SEJ Search Engine® Journal

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO

SEO

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO GETTING STARTED IN SEO

A complete guide to getting started in SEO.

Produced by

SEJ Search Engine® Journal

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Chapter 1

SEO Fundamentals: Your Guide to SEO Success Factors in 2018

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.

There is no secret recipe.

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.

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 Momentology and editor of Search Engine Watch.

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

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 2018 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.
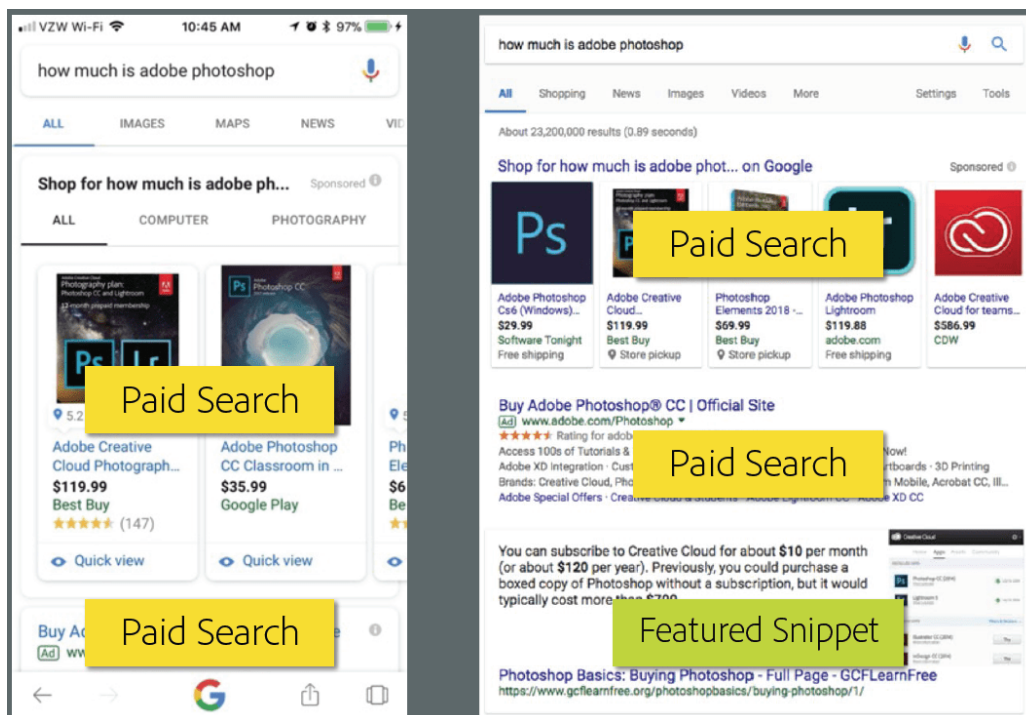
Search engines also travel with us wherever we go. Google refers to these search experiences as **moments,** with four of the biggest being:

- 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:
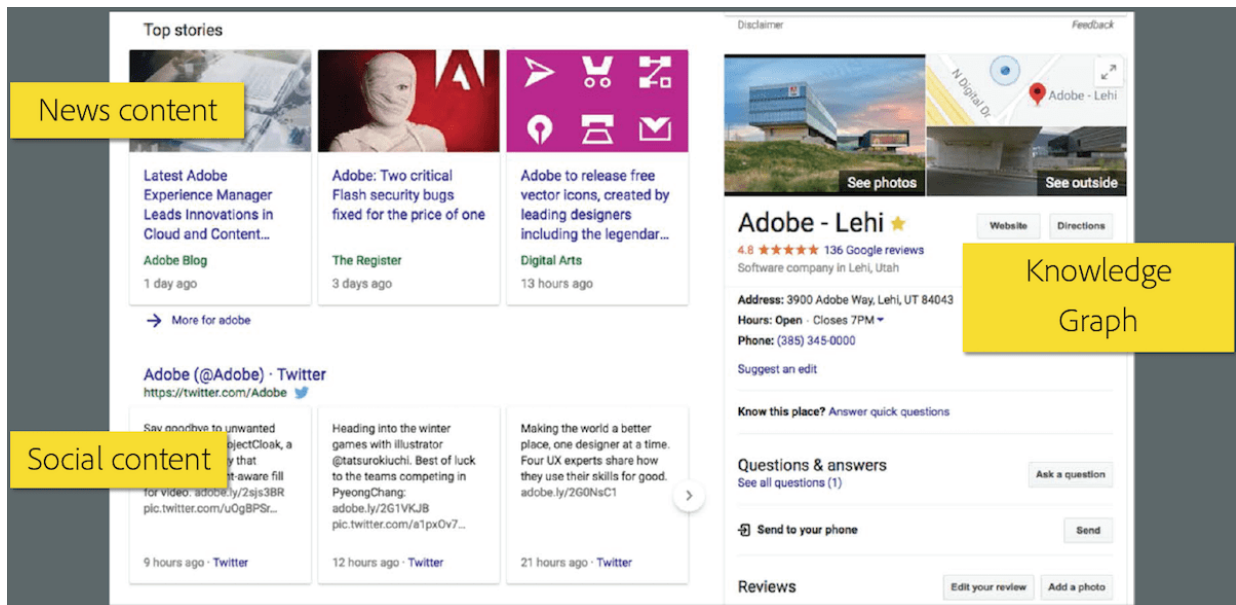
News & Social Content

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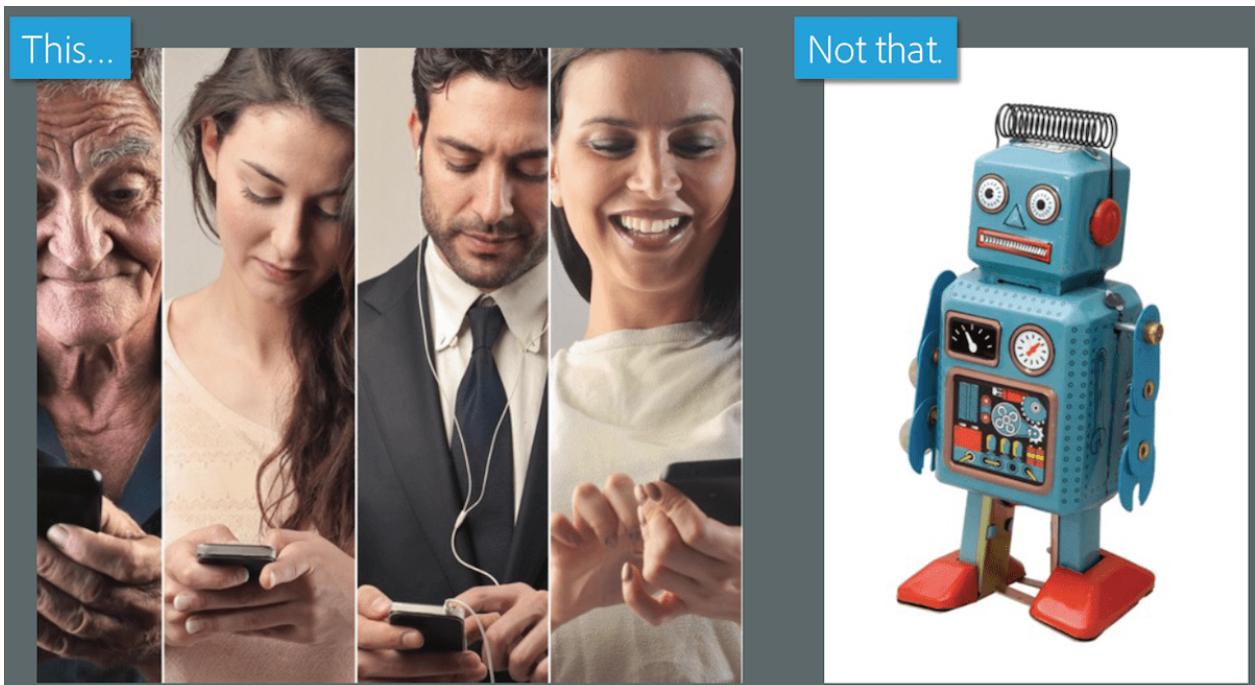
It's sometimes easy to forget that it's all about optimizing for people – your customers, readers, or subscribers.

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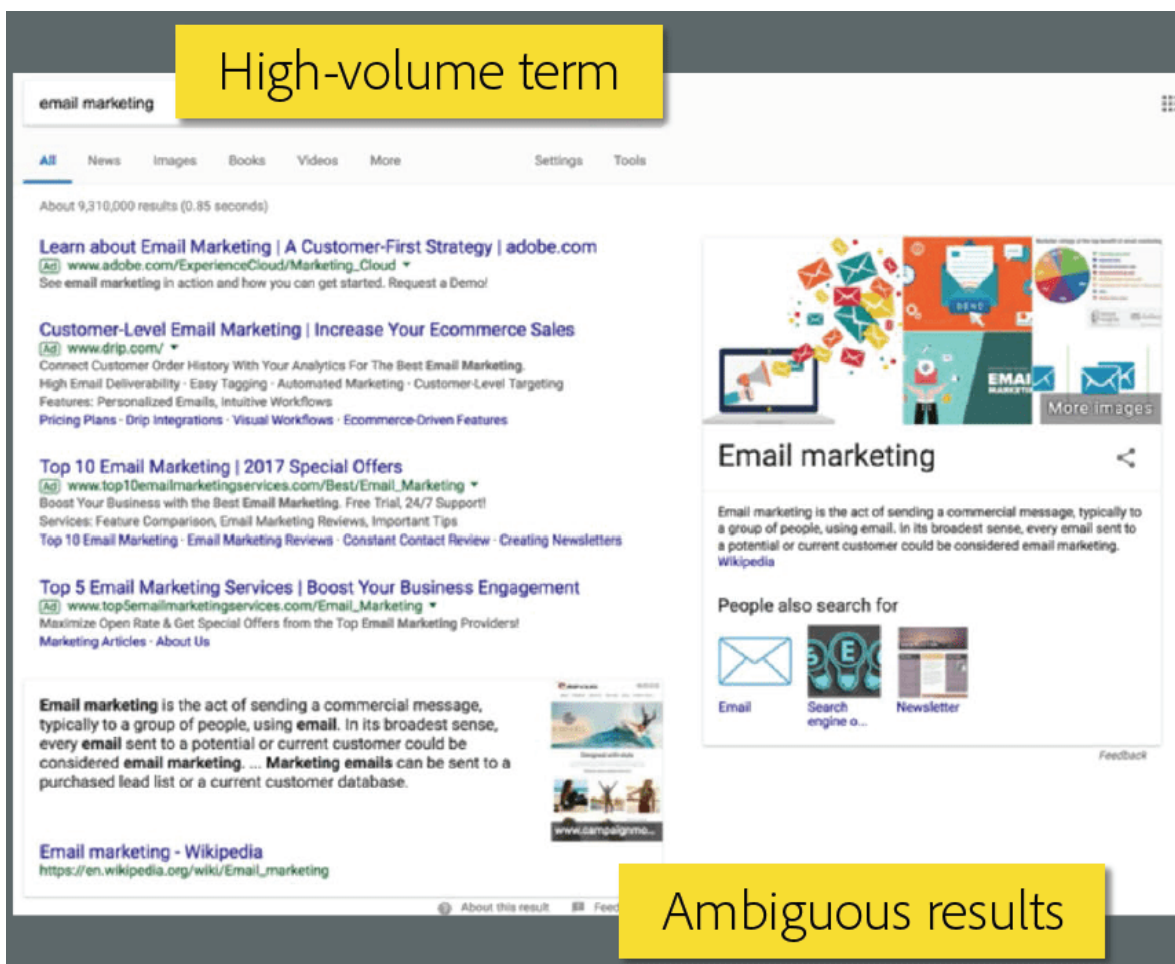
The search volume for this particular keyword is roughly 18,000.

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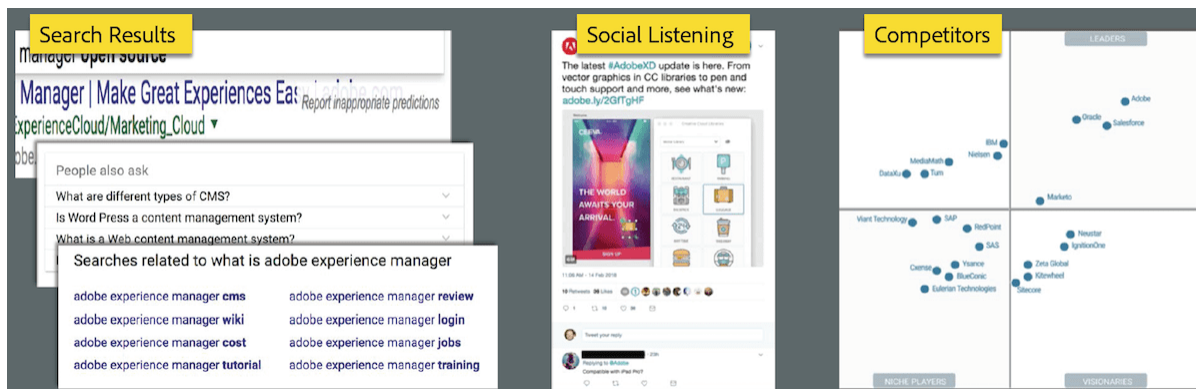
If you pay close enough attention, **your audience** will tell you what they want.

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 pains 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.
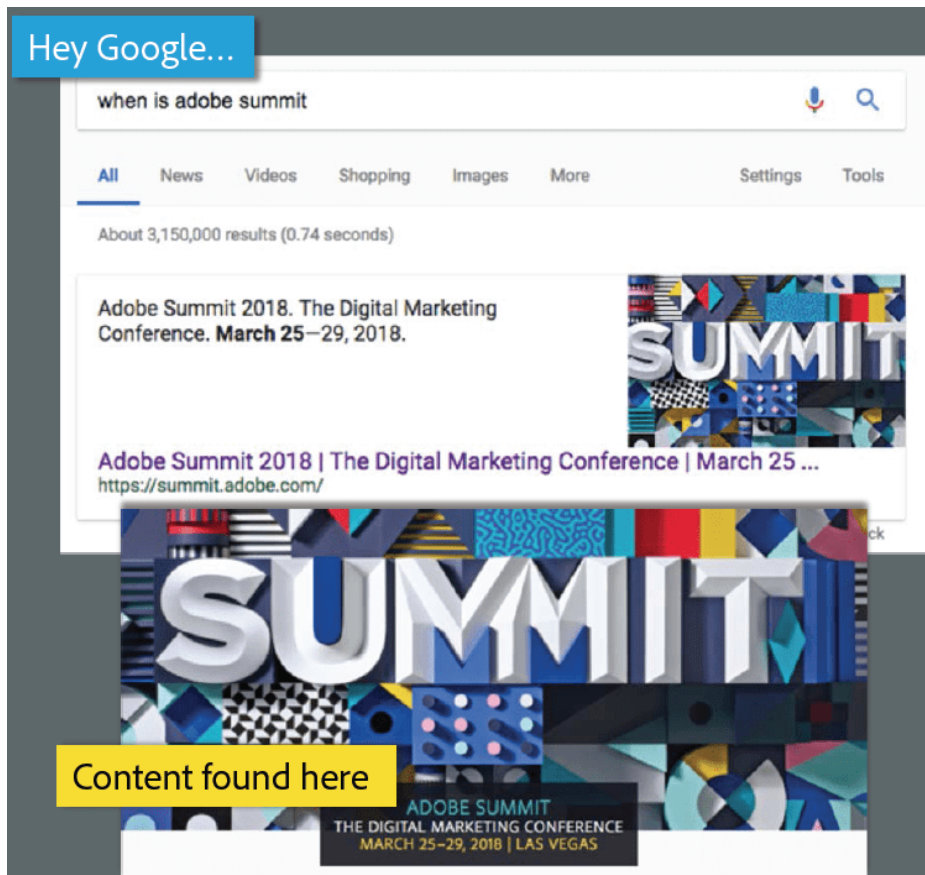
Position Zero

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.

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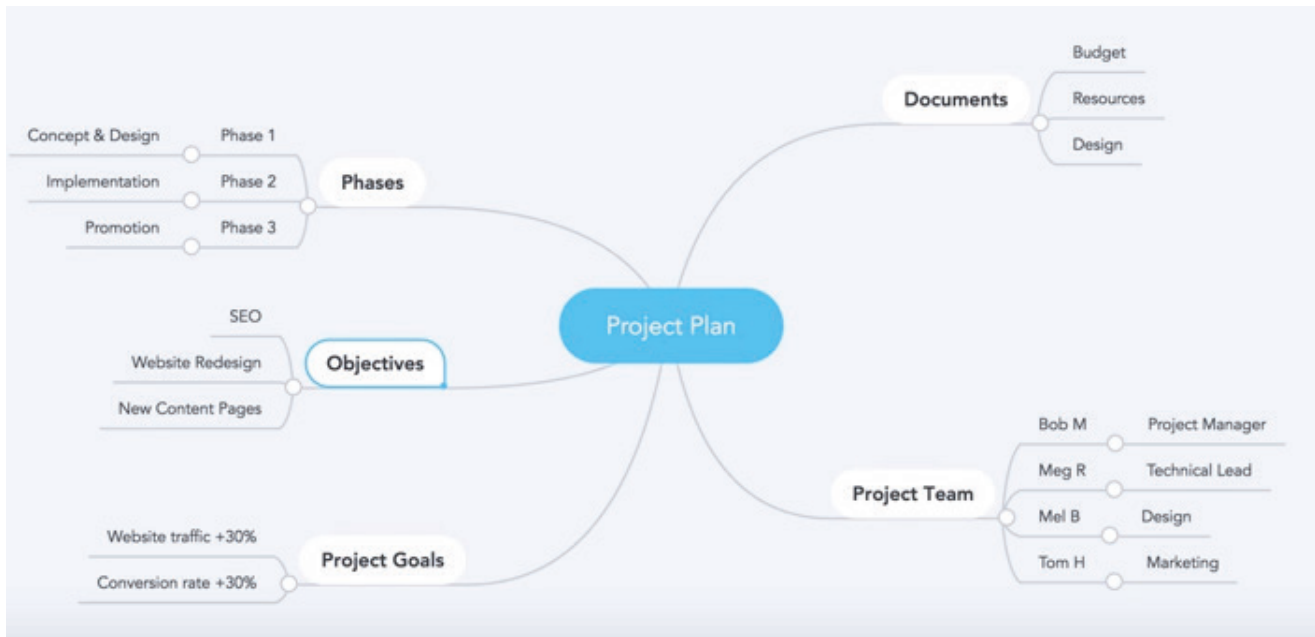
A mind map is a place to build your strategy from the ground up. A mind map is simply a branching series of categories, usually reaching out from the center, moving from more general to more specific categories, with ideas becoming more granular.

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 Market MindShift

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.

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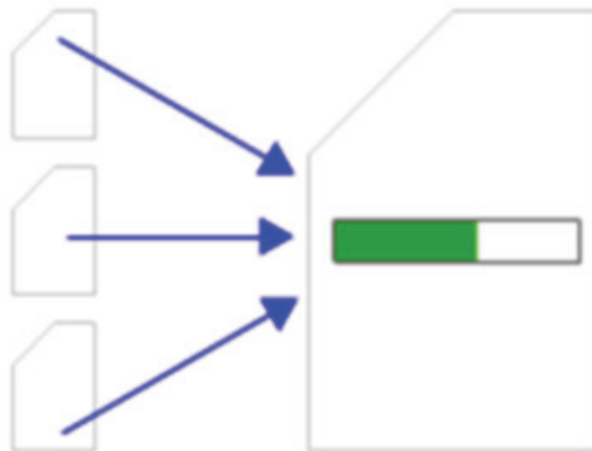
So a page that has large quantities of valuable links pointing to it will have a higher PageRank, and in principle will be likely to rank higher in the search results than other pages without as high a PageRank score.

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.
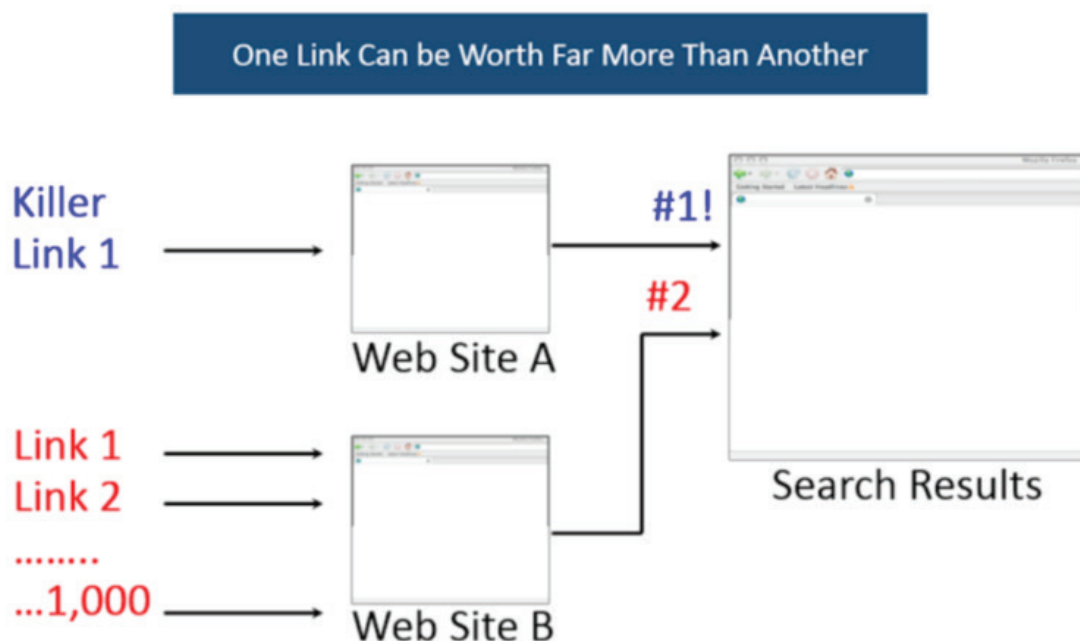
Not All Links are Created Equal

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.

One Link Can be Worth Far More Than Another

Killer Link 1 → Web Site A

#1!

#2

Link 1 → Link 2 → ....1,000 → Web Site B

Search Results

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.

imes from licensed data. These are also

th results. Implementation of schema can

ir search listings.

"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 2018, 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.
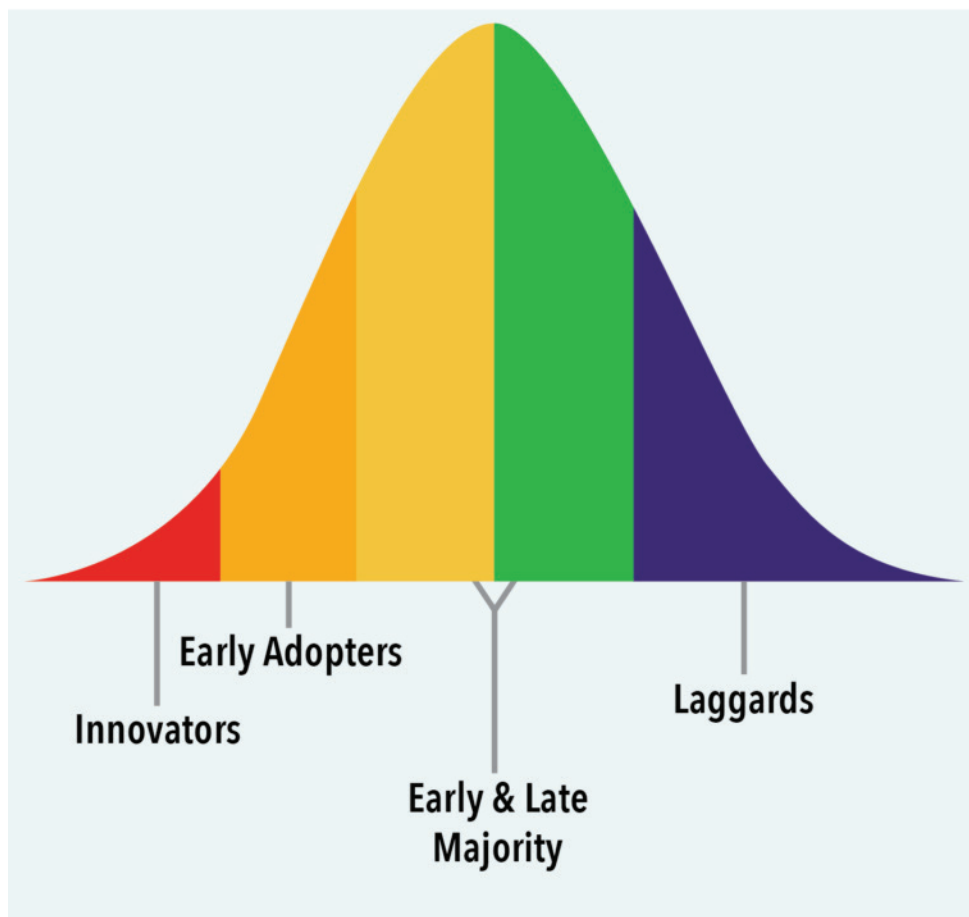
What Google really wants is for you to make a fantastic website, and promote it effectively, with the result that you earn or attract links.

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.
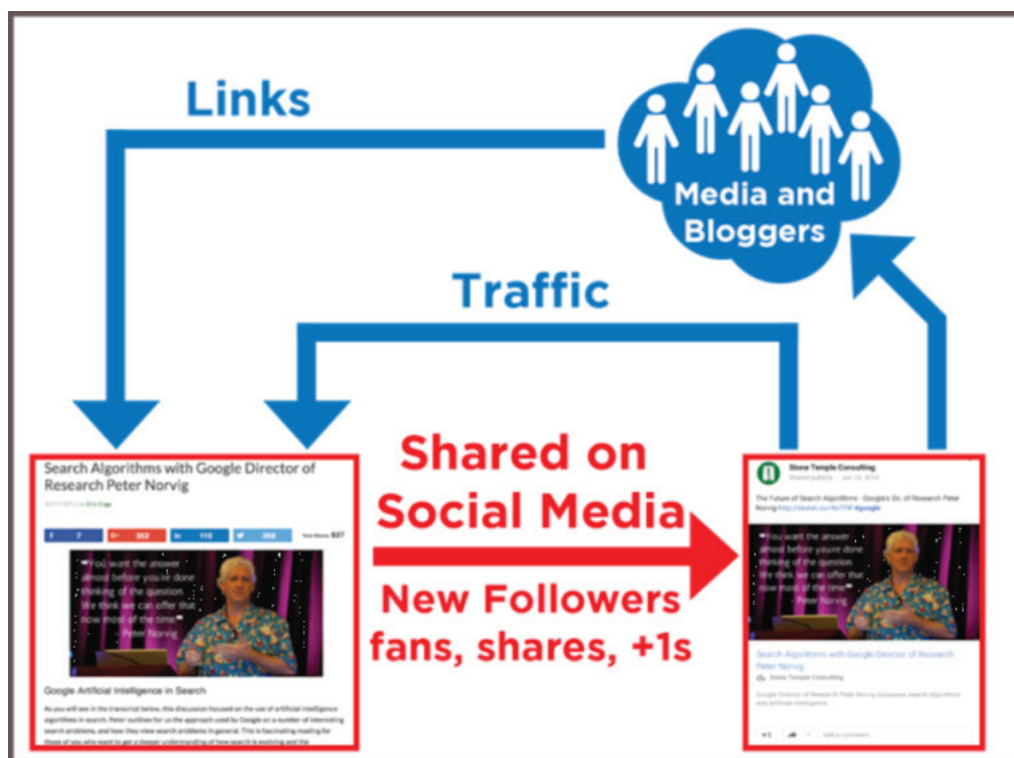
How do you get there?

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.
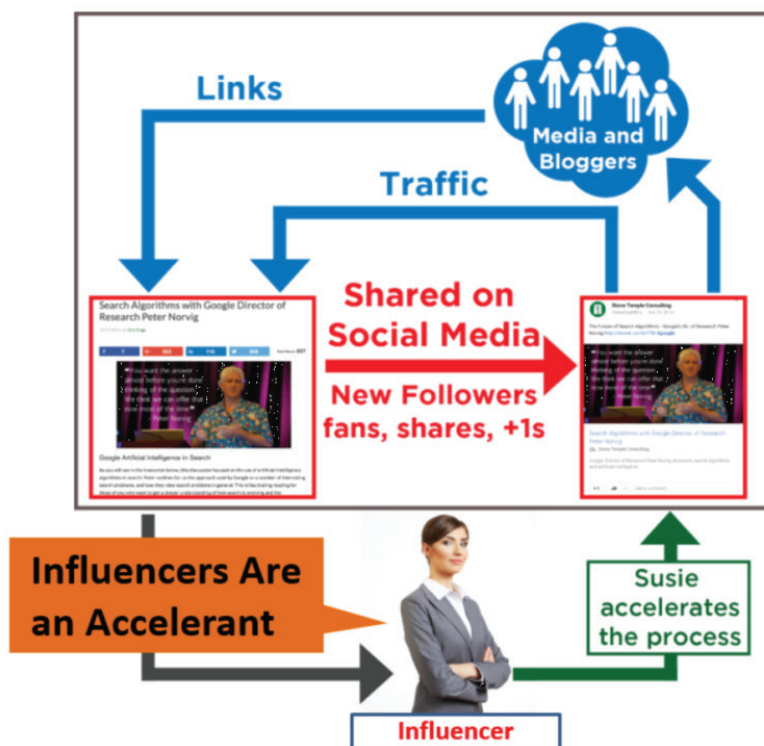
Getting influencers interested in sharing your content depends heavily on:

*   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!

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 2018, 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.
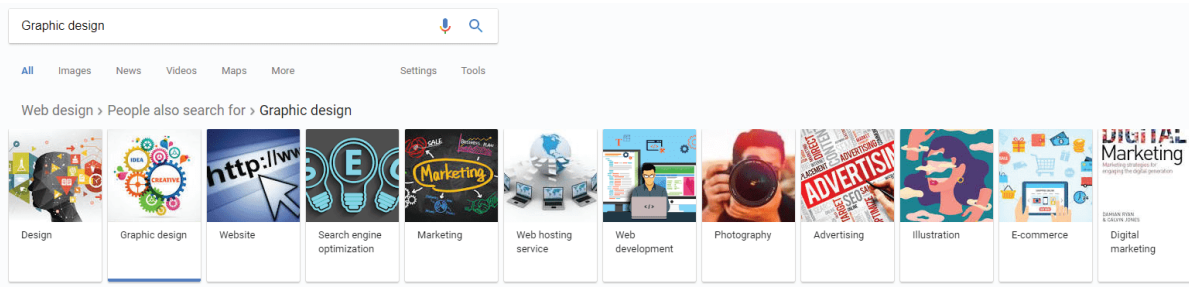
For example, **featured snippets** have been on the rise.
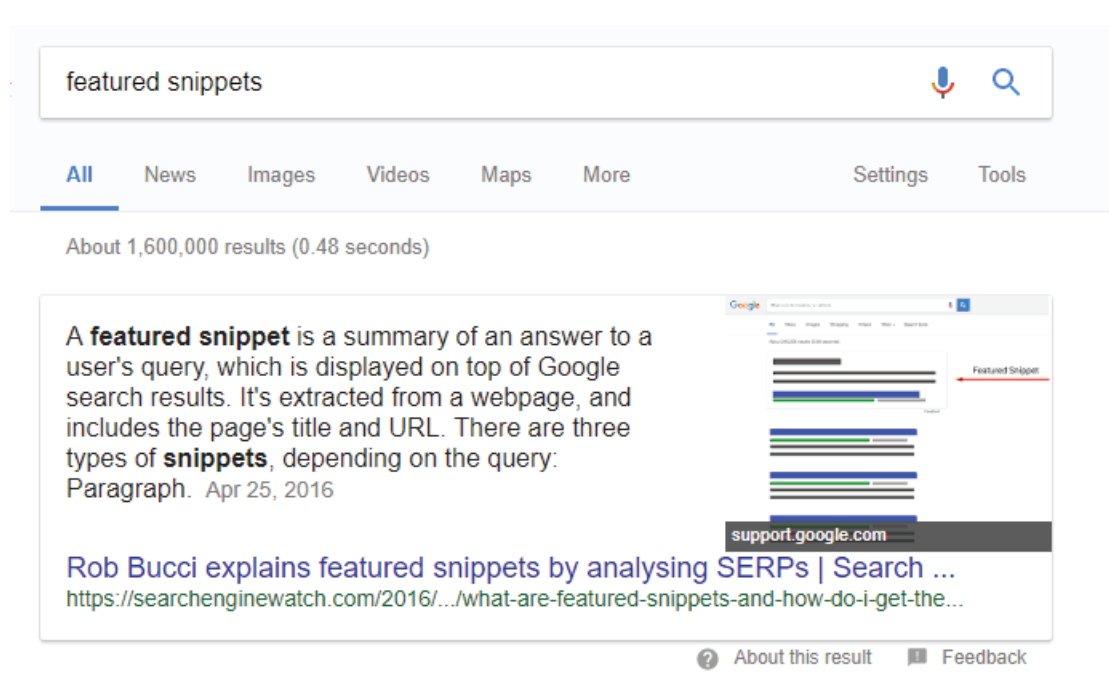
Moz found that they've risen from **5.5 percent to 16 percent** in just two years. But they recently saw a 10 percent decrease in featured snippets in a matter of four days.

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:

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

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:
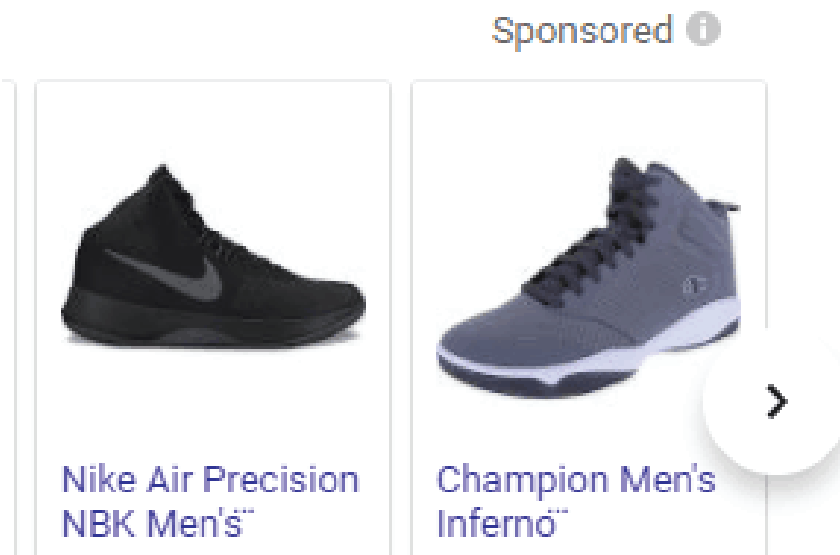
Which shoe would you buy? Probably Nike.

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 › SEO blog › 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 ⇒ user clicks on P_1 ⇒ "good"
- Algorithm B puts P_2 before P_1 ⇒ no click ⇒ "bad"

- Do we really think A is better than B? Judging SERP quality w/ queries & clicks :-)

SMX SEARCH MARKETING EXPO

◄ 30 of 69 ►

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.

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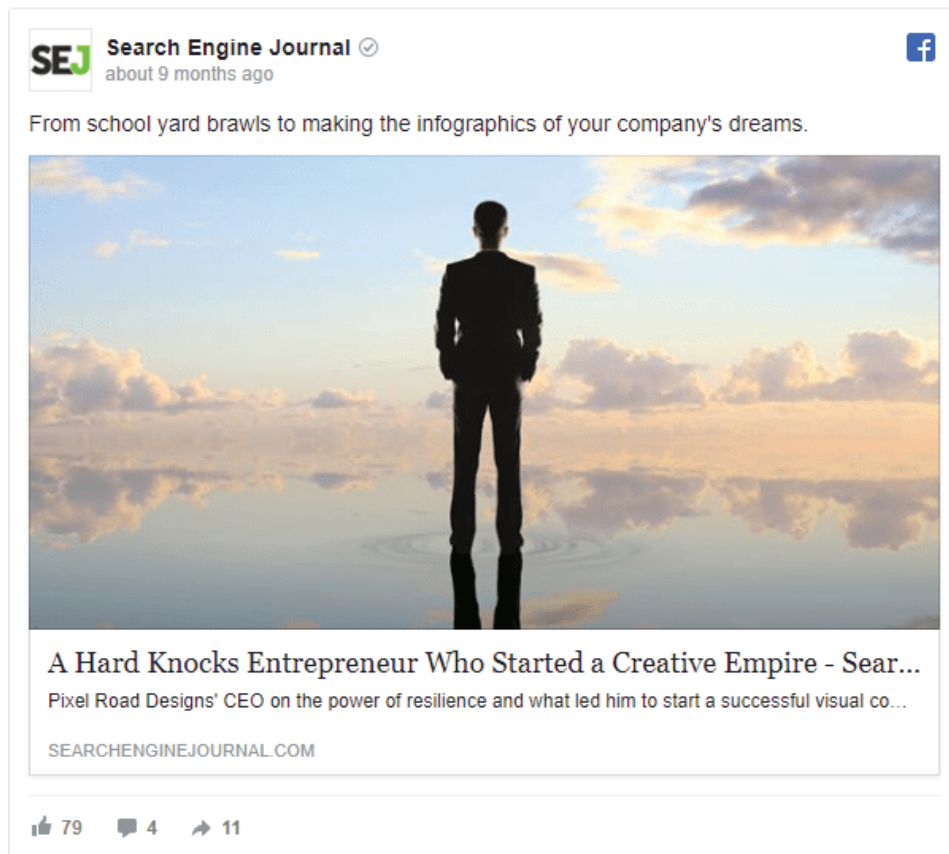
Facebook has the **cheapest CPM** out of any advertising platform ever created.

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 2018.

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.

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 Momentology 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 it's 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.

SEJ Search Engine® Journal

- 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

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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

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°

MOZCAST

85° WEDNESDAY June 27

83° TUESDAY June 26

83° MONDAY June 25

80° SUNDAY June 24

81° SATURDAY June 23

Tweet   Like   G+

Wed Jun 27 85°   Get the MozCast Weather Widget

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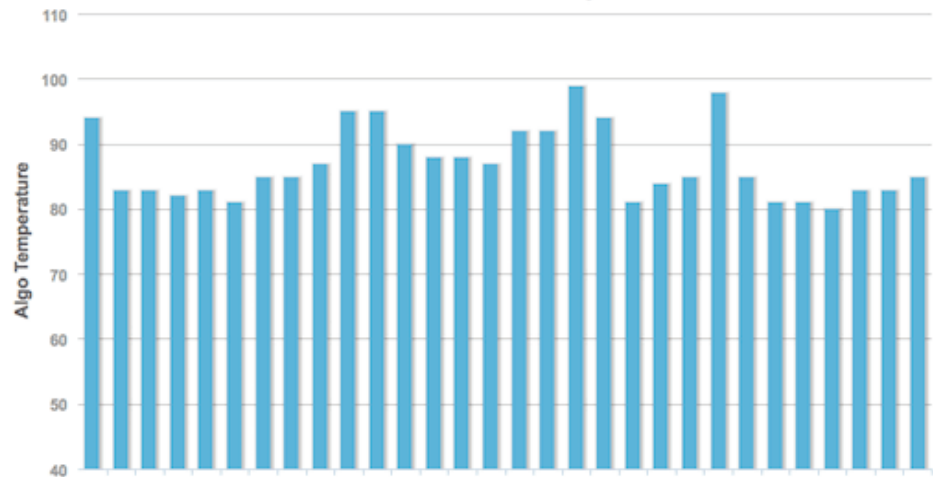
MozCast, in the style of a weather report, provides a "temperature" that represents how turbulent Google's algorithm has been every 24 hours over the past 30 days. Hotter and stormier means Google's rankings are very much in flux.

SEMrush Sensor

2.5 /10

🐦 1.2k

Normal range

Another ordinary day. Although some sites experience insignificant rankings changes, this is most likely because these sites or their backlink profiles are being updated. There is nothing to worry about.

f 339

`</>` **Embed widget**

SERP volatility for the last 30 days

Compare with... ⌄

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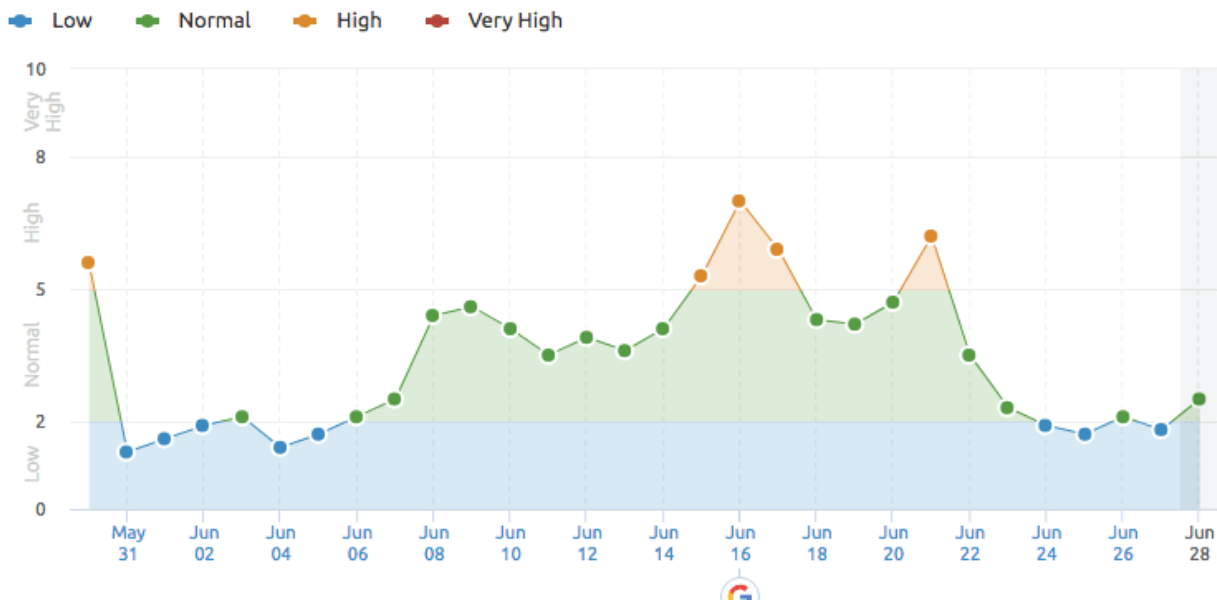
SEMrush Sensor is one of the more impressive algorithm tracking tools. You can see ranking changes (desktop and mobile) broken down into more than 20 categories, as well as by device, SERP feature, and location. Plus you can check out overall SERP volatility (and domain winners and losers) for the last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

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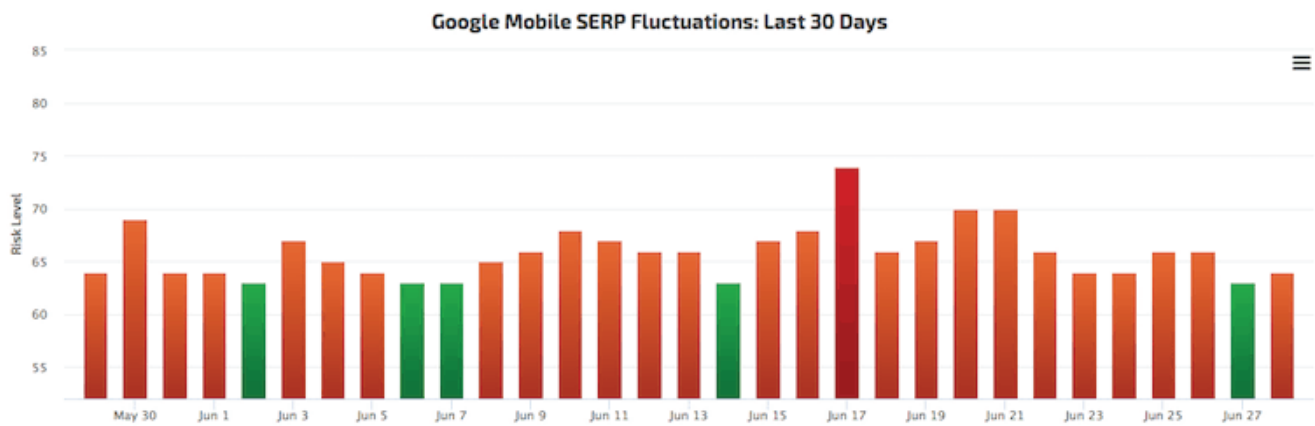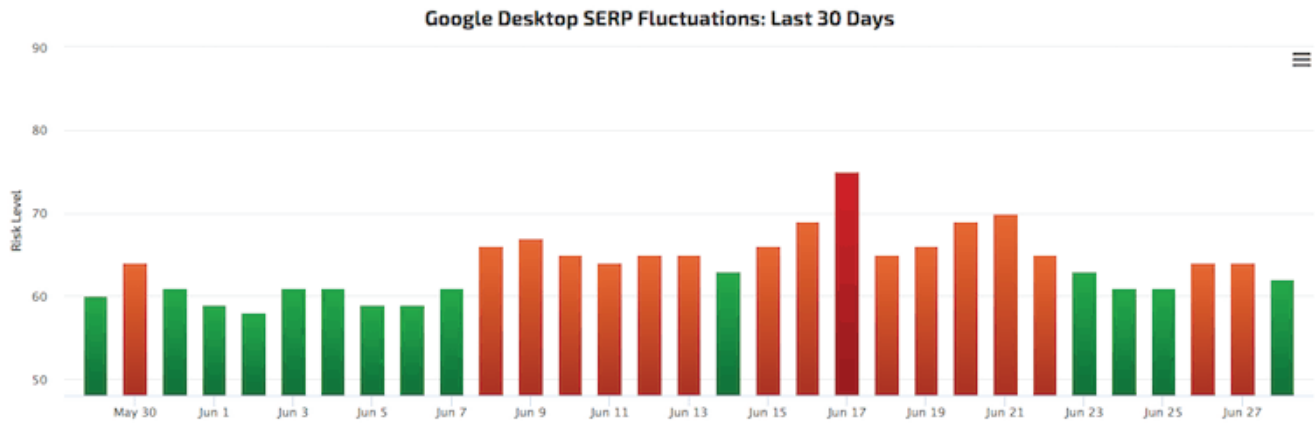
RankRanger monitors more than 10,000 domains and keywords daily to identify ranking patterns and track volatility in Google's desktop and mobile search results.

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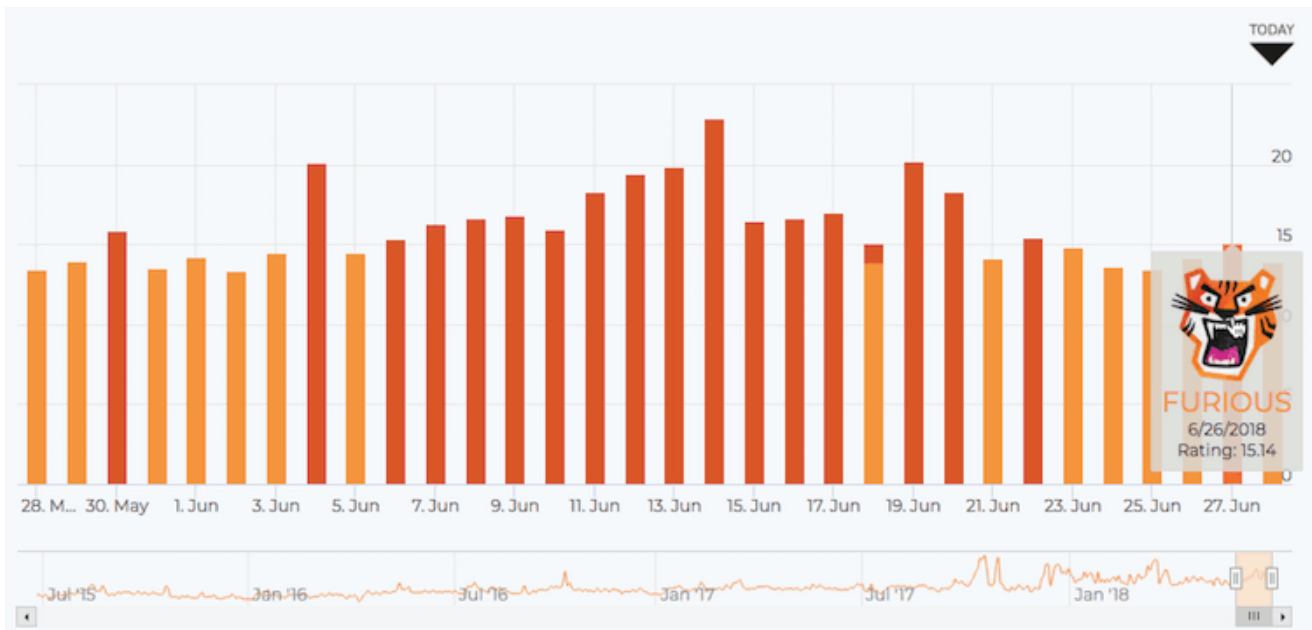
Is Google Chilled, Grumpy, or Furious? Find out Google's "mood" with Accuranker's 'Grump' Rating, which highlights fluctuations in Google's algorithm. You can also track by country and device and sign up for alerts via email.

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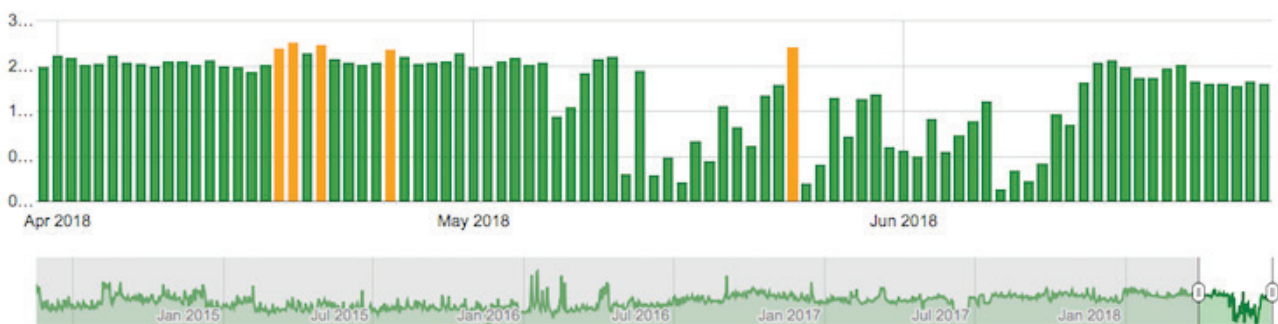
This Google algorithm tracking tool monitors fluctuations for about 17,000 keywords (desktop and mobile) using a flux metric called a "roo". A higher roo value means high volatility, while a low roo value indicates it's a fairly ordinary day. Algoroo also highlights weekly winners and losers.

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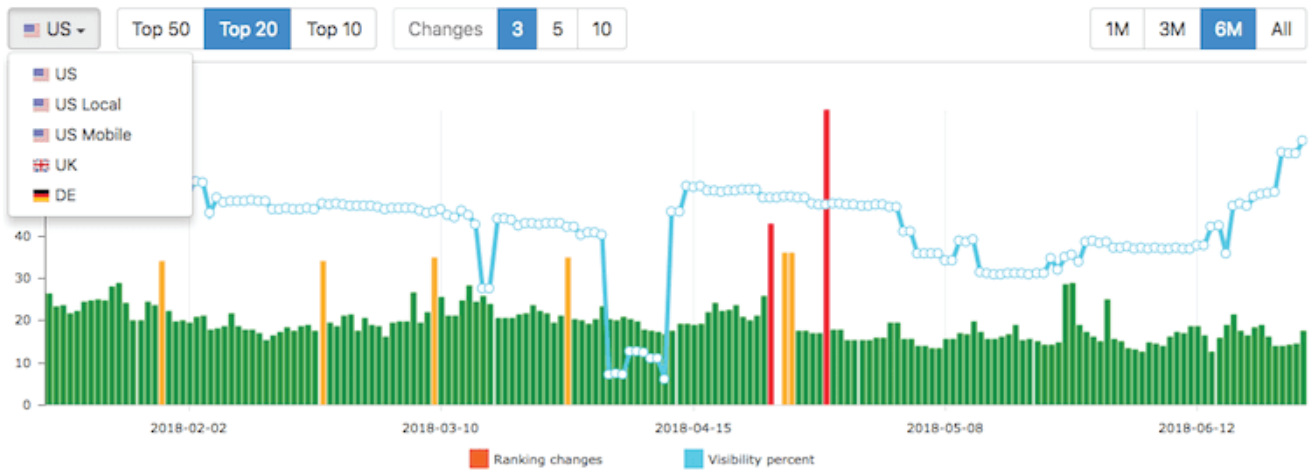
AWR's Google Algorithm Changes tool monitors 11,000 keywords and 500,000 URLs across various industries to highlight fluctuations and show changes in position.

Panguin Tool

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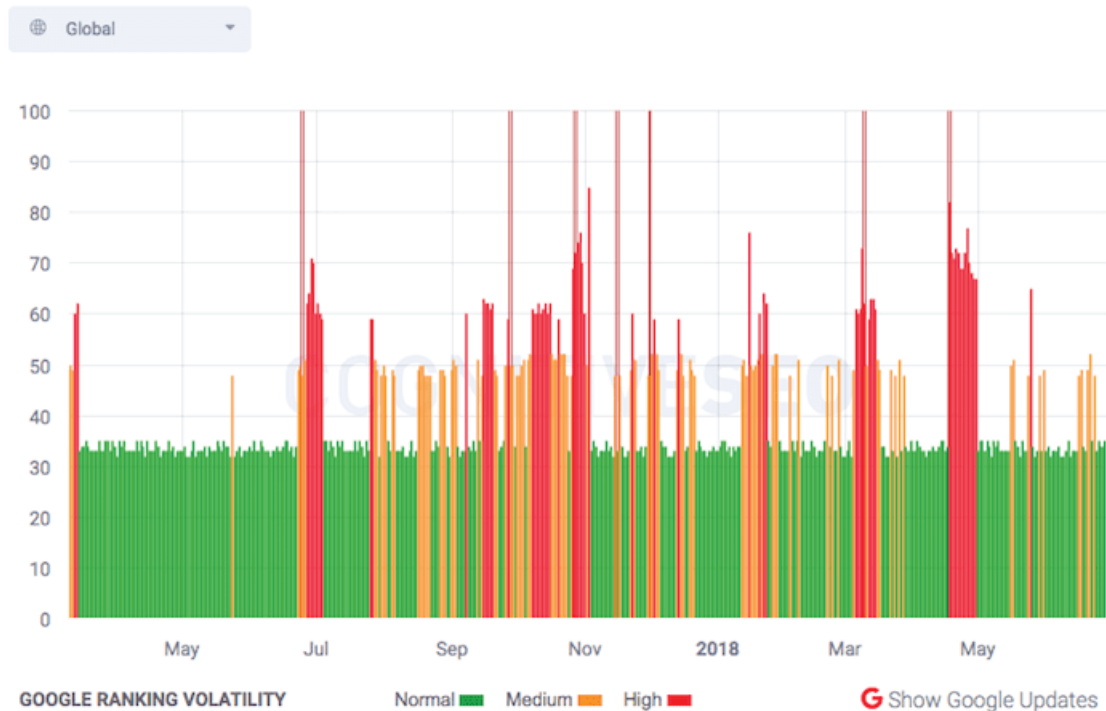
This tool monitors more than 100,000 keywords daily to track ranking fluctuations in desktop, mobile, and local search results. You can sign up to be notified when Google is particularly volatile.

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.

Top 7 Ranking Signals: What REALLY Matters in 2018?

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.

Now, 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.

Saroj Kumar @sarojnishad · 6 Sep
@methode @JohnMu What's the main important factor for rank a website in top search results on a particular phrase?

John ☆.o(≧∇≦)o.☆ ✓
@JohnMu

Awesomeness.
4:15 PM - Sep 6, 2017

♡ 40 💬 17 people are talking about this
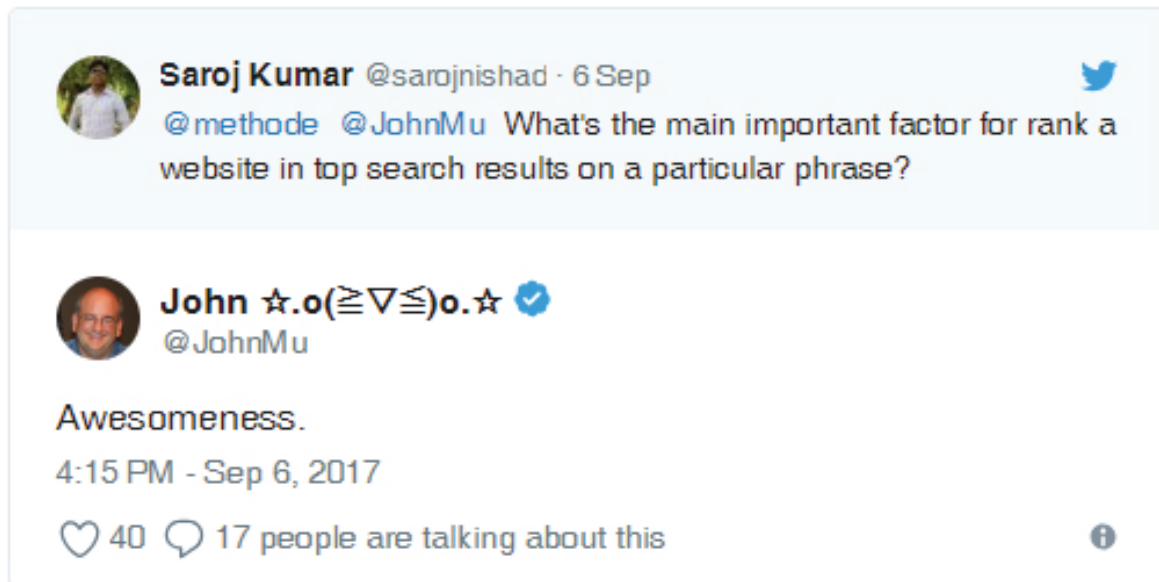
But, with over **1 billion websites** online today, how do you create awesomeness?

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 2018 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 2018.

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 2018, 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 2018. 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.
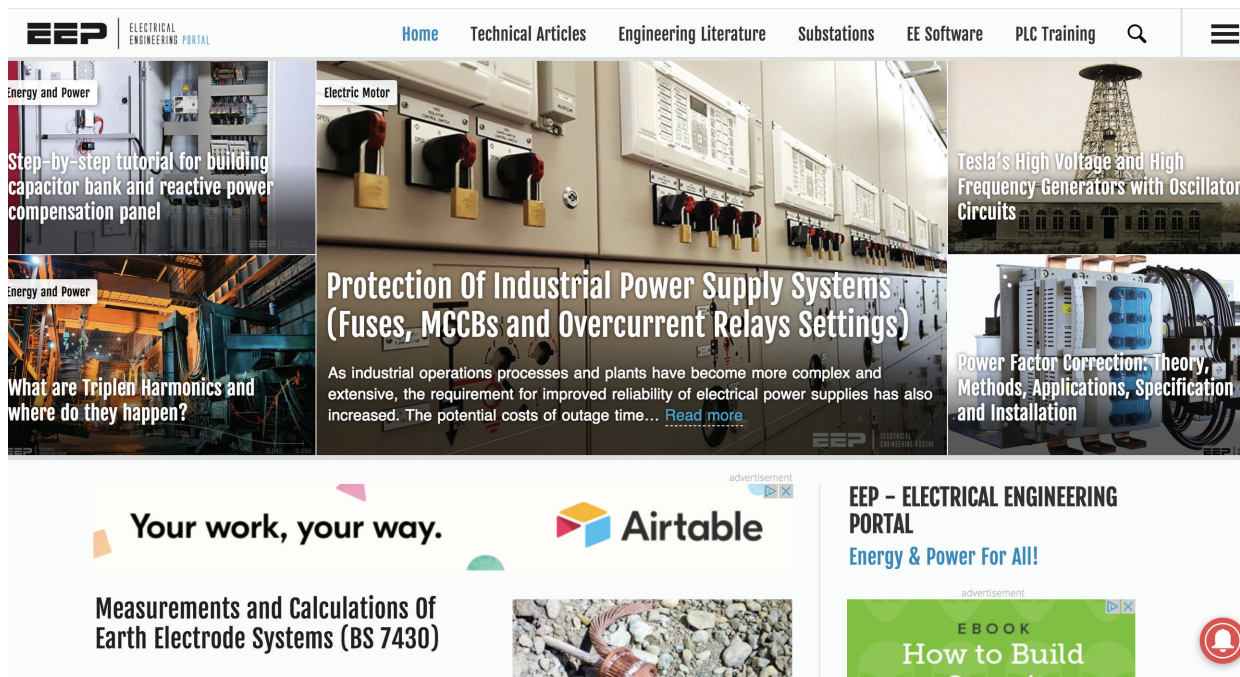
Or, **this.**

POLICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY TRAINING

ARRESTLING
Train Weekly or Fight Weakly

Active Shooter Training

Augmented/Mixed Reality

SIRT PISTOL TRAINING

CIT

Crisis Intervention Training

BANK TRAINING

PUBLIC TRUST

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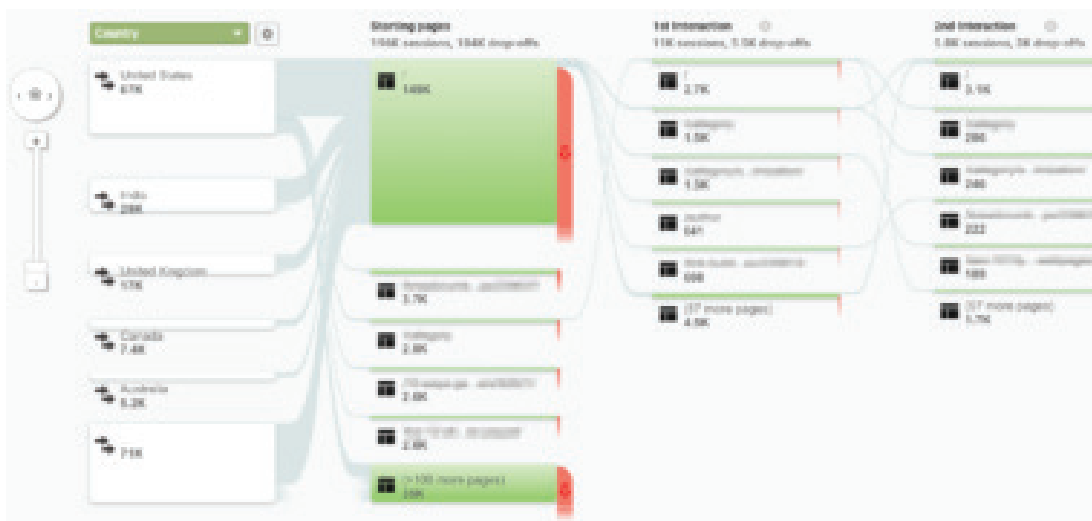
You can also view **Search Analytics report** in Google Search Console. This report will give you insights into what people are clicking on the SERPs to get to your site.

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 Cortona, 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/ ▼
★★★★☆ 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 rakes if you don't make the transition.

Here is what Chrome will look like when you implement HTTPS:
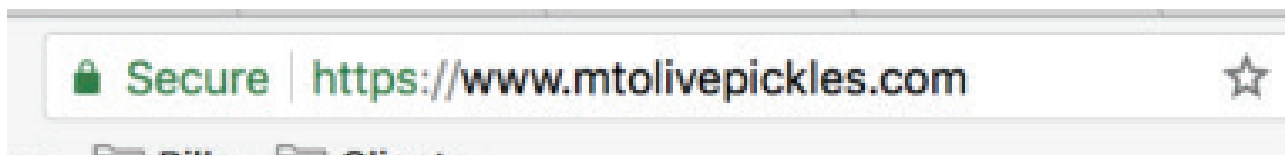
All of this shows that Google thinks HTTPS is essential.

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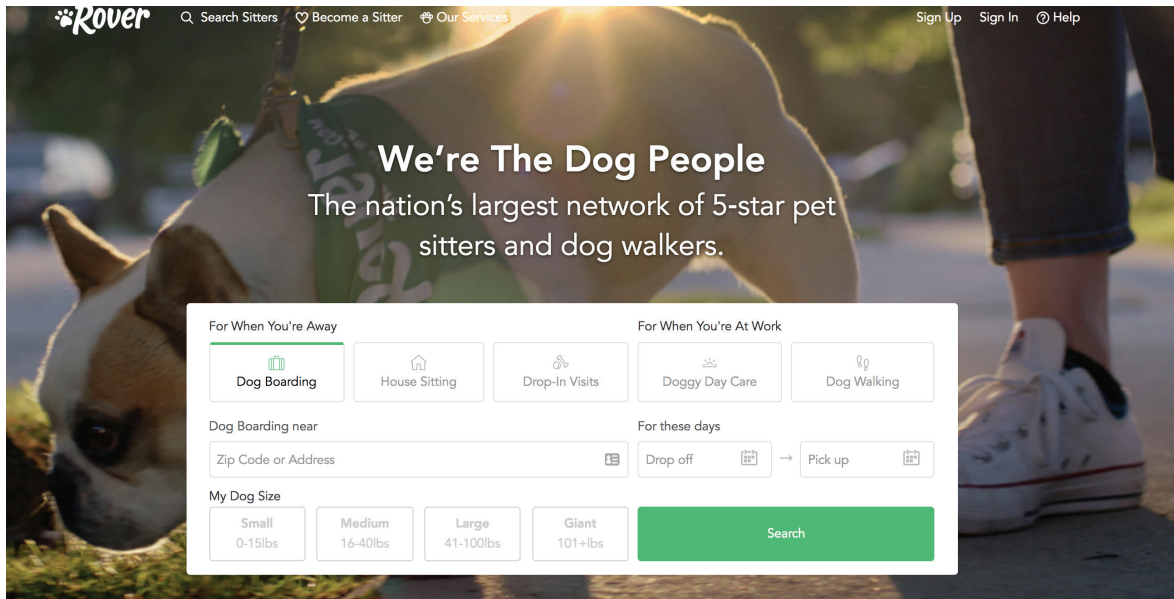
Search engines look at **dwell time** as a signal to see the amount of time a user spent on a site before clicking the back button to return to the search results.

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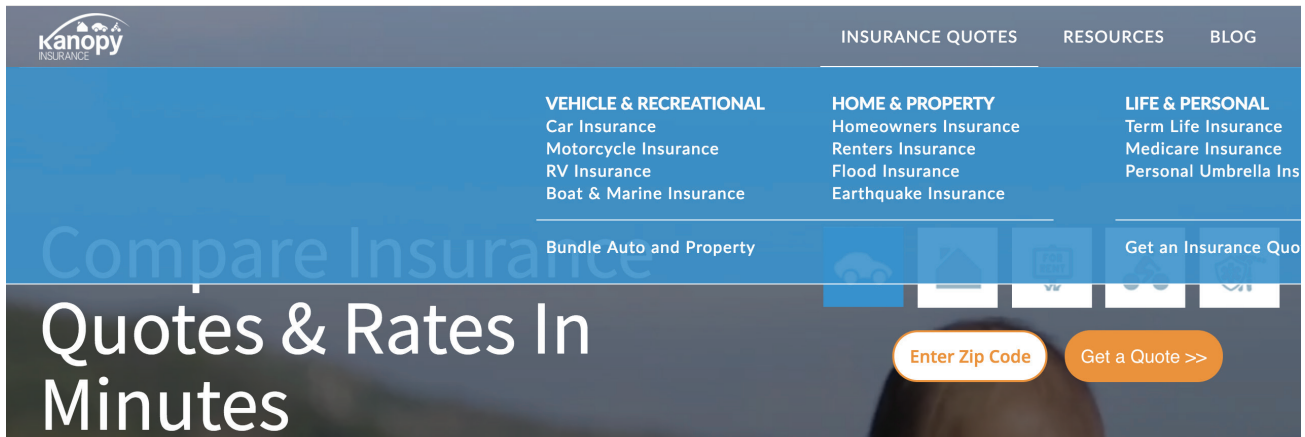
Not only does site architecture help users find what they are looking for with **better website navigation,** but it can also help search engine crawlers find more pages on a website.

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").

PageSpeed Tools > Insights

| HOME | GUIDES | REFERENCE | SUPPORT |

PageSpeed Insights

Make your web pages fast on all devices.

| Enter a web page URL | ANALYZE |

Web Performance
Learn more about web performance tools at Google.

Give Feedback
Have comments or questions about PageSpeed Insights?
Discuss on our mailing list.

About PageSpeed Insights
PageSpeed Insights analyzes the content of a web page, then generates suggestions to make that page faster. Learn more.

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 2018:

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.

Barry Schwartz ✔ @rustybrick · 14 May
@dannysullivan can you confirm google has changed the default for the number of characters shown as the search results Snippets?

Danny Sullivan ✔
@dannysullivan

Our search snippets are now shorter on average than in recent weeks, though slightly longer than before a change we made last December. There is no fixed length for snippets. Length varies based on what our systems deem to be most useful.

12:30 AM - May 15, 2018

♡ 111   💬 110 people are talking about this   ⓘ

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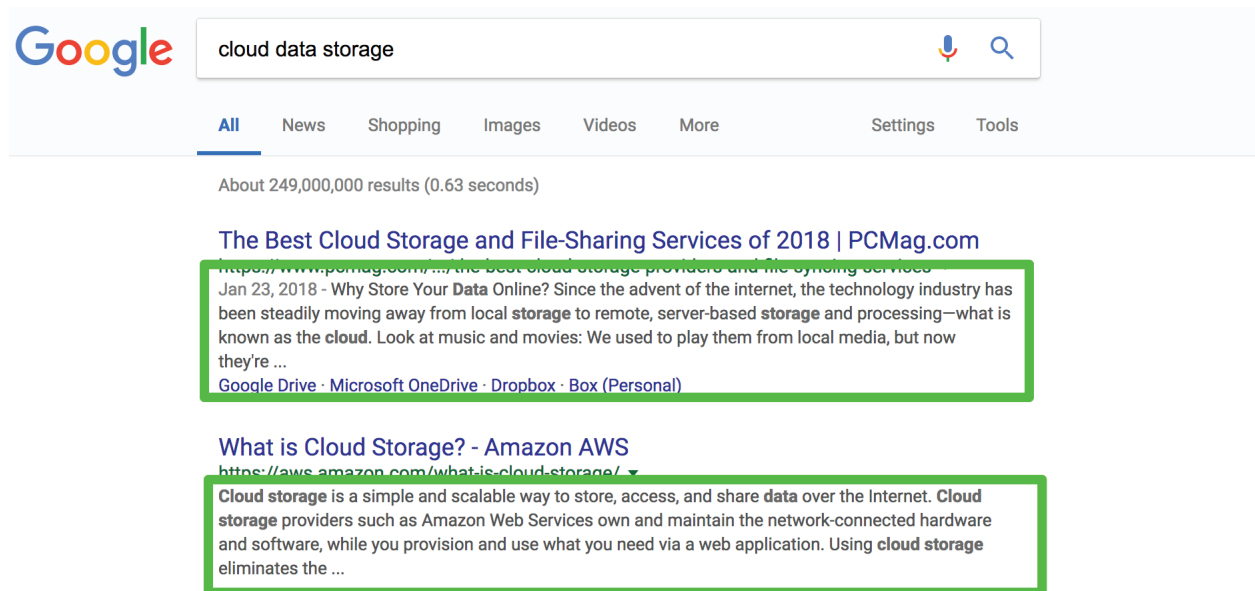
As it stands, write the best titles and descriptions for your pages that you can, but keep in mind that it won't always be used.

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 2018.

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 2018.

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 2018 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**

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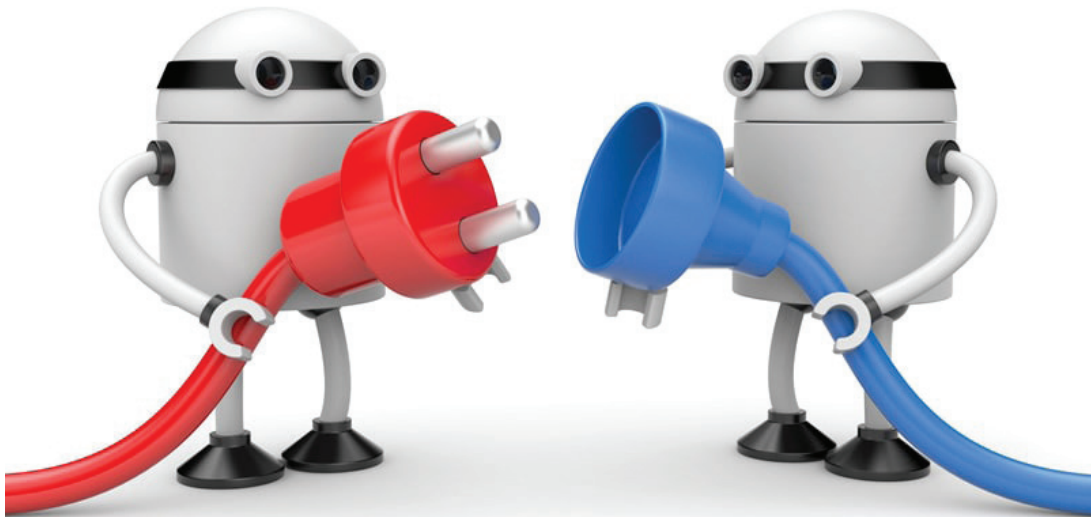
One of the easiest examples of an area machine learning can greatly increase Google's capabilities is in links.

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.

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 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
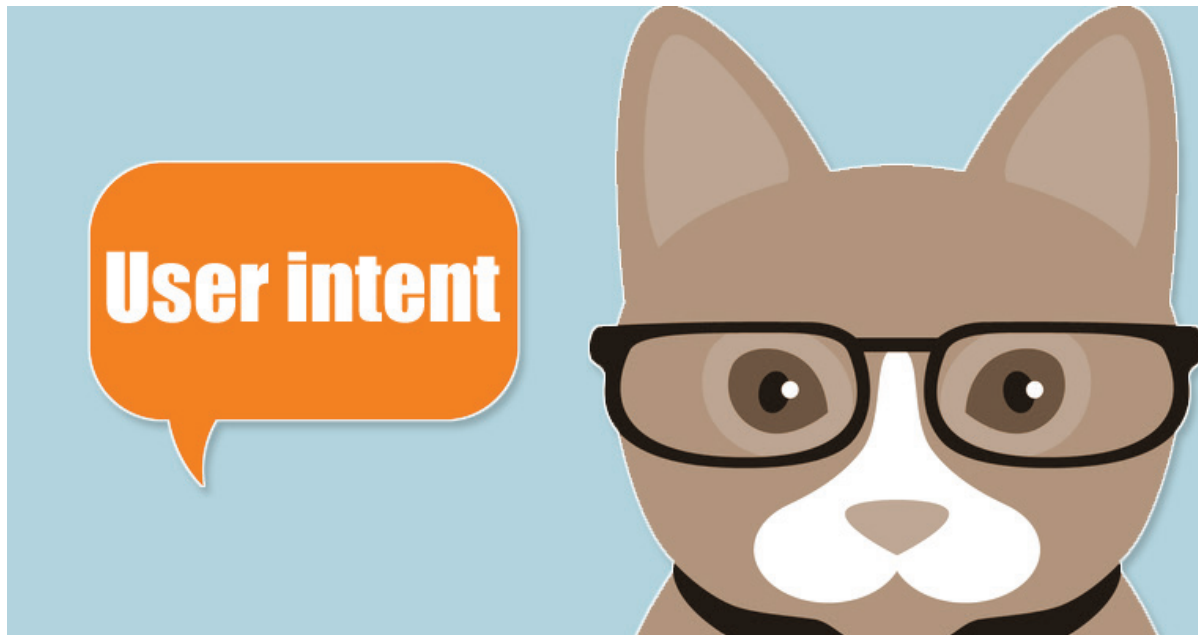
Words and phrases can have multiple user intents.

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!**
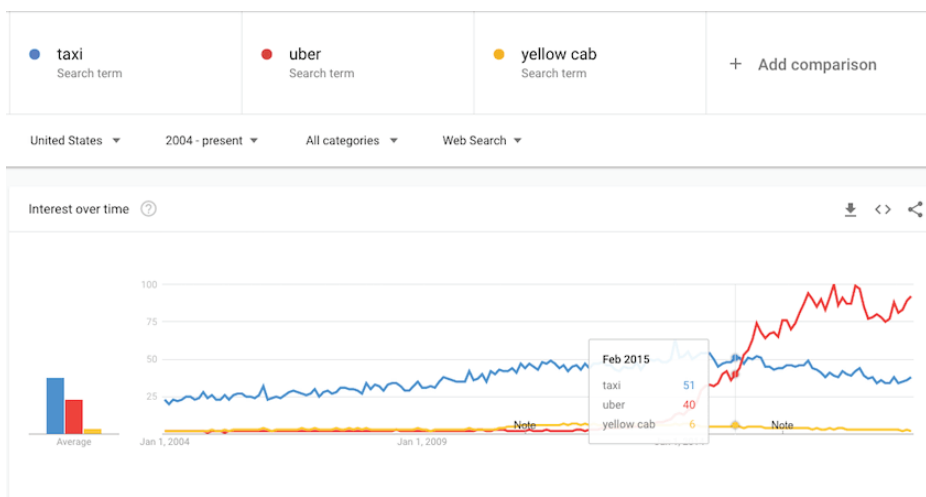
In the example above, it is abundantly clear that the phrase "uber" is wildly popular compared even to the generic phrase "taxi." The trend line also shows that the phrase taxi is trending downward, in recent times the search inventory plummeted to as low as it was in 2004.

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!

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.

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.

What if I told you there's a better way to approach discussing SEO with business stakeholders, in a language they can understand?

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):

See — Largest addressable qualified audience!

Think — Largest addressable qualified audience, with some commercial intent.

Do — Largest addressable qualified audience, with loads of commercial intent

Care — Current customers, With two commercial transactions.
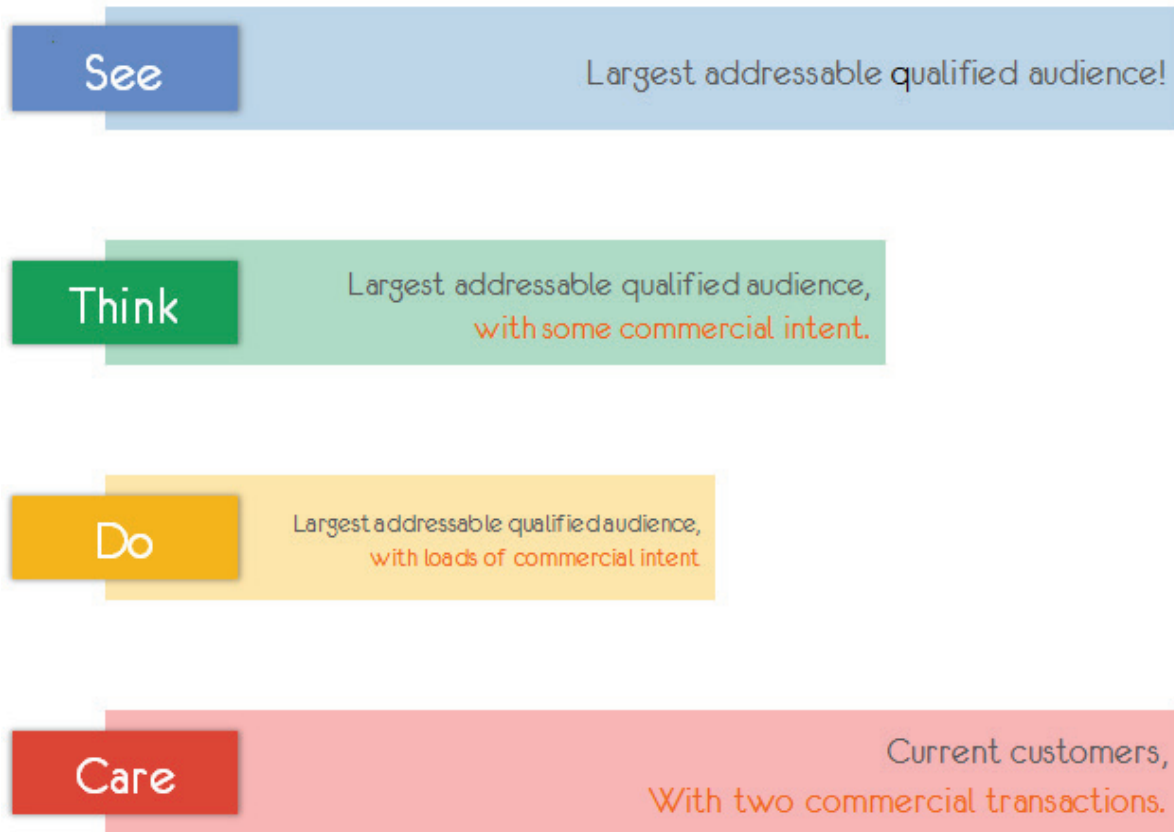
In this model, "audience intent" is defined by behavior, not demographics or psychographics, Kaushik said.

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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 then 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.

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.

Avoid, Avoid, Avoid Wikipedia-Type Content

I get it. You can't visit the location, so the easiest thing to do is use Wikipedia-type content, write about the county seat, change a few words, and forget about it.

The problem with this approach: it has been done several million (billion?) times already.

The real estate industry does it, the law industry does it. Everybody does it.

The problem with this type of content is that the quality has become so diluted, thanks to millions of people copying and pasting, that it provides little or no value.

Instead, the best thing to do is to take the content, perform your research, rewrite it in a quality way, and provide something of unique value that the reader will enjoy.

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.