phrases then you must be authoritative for the three-, four-, and five-word phrases.

In general, a site that is authoritative for a high traffic money phrase is only authoritative because they are comprehensive on a granular level. Once the granular content is in place, the links attracted to the granular topics builds topical relevance for the entire site.

Should You Worry About Latent Semantic Indexing or LSI Keywords?

In a word, no.

Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) is a very old technology, developed nearly 20 years ago. Its purpose was to strengthen a search engine's ability to identify the correct context of a word.

Words often have more than one meaning (this is called Polysemy). Thus, a word or phrase appearing on a page did not guarantee that the page was relevant to a search phrase.

LSI technology was used to overcome polysemy, to help a text-based search engine identify the context of a webpage and thus better match a search query.

Background Reading about Latent Semantic Indexing:

- <http://www.cse.msu.edu/~cse960/Papers/LSI/LSI.pdf>
- <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1301/1301.6705.pdf>
- <http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~pxt/IDA/plsa.pdf>
- <http://www.internetnews.com/IAR/article.php/2195901/Google+Scoops+Up+Applied+Semantics.htm>

History of LSI

In 2003 Google acquired an important contextual analysis technology, known as Circa, when Google purchased a company called Applied Semantics.

In a nutshell, Circa was based on an understanding of language through the use of the Open Directory Project categories to create themes that a webpage could be classified under. Thus, a webpage could be understood as belonging to a particular thematic topic.

Applied Semantics created the technology that powered Google's AdSense program, enabling Google to better match website content to keywords associated with advertising. This is a kind of contextual analysis that was used as a foundation for the AdSense program, which has since added additional technologies such as placement targeting, interest-based targeting and language targeting to improve and expand the AdSense program.

In fact, [according to Google](#), their contextual targeting uses the overall link structure of the entire web to determine what a webpage is about, which is far more sophisticated and advanced than simple LSI.

Seeing how LSI has a diminished role in the AdSense program, LSI likely plays an insignificant role in search ranking as well.

It is reasonable to surmise that LSI plays a small to insignificant role in search ranking because the science of information retrieval has come a long way since 2003.

Should You Use Keyword Synonyms?

Synonyms (and LSI) were initially used as a way to combat keyword spamming.

Although Google was never a keyword-based search engine, it wasn't entirely immune to keyword spamming (more formally known in scientific circles as

Term Spamming). This kind of spam focuses on search query terms, which is why it's referred to as search query Term Spamming.

With the advent of the **Hummingbird update** and the increased ability for natural language processing (an attempt to understand language beyond keyword relevance), the search marketing industry responded by recommending the use of synonyms in order to rank better.

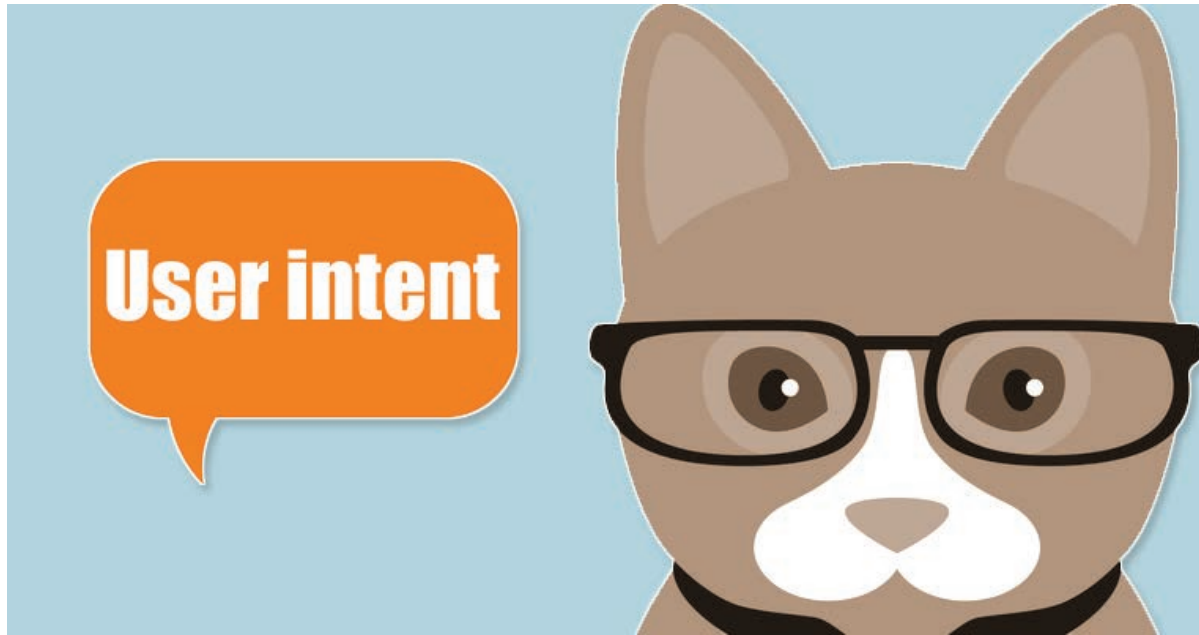
The thinking goes that in order to be topically relevant for a phrase that you would have to salt your webpage with synonyms. But this strategy is a “back of the napkin” solution to a highly complex problem.

The advice to use synonyms in a webpage is literally a joke: Did you hear the one about the SEO who walked into a bar, a speakeasy, a dive, a gin joint?

Clearly, using synonyms is a simplistic approach to being topically relevant. It's the tired old term spamming trick rooted solidly on ranking for keyword relevance, a strategy that no longer works. In my opinion, it's not necessary if you're focused on expertise, authority, and trustworthiness.

Even way back in 2005, in the research paper cited above, it is stated that the goal was to present the most relevant and most important webpages.

Keywords Are About User Intent



Words and phrases can have multiple user intents.

The SERPs are ordered to satisfy the user intent of the most people. Thus if the user intent you choose to satisfy is less popular you will never rank at the top of Google's search results. And that's ok! There's nothing you can do to change that situation when it happens.

Not to get too technical, but other research and patents deal with using prior searches, location, and other factors to personalize the order of the sites that are shown in the results. However, that likely isn't the norm across a wide range of search queries.

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that the best use of words is important. Understanding the user intent of a keyword phrase is paramount because it will guide the purpose of a page.

The search quality guidelines state that every page is judged according to how it satisfies a site visitors goals. The quality guidelines state that the best pages “fully satisfy the user intent” of the search query.

There is a ratings category called Fully Meets. It is applied to situations where the user intent is unambiguous. This applies especially so for ecommerce phrases where the intent to buy is clear. Fully Meets is the gold standard for satisfying a user query and becoming the number one ranked page for an unambiguous query.

In my opinion, it should be your goal for satisfying the user intent even of ambiguous queries, where you identify all the possible user intents then choose which user intent you are going to satisfy.

How Google Defines a Site That ‘Fully Meets’ a User’s Needs

- The query and user need must be specific, clear, and unambiguous.
- The result must be fully satisfying for mobile users, requiring minimal effort for users to immediately get or use what they are looking for.
- All or almost all users would be completely satisfied by the result—users issuing that query would not need additional results to fully satisfy the user intent.

In other words, the Fully Meets rating should be reserved for results that are the “complete and perfect response or answer” so that no other results are necessary for all or almost all users to be fully satisfied.”

The top ranked sites rank in the top ten because their web pages satisfy the most popular user intent for that keyword phrase.

Keyword Popularity

Understanding the user intent of a phrase is important because it will guide your content creation strategy.

In the case of an ambiguous user intent, where a keyword phrase has multiple meanings, it is important to make a list of all the different user intents.

If you search on Google you may be able to discern the different user intents. The most popular variation is most likely to be the one that is highest ranked.

Here's an important insight:

For many search queries, the top ranked sites are not ranked at the top because they have more links pointing to their pages. Nor are they top-ranked because they contain all of the keywords.

The top ranked sites rank in the top 10 because their webpages satisfy the most popular user intent for that keyword phrase.

If there are three user intents for a search query, it is the most popular user intent that will be featured at the top – not the site with the most keyword anchor text.

This literally gives the phrase Keyword Popularity a whole new meaning!

If the user intent is split between more users who are researching for academic purposes and users who are researching to make a purchase, Google will rank webpages that are informational than transactional. No matter how many links you amass to your page, if the user intent of your page is unpopular then you will never crack the top five of any search engine.

Ranking for keyword phrases is no longer about ranking the webpages with the most links and the most complete content. It's about ranking the webpages that most fully satisfies the most popular user intent.

The word paramount means that something is of extreme importance, more important than anything else. That's why I used that word when I said that understanding the user intents of keyword phrases is paramount.

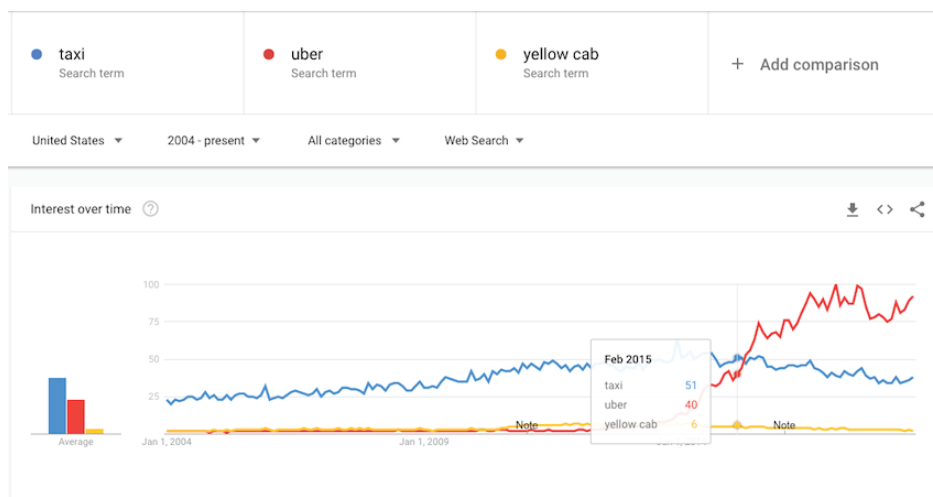
This also relates to what was stated at the beginning of this guide, that **keywords continue to be important**, but in a different manner in which they have been used.

Google Trends

Keywords are a window into what users want, the user intent. **Google Trends** is a good tool to identify changes in how keywords are being used.

Google Trends will help you see how phrases are trending up, trending down, trending in a cyclical pattern and identify regional patterns.

Understanding cyclical and regional patterns will better help you know when to roll out certain kinds of content and also to understand to focus your link building in certain regions for certain phrases, since those phrases will be more popular in those regions. **This is an important insight!**



In the example above, it is abundantly clear that the phrase “uber” is wildly popular compared even to the generic phrase “taxi.” The trend line also shows that the phrase taxi is trending downward, in recent times the search inventory plummeted to as low as it was in 2004.

Comparing keywords with brand names is highly useful.

For example, the keyword trends for “digital cameras” trends downward with the introduction of the iPhone. This data can be used to confirm a hunch about a correlation in consumer spending habits.

Another example is a comparison of the trends between the phrases “radio station” and the brand name “Spotify.” The phrase “radio station” is trending downward while the brand name “Spotify” is trending upward.

There’s no correlation between the two trends, but it illustrates a change in how people are consuming music.

When you see a traffic decline even though your rankings are unchanged, it can sometimes mean there is a change in consumer behavior tied to the introduction of a new product or service.

Here is an important insight into how to use the Google Trends tool:

Compare keyword phrases with keywords whose actual search volumes you are familiar with – even if the known keyword phrase is unrelated. Consequently, it makes analyzing the search trends for an unfamiliar keyword phrase easier because you have a baseline for comparison.

Keyword Research for SEO: 3 Important Takeaways

How can a webpage use a keyword phrase in a way that results in better rankings?

You now understand the answer:

Takeaway 1: Keyword Strategies Aren't About Synonyms

A proper keyword strategy is predicated on creating a topical map of your niche in order to help you grow your site to become authoritative, expert, and trustworthy.

Takeaway 2: Identify the User Intent, Then Satisfy That Intent

Algorithms are tuned to satisfying user queries by answering questions. They are no longer matching search queries to keywords on a webpage. This does not mean that you should phrase your pages as questions and answers. It means understanding the user intent and constructing your content so that it satisfies the user intent implicit in the keyword phrase.

Takeaway 3: Integrate User Experience Into Your Keyword Strategy

Webpages rank because websites link to those pages. Websites link to those pages because those pages solved a problem, because it scratches an itch.

Nobody ever linked to a webpage because of its keyword relevance. Only an SEO walks into a bar, a dive, a speakeasy. Nobody links to that.

People link to a site because of positive user experiences. View your keyword list through the framework of user intent and then consider how the resulting content can be used to create a positive user experience.

Now go forth and make some money!

Chapter 10

See, Think, Do, Care: A New Way to Communicate Your SEO Strategy

When discussing **SEO strategy** with the C-Suite, do you ever experience your audience's eyes glazing over?

Sure, you can try to explain website optimization in terms of the top of the funnel, mid-funnel, and bottom of the funnel; every CMO has some understanding of that. But that still doesn't effectively capture the essence of what organic search optimization should be today.

What if I told you there's a better way to approach discussing SEO with business stakeholders, in a language they can understand?



Christopher Hart

Head of Client Development,
US at Linkdex

Christopher Hart is Head of Client Development, US for Linkdex and has been with company since 2013. Prior to that he was an in-house SEO in the publishing industry from 1996 to 2008. From 2008 to 2013 he worked on the consulting side of the business for various agencies.

I'm referring to the marketing model envisioned by [Avinash Kaushik](#), digital marketing evangelist at Google, called "[See, Think, Do.](#)" His framework applies to all types of marketing strategies, regardless of the channel.

Here's how to apply the "See, Think, Do, Care" framework to discussions around the implementation of optimizing a website for organic search.

Understanding "See, Think, Do"

Discussing his framework in an interview with Acronym CMO [Mike Grehan](#), Kaushik dismissed the age-old AIDA (Attention-Interest-Desire-Action) model, as well as the conventional consumer buying cycle of awareness, consideration, purchase, and loyalty.



Instead, he argues for taking a customer-oriented approach based on an understanding of the consumer's journey. Grehan's conversations around "[intent-based digital marketing](#)" align nicely with this notion.

According to Grehan:

“I believe when you develop content around intent and think in a more focused way about the ‘required experience’ on the customer journey, you begin to change the voice and the way you communicate, too. You begin to think more of the individual and speak in a one-to-one tone as opposed to the often copied ‘mass media audience’ voice. The fact is, nobody watches the internet. You can’t compare it to the audience-designed broadcast medium. In short: Talk to ‘me’ — not my demographic.”

(I talk about intent briefly as well in this Search Engine Journal post on fleshing out the [intent behind keywords](#).)

In the video, Kaushik said:

“I don’t think about awareness, consideration, purchase loyalty — these standard marketing models, I hate them. So I created a new one. I call it ‘See, Think, Do.’ And what it says is that rather than thinking selfishly as a company, you have to think from a consumer perspective. ... Every single person in the world is in one of these four buckets [See, Think, Do, Care].”

The buckets of consideration that Kaushik is referring to happen when an audience is on their buying journey.

- **See:** This stage is comprised of the largest, qualified, addressable audience.
- **Think:** This stage is the part of the audience that is actually thinking or considering a particular thing.
- **Do:** This stage is made up of that subset of the audience that is looking to buy.

Below is an illustration from Kaushik that shows the [See, Think, Do framework](#) with the types of audiences that fall into each stage of consideration (with “Care” added for established customers):



In this model, “audience intent” is defined by behavior, not demographics or psychographics, Kaushik said.

So how does this model relate to SEO strategy?

Tying it into the traditional way we think about how people search, Grehan compared See, Think, Do to search queries that are either informational, navigational, or transactional in this [article](#).

The difference here is that the SEO of yesterday might focus on simply optimizing webpages with specific keywords from those three buckets (informational, navigational, transactional).

Today, See, Think, Do coupled with intent-based optimization is focused on what the audience is trying to accomplish, and bringing in various elements on a webpage to help them reach their goal.

Applying the See, Think, Do Framework to Website Optimization

Let's look more closely at how you might apply the See, Think, Do framework when discussing and implementing the optimization of a website to drive organic search, conversions, and revenue.

Keep in mind that when talking about optimization, we aren't just placing keywords; we're creating an experience through content and the various elements on a webpage.

See: This includes the larger audience of people online that are interested in something, and relates to the more generic search queries we see (e.g., “doorknobs”). In this phase, if you're in the market of selling doorknobs, you might create informational content in various forms on your website about doorknobs; varieties, uses, features and benefits, installations, etc. Again, we're thinking about the intent of the audience here.

Think: Your audience is essentially thinking about a purchase. Your website's job is to help that decision become easier. In this phase, you might create buying guides for doorknobs. You might also have functionality on your product pages that allow a person to compare various doorknobs.

Do: This is enabling a conversion on the webpage, whether that's buying a product or signing up for more information from your brand or any other type of conversion you deem important. This is usually facilitated by the elements on the webpage (for example, a noticeable “add to cart” button, an easy-to-find way to request more information or talking to customer service via chat, and so on).

Let's remember that the traditional journey from the top of the funnel to the bottom is no longer linear. Yes, your audience will still likely go through all three phases to get to the conversion, but that doesn't mean their actions exist in a silo.

While in the “See” phase and on an informational webpage, your audience may benefit from choices in the other phases of the journey, so that they move along at the pace they choose.

As this presentation from McKinsey & Company outlines, the consumer decision-making journey today is much more circular than linear:



See, Think, Do: An Example

Kaushik shares an illustrative example of how ModCloth employs multiple See, Think, Do elements on any given web page on their site:

The screenshot shows the ModCloth website's product page for the 'Call to Charm Cell Phone Handset in Retro'. The page is annotated with green 'S' (See), orange 'T' (Think), and purple 'D' (Do) arrows pointing to various elements:

- See (S):** Points to the top navigation bar, the product image, the 'ADD TO BAG' button, the 'ADD TO WISHLIST' button, the 'FOLLOW US' section, and the 'OUR STORY' section.
- Think (T):** Points to the 'Customer Care' link, the 'INVITE FRIENDS: GET \$15' banner, the 'Share' button, the 'Details' tab, the 'Tags' section, the 'Tell Me More' button, the 'Facebook' link, and the 'HELP' link in the footer.
- Do (D):** Points to the 'ADD TO BAG' button.

The product page includes a large image of the handset, a description, a 'The Story' section, 'Similar Items', 'Tags', 'Customer Reviews', and a 'Recently Viewed' section. The footer contains links for 'NEW ARRIVALS', 'CLOTHING', 'SHOES', 'BE THE BUYER', 'MY ACCOUNT', 'ABOUT US', and 'HELP'.

Why You Can't Afford to Ignore the New Approach

Without an understanding of what your audience is trying to do, SEO strategies today can fall short, be too prescriptive, and be too tactical.

When you implement the wrong tactics, you end up measuring the wrong things, too. As Kaushik points out [here](#):

“Without great content, and an equally worthy marketing strategy across See-Think-Do-Care, data is almost completely useless. Scratch that. It is completely useless.”

In an era where search engines are becoming smarter at identifying the webpages that answer **[your audience's intent](#)**, you can't afford not to consider models like intent-based optimization and See, Think, Do. Without it, your chances of visibility online are becoming slimmer.

Plus, approaching your conversations with the C-Suite in a more strategic way when discussing SEO is speaking a language they can understand, and presenting a roadmap they can get behind.

Chapter 11

How to Create Perfectly Optimized Content: 16 Essential Elements

Looking for a refresher on how to optimize content for SEO? Or learning it all for the first time?

Content optimization doesn't need to be difficult. It's certainly one of the easier elements of SEO to understand.

However, you need to ensure you're following a process and adhering to best-practice guidelines.

This guide will show you what perfectly optimized content looks like – you don't want to miss the handy visual checklist infographic at the end of this post.

However, you first need to understand why certain elements contribute toward an optimized page and also what to do to implement these into your content.



James Brockbank
Managing Director &
Founder at Digitaloft

James Brockbank is an experienced UK based SEO and content marketer and the Managing Director and Founder of award-winning Digitaloft, who specialise in creating high-performance content marketing and SEO campaigns for some of the UK's biggest brands!

Content Is a Key Google Ranking Factor

Content remains one of Google's strongest [ranking signals](#). Yet so many marketers fail to get content right.

Long gone are the days when you can write a 300 word blog post, hit publish and earn rankings.

It takes a great piece of content to rank on the SERPs.

With everything you publish, you should be able to answer one simple question:

Why are you publishing this piece of content?

It's important to create content with a purpose.

You should never just publish blog posts or other types of content just for the sake of doing so.

Typically, you'll be publishing content to meet one of a number of goals, including:

- To rank on the SERPs.
- To earn links.
- To educate an audience.
- To drive social engagement.
- To generate leads.

There's always going to be some crossover between the content format of choice for each purpose.

However, it's important that you fully understand why you're about to create and launch your next content asset.

It's the backbone for every successful article, blog post or guide. Above all else, it ensures you aren't falling into the nasty trap of producing something for reasons such as:

- Your boss wants to see a new blog post every day.
- Someone told you that the more content, the better (regardless of quality).
- Lots of fresh content helps our site to rank better.

If this sounds like your current approach to content; you need to re-evaluate. Check out our post on [creating content with purpose](#) to learn more.

Assuming you understand why you need to be using content as part of your SEO strategy, however, let's take a look at how you can ensure your content is perfectly optimized; looking at 16 essential elements.

16 Essential Elements of a Perfectly Optimized Page

When it comes to putting together the perfectly optimized page, there's a simple checklist which you can follow:

Keyword Targeted

Keyword research should always be the starting point when writing.

It's important to align the content you create with your keyword research.

You need to establish whether you're creating cornerstone / pillar content (the main hub of an overarching topic) or cluster / supporting content (that which is related to the main topic and links back in) and map out keywords based upon this.

Use tools such as [Google's Keyword Planner](#) or [Moz's Keyword Explorer](#) to determine the keywords which are being searched for by users around your chosen topic and use these as a base.

Don't just go into content creation blindly; formulate a plan based around a set of keywords and you're setting yourself up for success from the start.

This should form the basis of your content; and your chosen keywords will influence other on-page factors.

Bottom line: if you aren't targeting your content to specific keywords from the start, you'll struggle to rank for anything competitive.

Take your time and research thoroughly; understanding what could act as supporting cluster content at a later date if it's a cornerstone page you're currently putting together.

If it's supporting content you're working on at the moment, the keyword research task should be a little easier as you should have established related topics during the creation of the cornerstone page.

Related: [How to Do Keyword Research for SEO](#)

Search Engine Friendly URL

As far back as 2008, Google's Matt Cutts highlighted to [Stephan Spencer](#) at Pubcon that a 3 to 5 word URL is optimal and that, with those which are longer, "Google's algorithms typically will just weight those words less and just not give you as much credit."

It's important to understand that a clean, [search engine friendly URL structure](#) is as beneficial to users as it is search engines.

Imagine the following two URLs, both relating to a city guide to New York:

- **<https://www.travelwebsite.com/new-york-city-guide>**
- **<https://www.travelwebsite.com/?p=123>**

Which would you click on?

Almost certainly the first.

Why?

For the simple reason that you can see, from the URL, what the content relates to.

The first rule of structuring URLs is to always avoid complex and confusing structured, opting for shorter, keyword-optimized ones.

A Backlinko [study](#) found that shorter URLs typically rank better than longer ones.

Google's John Mueller also commented in [a Webmasters Hangout in 2016](#) that, "when we have two URLs that have the same content, and we are trying to pick one to show in the search results, we will pick the shorter one."

Be sure to also include your main target keyword in the URL.

That being said, if, based on our above example, you're targeting the term 'New York City Guide' you'd want to go with the URL of:

<https://www.travelwebsite.com/new-york-city-guide>

As opposed to:

<https://www.travelwebsite.com/category/guides/2018/new-york-city-guide>.

Related: [The Ultimate Guide for an SEO Friendly URL Structure](#)

Optimized Title Tag

The title tag of a page is one of the most important on-page SEO elements, yet one which is so simple to get right.

The best place to start when writing an optimized title tag is your target keyword.

Remember our target keyword of ‘New York City Guide’?

Let’s continue to work through this as an example.

You need to be sure to place your main keyword at the start of the title tag and keep it under 60 characters.

Google’s title tag display currently maxes out at 600px, however as a character limit this equates to approximately 60. You can use [Moz’s title tag tool](#) to check how yours will display.

Back to our example, a perfectly optimized title tag for our NYC city guide would be:

```
<title>New York City Guide | Where To Visit, Eat & Stay In 2019</title>
```

See how we’re using the main target keyword at the start of the title followed by key variations and a date modifier to increase click-through rate (CTR)?

Related: [Title Tag Optimization: A Complete How-to Guide](#)

Optimized Meta Description

You're probably wondering why we're highlighting an optimized meta description as an essential element of a perfectly optimized page when Google stopped using them as a ranking factor a number of years back?

One reason: CTR.

The meta description is the visible description which is (usually, unless Google chooses to pull from elsewhere in your content) shown on the SERPs.

A well written meta description can be the difference between getting the click and not.

It's well-reported that [CTR is potentially being used as a ranking factor](#), alongside dwell time.

Be sure to stick to a meta description of less than 160 characters to avoid truncating.

In terms of top tips for writing your meta description?

Be sure to include your target keyword and write in a way which encourages clicks through being informative and using a call to action.

Back to our New York city guide?

We'd go with:

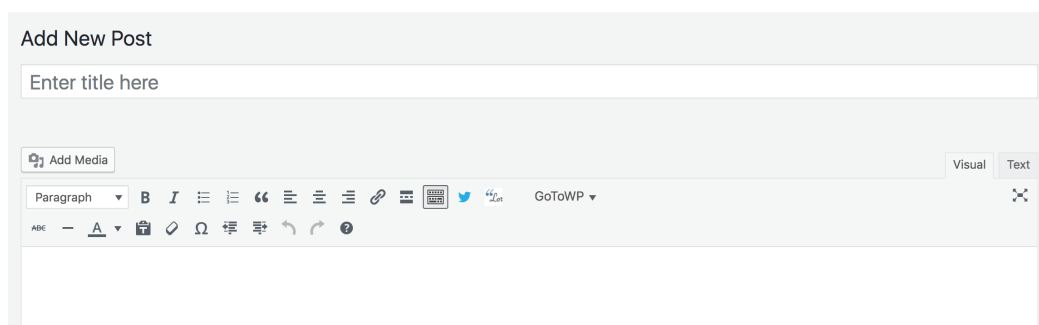

```
<meta name="description" content="Are you traveling to NYC in 2019? Check out our New York city guide to find the best places to visit, the best places to eat and drink, and where to stay." />
```

Related: [SEO Best Practices: How to Create Awesome Meta Descriptions](#)

Optimized H1 Tag

Your H1 tag should be the main heading on a page and is usually the ‘title’ area in your CMS.

If you’re using WordPress, this is most often the ‘enter title here’ field:



Always double check, however, as not all themes wrap the title in a H1 tag.

When it comes to what makes an optimized H1 tag?

In most cases, simply use your main target keyword with other important modifiers as you see fit.

In the example of our NYC city guide, the following would work brilliantly:

```
<h1>New York City Guide</h1>
```

However, there’s nothing wrong with adding to the heading after the main target keyword to aid rankings across variation terms.

As an example, you could also optimize the H1 tag:

<h1>New York City Guide – Where Visit, Eat & Stay In 2019</h1>

You'll notice that this is the same as what we're using for the title tag.

Related: [How Important Is an H1 Tag for SEO?](#)

Last Updated Timestamp

When you run a search on Google for [New York City Guide], you're served with the following results:

The Official Guide to New York City | nycgo.com

<https://www.nycgo.com/> ▼

Find out what to do, where to go, where to stay and what to eat in **NYC** from the experts who know it best.

[Official Visitor Guide](#) · [True York City](#) · [Maps & Guides](#) · [Manhattan](#)

An expert guide to New York | Telegraph Travel - The Telegraph

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/north-america/united.../new-york/> ▼

15 Jun 2018 - Read our Telegraph **Travel** expert **guide** to **New York**, including the best places to stay, eat, drink as well as the top attractions to visit, flights ...

[36 Hours in...](#) · [New York City](#) · [New york itineraries](#) · [New York events](#) · [Attractions](#)

New York guide: Where to eat, drink and stay in Manhattan | The ...

<https://www.independent.co.uk> › [GO](#) › [48 Hours In](#) ▼

20 Jun 2018 - The ultimate **New York City** **guide**. 1/9. Getty. 2/9. Take a boat trip to the Statue of Liberty. 3/9. The Tenement Museum is a preserved building where hundreds of immigrants lived. 4/9.

MoMA has an extensive modern art collection. 5/9. The trendy Pod Hotel has roof decks. 6/9. Buddakan featured in the 'Sex and the **City**' ...

New York City travel - Lonely Planet

<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/usa/new-york-city> ▼

Top sights in **New York City**. Central Park. Upper West Side & Central Park. Lincoln Center. Upper West Side & Central Park. Ellis Island. Financial District & Lower Manhattan. Grand Central Terminal. Midtown. Brooklyn Bridge Park. Metropolitan Museum of Art. American Museum of Natural History. Statue of Liberty.

Which result are you drawn to? In terms of that which you'd click to read an up to date guide?

Most likely either the second or third result.

As searches, we always want to ensure we're consuming the most up-to-date content that exists on a topic and we clearly see here that the Telegraph article was published June 15, 2019 and the Independent article June 20, 2018 (at the time of writing, both of these are less than 8 weeks previously).

Without clicking, we've absolutely no idea when the NYC Go and Lonely Planet guides were published.

Could they have been as recent as the others? Maybe they're a couple of years old?

The truth is that, without a date timestamp, it's impossible to know until you click; yet users are drawn to those which do show when the content was last updated.

You'll find that, in many cases, you'll have to do nothing at all to see the publish date appearing on the SERPs next to your content, however it's recommended that you go one step further and visibly display the date when the post or page (assuming we're not talking about your contact page or similar) was last updated.

If you're using WordPress, there's a [great guide](#) by the guys over at Shout Me Loud to talk you through how to do this; or you could use a plugin such as [WP Last Updated Date](#) if you're for a quick and easy solution.

Don't forget that, while an updated timestamp in itself may not be a ranking factor, there's plenty of research-led evidence to showcase that CTR impacts organic search performance and don't forget the increased engagement on the page itself by reassuring users that your content is up to date and current.

After all, no one wants to think they're reading a guide from three years ago!

Related: [Safe or Risky SEO: How Dangerous Is It REALLY to Change Your Article Dates?](#)

Target Keyword in First Paragraph

A word of warning here: don't try to forcefully work in your target keyword X number of times throughout your content.

That may have worked once over but the days of keyword stuffing are long gone ... thankfully!

It is, however, important that you do use your primary keyword within the content; just be sure to do so naturally.

It's recommended that you include this within the first paragraph of content on the page – ideally the first 100 words.

In the case of our New York city guide, this could be done easily by opening with something along the lines of:

If you're planning a visit to the Big Apple in 2019, our New York city guide is a must-read. We've teamed up with locals and seasoned tourists to the city to bring you the very best places to visit, eat and stay...

Notice how it isn't forced but fits nicely in the opening paragraph? That's what you need to aim for.

Optimized H2 Tags

You've already wrapped your page heading in a H1 tag, but you need to

also make sure you're wrapping subheadings in H2 tags (or H3 – 6 if there's headings under other subheadings).

Think of H tags as a hierarchy, where you're wrapping the most important title in a H1 and work your way down the page. If all your subheadings contextually carry the same weight, use H2 tags for these. If there's clear sections within these, use H3 and so forth in a logical order.

Don't fall into the trap of stuffing your target keyword straight into a H2 tag but include variations which make sense to the content.

In our example, you may open the main body of content, after your H1 tag and introductory paragraph, with the likes of:

`<h2>A Tourist's Guide To NYC</h2>`

Here, we're highlighting clearly the overall theme and keyword focus – a guide to New York – however use an obvious variant (NYC) and showcase to the user that it's a guide which is aimed at tourists.

Keep H2 tags concise and remember you don't need to have a keyword variant every time; just one will do nicely unless there's an obvious inclusion.

Related: [How to Use Header Tags: SEO Best Practices](#)

Use Of Images & Video

The use of images and video within content has a positive impact upon dwell time, and [research](#) from Hubspot suggests that “80% of marketers say video has increased dwell time on their website.”

Using video and images (which also includes the likes of infographics and charts) makes content easier to read and consume.

It's a well-known fact that we often learn better when content is visualized and there's no denying that we're more likely to work our way through a blog post which includes some form of visual content than simply one which includes nothing but text.

From a SEO perspective, content which engages user more will have a positive impact upon dwell time; a concept first introduced by [Duane Forrester](#) at Bing and which is essentially "the actual length of time that a visitor spends on a page before returning to the SERPs."

From the perspective of search engines, it makes sense that the longer a user spends consuming content on a site, the more useful it is in comparison to one with a much lower dwell time.

It's easy to see how and why video and images can increase dwell time and overall site engagement.

Just be sure to [fully optimize images](#) and embed videos from YouTube, Vimeo, Wistia or other video hosting and steaming platforms.

In our worked example, you could consider including images of key attractions, restaurants and hotels or even a first-person tour of the city.

What content can you create that's a little different from what everyone else is producing? How about an infographic walking tour? A map of top-rated hotels? The opportunities are endless...

Use of Semantically-Related Keywords

The key to successfully ranking content is to demonstrate relevancy and, in order to do so, it's important that you're using semantically-related keywords throughout the content.

Before Panda and Hummingbird, the search world obsessed over keyword density. Thankfully, that's now something of the past.

In many cases, you'll be using words or phrases that are semantically related to each other throughout your content when writing naturally.

However, it might be worth using a tool, such as [LSIGraph](#), to spark ideas as to semantically related words and terms.

Mobile-First Design Layout

Google began moving to a [mobile-first index](#) in March.

In their own words:

“Mobile-first indexing means that we'll use the mobile version of the page for indexing and ranking, to better help our – primarily mobile – users find what they're looking for.”

When it comes to producing content to rank on the SERPs, you need to ensure you adhere to mobile-first best practices.

Thankfully, there's a strong chance that your site is already responsive (or serves a mobile version), however be mindful as to how your content displays across mobile devices.

It's good practice to fetch and render as mobile Googlebot to outline any potential issues.

Related: [Mobile Optimization: 12 Best Practices for the Mobile-First Era](#)

Outbound Links

Not too long ago, SEO pros were scared to link out to external content.

Why?

The worry of “leaking PageRank.”

This was based upon a tendency to maintain as much PageRank as possible internally within a website and to avoid linking out.

From an editorial perspective, however, that doesn’t make sense.

Don’t be afraid to link out.

If you’re citing a source, go ahead and link to it. It not only helps users to read further into a sub-topic but also allows search engines to better understand relevancy based upon content you’re linking to.

Just be mindful to link to authoritative sources.

Don’t accept money from third-parties to link to their content from your own (more on that [here](#)).

Going back to our example content of the New York city guide, consider linking out to restaurants, attractions, or hotels that you mention within the guide, as well as things like transport information and pricing.

Essentially, link to anything that adds value and makes the life of the user easier; so they don’t have to go search out resources themselves.

Internal Links

Internally linking through to other key pages on your site is a must.

Internal linking are a key way to navigate both users and search engines through your content and help to spread link equity to key pages.

In the most simplistic form, if you're mentioning a topic within your content which you have a page or post about, link to it.

Don't be afraid to link using anchor text, either.

In other words, if you're linking to a 'New York Hotels' page, don't be afraid to use the target keyword of that page as the anchor.

How many internal links should you add into your content?

There's no hard rule. Don't go internally linking to anything and everything (and certainly don't be forcing keywords in just to link), but link where it makes sense and the target page adds value.

Related: [Internal Link Structure Best Practices to Boost Your SEO](#)

Page Speed

[Page speed is now a mobile search ranking factor.](#)

A lot more than content contributes toward a fast page speed. However, you need to ensure you're considering the ways in which this can impact the overall speed.

Primarily, from a content perspective, it's images which contribute to page speed so be sure to spend time optimizing them.

You use tools including [Google's PageSpeed insights](#) and [GTmetrix](#) to see your page speed and opportunities for improvements.

Related: [How to Improve Page Speed for More Traffic & Conversions](#)

Social Share Buttons

While [social shares aren't a direct ranking factor](#), it's important that readers are able to share your content.

After all, even if organic search is one of the reasons why you're creating a piece of content, the end result is that you want eyeballs on it which hopefully convert into business.

By including social share buttons within content, you're ultimately making it easy for readers to share with their network.

A simple but effective way to maximize the exposure of content and one which can easily be forgotten.

The good news is that, in many cases, social share buttons will already be on the template which appear as soon as you hit publish.

Important: make sure you're including and optimizing social meta tags including OpenGraph and Twitter Card tags. There's a great guide to this [here](#).

In short, you want to ensure that your content looks great when shared across all platforms and use the correct tags to avoid a common issue where the wrong image or title shows on social shares.

Unique, Educational Long-Form Content

The last point to make is relating to content length.

It's all too common for a marketer to ask how long a piece of content should be.

It's a tough question to answer.

A great response is often, "how long does it need to be?"

As a general rule, you need to make sure that your content goes into enough depth to properly cover a topic; but that's going to differ from industry to industry.

It's important that you're publishing unique and educational long-form content (in most cases – there's always exceptions such as news announcements and the like which are unlikely to ever be long-form) which adds value to your audience.

Don't be tempted to publish content for the sake of it.

Always strive to publish amazing content that addresses user intent and helps to solve problems and answer questions.

Avoid falling into the quantity over quality trap.

That said, to paraphrase from [SEO Fundamentals: Your Guide to SEO Success Factors in 2018](#), there are times you don't always need to have the absolute best content in the world. You just need content that's better than your competitors.

Ask yourself; if you were the searcher typing a query and came across your content as the top result; does it deserve to rank there? Does it answer your query in as much detail as possible?

If so, great!

If not, there's a good chance you need to continue to develop your content and ensure that it does just that.

Anatomy of Perfectly Optimized Content

So there you go – 16 essential elements of perfectly optimized content.

There's a lot to know and understand.

And, for that reason, we've put together a handy infographic on the above points to act as a visual checklist:



Keyword Targeted

Conduct keyword research to establish the primary keyword target for the content.

Short URL

Keep URLs short and search engine friendly, using your main target keyword.

Optimized Title Tag

Place your target keyword at the start of the title tag and keep under 60 characters.

Optimized Meta Description

An optimized meta description which contains your target keyword can increase organic CTR. Keep to less than 160 characters to avoid truncating.

Optimized H1 Tag

Ensure your target keyword is placed within a <H1></H1> tag. This is usually the visible heading at the top of a page.

Last Updated Timestamp

Increase engagement and trust by visibly showing users the date when a page was last updated.

Target Keyword In 1st Paragraph

Be sure to place your main target keyword within the first paragraph of copy, ideally within the first 100 words on the page.

Optimized H2 Tags

Wrap subheadings in H2 tags and be sure to include variations of your main keywords to increase relevance.

Use Of Images & Video

The use of images and video are great ways to increase engagement and reduce bounce rate; both of which contribute to an improved dwell time; a potential ranking factor used by Google.

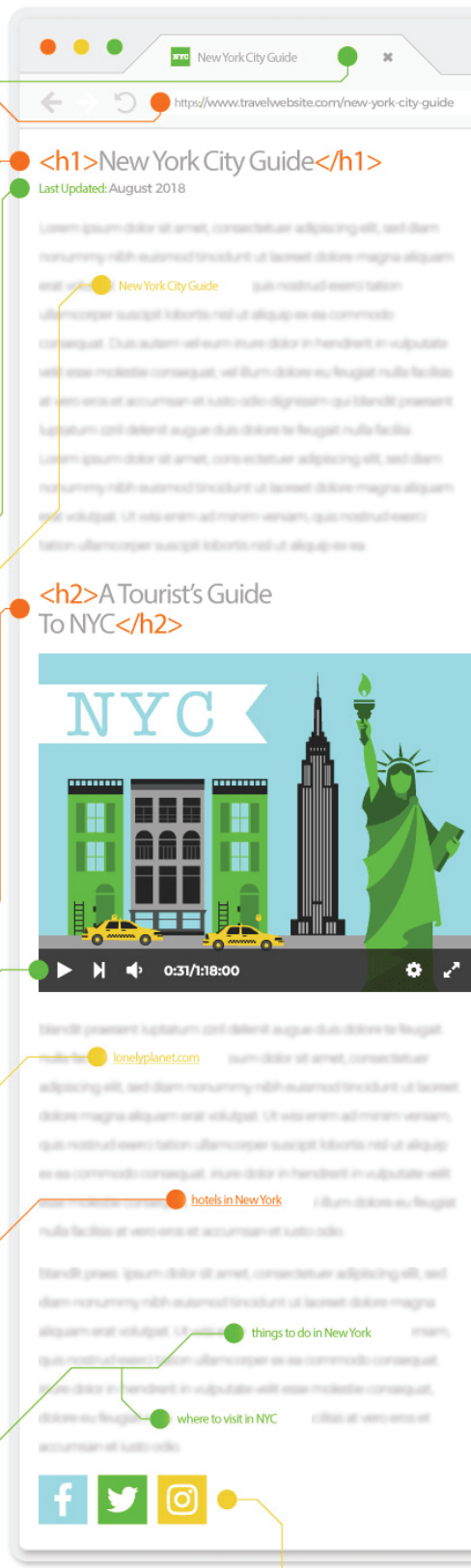
Outbound Links

Always be sure to link out to authority content which adds weight to your own page to further demonstrate topical relevancy.

Internal Links

Internally link through to other key pages on your own site to navigate both users and search engines to other related content.

```
<meta name="description" content="Are you travelling to NYC in 2018? Check out our New York city guide to find the best places to visit, the best places to eat and drink and where to stay." />
```



Internal Links

Internally link through to other key pages on your own site to navigate both users and search engines to other related content.

Use Semantic Keywords

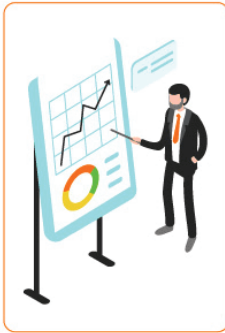
Avoid keyword stuffing like the plague but rather focus on naturally writing content which includes variations and related keywords to demonstrate topical expertise.

accountant at south africa



Social Share Buttons

Whilst not a direct ranking factor, social shares are great for brand awareness and page views. Make it easy for a reader to share your content to their social channels.



Fast Page Speed

As of July 2018, Google is now using mobile page speed as a ranking factor. Be sure to spend time optimizing images and other site factors to improve speed; not only for search engines but for user experience too.

Mobile-First Design Layout

How does your content render on a mobile device? Use Google Search Console's 'Fetch As Google' tool to ensure you're optimizing for the mobile-first index.



Unique, Educational & Long-Form Content

Always strive to cover a topic in-depth and avoid publishing content which doesn't educate and add something new. Whilst optimal content length differs by topic, spend time analysing the results which rank in positions 1 - 5 on Google and working to ensure yours is better. This could mean going more in-depth, a better user experience or adding a fresh take on a topic.



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Chapter 12

Making SEO & User Experience Work Together

When I started doing SEO back in the day, rankings were the only thing that mattered.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but in my very earliest days, my optimization practices constituted getting the keyword on the page as many times as possible without ruining the visitor's on-page experience.

It's heartening to know that I, and the industry at large, have come a long, long way since then.

In fact, one of the most significant evolutions that has happened over the years (and there have been many), is SEO professionals (a.k.a., digital marketers, web marketers, inbound marketers, etc.) growing up to be real marketers.

We realized that helping businesses do a better job at reaching, attracting, and converting their target audience was even more important than search engine rankings.



Stoney G deGeyter

CEO at Pole Position Marketing

Stoney deGeyter is the author of *The Best Damn Web Marketing Checklist, Period!*, and President of Pole Position Marketing, a leading web presence optimization firm helping businesses grow since 1998. Follow him on Twitter: @StoneyD.

But we aren't the only ones who have grown up.

Search engines grew up as well.

Spammers have always sought the lowest bar for entry (easiest way to achieve rankings) and brute force attacked the hell out of it. This forced search engines to raise the bar, which then forced SEO practitioners to raise the bar.

This cycle repeated year after year to where we are today.

And for that, the search engines can thank us.

Yet, the smart SEO pros are those who got ahead of the search engines long before any new algorithm rolled out.

Panda, Penguin, Hummingbird, and all the other algorithm updates had nary an impact on the web marketers who were focused on marketing their clients' websites.

Those who were still looking for the easy way to get rankings got hit and hit hard, time and time again.

Yet, a small handful of SEO pros through the years breezed through each algorithm update like it was expected. Because, well, it kinda was.

We were busy working for our clients' larger goals rather than working for rankings that may or may not help them achieve what they wanted: Growth. And for any business to grow, they have to focus on their customers first.

User Experience Is Critical to SEO

There is a whole field of UX optimization that requires its own level of expertise.

The typical SEO professional doesn't have to be a full-fledged UX expert. However, they should have an understanding of many of the basic website UX principles.

UX optimization is nothing more than focusing on the visitor.

Everything we do in the sphere of web marketing has to have the visitor in mind.

Yes, we do certain things for search engines, but search engines (almost always) require those things because they have learned it's what their users (searchers) want.

Search engines have some of the most advanced data mining operations in the world. They aren't just helping people find what they want; they're collecting data that helps them understand user behavior. From that data, the algorithms get tweaked in order to give searchers more of what they want and less of what they don't.

Which means websites that do a better job of meeting the needs of searchers have a better chance of landing on the first page of the search results. In this sense, anything we do for search engines we are doing for the searchers.

User experience shouldn't just be a by-product of SEO, however.

We don't do UX because the search engines tell us to!

Wise SEO professionals are going above and beyond the requirements of Google and Bing and looking for ways to improve their user experience overall.

And one really good reason is that search engines can only assess certain aspects of searcher behavior. If they see someone is bouncing back to the search results after hitting your site, they just know they bounced, they don't really know why.

That bounce could be the result of one or 10 things wrong with your site.

It doesn't matter to the search engine; they just see the bounce and, perhaps, factor that into how well you should rank.

Your job as the SEO is to determine what's causing this behavior and then figure out ways to provide a better result for the visitor overall.

SEO / UX Best Practices

As I said above, you don't have to be a UX expert to take some strong strides in providing a better user experience that complements your SEO efforts.

In fact, the best place to start is with conventional wisdom.

Before we get into some semi-universal best practices for SEO/UX, keep in mind that not all "best practices" are going to be the best thing for you, your industry, or your visitors.

Something that may work wonders for one website could be disastrous for you. Just because Amazon does it doesn't mean you should too! (Of course, it doesn't mean you shouldn't, either.)

Keyword Research



The base starting point for almost all online marketing is keyword research.

This affects everything from web design to site messaging to navigation to the content of the site.

While keyword research isn't a "best practice" that you can implement into your website, it is essential to for most of the best practices outlined here. Which means this is where you should start.

There is a whole art to keyword research, and I recommend you read up on it:

- [How to Do Keyword Research for SEO: Everything You Need to Know](#)
- [10 Timeless Keyword Research Tips](#)
- [A Deep Keyword Research Process That Will Attract More Customers](#)

Once you've got the hang of how to do keyword research, there are a few other points that are helpful to understand before deciding which keywords will be important to your overall marketing efforts.

Searcher Language

Keywords give us extremely valuable insight on how searchers think about our products or services.

Far too often, businesses use language that is native to those within the industry.

However, many searchers aren't in the industry and may not even know the "official" words that describe any particular product or service.

Keyword research not only uncovers the words they use to describe what they want but also the problems and solutions they are looking for.

This is valuable information that can inform your content later.

Searcher Intent

Not all keywords or phrases will mean what we think they mean.

For example, one person searching with the phrase "website audit" may be looking for someone to perform the audit, while another may be looking for tips on how to do the audit themselves.

Often, the intent becomes clearer as you get into more long-tail phrases, but be careful about making assumptions.

You always want to deliver searchers to pages that match their intent.

Entice the Click



Optimization isn't just about rankings, but about getting searchers to click to your site.

All things equal, the higher up on the page you are, the more likely you are to get clicked. But there is no reason you need to be equal when you can be superior to the competing search results!

It's entirely possible to get more clicks to your site than a competitor who is ranking higher than you.

This can be accomplished by making sure that your search listing captures the visitor's attention while using language that encourages them to click your result rather than another.

Bland language in the search results leads to poor click-through rate.

Give searchers a reason to choose you over the 10-20 other links on the page.

Title Tags

The **title tag** is (typically) the clickable link in the search result.

You have very limited space (about 70 characters), so use it wisely.

Make sure to use language that fits the search (keywords!) and provide additional, relevant information that is more likely to get the searcher's attention as they scan the results.

URLs / Breadcrumbs

The **URL** of the page or the **breadcrumb** trail follows the title tag.

This provides an additional signal to the searcher regarding the relevance of the result.

If the URL or displayed breadcrumb trail doesn't add value, or match the searcher's intent, they may choose to disregard your site as a viable option.

Meta Descriptions

The **meta description** comes after the URL in the search result.

Here, you're given a bit more room to reinforce and expand on the title tag message that caught their attention.

You have between 30 and 300 characters, with 150 being optimal, at least for the most important information.

Again, write what searchers might find valuable and encourage them to click through to your site.

Remember to address their needs using their language.

One caveat here: don't spend too much time on this as Google is rewriting these tags in search results more often than not.

Keep the Scent



Getting visitors to click into your site is a job well done, but not a job completed. There is still a lot more to do.

You have to remember that visitors are always in a hurry. They don't want to take a lot of time trying to figure out where they are or whether the page they landed on fulfills their needs.

In fact, if searchers don't find what they are looking for within a few seconds of landing on your page, they often leave. Which means you have to make sure you do everything you can to confirm your page is the right one.

That's called keeping the scent.

There was something about your search result that made them click into your site. They have started down a path based on that scent.

Now, you have to keep the scent by quickly confirming that you have what they came looking for, and encourage them to continue engaging with your site until they get a resolution.

Don't let them lose the scent at any point. If they lose the scent, you lose them!

Site ID

One of the first things visitors see when they land on a page is the Site ID (a.k.a. logo).

Your logo should be obvious, and not surrounded by clutter.

It also helps if your logo (or accompanying tagline) provides some association with what the visitor needs.

Header Tags

Aside from the logo, visitors will often look to the header at the top of the page content to confirm that the page they landed on provides the information they came for.

The topmost heading tag (which should be an H1 – and the only H1 on the page) should provide a similar message as the page's title tag.

You have no limitations here, other than what makes sense visually for the page, but use this to reinforce the message and to “title” the content that is below it.

You can also use [additional headings](#) to break up long content.

Visitors will often scan content looking for particular answers or solutions and heading tags can help them do that.

Navigation

Another signal many visitors use to confirm they are on the right site overall is to scan the navigation. This offers a nice chance to display your full value to the visitor.

Do you offer only one product or service, or do you offer many?

Either way, don't hide your solutions or services under a "shop" or "services" menu link.

Display them proudly in your navigation, grouping them into relevant headings.

You want visitors to be able to articulate exactly what you offer by looking at your navigation alone.

Also, your navigation is a great place to use keywords! Each navigation link can be a relevant keyword phrase that leads to the content for that topic or solution.

Content Optimization

This is where you fulfill the searchers' needs in full. It's not just the scent but the meal you deliver here. Whatever they were looking for, the content must deliver.

Keep the content focused on a single need and use links to direct the visitor to more information as needed.

Each page of content should have a primary goal, and everything on the page should direct the visitor toward the completion of that primary goal.

Use keywords as needed (and relevant), but focus the content on a single topic that addresses the visitor's needs and your goals for them.

Calls to Action

Navigation is important, but you need to incorporate other calls to action for the page's goal(s).

Make sure your calls to action explicitly state what the visitor will get when they click.

While each page may have one primary goal, not every visitor will be ready to convert.

It can be beneficial to provide some secondary goals with calls to action that will keep the visitor engaged on your site but through a less direct route to the goal.

Be Fast



Speed is an increasingly important component of optimization.

Regardless of what platform (desktop, tablet, phone) the search is performed on, if your pages are slow to load, the search engines will likely limit your exposure to searchers, especially those working from slow connections.

That means you want your site to be lightning fast.

Searchers and site visitors are very impatient. They are more apt to leave and start a new search than they are to wait around to see what you offer.

Image Compression

Large images can take up a whole lot of bandwidth.

But with HD resolution screens so common, you can't compromise on image quality for speed.

Instead, make sure to save images in the best format (jpg, gif, bmp) depending on what provides the best quality for your image.

You can then run your image through compression tools to decrease the size without decreasing the quality.

Streamlined Code

Technology has improved quite a bit since back in the day.

We can do things today with just a few lines of code that required a gluttony of code just a few years ago. And it keeps getting better!

While this is good for the web at large, it often means if you're not keeping up, you're slowing down.

Keep your code lean and clean to keep your site speed up to par.

Fast Servers

Your [web host](#) can also play a critical role in your site speed issues.

Sharing server space is likely to slow you down, so consider getting a dedicated server.

This is especially critical for businesses with a lot of traffic.

Talk to your web host about what you can do to speed up your site for a minimal cost.

Every host will have different options, but it's imperative not to let your server bog you down.

Always be Testing

There is always room for improvement.

Just because a change you made works well doesn't mean it can't work better.

Everything that can be tested should be tested – and it's OK to fail.

Even a test that turns out poorly is a learning experience for what not to do. You'd never know unless you test it, right?

In a perfect world, you'd test every UX change you make to see if the result improved performance before moving on to the next.

Unfortunately, we rarely visit – let alone live in – that perfect world.

Most sites are in such poor condition that taking one best practice at a time would take far too long to get measurable results.

If that's you, you can probably make good headway implementing the best practices here and then going back to test variations and additional changes later.

Chapter 13

The Definitive Local SEO Guide for Beginners

There are many misconceptions about local SEO strategy, tactics, and what should be happening when you put together a campaign.

When approaching any local SEO endeavor, it's best to approach with the mindset of not gaming Google, but using proven, holistic optimization best practices that will help your site stand the test of time.

This guide will walk you through every part of the local SEO process, from beginning to end, starting with a local competition analysis.

From there, we'll talk about the building blocks of local SEO:

- Keyword targeting.
- Technical SEO.
- Content.
- Links.
- Let's get started.



Brian Harnish

SEO Consultant at Site Objective

Brian has been doing SEO since before it was called SEO, back in the days of 1998. Back then, SEO was known as “add-ons to web development,” and the marketing of the term was just beginning. SEJ’s latest Guide to SEO says the earliest beginnings of SEO saw its roots in 1997. Now, SEO has boomed and blossomed into a multi-billion dollar industry.

Proficient in website design, website development, and having tons of practical SEO knowledge and expertise, Brian’s skills run the gamut from SEO to digital marketing to website development. Brian offers SEO audits, SEO consulting, and website design & development through his company, Site Objective SEO Consulting.

Local Competition Analysis

A local competition analysis can make or break your local SEO campaign.

By analyzing your competition, you can find out about the most important things they are doing to achieve organic results.

From this competition analysis, you can move forward knowing that the information you have will help you achieve the results you're looking for.



By looking at content, it is possible to figure out:

- What topics the competition is writing about.
- How many words they're writing on average.
- The frequency of their content updates.

Going through this process helps you gain a clear understanding of what they are doing so you can adapt your content strategy and beat theirs accordingly.

By looking at links, it is possible to figure out things like:

- How many links the competition is getting.
- What kind of links.
- Where they're getting their links from.
- How often they are getting links.
- When they are usually getting their links.

By looking at on-site factors like on-page optimization, it is also possible to develop a strategy that will outlast and beat their local strategy.

The factors you analyze in this local competition analysis will help you create a winning strategy.

Factors to Include in a Local Competition Analysis

Focusing on your market, your niche, and your locale, you will want to perform a deep local competition analysis.

On the surface, a local competition analysis will include the following factors:

- Content.
- Links.
- On-page SEO.

Diving deeper, the local competition analysis should include the following in order to gain a clear picture of the local competitiveness of the market.

Please make note that not all of these factors will increase local rankings – some will, but they are here in order to help you create a winning local strategy based on everything the competition is doing.

Links

- Local SEO Directories.
- Niche local sites.
- Editorial local links.
- Chamber of Commerce links.
- Local .GOV links.
- Local .EDU links.

Content

- Who is writing the content?
- What is the content about?
- When is the content being written?
- Where is the content focused (locally)?
- Why is the content being written?
- How many social shares is the content getting?

On-Page Technical SEO

- High quality, validated HTML and CSS coding.
- Schema.org coding for local SEO.
- Locally-optimized title tags.
- Locally-optimized meta descriptions.
- Locally-optimized URLs.
- Locally-optimized on-page copy with tight topical and keyword focus.

What You Want to Obtain During the Competition Analysis

This competition analysis should focus on the top 10 results on Google.

Do a search for your local area + keyword phrase in an industry you are targeting (e.g., “Orange County personal injury lawyers”).

Use a combination of link analysis tools like [Google Search Console](#), Majestic, SEMrush, Raven Tools, and Ahrefs; export all the data; put together that data; and analyze the link profile.

I recommend using at least two or three link profile analysis tools because single tools by themselves do not always have all of the data available.

What you are looking for in this link profile are things like:

Local SEO Directories

- What directories do these sites have?
- What niche local links do these sites have?
- What kind of editorial local links do these sites have?
- Do these sites have any chamber of commerce links, and if so, which ones?
- Do these sites have any local .gov or .edu links?

Directories still work as a linking tactic, if it is done with high enough quality links and they don't all appear to be spam.

Really, though, it's just a directory – pretty self-explanatory here.

You're looking for directories that aren't all ad spam, meaning they do not contain many, many ads above the fold, and the ads don't interfere with people looking for the link. The directories are generally clean, of high quality, and can drive high authority link equity.

Niche Local Sites

Niche local sites are those sites in your industry that are local authorities on their topics.

They can be anything from animal rights organizations to charities to other sites that will help lend an air of authority when they link to you.

The main idea when going after these links is to ensure that they are of high quality and not spammy in any way.

These sites can also take on the guise of local partners. Please note that I am not advocating link exchanges in this way, because that is a bad idea. I am advocating for creating partnerships with other local businesses in order to obtain links that will help your site in the SERPs.

What we are trying to do is gauge the feasibility of beating the site in the search results. We don't want to actually copy their link profile.

By gauging ranking feasibility, it will be much easier to determine an overall linking strategy afterward.

And the reason we don't want to copy their link profile is this: I can't be there to guide you every step of the way.

If you slip up and optimize with a low-quality link, you could eventually get yourself a penalty by getting too many of them. It is very easy to continue old habits once you start.

Chamber of Commerce Links

Chamber links are essential to good local SEO.

They provide high authority, can be a great partner-type link, and can also refer local business.

However, it is important to note that not every Chamber of Commerce link will be a .gov.

Local .gov and .edu Links

These links can be anything from local government offices or charities to local schools.

The fact that they are .gov and .edu links are all just a major bonus.

Things have not changed regarding the weight of .gov and .edu links.

They still tend to be some of the highest quality links available.

Content Considerations for the Competitor Analysis

When gathering data for the local competitor analysis, it is important to consider things like:

- Who is writing the content?
- What is the content about?
- When is the content being written?
- Where is the content focused locally?
- Why is the content being written?

All of the above factors will help determine the content you will ultimately put on the site, and how to go from there.

Please note that Google's [John Mueller has stated](#) that content doesn't have to be long content in order to rank well:

“There’s no minimum length, and there’s no minimum number of articles a day that you have to post, nor even a minimum number of pages on a website. In most cases, quality is better than quantity. Our algorithms explicitly try to find and recommend websites that provide content that’s of high quality, unique, and compelling to users. Don’t fill your site with low-quality content, instead, work on making sure that your site is the absolute best of its kind.”

On-Page Technical SEO

Basic URL Best Practices Are Still King

This means: always makes sure your site is crawlable from a local standpoint.

When using highly targeted, niche keyword phrases, use them in the URL as you name your page.

If your site is not crawlable and technically accurate, you can't expect Google to be able to rank it appropriately.

High Quality, Validated HTML & CSS Coding

Yes, I realize what most SEOs are going to say: high quality, valid HTML and CSS coding does not matter.

While Google doesn't have any such requirements in place, high quality coding does matter and can help rankings significantly as a quality attribute.

When you code correctly, you reduce the chance of the browser having to “guess” what you’re trying to have it render.

When you code and develop a website correctly, you reduce page speed and browser render speed.

Page load time is one [Google ranking factor](#) we all know about.



Regardless, high quality, validated HTML and CSS coding should always be the end result of your site’s development work.

If your competitors' sites in the competitor analysis do not have such validation or high quality coding in their framework, then you have an attribute you can use against them – make sure your site's coding and page speed is far better than theirs in all areas: well-optimized code, make server bottlenecks non-existent, etc.

Schema.org Coding for Local SEO

Schema.org coding should be on every website that has Schema data type information on it.

It is crucial to getting that site to show up in rich snippets and the carousels of Google's search results.

If those sites don't have schema markup for the data types that are present on your site, here is yet another useful ranking signal you can optimize for toward your benefit.

Locally Optimized Title Tags, Meta Descriptions, URLs

Every site being optimized on a local basis should have locally focused title tags, meta descriptions, and URLs.

What does locally focused mean?

This means if you are trying to optimize for keyword phrases like "Garden Grove personal injury lawyer" you should be using the city name in your target keywords.

Here's an example of locally optimized title tags, meta descriptions, and URLs:

La Habra, CA - Personal Injury Lawyer Los Angeles

www.██████████.com/personal-injury-lawyer-la-habra.html ▼

Have you been injured in an accident in La Habra, CA? Do you believe that someone else is responsible for your injuries? Are you confused or worried about ...

Locally Optimized On-Page Copy With Tight Topical and Keyword Focus

In the competitor analysis, you are also looking for competitors who may or may not have locally optimized on-page copy with tight topical and keyword focus.

This will tell you what the competition is actually doing for that on-page optimization.

Cheating With Your Competitor Research

If you really want to get nitty-gritty with the competitor research, I highly suggest performing an audit of your competitor sites with Screaming Frog.

Just set the Screaming Frog settings to your desired specifications, crawl each competitor site, and after you export the Excel spreadsheet data, filter out all of the data so that only the titles, meta description, and URLs are showing up.

You can even look up what they are doing to their H1 tags as well.

Looking at all of this useful data will show you exactly what your competition is doing on-site – and will help you make yours better.

Keyword Research

Start With Locally Focused Versions of Keywords Your Clients are Actually Looking For

Keywords and topical relevance are important factors to ensuring that your on-page optimization is properly targeted and fully optimized.

When you perform keyword research, you're looking for keywords that have a good search volume (above 70 or so average searches per month is a healthy number to shoot for), have lower competition, and are highly targeted.

A locally focused version of a keyword phrase for lawyers may be “Fountain Valley personal injury lawyers.”

If you try targeting personal injury lawyers by itself without a local focus, good luck. It will take massive amounts of links, authority building, and market penetration in order to expand to the type of reach that you want your marketing to accomplish.

When doing keyword research like this, it’s also important to consider the size of the market.

If you don’t consider the size of a market like Los Angeles (with millions of pages in Google’s index and businesses that have already built up their authority), you will be in for a rude awakening if you promise a client they will see rankings in Los Angeles within three months. Not going to happen.

It will likely take a year or more to achieve results on the first page of Google in a market the size of Los Angeles – assuming you have what it takes to beat the competition at their link acquisition and other SEO efforts.

Get Good Search Volume, Lower Competition, Highly Targeted Niche Keywords

Good search volume, lower competition, highly targeted niche keywords are diamonds in the rough.

These keyword phrases will usually bring the most sought-after improvement to an important metric for your client: conversions.

While lower competition is nice, good search volume should be at the top of your list when performing local keyword research.

The higher the search volume, the higher the interest searchers have in that topic.

If you don't pay attention to search volume, you may get lucky with a couple of conversions. But that kind of luck will run out eventually.

Solid research is at the helm of any SEO endeavor.

Highly targeted niche keywords are those keywords that are targeted toward people who are performing searches for specific things within your industry. You have to dive deep into the details of your industry when trying to unearth these keyword gems.

For example, if you know that people frequently perform searches for lawyers in Fountain Valley for auto accidents, you would want to use a keyword phrase like "Fountain Valley auto accident attorney."

If you know that people frequently perform searches for specialized items in a particular industry, there is usually intent and questions behind those searches.

By analyzing and thinking through the potential intent of people searching for these phrases, it's possible to build a keyword list that includes questions about these topics that you can use to build even further, deeper, highly targeted topical content pages. These types of pages can end up being real converters for your client.

The reason behind performing keyword research this deep is that you can then figure out what keywords are going to perform best for your client as a result.

Create Content That Will Entice Searches and Bring Traffic to Your Site

Using these keywords, you can then build a content editorial calendar focused around these topics.

Once you have these topic ideas and a plan with goals set to create these articles by such and such a date, you can start really driving local SEO performance through these types of keyword phrases.

This is only one solution of several.

I encourage you to experiment with this solution and find your own methods of developing lists of highly targeted, highly focused keyword phrases.

From these keyword phrases, you can develop content that even the savviest industry regulars will love.

This is what will help you grow that success metric that your client is counting on.

Content: What Not to Do for Local SEO

It's important to discuss some of the things you should not do, while also discussing what you should do.

Sometimes, bad habits creep in that never should when you are performing the SEO properly.

These include things like Wikipedia-type content, not being focused enough with your content, not being unique enough with your content, and keyword-stuffing.

Former Googler Maile Ohye talked about this during SEJ Summit 2016 in Santa Monica:

“Focus on delighting your user.”

I can't think of any area of content writing that this applies to more so than local SEO content. Create this content in that way with the end goal of delighting your user in mind.

Create Your Content With a Niche, Local Focus

Just like how we created keywords with a niche, local focus, we want to make sure that we create our content with the same focus in mind.

Create content in a way that aspires to this niche, local-focus content, while also focusing on what people in the industry want (all the information we learned from our competitor research earlier).

This content should be highly targeted and specific, being tailored to the end SEO goal in mind.

You wouldn't want to create informational text-based content when videos are all that's necessary. And you wouldn't want to create 10,000-word articles on sites where the only information people are searching for are local brick-and-mortar businesses.

The key is to tailor your content to that niche with the proper local and topical focus that creates a high-quality experience for users who are searching for these topics.

It is pointless to just create bland, uninteresting content that reads like Wikipedia content. That won't delight your user.

Put more thought and effort into creating your content and make sure that it fulfills all of these goals, as well as your end SEO goal.

Create Unique Content Per Page, and Per Site

It is extremely easy to fall into a trap of creating the same content per page, and the same content from site to site.

I get it. You hate writing. You don't wanna do it, you'd rather focus on SEO.

What are you doing in SEO if you hate writing? It boggles the mind!

Anyway...

When creating localized content it is important that this content from local page to local page is unique and provides unique value.

Don't just create bland, uninteresting content where the only thing that you change from page to page is the local keyword phrase. That is no longer going to work as a good content strategy.

Instead, you may end up finding yourself struggling to rank well if you do that enough.

The other pitfall is creating the same content per site. This can happen especially if you operate an agency that has clients throughout the same entire niche (e.g., legal, real estate).

It can be especially challenging to come up with unique content where there are only so many ways you can say things in law.

But, by doing the work to come up with unique, stellar content ideas that resonate with your website's audience, you won't have to constantly come up with content that sounds awful in its 100th variation.



Stay Conversational, Natural, and Avoid Keyword-Stuffing

Finding success on Google hasn't changed much over the past 15 or so years, even with the introduction of [RankBrain](#):

- Write your content using natural language.
- Focus on your user.
- Don't keyword stuff.

Links for Local SEO

Local SEO ranking factors typically are centered around on-page and off-page factors with a razor focus on local.

Just like content, links are an important part of local SEO ranking factors.

In the beginning, it is important to perform an analysis of the site and figure out where it's at locally.

Using a tool like Whitespark or BrightLocal can help you perform a local analysis of your site's link profile. I would recommend starting here and building on that.

If you have some local citations already, but not all, then you know where you need to be to get all of the others. But, if you have never done link acquisition for local SEO before, then it can be quite the daunting task to go after all of these local citations.

Including the Correct N.A.P. Information, Every Time

When claiming your local profiles and obtaining local SEO citations, it is important to make sure that your NAP info (Name, Address, Phone number) are all exactly the same.

Don't use Ste., Suite, and # in various instances of submitting the information on your site.

This isn't going to result in improved performance.

In fact, it can actually sink your ship because this introduces too many noisy local ranking signals.

We want to make sure that your links and citations are as strong as they can be.

So, if your address is:

Some Business, Inc.
123 Standard Way Suite 400
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Don't submit it as:

Some Business, Incorporated
123 Standard Way, Ste. 400
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Or:

Some Business, Ltd (when there isn't an Ltd)
123 Standard Way, #400
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Claiming Your Local Profiles & Local SEO Citations

When you first start out with claiming your local SEO citations, you may be asking: OK, so where do I start?

Ideally, you should be sifting through the competitor research we performed earlier and looking at your competitor's link profiles.

By examining link profiles thoroughly, it can generally be a good way to figure out what local sites your competition is using.

However, I say "generally" because doing it that way can only go so far: not every local site is going to have the URL local.business.com in it, and others will have regular .com domains.

That's why I recommend using in-depth competition research along with tools as mentioned above.

Final Thoughts on Local SEO

At the heart of it, local SEO isn't all that much different from organic SEO. Keywords, content, and links are the heart of your optimization strategy.

The difference comes when you consider the part of local SEO where the local focus comes into play.

It's so important to approach these strategies with a holistic, relationship-building approach in mind.

The wrong approach to take on any of these tactics is a constant strong-arm approach that results in a penalty for your site.

Focus on:

- Link acquisition, not link manipulation.
- Delighting the user, not stuffing your content with keywords.
- Creating a compelling user experience, not haphazardly designed digital ecosystems.

In short, if you build it with high enough quality, the people you want to attract will come.

Chapter 14

An Introduction to Mobile SEO

Mobile is to SEO what glaze is to Krispy Kreme. You can't have one without the other. It is the backbone of Google's index.

Sure, the mobile-first index just rolled out in 2018, but Google has been dropping not-so-little hints for the past few years.

In 2015, Google announced the mobile searches surpassed desktop. Then in 2016, mobilegeddon 2.0 rocked the SEO world. And, in 2017, Google introduced us to the mobile-first index.

But the question still remains:

What should my mobile strategy be?

It isn't enough to have a mobile-friendly site.

The technological advancements of both Google and Microsoft will mean big changes to how you optimize for mobile, voice, and visual search.



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Anna is the Features Writer for Search Engine Journal and an SEO-whisperer at Hello Anna & Co. Over the last 5 years, Anna has successfully developed and implemented online marketing, SEO, and conversion campaigns for 100+ businesses of all sizes; from the Fortune 500, to startups, and nonprofits. In her spare time, she moonlights as a volunteer soccer coach.

This post will tell you all you need to know to get started with mobile SEO.

Step into your future with the basics of mobile SEO.

How Google Deals with Mobile Search

If it isn't obvious yet, Google clearly favors mobile search.

But it can be quite confusing understanding how Google deals with mobile search.

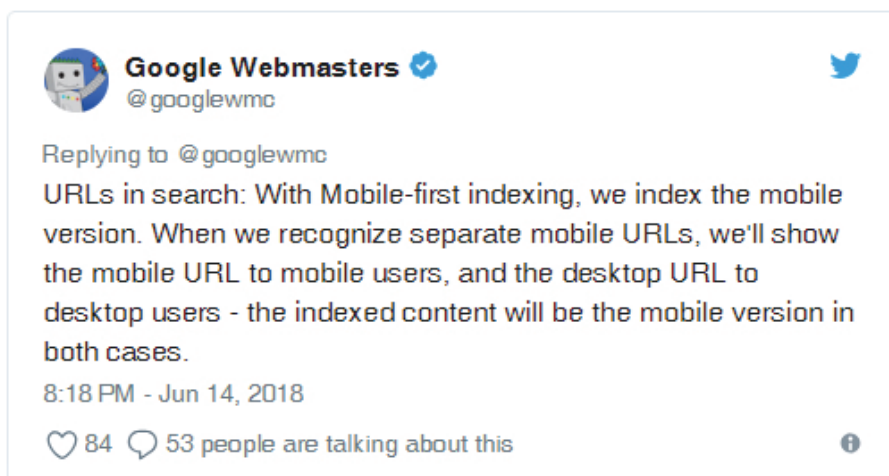
So, here's the lowdown on some common FAQs about mobile search and Google.

What URL Does Google Index If You Have Separate Mobile and Desktop URLs?

Google will display the desktop URL for the desktop searches.

And, the mobile searches will get the mobile URLs.

But, the indexed content (the big chalupa that determines how your rank) will be from mobile.



Will I Lose My Ranking Positions with the Mobile-First Index?

The mobile-first index does not affect your ranking position.

But, mobile-friendliness is a ranking so your UX is still important.

Mobile-friendliness is reviewed page-by-page, which means you'll want to update your money pages first.



Allow me to let you in on a little secret:

Google wants both your desktop and mobile site to have the same content.

If you have the same content (like a responsive design), you will see no impact from the mobile-first index.

Plus, on the bright side, Google sends notifications to let webmasters know the mobile-first indexing is going down on your site.



Mobile-first indexing enabled for [redacted]

To owner of [redacted]

This means that you may see more traffic in your logs from Googlebot Smartphone. You may also see that snippets in Google Search results are now generated from the mobile version of your content.

Background: Mobile-first indexing means that Googlebot will now use the mobile version of your site for indexing and ranking, to better help our (primarily mobile) users find what they're looking for. Google's crawling, indexing, and ranking systems have historically used the desktop version of your site's content, which can cause issues for mobile searchers when the desktop version differs from the mobile version. Our analysis indicates that the mobile and desktop versions of your site are comparable.

For more information:

- Monitor your index coverage using the [Index Status report](#).
- Monitor your impressions, clicks, and site appearance using the [Performance report](#).
- If you have any additional questions, drop by our [Webmaster forum](#) for more help - mention message type [WNC-20058194] or our [public events](#).

Is Your Site Mobile-Friendly?

To help you find out if your site is mobile-friendly, here are some of my favorite tools.

- [Mobile-Friendly Test](#)
- [Test My Site](#)
- [Fetch as Google](#)
- [PageSpeed Insights](#)
- [BrowserStack](#)

Best Practices for Mobile SEO

Let's break down how to optimize your site for mobile search.

We'll start by exploring a few mobile SEO best practices and techniques that apply to all mobile sites.

Mobile Content

To sum up mobile SEO, you want the same exact content from your desktop on your mobile site.

All content formats (text, videos, images, etc.) should be crawlable and indexable in mobile.

Google updated their app and mobile results to display badges for image search.

This means those image alt attributes that you've been ignoring are becoming even more relevant in mobile search.

I mean, if Google can already recognize dog and cat breeds through photos, can you imagine what's next?

Also, with the rise of voice search, you may want to consider aligning your content.

For example, I would recommend optimizing your meta titles for mobile search because they are shorter.

Remember, voice search is performed from a mobile device, so it makes sense to optimize your mobile site.

Voice search = mobile device.

This means redefining the way marketers perform keyword research.

Long-form queries and questions are dominating the SERPs, which is why things like featured snippets are having a major impact.

It's about user intent now.

Mobile Site Performance

To quote Top Gun, "I feel the need for speed."

Yes, Google is feeling the need for speed as the official mobile "[Speed Update](#)" hit the scene.

This is why Google introduced [the Accelerated Mobile Pages Project](#) to improve site speed and page load times for mobile content.

AMP allows content to be cached and served directly within a SERP (rather than sending the user to the original website).

This is also why the industry will start to see [AMP pages integrate with PWAs](#).

I would recommend using responsive design as well as AMP pages.

For example, using AMP pages to serve your blog posts and services pages if you're an SEO agency may be something to consider.

And, if you want to get really deep into page speed, listen to [this podcast](#) with Bastian Grimm and Brent Csutoras as they discuss paint timings.

Making Your Website Mobile-Friendly

There are three main approaches to making your website mobile-friendly:

1. Responsive Design
2. Adaptive Website
3. Separate Mobile Site

Here's how to optimize each.

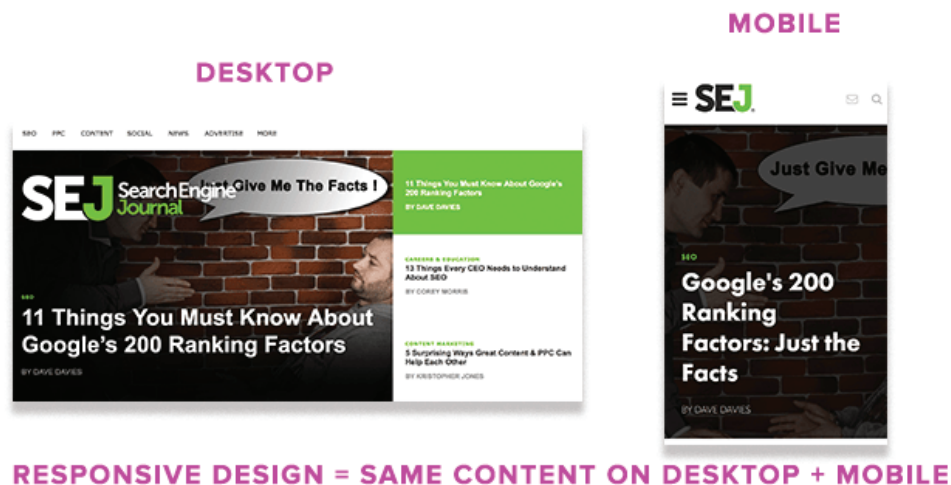
1. Optimizing Responsive Design for Mobile Search

There's a mistaken belief that if your site is responsive then it's automatically mobile-friendly.

False.

Let me explain.

Responsive design maintains the same website content from desktop to mobile. It takes the same URLs, HTML, images, etc.



However, responsive design does not mean that the needs of your mobile visitors are met.

Responsive design still needs to be optimized for user experience.

With that said, Google has stated that responsive design is their preferred option for mobile SEO, but has confirmed there is no ranking boost to gain from having a responsive site.

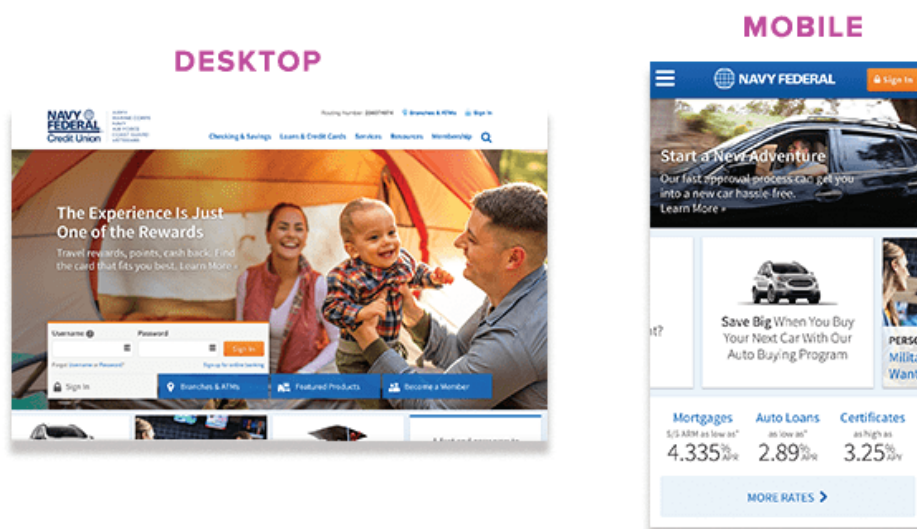
And, based on a study by Appticles, published in Smashing Magazine, that responsive websites are the most common mobile-friendly site holding it down at 51.11 percent.

Here is what you need to know about optimizing your responsive design for mobile SEO:

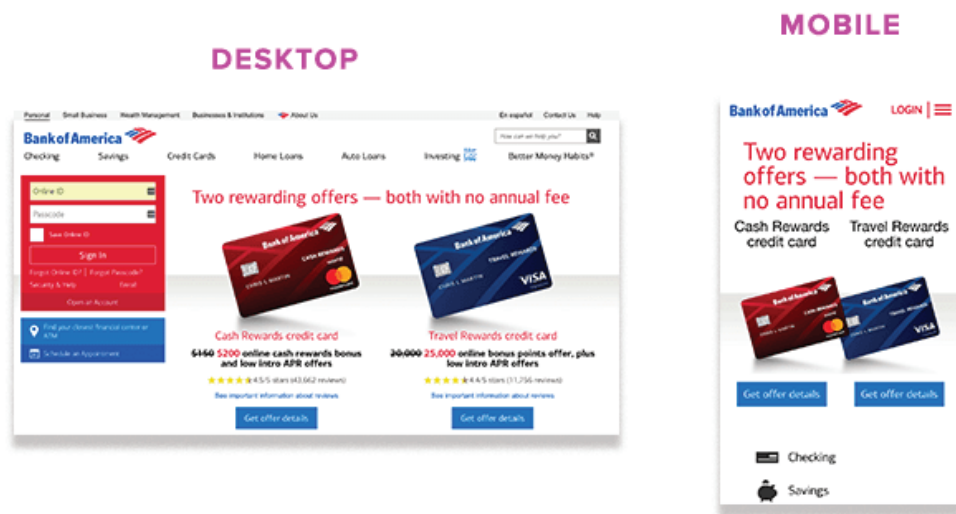
Scale Images

Images already scale with responsive design. But, they may not be necessary for your mobile users. I'll show you an example.

Here's Navy Federal Credit Union's homepage on desktop and mobile.



Now, here's Bank of America's homepage on desktop and mobile.



If you were a mobile user, which website would make you click?

Bank of America, right?

Navy Federal's desktop top image takes over the mobile website with no call-to-action. On the other hand, Bank of America's CTA's are front and center.

Key takeaway: Scale images for mobile users if you're using responsive design. Ask your developer to create alternate images for different viewports. Don't forget to **update the meta name = "viewport."**

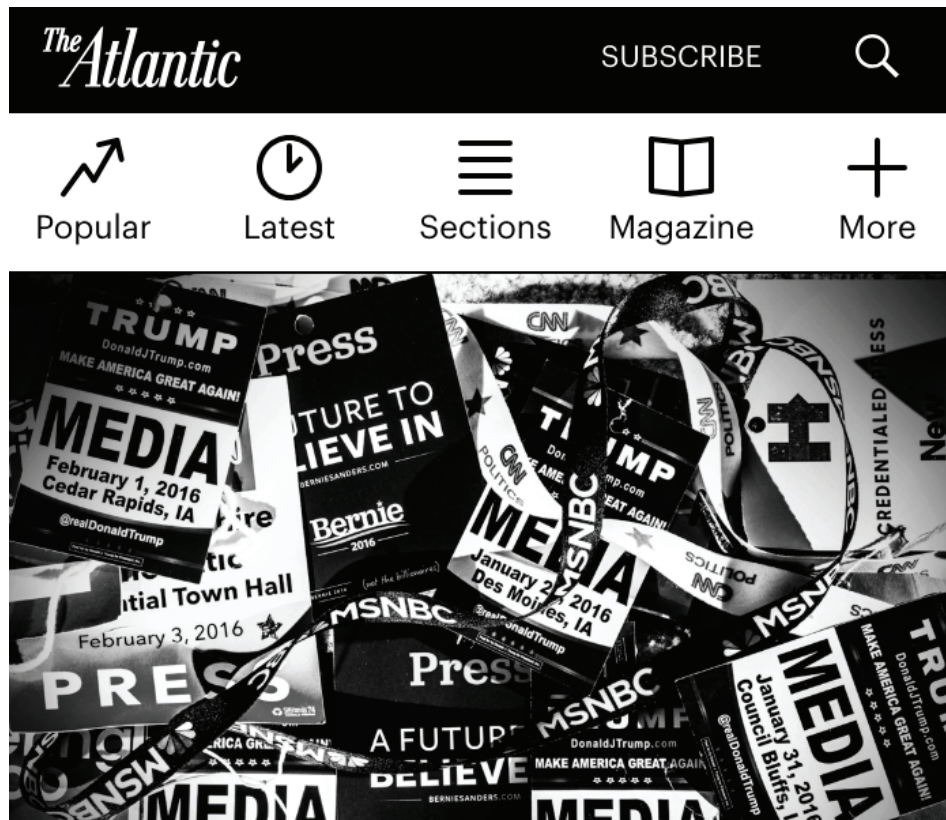
Clean Navigation

Creating a clickable, easy-to-view navigation menu is essential for mobile users.

I would recommend monitoring your mobile user behavior to understand what they are searching for on your site.

Then, tailor your navigation to their needs.

For example, The Atlantic keeps their navigation at the top with their main pages along with a hamburger menu in the center.



MARK PETERSON / REDU

Why a Free Press Matters

Journalists have been keeping a check on power
since the creation of the First Amendment.

Now, they're being tested.

DAN RATHER AND ELLIOT KIRSCHNER

Side bar: Google has confirmed that [hamburger menus are “fine”](#) to use in mobile design.

Key takeaway: Keep your mobile navigation simple and clean. Limit the main pages to 4-8. If you need more, utilize a hamburger menu.

Delete Mobile Pop-Ups

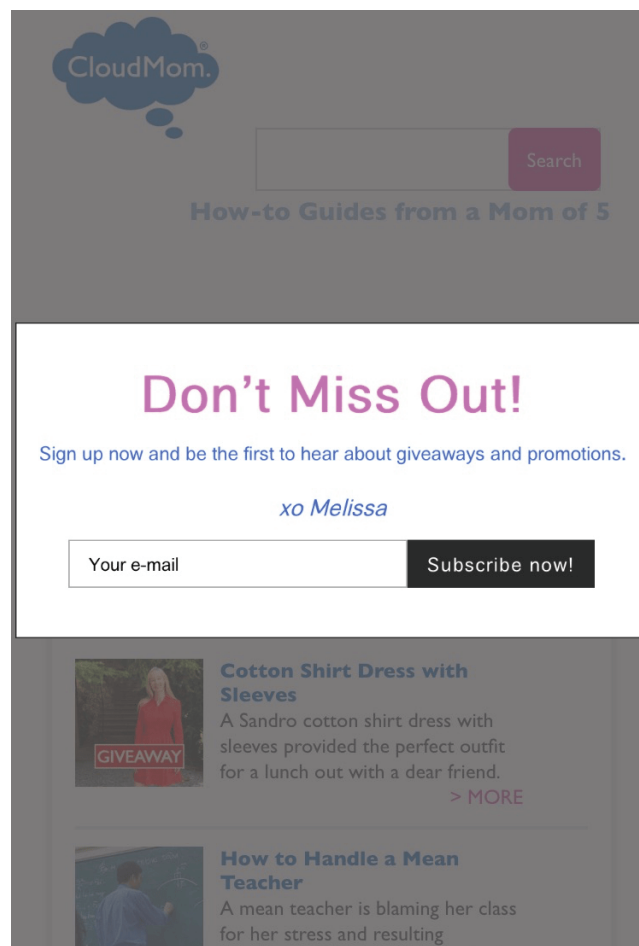
Google wants your mobile users to find what they need and fast.

To help their mobile users, Google introduced a new signal in 2017 that **stated:**

“Pages where content is not easily accessible to a user on the transition from the mobile search results may not rank as high.”

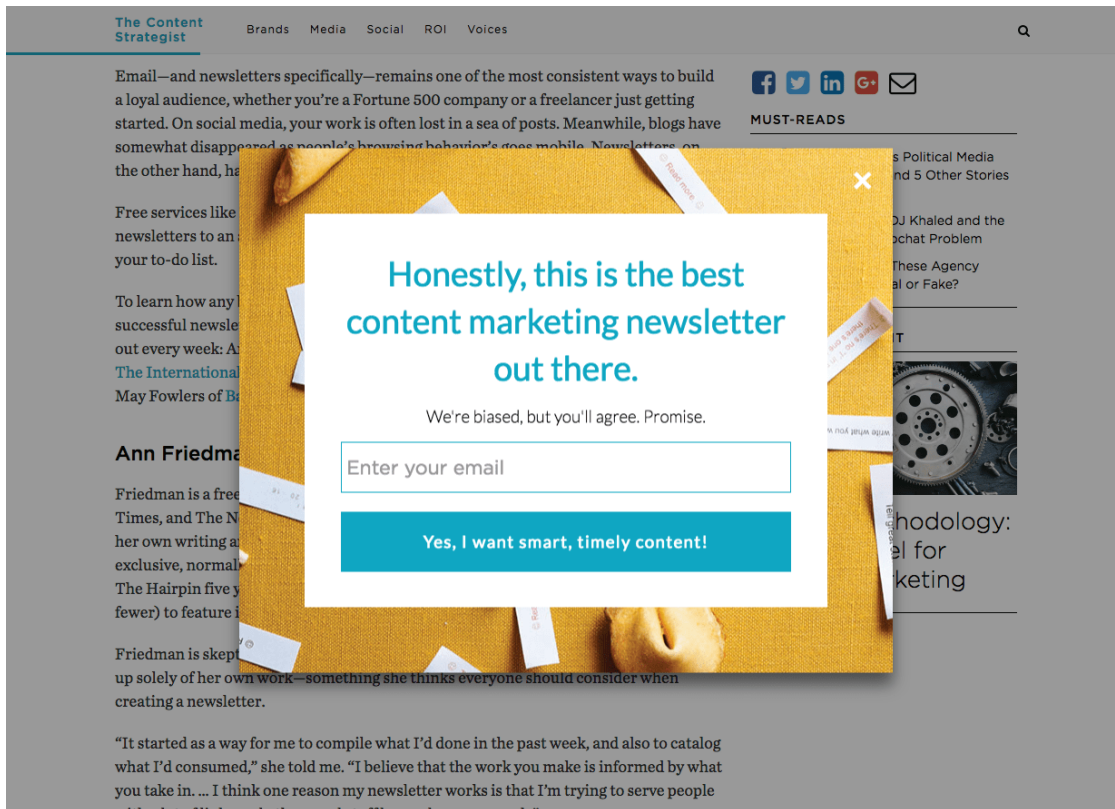
That’s not to say all pop-ups are bad.

Here’s an example of a bad pop-up:



The newsletter takes up the entire screen without letting users read the content behind it.

Here's an example of a good pop-up:



The image does not take up the full screen and the visitors can still see the content.

Key takeaway: Proceed with caution when it comes to pop-ups. There is proof that pop-ups do work. In fact, Sumo saw a **9.28 percent** conversion rate for their pop-ups. Just tread lightly.

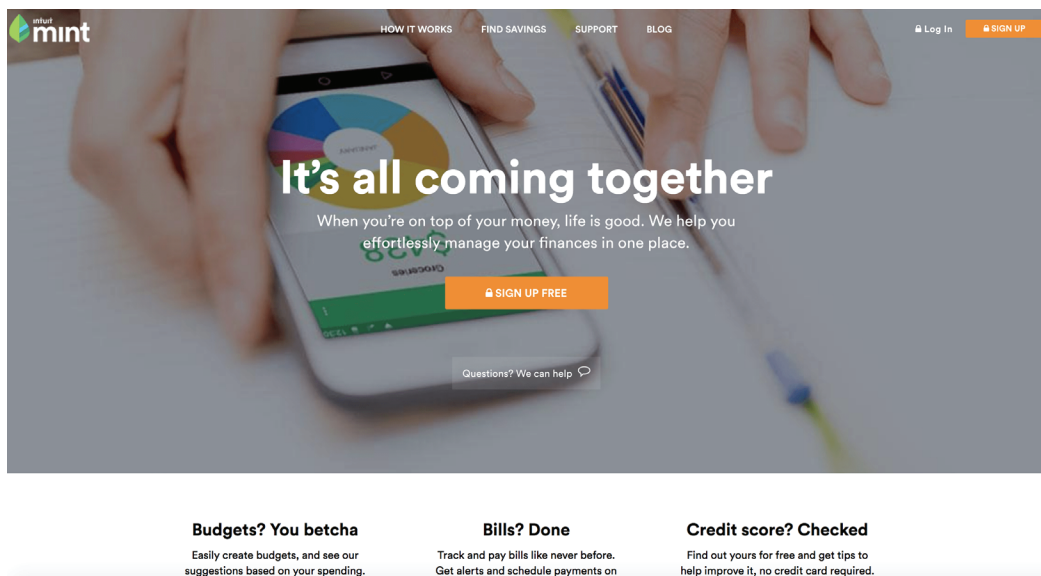
Shorten Copy

Desktop copy does not often translate well to mobile copy.

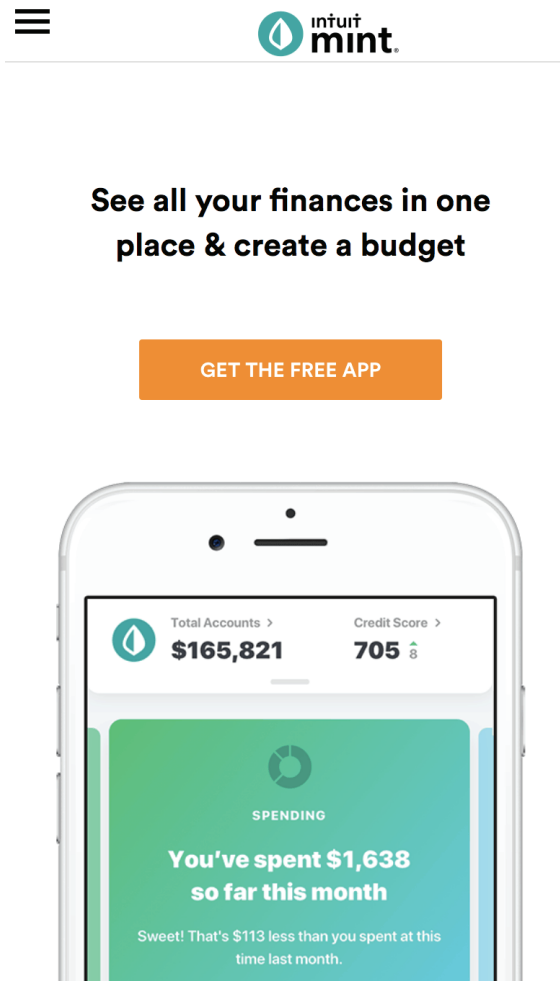
Lots of text on a mobile site can crowd and overwhelm mobile users.

I like to keep things simple by reducing text. Let me show you.

Here's Mint.com's desktop site:



Now, here's their mobile site:



The copy is reduced above the fold to keep the CTA clear and concise.

They pushed the longer form copy down for users to learn more if they scroll.

Key takeaway: Less is more. Keep conversions high by reducing the amount of copy above the fold. Entice users to scroll with the initial text, then give them the full monty after scrolling.

Design CTAs

iAcquire and SurveyMonkey discovered that **70 percent** of mobile searches lead to action on websites within one hour.

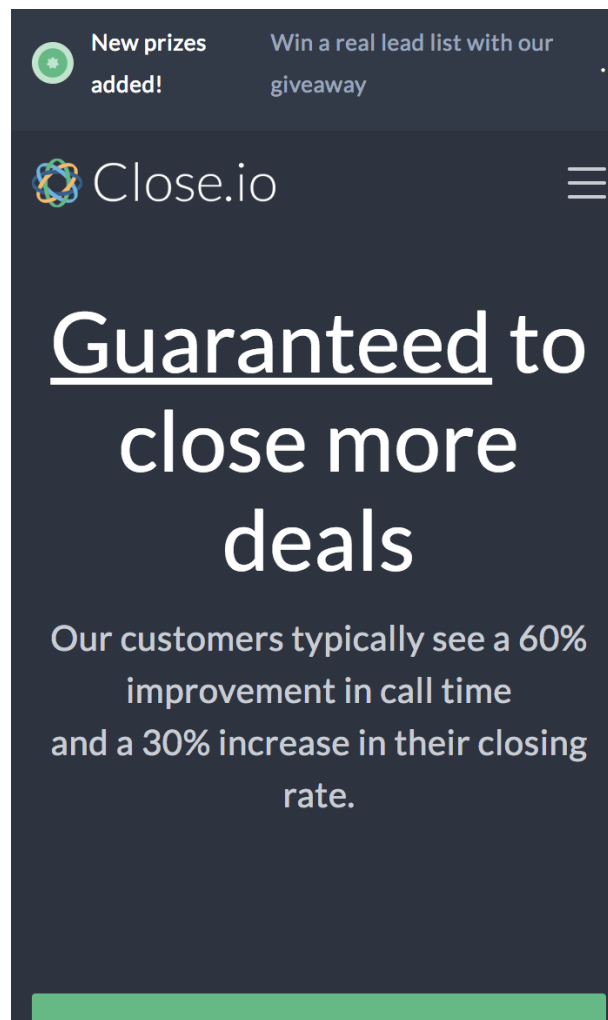
But, **mobile conversions are lower than desktop.**

Why?

The call-to-action is not clear.

Here's what I mean:

Look at Close.io's mobile site:



They require the user to scroll to see the CTA button.

It's likely they are losing out on mobile conversions.

Now, here is an example from Flywheel.



You can see that they want users to “Sign up for free” to use their product.

Key takeaway: Make it obvious to the mobile searcher what their next step is. Add a clear CTA button above the fold to get the user to click.

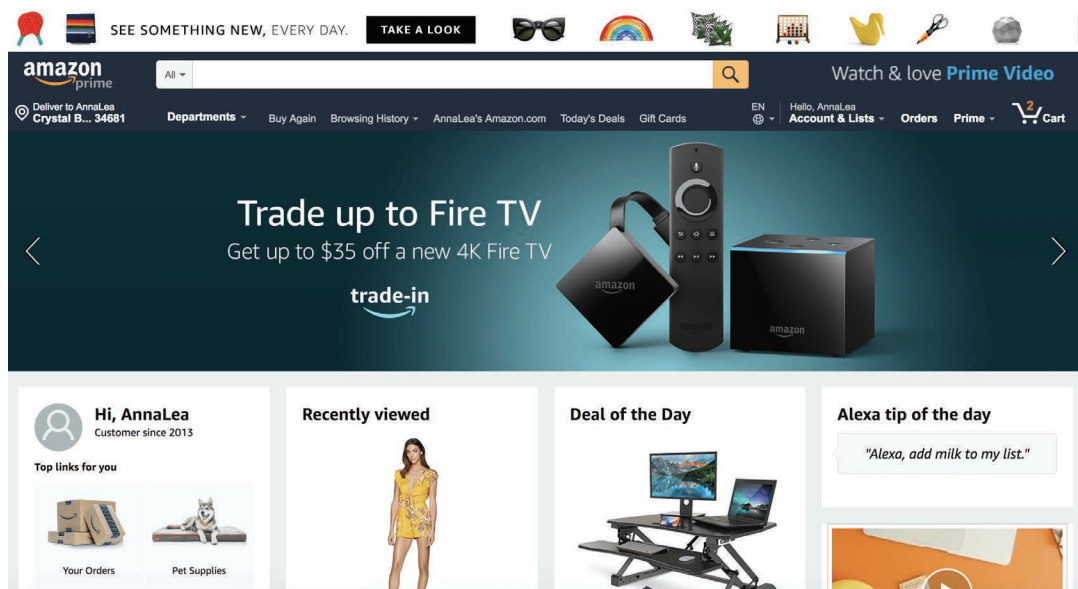
2. Optimizing an Adaptive Website for Mobile Search

An adaptive (or RESS/dynamically served) site uses the same URL, but the server sends a different version of the HTML (and CSS) based on what type of device is requesting the page.

You essentially have three different versions of your website:

- Desktop.
- Mobile.
- Tablet.

Amazon is a great example of adaptive web design:



So, why did Amazon choose to use an adaptive web design over responsive?

Mobile Marketer reported that Amazon chose adaptive design to increase page speeds on mobile **40 percent**.

If you're a small business, I'd recommend going with the popular vote of a responsive design.

Adaptive websites require more resources.

Here is what you need to know about optimizing your adaptive website for mobile SEO:

Cloaking

Google will devalue your site if you're showing one thing to the search engine and something different to the user.

This is cloaking.

To fix this issue, ask your host to use the [Vary-HTTP Header](#).

This will guide the mobile crawler to the separate mobile content and signal to the server what type of device the user is coming from.

Customize Design

With adaptive design, developers have full control over the layout, display, and graphics.

If your website is tailored to multiple countries, then you may want to swap out the design elements based on region.

The downside to this is that you'll have to manually update each version of the site.

For example, you can serve custom meta titles and meta descriptions that target mobile users.

Combine Adaptive with Responsive

There is an alternative before going knee deep in adaptive.

You can utilize responsive design with adaptive logic.

Developers can customize for mobile users using client-side JavaScript.

3. Optimizing a Separate Mobile Website for Mobile Search

A separate mobile site (or m-dot) is a completely different site.

The same basic SEO principles remain the same for your desktop, tablet, and mobile, but there are a few differences.

Here is what you need to know about optimizing your separate mobile website for mobile SEO:

Separate URLs

Each desktop URL should serve a mobile URL.

For example, if the desktop URL is www.example.com then the mobile URL should be m.example.com.

You will need to add the canonical URL `rel="canonical"` tag to the mobile site pointing to the desktop URL. Like this:

```
<link rel="alternate" media="only screen and (max-width: 640px)"
```

```
href="http://m.example.com/page-1" >
```

This can also be done in the sitemaps.

Implement Mobile Switchboard Tags

Switchboard tags are similar to canonical tags, they tell Google a mobile URL exists with a rel=alternate tag.

Without switchboard tags, Google may not crawl the mobile versions of your URL.

You will need to add the rel="alternate" tag to the desktop URL that points to the mobile URL. Like this:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.example.com/page-1 >
```

This can also be done in the sitemaps.

Detect User-agent Strings

Double check your redirects to make sure that your desktop URLs coordinate to the correct mobile URL when redirecting.

For example, www.example.com/about should redirect to m.example.com/about.

Otherwise, you could create a faulty redirect (not good).

Luckily, Google Search Console will detect these faulty redirects for you.

Search Console Verification

Make sure you verify the mobile version of your website in Google Search Console.

Structured Data

Always include the same structured data on your mobile and desktop sites.

Your URLs in the structured data on mobile pages should be the mobile URL.

Hreflang

If you're a global company using rel=hreflang, make sure your mobile URLs with the hreflang point to the mobile version of your country.

XML Sitemaps & Robots.txt

All links in the sitemaps should be available from the mobile version of the site.

This includes your robots.txt file, too.

Bonus: If this whole separate mobile site sounds exhausting to you, Google shares some advice on [how to transition from mdot's to responsive.](#)

Conclusion

For all late nights cursing my laptop and stress eating that mobile SEO has caused me over the past few years, I'll be the first to admit that the mobile-first index felt pretty blah.

The majority of the sites I work on are already responsive.

But, if you live for your separate mobile site, I won't stop gushing about how important a uniform URL structure can be.

The end goal remains the same:

- Allow the crawlers to access, read, and digest your content.
- Optimize the UX for all devices.
- Continue testing for better results.

Mobile search is no longer the future of SEO.

It's here.

Do you have what it takes to make it out alive?

Chapter 15

Agile SEO: Moving from Strategy to Action

Impactful SEO is rarely executed by a lone wolf.

You need buy-in for resources. Often from someone higher up.

Say, your CMO.

Well speaking as a CMO, I'm sorry to tell you, that those detailed multi-page SEO documents where you lay out your objectives, target audiences, competitive landscapes, keyword research and that Gantt chart for the next six months of vaguely detailed optimization projects...

I never read it in detail. And I never will. They don't allow me to quickly sign off on a task or write a few line email to get you the resources you need.

The fundamental problem with long SEO strategy documents is that as soon as you finish writing them, they're out of date.

Business objectives change. Competitive landscapes change. Algorithms change.



Jes Scholz

CMO Emerging Markets at Ringier

As an Australian born German resident who works on the ground in Africa & Asia, I am no stranger to the challenges of international marketing. Coming from the world of startups, I am a strong believer in data driven marketing and agile methodologies.

SEO is executed in a constant state of flux. You need to be flexible on a monthly, if not weekly, basis.

Focus on getting sh!t done. Not on writing long strategy docs.

Why Agile SEO Strategies Work

Agile SEO involves incremental iteration.

Break complex, overarching projects down into small, frequent changes.

Enable continual progress.



The only constant thing about
SEO is that it is not constant.

Google

It isn't about getting it perfect the first time.

It's about getting a minimum viable product (MVP) out the door and monitoring the impact on metrics.

Once you are armed with data, you can move on. The KPI impact will get you buy-in for the resources you need.

Let me give you an example.

Say your overarching goal is to completely overhaul the website architecture of an e-commerce site. All the URL routes, page titles, meta descriptions and H1s for the homepage, category pages and product pages.

Traditional Approach

Try to get buy-in for the entire SEO project. Your argument is that it's good for SEO.

The site will rank higher and significantly impact the organic sessions on the website. Which is true.

But the document to communicate all the requirements and reasons behind them will be long and complicated.

It seems like too large a project as it will likely not make it onto your development team's roadmap. They will likely feel your request will overload their development cycle.



Agile SEO Approach

First, try to get buy-in to optimize the title tag and meta description of the homepage.

This documentation is less than one page. The change request equivalent of snackable content. And due to the ease to get it implemented, it's much easier to get it into a sprint.

Now say this quick change produces a positive impact on KPIs, let's say a 3 percent lift of homepage organic sessions. You can then argue for similar changes for the category pages, pointing out, if we get a similar KPI lift as we did for the homepage, this will achieve X more sessions.

You have already proven such tactics can increase KPIs. So there is more trust in your approach. And it's, again, a small request. So your development team is more likely to do it.

And you can proceed in this manner until you have the whole site migrated.

How to Document an Agile SEO Strategy

So now we know to stop writing long SEO strategy documents.

To start creating agile, "snackable" tactics.

But we still need to understand what:

- Has been completed in the past?
- Is being worked on now?
- Is coming up next?
- Are all our ideas?

This information must be easy to digest, centrally accessible, and flexible.

One solution for this is an “SEO calendar” document.

Date	Change	Tactic Brief	Sign Off	Outcome
CW 01 - 02 01 Jan - 14 Jan	Meta description length increase on category pages	https://docs.google.com	Head of Marketing	8% category page organic session increase
CW 03 - 04 15 Jan - 28 Jan	Meta description length increase on product pages	https://docs.google.com	Head of Marketing	1% product page organic session increase
CW 05 - 06 29 Jan - 11 Feb	Itemlist schema markup on category pages	https://docs.google.com	CMO	5% category page organic session increase
CW 09 - 10 26 Feb - 11 Mar	Product schema markup on product pages	https://docs.google.com	Head of Marketing	Collecting data
CW 11 - 12 12 Mar - 25 Mar	Article schema on blog pages	WIP	Head of Marketing	-
Backlog	Pagination handling	-	-	-
	Homepage UX design improvements	-	-	-
	Category tree optimisation	-	-	-
	Improve filters	-	-	-
	Visual search functionality	-	-	-

Elements of an SEO calendar:

Date column: Ideally matched against IT sprint cycles. This does not mean every SEO initiative involves IT. But if you do need a developer’s assistance, it will make cross functional team project simpler. Having it set, for example, every two weeks, also promoting small but constant releases from the SEO team.

Backlog: Provides space for ideas to be recorded by team members, without having to make any significant commitment of time. Assess all idea on a regular basis as you fill your next available calendar slot.

Change column: A clear and concise sentence on what has been or will be changed.

Tactic brief: A link to the detailed information of that test. More details coming below.

Sign off: Ensuring all SEO changes pass a four eye principle from a strategic point of view lowers the risk of any errors. And these quick to read, snackable briefs as easy to get your managers buy-in and sign-off for resources.

Outcome: One short sentence summing up the KPI impact.

The benefit of a calendar layout is it is fully flexible but time relevant. To change priorities, it's as simple as moving the de-prioritized item to the backlog.

It can act as a website change log for SEO. Everyone can know the timetable of changes, both past and planned upcoming.

Those interested in why the KPIs increased on a certain date have the answer in one glance. And more detailed information in one click. This can be invaluable for troubleshooting.

And, for team leaders, if any gaps appear in the iteration cycle, you can see this as gaps will appear in the calendar, allowing you to address the root cause.

Snackable Tactic Briefs

The benefits of tactics briefs are twofold:

Pre-launch: They concisely answer the Five Ws of your SEO change to get buy-in from stakeholders. Once aligned, it will act as the specification if you need someone else to execute it.

Post-launch: Be the record of what was actually changed. What impact did it have on the KPI funnel? What did we learn? And what are the next steps, if any?

My team's tactics briefs have five sections:

1. Overview
2. SMART Goal
3. Specifications
4. Results
5. Learnings & Action Items

Overview

The overview section should cover the basics of the test:

- Who is the one person ultimately responsible for leading the execution of the test?
- When will it (pre-launch) did it (post-launch) go live?
- When will we (pre-launch) / did we (post-launch) assess results?
- Who proposed the change? (This may be important to know if you need more information on the background for the test or to know if an action has come from senior management.)
- Who has agreed to this execution? (This may be development, the line manager in marketing or another key stakeholder. Allowing everyone to see who is on board.)

Task Owner	Team member full name
Launch Date	Time Day, DDth Month YYYY
End Date	Time Day, DDth Month YYYY
Requester	Team member full name
Signed Off	Team member(s) full name

SMART Goal

The SMART goal is the high-level tactical approach.

Align your goal with your stakeholders before detailed documentation effort goes into a task. This also ensures the change is in line with business goals.

What is the main task to be completed? (Specific)	Optimize title tags for all category pages
Upon what metric will outcome be determined? (Measurable)	3% increase in google / organic sessions on category pages
What are key details on how this action will be achieved? (Achievable)	Rewrite the title tags to improve keyword targeting and communicate brand CVP for all category pages.
Who will be involved in completing this task? (Resourced)	SEO lead to recommend text and track results, sending wrap up email at conclusion of test. Head of Marketing to confirm brand alignment. Product manager to create JIRA ticket. Front end developer to implement tags.
What is the period for assessing the impact? (Time bound)	2 weeks

Specifications

This section will vary based on your test. But always try to communicate what it was, and what it will be. This way, you have a historical record you can refer back to for any interested party.

Key is to have only the details needed. Nothing more, nothing less.

You can use tables to keep it easy to scan.

For example, it could be as simple as a single table, in the case of a title tag change.

Title tag formula for category pages

Unoptimized Formula	Optimized Formula
Buy {CATEGORY} Online Brand	{CATEGORY} for Sale - Local Designers Brand

Or more complex, for example, detailing the configuration of parameters in Google Search Console.

Google Search Console Parameter Configuration

Search Parameter	Pre-Launch Crawl Rule		Post-Launch Crawl Rule	
	Effect	Crawl	Effect	Crawl
p	Paginates	No URL	Paginates	Every URL
location	--	Let Googlebot decide	Narrows	No URLs
order	--	Let Googlebot decide	Sorts	No URL
utm_campaign	--	Let Googlebot decide	-	Representative URL
utm_medium	--	Let Googlebot decide	-	Representative URL
utm_source	--	Let Googlebot decide	-	Representative URL

They key is to avoid long paragraphs of text.

Focus on clearly communicating the outcome.

What was it before and what will be it after?

Don't explain how the task was executed.

Results

This section should contain one table to effectively communicate the percentage change between the benchmark weeks and the SEO change from a full funnel perspective, as well as any additional tables to drill down for more insights.

An example of a table could be similar to the below.

Category page organic KPI

KPI	CWXX	CWXX	CWXX	CWXX	% change
	Unoptimised Formula		Optimised Formula		
GSC Impressions					X%
GSC clicks					X%
GSC position					X%
Sessions					X%
Bounce rate					X%
Conversions					X%
etc					X%

Learnings & Action Items

Here is where you can succinctly analyze the results.

Remember, you have the data clearly available in the table above, so you don't need to list the numbers again.

Explain what the numbers mean and what actions will be taken next.

Final Thoughts

Having worked in an agile SEO system for the past year, I can tell you as a CMO that I appreciate the flexibility and the visibility.

At any time, I can understand what actions my team is driving and what has shifted our KPIs without having to ask.

This is how we get sh!t done.

I'd love to hear how you have approached the challenge of documenting SEO. Let me know on [Twitter](#).

More SEO Resources:

- [What Is Search Engine Optimization in 2018](#)
- [3 Reasons SEO Is Incredibly Valuable to Your Company](#)
- [11 Ways to Prove the Value of SEO to Your Boss](#)

Chapter 16

The 9 Most Important SEO KPIs You Should Be Tracking

Your website is beautiful.

You've invested heavily into content marketing.

You've spent countless hours developing buyer personas and zeroing in on your target audience.

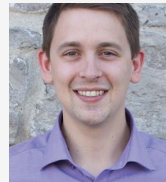
Now it comes time to present your efforts to your client, or share the latest campaign developments with the higher-ups.

How can you prove success?

How can you demonstrate value in a tangible way?

Key performance indicators (KPIs) hold the answer.

KPIs are objective metrics that help to measure and give clarity into the success of a given organization or campaign.



Brock Murray

Co-Founder at seoplus+

Brock is a full-stack marketing specialist. He is actively involved in all aspects of digital marketing but specializes in SEO. In just 4 years he built a 7-figure agency using the practices he preaches.

What are the most important KPIs when it comes to measuring the success of your SEO and digital marketing efforts?

Here are nine critical KPIs you should be tracking.

1. Organic Sessions

Organic sessions measure earned visits to your website from search engines such as Google and Bing.

A session is defined by a visit to the website, the actions taken by the user during that visit, and then the exit of the user from the site.

If a user idles, their session will time out after 30 minutes of inactivity by default.

A single user can be responsible for multiple sessions.

Organic traffic can be measured directly in [Google Analytics](#), or you can integrate the data with a reporting tool such as [Agency Analytics](#) to better cross-reference with other data points.

Growth in organic traffic is the single most important key performance indicator because it most clearly aligns with the objective at the heart of SEO: getting more eyes on your website.

A growth in organic sessions has a few potential causes that can be pinpointed by digging into your analytic data and keyword positions.

For one, it could mean more branded searches. As your digital and traditional marketing efforts pay off with increase brand awareness, you'll see more searches for your brand name or products as a result.

As your on-page and off-page optimizations start to pay dividends, your website will improve rankings for keywords, both ones you are targeting and ones you have put no effort into achieving.

Expected click-through-rate (CTR) increases with every single position on the search engine results page. Jumping from 3rd 2nd on page 1 can result in a spike in organic sessions, not to mention if you're able to jump from page 2 to page 1 of the results for a high volume keyword.

You can help spur more organic sessions by crafting a compelling, relevant page title and writing a meta description with a clear, enticing call-to-action.

Growing organic sessions indicates that you are occupying more value real estate on the leading search engines, exactly what you'd hope to achieve with a full-scale SEO campaign.

Digital and traditional, on-page, and off-page marketing efforts alike will help you continue to grow the number of organic sessions.

2. Keyword Ranking Increases

Keyword rankings are where your specific keywords are positioned in major search engines like Google or Bing.

The closer to number one, the better.

The higher your website ranks for high volume keywords (terms that are frequently searched), the better.

You can track keyword rankings in a tool such as SEMRush or SE Ranking.

There are some keywords you will naturally rank highly for, like your brand name or highly targeted long-tail keywords specific to your service and location. Others will be part of a long-term strategy in an effort to gain visibility for competitive terms with high commercial intent.

Keyword ranking is an essential KPI because it's what clients directly correlate with SEO success.

Keyword ranking improvements are the first entry point to achieve other primary objectives: more traffic, leads, and sales.

You should keep a close eye on keyword rankings.

Fluctuations are normal and [Google algorithm updates](#) can cause significant volatility, but in the long view you should see growth.

Keep an eye at least weekly if not daily, as a [drop in rankings](#) could signal an issue with your site that must be addressed.

But don't panic if you see minor drops. Over-optimization is just as bad as under-optimization.

Your on-page and off-page optimization efforts will result in keyword rankings improvements.

Everything from high-quality content additions to speed optimizations to link building to developing an engaged social following, among [other ranking factors](#), will help improve rankings.

3. Leads/Conversions

The first two ranking factors relate to attracting visitors to your site from search engines – but what action do you need users to take once they’ve landed on your site?

You’ll want to generate a lead that will hopefully convert into a sale.

A lead is any kind of contact with a potential customer. It could be a:

- Newsletter signup.
- Contact form submission asking for more information.
- Phone call.
- Registration for a webinar.
- Completed purchase.

If you [set up goals and events in Google Analytics](#), you can track leads across a variety of dimensions:

- Do you have a higher conversion rate on mobile vs. desktop?
- Men vs. women?
- What page drives the most leads?

You can also set up goal funnels to see where people drop off in the process and make improvements to your site and iterate from there.

An increase in leads not only means you’re drawing more visitors to the site, but those visitors are completing the desired action in higher and higher numbers.

This is an essential KPI because it relates so closely to the core business objective of growing the customer base and increasing sales.

To improve results for this KPI, put focus on conversion rate optimization (CRO) and user experience (UX).

- Is your website easy to navigate?
- Are calls-to-action (CTAs) prominent and clear?
- Is the content trustworthy and persuasive?
- Can the user move through the conversion funnel in easy and expected ways?

4. Bounce Rate

Bounce rate is a metric that measures the percent of sessions where the user loads the page and immediately exits without performing any action.

Bounce rate is calculated by dividing the number of non-interactive sessions by the total number of sessions.

A typical bounce rate is between 40 to 60 percent, meaning about half of all sessions are expected to end with no action taken. But this will vary greatly depending on your industry/niche.

Bounce rate is an important KPI because a huge priority for search engine algorithms is satisfying the user's search query.

When a user searches a keyword, Google wants to show them the most relevant and highest quality results possible that resolve the issue.

When users bounce back to the search results page it can indicate that the ranking page is not relevant, frustrating to navigate, or may not be trustworthy.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a low bounce rate indicates that your site is relevant, easy/rewarding to navigate, and satisfies a minimum **E-A-T** threshold.

Routinely audit pages on your site with high bounce rate and A/B test different approaches to see if you can get that number to improve.

5. Pages/Session

Pages per session is a simple metric that measures, on average, how many pages users visit during a session. It also counts repeated views of a single page.

What is a strong pages/session metric? It will depend on the depth of your site architecture and the complexity of your conversion funnel.

If you have a one-page website, 1 page per session is perfect (you'll want to look at time on site, in that case).

If you have a content-heavy site focused on informing the user, or an ecommerce site where users typically view multiple products and go through a multi-step checkout process, you'll expect to see many more pages per session on average.

As with other metrics that track user behavior, pages per session is an important KPI because it indicates the value/quality of your site and how users navigate through it.

Still, having a user visit 100 pages is not truly valuable unless you're priming them for a conversion now or later.

Make sure you have prominent and clear CTAs through, even on deep inner pages, to direct users deeper into your conversion funnel.

6. Average Session Duration

Session duration measures the average length of a visit to your website.

The more in-depth your content and site structure, the longer you can expect this duration to be.

Session duration is an important KPI because it indicates the quality of your site content and how incentivized users are to stay, read, and click deeper into the site architecture.

If you see a drop in session duration, has something changed to frustrate your users?

Continue to focus on prominent and clear CTAs to convert this captive audience into a lead or customer.

7. Page Load Time

We haven't touched on it yet, but page load time is an underlying contributor to most of the metrics discussed so far.

Think about how you behave as a user.

If a site is taking a long time to load, you're more likely to bounce back to the search results page.

If a site is very slow to load, you're less likely to explore pages deeper on the site. You're also probably less likely to convert because your first interaction with this company has been frustrating.

Ideal page load time will vary based on the complexity of the content and the patience of your user, but the majority of users will abandon a page if it takes more than 3 seconds to load.

With every additional second of loading, expect bounce rate to increase as a result.

In fact, a page that takes 5 seconds to load increases the probability of a bounce by 90 percent compared with a page that loads in one second.

Use a tool such as GTMetrix for insights into how well your site loads, and get recommendations about optimizations you can make to the server, code, content, or images to improve load time.

Every time you take a website action, whether it's redesigning a page layout or uploading a new picture, keep the effect on speed in mind.

It's much easier to optimize images, content, and code as you go, versus trying to correct a decade of bloated code, massive images, and redirect chains.

8. Top Exit Pages

An exit page is the last page visited by a user before ending the session, closing the tab or browser, or searching for a new website.

Though people are leaving your website, an exit page is not inherently negative – a user can exit from the thank you page or purchase confirmation page, having a fully satisfied experience.

However if a high percentage of users are exiting from a page where you do not intend their journey to end, it could be an opportunity for CRO/UX improvements.

You can find these details in Google Analytics' by navigating to Behavior Reports > Site Content > Exit Pages.

You'll want to assess not only the raw number of exits, but also the exit rate. This is a percentage calculated by dividing the number of exits by the number of pageviews for a given page.

If you have a high exit rate for a page that is not intended to be an exit page, optimizations are needed.

9. Crawl Errors

Googlebot and other crawlers need to be able to fully see and access site content to assess its value and relevance.

If your site has crawl errors, it means that Googlebot is having trouble accessing your site or reading its content.

Crawl errors can be found in [Google Search Console](#).

You can test the crawlability of a page at any time using the "Fetch as Google" tool in Search Console and selecting the "fetch and render" option.

Crawl errors can be at the server error, if Googlebot cannot communicate with the DNS server, the request times-out, or your site is down. Crawl errors can also be at the URL level, if a given page no longer exists or has a long redirect chain.

If you see a spike in crawl errors, you'll want to take immediate action especially if the crawl errors are at server level or the URL errors affect core pages.

Conclusion

In focusing on these nine KPIs and making efforts to see an increase month-over-month, quarter-over-quarter, and year-over-year, you should see an increase in the corresponding business KPIs as well:

- Customers.
- Profit.
- ROI.

Leverage the power of Google Analytics and rank tracking, heat map, site speed analyzers, and other analytic tools to amplify strengths and correct weaknesses on your website.

Chapter 17

SEO Strategy: 3 Trade-offs You Must Consider

Investing more in one SEO strategy usually means investing less in another, at least in the short term.

Choosing the path straight down the middle isn't going to be the best choice for every brand, either.

With that in mind, let's talk about three primary strategic SEO trade-offs that you'll need to consider when making important decisions for your brand optimization.

1. Traffic vs. Relevance

I know what a lot of you are thinking. "It's relevance, obviously."

Yes, an **SEO strategy** that doesn't factor relevance into the game plan is obviously flawed.

Traffic from users who would never have an interest in your product is inherently wasteful.



Pratik Dholakiya
Founder at The 20 Media

Pratik is the Founder of The 20 Media, a content marketing agency specializing in content & data-driven SEO. Pratik has been featured on sites like Forbes, Moz, SEW, The Huffington Post, KISSmetrics, Entrepreneur and Fast Company to name a few. Hit him up on Twitter @DholakiyaPratik for a quick chat

Except when it isn't.

Here's the thing:

There's actually a lot more to consider than might be immediately apparent.

Consider the following:

Pros of a High Traffic, Low Relevancy Approach

- Higher the traffic earned, better are your chances of earning natural links from visitors.
- High traffic means that people who would be interested in your products may hear of you secondhand from visitors who never would be interested in your products, whether that is through social sharing or in person.
- More traffic volume means it is easier to achieve statistically significant results from SEO experiments, A/B tests, and similar data approaches.
- More traffic can ultimately mean increase in the total number of relevant visits, even if the proportion of relevant visits is lower.
- High traffic strategies can reach people who are further up the sales funnel but may still ultimately take an interest in your product, often in wildly unpredictable ways.

The Disadvantages of a High Traffic Approach

- High traffic keywords are often very competitive, even when they are low in relevancy. The easiest keywords to rank for are those with limited traffic potential and audiences with very specific needs.

- Poor conversion rates limit the immediate financial value of high traffic strategies.
- Chasing too many high traffic topics can look cynical or dilute your brand's message.

Pros of a High Relevancy, Low Traffic Approach

- Much higher conversion rates for lead generation and sales.
- Less competitive keywords to target.
- A more targeted psychological impact on the visitors who are most likely to ultimately buy your products, leading to a stronger brand affinity.
- More enthusiastic brand advocates.
- More relevant natural anchor text in your earned links.

The Disadvantages of a High Relevancy Approach

- High relevancy keywords can be just as competitive as high traffic keywords if they have high conversion rates. High audience relevance often doesn't translate to high product relevance.
- High relevancy strategies can be difficult to scale, especially without alienating your existing audience.
- Becoming too focused on a limited set of topics can limit your brand's perceived personality.

2. Consumer vs. Influencer

It seems obvious that your [target audience](#) should consist of the people who will ultimately end up buying your products.

However, you also need to consider the fact that influencers with the power to link to us, share our content, and expose us to a broader audience are equally important as a factor.

Closely related is the question of whether we are writing for an industry or for a set of interests.

I'll mostly be lumping “set of interests” in with “consumers”, and “industry” with “influencers,” but keep in mind that there can be a little bit of cross contamination here.

If you work in B2B, things are slightly different, but much of what applies to “consumer” applies to the businesses that would be your clients, while the “influencer” label falls to thought leaders in your industry and your client’s industries, it also includes businesses that offer services similar to your own.

Pros of an Influencer, Industry Targeted Approach

- Writing for bloggers, journalists, and the industry you compete in is the strategy most likely to earn the most [authoritative links](#). Since these are the people who own the authoritative sites, and most of them are willing to cite their sources, you can still pick up a tremendous amount of [SEO authority](#) with content that targets these people.
- Likewise, producing content for this audience is the most likely to result in sharing on social networks.

- Influencer-focused content can be a jumping off point for collaborative content, mutual [link earning opportunities](#), and even business partnerships and B2B opportunities that you may not have considered.

Cons of the Influencer Approach

- The influencers who can reach your audiences and the businesses who are competing with you for sales from them are often one and the same.
- Industry-focused content may not necessarily appeal to your consumers, and may even alienate them.

Pros of a Consumer, Interest Focused Approach

- Writing for consumers gives you a more down-to-earth appearance in the minds of the people who will actually be buying your products.
- Having a direct practical impact on your consumer's life before they even buy a product from you means they will be more likely to trust you and buy your products.
- Consumer-focused content usually has more overall traffic potential.

Cons of the Consumer Approach

- Consumers rarely control platforms with followed links which can help your SEO and can rarely connect you to larger audiences of their own.
- Consumer-focused content, particularly when it isn't aimed at power-users, can come across as introductory level to influencers and thus not worthy of passing on.

3. Trending vs. Evergreen

The choice between content that appeals to people's desire for novelty and content that stands the test of time can be a difficult one to make.

Investing more in one type of content always means investing less in the other.

How much of each is the right balance for you?

Pros of Content About Trending Topics

- Focusing on trending topics allows you to be a part of ongoing conversations, which has obvious SEO benefits in terms of earning links and engagements that contribute to your long-term authority in the search engines.
- If you are one of the first to tackle a trending topic, it's unlikely that your competitors will be able to overtake you before the interest in the topic subsides.
- Emerging topics, especially the ones that haven't been tackled by large news sites, have limited competition, and SEO is skewed more in the direction of **freshness** than authority, giving sites with limited SEO authority a better chance of ranking.

Cons of a Trending Approach

- If you aren't selective enough with your trending topics, you are likely to pick the same trending topics as others and unlikely to be one of the first to publish.
- Trending topics earn a spike in traffic, but rarely send long-term traffic.

Pros of Content About Evergreen Topics

- Since evergreen content continues to earn traffic every month, it allows you to cumulatively build your monthly traffic just by producing new content, instead of needing to chase bigger topics each month.
- Since it is a recurring source of traffic, you have more freedom to update it, experiment with it, test it, and optimize it for conversions, relevance, and traffic potential.
- Since your products are designed to solve problems that will continue to exist, and evergreen content is designed to solve problems that will continue to exist, the connection between evergreen content and sales is often more direct, even for topics relatively high up the sales funnel.

Cons of an Evergreen Approach

- It can be difficult to earn attention from influencers for an evergreen topic without introducing some novel information, such as a survey or original research, and since it is likely that others have covered the topics beforehand making it difficult to overtake the competition. Put another way, the benefit of evergreen content for those who wrote it first is an obstacle for anybody else who would want to tackle the subject.
- Evergreen content typically needs to be more comprehensive, in-depth, and well produced than content about trending topics, which can require investing more resources.

Conclusion

Every brand is different, and “all things in moderation” isn’t specific enough. Consider the trade-offs above as you develop your brand’s SEO strategy.

Chapter 18

What to Do When Things Go Wrong in SEO

One unfortunate part about the world of SEO is that sometimes things go wrong.

This can happen because you:

- Get over-aggressive with SEO tactics.
- Do things that are considered wrong by Google because you don't know any better.
- Use shady/spammy tactics.

If SEO has gone wrong for you, this chapter will go through what you need to do get back on track.



Eric Enge

CEO at Stone Temple Consulting

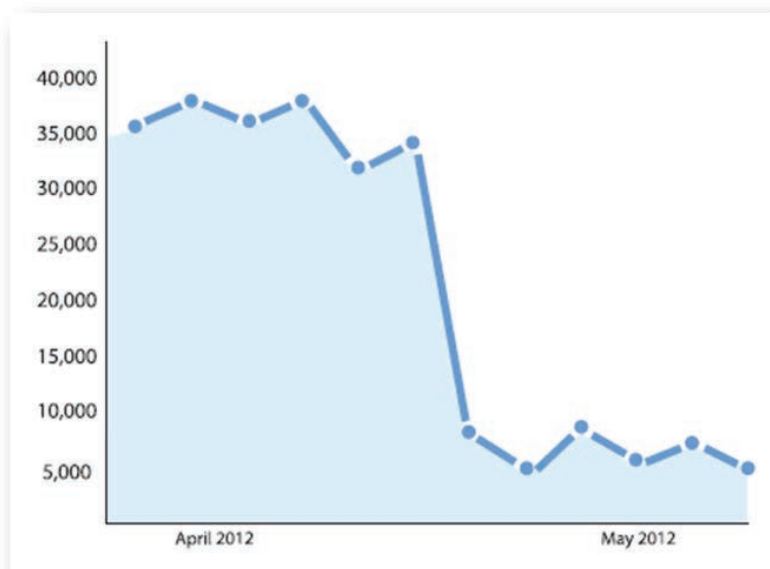
Eric has been involved in digital marketing since 1990, and regularly keynotes conferences on related topics. He is also CEO of Stone Temple Consulting, a 70 person digital marketing agency

Diagnosis

There are two major ways to learn that you have a problem.

The first way you learn of a problem is seeing a large drop in the organic search traffic to your site.

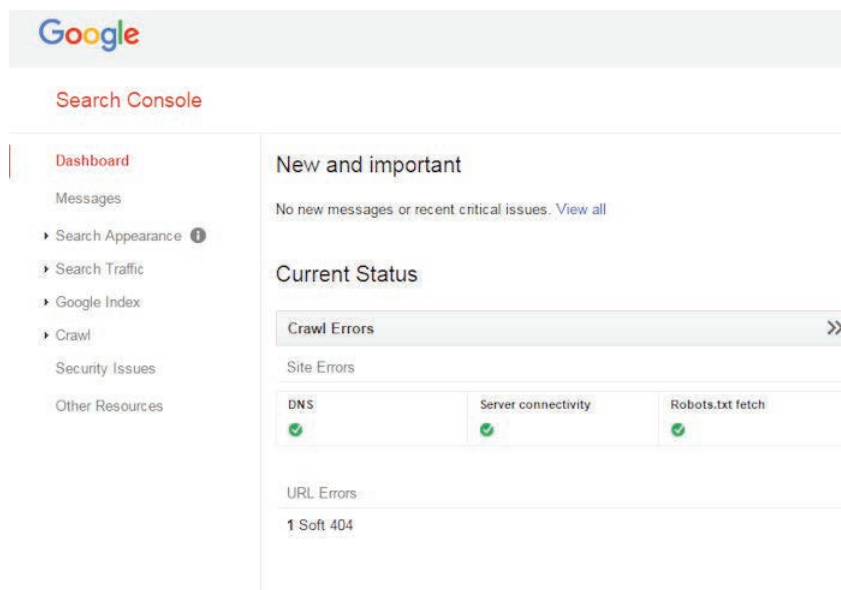
Sometimes that drop can be catastrophic in nature, and it might look something like this:



The other way you might learn about a problem is if you get a message directly within [Google Search Console](#) telling you about it.

If you haven't signed up for Search Console, do so immediately.

Here's where you can find these messages in Search Console:



Overview of Manual Penalties

When you get notified about a problem within Search Console, this is considered a manual penalty.



What that means is that a person at Google actually analyzed your site, and as a result, assessed a penalty to the site.

When this happens, the message in Search Console normally gives you some high level description of the problem.

The three most common manual penalties are:

- Sitewide link penalties.
- Partial link penalties.
- Thin content penalties.

Here is an example of such a Search Console message focused on links:

  [http://\[redacted\]](#) **Unnatural inbound links**

Google has detected a pattern of artificial or unnatural links pointing to your site. [Buying links or participating in link schemes](#) in order to manipulate PageRank are violations of Google's [Webmaster Guidelines](#).

As a result, Google has applied a manual spam action to [\[redacted\]](#). There may be other actions on your site or parts of your site.

Recommended action

- Use the [Links to Your Site](#) feature in Webmaster Tools to download a list of links to your site.
- Ensure that unnatural links pointing to your site are removed.
- When these changes are made, and you are satisfied that links to your site follow Google's Webmaster Guidelines, submit a [reconsideration request](#). If you're unable to remove links pointing to your site, please provide as much detail as possible in your reconsideration request.
- For an updated list of manual actions currently applied to your site, visit the [Manual Actions](#) page. If no manual actions are listed, there is no longer a need to file a reconsideration request.

If we determine your site is no longer in violation of our guidelines, we'll revoke the manual action.

If you have any questions about how to resolve this issue, please visit the [Webmaster Help Forum](#).

Here is an example of a manual thin content penalty notice:

Thin content with little or no added value
This site appears to contain a significant percentage of low-quality or shallow pages which do not provide users with much added value (such as thin affiliate pages, cookie-cutter sites, doorway pages, automatically generated content, or copied content). [Learn more.](#)

Once you have a manual penalty, you must follow a basic three-step process:

1. Determine the cause of the penalty. (For example, if you have a link penalty, you need to determine which links Google doesn't like.)
2. Remedy the problems.
3. Submit a [Reconsideration Request](#) to Google asking them to remove the penalty.

Overview of Algorithmic Penalties

These are caused by algorithms that Google uses to identify sites that they consider to be poor in quality, and then lower your rankings.

The most well-known of these are:

1. **[Panda](#) (now part of the main Google algorithm):** Focuses on identifying poor quality content.
2. **[Penguin](#) (now part of the main Google algorithm):** Targets poor quality links.
3. **Search Quality:** A lesser known algorithm that evaluates site/page quality.
4. **[Top Heavy Ads](#):** Focuses on sites that use too much advertising.
5. **[Payday Loans](#) (Spammy Sites):** Identifies spammy SEO practices that Google has seen as a common practice on payday loan sites, but the algorithm is applied to any site using those practices.

Technically, Google considers these to simply be algorithms, and not penalties, so we'll go with their terminology.

But the practical impact on you is the same: you see a drop in your traffic.

If you have one of these algorithms hurting your traffic, you need to try to figure out what the cause is, as Google doesn't tell you about these with a message in Search Console.

Google used to announce updates of algorithms like Panda and Penguin, but that doesn't typically happen any longer, so that will leave you with the challenge of working it out on your own.

This will require a strong understanding of what the algorithms do, and then a harsh look at your site to see if you can figure out what the problem is.

Links Google Doesn't Like

If you've received a manual link penalty, this section will help you determine what types of links may be causing the problem.

You can also use this section to understand the types of links that Penguin is likely to act on, but for Penguin it's important to understand that affects are more subtle.

I'll discuss Penguin specifically in more detail a bit further down in this guide.

As you saw earlier in this guide, Google considers links to be an important part of their ranking algorithm.

For that reason, many publishers are anxious to get as many links as they can, but unfortunately, there are certain types of links that can hurt you.

Basically, what Google really wants you to do is obtain links that are editorial in nature.

What that means is the links can't be something that you paid for, provided compensation for, or that otherwise were given to you for reasons other than the linking party genuinely wanted to reference your site.

This is because Google relies on these links to act as votes for your content, and each vote is an indicator that your site has some level of importance.

More votes signifies more importance.

However, all votes for the content of your site are not created equal. Some are far more important than others.

The reason why Google doesn't like certain types of links is that the nature of those links may indicate to Google that they are non-editorial in nature.

If you have too many of these links pointing to your site, it starts to impact the quality of their search algorithms, and this is why Google takes action on them.

With that in mind, here are some of the most common links that can cause problems:

Paid Links: Any form of payment is considered a problem by Google. If you're buying ads and getting links to your site in return, the best policy is to implement a "[nofollow](#)" attribute on those links so Google won't think you're trying to spam their search results.

Web Directories: These are sites that organize websites into hierarchical directories, and these are largely useless today. Even the decent ones that we would have spoken about 3 or 4 years ago (e.g., Best of the Web, Business.com,

DMOZ.org) are likely to offer no SEO value today. (Note: this commentary does not apply to local business listing directories, which still offer value from a Local SEO perspective.)

Article Directories: These are sites that allow you to submit your article content, and they usually include a link back to your site. However, these links are not editorial in nature. You can simply upload the article and no one reviews it, so for that reason, it doesn't really act as a true endorsement for your site. Don't use them.

International Links (from countries where you don't do business): There is really no reason for you to have many links from countries where you don't operate, so if you have lots of these, that could be a problem.

Coupon Codes: If you have been handing out coupon codes to other publishers and getting a link in return, that's considered to be very similar to a paid link. If you have these types of links, you'll have to deal with them.

Poor Quality Widgets: If you created a neat widget that publishers can place on your site, and in return you get a link, this might be a problem, especially if you've obtained a large number of links this way.

Affiliate Spam: If you are paying a publisher for clicks to your site, or a revenue share or commission on sales generated by traffic they send to you, that's considered a purchased link.

Comment Spam: If you've been going to blogs and forums all over the web, and implementing links back to your site, Google isn't going to like that, so avoid it altogether.

Link Exchanges: There is nothing wrong with exchanging links with close business partners or major media sites. However, if a large percentage of your

overall link portfolio comes from link exchanges, that will raise a red flag. So do this only in moderation.

Other Non-Editorial Links: The list above isn't a complete list of problem links. To make the final diagnosis, you have to try and evaluate whether it makes sense for Google to consider a link editorial.

Bad Anchor Text Mix: The words used in the anchor text of links helps Google understand better what your pages are about. In the past, SEO practitioners abused this by going out and obtaining many links using “exact match”, or “rich” anchor text (i.e., the anchor text of the link was close to or exactly the main keyword associated with your page). Too much of this rich anchor text is a clue to Google that you are being over-aggressive in your SEO. Here's an example of bad anchor text:

St. Mary's

St. Mary's is a town just under an hour's drive from Bicheno, or an hour and a half's drive from Launceston. You can challenge yourself to a climb to the St. Patrick's Head, or the South Sister's Peak, or a relaxing drive in the Elephant Pass – all of which give spectacular views. In town, have a browse through all the craft galleries, bakeries and shops that this small town has to offer.

In terms of getting yourself a vehicle, scope out rental options, or if you're going for an extended holiday, you can consider looking at second hand cars to [buy. Cars](#) should be reliable, safe and road worthy of course, so don't buy something that's run down just because it's cheap.

This is obviously contrived.

The writer couldn't even take the time to write the article in such a way as to put the words “buy” and “cars” in the same sentence.

Note that it isn't bad if some links to your site use rich anchor text, but if you're getting a large percentage of links that do so, that's not normal, and Google will see that as a problem.

Cleanup Up Link Related Problems

If you've received a manual link penalty, or are worried that your site is in danger of having that happen, you should work on cleaning up your link profile.

Here's the basic nine-step process for doing this:

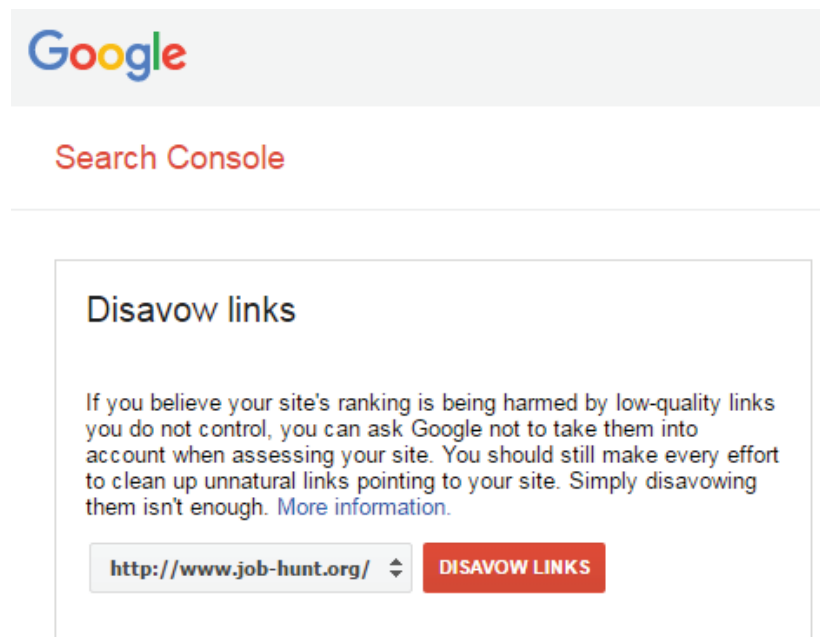
1. Build a complete list of links to your site. Google Search Console provides a list of links, but unfortunately, that list isn't complete. For that reason, we recommend that you also obtain data on links to your site from Moz's Link Explorer, Majestic, and Ahrefs. The reason we use all three of these sources, plus Search Console, is that each will find links that none of the others do.
2. Deduplicate the list as much as possible, as each tool will show many of the same links that the other tools do.
3. Begin analyzing all of the links. Generally speaking, you don't need to look at more than two or three links per domain linking to you.
4. Mark links that you see as problematic as you'll need to address them.
5. Repeat three and four until you've been through links from each of the domains linking to you.
6. Reach out to sites that you want to remove links from, and request their removal.
7. Repeat the outreach to those that don't respond to increase your chances of success. Don't make this request more than three times, and spread it out a bit so you aren't a complete pest.
8. For those links that you can't get removed, use [Google's disavow tool](#) to tell Google you want to discount those links.

9. Once steps 7 and 8 are complete, the hard part of the labor is done.

In step 8, I reference Google's disavow tool.

This tool allows you to list all the links pointing to your site that you think might be bad, and to tell Google to not credit them to your site.

Basically, it acts as a shortcut to removing potential links.



This might lead you to ask, why should I take the time to manually request link removals then? Can't I just list all the bad links in the disavow tool?

The reason you should still request removals is that Google likes to see the extra effort.

From their perspective, when they've penalized you it's because you were over the line in what you were doing, and they want to see clear evidence that you won't do it again.

When they see that you make the manual removal effort, it acts as a signal that you are sincere in your intent to not violate their guidelines again. This is particularly important in the case of manual penalties.

As the last step in a recovery process, if you cleaned up your links because you received a manual link penalty, you will need to fill out a reconsideration request. You can read more about that below.

One last point: Recovering from link problems is aided by attracting high value links as well.

This is something you should be trying to do on an ongoing basis.

How to do that is beyond the scope of this section of the guide, but learning how to do this is a cornerstone to the success of any SEO strategy.

Penguin Recovery Process

Penguin used to generally lower rankings for sites that it determined were using poor link building practices.

But, as of the [Penguin 4.0 release](#) on September 23, 2016, Penguin simply discounts links that it doesn't like.

In other words, there is no direct punitive aspect to it.

However, don't trivialize that impact.

If you're aggressively investing money in adding links, and those links don't count, that investment is wasted – probably not something you want to do.

The other thing that happened with the Penguin 4.0 release is that it got rolled into the main part of the Google algorithm, so Penguin updates are no longer announced.

As a result, there is also one scenario in which a Penguin action may seem like it's a penalty.

If you're busily obtaining links that the Penguin algorithm currently does not discount, they'll be helping you improve rankings and organic traffic.

Perhaps you have found a way to obtain links that are actually non-editorial in nature, but they currently work.

But, if at a later date, a Penguin update comes out that starts to discount those links, you will suddenly lose all the benefit you were getting from those editorial links.

This will feel exactly the same as a penalty, though in fact, it's not that at all. This is one of the reasons I suggest that you focus only on earning editorial links in any link building strategy that you implement.

Unlike a manual penalty from Google, if Penguin has begun to discount your links, there is no value in filing a reconsideration request.

You just need to work on getting high quality, 100 percent editorial links, and this is always the best strategy related to earning links.

Doing this is hard, I know, but that's why it works.

Content Google Doesn't Like

Just as there are types of links Google doesn't like, there are also types of content that Google doesn't like.

Some of the most important types of these are:

- **Thin Content:** If you have a large number of pages with only a sentence or two on them, and they make up a large percentage of your overall site, that can be a problem.
- **Curated Content:** Sites that simply curate content from third parties and add little unique value are also problematic.
- **Syndicated Content:** It's OK if you have some syndicated content on your site. But if a large percentage of the pages are syndicated from third-party sites, and you add little of your own value, then that will be seen as a problem.
- **Scraped Content:** If you're scraping content from other sites, that will definitely be an issue. This is one of the more egregious forms of poor quality content.
- **Doorway Pages:** These are pages that have been created largely for the purpose of capturing search engine traffic and immediately driving sales. These are often pages that are poorly integrated into the site (i.e., have few, or no, links to them), and focus on driving an immediate conversion.
- **User-Generated Content that is not properly moderated:** This almost always leads to large amounts of low value content. If you allow users to add comments or reviews to your site, this can be a great thing, but take great pains to use human review to screen out poor quality contributions.

- **Advertising Dominated Content:** This is content where the value added content is somewhat obscured or dominated by the presence of ads. In other words, these pages may have multiple ads above the fold, and the user needs to scroll before they see much of the value added content they were looking for.
- **Ecommerce Sites with the Great Majority of Pages Being Product Pages with Nothing but Manufacturer's Supplied Descriptions:** This is common with many lesser brand ecommerce sites. Be careful, though. Simply rewriting those product descriptions, but saying more or less the same thing, isn't enough.

Google wants to see the unique value add of your site. They aren't going to let you receive search engine traffic if you simply aren't adding much unique value to users who visit your site.

To be clear: the mere existence of your site, or having a nice navigation hierarchy, aren't examples of unique value.

Better examples of quality content are:

- Unique articles that you've created that help users solve problems of interest to them.
- Reviews of products placed on your site by users. Important note: reviews that you repost from other sites don't count as unique content.
- How-to videos that walk users step by step through something they want to learn about.
- Interactive content that engages users and attracts lots of attention.
- **Data-driven studies** that reveal key information that others haven't seen or created before.

- Access to expert advice and/or interaction with experts.

These are just a few examples.

The bottom line is that Google wants to see what it is that makes you special.

It's OK if you have the best plumbing site that services Rhode Island, or the best marriage counseling site in Pasadena.

Just produce unique content related to what you do, and that is specific to your local market.

If you serve broader markets, such as all of Europe, then the challenge content-wise is greater, and you have to be prepared to step up to meet it.

Continually Improving Content Quality

It's easy to say that if you've been hit by a thin content penalty, or Panda, that you need to improve your content quality.

However, it would be better to say that you need to improve your content quality whether or not you've been impacted by either of these.

You should be thinking about this all the time.

If you publish a website, then continual improvement of the quality of the content on it needs to be a core mission of your website team.

It's a competitive world out there and Google loves quality content.

There's no win in letting your competition get an edge on you.

Invest the time and energy to make your site the best it can be, from the perspective of adding value to users who come to it.

Keep the focus tight to the marketplace you serve.

If you've been hit by a manual thin content penalty, and you believe you fixed the problem, then the next step is clear: file a reconsideration request.

Panda Recovery Process

Google's Panda algorithm is also a part of the main Google algorithm.

However, unlike Penguin, it can take actions that lower overall site rankings if it detects content quality problems on your site.

Sadly, there is no simple way to tell if a traffic drop is due to Panda.

If you suspect that it is, you'll need to closely examine the content across your site to see if you detect quality problems.

Also, a reconsideration request won't help you here. All you can do is fix the content quality issues and then wait and see.

It may take Google a few months to re-crawl your site, see the improvements, and then rerun the Panda portion of their algorithm on it (even though it's now considered part of the main algorithm, it still works this way).

Frankly, the best way to deal with content quality has little to do with Panda or any manual penalty.

You should be obsessed with it.

You need to have a continual focus on improving content quality on your website, and have ongoing programs to keep making your site more and more valuable to users.

It's a competitive world out there. It's likely that one or more of your competitors is beginning to think this way. This is exactly the behavior that Google wants.

Here is way to frame it: "Be the Answer That Users Want, and You Become the Answer That Google Wants."

If you use this mental approach, you're changes of staying clear of worries about Panda, or any manual content penalties will go way up.

Reconsideration Requests

If you've been hit by a manual penalty, and you believe you've fixed the problem, you must file a reconsideration request.

Google won't notice that you've fixed it, and you must notify them before they will take a look at it.

There are some key elements to a reconsideration request.

Here is a summary of the most important ones:

- **Fix your problems:** Don't file a reconsideration request until you have made a thorough effort to clean up the issues reported by Google. Just don't. If the reviewer at Google sees that you haven't taken their concerns seriously, they will reject your request, and the bar to getting a future reconsideration request approved could potentially get higher. They're human, and if you don't take their complaint seriously, you may simply upset them.

- **Keep your reconsideration request short and to the point.** Explain that you saw the penalty, that you made a good faith effort to fix the problem, explain what you did, and tell them that you will endeavor to meet their guidelines going forward.
- **Don't complain about the fact that you were penalized.** Don't complain about the impact on your business. From their point of view, they gave you a penalty because you were doing things to negatively impact their business, and they deal with thousands of these requests every day, so you're more likely to aggravate them than get their sympathy.
- **Remember they are human.** You can't use a reconsideration request to become their friend, but you can write it in such a way that you are being considerate of their time, and not make yourself a burden on them.

Those are the basics, but it bears repeating:

Don't send a reconsideration request until you've made a serious effort to address their concerns.

Otherwise, you're wasting the reviewers time, your time, and delaying the eventual recovery of your website.

Other Types of Penalties

There are many other penalties that are beyond the scope of this guide to cover.

For the most part, these arise from more advanced forms of trying to deceive Google, so hopefully you will never encounter these.

Here is a brief list of some those other types:

- **Cloaking and/or Sneaky Redirects:** This happens when you serve different content to Google than you do to users. Google considers this to be a major no-no.
- **Hidden Text and/or Keyword Stuffing:** SEO practitioners used to find ways to put text on webpages that users couldn't see (such as white text on a white background) to feed content only to Google. Or, they would repeat the main keyword over and over again on webpages. Don't do these things!
- **User-Generated Spam:** You might get this message if you are accepting user generated content (UGC) on your site, and you aren't carefully moderating it. UGC is a great way to add unique content to your site, but you should only do it if you are actively screening out bad submissions.
- **Unnatural Links from Your Site:** If you appear to be selling links to other publishers with a goal of providing them SEO benefit in return for money, Google may spot that you're doing this and give you this message.
- **Hacked Site:** This is Google trying to flag you that you have a problem because a third party has hacked the code for your website. The best way to keep this problem from happening is to be ruthless about keeping all the software involved in publishing your site up to date.
- **Pure Spam:** Google will give you this message in the Search Console if they believe your site is using aggressive spam techniques.
- **Spammy Freehosts:** This is related to where you are hosting your site. Make sure you are working with a reputable hosting company!

Summary

Recovering from a penalty (or an algorithm, like Panda or Penguin) should only be viewed as the first step.

Treat it like a warning shot across the bow.

Just because you're able to recover doesn't mean that you can't get hit again.

In the future, you should avoid the behavior that led to the problem.

But look beyond that.

All the work that you did to recover should be a clue as to what you need to do to thrive in Google.

If you had to deal with thin content, then take that as a signal to keep focusing ongoing energy on improving your content.

Or, if you have a link-related problem, keep investing energy in doing the types of things that attract high quality editorial links to your site.

Then you can move past survival, and into a world where your traffic keeps growing over time.