

prop·er noun

CASE STUDY

SEO Penalty Recovery for E-Commerce Store

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Key Campaign Metrics

In January of 2019, we were contacted by an e-commerce business in the medical supply space regarding a current downturn in organic traffic. The website had been heavily impacted by a recent Google Algorithm change - the Google Medic update. Here's a brief overview of what we achieved throughout this SEO Campaign.

Organic Traffic

88% ↑

Growth in Organic Traffic
in 5 Months

Search Engine Visibility

72% ↑

Increase in Search Engine
Visibility in 5 months

Website Sales

67% ↑

increase in website sales
in 7 months

New Customers

142% ↑

increase in new customer
sign-ups in 5 months

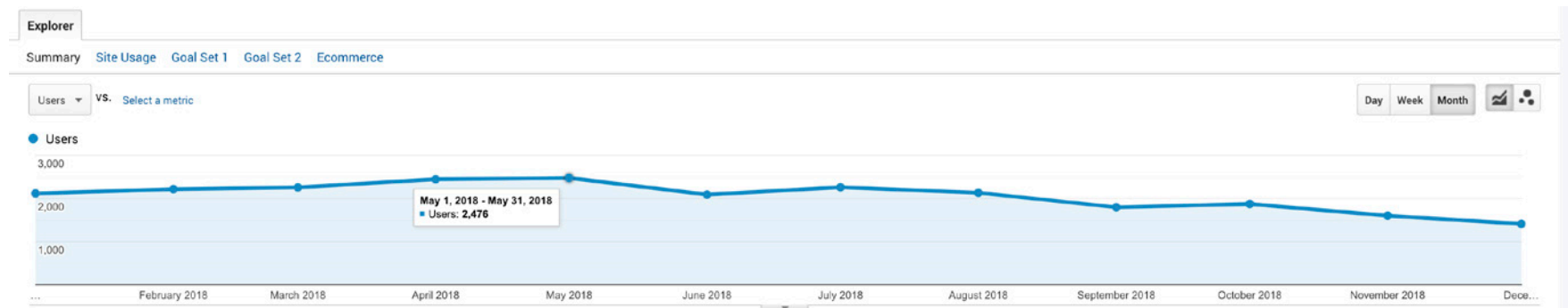
Campaign Overview

The Google Medic update seemed to have impacted websites in the health space. This included websites in the medical, fitness, and healthy lifestyle categories. The algorithm update also seemed to have an effect on e-commerce stores, only amplifying the impact on this client's traffic.

Historically, the client's website traffic reached its highest point in May 2018, acquiring just under 2500 organic visitors with a bounce rate of 52.9%.

However, after the algorithm update, the website only recorded 1750 visitors in September 2018. **That's a 30% decrease in organic traffic in just two months.**

The organic traffic continued to decline month-over-month, finally hitting a low point in December 2018 with just 1410 organic visits. In only 6-7 months, **they had a nearly 44% drop in their organic traffic.**



Website Background

This e-commerce website was built on the Magento 1 platform. At the time of campaign kickoff, the store had roughly 2000 products and 60 categories. The website in its current iteration had been live since early 2017, and the domain had been in existence since 2015.

The website has an attractive design, it is easy to use and intuitive, it has fast page speed, and the site architecture is very well organized. At no time had the owners of the website ever conducted an SEO campaign or engaged an SEO company.

The Challenge

Our main challenge was identifying what could be the cause, or the causes, for the drop in search traffic. Was it a single penalty that we weren't aware of yet? Was it multiple factors?

We started by running a full on-site technical audit for more than 3000 pages, products, and categories. Our audit also included various data points like website page speed, website mobile usability, overall user experience, and the internal link structure.

Once we completed a technical audit, we then ran a comprehensive on-site content audit.

We evaluated factors such as:

1. What landing pages were receiving the most traffic over the past 12 months?
2. Which keywords drove the most traffic over the past 12 months?
3. Which keywords experienced the biggest drop as a result of the Medic update?
4. Pages that had thin or non-existent content on them
5. Gaps in content or landing pages for high-value keywords
6. What, if any, content creation or blogging had been taking place?

Our Findings

After completing our audits, we were able to boil down the problems that the website was facing into a few main categories.

Duplicate Content Issues

When publishing new products and categories on the website, it was done by duplicating existing products and categories. The important user-facing information for each new product was updated during this process (i.e. product title, prices, description). However, the meta titles, meta descriptions, and page URLs were not updated.

As a result, there were hundreds of pages of duplicate content on the website that needed attention.

Metadata Optimization Issues

We performed a scan of each pages meta title and meta description content. We found that there were thousands of pages with empty meta descriptions, under-optimized titles and descriptions, and incorrect metadata.

Thin Content Issues

After crawling the website's content, we found that some of their most popular product pages and category pages had almost no relevant text content on them.

In most cases, these pages had fewer than 150 words on them, in some cases no relevant text whatsoever.

Content Gaps

There were several keyword topics and keywords that competitors were ranking for that the website did not have a viable landing page for. Landing page examples would include articles, authority content pages, product pages, or category pages. Informative, authoritative content is one of the most crucial factors in driving search engine traffic.

Strategy & Implementation

Once we had a more precise understanding of what we were up against, we began to formulate a strategy.

As the most significant problems the client was facing involved their on-site optimization, this is where we focused our initial attention.



Resolving Duplicate Content

Our approach to this campaign was to start by addressing the most serious of the issues first - the duplicate content. Google has been relatively clear with its stance on duplicate content over the years.

While Google does differentiate between unintentional duplicate content and intentionally malicious duplicate content, a website can receive a penalty even if the duplicate content is not intentional spam.

As this is a Magento e-commerce website, we were able to utilize an extension to assist with some of the duplicate content resolution and other SEO configuration issues.

The extension also allowed us to run reports on all products and categories that contained duplicate content of any sort. We were able to use these reports to isolate and update the problem pages more quickly.

Resolving Duplicate URLs

Once we resolved the duplicate page content, we then began rewriting the duplicate URL's. Many of the product and category URLs were unchanged after their initial duplication.

This process created a scenario where a product, "Product ABC," cloned from "Product XYZ," had a URL of "product-x-y-z-2".

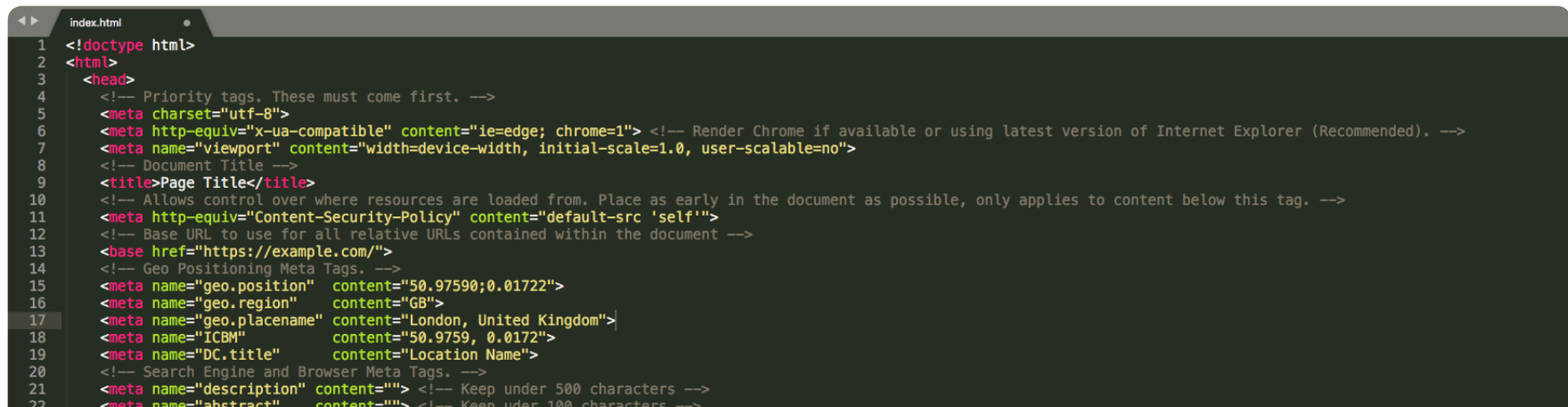
We then rewrote all page URLs, product, and category URLs to be concise, descriptive, and as flat as possible.

Finally, we went through all of the various category pages, filtered category views, brand page views, and product views to set the appropriate canonical URLs.

Metadata Optimization

Aside from the website's homepage and about page, the website metadata was very under-optimized. The site metadata was facing various issues, such as:

1. Pages with duplicate title tags
2. Pages with duplicate meta description tags
3. Pages with title tags that were for incorrect products or categories
4. Empty meta description tags
5. All of the same issues replicated across social media tags



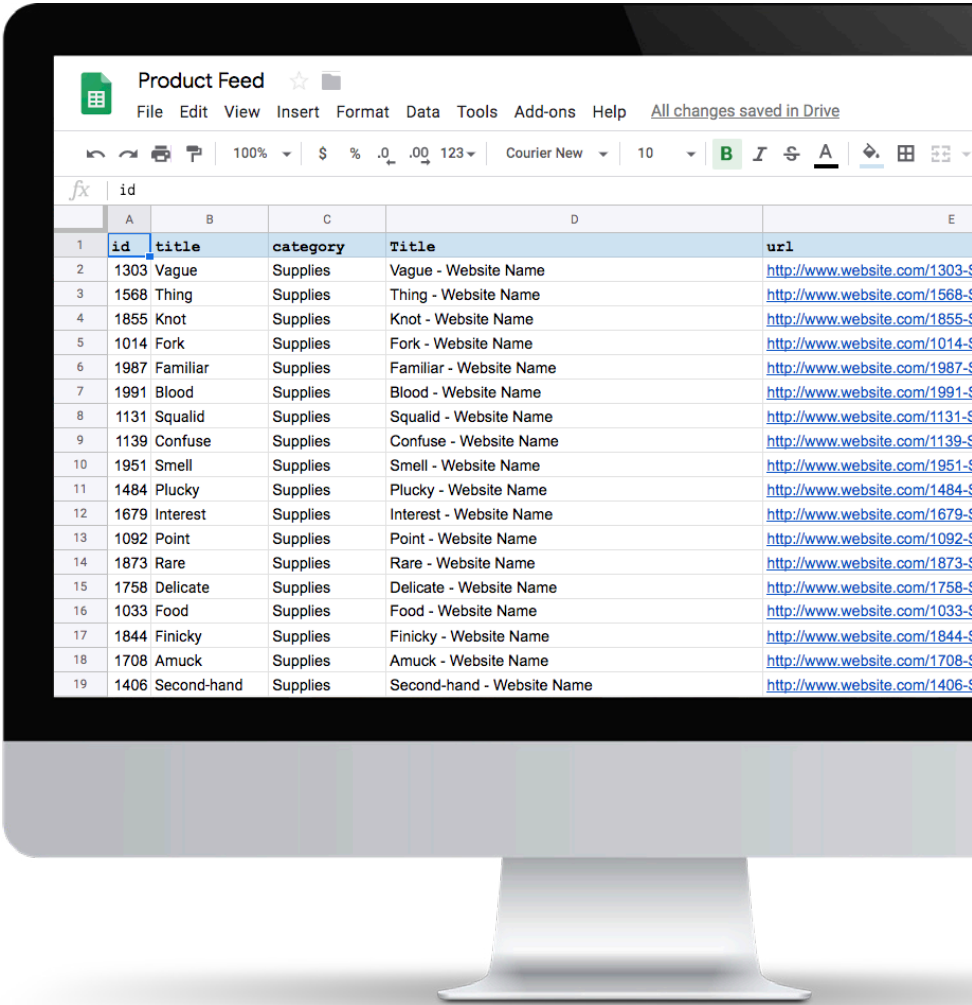
```
1 <!doctype html>
2 <html>
3 <head>
4 <!-- Priority tags. These must come first. -->
5 <meta charset="utf-8">
6 <meta http-equiv="x-ua-compatible" content="ie=edge; chrome=1"> <!-- Render Chrome if available or using latest version of Internet Explorer (Recommended). -->
7 <meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width, initial-scale=1.0, user-scalable=no">
8 <!-- Document Title -->
9 <title>Page Title</title>
10 <!-- Allows control over where resources are loaded from. Place as early in the document as possible, only applies to content below this tag. -->
11 <meta http-equiv="Content-Security-Policy" content="default-src 'self'">
12 <!-- Base URL to use for all relative URLs contained within the document -->
13 <base href="https://example.com/">
14 <!-- Geo Positioning Meta Tags. -->
15 <meta name="geo.position" content="50.97590;0.01722">
16 <meta name="geo.region" content="GB">
17 <meta name="geo.placename" content="London, United Kingdom">
18 <meta name="ICBM" content="50.9759, 0.0172">
19 <meta name="DC.title" content="Location Name">
20 <!-- Search Engine and Browser Meta Tags. -->
21 <meta name="description" content=""> <!-- Keep under 500 characters -->
22 <meta name="abstract" content=""> <!-- Keep under 100 characters -->
```

Duplicate Title Tags

Our first step was to resolve the duplicate title tags across the website. By creating title tag templates following the pattern “{PRODUCT NAME} - {WEBSITE NAME}” and “{CATEGORY NAME} - {WEBSITE NAME}”, we were able to batch replace roughly 90% of the duplicate titles. We also included a condition so that any titles longer than 70 characters would not include the brand name.

Once our batch update was complete, we then manually rewrote the remaining 10% of duplicate page titles. Our batch updates did not impact these titles due to extreme similarities in product names or category names. In these situations, we would reorganize words in the titles when appropriate or include a product brand name for differentiation.

After completing our manual rewrites, we had now resolved all duplicate title tags, as well as any of the incorrect or inaccurate title tags.



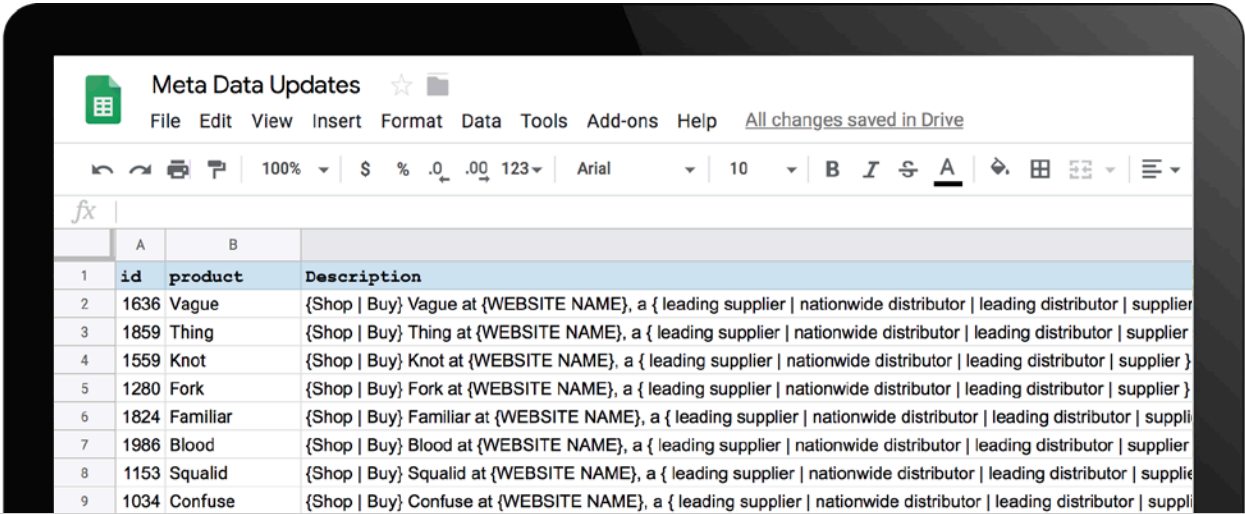
Duplicate Meta Descriptions

The next step in our strategy was to resolve the duplicate meta descriptions and empty meta descriptions. Due to the size of the catalog and the lack of significant product attribute data, we decided to write a very dynamic meta description template.

Our template followed the pattern “{Shop | Buy} { PRODUCT NAME | CATEGORY NAME | BRAND NAME } at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier | nationwide distributor | leading distributor | supplier } of { BRAND NAME products | hospital supplies | medical supplies | infusion supplies }. Ask about our low price guarantee!”.

If you are unfamiliar with “Spintax”, the syntax used above may be confusing. Essentially, any text stored within brackets and separated by a pipe will be selected at random when generating a new description.

The dynamic nature of this template significantly minimized the likelihood of additional duplicate descriptions, despite the lack of unique product attribute data. After applying our batch update, we were able to resolve more than 99% of the duplicate and empty meta description issues. We then manually rewrote the remaining ~1% of meta descriptions.



	A	B	
1	id	product	Description
2	1636	Vague	{Shop Buy} Vague at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor supplier
3	1859	Thing	{Shop Buy} Thing at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor supplier
4	1559	Knot	{Shop Buy} Knot at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor supplier }
5	1280	Fork	{Shop Buy} Fork at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor supplier }
6	1824	Familiar	{Shop Buy} Familiar at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor suppli
7	1986	Blood	{Shop Buy} Blood at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor supplier
8	1153	Squalid	{Shop Buy} Squalid at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor supplie
9	1034	Confuse	{Shop Buy} Confuse at {WEBSITE NAME}, a { leading supplier nationwide distributor leading distributor suppli

Fill In Content Gaps

During the audit phase of our project, we performed a competitive gap analysis on 5-6 competitor websites. The next step in our SEO strategy was to create new content to fill in any gaps that we found during this analysis.

We identified 15 specific keywords grouped into 5 content topics that we would focus on first. We planned to create a mix of authoritative website pages as well as informative blog articles.

Our first step was to conduct a series of discussions with the client to get a better understanding of their position on the topics, as well as to acquire any relevant background information. From here, we were able to develop a list of article titles and begin our research.

<input type="checkbox"/> office supplies	-	-	-	-	72	201,000	77.50	3.17	0.69	10,140,000,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> bougie	-	-	-	-	60	165,000	85.76	0.36	0.00	92,100,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> buddy meter	-	-	-	-	75	165,000	61.07	2.92	0.00	20,500,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> incontinence	-	-	99	-	60	165,000	80.34	6.80	0.20	39,100,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> aquaphor	-	-	-	-	41	135,000	80.07	1.01	1.00	3,120,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> ems	-	-	-	-	53	135,000	72.38	0.23	0.03	444,000,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> magnesium citrate	-	-	-	-	78	135,000	84.12	0.34	1.00	26,800,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> stethoscope	14	-	-	-	21	135,000	66.46	1.34	1.00	50,600,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> medline	-	-	-	-	1	110,000	82.62	1.05	0.12	62	
<input type="checkbox"/> shower head	-	-	-	-	96	110,000	81.97	1.13	1.00	905,000,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> tape measure	-	-	-	-	60	110,000	84.02	0.57	1.00	529,000,000	
<input type="checkbox"/> tens unit	-	-	65	-	69	110,000	74.36	1.38	1.00	84,090	
<input type="checkbox"/> conform	-	-	-	-	72	90,500	86.69	0.50	0.00	171,000,000	

Initial Content Creation

To start, we knew we would be writing a minimum of 1000 words for each article. We determined the actual goal length for each article based on the length of each competing article.

We utilized a three-step approach when writing each article or page.

1. We started by writing each article in full and then performing edits for grammar and spelling. Each article went through 3 rounds of edits to proof for accuracy, awkward phrasing, readability and any additional grammar issues.
2. Next, we scanned each article with a TF*IDF analysis to find contextually related keywords. Once the scan finished, we then modified the article to either increase, reduce, or include a wide variety of these contextually related keywords. In most cases, we were able to include at least an additional 10-15 contextual keywords, and in some cases, up to 20 contextual keywords.

3. Our final step was to put the final code for each article through a thorough content optimization process. This process not only analyzes the content of the article but also analyzes how the content is used within various code elements, for example, H1 and H2 elements or Paragraph elements.

Our Hypothesis

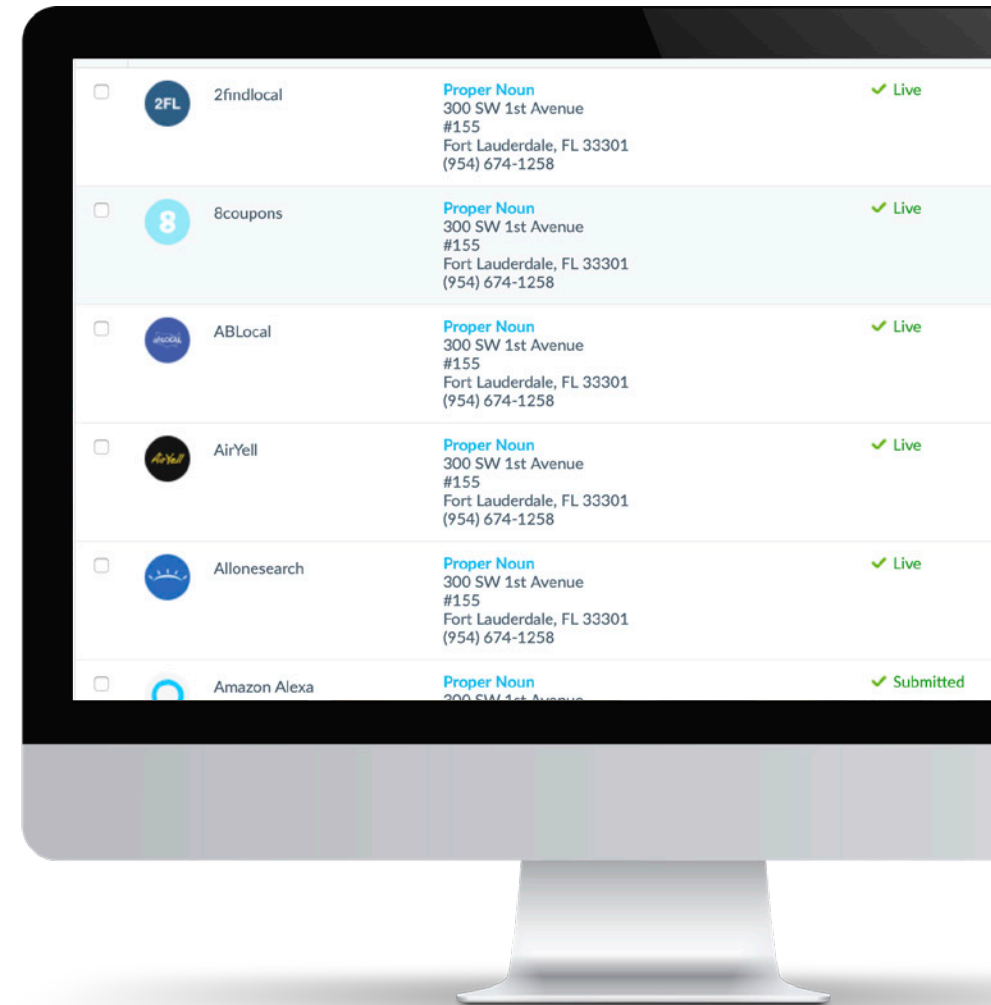
We hypothesized that by better organizing the article content with a clear hierarchy, the more readable and indexable it would be by a search engine. We felt we would achieve higher rankings, more quickly, by varying our use of focus keywords and contextually related keywords strategically throughout the content.

Local Citation Building

The final piece of our optimization campaign was to perform off-site optimization. We started by running a thorough scan on more than 100 local listing directories, professional business directories, and other listing websites.

While the client was listed on some of the sites we scanned, they were not unlisted or had incorrect information on the vast majority.

We started by fully optimizing the client's Google My Business profile and then syncing that data with an internal NAP (Name, Address, Phone Number) optimization tool. We then created listing citations on nearly 100 listing sites, directory sites, and business websites. We also removed any duplicate listings and corrected any incorrect listings.

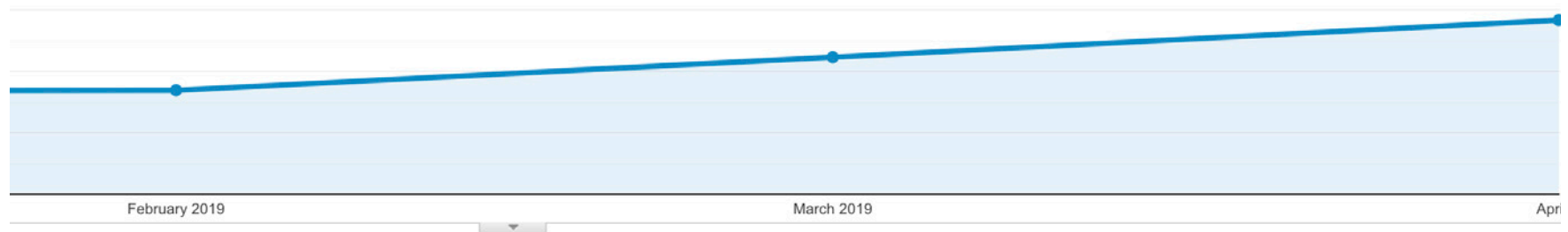


Initial Campaign Results

Our initial on-page optimization campaign took about 6 weeks to complete, with the last of our significant changes going live around the third week of February 2019. We started to see the results of our changes almost immediately.

In March 2019, website traffic **increased from 1700 users in both January and February to just under 2300 organic users** in March. That's a **35% recovery in organic traffic** in just 1 month.

By April 2019, **traffic went up another 25% to just under 2900 organic visits**. Website traffic increased another ~10% in May 2019 to just over 3200 visitors.



Search Engine Visibility

Based on the total number of keywords a website ranks for in the search engines, and where precisely each keyword ranks, you can establish an overall level of search engine visibility. This value is a percentage, where 0% would mean no visibility and 100% would mean your website is ranking #1 for all of your keywords.

Our client's website had a search visibility scoring right around 13% before the implementation of our changes. Within about one week of implementation, that number jumped to almost 20%.

As all of our new page content began to get indexed by search engines and rank higher, the search engine visibility continued to rise.

We continued to publish new blog articles and authority pages in March and April, resulting in a current visibility score of 22.3% at the time of writing (May 29, 2019).

That is nearly a 72% increase in search visibility in less than 6 months of work.



E-Commerce KPI's

As this was an e-commerce campaign, it's also essential to look at metrics like new customer sign-ups and overall sales.

Overall Sales

First, let's start with the most critical metric, overall sales. Between January 2019 and May 2019, there was a 24% growth in total sales. This change also represented more than a 25% growth in overall sales from the previous year's sales.

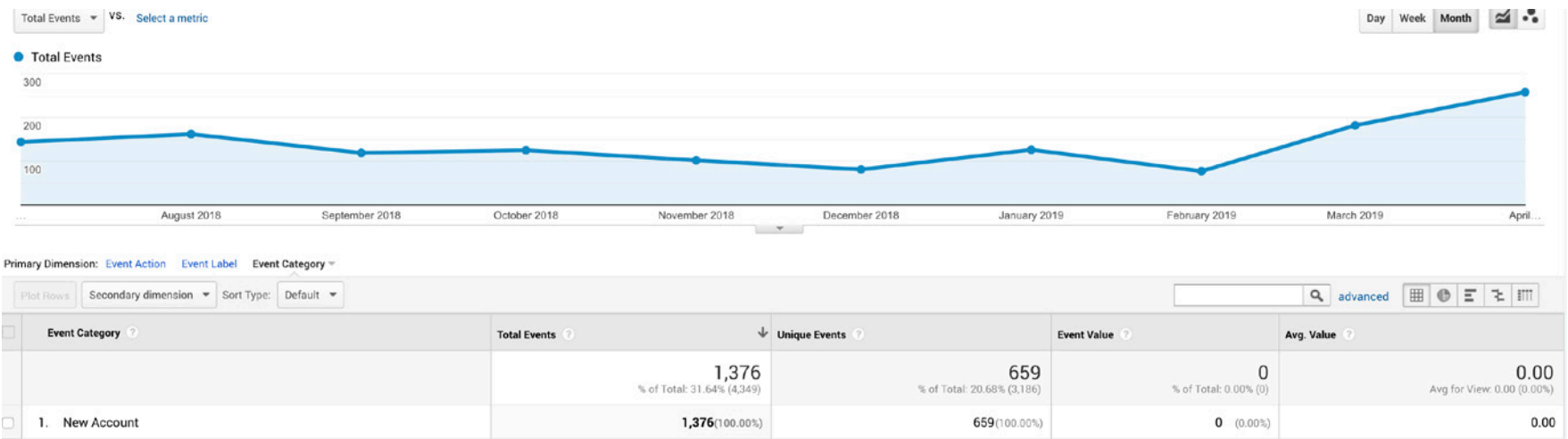
Between September 2018, the time of the penalty, and May 2019, overall sales rose steadily month-over-month, ultimately yielding a 66% lift in overall sales online.



New Accounts

From a new account standpoint, we also saw very considerable growth. After the August 2018 update, new accounts fell to 22 in September from 38 the month before. The number continued to drop until it hit a low of 19 by January 2019.

Right after implementing our changes, March 2019 saw a nice jump to 28 new accounts created. That number rose again to 36 new accounts created in April 2019. May 2019 was a record month for new account creation with 46 new accounts created.



Ongoing Growth Strategy

Based on the optimization work already performed, we expect to see continued growth month-over-month for the next several months. The current success also provides us with new opportunities to generate more qualified traffic.

In addition to the client's website ranking highly for our focus keywords as a result of our optimization strategy, the website has also begun to rank on pages 7, 8 and 9 for many new high-value keywords. Of course, page 9 does not provide much traffic value to a website, but it does show that Google has begun to associate your website with that keyword.

Our growth strategy for the coming months has followed a similar pattern to our initial strategy. We started by identifying a new batch of about 30 high-value keywords that the client's website has an opportunity to rank for, and grouped them into 5 keyword groups. Next, we designed a content strategy to address our keyword groups and focus keywords.

We are now in the process of creating new content for the client's website in the form of informative blog articles, product resources, and product use information, and we have even begun experimenting with creating video content for publication on youtube.

We expect to see continued growth month-over-month for several months in organic, qualified traffic and account creation.

Conclusions

At the outset of this campaign, our goal was to regain the website traffic that had been lost as a result of a Google algorithm change. In achieving this goal, we also achieved a secondary goal in growing search engine visibility.

Recovering From An Algorithm Update

We believe that a website that has strong on-page optimization, creates authoritative on-page content, and cultivates strong off-page citations is ultimately “algorithm-proof”. While it’s not always the case, usually when an algorithm update impacts your website, it’s because there’s a problem with your website.

Many website owners think that once Google has penalized their website that there is no recovering. Rest assured, that is not the case. When a Google Algorithm change harms your website traffic, that’s just Google’s way of letting you know you may not be providing your users with the best possible user experience or information.

We took our standard approach to penalty recovery and were met with excellent results. By implementing proper on-page technical optimization and publishing high quality, well-researched content on our client’s website, you can quickly begin to send authoritative signals to Google.

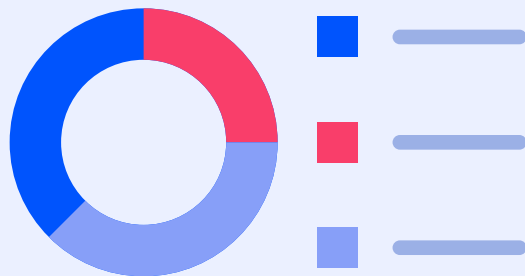
Improving Website Visibility

While it is important that a website strive to rank as highly as possible for its primary focus keyword, the true goal of a search engine optimization campaign should be to increase website visibility in the search engine results.

This is achieved not through ranking a few highly competitive keywords, but rather by rankings hundreds, if not thousands, of keywords with lower competition.

When a website ranks for hundreds of diverse keywords, it not only creates an exponentially higher opportunity to be found in the search results, but it also minimizes the impact that losing position for any one keyword can have on a website's traffic.

By improving this client's website visibility, we were able to not only recover the traffic that they had lost, but also **grow the website traffic by at least 10% each month** since the campaign was started.





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