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Six Reasons Not to Invest in SEO for 2016

Why now is the time to focus on the user experience

In 2016, focusing on the user experience should take precedence over pursuing outdated SEO tactics. To explain why this shift is necessary, this report explores the recent algorithmic changes that search engines have adopted, highlights their increased emphasis on an optimized user experience, and provides recommendations about how site owners can stay ahead of the curb.

Reading time: 15 minutes

Good search engine optimization (SEO) can make your website traffic numbers do amazing things, but that traffic is wasted unless you're bringing the right visitors to a website they'll love using, and getting them to convert into leads, sales, or whatever metric represents the next step toward your business goals.

In fact, driving traffic to a poorly optimized website becomes more and more expensive over time, as you need to constantly find more visitors to make up for declining conversion and close rates.

However, not every marketer feels this way. According to Target Marketing's "2015 Media Usage Survey," 50% of marketers planned to increase spending on SEO, and only 3% were reducing that spending. It was the same in 2014, with 55% increasing and only 4% decreasing.
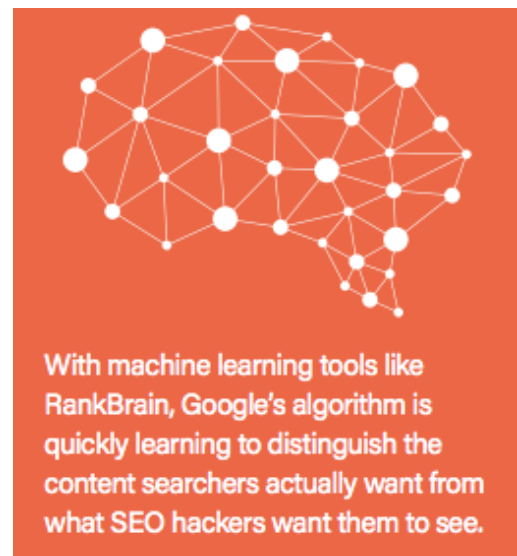
Still, this doesn't mean SEO should be your default priority moving forward. As this report will demonstrate, the best investment to make is optimizing your existing traffic with a website that is easy to navigate, clear to users, and delightful to use.

Here are six reasons to go against that trend and be the smart marketer this year by not investing in SEO for 2016.

1. Search engine algorithms are adapting too quickly

For years, Google and other search engines used results algorithms that relied heavily on numeric ranking factors. If a company was looking to reach the top of a keyword's results page, those factors were fairly easy to manipulate.

For example, PageRank, the algorithm in Google that determines how "important" a page is when determining search results page ranking, relied mostly on links to that page from other pages. So for years an essential part of SEO strategy was getting as many backlinks as possible.

With machine learning tools like RankBrain, Google's algorithm is quickly learning to distinguish the content searchers actually want from what SEO hackers want them to see.

Now Google has shifted its logic away from simple numeric factors that can be "gamed," and instead focuses on the macro goal of returning search results the searcher is most likely to want to see.

PageRank, although it's still a part of the equation, appears to have given significant ground to Hummingbird, Panda, and Penguin algorithms. All of these focus on various elements of the user experience (UX) and satisfaction. For example:

"There are lots of variables that can be fed into the RankBrain and collected by Google via Chrome, Analytics, and interaction with the SERP. Plus there are social media data sources that can also factor into user preference," says Kevin Lee, executive chairman of the New York-based SEO consultancy and digital marketing agency Didit.

Altogether, these aren't algorithms you can fool with SEO tricks. And they're not even the only things Google is weighing — Google is also now penalizing sites for delivering a bad UX, especially on mobile (think unusable display and long load times).

And how often do these changes happen? Google updated its algorithm five times in 2015 alone — and fifteen times the year before! — according to MOZ's Google Algorithm Change History.

Catching up to search algorithm adjustments to target their ever-shrinking loopholes is a losing game. You need to get ahead of it.

2. The penalties for bad SEO tactics aren't worth the risks

As search engines have stepped up optimization of their algorithms, they have also increased the risks to you if you try to manipulate them.

"The risk of manipulation using 'black hat' SEO tactics has escalated dramatically," says Lee. "Even if the tactics seem to work in the short-term, there's a considerable chance that you'll end up worse off than when you started."

And the more you attempt to use those kinds of tactics, the more you'll find yourself in thepunished, marginalized minority.

"The good news is that many of the tactics that were once used to 'game' the system are simply no longer effective," says Michael Fleischner, CEO of the New Jersey-based marketing agency Big Fin Solutions and author of several books, including "SEO Made

Simple." "For sites that are e-commerce driven, a Google penalty can have immediate and long-term effects."

It's not just e-commerce marketers who need to worry. Search Engine Land recently described a penalty applied to Thumbtack, a lead-generation company funded by Google itself. Thumbtack is designed to rank well on Google on searches for local service providers — landscapers, lawyers, that kind of thing. It then brings searchers to a page that recommends local providers in its network for those services.

Thumbtack simply asked all of its members to put a seal graphic on their sites to show they were part of the network. The seal linked back to thumbtack and counted as a backlink. Google decided this constituted "unnatural links" to Thumbtack, and hammered it with a penalty so hard that you couldn't even find the company when you Googled "Thumbtack."

Thumbtack was able to fix this by marking all of those links as no-follow, and then appealing to Google to lift the penalty, which it did. But there's no appeal process that can bring back those weeks or months of lost traffic and the damage that does to your business.

Sites using tactics that Google considers, or may one day consider, "black hat" are never safe from this kind of action. According to Phil Frost, Founder & Chief Operations Officer of Main Street ROI, even if you are able to "game" the search rankings for the time being, eventually that's going to backfire and your traffic will plummet, along with your business model.

"Using spammy SEO tactics to trick search engines may work in the short-term, but eventually the house of cards will collapse," says Frost. "For example, marketers that used spammy link tactics lost rankings after the notorious Penguin update, and they now have to work hard to get back to where they were before the update."

"The best long-term strategy," according to Frost, "is to focus on giving Google what it wants: Easy to use webpages that provide relevant, high quality information."

3. Optimizing your site for users will optimize it for search engines too

All search engines, especially Google, are going in the same direction: Giving the highest rankings to sites that give their users what they want when they want it. That's what every search engine wants: for users to be the most satisfied with the results it offers.

Therefore, optimizing your site for what your users want to find will optimize it for search engines, too. That's the best SEO investment you can make in 2016.

"As the search engines get smarter, marketers are compelled to get smarter, too. Meaning, they must go back to serving their customers and prospects with excellent content and information that helps them do their jobs, instead of trying to game the system," says Ruth Stevens, principal of eMarketing Strategy and co-author of the upcoming book "B2B DataDriven Marketing: Sources, Uses, Results."

So what kind of investment pays off? According to Stevens, "it's quality editorial—timely blog posts, well-researched white papers, compelling case studies, informative videos. These are the investments that make sense today."

In fact, good content not only helps you keep customers on site and moves them toward making a purchase; it is your best bet for SEO in the current environment.

"Original content that is published on your website and referenced through social media sends a number of favorable ranking signals to Google and other search engines," says Fleischner. "The key is to create value-added content that prospects and customers engage with through commenting, sharing, liking and responding to."

Just as important as creating that content is making sure users can find it immediately. Your website's navigation must be clear and help visitors get where they want to be as quickly as possible. Site search is another overlooked key here: if users can find the content easily on your website, Google will see engagement clues that help your site rank more highly in search as well.

"Another way of thinking about it," says Kevin Lee, "is that social has taught Google and Bing that the best content and UX combination rises to the top naturally in social media, and therefore it should do so in search as well, driven off the wisdom of an AI that knows how to tell what people actually like."

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> —Kevin Lee, Executive Chairman, Didit

Google wants to deliver search engine results that make the searcher happy. Your only way to reliably get those is to deliver a site that legitimately delivers on the search terms they used. There's no SEO trick that can do that. You actually have to have the content

they want to find, on a site they'll want to use, and leave them happy they clicked on your link in the search results.

Content isn't the only factor in that...

4. Making sure your site's UX is worthwhile for search visitors is more important than SEO

One of the best ways to make sure search visitors are happy when they come your website is to invest in the aspects of your site like organization, landing page design and site search that helps users find what they want from you as quickly as possible. The UX is actually more important to your success than the SEO that gets them there in the first place.

"Make sure the site delivers on the 'promise' of SEO," says Stevens. "Specifically, do your keyword research to determine what terms your prospects are searching on."

You used to be able to find those keywords by looking at the search terms that were bringing individual searchers to your website in Google Analytics, but today most search traffic is anonymized by Google, and keywords are "not provided." However, you can learn a lot about the keywords bring traffic to your site through Google Webmaster Tools.

Another great way to find out what your visitors are looking for is to check what they're entering into your site's own site-search tool. These keywords are high-priority for two reasons: They're terms your users are dedicated to finding out more about, and the fact they're searching for them tells you the answer they wanted wasn't obvious in your site's
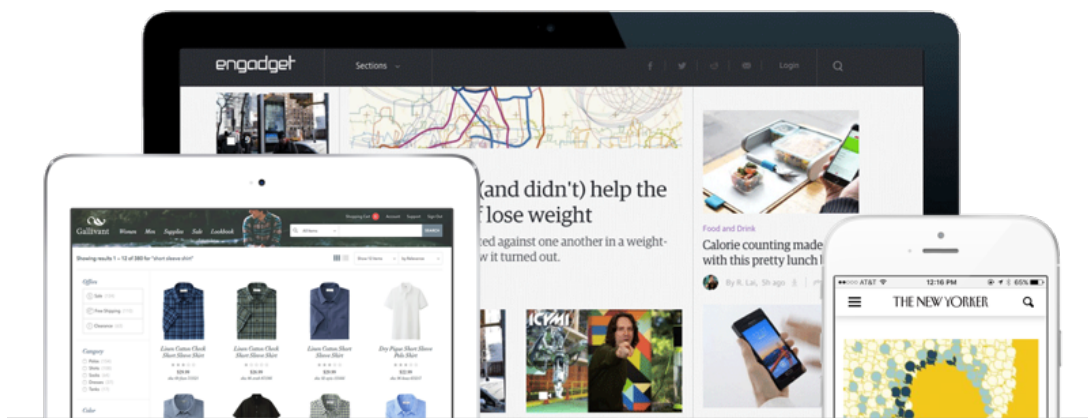
Ensuring your website is responsive across all devices is an important component in Google's latest ranking updates.

navigation. That's the kind of thing you want to focus on when you optimize your site for search visitors.

Once you know those terms, Ruth Stevens recommends that you, "Deploy those terms in your copy, but don't just pack them into copy here and there for SEO's sake. Also, take care that there is plenty of meat around those terms that demonstrates your company or products' capabilities in the area, so the visitor will be informed and satisfied. Without that, you're wasting your time and theirs."

The interaction between the search terms you rank for and the content and organization of your site should not be overlooked. This is a structure you're building that will house your marketing for a long time.

Frost compares it to building a house: "First, you need to set up your website properly. Like a house, you need a strong foundation if you want your website to be stable over the long term. Then, once your foundation is set, invest in content marketing. Create information that your prospective customers are looking for online and would be likely to share with friends via social media."

Sometimes UX difficulties are in the very structure of your website. With the rise in mobile search traffic, for example, Kevin Lee sees many marketers who "are struggling with the surge in mobile search traffic because it's quite challenging to delight the user on a mobile screen while also making sure you meet your marketing objectives like leads, calls or purchases."

These are all shortcomings you should invest in before spending money on SEO this year. The clearer you can make your site structure, the easier you can make it for your customers to navigate or search for what they need, and the better you make the overall UX, the more effective your site's going to be in attracting search visitors and converting them into customers.

## 5. Making sure your site is optimized to generate ROI is also more important than SEO

Building your site's structure properly is not just about meeting your customer's needs, it's also imperative to make sure you're capturing and nurturing search visitors.

Most search traffic will be from new visitors to your site. To have any chance to convert that traffic into customers, you need to collect contact information—especially email

addresses—and provide offers and opportunities for them to move further along your conversion funnel.

This should become one of your most important channels for customer acquisition, but too many marketers allow that opportunity to slip by without collecting so much as an email address.

"Many websites are simply not set up properly to convert on their SEO traffic," says Phil Frost. "That's because the vast majority of website visitors are not ready to buy right away. For example, a good sales conversion rate for an e-commerce website is 2%. That means 98% of the traffic leaves without buying!"

Is your website experience optimized to extract value from visitors already on your website?
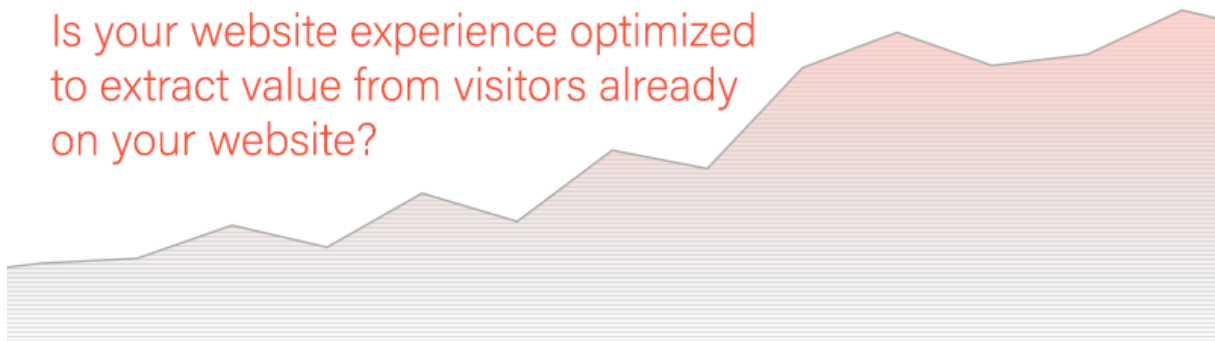
This is part of why lead-capture is such an important part of your website. While the sale conversion rate may be around 2%, conversion rates for lead generation are much higher, generally over 10%. Recent research by Wishpond put average B-to-B landing page conversion rates at 13.3% and B-to-C at 9.9%. The reason these overall rates are so much higher than rates to sale is because it's much easier to get the small commitment of an email address from a search visitor than it is to try to go directly to the sale, especially if it's a complex sale.

"The main problem I see," says Ruth Stevens, is websites that fail "to set up a data capture mechanism to identify the visitor and begin a relationship. There are basically two ways to do this: one, add a compelling offer and Web form to motivate response, and two, using IP address identification software to learn the visitor's company name."

The easiest and most effective of those options is to make an offer, and to optimize that offer, as well as the rest of your landing page, using A/B testing.

Testing is an often overlooked aspect of website optimization, but it is essential for longterm success. Your visitors are adapting just as quickly as Google's algorithm. A page layout, button color or offer that worked yesterday isn't necessarily going to work forever, and may not even be the most optimal choice now. Testing lets you dial those in on a continuous basis so you're always adjusting and improving yourself.

"Find out what you can give them that will convince them to give something to you in return, particularly their email address," says Kevin Lee. "By looking first at what they will be motivated by, you can craft a message to visitors that will resonate."

Once you have them, "Funnel optimization is still a great way to invest marketing dollars," says Fleischner.

"It's relatively easy to understand the value of a conversion," he continues. "Working backwards to better understand the value of a marketing qualified lead (MQL) and sales qualified lead (SQL) can help with budgeting and resource allocation. Learning more about your analytics and drawing conclusions based on real data can stretch marketing dollars and make them work harder for your organization."

6. Self-service tools, like site search, offer greater ROI than SEO

A large portion of online conversions are lost due to factors stemming from visitor confusion on your website. What's worse, many customers, from Generation X through Millennials and the emerging Gen Z, try to avoid interacting with any kind of customer service representative.

In fact, according to a study by Desk.com, only 12% of respondents would call a customer service line first to get support, and only 10% would go into a store for help. Eighty percent of respondents consider calling customer service an "inconvenience."

Worse, Forrester's "North American Consumer Technographics Customer Life Cycle Survey 2, 2015," found that 68% of customers are "unlikely to return to a website that does not provide a satisfactory customer experience."

This makes self-service customer service tools — like site search, Q&As and customer reviews — absolutely essential, and a better investment than SEO.

68% Percent of customers who are unlikely to return to a website after a bad experience.

12% Percent of customers willing to call customer service.

10% Percent of customers willing to go to a store for help.

"Make all content and the UX user-centric," says Lee. "Give them what they want, not what you want them to read/see, and then nudge them towards your objectives."

This often means beefing up areas of the site you might not pay a lot of attention to, like site search.

"Site search remains critical and users expect site search to be as good, if not better than, Google or Bing," says Lee. "They want simple checkbox filters to help them find what they want, plus great search."

This becomes more important on websites where visitors have a tendency to get lost. According to Fleischner, "If your site contains a lot of content and people are not following a linear path, then site search is essential. ... You can see what people are searching on and in what quantity. This helps for site planning and content purposes. If you see, for example, that individuals are searching for your frequently asked questions in high percentages, you may want to make access to this resource immediate by placing a link or button on your home page."

It's even better if these tools self-correct with personalization.

"Personalization and adaptive/responsive design is a great way to improve the site experience, because it tunes the experience based on both the device and other data," says Lee.

Again, Google wants the top search results to be sites that make searchers happiest, which means sites that deliver the content they're looking for and the best overall UX. There is nothing more frustrating to users than having to seek out help offline to address shortcomings of your website.

Help users help themselves, and that will help you in the search rankings, in your site conversion rates, and in the boardroom with higher overall ROI.

Conclusion

Attracting prospects via search is a very important tactic, and it's likely to remain so. But it's important to realize that constantly throwing money at one acquisition tactic has diminishing returns.

Take a hard look at everything you're using to talk to those prospects. Do you deliver on the promise of your SEO? Do you deliver a great UX once they're on your site? Do you make a strong offer to capture visitors as leads and follow up with them? Do you give them the tools with site search, Q&A, and great content to find the answers they're looking for?

If you invest in doing those things well, you'll get higher ROI than just throwing more money at SEO.

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