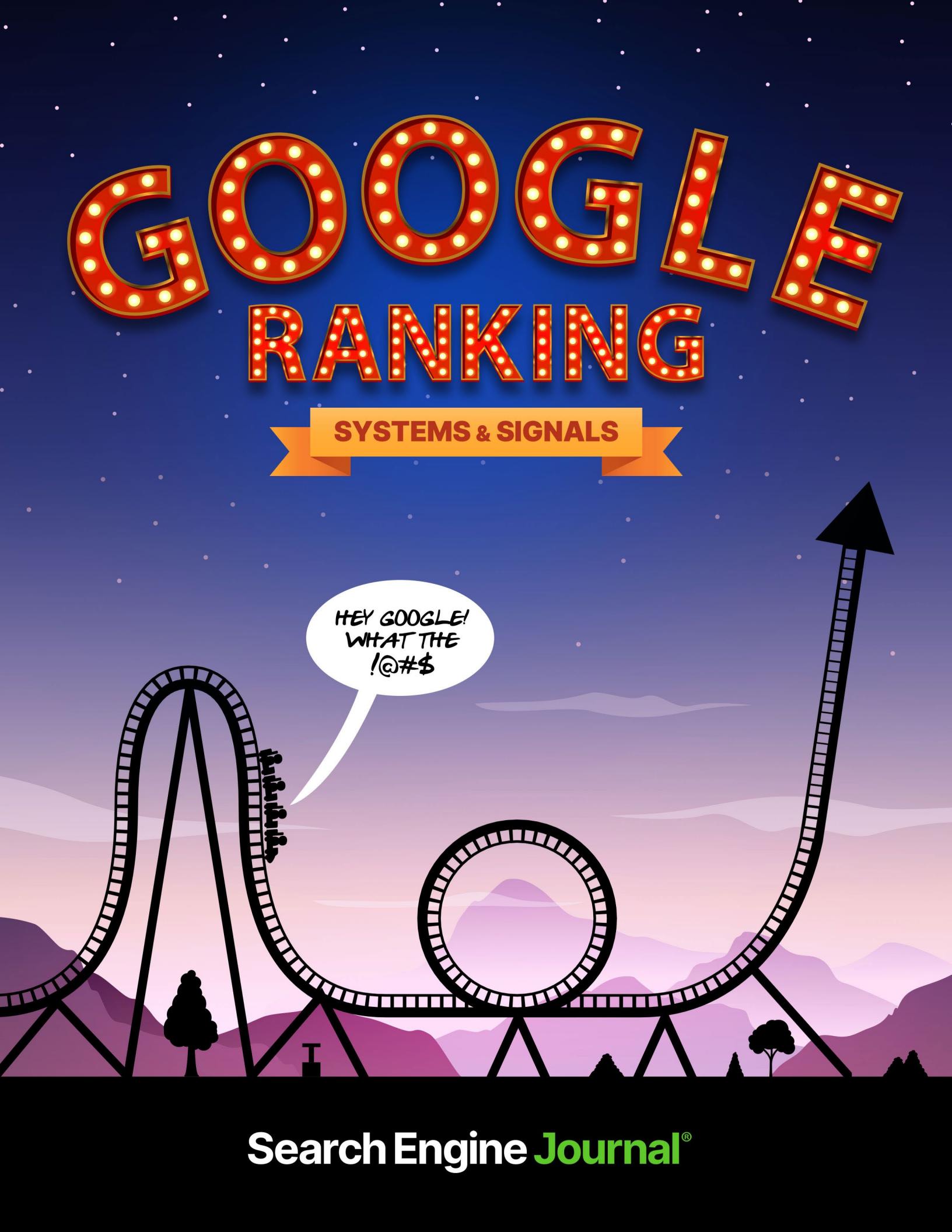


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Published by Search Engine Journal
160 W. Camino Real, Unit #606
Boca Raton, FL 33432
SearchEngineJournal.com

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Introduction

So [2023 was quite a year](#), huh?

And the first quarter of 2024 wasn't so great either.

We all breathed a collective sigh of relief when the [Google March Core Update](#) came knocking on the doors of AI-generated content mills, but it's starting to feel like a band-aid solution to a bigger problem with search results.

Let's set the stage a little more.

Spam in Google is nothing new. [Google Search](#), and the internet in general, goes through phases. Search algorithms are engaged in a constant defensive war against spam. By necessity, search algorithms are reactive.

Spammers find a way to game a system, and then the system needs to react to the new strategy. These fixes can take time to develop. To stamp out spam successfully, it may be necessary to allow new spam strategies to mature before counteracting them instead of responding as soon as they appear.

This has resulted in a familiar cycle: a boom of shady tactics and spam in search, followed by a sweeping algorithmic crackdown.

Over the last year, [public pressure](#) has mounted as experts in the SEO community, researchers, and everyday users drew attention to the fact that the [quality of SERPs is decreasing](#), with search algorithms surfacing [spam](#) and, in some cases, actively [malicious](#) or [dangerous](#) results.

In March of 2024, Google released a core algorithm update. One of its purposes was to combat spam. However, many of the impacted sites appear to have been hit by [manual actions](#). As the dust settled, [spam still seemed to be thriving](#) in search.



To compound frustrations, [Google is not communicating effectively](#) with site owners hit by last September's Helpful Content Update and the March core update.

Search suffers from a surge of spam powered by generative AI, and that very same technology – integrated into the platforms themselves – threatens to [rob publishers of traffic](#).

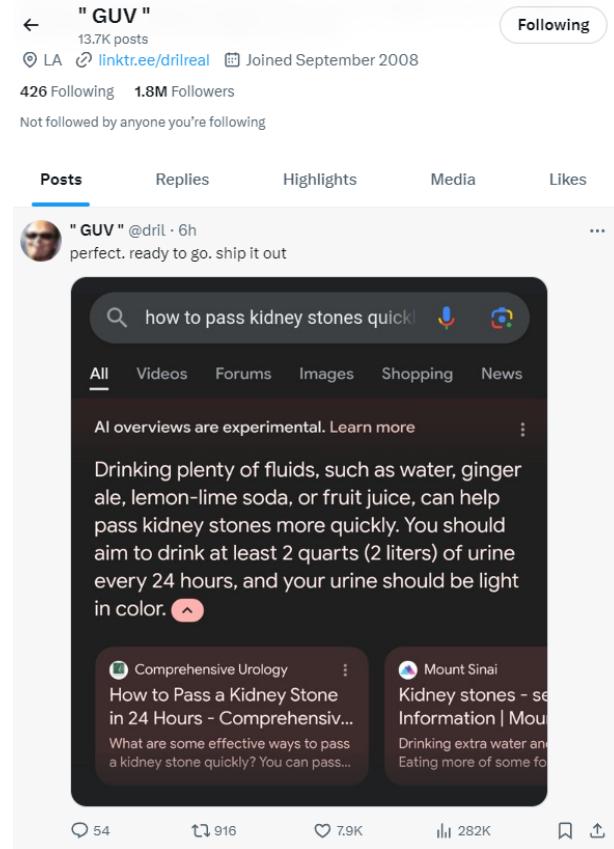
Up until May of 2024, Google was experimenting with an AI-powered search feature known as "Search Generative Experience." This additional feature would use generative AI to provide direct answers when it was activated by a query, much like certain queries triggering rich results. In May, Google released this feature in the U.S. and changed its name to ["AI Overviews" \(AIO\)](#).

Not many people truly knew how to prepare for it, partly because many of the results in labs were, to put it mildly, baffling.

AIO results show up when a user is logged into their Google account on their Chrome browser. It will usually show a summary generated by the language model followed by a few links that users can click on.

In some cases, the results of rushed AI integrations are as funny as they are damning (and potentially dangerous).

Meanwhile, information is coming to light about [Google's internal struggles](#) and the blurring of lines between Search and Ads, thanks to the antitrust trial.



Screenshot by author from X (Twitter), May 2024

Public disillusionment and distrust of search engines also seem to grow, with discussions about “[enshittification](#)” surfacing, rampant [bots on social media platforms](#), and increasingly [aggressive advertising](#) tactics.

All the while, publishers and websites have struggled to navigate an environment where they are outranked by second-hand reporting and even [AI-generated “ripoffs”](#) of their content.

In short, ranking doesn’t seem to make sense right now, and Google has neither fixed it, nor explained why.

This presented a problem when we started work on this year’s Ranking ebook. In previous years, this ebook was a mythbusting exercise. We investigated individual signals and told you whether we thought they were real ranking factors with an algorithmic impact.

That isn’t going to work this time around for a few reasons.

Apart from the fact that ranking hasn’t made sense to many people in over a year, the systems themselves are getting more complicated.

In fact, an over-reliance on specific signals and formulaic approaches may hold websites back. There are, and likely will always be, core pillars to ranking systems that we can point to and say, “This works.” However, as systems and updates continue to evolve and layer on top of one another, it’s much harder to speak to ranking factors in a universal way.

That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t pay attention to [patents](#) and search engineers performing scientific testing. The things that matter in ranking still matter.

Understanding ranking systems and how they work is still critical to SEO success. As Scott Stouffer, CTO and co-founder of Market Brew, points out below in the section titled, Why Is Search Full Of Spam?, individual SERPs use different combinations and weights of signals. Ranking requires a specific and nuanced approach.

Focusing too much on a series of signals can also put you in a reactive – not a proactive – mindset. It can send you down rabbit holes chasing improvements that have minimal impact or cause you to prioritize appeasing systems over people.

It's also critical to understand the directional progress and intentions of the platforms you interact with, as well as the things that matter to the experience of your audience. This is how you create the kinds of websites that users value. At the end of the day, showing users what they're most likely to value and what will most likely provide a good experience is what the algorithms are ostensibly trying to do.

In times of significant disruption and volatility in search, lean into what you know is good for your audience.

This gives you leverage to explore different platforms, delivery methods, and even business models while aligning you with search algorithms' end goals – even if they're not currently rewarding you. It's the best of both worlds, helping you address SEO problems while building a path to diversifying your traffic sources.

To try and parse what's happening in search and give you good advice moving forward, we reached out to SEO experts to ask for their opinions. I was interested in the answers to three questions in particular:

1. What is happening right now in search, and why does everything seem broken?
2. What are the top ranking factors that SEO professionals can rely on right now?
3. In an environment where bad actors will either use AI to rewrite or steal your content wholesale and outrank your original work with it, should you even bother giving Google your best work?

What's the incentive for providing content to a platform that isn't rewarding you for it, and more than that, building an AI tool that could use the content you provide to siphon even more traffic away from your website? Where does your **best** content truly belong?



Why Is Search Full Of Spam?



Ben Steele

Managing Editor,
Search Engine Journal

The first question I asked the contributors is this:

It seems like long-standing strategies and advice have gone out of the window. The public, media, and especially SEO professionals complain that the SERPs are a mess of spam.

What, in your opinion, is going on? Is this the ebb and flow of the internet? Google has gone through phases like this before and repaired the issues, so do you think this will be fixed? Are there predictions you feel comfortable making?

I received a fascinating range of responses. Most of the answers were, on the whole, positive.

The overall conclusion seems to be that, although this is worse than we're used to, the current disruption is a transitory phase. As long as you keep your sights on what's important and provide high-quality experiences, you'll be in a good position when the dust settles.

However, some of the contributors warn that there is a fundamental shift occurring in how people think about and use the internet and how platforms like Google operate. Across the board, these shifts haven't been good for organic traffic, and it could well get worse.

But, oddly enough, the advice might end up being the same.

Understand Google's algorithms, but don't chase them.

Understand your audience and provide them with the best experience you can.

This isn't just how you find success within Google's algorithms; it's how you can reduce your dependence on a third party that you have no control over. Leaning into your knowledge, your value, your niche, and your customers opens up multiple paths forward.

Contributor Responses

I like that Google is using user experience and authenticity in the results, but results need to be factual, or people will get hurt – especially with financial and medical advice.

The same goes for its AI Overviews results. It's going to cause damage to businesses by sharing that a restaurant serves undercooked chicken or fake foods like unicorn and Smurf meat. I [tweeted examples](#) of AIO doing just this.

For the most part, the companies and publishers that create quality experiences made from value-adding content, that have easy navigation, and that are focused on the user rather than themselves and SEO will do just fine.

There were casualties who didn't deserve to be tanked, but it is important for a business owner to have multiple forms of revenue and traffic for when one dries up.



Adam Riemer
President, Adam Riemer
Marketing

Google is constantly trying to improve its algorithms, but very often, updates hit too hard (the March 2024 core update is no exception). Along with useful moves like deindexing spammy sites, such shakeups usually bring anxiety.

I guess we're all used to the fact that fluctuations in Google algorithms come and go. But despite everything that happens in search results right now, one thing remains constant: Websites need to stay trustworthy.



Aleh Barysevich
Founder, SEO PowerSuite

Over the past decade, Google has prioritized many of the same things when evaluating websites.

To make sure your website stays strong when search rankings shift, you have to prioritize transparency and openness. That means providing clear information about who owns the website and who makes the content (as well as why these persons are the ones to trust). Plus, you need to ensure that users have mechanisms to share their feedback and reviews.

In addition to transparency, it's essential to offer users more than just content different from your competitors. What truly matters is to provide users with genuinely new insights and unique ideas they can't find anywhere else. I believe that quality excels over quantity.

So, when websites keep offering fresh and helpful information, both users and search engines see them as reliable.

It's normal for website owners and SEO experts to feel worried during times of search algorithm updates. Even though the SERP may experience turbulence, maintaining perspective is essential. Website owners can ride these waves by focusing on making high-quality content.

Looking forward, Google will likely care about the same things: website trustworthiness and relevance. By sticking to these basics, websites can handle the changes and establish themselves as authoritative sources within their respective niches.

While the specifics of search algorithms may change, the timeless principles of transparency, relevance, and quality content will remain the foundation of a successful online presence.

Since its early days, Google's Achilles heel has been web spam. Its entire business model depends on the ability to deliver high-quality results to users, and this can be easily threatened by unuseful content and spam.

Google's existing index is comprised of 400 billion documents and is growing. The problem we need to focus on is that we moved from essentially a "static web" made of pages predominantly human-curated that Google has been crawling, indexing, and cleansing for over two decades to a new breed of the web made of "generative AI" and synthetic media.

This transition has nothing to do with Google, but it challenges its existence. Whether we like it or not, end-users, in most cases, are looking for expert answers to trillions of questions every day and not to sift through links to find these answers.

Generative Search is an inevitable force driven by technological trends that have existed for years.

Google's management was not prepared for the pace of these changes.

Google's business model needs to change way faster than they expected. The balance between organic traffic and paid ads has worked for decades but is rooted in the old "static" web.

In this new paradigm of synthetic media and GenAI, Google's potential path forward is to monetize transactional intents – shifting focus from advertising to facilitating transactions directly, acting as a marketplace alongside search results.



For several years, Google has been investing a lot in Search – from its algorithms to prevent manipulation, such as Panda and Penguin, through to mobile-first indexing, and now, the “search experience” is being developed.

It has also been very open in recent years that the internet is expanding at a pace it cannot keep up with, and in reality, it doesn’t have a vested interest to do so.

In my opinion, the increased accessibility of AI to generate content has led to increased quality thresholds and a reduction in crawling and indexing some websites.

More stringent thresholds are needed to cope with an ever-increasing demand for content to be crawled and considered – the May 5th implementation of policies against parasite SEO is a good example.

This is going to take some time to get right, and during any major transition phase, there are mistakes.

I firmly believe the major errors and spam will be removed or transitioned out as new features such as AI Overviews and other AI-powered/enabled search tools come into play – such as Circle Search, which, considering the aggressive rate of rollout, I assume has good user feedback.

I think regardless of the spam in SERPs now, Google – and the Search journey as a whole – will look very different in a year. Search has already become multimodal, with users discovering brands and products through other platforms such as TikTok, and this is a general evolution of the internet.

20 years ago, barely anybody had internet-enabled phones. How users organically discover and satisfy their objectives will continue to evolve.



SEO needs to evolve with this. In my opinion, it will become more mid-funnel focused but still complement other funnel stages and work with other channels as a form of Organic Discovery Optimization (ODO) as our content needs to align with other mechanisms of organic discovery and brand.

So, here's why I'm very ambivalent on how to answer this.

Yes, there are many complaints about the quality of the search results.

Yes, the change (especially over the past months) is blatantly obvious.



Yes, Google Search has never been perfect. And never will be. By nature, it can't be.

I'm deeply concerned about many things in Google Search, and critique is warranted, but I feel like we've gone too far on the other end and are losing sight of the forest for the individual complaints.

So I ask myself:

- ★ Do I still consider Google the best place to search?
 - Yes. For the things I'd searched on Google before, I still find Google the best place to search.
- ★ Is there another place to search where I trust the information I get back is filtered (not perfectly, but still filtered) based on algorithms, guidelines, and policies built to fight hate speech, misinformation, spam, etc.?
 - No. Google still seems to have the most sophisticated systems (even after showing more cracks lately). Anyone who feels they have found this other place on TikTok, Perplexity, ChatGPT, Twitter, or Instagram, get in touch; I'm all ears.

- ★ Is this an interim phase while cataclysmic changes are happening in AI and users' behaviors shift?
 - I'd like to think so. I'd also like to think the company that has invested so much over decades in making Search accessible, helpful, and functional can (and wants to) figure things out.

Here's what I think is happening. For a very long time, Google has had no real competition. And by competition, I don't mean another search engine that can eat away at its market share. I mean competition in facing a disruptor.

So, all moves had to do with increasing its stock price, which also relied on revenue from Search and crashing its direct competitors (let's not discuss the legalities around that).

Now, the market is disrupted.

Google could very well already have the most advanced product in the backend (we don't know). Or maybe not. But it is a product it wasn't ready to unleash into the wild before the market got disrupted and the market pressure rose exponentially.

We see the outcome of these pressures and probably some very bad decisions made years ago in how Search functions, what gets prioritized for shipping, and what gets more investment to develop. But now, I'm going into wild speculation, so I'll stop.

We hold Google accountable to very high standards. And we're the first to jump the gun when something is not functioning as expected.

But do we do the same when using other tools or platforms to search? I don't think so.

- ★ Do we constantly complain because ChatGPT hallucinates, gives unhelpful responses, or returns blatantly wrong information?
 - No. We beat ourselves up because our prompts were incorrect, and we enjoy conversing with AI. We expect it to be bad, and we rejoice at every instance when it's not.

- ★ Do we talk about how bad the free version of Perplexity is? Remember, Google Search is a free product.
 - No, we talk about how innovative it is. Why are we so amazed? I'm perplexed. Excuse the terrible pun.
- ★ Do we even talk about the level of spam, misinformation, and hate speech on TikTok?
 - No. We're talking about how cool the captions in videos are and are ready to take advice from anyone who was paid to try a face cream made of cat hair and jellybeans.

[Editor's note: For my part, I constantly complain about ChatGPT and generative AI. It's hard to get me to shut up about how bad these tools are for the purposes people want to use them. But I don't think I'm the norm.]

Whereas, about Google, we complain:

- ★ When the ads are not very visible.
- ★ When they are.
- ★ When AI content ranks.
- ★ When it doesn't.
- ★ When link building works.
- ★ When it doesn't.
- ★ When "SEO content" (whatever that is) works.
- ★ When it doesn't.
- ★ When the results all looked the same.
- ★ Now they don't.

I can fill in thousands of rows.

But the point is this: The more search products use machine learning and AI, the more stumbling blocks we'll encounter. Google was not built to be "sticky"; it was built to index and serve information.

It's breaking because to keep making profit and dominate, it has to recalibrate and become sticky in ways it wasn't supposed to. Will they manage to do it? I don't know.

Do I want Google to become more like anything else out there now?

Definitely not.

Google has had a rough few years. With AI content being used prolifically online, social media sites being touted as the “new” search engines, and pressure from Bing’s technical advances, Google has had to react.

Unfortunately, many are unhappy with those reactions.

This has, of course, been Google’s burden over the years.

1. It makes a change for the “better.”
2. Those affected by the changes loudly lament.
3. Spam filters too heavily back into the results.
4. Google tweaks the ranking systems again.



We aren’t strangers to sudden SERP fluctuations or the arduous few weeks following major system updates. Recently, however, a quick succession of changes has really upended the status quo of Google’s SERPs.

It’s too early to tell whether Google will be able to weather this storm, as they have done before.

However, it’s not the opinions of SEO professionals like me that they need to worry about. It’s searchers. With the improvement in Bing’s AI-driven search functionality and TikTok being pushed as an alternative search destination, Google’s competition is stronger than ever.

What we're seeing is the result of multiple factors:

One, the quality of web content hasn't necessarily improved. Approaches like the skyscraper technique and technologies like AI have degraded content quality.

Two, publishers, which used to be sources of high-quality content, are struggling and grasping for money lifelines like affiliate revenue. Plus, they're cutting costs and firing people.

Three, Google still doesn't rank the best content but the best-optimized content.

Four, more content creation has gone to video, social, and podcasts over the last years. The open web is shrinking, and so is its content.

My prediction is that Google will keep enriching the SERPs with content from other platforms, as it has done with Reddit, TikTok, and YouTube.

Besides more algo updates, I could see Google making a move to stimulate more open web content creation, maybe by buying or developing its own content platform. Could Blogger come back?

The current state of Google's search engine results pages is likely due to the evolution and integration of AI like RankBrain, neural matching, BERT, and MUM into Google's core ranking system.

These systems require training on real-world situations and data, which includes identifying and devaluing content.



In 2015, Google first deployed RankBrain, saying, "At the time it was groundbreaking." Then, in 2018, it introduced neural matching to understand concepts on the page. Shortly after, in 2019, it launched BERT to understand meaning and intent, and most recently, in 2022, launched MUM to "improve searches of COVID vaccine information."

These systems are not very old and are still learning.

Google wants these AI ranking systems to assess content quality and relevancy to a query like a human would, which is much different than keyword-based ranking systems.

Google has used teams of search quality raters to evaluate the SERPs and ensure that the results match humans' understanding of relevance and quality.

Ben Gomez, Google's VP of search engineering around 2018, said on CNBC, "You can view the rater guidelines as where we want the search algorithm to go," and went on to say, "They don't tell you how the algorithm is ranking results, but they fundamentally show what the algorithm should do."

However, now Google uses AI to do what the search raters once did.

Early in 2024, Google [terminated the contract](#) with Appen, the firm that handled the quality rating, signifying that it may intend to let AI do the job instead of the raters.

Google is likely letting AI do more of the heavy lifting in the overall ranking system. However, AI requires training without input from other systems. As AI becomes more independent, Google would likely have to remove Penguin, Hummingbird, and Panda from the core ranking systems.

The large amount of spam that ranked could have been the point at which Google removed the old ranking systems from the core algorithm or reduced their weighted importance.

AI ranking systems are now learning from real-world data and could get much better soon.

Look at it like this: if you want to learn how to fight mixed martial arts (MMA), you will want to shadow box with no opponent. But eventually, you'll have to test your foundational skills in a fight, where you'll get hit in the face. Getting hit and hitting others changes how you react and how others react to you.

Eventually, Google's AI ranking systems will have to get hit in the face.

Ah, the wild world of Google and its SERPs, where, one day, you're the king of the castle, and the next, you're lost in the dungeon of page two. The current chaos? It's like a zoo where the animals have taken over, leaving SEO pros and website owners running around like they're trying to herd cats.

Yet, Google has a history of adeptly steering through its tribulations.

Picture this phase as a complex story arc in a well-loved TV series: Despite the current disarray, there's a quiet assurance that balance will ultimately prevail.

As we go through this phase of "Google's Evolution," energized by the AI revolution, staying agile and forward-thinking is crucial.

The unpredictable nature of the internet, coupled with the transformative impact of AI (+Generative AI), suggests that while we can speculate about the future, the reality will be quite different. Success hinges not solely on robust keywords and compelling content, but also on our capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing digital environment.



I think it's the perfect storm.

The internet is ebbing and flowing like never before, both because of the influx of AI and the demand of users for more authentic content experiences.

To deal with it, Google defaulted into a reactionary position.



Folks want firsthand content experiences? To Google, that means splattering Reddit all over the SERP instead of creating a long-term strategy that changes the incentive cycle so that this content gets created across the web.

Everything seems to be shortened all of a sudden. At the same time, it seems like Google has gotten distracted by all things shiny (i.e., AI). It's very hard to go all in on the great AI race in the sky and focus on SERP quality at the same time.

It also seems like its various interests and the conflicts it creates have hit a head. The need for more ad revenue and to dominate the ecommerce space has hit critical mass (especially the latter). Again, a lot of this, to me, is that Google is not thinking about the long-term consequences – both on the internet and on its bottom line. It seems to be totally caught up in performance and in denial about perception, which will eventually impact its performance.

Its efforts to address the issue – moving from focusing on “quality” to “helpfulness” – haven't panned out well. The Helpful Content Update was needed but seems flawed (and that's okay; these things take time to sort out). But maybe don't give it so much power until you do work it out.

Adding multiple ways to assess helpfulness within the core algorithm doesn't seem to have gone well (at least immediately following the March 2024 Core Update), probably because that approach was almost definitely built off the foundation of the Helpful Content Update. At the same time, all of the optics are just terrible.

Suddenly, the question of whether we are seeing a brand on the decline is a legitimate one.

In order to answer this, I first have to talk about the evolution of SEO – from generalizations to specifics.

In the fluid industry of SEO, it's common to witness shifts in strategies and advice. As a seasoned search engineer with over 18 years of experience, I've witnessed firsthand the fluctuations and transformations that occur. The current sentiment of chaos and frustration among SEO professionals and the general public regarding SERPs filled with spam begs the question: What's really going on, and what does the future hold for SEO?



My perspective as a search engineer is deeply rooted in dealing with specifics. For instance, when Google introduces new paradigms like experience, expertise, authoritativeness, trustworthiness (E-E-A-T), my focus as an engineer shifts towards dissecting these concepts into individual components. I strive to understand the core principles driving search engine algorithms by building algorithms designed to identify these specific elements.

However, there exists a disparity between search engineers' approaches and Google's communication strategies.

While engineers delve into specifics, Google tends to deliver generalizations to the SEO community. This communication gap is exacerbated by SEO influencers' amplification of these generalizations, often leading to a game of broken telephone where the original message becomes distorted.

Consequently, the SEO industry finds itself navigating through metaphorical "asteroids" in the form of major algorithmic filters, indiscriminately impacting SEO practitioners who fail to grasp the correct specifics.

This dynamic reflects the age-old adage that change is inevitable, and clarity often emerges only after the departure of outdated practices and the emergence of new perspectives.

Looking ahead, I foresee a gradual transition within the SEO industry towards a more objective and non-speculative approach. As more professionals with engineering backgrounds enter the field, there's a natural progression towards a greater emphasis on understanding the intricacies of search algorithms.

This shift promises a future where SEO strategies are anchored in concrete principles rather than fleeting trends perpetuated by generalists.

In addition to the dynamics of SEO strategies and algorithmic changes, it's crucial to acknowledge the ongoing battle against black hat SEO practices.

As search algorithms continue to evolve and become more sophisticated, the loopholes exploited by black hat practitioners are gradually diminishing. One significant trend in this evolution is the alignment of algorithms with human perception.

Loopholes in algorithms often arise due to their lack of perceptiveness compared to human judgment. However, as algorithms become more attuned to mimicking human cognition and understanding, the viability of black hat SEO techniques diminishes.

Google and other search engines are actively working towards eliminating these loopholes, aiming to create algorithms that can discern the nuances of content and intent as effectively as a human would. By striving for this advancement, search engines aim to curtail black hat practices before they proliferate further, thereby fostering a more equitable and trustworthy online ecosystem.

The current upheaval in the SEO landscape underscores the importance of bridging the gap between generalizations and specifics. While challenges persist due to the inherent complexities of search algorithms and the constraints imposed by industry dynamics, there's optimism for a future where clarity prevails, driven by a community of professionals committed to unraveling the intricacies of search engine optimization.



AI Search & Search Features Make Some SERPs Unwinnable



Tom Capper

Senior Search Scientist,
STAT Search Analytics + Moz



As Google continues to iterate on its AI Overviews (previously referred to as Search Generative Experience or “SGE”), there will be a focus on informational intent SERPs where the lack of monetization within AI results hurts Google the least. Organic results have been increasingly overshadowed for many such keywords for a long time now, and as such, it is becoming more and more critical to be able to spot worthwhile opportunities in the mire.

We like to surface features that are possible to win traffic from versus features that send traffic to Google (or nowhere at all), and also to contrast pure organic rank (that is, excluding SERP features) vs. overall rank for sites. We'll be doing the same with generative AI results as they start to appear in an increasing variety of forms, categorizing and parsing them to bring order to the chaos.

On the other hand, sometimes what data like this reveals is that certain informational SERPs are no longer winnable ahead of zero-click features. In many verticals, SEO professionals may choose to move their focus further down the funnel to the commercial and transactional stages, and it will be important to understand where keywords fall in terms of search intent stage within a customer journey for a given site.

[Segmenting and analyzing your keywords by search intent stage](#) can reveal more specific competitors and target SERP features that might not be so prominent for a less focused keyword set, and this will be critical for helping SEO pros navigate AI-infused SERPs.



What Are The Top Ranking Factors That SEO Pros Can Rely On Right Now?



Ben Steele

Managing Editor,
Search Engine Journal

The second question I asked contributors was this:

Is there currently any rhyme or reason to ranking? Which, if any, ranking signals can people still trust to work? Or are we moving into a time when even talking about specific “signals” is obsolete?

I'll begin with what we have to say on the matter, and then move on to the contributors.

In October 2023, SEJ's Shelley Walsh wrote [The Top 3 Google Ranking Factors That Really Matter](#).

This is still a great guide to approaching ranking in 2024.

The Top 3 Ranking Factors

Walsh said that the top 3 ranking factors are:

1. High-quality content.
2. Page experience.
3. Links.

According to Walsh, "The main thing to take away from this article is that ranking and SERP visibility is not a straightforward application of 'here is a list of ranking factors that we can work with.'

It's one of the reasons why this industry is such an exciting and challenging space to work in.

Although there is not a clear set of Google ranking factors that you can follow, there are a number of factors and signals that are important to get right to achieve the best ranking you can."

While “high-quality content” is currently somewhat arguable, to put it lightly, we do expect this to change. Google has stated that it wants to prioritize original and high-quality content in search results. It can’t seem to do it effectively right now, but that is highly likely to change.

Page experience has only become more important since Walsh wrote her piece, with [INP being officially rolled into Core Web Vitals](#).

Links are tricky. Google has recently downplayed their importance, but we’re not convinced of that yet. Links still matter, but keeping them within guidelines is the best approach.

The quality of links is a critical factor, and relevance is a key determiner of how effective a link can be. This is true for both internal and inbound links.

The better that ranking algorithms get at accurately making connections between [information and entities](#), the more valuable it becomes to have a well-organized information infrastructure. Links, especially internal links, provide critical data about how your pages and the various entities contained within them are related and organized.

The more time goes on, the more the user-friendliness of a link matters – how related the link is to the page, how well the anchor text describes the link, and how it sets expectations. The correlation of user-friendly links and SEO-friendly links will continue to converge as search algorithms get better at understanding the real-world connections between entities.

Freshness & Content Maintenance

We've directly observed the value of maintaining your content at SEJ. Information gets out of date fast, and Google seems to be rewarding websites that care for their content and keep it current.

This isn't a universal rule, and much more important in some verticals than others. We write about SEO, an industry that changes quickly and regularly. If you're in an industry that moves more slowly, rewriting your content probably isn't something you should focus on when it isn't necessary. However, you should improve your site as you learn more about your audience or digital marketing.

The key is to provide new value. An updated page should have updated information that wasn't present before, new ideas and takeaways, or new ways to take in the information that's there.

"[Freshness](#)" comes from the name of a specific Google algorithm that impacts three different types of queries: recent events, recurring events, and content requiring frequent updates. Generally, this algorithm is applied in very specific situations where Google believes the user is actively seeking up-to-date information.

But I think that timing has a broader impact than that, and the idea of "freshness" could apply – in general, if not as a specific consequence of this system – to a wide range of queries.

Updating content for the sake of the algorithm isn't the takeaway. But updating your content as it ages, as new information is released, or even as you learn more shows that you care.

I think many people might underestimate the importance of the last point I mentioned above: If you, as a person or entity, learn new information or learn that the information you've posted is out of date or incorrect, you should update your content. Something doesn't have to be brand new or newsworthy to be worthy of an update. If you just post new content and move on, the old, less accurate content will still exist.

Even we struggle with this sometimes. SEJ has a massive catalog of content, and SEO moves fast. Everything is getting old all the time. So, we prioritize as best we can based on our business goals and the needs of our audience. Updates and corrections demonstrate growth, which can go a long way in demonstrating trust and authority.

“Ranking” In AI Overviews

Now that AI Overviews (AIO) has been released to live SERP results in the U.S., SEO professionals are getting a taste of its real-world impact. So far, this has been a mostly hilarious and sometimes scary [disaster](#).

In terms of traffic, the actual impact on search queries varies by vertical. No one actually knows what the full impact of AIO is because Google is not sharing specific traffic data about AIO.

In the meantime, [reactions to the rollout](#) have been mixed. [Google defends the product](#) but the Google support forums are full of “duplicate” questions asking [how to turn the AI features off](#), and there are already [articles explaining how to get rid of AI results](#).

Back when AIO was still in labs as SGE, the folks at Onely did a testing which produced some [very interesting results](#).

AIO has the potential to knock organic results right out of the view of users. But it also has the potential to surface websites buried in the search results even further than search features do, according to Onely’s research. AIO uses a different algorithm to populate clickable links appearing in its results.

So far, the actual implementation of this has been questionable. Links that are tens or more pages deep in Google’s results are surely there for a reason. Seeing them brought to the front is certainly odd.

There are many theories about how you might best position yourself to appear in AI Overviews. One key difference between AIO and traditional ranking is that AIO is very question-focused. Understanding user intent and effectively answering a specific query could see your website surfaced from deep in the traditional SERPs. In theory, surfacing in AIO appears to be about providing the best answer, not the best overall page.

Be warned that this granular approach is not exactly functioning properly; there are confirmed reports from March 2024 that [then-SGE was surfacing scams, malware, and porn](#). The issue of low-quality results doesn't appear to be fixed in the current (June 2024) AIO release.

But in anticipation of these significant road bumps being fixed, there are ways you can prepare to rank in AIO. [Bart Goralewicz](#) talked about this in a [webinar](#) with SEJ's own Brent Csutoras.

One key point is the processing power AIO requires to parse pages and return results to users.

It's possible that a page optimized for performance and low load times could have an edge. Goralewicz specifically called out lightweight code as a success factor when AIO was still SGE.

Here are a few other ways to prepare:

- ★ Develop the best answers to specific questions that you can – “be the answer, not the URL,” according to Goralewicz.
- ★ [Deconstruct LLM knowledge graphs](#) and build content to target them.
- ★ Track the keywords that trigger AIO results and test changes to your pages.

More SEJ resources about ranking on Google:

- ★ [How To Rank On Google \(According To Danny Sullivan At Google\)](#)
- ★ [Google Ranking Algorithm Research Introduces TW-BERT](#)
- ★ [Google September 2023 Helpful Content Update – Changes To The Algorithm](#)
- ★ [Google Launches October 2023 Core Algorithm Update](#)
- ★ Webinar: [9 Major Google Updates From 2023 & 2024 SEO Predictions](#)

So, that's what we think about the current state of ranking signals.

What about the contributors?

Contributor Responses

Discussing signals is useful for simplifying and explaining how search engines function. It also serves as a practical framework for presenting to others how we can build a growth strategy for organic search.

However, it's important to note that it has very little to do with the actual workings of search engines.

So, where do we begin? If the web is constantly generating and changing, how can we optimize for the AI that governs these interactions?

One key factor differentiating one AI from another is semantically rich data. This data can be structured and encoded into webpages, but it is not limited to that. As the web becomes more dynamic, the relevance of structured data within webpages decreases. Instead, more data gets streamed directly via APIs into the new generative search engines.

This is already seen with shopping data in Google's Merchant Center, where semantic data is fed via APIs. Transit information related to trains, flights, and public transportation is also streamed via APIs.

In the not-so-distant future, APIs will provide conversational responses, making search engines more like chatbots that connect users with AI experts for specific topics. Branding is important in this new era, but optimizing user experience and AI techniques is also crucial.



Overall, I think we need to stop looking at ranking in Google as a set of metrics. Yes, in some niches and verticals, it still is the same as it was 10 to 15 years ago, but I think it is time to stop focusing so much on signals.

This addresses a larger skills gap in SEO, and that's around strategy. A lot of "strategies" are just tactic lists focused on either influencing third-party metrics or specific signals or misconceptions around E-E-A-T.

We can't discard these metrics, as clients and KPIs still revolve heavily around them – but to achieve "SEO success," we need to start talking to brand teams, product teams, sales teams, and SDRs.

It's time to build the core strategy around our client ICPs and growth objectives. It's time to build content around user friction points and not just to serve the purpose of ranking for keywords.

I think "specific" signals have been obsolete since SEO's death #146 (around RankBrain time, almost 10 years ago).

The only signal I care about is whether my brand gives out all the right signals

- ★ Is my content relevant?
- ★ Is it good content?
- ★ Would anyone miss it if it wasn't there tomorrow?
- ★ Would it make people think, after reading it, whether on social media or on my site, "Phew, I'm glad I spent my time on this."?
- ★ Can people have a good experience on my site?



- ★ What do they hear about me when searching – on Google, on TikTok, on YouTube and anywhere else they go to search?
- ★ Do people want to talk about me when talking about relevant topics?
- ★ Am I helping Google understand what my pages are about?
Am I driving their bot crazy?

I guess all I'm saying is you can't afford to view ranking on Google as the sum of X parts.

It's much bigger than that. You'll never have the formula.

Get over it and think like a marketer. What earns people's attention, engagement, and loyalty?

That's your signal.

I don't feel like much has changed in the way SEO should be approached. For many years, it's been the case that what works in one industry doesn't have as much effect in another.

Let's look at highly competitive industries like gambling.

In that high-stakes vertical (pun fully intended), parasite SEO is still littering the SERPs. This goes against everything that Google and many SEO pros would preach. These news websites have little topical authority compared to the affiliate sites and casino operators they outrank. Yet, they still rank well for short-tail, high-converting terms, despite Google's recent moves to lessen this type of spam.



There has never been one ranking signal to rule them all. Every page has to be examined holistically within its industry, the rest of its website, and linked sites. Audit the page to rule out technical, topical, and authority issues.

Look at your competitors to understand what they are doing that is causing them to rank well. Tweak, experiment, and improve your content accordingly.

Getting too focused on one or two ranking factors will likely lead you astray. However, there are times when simple, small tweaks to your page might help you outrank another.

One pattern I see across the board is slimming websites down and focusing on content quality. “Fewer but better pages” is the motto.

That’s not necessarily new. “Panda Diets” have existed for a long time. However, it seems that Google pays a lot of attention to domain quality, which refers to the ratio of strong vs. poor pages on a domain.



Another one that’s tricky to influence is brand combination search volume. For example, how many people search for “Shopify business name generator” as a signal that Shopify is most relevant for the keyword “business name generator.”

The last one I’ll mention is layout and design. Sites that look old perform worse. Facelifts often have a positive impact on organic traffic. One client I worked with did a simple design overhaul of their blog and saw an increase of 1,000 more keywords in top 3 positions overnight. I don’t want to say Google has an understanding of the look and feel of a website, but it seems that better user signals due to better design quickly impact keyword rankings.

While traditional ranking signals like keywords and links are still important, Google's increasing use of AI to understand search queries and content means that the system is quickly shifting toward matching the overall relevance and quality of content in a way that Google originally intended: evaluating and ranking content like a human.

As we see from Ben Gomez's quote and the termination of search quality rater roles, Google wants the algorithm to work based on the standards set in the [search quality evaluator guidelines](#) and is building the AI to evaluate this automatically.

The guidelines cite "reputation" and "experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness" (E-E-A-T) and a list of "considerations" to use when evaluating "page quality."

These are not ranking factors but ways a human can evaluate any given piece of content.

Although I constantly try to find content on Google to be inundated with irrelevant results, Google's AI ranking systems will evolve quickly.

Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI, said on a [recent podcast with Lex Fridman](#) that relative to where we will get to very soon, ChatGPT 4 "kinda sucks."

AI advances very quickly, the ranking factors will change quickly, and they will become more human-like in the near future.

From 2015 to 2022, Google moved from a simple ranking system of RankBrain to MUM, which could understand medical information about vaccines.



It's time to start thinking beyond the simple ranking signals and thinking about marketing your website to a specific audience with the intention that they will find the content helpful.

For years, I've been on a soapbox that "quality" (or should I now say "helpfulness" – or perhaps both) is a "meta" factor. It happens at the prefactor level.

That was one of the more interesting things to me about what was [leaked the DOJ trial](#). To me, these "meta" or foundational "factors" are the most important thing. It's what separates your content out and puts it in the running for rankings.

From there, you obviously want to refine it so that the specifics align with user needs and demands. But without that foundation, nailing down the particular factors is meaningless. You run the risk of focusing on details when the entire essence of the thing is lacking.

In dissecting the current state of search engine ranking, it's imperative to trace back to Google's pivotal shift from a rules-based search engine to one driven by machine learning.

Initially, Google employed algorithms crafted in a rigid "if this, then that" manner to combat spam. However, this approach proved inadequate, given the vast array of potential scenarios and the ingenuity of black hat SEO practitioners in exploiting loopholes left by these rules.



Around 2012, Google underwent a fundamental transformation by embracing a supervised machine learning approach. This marked a paradigm shift where humans were tasked with categorizing websites into “good” and “bad” buckets based on various classifiers. Google then leveraged this human feedback to refine its algorithms, effectively allowing humans to rank results first before determining the optimal mix of algorithms to achieve those desired rankings.

This transition from rules-based to machine learning-based algorithms enabled Google to move away from providing specific instructions and instead focus on generalizations encapsulated in its Quality Rater Guidelines (QRG).

However, this shift posed challenges for the SEO community accustomed to receiving granular specifics rather than overarching principles.

Moreover, the dynamic nature of machine learning allowed Google to customize the algorithmic makeup of each search engine results page (SERP) based on the specific user query or search intent. This variability in algorithmic recipes for different SERPs further compounded the confusion within the industry, as generalized advice from Google failed to account for the nuanced variations in algorithmic weightings.

Contrary to the perception of an absence of clear signals, the reality is that discernible patterns and signals still exist within the realm of search engine ranking. While new algorithms continuously emerge, such as the evolution from TF-IDF to entity-based to embedding algorithms within the semantic algorithm arc, the fundamental principles underlying ranking signals remain intact.

To navigate through the seeming maze of algorithmic complexity, adopting a SERP-specific approach is paramount. Each SERP presents a unique combination of algorithms with distinct weightings and biases, thereby influencing the ranking of websites in response to specific queries.

By analyzing the performance of websites across different algorithms within a given SERP, and discerning the relative weightings assigned to each algorithm, clarity can be attained in understanding ranking dynamics.

Essentially, the key to unlocking the puzzle of search engine ranking lies in embracing the fluidity and specificity inherent in SERP dynamics. Rather than seeking universal formulas or signals applicable across all contexts, SEO practitioners must adapt to the intricacies of individual SERPs and tailor their strategies accordingly.

While the transition to machine learning-based algorithms may have introduced complexities and uncertainties, it has not rendered the concept of ranking signals obsolete. Instead, it underscores the importance of embracing a nuanced, SERP-centric approach to deciphering the underlying mechanisms driving search engine rankings in the contemporary digital landscape.



Staying Indexed Is The New SEO Challenge



**Steven van
Vessum**
Director of Organic
Marketing, Conductor

 conductor

With the automated AI content creation rush of 2023, we will continue to see a growing flood of low-value, auto-generated content.

We can expect Google to drop pages from SERPs.

Why?

Because for Google, indexing and rendering are the most resource-intensive and expensive parts of the process.

For context, findings from Google's antitrust trial in the U.S. in 2020 recently revealed that the search engine giant had a [400 billion-page index](#) at that time. We don't know what that number is today, but comparatively, an employee at Bing confirmed the search engine discovers around [24 to 48 billion pages per day](#) as of 2022. That's an unfathomable amount of new daily content. Only a small subset of that makes it into search engine indexes and stays there.

So, you should expect Google to continue to improve at filtering out bad content to make room for relevant, accurate, and useful content.

As a result, Google will keep upping the threshold for content it deems worthy of maintaining in its index and, as a result, ranking on SERPs.

TL;DR? Auto-generated or low-quality content may get indexed initially as Google has trouble understanding that it's poor right away. However, don't expect it to stay indexed for long.



Where Does Your Best Content Belong?



Ben Steele

Managing Editor,
Search Engine Journal

I must admit, the third question is a little bit leading. There's a lot of my opinion already in there. But I had some thoughts I wanted feedback on.

I asked the contributors:

*Where does your **best** content belong? Is it in search? Should you cultivate an audience that isn't platform-dependent?*

- ★ *Should people think about the direction many publishers, influencers, and businesses are taking, gating content behind reader-supported business models, email newsletters, downloads, etc.?*
- ★ *On the other hand, is gating your content a bad idea right now? Should you put your absolute best into organic search discovery in anticipation of algorithm corrections favoring you?*
- ★ *Or is the answer a mix of the two?*

For a little clarification, when I say “best” content, I do mean your very best – not good content, not helpful content, **your very best**.

It's my opinion that, at the moment, Google doesn't deserve your best. And based on the way ranking is (or isn't) working, it might even be the wrong platform for the content you put the most effort into. But it is the right platform to acquire users who might be interested in that content.

Most of the contributors disagree with me to some extent, but it's a thought I can't get out of my head.

I'm fond of the general consensus that appeared, however. Choose platforms and distribution based on the purpose of the content and the needs of the audience.

In my opinion, the fundamental disconnect between Google and exceptional content is that search algorithms prioritize showing people exactly what they want to see. One of the key features of exceptional content is discovery in a different way – introducing an audience to new ideas.

I believe that regurgitating existing content and optimizing it to make it easier to parse quickly will consistently outperform original content in search results. This is largely due to the emphasis on addressing specific user queries, leaving little space for content discovery. Instead, search algorithms currently prioritize concise summaries and key takeaways.

Not only can bad actors take advantage of this, but it can also rob original work of its nuance and meaning.

I think this is a symptom of systems that prioritize understanding user behavior as a stand-in for quality – this has been true from the start. Links are effectively a behavioral analysis, because they are a question of who references what and why. (I've changed my mind about user behavior too.)

It's important to note that I'm referring not to the length of content, but rather its intent and structure. Websites can present the exact same information as someone else and win on optimization or established authority, what I sometimes call "momentum." They can present less information – be less original and helpful in the scope of their content – but if it appears more immediately satisfying, they can win there too.

I don't believe that in its current state, Google is friendly to the best, the most original, the most interesting content.

This doesn't mean you should stop letting Google crawl your content or discontinue posting. Instead, you should begin to think about the platforms on which your audience interacts with you and the suitability of content for each.

The Rebooting hosted a great webinar about "[Getting Off The Traffic Treadmill](#)" and focusing on audience value instead of audience volume. I think there are lots of good takeaways to apply to a multichannel content strategy.

But that's enough of my rambling. Let's see how contributors answered, "*Where does your best content belong?*"

Contributor Responses

No one piece of content should ever be the best; all of it should be the best.

If it isn't the best, why are you releasing it? More content does not mean more customers or a better experience.

Don't create content as a one-size-fits-all solution.

People on YouTube are looking for how-to guides and entertainment or reviews and comparisons.

If you're on TikTok or Instagram Reels, you're looking for funny videos or recommendations, not a sales pitch from a brand.

Blog posts are meant to inform, educate, inspire, or provide solutions. Do that instead of sharing things that don't matter to consumers, like your company's holiday party.

Your best content is the content that meets the user's needs and in the format that works for the platform they're engaging with.



Our top-quality content consistently maintains its position in organic search, despite the updates. However, in today's reality, we should not limit ourselves only to organic results in terms of obtaining traffic and users. A holistic approach to business development is now essential. By diversifying your strategies, you can mitigate the impact of algorithm changes.



I advocate for a hybrid approach: combining the publication of SEO-optimized content with offering extra materials through closed channels.

For instance, you can provide exclusive downloads or newsletters in exchange for email sign-ups, or create private groups on social media platforms like Facebook to add value to your audience's experience.

The more visible your business becomes across various online platforms (through ebooks, podcasts, newsletters, or other forms of content), the more trust Google places in your brand. Increased exposure and engagement will bolster your brand's authority, leading Google to confidently display your website in competitive search results.

I think if you're going to gate content, you need to be asking two major questions:

1. Is the content I'm gating vastly different from the value proposition of anything else on the internet that's available for free?
2. If the value proposition is the authorship/expertise of the author or publication, do users value this to the point they'd pay for it?



In this debate, I've always felt that you need a mixed model.

For there to be a value exchange, there needs to be perceived value on both sides and I feel too many publishers and brands feel they have a more dominant position because of their brand/being a known brand. But there's still the need to create that value gap with the user.

In terms of content distribution, you need to utilize social media, email newsletters, and downloads – any mechanism that is appropriate to your ideal customer profile (ICP) and total addressable market (TAM).

As SEO professionals, we have a lot of data on how users discover content, and other channels have a lot of data on how content is engaged with on both sides of the conversion funnel and isn't reliant on "the website" as being where the audience gathers.

I believe your best content belongs everywhere. Creating boring optimized blog posts "to rank" but creating awesome reports for your ABM marketing is just lazy, and so 2014.

Content can be like a liquid: It has the ability to take many shapes and forms without becoming less of what it is.



You can create amazing "free" content from the same resource as your gated content. Doing so would probably amplify the results multiple times over.

People appreciate it when you don't treat them like information beggars because they're not paying for a subscription.

So, no. I don't believe you should put all your efforts into organic search right now. Or into any other channel, format, or "hack," for that matter.

You should take discovery and nurturing seriously and accept that they were never about tricking an algorithm into ranking you.

And you should take affinity and loyalty even more seriously than ever before.

Because if discovery requires patience and resources – and results cannot be guaranteed – then the one thing you can always rely on is the impact word of mouth has.

Your content should be where your audience is. This might, of course, mean different content or formats for different platforms. It definitely doesn't mean limiting your content purely to the website in the hope it builds up your organic search traffic.

SEO should never be considered in isolation, and this is one reason why. Content must be treated as a commercial asset, not just an SEO one.

From a purely SEO perspective, you don't want to do anything that might prevent searchers or search engines from reading your content. Gating content puts barriers in place for both. However, it can also prove to be a goldmine for email sign-ups, subscriptions, and ultimately – revenue generation.

SEO strategy must sit firmly alongside product, marketing, and commercial strategies. That might mean that SEO “best practice” sometimes takes a back seat to allow for what's better for the website overall.



Your best content belongs everywhere: search, video, social, etc. The question is, where do you start? In my experience, the best content strategy is to create content for one channel and then “translate” it to another one. That doesn’t mean you should copy/paste content over, but one channel leads the strategy in terms of what topics to address.



You always want to create a safety net by getting users into channels you can control, like email, forums, or native apps. Modern user acquisition channels are simply too volatile to build a house on them.

The choice to gate content depends on your business model. But one thing we can say is that advertising has been the loser of monetization models over the last few years, unless it happens on Alphabet, Meta, and Amazon.

There is a spectrum: For creators, I think subscriptions and gated content are some of the best monetization models.

For businesses, gating content is one of the worst ideas.

Enterprises can still drive leads with gated assets, but the motto for 2024 is to “show and tell” rather than “build a lot of desire and add friction to the process.”

If you make more than 25% of revenue from organic search, you want to send Google your best horse. If it’s less, I’d gate it and find other distribution channels.

Your best content should be strategically optimized and placed across multiple platforms and channels to align with the different stages of the customer journey. This approach ensures that you meet your audience where they are, providing them with the information they need at each stage of their decision-making process.

A customer journey references the learning path someone takes to make a decision to either solve a pain point or take an opportunity. At various stages of the journey, a person will become aware of the problem, potential solutions, and eventually take action. They will gather information across various touch points or channels at each stage of the journey.

Targeting just focusing on search engines for traffic or only focusing on building an audience to visit your site has some unique challenges, including:

- ★ **Tougher Ranking Criteria:** It's no longer just about backlinks. To rank well, you need expert-led content that reflects real expertise and encourages audience interaction with your brand.
- ★ **Complex Customer Journeys:** People now use a variety of channels to learn about problems and solutions, making their path to purchase more intricate than ever. Fewer people are just going to Google to find a product or service and then make a direct purchase.

These are the reasons why targeting an audience where they want the information is becoming so important.



Focusing on an integrated approach has some major benefits:

- ★ **Enhanced Customer Experience:** Seamlessly interacting with your brand across different platforms strengthens your authority on key topics.
- ★ **Broader Reach:** Tailoring content for multiple channels expands your audience.
- ★ **More Engagement:** Content optimized for specific platforms resonates more, driving up engagement.
- ★ **Trust and Credibility:** Consistent, focused messaging – especially when echoed by others – builds trust in your brand.
- ★ **Future-Proofing:** Diversifying beyond just SEO or PR safeguards you against changes in digital platforms.
- ★ **Higher Conversion Rates:** A well-optimized, coherent journey guides audiences more effectively toward conversion.

Address the audience's journey when planning a content strategy and ensure that you create content for each stage in a channel that makes sense for your audience's needs.

Awareness Stage

At this initial stage, your audience might not even know they have a problem or opportunity. Content aimed at generating awareness should be broadly accessible and engaging.

Utilizing social media platforms, press, or podcast appearances can effectively introduce your brand and start to build recognition.

Unique data and research can be particularly effective here, as they are journalists, and most audiences like to see data that proves the size of a problem or event, the impact of it, or just trends that create opportunities.

Consideration Stage

Once your audience recognizes the problem or opportunity, they start looking for solutions. At this stage, they will likely turn to search engines to find answers. This is where SEO-optimized content becomes crucial.

Detailed blog posts, how-to guides, and comparison pieces can help your audience understand their options and see your brand as a helpful resource.

Decision Stage

In the final phase of the journey, when the audience is ready to make a purchase or take action, your content should be focused on conversion. Testimonials, case studies, and product demos can be hosted on your website to provide the final push toward a decision.

PR can be an important discipline at this stage, as the press and media love a good customer story or content about how real people are solving problems or taking advantage of opportunities.

Cross-Platform Presence

While your content should be tailored to the stage of the customer journey, it's also important to ensure that your audience encounters your brand consistently across platforms. This means adapting your message to fit the format and audience of each channel, whether it's expert commentary for the press, talking about it on a podcast, or sharing unique research through a thought leadership article while maintaining a coherent brand voice and identity.

Cultivating A Platform-Independent Audience

Relying on a single platform for audience engagement can be risky due to changing algorithms and platform policies.

To mitigate this risk, it's important to build an audience by engaging them with your brand across different channels.

- ★ Create a study that lives on your website.
- ★ Create a unique guide that explains a unique methodology.
- ★ Provide expert commentary to the media and create content of interest to journalists.
- ★ Share customer stories that live on-site and on LinkedIn.

This approach diversifies your audience and strengthens your relationship with them, making them more resilient to changes in individual platforms.

In conclusion, your best content belongs not just in search or on a single platform but across a carefully selected mix of channels that align with your audience's journey from awareness to decision.

By being present at each stage and optimizing your content for each platform, you can maximize engagement, build a strong brand presence, and achieve a higher return on investment (ROI) from your content marketing efforts.

For effective content distribution and audience engagement, it's crucial to reassess where the best content belongs and how to optimize its reach.

The prevailing sentiment among many SEO professionals, publishers, influencers, and businesses suggests a growing disillusionment with traditional search engine algorithms and a shift towards alternative platforms and distribution models.



However, search remains a cornerstone of online discovery, making it imperative to strike a balance between platform diversification and organic search optimization.

The current backlash against Google's algorithmic changes and the perceived inadequacies of traditional search strategies have prompted many to explore alternative avenues for content distribution. There's a temptation to gate content behind reader-supported business models, email newsletters, or exclusive downloads, with the belief that such strategies can cultivate a loyal audience insulated from the uncertainties of search engine algorithms.

However, this approach overlooks the enduring importance of organic search as the primary driver of new users. Despite the frustrations stemming from algorithmic unpredictability, search remains the first step in the discovery process for vast numbers of internet users. Ignoring the potential of search in favor of walled-garden approaches risks limiting the reach and accessibility of content.

While diversifying traffic sources beyond search is always a wise move, gating content presents inherent limitations. By erecting barriers to discovery, gated content undermines the organic flow of traffic from search engines, hampering the potential for broader exposure and engagement.

The crux of the matter lies in the balance between specificity and generalization in content strategy. Embracing a nuanced understanding of search engine algorithms, and their implications for SERP dynamics, empowers content creators to tailor their strategies for optimal visibility and relevance. Those who can decipher the preferences of search algorithms and anticipate shifts in ranking criteria stand to benefit from organic search discovery.

Conversely, relying solely on generalizations and one-size-fits-all approaches risks plunging into the chaotic currents of algorithmic uncertainty. Without a clear understanding of the specific nuances shaping search engine results, SEO efforts may appear futile, leading to disillusionment and frustration among marketing teams.



Proactively Embracing SEO Disruption By Focusing On User Needs



Jenna Watson

Senior Vice President,
Digital Media, DAC



SEO is changing – fast – but this is nothing new.

Google is steadily embracing its habit of constantly improving. This year, natural language processing, core algorithm updates that penalize low-quality content, and the inclusion of AI into Search via AI Overviews (AIO) seem to be its primary focus.

However, there's a surefire way to ensure you're embracing these changes and remaining in a proactive state when it comes to managing your SEO.

The best solution? Addressing user needs by understanding the user's intent.

This highly successful approach is not about figuring out the algorithm or beating Google – the key is creating quality content that will address users' needs with the best possible experience.

By reframing your efforts to give the end user what they need (rather than optimizing for Google or wanting to beat a year-over-year traffic number), you will ensure you remain on the right side of Google's constant changes.



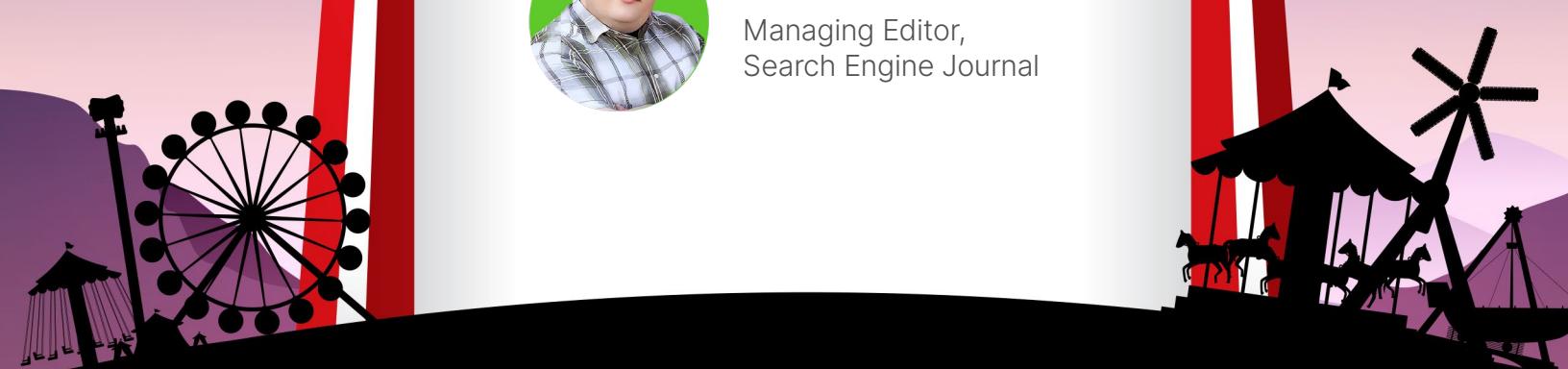
Making Sense Of Ranking In 2024

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



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If there's one thing I hope you'll take away from this ebook, it's that you shouldn't stop doing the right things just because Google isn't rewarding you for them. Because ultimately, you want to serve your user first and create the best experience for them.

SEO should be a lot more than just trying to please Google.

The more that Google's algorithms don't seem to act in the way Google states they're supposed to, the harder it is for the public and SEO professionals to trust it. A series of [unpleasant revelations, poorly received launches, and lapses in communication](#) compound these frustrations.

I think we all understand why Google obfuscates certain aspects of search. Most of us have a lot of grace to extend to Google about the need to keep details secret in order to prevent manipulation.

However, we also can't take for granted that the best interests of Google, of users, and of website owners are always aligned.

As SEO professionals, we should all respect the hardworking engineers and liaisons at Google. But that doesn't mean we have to roll over and quietly go back to our Search Consoles when there are clear problems with search algorithms, new products, and the direction of updates.

I do believe that the public pressure exerted by users and dedicated SEO professionals can (and should) impact Google's response and influence future changes for the better.

Critique is important. But feedback takes time to consider and implement.

In the meantime, you have business challenges to solve.

The advice that you shouldn't optimize strictly for search algorithms is still true. On the other hand, just making great content and waiting for rewards doesn't make sense either. You do still need content to be found. We are not in a post-optimization world, and I'm not sure we ever will be.

Based on the way Google currently works, and the way AIO currently works, SEO will experience a period of instability. Be prepared for search to change as the industry absorbs the disruption that AI has instigated. However, it will eventually stabilize in some form or other.

Navigating instability in search requires that you:

- ★ Maintain a clear course that prioritizes users.
- ★ Experiment to discover the ranking factors that impact your specific SERPs most.
- ★ Research how AI and generative AI algorithms classify knowledge and surface information, then apply those insights to your content strategy.
- ★ Diversify your audience acquisition, retention, and monetization strategies and channels.

Unfortunately, not all websites – not all businesses – will survive the extended disruption, but this isn't the first time our industry has experienced this and it won't be the last. SEO is about adaptability and now is the time to consider a future that isn't so reliant on Google.

Earlier in the ebook, I reviewed some of the things we're doing at SEJ to account for the pains we've experienced over the last year. We do know that leaning into quality, expertise, and serving our users has had a significantly positive impact on our key performance indicators (KPIs) for retention, opt-ins, and other user behavior metrics.

If you're in the SEO industry, you know that traffic is down nearly across the board, with the exception of a few big winners, and new features like AIO threaten to reduce it even more. So, you need to ask yourself:

- ★ What if less traffic to go around is your new reality?
- ★ Can you sustain organic growth by competing for a smaller piece of the pie?
- ★ What's your plan to get ahead of the curve?
- ★ How can you diversify your organic growth strategies and monetization to protect yourself from the impacts of search disruption?

To be clear, I'm not telling you to abandon search and SEO. You'll always need them, and the contributors to this book make many constructive and positive arguments about succeeding in Google in the short and long term.

Thank you for reading.

A few days after downloading this ebook, you'll receive a survey in your email inbox. Please fill it out to let us know what you think. I read all the surveys.

Regards,

Ben Steele, Managing Editor