

CHAPTER SIX

HOW USABILITY, USER EXPERIENCE & CONTENT
AFFECT SEARCH ENGINE RANKINGS

The search engines constantly strive to improve their performance by providing the best possible results. While "best" is subjective, the engines have a very good idea of the kinds of pages and sites that satisfy their searchers. Generally, these sites have several traits in common:

Easy to use, navigate, and understand

Provide direct, actionable information relevant to the query

Professionally designed and accessible to modern browsers

Deliver high quality, legitimate, credible content



Despite amazing technological advances, search engines can't yet understand text, view images, or watch video the same way a human can. In order to decipher and rank content they rely on meta information (not necessarily meta tags) about how people interact with sites and pages, and this gives them insight into the quality of the pages themselves.

The Impact of Usability and User Experience

On search engine rankings

There are a limited number of variables that search engines can take into account directly, including keywords, links, and site structure. However, through linking patterns, user engagement metrics, and machine learning, the engines make a considerable number of intuitions about a given site. Usability and user experience are second order influences on search engine ranking success. They provide an indirect but measurable benefit to a site's external popularity, which the engines can then interpret as a signal of higher quality. This is called the **"no one likes to link to a crummy site"** phenomenon.

Crafting a thoughtful, empathetic user experience helps ensure that visitors to your site perceive it positively, encouraging sharing, bookmarking, return visits, and inbound links—all signals that trickle down to the search engines and contribute to high rankings.

Signals of Quality Content

1. Engagement Metrics

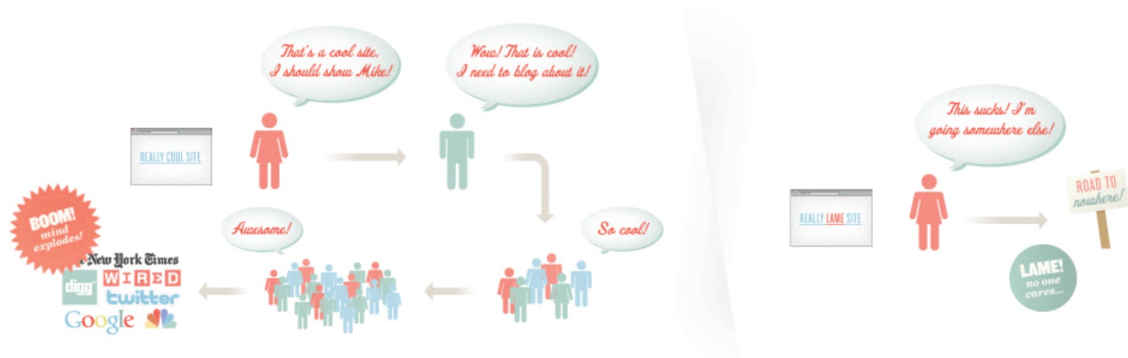
When a search engine delivers a page of results to you, it can measure the success of the rankings by observing how you engage with those results. If you click the first link, then immediately hit the back button to try the second link, this indicates that you were not satisfied with the first result. Search engines seek the "long click" – where users click a result without immediately returning to the search page to try again. Taken in aggregate over millions and millions of queries each day, the engines build up a good pool of data to judge the quality of their results.

2. Machine Learning

In 2011 Google introduced the [Panda update](#) to its ranking algorithm, significantly changing the way it judged websites for quality. Google started by using human evaluators to manually rate thousands of sites, searching for low quality content. Google then incorporated machine learning to mimic the human evaluators. Once its computers could accurately predict what the humans would judge a low quality site, the algorithm was introduced across millions of sites spanning the Internet. The end result was a seismic shift that rearranged over 20% of all of Google's search results. For more on the Panda update, some good resources can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

3. Linking Patterns

The engines discovered early on that the link structure of the web could serve as a proxy for votes and popularity; higher quality sites and information earned more links than their less useful, lower quality peers. Today, [link analysis](#) algorithms have advanced considerably, but these principles hold true.



All of that positive attention and excitement around the content offered by the new site translates into a machine-parseable (and algorithmically-valuable) collection of links. The timing, source, anchor text, and number of links to the new site are all factored into its potential performance (i.e., ranking) for relevant queries at the engines.

Now imagine that site wasn't so great—let's say it's just an ordinary site without anything unique or impressive.

Crafting Content

For search engine success

"Develop great content" may be the most oft-repeated suggestion in the SEO world. Despite its clichéd status, though, this is sound advice. Appealing, useful content is crucial to search engine optimization. Every search performed at the engines comes with an intent—to find, learn, solve, buy, fix, treat, or understand. Search engines place web pages in their results in order to satisfy that intent in the best possible way. Crafting fulfilling, thorough content that addresses searchers' needs improved your chance to earn top rankings.

Search Intent Flavors

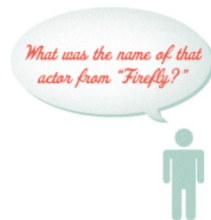
Search intent comes in a variety of flavors ...



Navigational Searches

Visiting a pre-determined destination or sourcing a specific URL.

Navigational searches are performed with the intent of surfing directly to a specific website. In some cases, the user may not know the exact URL, and the search engine serves as the White Pages.



Informational Searches

Researching non-transactional information, getting quick answers, or ego-searching.

Informational searches involve a huge range of queries from finding out the local weather to getting maps and directions to finding out how long that trip to Mars really takes (about eight months). The common thread here is that the searches are primarily non-commercial and non-transaction-oriented in nature; the information itself is the goal, and no interaction beyond clicking and reading is required.

Fulfilling these intents is up to you. Creativity, high-quality writing, use of examples, and inclusion of images and multimedia can all help in crafting content that perfectly matches a searcher's goals. Your reward is satisfied searchers who demonstrate their positive experience through engagement with your site or with links to it.

Written by [Rand Fishkin](#) and Moz Staff

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