SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION FOR GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

Joe Pagano Memorial Web Analytics Lecture Series

Tuesday, June 10, 2014

GSA

Agenda

- What Is SEO & Why Is It Important?
- Search: Then & Now
- SEO Building Blocks for Writing Content
- Conduct Keyword Research
- Eliminate ROT
- Resources
- SEO Checklist

WHAT IS SEO & WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

What Is SEO?

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization.

Why is it important?

We need to apply SEO practices to improve (optimize) our online content to rank/perform well in search engines.

Web Search: The Public Finds .gov Websites via Bing, Google, Yahoo, etc.*

Did you know? Almost one-third of traffic to .gov websites in 2014 has come from organic search—Google (27%), Bing (3%), and Yahoo (1%).

Site Search: Some .gov Search Results Are Powered by Bing and Google

SEARCH: THEN & NOW

A List of Links: Google in 2004
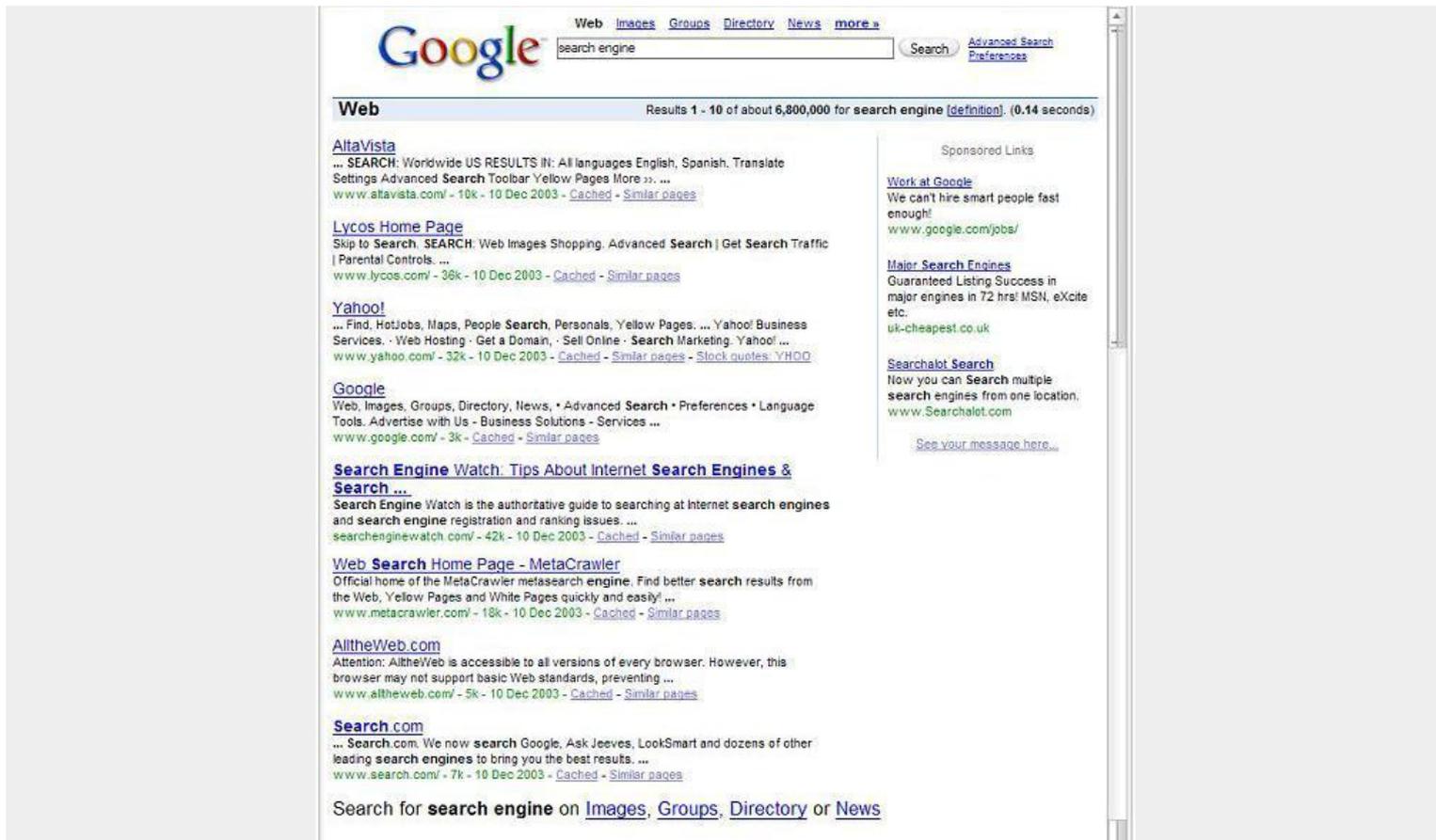
Compare that to today: news, shopping, places, in-depth articles, maps, knowledge graphs, images, videos, and more!

Digital Strategy & Open Data Policy Are Good for SEO*

Web   Images   Video   News   Maps   Books   Products

Digital Strategy & Open Data Policy
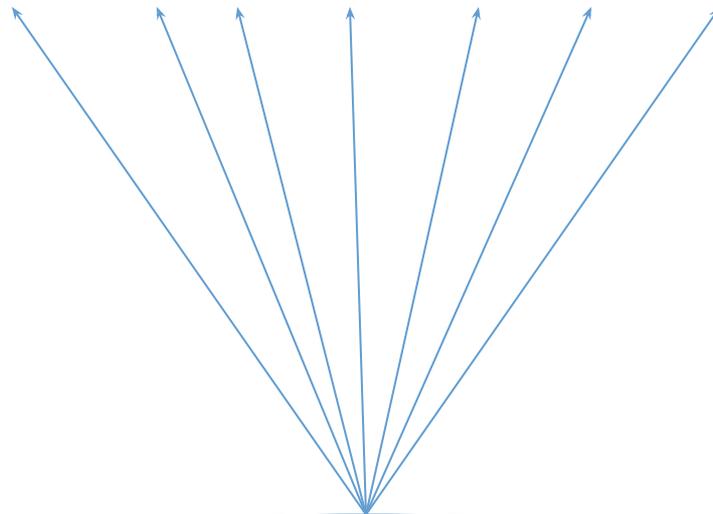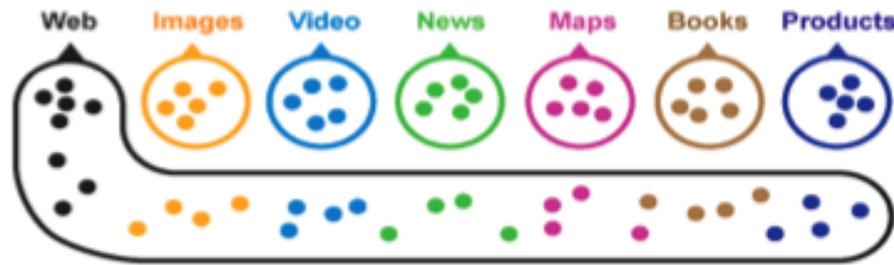
* Plus, plain language and accessibility, too.

Content Isn't Always King. SEO Sometimes Rules.

U.S. multi-platform unique visitors
■NY Times ■BuzzFeed ■HuffPost ■Yahoo News

Made with Chartbuilder

Data: comScore

Source: http://digiday.com/publishers/new-york-times-digital-challenges-5-charts/
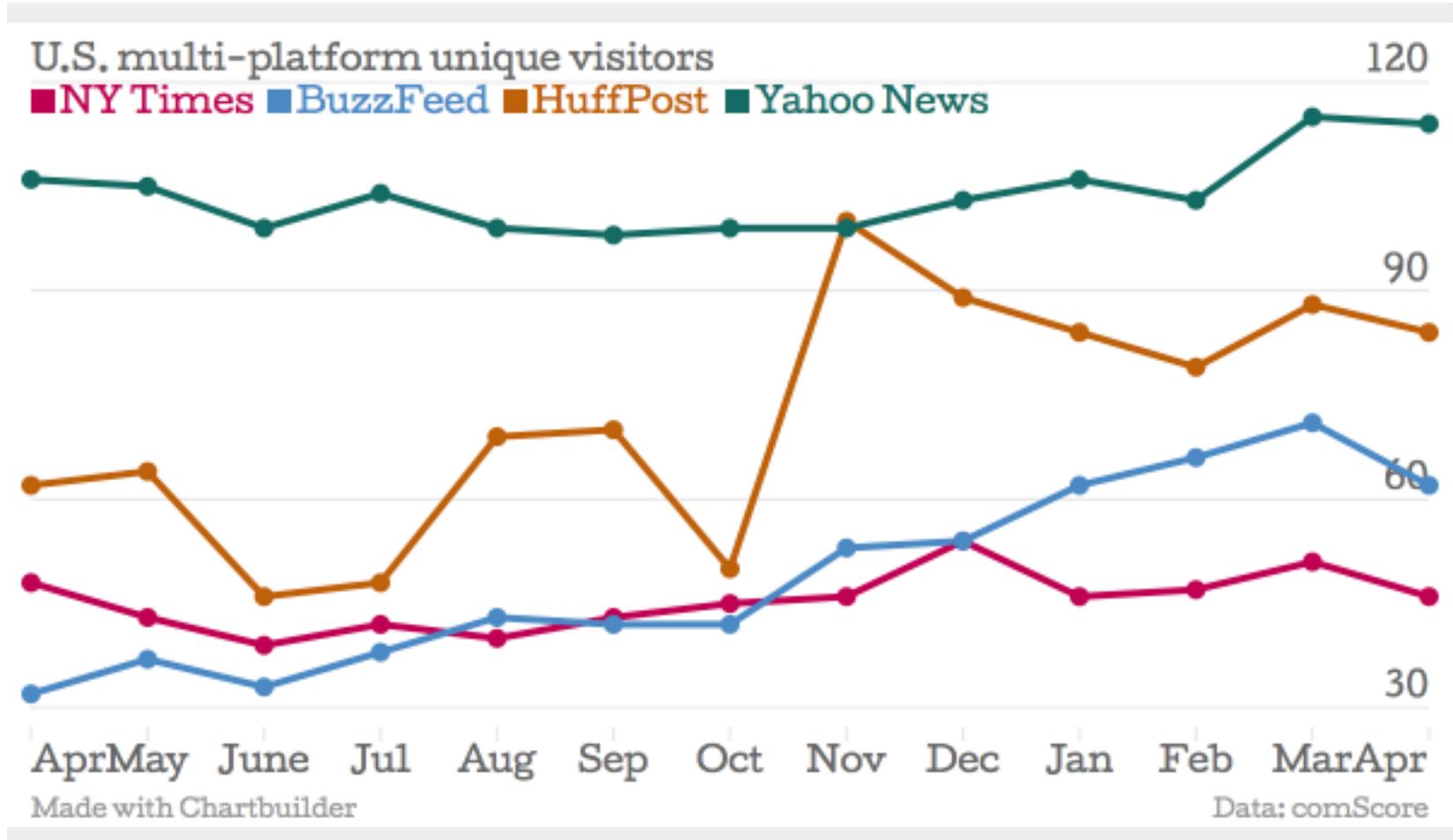
Create "Readable" Content for Both Humans & Technology
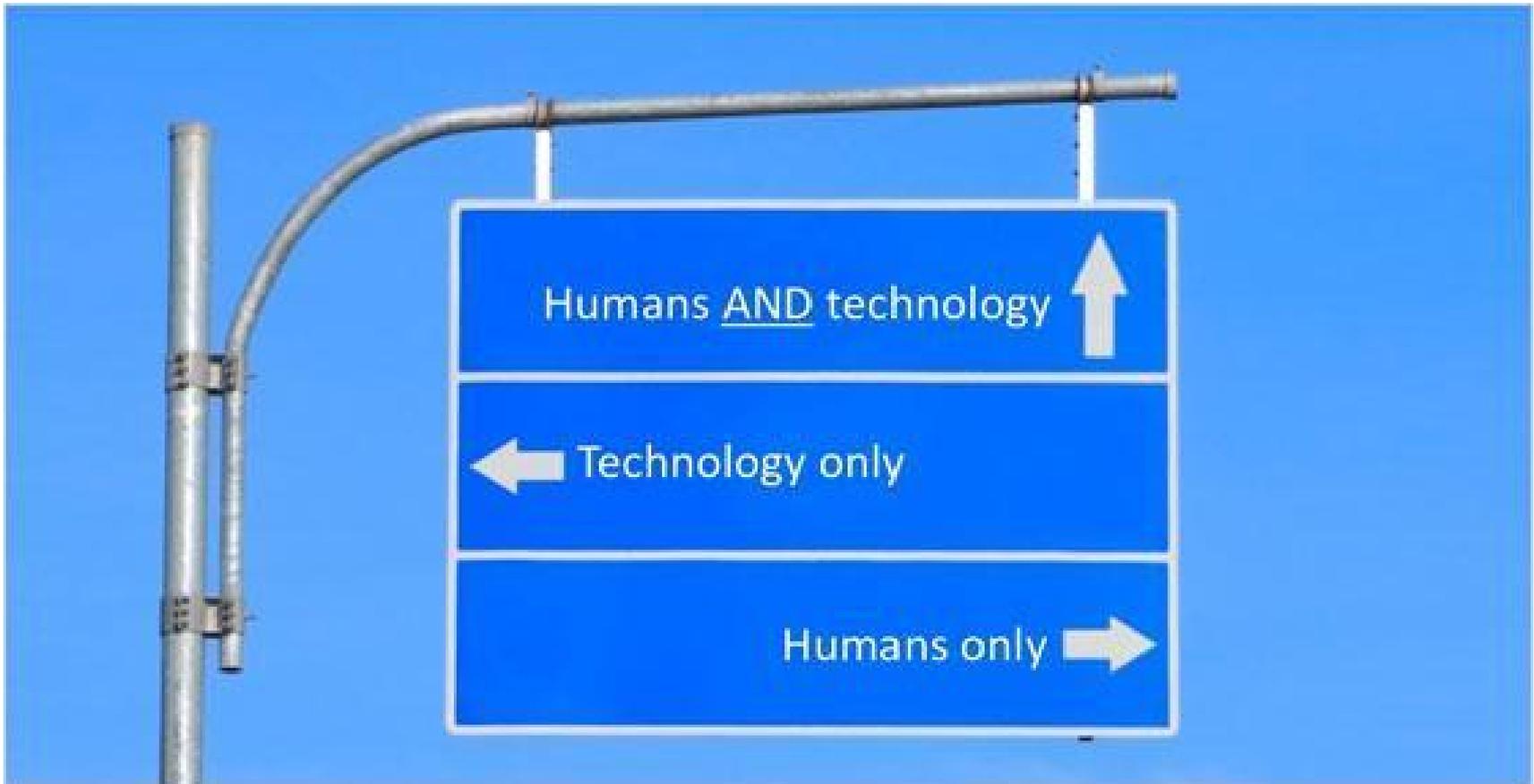
If I Was a Crawler …


```
t">rulemaking agenda</a> in conjunction with a broader initiative led by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to publish a Unified Agenda of Regulatory and
Deregulatory Actions across the federal government. Portions of the Unified Agenda are published in the Federal Register, and the full set of materials is also <a
href="http://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/eAgendaMain">available</a>.</p>
153 <p>Under the Regulatory Flexibility Act, federal agencies are required to publish regulatory agendas twice a year. We've been <a
href="/blog/category/rulemaking/">doing this for a couple of years now</a> by voluntarily participating in the Unified Agenda. Our regulatory agenda includes
rulemaking actions in the following stages: pre-rule, proposed rule, final rule, long term actions, and completed actions.</p>
154 <h3>Mortgages</h3>
155 <p>Our agenda includes a number of rulemakings mandated by the Dodd-Frank Act. For example, we recently <a href="/newsroom/cfpb-takes-steps-to-improve-information-
about-access-to-credit-in-the-mortgage-market/">convened a small business review (SBREFA) panel</a> to discuss potential amendments to the Home Mortgage Disclosure
Act, some of which were mandated by Section 1094 of the Dodd-Frank Act. We're also focusing intensely on <a href="/regulatory-implementation/tila-respa/">supporting
the implementation process</a> for our recent rulemaking to implement a Dodd-Frank Act directive to consolidate and streamline federal mortgage disclosures required
under the Truth in Lending Act and Real Estate Settlement Procedures Act. We're also continuing work with stakeholders to address questions that have arisen with
regard to the 2013 mortgage rules, including issuing additional clarifications and amendments as warranted.</p>
156 <h3>Defining larger participants</h3>
157 <p>We're also continuing rulemakings to implement our supervisory program for certain nonbank entities by defining "larger participants" in various markets for
consumer financial products and services. For example, we're developing a proposal to identify "larger participants" in the market for auto lending. We've previously
defined larger participants in the consumer debt collection, credit reporting, and student loan servicing markets and are now in the process of finalizing a rule
defining larger participants in the international money transfer market.</p>
158 <h3>Debt collection</h3>
159 <p>We've been doing research and outreach to assess issues in various other markets for consumer financial products and services over many months. In November 2013,
<a href="/newsroom/cfpb-considers-debt-collection-rules/">we issued an advance notice of proposed rulemaking</a> seeking comment, data, and information from the
public about debt collection, which is the single biggest source of complaints to the federal government. We received more than 23,000 comments in response to the
notice, and in our <a href="/reports/fair-debt-collection-practices-act-annual-report/">2014 annual report on Fair Debt Collection Practices Act</a>, reported that we
received more than 30,000 consumer complaints in this area.</p>
160 <h3>Payday loans and prepaid cards</h3>
161 <p>We're researching and considering whether rulemaking is warranted in the areas of payday and deposit advance products, as well as consumer overdraft products. <a
href="/blog/live-from-nashville">We held a field hearing in March 2014 in Nashville, Tennessee</a>, and also <a href="/reports/cfpb-data-points-payday-
lending/">released a report that analyzed payday lending</a> and found that four out of five payday loans are rolled over or renewed within 14 days. We're also
expecting to build on an <a href="/pressreleases/consumer-financial-protection-bureau-considers-rules-on-prepaid-cards/">Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking</a>
that we published in 2012 concerning prepaid cards by issuing a proposed rule to strengthen federal consumer protections for these products. We've been <a
href="/blog/prepaid-cards-help-design-a-new-disclosure/">testing potential disclosures</a> that we may propose to be used on the packaging of prepaid cards.</p>
162 <h3>Privacy disclosures</h3>
163 <p>We're returning to a topic that had been raised as part of an earlier initiative to seek comment on ways to streamline and modernize regulations that we had
inherited from other agencies. Specifically, we are expecting to issue a proposal regarding the notices that consumers receive each year from their financial
institutions to explain the companies' information sharing practices. A number of commenters had suggested that eliminating the annual privacy notices where there has
been no change in policies would reduce unwanted paperwork for consumers and unnecessary regulatory burdens, at least where a financial institution limits the sharing
of information with third parties.</p>
164 <p>We're continuing research, analysis, and outreach on a number of other consumer financial services markets, and will update our next semi-annual agenda to reflect
the results of further prioritization and planning.</p>
165                                             </div>
```

Compare:

view-source:http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Government-Unclaimed-Money.shtml

SEO Building Blocks for Writing Content

What Are 4 Things I Should Do When Writing Content?

Search engines place weight on keywords according to where they are used.

1. Put primary keywords in the:

- URL,
- First words of the page <title>,
- Meta description, which is readable, plain language, and inspires clickthrus,
- Headline, which is tagged as an <H1>,
- Body (at least two times or more),
- Link titles, and
- Alt text in images.

Writing Content (cont'd)

2. Put secondary keywords in the above, when appropriate, plus the secondary <H2>, <H3>, etc. headings.

3. Keep key page elements short:

- Title < 75 characters with spaces.

- URL < 90 characters with hyphens.

- Meta description < 160 characters with spaces.

4. Link to authoritative sites, and avoid broken links.

Q1. What's the best URL for a blog post published about summer food safety?

A. www.usa.gov/blogs/201406.html

B. www.usa.gov/keep/events/summervacations/

C. www.usa.gov/health/food-safety-tips.html

D. www.usa.gov/health/foodsafetytips.html

Q2. What's the best page title?

A. USA.gov | Food Safety Tips

B. Food Safety Tips | USA.gov

C. Holiday Food Safety Tips for a Healthy Fourth of July and to Avoid Food Poisoning During a Picnic | USA.gov

D. Check Your Food and Don't Leave It Out Too Long: Food Safety Tips | USA.gov

Websites like Upworthy, whose core product is content, [re-write headlines (and so title tags) up to 25 times](#) to test their success across search and social.

Q3. What's the best meta description?

A. Food safety, food poisoning, e. coli, safe foods, salmonella, listeria

B. Tips for keeping food safe and preventing food poisoning at your holiday picnic.

C. Food Safety Tips

D. None. Don't include a meta description.

Q4. What's the best link?

A. Find [nutrition and weight loss resources](#)

B. [Click here](#) to find nutrition and weight loss resources

C. Find nutrition and weight loss [resources](#)

D. [Find](#) nutrition and weight loss resources

How Would You Improve This?

Conduct Keyword Research

The Long Tail of Search

- Focus on the top tasks (head of external and internal search terms).
- Don't forget the long tail queries.
  - There's less competition.
  - Longer-tail queries are more likely to convert.

Source: http://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo/keyword-research
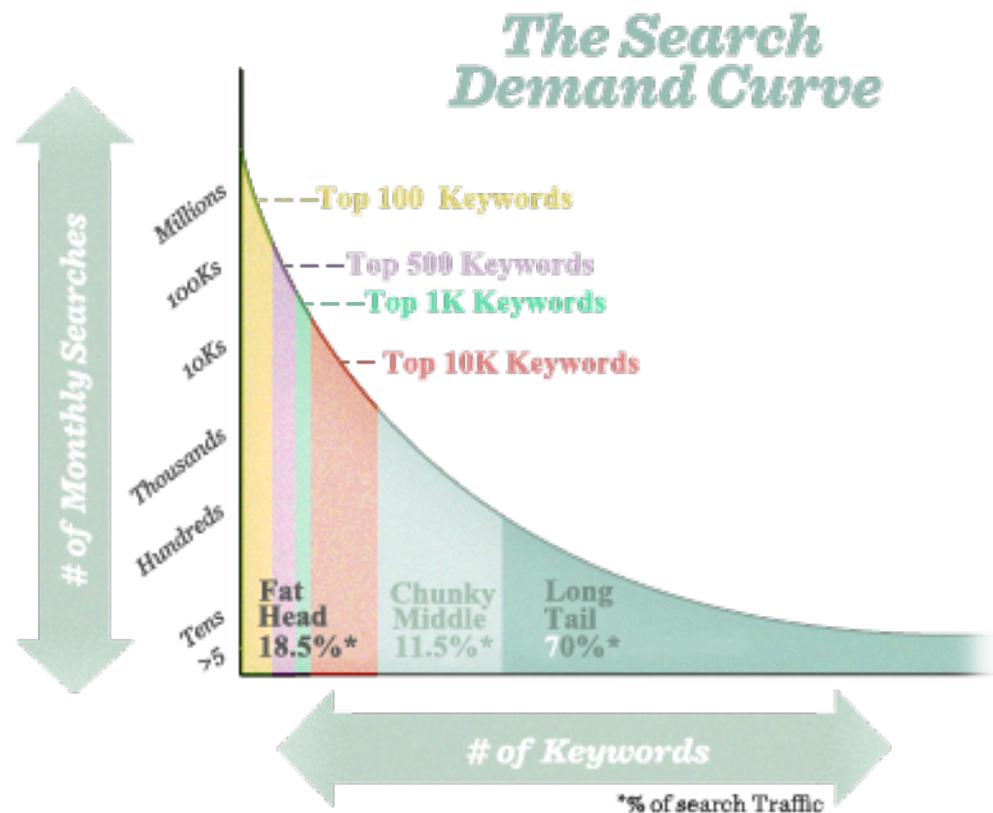
What's In Our Toolkit?

- **Google Analytics (and [Digital Analytics Program](#))**
  - What search terms are driving visitors from Google to .gov sites
  - Example: What variants of unclaimed money are [driving the public from Google to USA.gov's unclaimed money page](#)?
- **Site search analytics**
  - What search terms visitors are using once they're on a .gov site
  - Example: What variants of unclaimed money are searchers using [on USA.gov](#)?

Toolkit (cont'd.)

- **Dictionaries and thesauri**
  - Dust 'em off for ideas for synonyms
  - Example: What are some synonyms for funds?
  - So, target unclaimed stocks?
- **Google Trends**
  - View by topic, or compare two or more keywords
  - Example: What are the top & rising queries on the topic of unclaimed, mislaid, and abandoned property?
  - So, work with NAUPA to publish the list of state URLs (vs. having them "hidden" behind map on NAUPA's site?
- **Google AdWords Keyword Planner plus others like Wordtracker**
  - Ideas for related keywords based on search volume & competition
  - Example: What are some higher volume, but low competition keywords that could be targeted?
  - So, target office of unclaimed funds?

Check Out the Competition

- Who are our "competitors" (other agencies, nonprofits, businesses, scammers, others)? Do they vary by topic?
- Do we have (or want) a competitive advantage for any keywords?
- Where do our competitors stack up against the keywords for each topic?
- Research competitors in tools like Alexa, which also has topic-based segments like Unclaimed Money.

Content Isn't Always King

Think back to the *NYT* vs. *Huffington Post* …

- How do you plan to repackage the content you've written?
- Personalize it?
- Promote it online?

ELIMINATE ROT

ROT (redundant, outdated, trivial) content hurts SEO

Example 1: Redundant Content

How Can We Improve This?

1. Find all similar pages on USA.gov. Some ways to find them:
- **Site: param =** contact+elected+officials+site:usa.gov
- **Link: param =** link:www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml
- **Related param =** related:www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml
- Other ways?

2. Consolidate the content, and remove the redundant pages.
- Decide which one(s) to keep. Delete the others.
- Place **301 redirects** on deleted pages to redirect users to the new page.

3. Optimize the remaining page for SEO.
- Conduct keyword research. Add Obama instead of simply "the President"?
- Repackage, personalize, and promote it.

Example 2: Outdated Content

How Can We Improve This?

This page no longer exists. So:

- Return a **404** (Not Found) or **301** (Permanently redirected) status. Tip: You can check a page's status on sites like http://httpstatus.io.
- Update your **XML sitemap**.
- Tell search engines the page no longer exists via their **webmaster tools**.

Note that, if the page does exist, it isn't outdated. But, it is still unwanted. Your options change:

- Password protect the page, or folder.
- Use a **robots.txt** file to block crawlers' access to the page.
- Use a **noindex meta tag** to prevent content from appearing in search results.

RESOURCES

Webmaster Tools

- Bing Webmaster Tools
- Google Webmaster Tools

A Few (of Many) SEO Resources

- Bing's Collection of SEO-related documents
- Google's SEO Starter Guide & How Search Works
- Moz's The Beginner's Guide to SEO
- Search Engine Land's Guide to SEO

PART 2: SEO CHECKLIST

Overview: SEO Checklist

1. Searchers can find your web pages on commercial search engines.
2. Searchers can find your site's pages at your preferred domain.
3. Searchers see unique, descriptive titles & snippets for your web pages.
4. You have an account for both Bing and Google webmaster tools.
5. Your site has a robots.txt file.
6. Your site has an XML sitemap.
7. Your site's web pages load quickly.
8. Headings are tagged as <H1>, <H2>, etc.
9. Images have alt text for their captions.
10. Your site doesn't have "link rot."

SEO Checklist: Tips and Questions

1. **Searchers can find your web pages on commercial search engines.**

   Tip: *Search for* <u>site:agency.gov</u> *on various search engines like Bing (Yahoo) DuckDuckGo, and Google.*

   Page through the results. Do you expect fewer or more results? Do you like what you see? What looks good? What would you like to change?

2. **Searchers can find your site's pages at your <u>preferred domain</u>.**

   Tip: *Type both www.agency.gov and agency.gov in your browser's address bar. Can you use both to access your site's homepage? Does the non-preferred one redirect to the other, preferred one?*

Checklist (cont'd)

3.   **Searchers see unique, descriptive <u>titles</u> (<title>) & <u>snippets</u> (<meta description>) for each of your web pages.**

   Tip 1: Search for <u>site:agency.gov</u>, site.subfolder.agency.gov, site:agency. gov/folder, and other patternds on various search engines.

   Page through the results. Can you distinguish among pages? Do the titles differ from the snippets? Are any too short or long?

   Tip 2: Download a tool (like <u>Screaming Frog</u> or other <u>SEO tools</u>) that analyzes your site.

   Page through the tool's report. Are any pages missing titles or meta descriptions? How long are they?

Checklist (cont'd)

4. **You have an account for both Bing and Google webmaster tools.**

   Tip: If you don't have an account, sign up at [Bing Webmaster Tools](#) and [Google Webmaster Tools](#). If you do have an account, sign in and see if there are any new messages waiting for you.

5. **Your site has a robots.txt file.**

   Tip: Check agency.gov/robots.txt to see if you have a file.

   Does it disallow access to any folders it shouldn't block? Does it allow access to any folders it should be blocking?

6. **Your site has an XML sitemap.**

   Tip: Check agency.gov/sitemap.xml to see if you have a file.

   Does it accurately reflect your site's content and update schedule?

Checklist (cont'd)

7. **Your site's web pages load quickly.**

    Tip: Install a tool like Google's Page Speed Tools or Yahoo's Yslow to test them.

    Does your page load in under one second?

8. **Headings are tagged as <H1>, <H2>, etc.**

    Tip: Install a tool like the Wave Toolbar for Firefox. Then, use it to view your page as an "Outline."

    Are headings tagged? Are they in the correct hierarchy, starting with H1?

9. **Images have alt text for their captions.**

    Tip: Use the Wave Toolbar to view your page's "Structure / Order." Confirm alt tags are present on images and use good SEO-rich keywords.

Checklist (cont'd)

10. **Your site doesn't have "link rot". That is, you don't have many (or any) broken links to either internal or external resources.**

    Tip : *Download a tool (like [Screaming Frog](#) or other [SEO tools](#)) that analyzes your site. Or, use an online link checker like [Broken Link Checker](#).*

    Page through the tool's report. Find broken links and fix them.

Contact

Ammie Farraj Feijoo
ammie.farrajfeijoo@gsa.gov

DigitalGov Search Team
E: search@support.digitalgov.gov
P: 202-505-5315

http://search.digitalgov.gov