UNIT – 5

Why Measuring Success Is Essential to the SEO Process

Although quantifying deliverables and measuring progress are important for external reporting purposes, it is just as important for SEO practitioners to measure the efficacy of their own efforts so they can make timely adjustments as necessary.

At the beginning of any SEO project, it is wise to establish baseline data points for the website. This includes the following:

• Quantifying organic search traffic by search engine and keyword.
• Quantifying a baseline of the major keywords that are driving traffic by search engine.
• Quantifying a breakout of what sections are getting the current organic search traffic by search engine and keyword.
• Quantifying data on conversions broken down by search engine and keyword.
• Identifying poorly performing pages.
• Identifying the best-performing pages (in terms of traffic and conversions).
• Tracking search engine crawler activity on the site.
• Determining the number of indexed pages.
• Determining whether the indexed pages are getting search traffic.
• Determining whether best-selling product pages are indexed and getting search traffic.
• Identifying 404 error pages and external sites linking to these pages, if any defining and mapping the path toward concrete goals are crucial aspects of the SEO process—and over time, some goals may change. Therefore, it is also important to make sure the data you capture helps you understand your progress toward these goals.

Measuring Search Traffic

Classic web analytics data is an incredible asset to SEO. Here are some examples of ways to utilize this data for SEO purposes:

• Look at your daily referral reports to detect newly received inbound links (the great majority of webmasters click on a link after implementing it, to make sure it works).
• Look at the search terms people use to come to your site to spot long-tail search opportunities.
• Measure the results of your campaigns by tracking the increase in conversions you are driving over time.
• Try to find missed opportunities—that is, search terms and phrases that people used to come to your site that did not result in a conversion.

Web analytics platforms track your site's traffic in two major ways. The older of the two methodologies is to use software that analyzes your web server log files, which contain detailed information of all the traffic on your website. Setting up this type of solution generally involves installing the software on an internal server that is able to gain access to the log files.

Tying SEO to Conversion and ROI

It is important to tie your SEO campaign to the results it brings to the business. Key to that is measuring the conversions driven by organic SEO traffic. Here are some of the most common types of conversions:

Sales/sales revenue

This is the one most people think of when they think of conversions. Sales and sales revenue (or better still, margin) conversions can be the simplest things to track, provided you are not selling many different products at different price points and in different quantities.

Email/blog/newsletter subscriptions

Any time a user signs up to receive regular communications from you, it is a win. Even though this action does not have direct financial consequences, it is still a conversion.

Sign-ups

Closely related to subscriptions are other types of sign-ups. Perhaps you offer a service such as a tool that people need to sign up to use. Even if the tool is free, you should track this as a conversion.

Downloads

Even if you do not require a sign-up of any type, you should still count a download as a conversion. You are getting your message out there with the downloads you offer.

Contact forms and phone calls

When someone contacts you, or requests that you contact him, it may count as a conversion. This contact can take the form of filling out a "contact me" request form, or a phone call. Phone calls can be tracked through unique numbers per type of action or landing page.

Visitors who share

This kind of conversion happens when a visitor shares the information she found on your site with someone else.

Visitors who link

Users who visit your site and find its content useful, entertaining, or otherwise compelling may link to it from their own sites. Linking counts as a conversion.

Visitors who publicize

Visitors can publicize your site by mentioning it in forums or blog comments, on social media sites such as Google+, Twitter, and Facebook, or by writing about it on their own sites. These actions also count as conversions.

Competitive and Diagnostic Search Metrics

Thus far in this chapter we have focused on the basics—the dollars and cents of determining whether you have succeeded in your SEO campaign. As we noted at the beginning of the chapter, these should be your first priority in your analytics efforts.

Search Engine and Competitive Metrics

Numerous tools allow you to monitor your site and those of your competitors, providing insight into your SEO progress. You can also use these tools to figure out what your competitors are doing from an SEO perspective. This type of intelligence can provide you with new ideas on how to adapt your strategy to get better results.

As with all such tools, it is important to understand the context of the tools and to have an idea as to what you are looking for. Better knowledge of your competitors' strategy is certainly one valuable goal. Detecting a problem in how your website is crawled is another. By selecting specific and actionable goals, you can set yourself up for the highest possible return.

Site Indexing Data

It is valuable to know how many pages in your site are in a search engine's index. This is interesting for two reasons:

• To determine whether important parts of your site are not in the index.
• To learn about your competitors' sites and strategies.

Link Building, Link Tracking, and Link-Based Metrics (Including Anchor Text Analysis)

Measurement of link-building campaigns is another must for the expert SEO practitioner. This can help you refine your campaigns to bring better results, compare link growth to your search rankings, and perform analysis to see how your campaigns are faring compared to the efforts of your competitors.

Key Performance Indicators for Long-Tail SEO

The long tail is an important part of SEO. Metrics are available for diagnosing the health of your long-tail search traffic. Here are some that were developed by Brian Klais of Netconcepts:

Branded-to-non branded ratio

This is the percentage of your natural search traffic that comes from branded versus non branded keywords. If the ratio is high and most of your traffic is coming from searches for your brand, this signals that your SEO is fundamentally broken. The lower the ratio, the more of the long tail of natural search you likely are capturing. This metric is an excellent gauge of the success of your optimization initiatives.

Unique crawled URLs

This is the number of unique (nonduplicate) web pages on your site that are crawled by search engine spiders such as Googlebot. Your website is like your virtual sales force, bringing in prospects from the search engines. Think of each unique page as one of your virtual sales people. The more unique pages you have, the more opportunities you have to sell through the search engines.

Search visitors per contributing page

This is the percentage of unique pages that yield search-delivered traffic in a given month. This ratio essentially is a key driver of the length of your long tail of natural search. The more pages you have yielding traffic from search engines, the healthier your SEO program is. If only a small portion of your website is delivering searchers to your door, most of your pages—your virtual salespeople—are warming the bench instead of working hard for you. You can think of these nonperforming pages as "freeloaders."

Keywords per page

This is the average number of keywords each page (minus the freeloaders) yields in a given month. Put another way, it is the ratio of keywords to pages yielding search traffic. The higher your keyword yield, the more of the long tail of natural search your site will capture. In other words, the more keywords each yielding page attracts or targets, the longer your tail is. So, an average of eight search terms per page indicates pages with much broader appeal to the engines than, say, an average of three search terms per page.

Search visitors per keyword

This is the ratio of search engine–delivered visitors to search terms. This metric indicates how much traffic each keyword drives and is a function of your rankings in the SERPs. Put another way, this metric determines the height or thickness of your long tail. The average online retailer in the aforementioned Net concepts study obtained 1.9 visitors per keyword.

Index-to-crawl ratio

This is the ratio of pages indexed to unique crawled pages. Just because Googlebot crawls a page doesn't guarantee it will show up in Google's index. A low ratio can mean your site doesn't carry much weight in Google's eyes.

Search visitors per crawled page

Calculated for each search engine separately, this is a measure of how much traffic the engine delivers for every page it crawls. Each search engine has a different audience size.

This metric helps you fairly compare the referral traffic you get from the different engines. The above mentioned Net concepts study found that Bing and Yahoo! tended to crawl significantly more pages, but the yield per crawled page from Google was typically significantly higher.

The Ongoing Evolution of Search

Search has come a long way, and will continue to progress at a faster and faster pace. Keeping up with these changes, the competitive environment, and new and emerging technologies provides both a challenge and an opportunity.

The Growth of Search Complexity

Search has been evolving rapidly over the past decade and a half. At the WSDM conference in February 2009, Google Fellow Jeff Dean provided some interesting metrics that tell part of the story:

• Google search volume had grown 1,000 times since 1999.
• Google has more than 1,000 times the machines it had in 1999.
• Latency dropped from less than 1,000 ms in 1999 to less than 200 ms in 2009.
• Index update latency improved by about 10,000 times over this period.

Whereas updates took Google months in 1999, in 2009 Google was detecting and indexing changes on web pages in just a few minutes.

These are staggering changes in Google's performance power, but this is just part of the changing search environment. Some of the early commercial search engines, such as Web Crawler, InfoSeek, and AltaVista, launched in the mid-1990s. At that time, web search engines' relevancy and ranking algorithms were largely based on keyword analysis. This was a simple model to execute and initially provided pretty decent results.

However, there was (and is) too much money in search for such a simple model to stand. Spammers began abusing the weakness of the keyword algorithms by stuffing their pages with keywords, and using tactics to make them invisible to protect the user experience. This led to a situation in which the people who ranked first in search engines were not those who deserved it most, but were in fact those who understood (and could manipulate) the search algorithms the best.

By 1999, Google had launched, and the next generation of search was born. Google was the search engine that most effectively implemented the concept of citation analysis (or link analysis). As we outlined earlier in the book, link analysis counts a link to a website as a vote for its value. More votes represent more value, with some votes being worth more than others (pages with greater overall link juice have more juice to vote).

This created a situation that initially made the job of the spammer more difficult, but the spammers began to catch up with this advance by purchasing links. With millions of websites out there, many of them generating little or no revenue, it was relatively easy for the spammer to approach a site and offer it a nominal amount of money to get a link. Additionally, spammers could implement bots that surfed the Web, finding guest books, blogs, and forums, and leaving behind comments with links in them back to the bot owner's site.

More Searchable Content and Content Types

The emphasis throughout this book has been on providing the crawlers with textual content semantically marked up using HTML. However, the less accessible document types—such as multimedia, content behind forms, and scanned historical documents—are being integrated into the search engine results pages (SERPs) more and more, as search algorithms evolve in the ways that the data is collected, parsed, and interpreted. Greater demand, availability, and usage also fuel the trend.

Engines Will Make Crawling Improvements

The search engines are breaking down some of the traditional limitations on crawling. Content types that search engines could not previously crawl or interpret are being addressed. For example, in November 2011, Google announced that it had increased its capability to execute JavaScript, discover content embedded in AJAX, and process forms.

In June 2009, Google announced that it had improved the crawling and indexing of Flash content. In particular, this announcement indicated that Google was now able to load content within Flash that was accessed by external JavaScript calls, which is an implementation method that many Flash-based systems use.

Engines Are Getting New Content Sources

As we noted earlier, Google's stated mission is "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." This is a powerful statement, particularly in light of the fact that so much information has not yet made its way online. As part of its efforts to move more data to the Web, in 2004 Google launched an initiative to scan in books so that they could be incorporated into a Book Search. This became the subject of a lawsuit by authors and libraries, but a settlement was reached in late 2008. In addition to books, other historical documents are worth scanning. To aid in that, Google acquired reCAPTCHA in 2009.

Multimedia Is Becoming Indexable

Content in images, audio, and video is currently not easily indexed by the search engines, but its metadata (tags, captioning, descriptions) and the anchor text of inbound links and surrounding content make it visible in search results. Google has made some great strides in this area. In an interview with Eric Enge, Google's director of research discussed how Google allows searchers to drag an image from their desktop into the Google Image Search search box, and Google attempts to recognize the content of the image.

Personalization, Localization, and User Influence on Search

Personalization efforts have been underway at the search engines for some time. As we discussed earlier in this book, the most basic form of personalization is to perform an IP location lookup to determine where the searcher is located, and tweak the results based on that location. However, the search engines continue to explore additional ways to expand on this simple concept to deliver better results for each user. It is not yet clear whether personalization has given the engines that have invested heavily in it better results overall or greater levels of user satisfaction, but their continued use of the technology suggests that, at the least, their internal user satisfaction tests have been positive.

The Increasing Importance of Local, Mobile, and Voice Recognition Search

New forms of vertical search are becoming increasingly important. Areas that the search engines have already embraced include local search and mobile search. In addition, voice recognition–based search is an area in which all the major engines are actively investing.

Local Search

Local search was an active business before the advent of the Internet, when the Yellow Pages as supplied by your phone company were the tool of choice. As the World Wide Web gained prominence in our lives, the Yellow Pages began migrating online. These types of local search sites have subsequently evolved to leverage more of the unique nature of the Web. Some of the major players are CitySearch, Local.com, and Superpages.

As the major search engines developed, they integrated sophisticated mapping technology into their systems, and then began to map in local business data as well. Some of that data came from the same types of data sources that drive the Yellow Pages websites, such as Acxiom,InfoUSA, and Localeze. You can find these local search engines at *http://maps.google.com*, *http://local.yahoo.com*, and *http://www.bing.com/maps*.

Mobile Search

With over 1 billion mobile phones in use worldwide, the opportunity for mobile search has begun to grow rapidly. An April 2011 Google study showed that search engines were the most visited sites on mobile devices, with 77% of those surveyed reporting their use.

The same study showed that 9 out of 10 searchers took action as a result of conducting a search. This provides a strong incentive to have a mobile search strategy in place.

The convenience of being able to get the information you need while on the go is just way too compelling. Why be tied to a desk if you do not have to be? Further, in many countries, freedom from a desktop is a requirement because the space that people have for their personal lives is quite different from what people experience in the United States.

Voice-Recognition Search

When users are mobile they must deal with the limitations of their mobile devices, specifically the small screen and small keyboard. These make web surfing and mobile searching more challenging than they are in the PC environment.

Voice search could be a great way to improve the mobile search experience. It eliminates the need for the keyboard, and provides users with a simple and elegant interface. Speech recognition technology has been around for a long time, and the main challenge has always been that it requires a lot of computing power. Processing power continues to increase, though, even on mobile devices, and the feasibility of this type of technology is growing.

Increased Market Saturation and Competition

One thing you can count on with the Web is continued growth. Despite its constantly growing index, a lot of the pages in Google may be low-quality or duplicate-content-type pages that will never see the light of day. The Web is a big place, but one where the signal-to-noise ratio is very low.

One major trend emerges from an analysis of Internet usage statistics. According to Miniwatts Marketing Group, as of March 2011, 78.3% of the North American population were using the Internet, so there is not much room for growth here. In contrast, Asia, which already had by far

the most Internet users (922 million), had a penetration rate of only 23.8%. Other regions where there is a great deal of opportunity for growth include Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

This data is telling us that in terms of the number of users, North America is already approaching saturation. There is some room for growth in Europe and Oceania/Australia, where penetration rates hover at around 60%, but not that much. However, in Asia we could still see massive growth, to 2 to 3 billion users! The bottom line is that a lot of Internet growth in the coming decade will be outside North America, and that will provide unique new business opportunities for those who are ready to capitalize on that growth. With the growth in Internet users has come an increasing awareness of what needs to be done to obtain traffic. The search engines are the dominant suppliers of traffic for many publishers, and will continue to be for some time to come. For that reason, awareness of SEO will only continue to increase. Here are some reasons why:

- *The Web outperforms other sales channels*
- *It is the right time to retool*
- *Paid search drives interest in SEO*
- *SEO is losing its stigma*
- *Marketing departments are in a brainstorming cycle*
- *Search traffic will be relatively unscathed by the market*
- *Web budgets are being reassessed*
- *Someone finally looked at the web analytics*

SEO as an Enduring Art Form

Today, SEO can be fairly easily categorized as having five major objectives:

• Make content accessible to search engine crawlers.

• Find the keywords that searchers employ (i.e., understand your target audience) and make your site speak their language.

• Build content that users will find useful, valuable, and worthy of sharing. Ensure that they'll have a good experience on your site to improve the likelihood that you'll earn links and references.

• Earn votes for your content in the form of editorial links and social media mentions from good sources by building inviting, shareable content and applying classic marketing techniques to the online world.

• Create web pages that allow users to find what they want extremely quickly, ideally in the blink of an eye.

Note, though, that the tactics an SEO practitioner might use to get links from editorial sources have been subject to rapid evolution, and will continue to be in the future. In addition, mastery of social media environments is now required of most SEO professionals.

One thing that you can be sure about in the world of search is change, as forces from all over the Web are impacting search in a dramatic way.

To be an artist, the SEO practitioner needs to see the landscape of possibilities for her website, and pick the best possible path to success. The requirements currently include social media optimization expertise, local search expertise, video optimization expertise, an understanding of what is coming in mobile search, and more. Such a well-rounded individual is a far cry from the backroom geek of the late 1990s.

No one can really predict what the future will bring and what will be needed to successfully market businesses and other organizations on the Web in 2 years, let alone 5 or 10. However, you can be certain that websites are here to stay, and also that websites are never finished and, just like any other direct marketing channel, need continuous optimization. SEO expertise will be needed for a long time to come—and no existing person is better suited to map the changing environment and lead companies to success in this new, ever-evolving landscape than today's SEO practitioner.