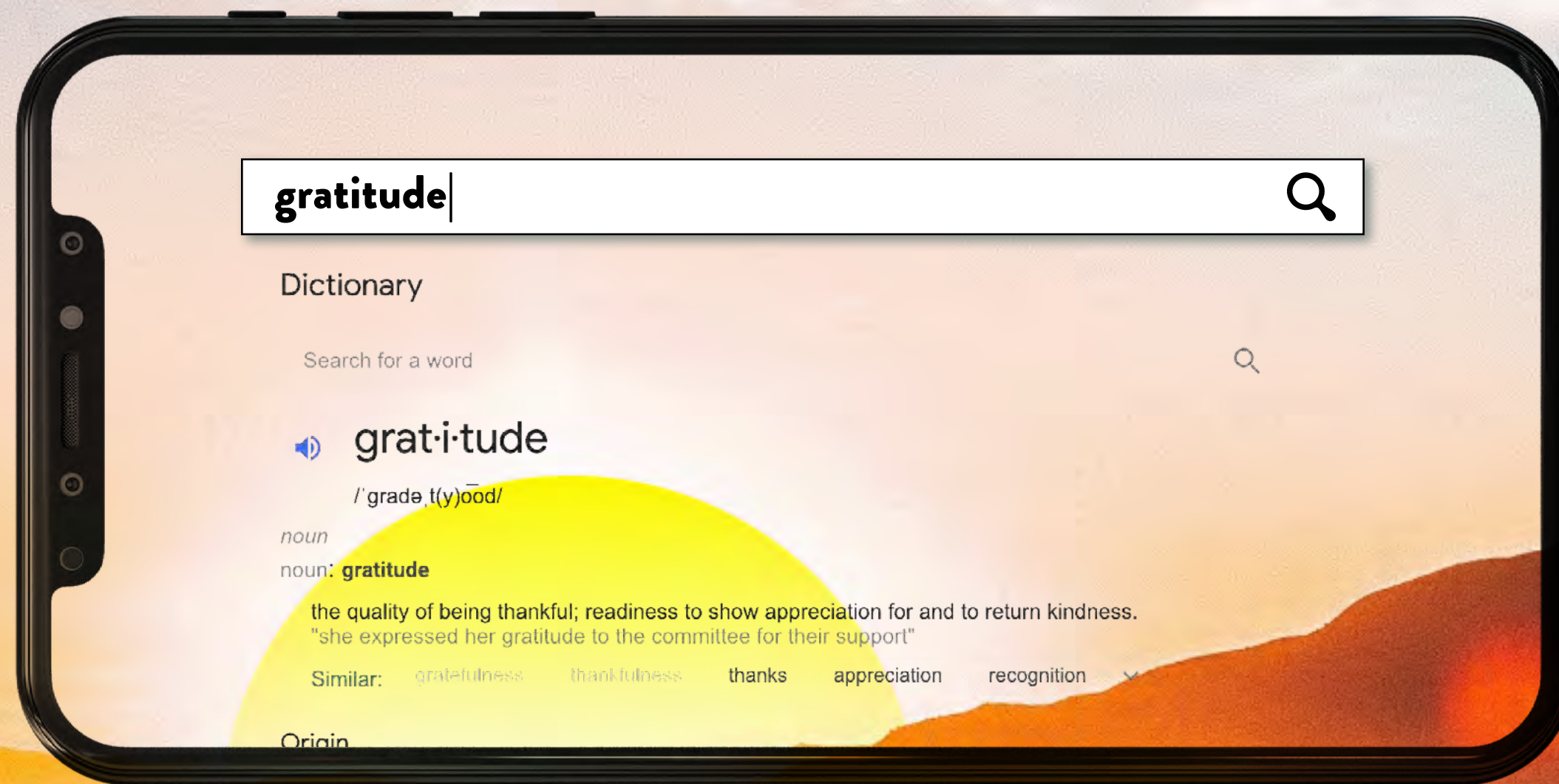

VOLUME 4
ISSUE 4
2021



CLEAN
PROVEN
SEO

A DIGITAL SEO MAGAZINE



**ALEX OMELCHENKO • OLGA ANDRIENKO • DR. PETER J. MYERS • ZAINE CLARK • JOELLE IRVINE
BRTINEY MULLER • CHARLES TAYLOR • GARRETT MEHRGUTH • CONNOR BONAM • LIAM BARNES
HEATHER PHYSIOC • IZABELLE HUNDREV • BRITT HANKINS • DANA DiTOMASO • AND MORE...**

Table Of Contents



011. ARTICLE ELEVEN
Put Your Best Foot Forward
Heather Physioc

012. ARTICLE TWELVE
eCommerce #Goals
Joelle Irvine

013. ARTICLE THIRTEEN
Seven Deadly Sins of SEO
Izabelle Hundrev

014. ARTICLE FOURTEEN
The Lost Art of Brand Queries
Britt Hankins

015. ARTICLE FIFTEEN
SEO Reporting
Dana DiTomaso

016. ARTICLE SIXTEEN
Industry Bosses:
A Showcase



005. ARTICLE FIVE
Audience + Algorithms
Joelle Irvine

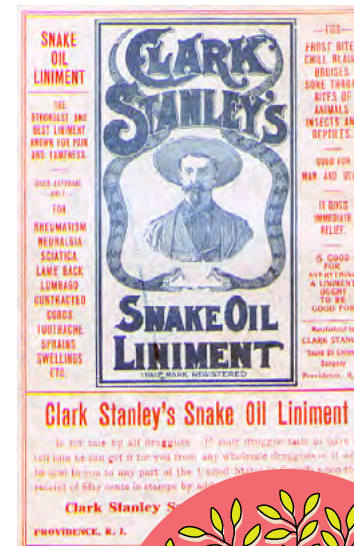
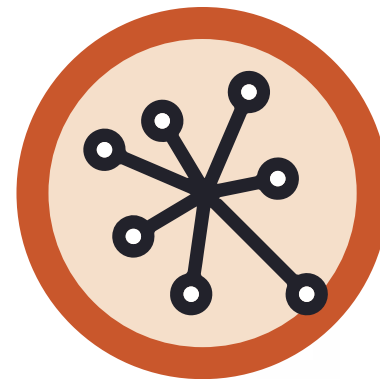
006. ARTICLE SIX
SEO Tasks for Maximum Results
Britney Muller

007. ARTICLE SEVEN
Header Tags & Hierarchies
Charles Taylor

008. ARTICLE EIGHT
Becoming Discoverable
Garrett Mehrguth

009. ARTICLE NINE
Is There Bad Organic Traffic
Connor Bonam

010. ARTICLE TEN
Nobody is an SEO Expert
Liam Barnes



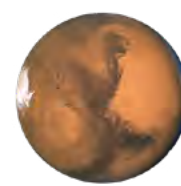
00P. PRELUDE
A PAGES Thank you
The PAGES Crew

001. ARTICLE ONE
Guest Blogging for Link Building
Alex Omelchenko

002. ARTICLE TWO
Crafting Content Magic
Olga Andrienko

003. ARTICLE THREE
Going Meta On Your SEO
Dr. Peter J. Myers

004. ARTICLE FOUR
The Payoff from Audience Research
Zaine Clark



It seems almost surreal to be writing this last prelude; a grateful nod to the agencies and businesses who have supported us through advertisement and to the 100+ contributors who have shared their expertise with us. This tribute is also to you, our reader. It is not an exaggeration to say we couldn't have had such a successful run without your readership and overwhelming support. Your inquiry into SEO best practices dared us to break the mold and ask, "What if—?"

What if we chose a different route within this tech-heavy generation and put *PAGES* into the actual hands of over 2,000 subscribers worldwide? Our curiosity got the best of us and what followed was the advancement of knowledge, the sharing of research, and a refreshingly nostalgic platform for expert voices that helped carry us through unprecedented growth and change within the industry and world around us.

The overwhelming success and adoration of *PAGES* magazine showed us that the need for unity within the marketing industry is great, as is the desire for a vehicle to educate the industry as a whole. The extraordinary teamwork that came with that effort and the sublime graphics found within the pages continue to give us pause as we consider that we are all just people, looking to make this world better, one relationship at a time.

With enthusiasm, you came alongside us to engage in deeper questions. With every issue, barriers were broken and amazing new relationships formed — ones that are sure to continue even beyond this last issue. Though we've chosen one article from each of our past issues to showcase, we invite you to revisit all of your favorites as they forever live in the digital world on the *PAGES* SEO Magazine website.

Therefore, this is not a full stop but a hello to the perpetuation of all we, together, have improved on and, with that, a pledge to continue amassing knowledge, staying unified in the process, and giving back to our communities.

One last humble thank you, from the entire *PAGES* crew.



- The Pages Crew 😊



001.

AS SEEN IN
Q1 2018

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

An Introduction: To Guest Blogging For Link Building

By Alex Omelchenko

What is guest blogging?

Guest blogging — also called guest posting — is the practice of contributing a post to another person's blog. The concept is simple: you write an article as a guest for another blog and gain a link back to your own site within the post.



No matter how you create content for your blog or website, if there are others who would benefit from seeing it, guest blogging is a great way to get your creative offerings in front of them.

GUEST BLOGGING ALLOWS YOU TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE BLOGGERS HOSTING YOUR POSTS AND TAP INTO THEIR AUDIENCE FOR ADDITIONAL EXPOSURE. IT'S ALSO A METHOD TO ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS AN AUTHORITY TO YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE, AND THE BLOG OWNER BENEFITS FROM THE FRESH, HIGH-QUALITY CONTENT YOU PROVIDE THEIR READERS.

**GET
IT
RIGHT**

Good guest authors and bloggers recognize that relevant, well-placed links within a blog post benefit readers by providing them with further information and additional resources. With the right application, guest blogging is a powerful online marketing tactic and one of the best ways to build valuable links.

In the past, SEOs who were interested only in gaining links took advantage of blogs that were open to guest posts, requesting that blog owners publish poorly written articles full of irrelevant links. Because of this, reply rates can be low to guest post requests. But don't worry — there are a few things you can do to increase your chances of making a connection with the managers of a blog.

The first is to start with the blog posts you write. If you wouldn't want to read it, don't assume anyone else will. Don't worry about perfectly optimized anchor text or advertorial content — that won't work here. Put people first and stop worrying about the robots.

Next, remember that building relationships should be the primary goal of your outreach to blog owners. Your emails should be personalized, and as concise as possible. They also need to show the webmaster why your guest post is valuable to them.

Some bloggers may ask for money in exchange for publishing your content. It's best to avoid this activity, as it's directly against Google's guidelines to pay for links. It can also result in a manual penalty, which works against your rankings in the search engine result pages (SERPs).



BACKLINKS — LINKS FROM ANOTHER WEBSITE BACK TO YOUR OWN — ARE THE PRIMARY VALUE OF GUEST BLOGGING TO YOUR SITE'S SEO.

Backlinks remain one of the most important ranking factors in search engine optimization. But not every backlink to your page has the same value to Google. There are a few ways Google gauges the value of a link.

One is by the domain and the page the link is on. You gain the most value by posting on high quality websites. Another is the placement of the link on the page: where on the page the link is located. Links located in the body of an article, like a blog, tend to be most natural, since they should be added to support the content of the article.

The anchor text is also an indicator of value — it helps search engines and readers understand what the page being linked to is about. The anchor text is the hyperlinked words that a reader is able to click on.

If you write an SEO optimized article, your guest post can also provide value by ranking in search, giving you or your brand some extra awareness and potentially increasing traffic.

SEO BENEFITS OF GUEST BLOGGING

HOW TO FIND GUEST POSTING OPPORTUNITIES

Here are a few examples of search strings you can use to find blogs searching for writers:

EXAMPLE SEARCH STRINGS:

- "write for us" "keyword"
- "keyword" inurl:contributors
- "keyword" inurl:authors
- intitle:"guestpost" "keyword"
- inurl:"keyword" "contributor"

Google

alex omelchneko guest post



HOW TO SPOT LOW QUALITY WEBSITES

Posting on a low-quality site can do more harm than good. Not only can it hurt your reputation, but it can also result in penalties, sending you further back in the SERPs. It's important to audit the sites you discover while prospecting. Keep your eye out for the following red flags.

If a webmaster replies to a pitch for a blog post with a large list of other domains that they control, it's a good sign that they're running a *private blog network* or a *dropped domain site*, which are both things you want to avoid.

An *unnatural link profile* can also indicate a low quality site. You can use tools like Majestic's Site Explorer to view the link portfolio of a site and identify signs that a site might be using linking practices that violate Google's guidelines.

Low traffic might also show that a blog isn't a good spot for your guest post — you want links from websites that cater to an actual audience. You can use a tool like SEMrush or Ahrefs to monitor traffic on potential target sites. Good websites will also be visible in SERPs.

WITH TIME, YOU'LL BE ABLE TO EASILY IDENTIFY WEBSITES THAT PRESENT GOOD GUEST POSTING OPPORTUNITIES. IT TAKES TIME TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH WEBMASTERS IN YOUR INDUSTRY, BUT BY DOING SO, YOU'LL BUILD AUTHORITY, GAIN VALUABLE LINKS, AND OPEN UP NEW MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES. ■

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Q1-018

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NICHOLAS CHIMONAS
DAVID FARKAS
ANDREW DENNIS
ALEX OMELCHENKO

002.

AS SEEN IN
Q2 2018

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

CRAFTING
CONTENT

Magic

KEYWORD RESEARCH FOR
CONTENT MARKETING

- OLGA ANDRIENKO -
Head of Global Marketing, SEMrush

According to a recent study by eMarketer, 9 out of 10 B2B businesses in the United States use digital content marketing. It's not only an industry best practice, but quite often a competitive requirement to run content marketing campaigns in-house or with the help of an agency.

If you're not applying keyword research to your content marketing, it's time to start. Keyword research can help you create assets your customers are searching for, driving traffic to your website and building brand authority on the topics your target market cares about.



IF YOU'RE NOT APPLYING KEYWORD RESEARCH TO YOUR CONTENT MARKETING, IT'S TIME TO START



The **BASICS**

Content marketing is a branch of online marketing that helps attract users to a company's website.

Some common examples of content include articles on a company's blog, videos, or infographics. By sharing content, a company doesn't aim to advertise to a broad audience, but targets precisely the users who are already searching for something related to the business.

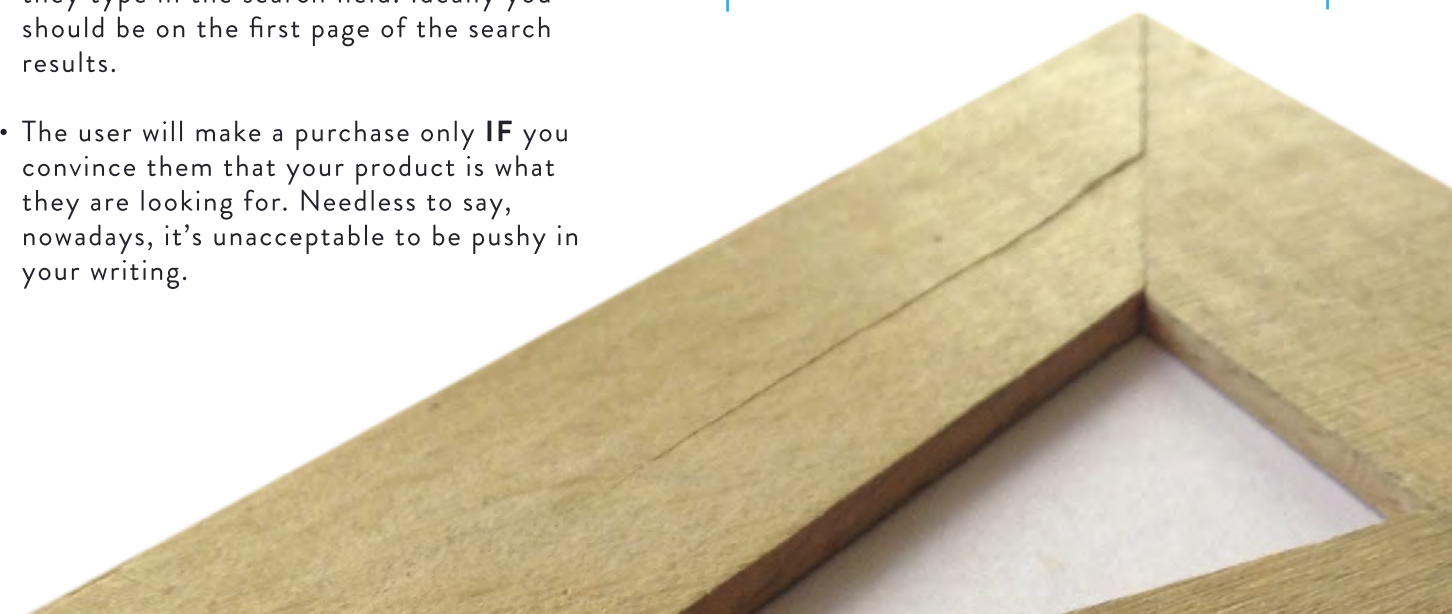
Let's say your company sells power tools online. Your content marketing process might look something like this:



There are a lot of “IFs” when it comes to content marketing.

- You can only post **IF** you run a content platform: a corporate blog, forum, or social media.
- The user will see your page in search results only **IF** you rank high enough for their search query — the keyword that they type in the search field. Ideally you should be on the first page of the search results.
- The user will make a purchase only **IF** you convince them that your product is what they are looking for. Needless to say, nowadays, it's unacceptable to be pushy in your writing.

Regardless of the challenges — and perhaps, in part, because of them — content marketing is a very effective means of attracting users to a website. This is the main reason why companies run blogs and invest in social media marketing: to attract potential customers. The noble intention of sharing valuable knowledge with the world usually comes second.



The CONTEXT

Keyword Research in Content Marketing

Any piece of content you create should be designed for your target audience, so it has to be relevant to their interests - or better, satisfy their *intent*. This concept, broadly popularized by Google, is described as the intention of the user when they open their browser on the search page.

You can't know for sure what your readers *will* be interested in, but you can know what they *are* looking for now. This is the main implication of content creation: you assume that users will be interested in a certain topic based on the information that a sufficient number of users are already interested in it. Though this involves some educated guesswork, big data provides the necessary insights.

Keyword research is how you discover what your potential readers are searching for.

Keyword search volumes — the average amount of search queries for a certain keyword in a particular geographical location — can give you an indication of how much demand there may be for a given topic or query and help you decide where to focus content creation efforts.

There are plenty of online tools that help you find the most popular and relevant keywords, from Google's own Keyword Planner to multiple other providers with independent calculation mechanisms, including SEMrush.

YOU CAN'T KNOW
FOR SURE WHAT YOUR
READERS WILL BE
INTERESTED IN, BUT
YOU CAN KNOW WHAT
THEY ARE LOOKING
FOR NOW.

The APPLI- CATION

Applying Keyword Research

Keyword research traditionally involves three major steps:

1. DEFINE

DEFINING THE CORE TOPICS THAT YOU WILL BE WRITING ABOUT.

In the power tools example it could be “power tools” and “DIY.” This list can consist of more search terms, which we call *seed keywords* or *seeds*.

2. EXPAND

EXPANDING THE LIST OF SEED KEYWORDS WITH THE HELP OF A KEYWORD RESEARCH TOOL.

3. INVESTIGATE

RUNNING COMPETITIVE RESEARCH TO SELECT THE KEYWORDS THAT HAVE THE BEST POTENTIAL.

Usually, these keywords have a combination of high volume and low competition level.

Step one is typically pretty straightforward — a quick brainstorm is usually enough. You already know what your business provides.

For the last couple of steps, you'll need to use specific tools that can show related keywords and keyword volumes, and are capable of filtering the results to help you decide precisely which keywords to target.

At SEMrush, we have developed the Keyword Magic Tool for keyword research. It's easy to use, even for beginners, and provides multiple valuable insights useful to even experienced content strategists.



The EXAMPLE

Keyword Magic Tool Walkthrough

If you enter the seed keyword “circular saw,” the tool generates 12,615 relevant keywords.

By number of keywords	By volume
All keywords	12,615
> blade	2,714
> cut	1,391
> 1	993
> 4	780
> dewalt	779
> cordless	749

The Keyword Magic tool groups results by the number of words in a keyword phrase, displays search volumes for the past month, provides keyword difficulty (which indicates how strong the competition is for this keyword), and indicates whether this keyword triggers any SERP features — for instance, Featured Snippets, Top Stories or Local Packs.

One of the biggest advantages of the tool is its ability to show you the most commonly-searched questions related to your seed keywords. By addressing these specific questions in your content, you provide valuable information to the user and satisfy their search intent with an answer — what they intended to find when they began their search.

All keywords					
Total volume 318,370 Average Difficulty 7.43%					
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keyword		Volume	KD%	CPC
<input type="checkbox"/>	circular saw	+	49,500	87.17	0.76
<input type="checkbox"/>	dewalt circular saw	+	6,600	85.64	0.73
<input type="checkbox"/>	circular saw guide	+	6,600	78.21	0.51
<input type="checkbox"/>	makita circular saw	+	4,400	88.59	0.64



All keywords			
Total volume 10,510 Average Difficulty 5.04%			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keyword		Volume
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to use a circular saw	+	1,900
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to change a circular saw blade	+	590
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to sharpen a circular saw blade	+	320
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to cut straight with a circular saw	+	260
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to cut a straight line with a circular saw	+	210
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to make straight cuts with a circular saw	+	210
<input type="checkbox"/>	what is a circular saw	+	170
<input type="checkbox"/>	how to cut plexiglass with a circular saw	+	170

The WRAPUP

In Conclusion



Keyword research boosts the effectiveness of your content marketing, and it’s simple to implement as long as you have the right tools. Once you understand which metrics to look for and how to use the tools, it’s not difficult to incorporate keyword research into your content marketing and reap the SEO and brand-building benefits. Try adding a few extra steps to include keyword research in your content creation workflow — they’ll add significant value to your assets. 🎯

[INDUSTRY BOSS]
SEO TITANS TO KNOW

OLGA

Andrienko

Olga is Head of Global Marketing at SEMrush.

She and the SEMrush team have built one of the strongest and most active international communities in the online marketing industry.

In 2016, Olga worked on tapping into new markets, and YoY average revenue growth from the top 10 new markets was over 90%. During the last year, she's been focused on investing in SEMrush's PR and social media, and revenue coming from referrals has doubled as of the end of 2017.

Olga is a sought-after speaker at leading marketing conferences such as SMX, Pubcon, and BrightonSEO.

 @olgandrienko



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A N S E O M A G A Z I N E



my next vacatio|

my next vacation
my next vacation **will be**
my next vacation **destination**

THE KEYWORD RESEARCH ISSUE

LINK WITH INTENT

Vincent Nero
Content Marketing Manager, Siege Media

KEYWORD DIFFICULTY

Russ Jones
Principal Search Scientist, Moz

GET OUTSIDE THE BOX

Tim Soulo
Head of Marketing & Content Strategy, Ahrefs

CRAFTING CONTENT MAGIC

Olga Andrienko
Head of Global Marketing, SEMrush

GREAT MINDS

Matt Vazquez
Online Marketing Manager, Drift

THE REAL GOLD

Peter Buffington
Product Manager, Australian Broadcasting Corp.

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Q2-018

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FEATURING:
VINCE NERO
OLGA ANDRIENKO
RUSS JONES
MATT VAZQUEZ
TIM SOULO
PETER BUFFINGTON





GOING META ON YOUR SEO

DR. PETER J. MEYERS

MARKETING SCIENTIST, MOZ

Whether you've been an SEO for two weeks or two decades, you're inevitably going to stumble into arguments about meta tags. It's sometimes hard to separate myth from history, and the role of meta tags in SEO has evolved a great deal over time, but the basics are still critical and don't need to be complicated.

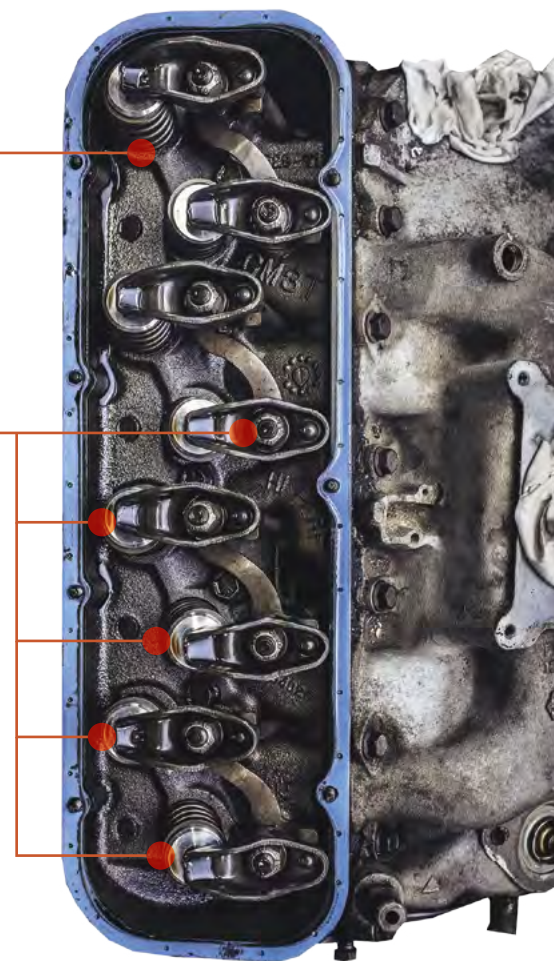
Put simply, meta tags are data that help search engines understand your webpage but aren't part of the regular content. There are a number of advanced meta tags, but let's focus on the three with the most SEO history: Meta keywords, Meta description, and Title tag, in reverse importance...

META KEYWORDS

The Meta keywords tag is a comma-delimited list of keywords (or topics) that your webpage is about. There was a time when this tag helped search engines decide where and when your page should rank.

That time was twenty years ago.

By the early 2000s, search engines realized that Meta keywords were too easy to game, and we have good reason to believe that many even viewed them as a negative ranking factor (i.e. they treated those keywords with suspicion). In 2018, the Meta keywords tag is unlikely to help or harm you in most situations, and it isn't worth much time or effort.



003.

AS SEEN IN
Q3 2018

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

META DESCRIPTION

Your Meta description is meant to be a human-readable summary of your webpage. This summary is often (note: not always) used by search engines and some social networks as the description or “snippet” that they display.

This summary is a vital part of the first impression that will determine if someone will click on your search result.

HERE ARE THREE TIPS FOR WRITING GOOD META DESCRIPTIONS:

Write for Humans

Too many people still treat their Meta descriptions as a dumping ground for their SEO keywords. Don't do this. Your Meta description isn't a significant ranking factor in 2018. It is, however, very important in determining whether someone clicks on and engages with your site. Like good ad copy, your Meta description should grab a searcher's interest and leave them wanting more.

Mind Your Length

Google currently limits display snippets to about 155 characters, after which they add an ellipsis (...). Try to keep your Meta description under this length, or make sure that the most important parts of your description happen before the cutoff.

Keep it Relevant

While you want to attract clicks, make sure that your description is relevant to your page's content. Tricking searchers into a click leads to high bounce rates and no long-term value. In many cases, if your description isn't relevant to the search or your content, search engines will simply overrule you and rewrite what they display.



TITLE TAG

Your Title tag not only serves as the page title displayed by web browsers, but is often used by search engines and social media sites as the headline for your page. Keywords in your Title tag do still seem to impact rankings in 2018, but like your Meta descriptions, I'd encourage you to write Title tags for humans and treat them as your first impression to a world that may not know your brand or your content.

HERE ARE THREE TIPS FOR WRITING HIGH-IMPACT TITLE TAGS:

Think Like a Reporter

Think of your Title tag like a headline, and don't bury the lede. Especially on the web, attention spans are short, and you have to help people quickly understand what your page is about and why they should care.

Focus on the Unique

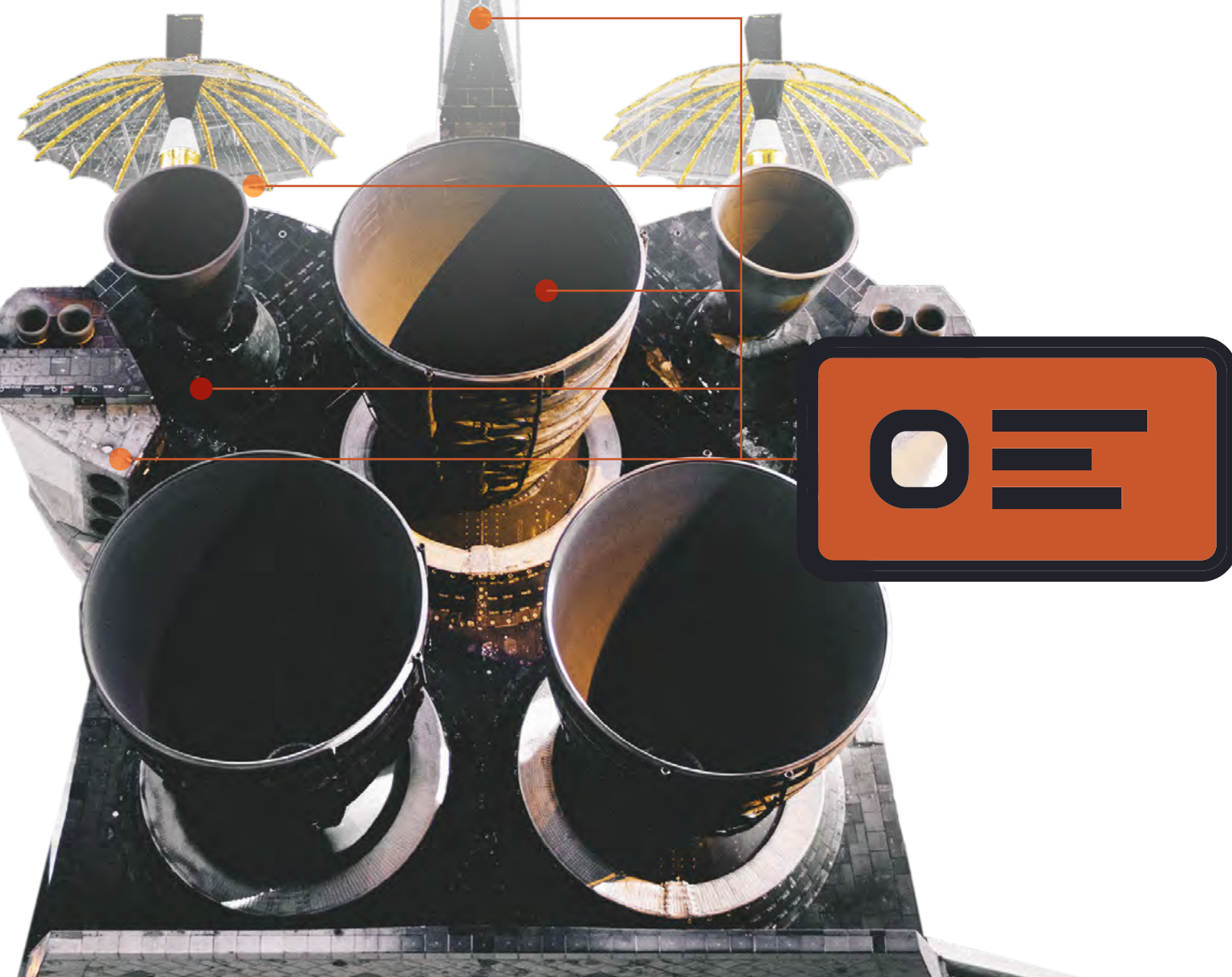
Front-load the most unique part of your title. If you have hundreds or thousands of products pages, and you start every Title tag with your brand name, product category, and subcategory, people will give up before they know which product your page is about.

Be Succinct

In addition to the problem of short attention spans, Google only displays about 50-60 characters of your Title tag. Get to the point quickly, or it's likely to get stranded behind the “...” and never be heard from again.

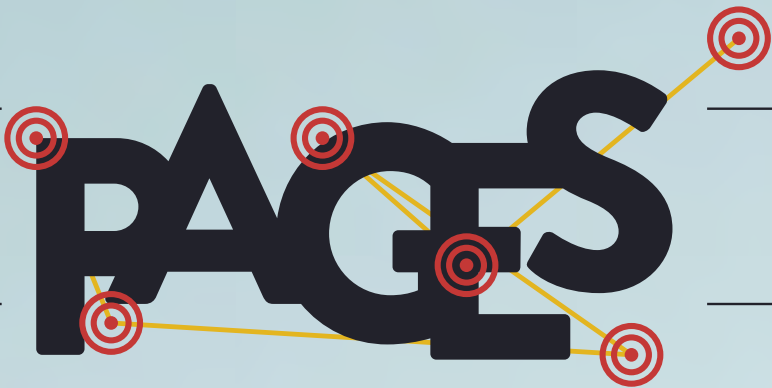
WRITE RESPONSIBLY

Meta tags are your webpage's face to the search world. If you stuff them with irrelevant nonsense, you're not going to achieve anything in 2018 but irritating potential customers. Write like a human, be relevant, and take the time to craft Meta descriptions and Title tags that represent your value proposition and leave people wanting more. 🍷



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ISSUE 3
2018



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<title>

AN SEO MAGAZINE

</title>

<body>

<H1> THE TECHNICAL SEO ISSUE </H1>

<meta> July 5, 2018 - This issue of *PAGES* explores technical **SEO**: search engine optimization techniques concerning the **technical** elements of a website, which improve the site's performance in **search**. </meta>

<content>	GOING META ON YOUR SEO <i>Dr. Peter Meyers</i> Marketing Scientist, Moz	DIAGNOSING TRAFFIC DROPS <i>Marie Haynes</i> Marie Haynes Consulting, Owner	STRUCTURED DATA <i>Alan Ibbett</i> Chief Information Officer, Diocese of Wollongong	</content>
	AN ANSWER YOU CAN'T IGNORE <i>Charlie Williams</i> SEO Strategist, Screaming Frog	RACE TO THE TOP <i>Wes Marsh</i> Director of Digital Marketing, SoloDev	SOLVING CRAWLER ISSUES <i>Nicholas Chimonas</i> Director of SEO, WTP Inc.	

</body>

</mag>



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FEATURING:
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MARIE HAYNES
WES MARSH
ALAN IBBETT
NICHOLAS CHIMONAS

004.

AS SEEN IN
Q4 2018

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

THE PAYOFF FROM AUDIENCE RESEARCH

- ZAINE CLARK -
Senior SEO Associate, Seer Interactive



OBSERVATION

While SEO is best categorized as a marketing discipline, most SEOs don't think of sitting down and actually talking with their client's customers. After all, most simply put, our job is to improve search engine visibility and rankings while increasing conversions. But can we really do our jobs if we assume we understand what search engine users are looking for, without having those conversations?

QUESTION

HYPOTHESIS

We have a different approach here at Seer Interactive. Although we do want to increase search visibility, we also want to make sure that we are drawing the right customers to our client's websites and solving their problems. One of the best ways to understand customers is to give them your time: sit down and talk with them.

PREDICTION

WHY SHOULD YOU DO AUDIENCE RESEARCH?

Keyword research is a great way to see what people are searching for and how they try to find it. Google even provides us with "People Also Ask" and "Related Searches," which are both great resources for finding what people are searching for and identifying intent. But do you want to know the greatest resource for understanding what people are searching for?

People. Once people tell you what they want to find, what they couldn't find, things they loved and things they hated, then it's time to perform your keyword research and craft your content strategy. In the field of new product development, gathering this data is the standard best practice — and it works! Why wouldn't we bring these practices into digital marketing?

INVESTING IN AUDIENCE RESEARCH

There are two types of investment to keep in mind when proposing audience research (whether internally, or to a client): time investment and financial investment.

TIME & FINANCIAL INVESTMENTS FOR AUDIENCE INTERVIEWS

As digital marketers, our clients pay us for our time, expertise, and direction. When you pitch interviewing your client's customers, you may receive some pushback regarding time and money. That makes sense. However, understanding exactly what the audience is searching for and providing it to them yields big returns.

Because it takes time to complete the interviews, compile your findings, then make sense of the interview responses, it costs money. Before you even start the interviews, you need permissions to record phone calls and screen shares. Then, you'll need to get a panel together (if applicable). After the interviews are finished, you'll need to distill down the interviews into a set of findings.

In my experience, interviewing can take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour per person, so if you want to interview 15 people, that's 7-15 extra hours of work to account for. And that doesn't include listening for a second time, re-watching the videos, and making sense of your findings.

As SEOs, do we really want to spend our time and our client's money interviewing people, analyzing our notes and comments, and then doing the research that goes into creating content? Is interviewing people going to help you reach that goal of increasing organic conversions by X%?

Absolutely we do. After all, these are the people that are searching and ultimately converting for our clients and determining our success as SEOs. So why wouldn't you want to hear from them?

TEST

THE PROCESS OF CONDUCTING AUDIENCE RESEARCH.

THE INTERVIEWS

To kick things off, you'll need to compile questions that will help you reach the goal of your research, followed by a list of individuals provided by your client (or your customers, if you are in-house) and start scheduling those interviews. It's often tough to take notes, be a good listener, and think of follow-up questions simultaneously, so I recommend getting permission to record the audio from the interviews and going back later to take notes.

It's important to avoid leading questions. We ask our clients' customers why they started searching, with the aim of identifying the initial pain point, what was going on in their lives at the time, who else was involved in the decision, and other important contextual details.

From that point, we hop on a screen share and have the interviewee walk us through their journey; we have them perform multiple searches and watch them as they go through the SERPs. We ask them what they were trying to find, what would have made the content they clicked on more trustworthy or more useful, what they do and don't like about the sites they found, and what those sites were missing. We also listen for comments like, "I wish the client site would have told me this," or "I was frustrated when I couldn't find..." and other responses that let us know something is missing. When content is "missing" for the searchers, you've found the golden ticket (assuming that it's a recurring issue, and not from only one interviewee). You'll want to understand why they type what they do, why they click on the results they choose, what makes them stay on the page, or why they bounce.

MAKING SENSE OF THE INTERVIEW DATA

When you begin looking at your notes from the interview responses, keep track of common themes you find. It's also a good idea to get a colleague to go through the responses as well and pull out any themes they notice. Focus on identifying the major pain points, what's missing that would help the customer through their journey, and even their post-purchase needs. Really dig in to identify what they are looking for, where they try to find it, and how you can get in front of them.

ANALYZE

RESULTS

THE RESULTS

From my experiences, what is learned from audience interviews can completely change your SEO strategy, and sometimes even the business strategy for your company or your clients. The best way I can share the impact of audience interviews is with a personal story:

Recently at Seer, a colleague and I went through this process for our client. We identified 7 new content opportunities that we would not have found through a content gap analysis.

The interviewees explained to us what they were looking for, but couldn't find any information about on the internet. Something that we noticed with this particular client was that searchers couldn't seem to find answers to some pretty low-funnel questions. We then created content related to these topics, which resulted in 4 new pages. These 4 low-funnel pages, after only being live for 2 months, have increased traffic year-over-year by over 9%, which is great! But we expect these numbers to climb as these pages are live for a longer period of time and begin to gain more authority.

We also made updates to existing pages that, as a result, have seen tremendous growth. The 10 pages that we made adjustments to have seen a combined total of 86% growth year-over-year and have sourced over 80% more new users year-over-year. We have also seen an increase in average ranking position from 21 down to 9.6, meaning that we are appearing more frequently on the first page of SERPs.

Our client was able to walk away from our research understanding their audience's pain points and how they are searching to better serve them via other channels such as PPC, Social, and more.

THE TAKEAWAYS

Although conducting audience interviews has associated costs, the payoff is well worth the time and money. After completing audience interviews, you will know your audience better than they know themselves. You will know what kind of content they are looking for, what would make them convert, and how they actually complete their search process. To those of us at Seer, that's priceless.

Or at least until we see an increase in transactions, revenue, or assisted conversions — then we can assign a monetary value to the process. ©

YOU'LL KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE BETTER THAN THEY KNOW THEMSELVES.

CONCLUSION



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VOLUME 1
ISSUE 4
2018

PAGES

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THE SEO ROI ISSUE

SEO MYTHBUSTING

Charles Taylor
SEO Manager, Verizon Fios

THE PAYOFF FROM AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Zaine Clark
Senior SEO Associate, Seer Interactive

MEASURING SEO RESULTS & ROI

Eric Enge
General Manager of Digital Marketing, Perficient Digital

THE RETURN ON SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Cory Collins
Strategy Development, Page One Power

LINK RECLAMATION

James Brockbank
Managing Director, Digitaloft

SITTING AT THE SAME TABLE

Theresa Navarra
Content Director, UiPath

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUICK WINS

Matt Vazquez
Conversational Marketing Specialist

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Q4-018

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FEATURING:

CHARLES TAYLOR

ZAINE CLARK

ERIC ENGE

CORY COLLINS

JAMES BROCKBANK

THERESA NAVARRA

MATT VAZQUEZ

005.

AS SEEN IN
Q1 2019

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

AUDIENCE

+

ALGORITHMS

HOW

TO

OPTIMIZE

YOUR

CONTENT

STRATEGY

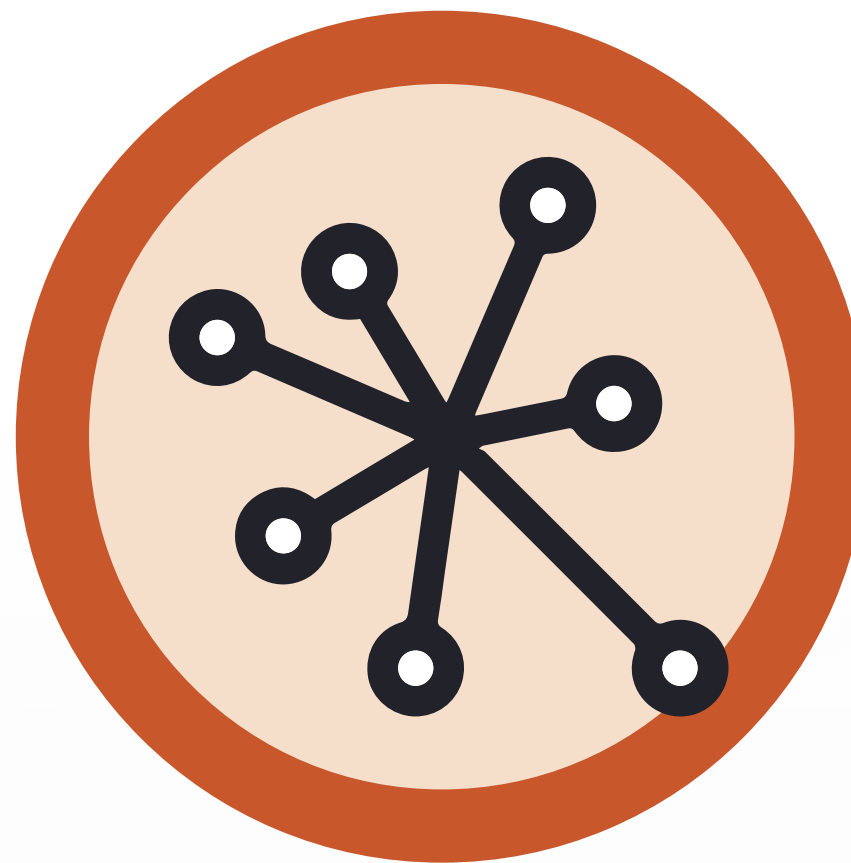
IN

2019

- JOELLE IRVINE -

Director of Marketing and Growth, Bookmark Content and Communications

ACCORDING TO A RECENT STUDY BY THE CONTENT MARKETING INSTITUTE, 91% OF B2B BRANDS AND 86% OF B2C BRANDS USE CONTENT MARKETING.



That's a lot of content being produced — and not all of it is good.

As marketers, we get bombarded with cold sales emails, follow-ups on those emails, sponsored LinkedIn messages, invitations to events, and newsletters — tons of newsletters (especially on Thursdays).

Realistically, we aren't reading all of the content we're seeing. And chances are, our prospective clients or customers are also missing out on relevant content we're producing. There's a vast sea of content on the web, now well over 100,000,000 gigabytes in size¹, and it grows by the minute.

Just as content marketers work to produce relevant content for their audiences, Google faces the challenge of determining which pieces of content are worthy of coveted top rankings.

Google has been making strides to improve their algorithm to filter the noise and present the most relevant and useful content for each query. In 2015, Google introduced E-A-T quality guidelines and has now stated that it is one of their top signals for page quality.

E-A-T stands for Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness.

E-A-T is especially important for sites and pages that are considered related to Your Money or Your Life (YMYL).

These pages include:

- Financial, medical, or legal information pages. Also articles providing advice.
- Shopping or financial transaction pages where users make purchases or pay bills.
- News articles or public/informational pages (e.g.: disaster response services, government programs, social services, news about important topics relating to international events, science, technology, etc.)
- Other topics, such as car safety and child adoption information, that the public relies on as being accurate and true.

EXPERTISE:

Content should be written by an expert in your industry, be useful, and add value to the reader.

AUTHORITATIVENESS:

Your audience should be able to trust that your content is accurate, reliable, and true. Authority can also come from your writers' credentials and the quality of the comments or reviews on your site.

TRUSTWORTHINESS:

At a very basic level, your site needs to be secure, with an SSL certificate, and abide by an easy-to-read privacy policy. Your audience needs to be able to trust the content and company information on your site.

SO HOW DO YOU ADAPT YOUR CONTENT STRATEGY TO ADDRESS THIS? HERE ARE FIVE TACTICS YOU CAN USE TO ENSURE YOU ARE PRODUCING HIGH-QUALITY CONTENT FOR GOOGLE'S QUALITY GUIDELINES, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY FOR YOUR AUDIENCE.

1. WRITE FOR HUMANS

If you're creating content to educate your audience and build trust, write with them in mind.

Start a conversation, keep your content straightforward, and provide takeaways. Content should be written in natural language, as if someone was speaking rather than writing, with minimal jargon. And if you must include buzzwords, explain them. Don't make assumptions about what your reader does or doesn't know.

Search engine algorithms are becoming smarter. At the same time, users expect more of technology. People are searching on-the-go, using voice assistants and mobile devices, and using natural language when making queries.

As of 2018, 52 percent of global online traffic was generated on mobile devices². It is also expected that 50 percent of search queries will be voice-based by 2020³.

Keep in mind that queries also exist beyond the search bar. Your audience may be using social media, image search, YouTube, and even eCommerce platforms to do their research. So, make sure you're creating and customizing content suitable to different audiences and platforms.

Either way, advancements in machine learning — combined with access to big data — impact user experience (UX) twofold: changing the way content is served up, and increasing user expectations.

This means we need to adapt the way we approach keyword research, and adjust the way we write our content accordingly. Think of keywords as topics, rather than long-tail keywords. Page titles should reflect what someone would ask out loud rather than a typed query.

It's always best to commission actual writers, instead of companies that use AI to mass-produce content. Hundreds of badly-written articles will not appeal to readers, or to Google, and will definitely not help your brand. Think about it: writers can provide perspective, expertise, and relate to your audience in a way that cannot be matched by a machine, even if it's a smart one.



TIPS & TOOLS:

Google Keyword Planner is useful for identifying search volume and determining topics, but here are other useful tools to optimize your content for mobile and voice search:

- **Google Trends** to see search trends over time.
- **Answer The Public** for examples of questions using natural language.
- **KeywordShitter** mines Google autocomplete, providing infinite results.
- **People also search for... & Related searches** in Google search results.
- **Search Console** to see search queries that people use to come to your site.
- **Q&As from Google My Business** will show you what your customers are asking.
- **Twinword Ideas** is a visual latent semantic indexing (LSI) tool, to help you find related words for your content (and potentially replace your thesaurus).

2. OPTIMIZE FOR MACHINES

In 2018, Google rolled out several algorithm updates. Most notably, mobile-first indexing, the mobile speed update, Chrome security warnings, and the Medic core update in August. The commonality here is the user.

These are user-first updates, improving the mobile experience, user safety, and the quality of content in the search results.

Balancing your high-quality content with technical SEO best practices is key for an optimal UX. At a very high level, site speed, security, responsive design, and implementation of structured data are key for top performance. Here are the elements you'll want to prioritize and address:

Speed

You need a fast site if you hope to rank. This could involve upgrading your server, as well as enabling caching and compression on your site. Defer render-blocking JavaScript and CSS. Create a canonical AMP version of your site. Each of these tactics will help your site load faster on mobile.

Security

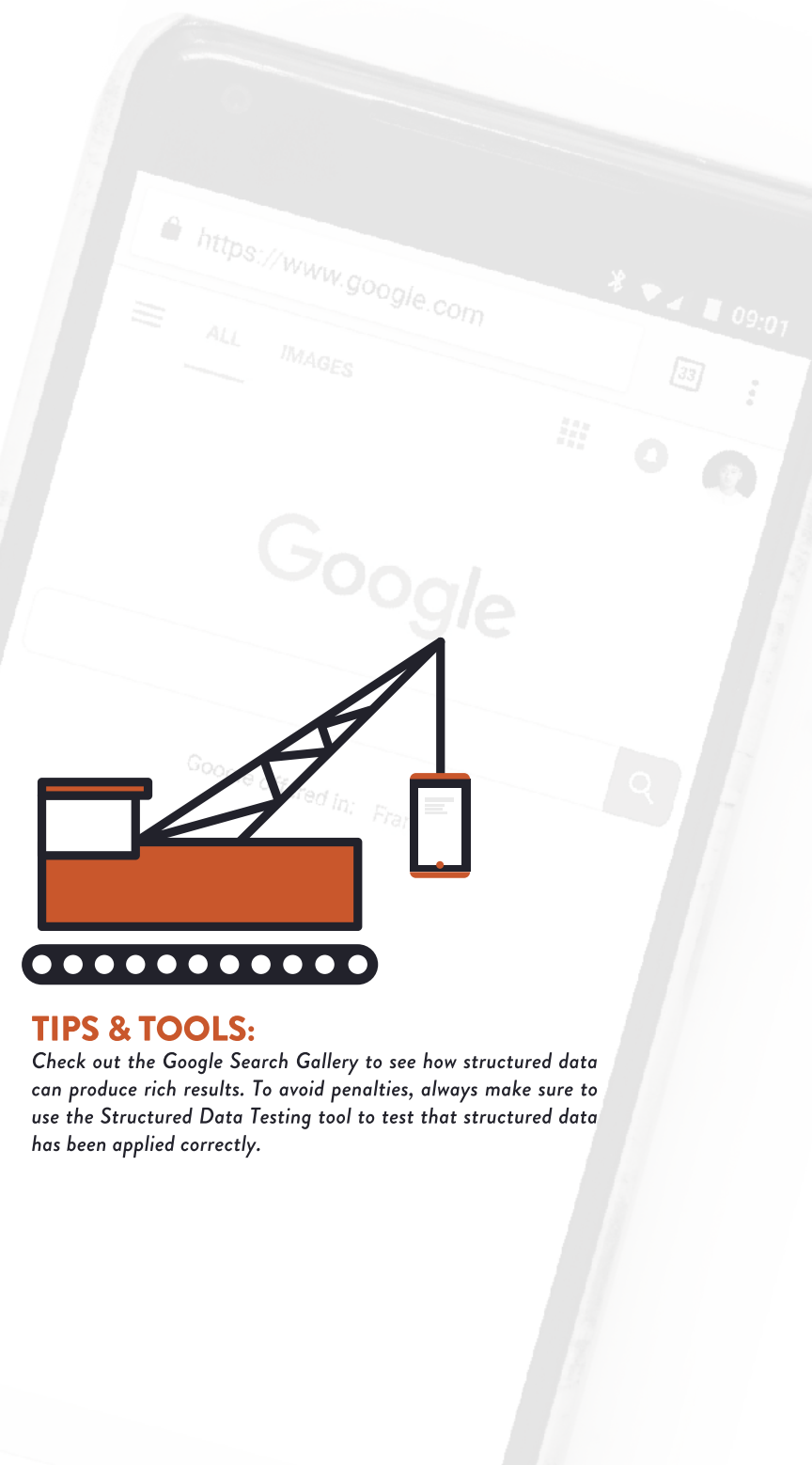
Site security is more salient than ever in 2019. Add an SSL certificate to make your site secure (HTTPS) and validate that there are no security issues in Google Search Console.

Responsiveness

Your site should be designed with a fluid grid that adapts based on screen size. Design mobile-first, and then adapt the design for desktop. Include larger fonts, scalable images, and a mobile menu.

Structured Data

Add structured data on your site to help Google (and other search engines) categorize and index the content on your site properly, so that it serves up the best results for each query. If implemented correctly, your page(s) could qualify for rich results. A few examples include the knowledge panel, rich cards, videos, ratings, and most importantly, featured snippets, where voice assistants usually pull their results from.



TIPS & TOOLS:

Check out the Google Search Gallery to see how structured data can produce rich results. To avoid penalties, always make sure to use the Structured Data Testing tool to test that structured data has been applied correctly.

3. THINK ABOUT FORMATS

Quality content is all about UX.

If your customer has even one bad experience with your brand, they may not come back. Your site design and overall experience needs to be on point. All visual assets should be on brand so that your audience recognizes them as your content. Assets should also be created for mobile-first and optimized using alt attributes and metadata to ensure they can be found using image and video search.

Here are a few examples:

Images

Images should have the right balance of resolution and file size. Aim to make them as light as possible without losing quality. Images should be formatted to adapt to different screen sizes, device types, and for rich results (snippets). Always remember to include alt images and image titles — image search is going to be huge this year!

Videos

Spend a little more time and budget to plan for multiple formats including horizontal, vertical, and square (for specific social media platforms and website requirements). Add music, but make sure that the video can be watched without sound. Include subtitles and title screens. When deciding on the length, think about your audience and the purpose of the video. Add meta descriptions to help people find your videos on YouTube and Vimeo.

Infographics

Interactive or animated infographics have the best UX, especially on mobile. However, sometimes you may be up against budget constraints, or requests to repurpose content that was originally designed for print. When this happens, create a mobile version that's long and skinny, with increased font size (18 to 20 pts) that can easily be viewed on mobile.

MORE THAN HALF OF PEOPLE SAY THEY LOOK POORLY ON BRANDS WITH MOBILE SITES THAT ARE NOT DESIGNED FOR USE ON A SMARTPHONE.

4 Insights Into How Shoppers Use Apps and Mobile Sites | Google, 2017



TIPS & TOOLS:

Have you heard of Adobe Spark? It's a great tool to help marketers create visual assets in a plug-and-play interface. It's useful for creating social media posts and videos without a designer. [Editor's note: But you should hire a designer whenever possible!]

ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS:

Include closed-captioning for the hearing impaired. Educate yourself on color combinations to keep your content accessible for people with colorblindness.

4. CONSENT & COMMUNICATION

Last year, the EU rolled out **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**, requiring everyone who communicates with Europeans to adopt new privacy policies.

Canada has similar laws, and I wouldn't be surprised if the rest of the world soon followed.

As the Director of Marketing and Growth at a global content marketing and communications company, I understand how much impact this can have on your business. We took the opportunity last spring to reevaluate our privacy policy and fine print. And although our newsletter subscribers had consented previously, we did a major cleanup to remove contacts with low engagement. We made sure to reach out to them by email before unsubscribing them.

By reducing our newsletter distribution list by 23 percent, the open rate increased by 22 percent and click rate increased by 27 percent.

Even though our list shrunk significantly, the silver lining is that our engagement stats increased, as our list now consists of people who are interested in reading our content. This may be a hard sell for brands that care mostly about reach and the optics of a large distribution list. But it could be a selling point to companies that are more interested in connecting with their niche audience.

It is in every brand's best interest to introduce stronger privacy and data protection protocols for their business and for their customers. It is imperative to create clear opportunities for customers to opt-in or provide consent to receive communications, as well as easy ways of opting-out. This is part of building strong trust relationships with your audience.



TIPS & TOOLS:

Your fine print and privacy policy should be clear and concise. It shouldn't be excessively long, and it should be written so that anyone can understand it. Aim to use the same tone of voice as your main content, and whenever possible, use examples.

+ 5. FREQUENCY: LESS IS MORE

If you're struggling to meet your social media schedule, it could be time to rethink your content strategy.

If that means only posting once or twice a week, do that. Use your data to find the best day and time of day to post, and then align it to create a content calendar that makes sense for your business and resources.

The cadence of your content is also important. The ratio of curated, promotional, and original content you publish will help establish trust with your audience. Original and curated content lets you showcase your brand's expertise and authority, while the promotional pieces will give your prospects clear and relevant calls-to-action relating to your recent campaigns.

There are several different ratios that brands use. Generally, it is a best practice to share more of the curated and original pieces, and less of the promotional posts. The best approach for your brand can be found through testing.

Newsletters are an easy way to share your best work. However, if you are currently sharing all of your content by email, you're doing something wrong. Depending on your business, reducing the distribution frequency of your newsletter can provide several benefits, including:

- Reduction of clutter in your readers' inboxes.
- Providing you with time to check your stats and share only the best performing posts.
- Providing you with time to segment your list and share targeted content based on your readers' interests.
- Impress your readers with really amazing content that they will love and be inspired to share.



TIPS & TOOLS:

Spend less time creating content and more time distributing it, analyzing results, and fine-tuning your strategy. Don't post anything and everything, just post your best stuff. Take a look at your stats to see what your audience likes, shares, and engages with. Use that data to refine your content for future campaigns.

+ RECAP

Not only will 2019 be the year of high-quality content, it will also be the year where content is created for the way people search, whether it be on mobile devices, voice assistants, image search, communities, reviews, social media platforms, or YouTube.

By using data to better understand your consumer, what interests them, and where they live online, you can create content specific to their needs and customize it for the channels they visit most often. These tactics will not only extend reach and increase visibility, but also lead to credibility, engagement, and loyalty.

The gap between what appeals to readers and what pleases search engines is quickly narrowing. Google's E-A-T is a perfect example of that.

It may seem that following these guidelines will be time-consuming, but it doesn't have to be. Remember, less is more. Save time and resources by creating content that is of a higher caliber at a reduced frequency. And, spend those extra hours on your strategy, analysis, adapting your content to various formats and distributing your content on the right channels. 🎯

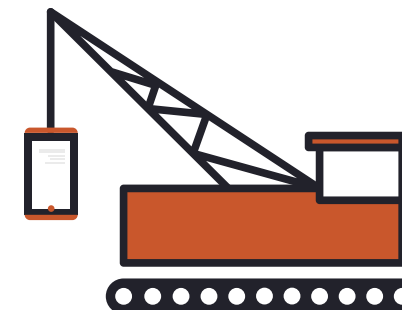
Have you got your audience tuned in and algorithms trusting your site? Let Joelle know on Twitter:

@joelleirvine
@BookmarkContent



CITATIONS:

1. Google Data, 2018
2. Statista, 2018
3. ComScore, 2017

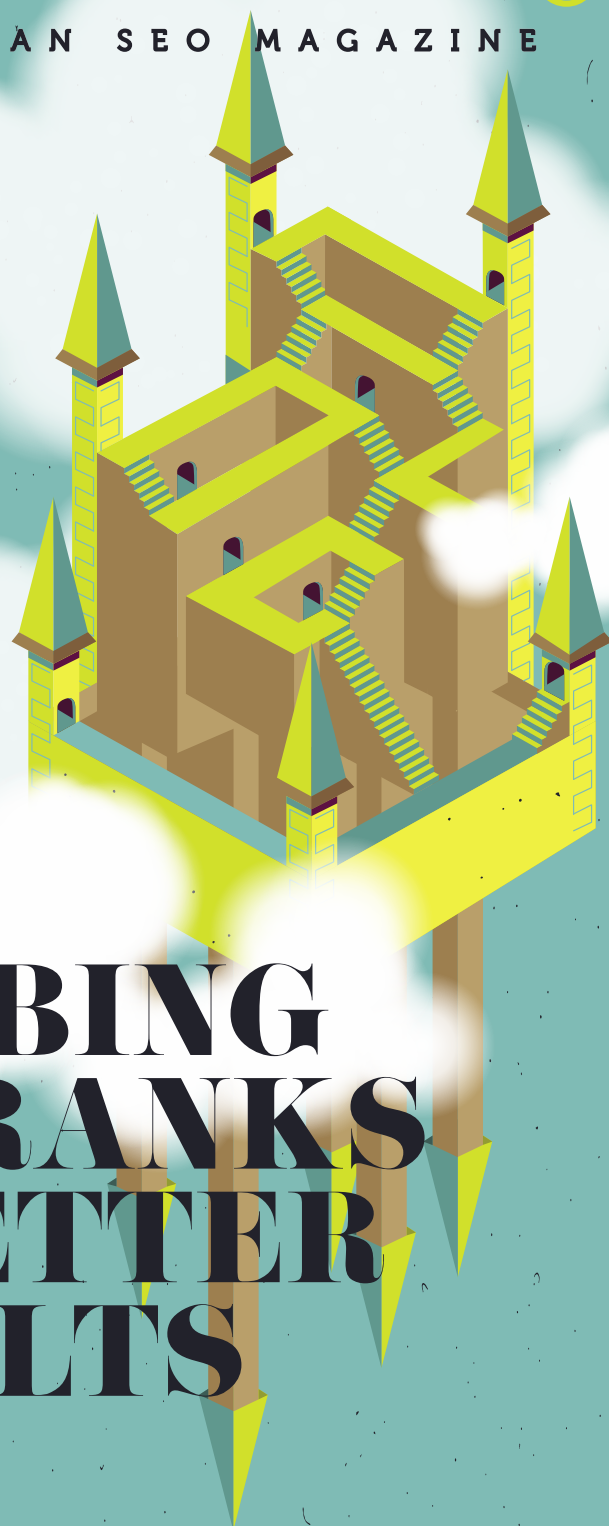


VOLUME 2
ISSUE 1
2019

PAGES

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CLIMBING THE RANKS TO BETTER RESULTS

EXTENDING YOUR REACH

Vince Nero
Content Marketing Manager,
Siege Media

AUDIENCE & ALGORITHMS

Joelle Irvine
Director of Marketing and Growth,
Bookmark Content and Communications

SEO MYTHBUSTING PT. II

Charles Taylor
SEO Manager,
Verizon Fios

THE ULTIMATE SEO COMMODITY

Greg Jacobs
Senior SEO Strategist,
Found

SITE AUDITING ODDITIES

Mary Wilson
Technical SEO Specialist,
Page One Power

GOOGLE MY BUSINESS 101

Ryan Joos
Senior Marketing Strategist,
Nifty Marketing

INTEGRATE SOCIAL & SEO

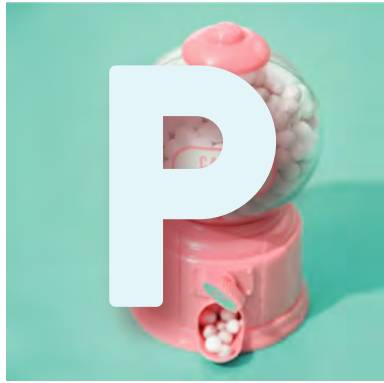
Kristen Vaughn
Associate Director of Online Marketing,
KoMarketing

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Q1-019

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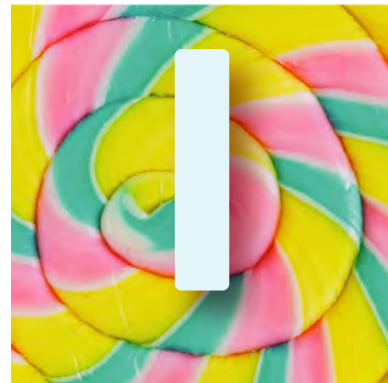
FEATURING:
VINCE NERO
JOELLE IRVINE
CHARLES TAYLOR
GREG JACOBS
MARY WILSON
RYAN JOOS
KRISTEN VAUGHN



006.

AS SEEN IN
Q2 2019

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

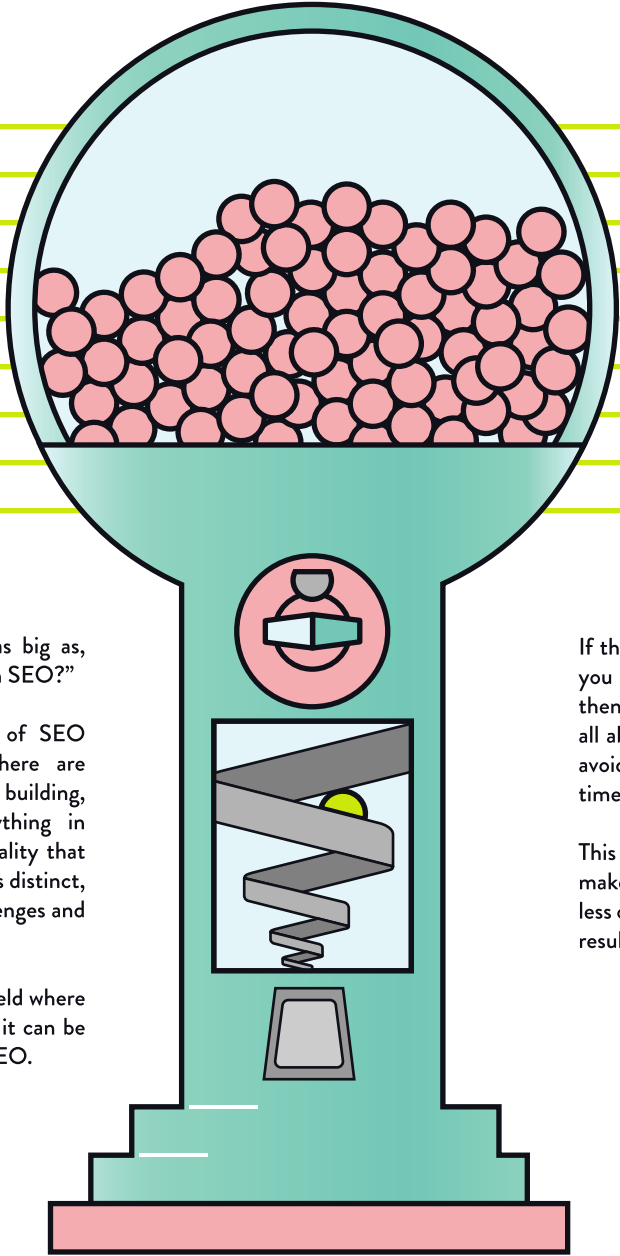


SEO TASKS FOR MAXIMUM RESULTS



- BRITNEY MULLER -
Senior SEO Scientist, Moz

“WHERE SHOULD OUR COMPANY START WITH SEO?”



How do you answer a question as big as, “Where should our company start with SEO?”

There are, quite literally, hundreds of SEO activities you could perform — there are on-page optimization tactics, link building, technical improvements, and everything in between. Layer on top of that the reality that every website, industry, and business is distinct, and carries its own unique set of challenges and opportunities.

With so many possible activities in a field where one size doesn’t fit all, it’s no wonder it can be difficult to know where to start with SEO.

If the thought of these endless possibilities has you overwhelmed — don’t worry, it’s normal — then it’s time to prioritize. SEO prioritization is all about choosing your tasks wisely so you can avoid spinning your wheels and spending all your time on projects that don’t move the needle.

This guide will help you select the tasks that’ll make the most impact, so not only will you be less overwhelmed, but you’ll be maximizing your results as well!

START WITH YOUR GOALS

Long before you touch a title tag, edit a landing page, or add structured data markup, you need to identify your goals. In other words, before you start any SEO initiative, you need to be able to answer the question, “What are our business goals, and how is the website being used to achieve them?”

Remember, SEO performance is not an end unto itself. It’s a vehicle to help your business accomplish its goals. Any SEO tactics that are divorced from your goals will only produce vanity metrics, rather than real growth.

If you haven’t identified your goals yet, now’s the time! Here are some tips to get you started.

MAKE SURE YOUR GOALS ARE S-M-A-R-T!
Goals should always be *specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound*.

CREATE STRETCH GOALS
Set goals outside your comfort zone. While you can share your “achievable” goals with your clients, setting a personal stretch goal can actually give you the motivation you need to deliver above-and-beyond what was promised.

SHARE YOUR GOALS
Don’t keep your goals bottled up! Make your goals tangible by writing them down, and hold yourself accountable by sharing them with others.

IDENTIFY KEY PAGES

Do you know which pages on your site are driving the most conversions? Once you know your goals, it’s important to identify which pages on your website most directly contribute toward achieving those goals.

For example, if you have a goal to increase organic leads by 10 percent over the next six months, you’ll want to identify which pages have conversion forms.

For the sake of simplicity, let’s say that there’s only one of these pages on your site — the contact page. Not only do you want to make sure the contact page is easy to use, but you’ll also want to figure out what paths your site visitors take to get to the contact page, and optimize those common paths as well. To do that, check out the Reverse Goal Paths report in Google Analytics.

An example of a common path might be that a visitor first lands on your site on a blog post, perhaps one written specifically to rank for target keywords relevant to what your business offers. From there, they might click over to a service page or your “about” page. After reviewing some mid-funnel content about your business, they navigate to the contact page and complete a form.

PRIORITIZING IMPROVEMENTS TO YOUR CONVERSION PAGES, AND THE PAGES THAT COMMONLY ASSIST CONVERSIONS, IS A SUREFIRE WAY YOU CAN USE SEO TO ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS.



CHECK FOR TECHNICAL ROADBLOCKS

Even the best pages won't achieve your goals if technical errors are holding your site back. That's why it's critical to uncover these issues from the get-go. You can think of this step as the regular maintenance your website needs in order to avoid breaking down.

While you could check a lot of things manually, it saves a ton of time to perform this step with help from a site crawl tool. I recommend Moz Pro, Screaming Frog, and DeepCrawl, but there are plenty on the market that could assist you in this area.

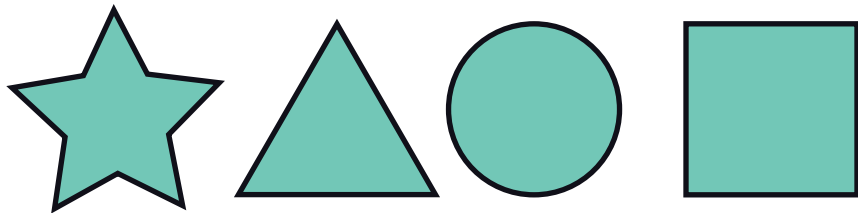
If you're not familiar, here's an overview of what a site crawl tool does.

SITE CRAWL TOOLS

- Scan all the pages on your site
- Collect data on those pages
- Organize that data into reports
- Alert you to technical issues

An example error you could discover during an audit could be that your important pages have a `<meta name="robots" content="noindex">` tag, essentially saying that you don't want those pages listed in search results!

As important as this step is, there's a very real possibility that you will come away with hundreds or even thousands of issues you need to address, leaving you overwhelmed yet again. But fear not! The next step is all about how to manage your time effectively.



MANAGE YOUR TIME EFFECTIVELY

When you have a huge list of items on your to-do list, it's easy for everything to seem like it carries equal weight — and when everything is a priority, nothing really is.

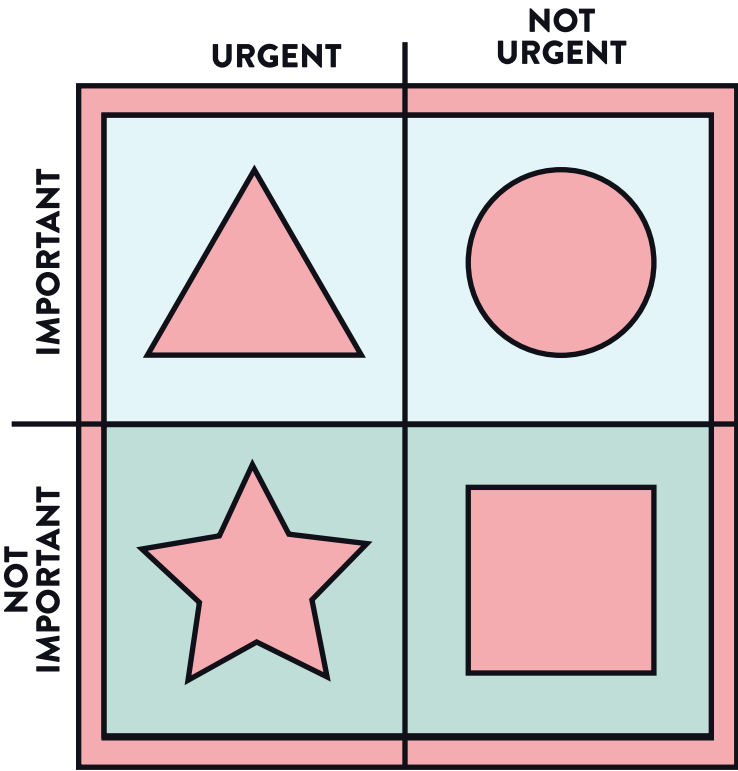
You can avoid this trap by implementing Stephen Covey's time management grid.

There will always be urgent tasks that require your immediate attention, but always remember to set aside time for those important but non-urgent tasks! Otherwise, you'll always be reacting, and never proactively working on achieving your goals.

But how do you decide what's important and what's not important?

Remember your key pages? Now that you've identified your conversion pages, as well as the most popular paths visitors take to get there, you can prioritize technical issues by determining whether or not they're affecting these critical pages.

You can also prioritize tasks according to the total number of issues in each category. Sometimes volume is a great indicator of importance.



Stephen Covey is the author of "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People". Covey's system makes use of four different quadrants that allow you to prioritize tasks in relation to their importance and urgency, helping you to decide whether you need to address a task immediately or if you can postpone it. - planetofsuccess.com

ANALYZE RESULTS & COMMUNICATE OFTEN

If you're performing SEO on a business's website (as opposed to your personal website), it's critical to be transparent with your progress and results, and communicate those things often. That type of communication will naturally foster a sense of trust with your boss, your client, or other website stakeholders. Without that trust, you may not be given the opportunity to see your SEO tasks through to completion.

Frequently analyzing results will also allow you to see which optimizations are performing well and deserve further investment, and which initiatives you may need to reverse course. Seeing what's performing (or not) can make it much easier to set and prioritize future tasks.

When analyzing and reporting on results, just remember to pick KPIs (key performance indicators) that measure your specific SEO actions. Each type of action will have different KPIs, so choose appropriately! Be sure you can demonstrate how the results get you closer to achieving your goals. Metrics that aren't tied to goals are just vanity metrics.

Last of all, know your audience. Take your boss or client's unique personality into consideration, and create a communication and reporting strategy that's tailored to them. Speak their language and stay focused on what's important to them.

Getting started with SEO can seem daunting, but if search is an important channel for your business, it's worthwhile.

Once essential optimizations have been made, you can focus on taking a more proactive approach to SEO. In the long term, you'll be able to expand your SEO strategy beyond tackling implementation. This might include initiatives like integrating more closely with your content marketing team, utilizing organic search data to inform UX, and undertaking off-page optimizations, just to name a few.

But if you've been wondering where you should begin, now you know — start with the tasks that are uniquely important to your website!

Armed with these prioritization tips, you'll be ready to squash that overwhelmed feeling and get to work on the SEO activities that'll make the biggest impact for your business. ☺

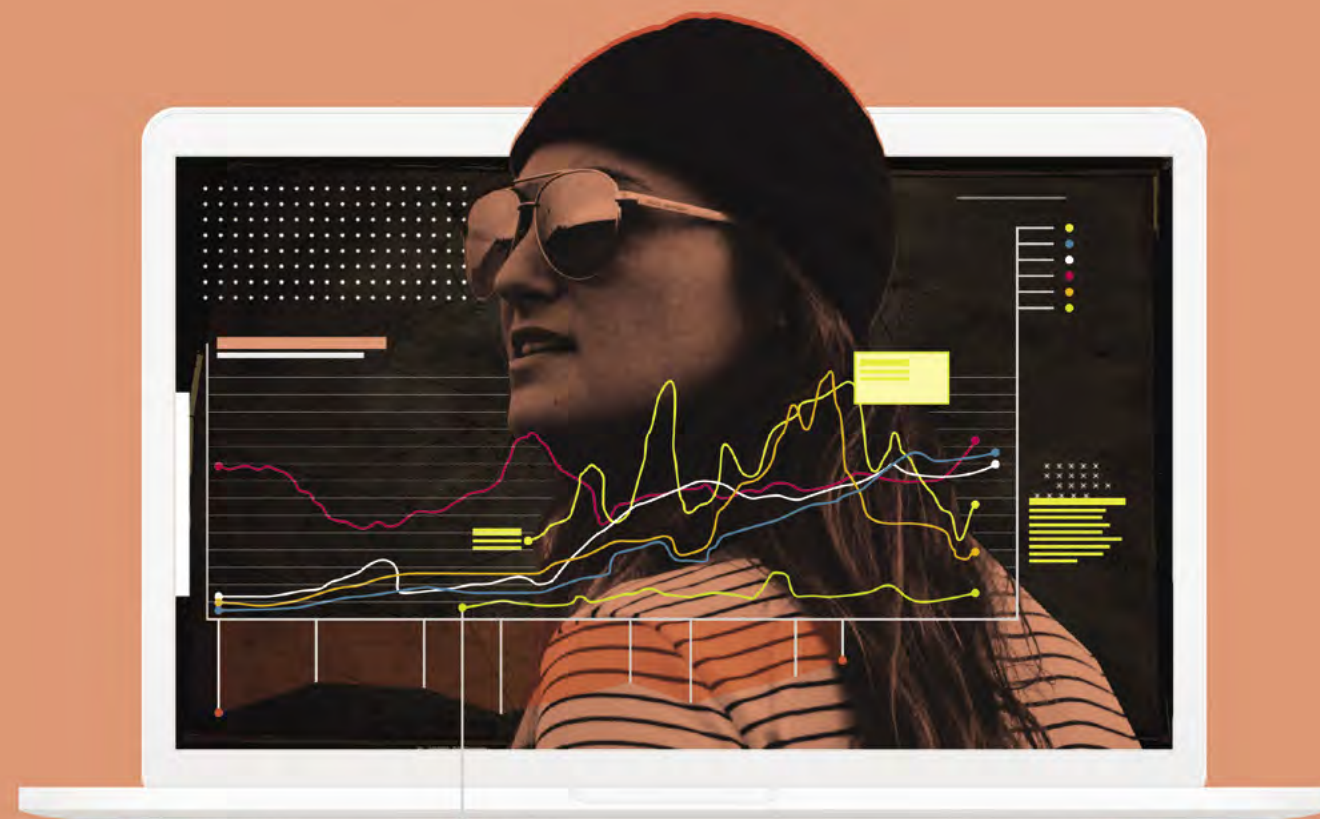


VOLUME 2
ISSUE 2
2019

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THE **SEARCH** IN ALL OF US.

PRIORITIZING SEO TASKS FOR MAXIMUM RESULTS

Britney Muller
Senior SEO Scientist, Moz

SEARCH IN CHINA: AN INTRO TO SEO FOR BAIDU

Tania Lobo
Content Specialist, Digital Crew

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR CONTENT STRATEGY

Julia McCoy
CEO, Express Writers

BE THE BEST ANSWER: APPLYING SEARCH INTENT INSIGHTS

Ronell Smith
Content Strategy Consultant

PRESIDENT TRUMP & BIAS IN THE CODE

Charles Taylor
SEO Manager, Verizon Fios

BRINGING SEARCH MARKETING TO UNIVERSITIES

David Schulhof
CEO, Red Hot Penny

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Q2-019

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FEATURING:
BRITNEY MULLER
TANIA LOBO
JULIA MCCOY
RONELL SMITH
CHARLES TAYLOR
DAVID SCHULHOF

007.

AS SEEN IN
Q3 2019

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

SEO MYTHBUSTING

HEADER TAGS & HIERARCHIES

- CHARLES TAYLOR -
SEO Manager, Verizon Fios

*We test not simply
because we enjoy it; we
test because it informs us.*

Tests grant us insight into how the Google algorithm works and on what we should, and more importantly, should not, be focusing our energies. Tests also allow us to make the case for which best SEO practices to implement in the early stages of a project. Without concrete evidence, why should project managers grant us SEOs a seat at the table? Their job is to get a project accomplished as quickly and efficiently as possible. The more stakeholders involved, the more complicated the work, and more slowly a project is completed.

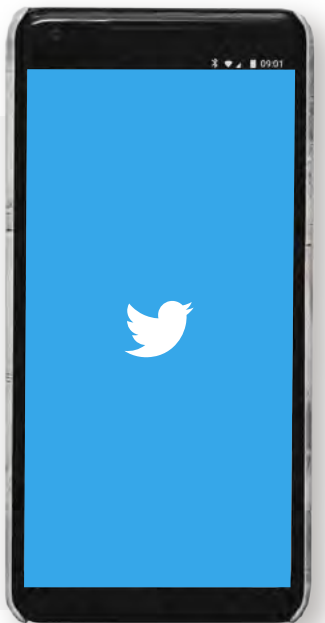
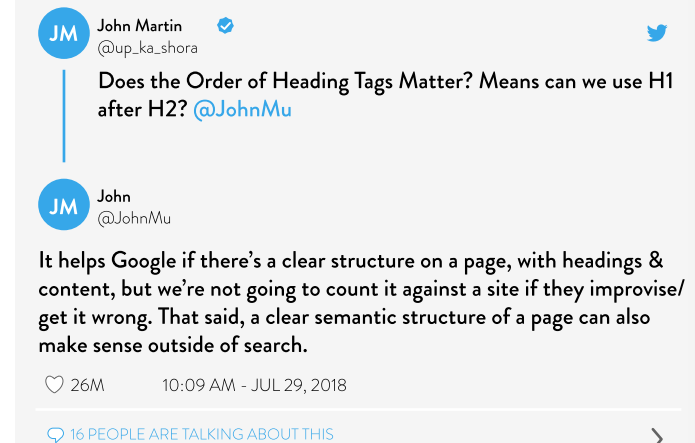
Just recently, I was speaking with my UX team and page editors to explain the importance of a good hierarchical structure using header tags (i.e., H1, H2, H3, etc.). One of the members pointed to a tweet John Mueller had posted last year, implying that placement of header tags on a page is not a ranking factor. It was the coder's belief that Google can "figure it out," and SEO doesn't need to be involved in page design.

After reading the tweet myself, the idea that Google does not need any guidance is not particularly what I took away, but I can see how someone could be left with that impression. This takes us back to one of the key purposes of testing: if we want to be included in the project planning phases of site or page development, we need to be able to prove the value of SEO with data. Lucky for us, we can run tests to show how the search engine will react to different kinds of page structures.

Proving that structure matters is the basis of this quarter's tests. As always, there are dozens of possible ways we could tackle this subject. I ultimately ended up creating seven variations of this test.

THE QUESTION

**DOES SITE HEADER STRUCTURE MATTER
TO IMPROVE SITE RANKINGS?**



THE TESTS

Test 1:

Testing whether the presence of an unoptimized H1 tag is a ranking factor. I see this as establishing a base argument for using H1 tags.

Test 2 & 3:

Test whether the position of the unoptimized H1 tag on a page is a factor when no other header tags exist. Does Google care about H1 tags if no other tags are being used?

Test 4 & 5:

Test whether the position of the unoptimized H1 tag on a page is a factor when H2 header tags are also present. Does Google care about proper usage of H1 tags if other tags are in place?

Test 6 & 7:

Test whether the position of the unoptimized H1 tag is a factor when a complete page hierarchy is in place — specifically H2s and H3s are also on the page. Does Google expect you to order them properly?

TEST #1

I set up seven identical pages with a shared fake keyword — one for which there are no results when you search for it in Google. Each page had four paragraphs (using <p> tags), and above each paragraph, plus one at the end, was a single word wrapped in a <p> tag itself. Those single word <p> tags were my placeholders for future header tags. I placed random English in all the paragraphs and published the seven identical pages. After the rankings for the fake keyword settled, I took the middle ranking page (the page ranking #4 out of 7) and swapped the initial header tag placeholder from <p> to <h1>.

Then, I waited. To my surprise, the page never really jumped or moved significantly. Could it be? Does Google not care about H1 tags as much as I thought?

TEST #2 & #3

After the initial test result, I set up two more sets of seven pages, each set with its own fake keyword. Using random English words, I created the two sets of pages so that each set contained identical copy. The pages contained header tag placeholders before each paragraph, plus one at the end.

I published the pages, and waited for them to be indexed and for the rankings to settle. Once the rankings settled, I adjusted the middle ranking page (4th position out of 7) within each set. In test #2, I swapped the central header tag placeholder from <p> to <h1>. In test #3, I replaced the last header tag placeholder from <p> to <h1>.

After waiting a week or so the results were in — and very interesting. In test set #2, I'd added an H1 tag to the middle of the page: the same amount of text was both above and below the H1 tag. This page's ranking did not move.

In test set #3, I'd added an H1 tag to the very bottom of the page. All page copy was above the H1, none was below it. This page dropped to the bottom of the rankings decisively and immediately, and it never fluctuated.

I found the results of the three tests a little perplexing. The structure of the page did not seem to matter that much, but there is a way to “do it wrong.” Google's algorithm seemed forgiving of pages that did not have an H1 at the very beginning of the content, but clearly did not like it at the very end. My initial thought was maybe this was because I had only used an H1; there were no other tags, like H2 or H3. So, I decided to run a version of the last two tests (test #2 and test #3) but instead of placeholders using <p>, there would be <h2> tags instead.

Control Pages

Diagram showing five identical control pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <p>tag placeholder and followed by a <p>tag placeholder at the end.

Test #1 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <p>tag placeholder and followed by a <h1>tag placeholder at the end.

DOES GOOGLE NOT CARE ABOUT H1 TAGS AS MUCH AS I THOUGHT?

Control Pages

Diagram showing five identical control pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <p>tag placeholder and followed by a <p>tag placeholder at the end.

Test #2 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <p>tag placeholder and followed by a <h1>tag placeholder in the middle of the page.

Test #3 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <p>tag placeholder and followed by a <h1>tag placeholder at the bottom of the page.

However, with the H1 tag placed at the bottom of the page, the page immediately dropped to the bottom of the rankings and stayed there.

I FOUND THE RESULTS OF THE THREE TESTS PERPLEXING. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PAGE DID NOT SEEM TO MATTER THAT MUCH, BUT THERE IS A WAY TO DO IT WRONG.

TEST #4 & #5

I set up two more sets of seven pages each; like the previous tests, each had a unique fake keyword. Using random English words, I created the two sets of pages so that each set contained identical copy. Also, just as in the other tests, the pages contained header tag placeholders before each paragraph, plus one at the end. However, this time, I wrapped the placeholders in an <h2> tag.

I published the pages, and waited for them to be indexed and the rankings to settle. Once the rankings settled, I adjusted the middle ranking page within each set. In test #4, I swapped the central header tag placeholder from <h2> to <h1>. In test #5, I replaced the last header tag placeholder from <h2> to <h1>

After waiting a week or so, the results were in. In test set #4, I swapped the middle H2 for an H1. So now, we had two H2s and two paragraphs above and below the H1. The page ranking wiggled a little, but never jumped to the top or bottom of the rankings. I suspect this was SERP “noise.”

In test set #5, I added an H1 tag to the very bottom of the page. Four H2 tags and all page copy was above the H1; nothing was below it. This page dropped to the bottom of the rankings initially, but often moved up one or two positions, only to drop again. Like test #3, I am going to call this a negative move and chalk up these minor movements to SERP “noise” as I saw in test #4.

Now is a good time to mention the occasional challenges when testing. I started these tests in March, when Google began running some kind of algorithm update. This caused me all kinds of trouble. Initially, the pages were not indexed. Usually, I can get pages indexed within a couple days, but this time it took at least a couple of weeks. Then, after the pages were indexed, it took another couple weeks for the rankings to settle. Interestingly enough though, after I made adjustments to the test pages, there was little fluctuation, except for the last set. I suspect this was due more to timing than any other factor. One of the many challenges you can face while testing!

Control Pages

Diagram showing five identical control pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <h2>tag placeholder and followed by a <h2>tag placeholder at the end.

Test #4 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <h2>tag placeholder and followed by a <h1>tag placeholder in the middle of the page.

Test #5 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <h2>tag placeholder and followed by a <h1>tag placeholder at the bottom of the page.

PART OF BEING A GOOD TESTER IS TO CONSTANTLY QUESTION YOUR METHODS AND LOOK FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE.

TEST #6 & #7

I wasn't exactly satisfied by these results, so I decided to develop two more final tests. This time, the pages had a full header tag hierarchy implemented, according to the theoretical best practice for using these tags. I set up two sets of seven pages each, just like the other tests, using random English words and a fake keyword. Unlike the previous tests, the pages contained a standard header tag hierarchy: H1 at the top, three paragraphs preceded by H2 tags, and an H3 tag at the very bottom of the page.

I published the page sets and then waited for them to be indexed and for the rankings to settle. Once the rankings settled, I adjusted the 4th ranking page within each set. In test #6, I swapped the H1 tag and the second H2 tag: the page now had two H2 tags at the top, followed by an H1, then one more H2 tag, and lastly, an H3 at the end of the page. This hierarchy is out of order from best practices, which should, in theory, hurt the page's ranking. In test #7, I swapped the H1 with the H3 tag at the end, making this page's hierarchy completely out of order.

After a couple weeks of fluctuations, the rankings finally solidified. As expected, both of the variations dropped to the bottom of the rankings. Google's algorithm clearly did not like the page structure being “out of order.”

Control Pages

Diagram showing five identical control pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <h1>tag placeholder at the top, followed by three paragraphs preceded by <h2>tag placeholders, and followed by a <h3>tag placeholder at the bottom.

Test #6 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <h2>tag placeholder at the top, followed by a <h1>tag placeholder, then one more <h2>tag placeholder, and followed by a <h3>tag placeholder at the bottom.

With the H1 out of order in this test, the page fell to the bottom of the rankings.

Test #7 Variation

Diagram showing five identical test pages. Each page contains five paragraphs, each preceded by a <h3>tag placeholder at the top, followed by three paragraphs preceded by <h2>tag placeholders, and followed by a <h1>tag placeholder at the bottom.

The same was true of test #7, having the H1 at the bottom and completely out of order, the page found the bottom of the rankings.

THE RESULTS

So can we take anything away from these tests? I would say yes, it did yield some interesting clues, just not the ones I expected. The mere presence of an H1 tag does not seem to help a page rank better. Placing content above your H1 does not seem to negatively affect your rankings either. With that said, you can “do it wrong” if you place the H1 tag at the very bottom of the page; that clearly was a negative factor. In addition, if the page has a fully developed hierarchy, the algorithm seems sensitive to the order as well.

Therefore, John Mueller’s tweet was somewhat accurate but also did not tell the whole story. This is how myths get started and can easily confuse those not focused on practicing SEO in their everyday work. The belief that Google can “figure it out” is true only if your page does not have full structure. While there does seem to be a right and wrong way to structure the page, Google is also flexible.

Too often, SEOs present themselves in a mystical fashion, and this causes some to be suspicious and exclude us from important planning sessions. We can use a robust testing process to illustrate these nuances to designers and developers and earn our seat at the planning table. We can use our knowledge to help inform the process, but not hijack it. Like a good lawyer, we can use our knowledge to keep designers and coders out of trouble, without needing to place heavy directives on the team and slow down the project. 🕒



Charles keeps us on our toes by testing assumptions about search. Give him a follow on Twitter here: [@CharlesHTaylor](https://twitter.com/CharlesHTaylor)



VOLUME 2
ISSUE 3
2019

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AN SEO MAGAZINE

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Searching the SEAS OF SEO

A QUICK GUIDE TO SITE ARCHITECTURE

Sloan Roseberry
Content Marketing, TSheets

AN INTERVIEW WITH AN AUDITOR

Casey Markee
Founder, Media Wyse Consultancy

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN DESIGN & SEO

Jake Smith
Content Strategist, Stalka Marketing Group

8 KEY METRICS TO TRACK YOUR SEO PERFORMANCE

Adeline Karpenkova
Brand Specialist, Seppstad

INTEGRATING PR & SEO: BEST FRENEMIES

Andrew Dennis
Content Marketing Specialist, Page One Power

CRAP ON THE MAP - PUTTING AN END TO GOOGLE MAPS SPAM

Joy Hawkins
Owner, Starling Sky

SEO MYTHBUSTING: HEADER TAGS & HIERARCHIES

Charles Taylor
SEO Manager, Verizon Fios

SEO PROJECT MANAGEMENT & ACTUALLY GETTING STUFF DONE

Ben Sailer
Content Marketing Lead, CoSchedule

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Q3-019

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JOY HAWKINS

CHARLES TAYLOR

BEN SAILER

BECOMMING DISCOVERABLE

- GARRETT MEHRGUTH -
CEO, Directive Consulting

008.

AS SEEN IN
Q4 2019

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

Is your brand discoverable?

Let's go back to September 4th, 1998. On this day, Google was born.

Ever since, marketers have asked themselves, "How can I make sure my brand shows up when potential customers search for the products or services we sell?"

Fast forward to 2019: we have more data than we can analyze, more tactics than we can execute, and more confusion around search engines than ever before.

We also have become more focused on

The bigger plot is directly correlated to our culture. Our culture wants to comparison shop. I call this the "Yelp and Amazon Effect". We look tirelessly at Yelp reviews before choosing a restaurant. Then, when we get to the restaurant, we log back onto Yelp and look at "Popular Dishes". Our entire decision-making model is based on peer review.

Think about Amazon. How do you choose a product? Do you take stock in what the product marketer wrote in the description section? Or, like me, do you scroll right past their description and read the reviews? In fact, we trust brands so little that we then

the details—so much so, in fact, that we've begun to value our own website above all else.

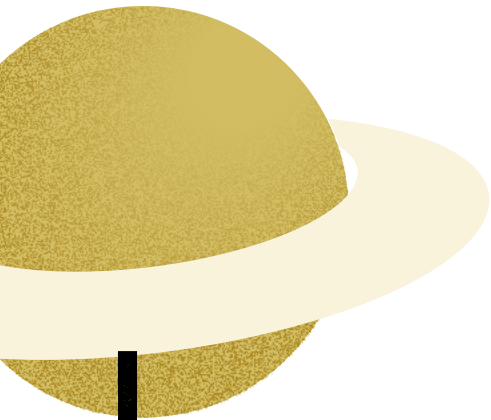
What I mean by that is the majority of our tactics are about getting potential customers to our website. Why? We can report on this data. It's all about US and OUR numbers, not the customer.

If we were really worried about the customer and our brands, we would start to think differently about search engines. We would realize that the most important part of search marketing is ensuring the right people discover our brand at the right time.

wonder if any of these reviews are fake, but never once do we trust the brand alone. We are too smart for that.

Google is aware of this culture shift. They recognize the "Yelp and Amazon Effect" and have changed how their algorithm chooses which search results to show when a searcher expresses purchasing intent.

It used to be that search marketers could show up for any keyword they wanted. A few links here, a little content there, and next thing you know, your brand is ranked number one.



Let's take a moment to search on your phone or computer: "top ERP software".

What do you find?

Every one of these results is a third-party website that makes money comparing multiple ERP vendors and charging those vendors to be on their list.

Is it transparent? No.

Is it fair? Not always.

But has there ever been anything fair about advertising?

In my opinion, this is the fairest it's ever been.

Today, a start-up ERP software can get a few raving fans, a small ad budget, and with a couple of reviews, can firmly plant themselves in the buying journey for anyone searching for an ERP software.

Unfortunately, most search marketers have no idea that the game has changed. Instead, they still try to manipulate Google and inject their website into search engine result pages (SERPs) that they will never rank for.

In the example above, no individual brand ranks in the top 10. This is not because SAP, Microsoft, and Odoo have small budgets, bad teams, and no SEO. This is because Google knows that thesearcher wants peer reviews over a brand's website.

If your customer reads reviews before buying a breakfast burrito, they will read reviews before buying a two million dollar ERP software.

It's time to go back to the right question, "How do I make my brand discoverable?"



THE DISCOVERABILITY PROCESS

That said, I think it's beneficial to note that I am not some website-hating marketer living in a cave with his thoughts.

Instead, I am desperately trying to highlight a different way of thinking, a seismic shift in how we approach marketing in search engines.

Let's assume you are a pioneer and ready to take on a fresh, new approach. I have outlined below how you can go about turning the concept of discoverability into a viable strategy.

Step 1: Analyze the Buying Journey

If you have a keyword research tool like Moz, Ahrefs, or SEMrush, odds are you are probably attached to them. Unfortunately, these tools do little to inform you of the process of how an actual customer searches for what you offer.

Instead, I want you to use common sense and ignore your tools and data (common sense is a competitive advantage in 2019).

As a first step, put yourself in the mindset of your ideal customer. I like to role play so that my biases and assumptions don't hinder this process.

Pretend you are a middle manager at one of your target accounts.

Your boss, who is always in a hurry, passes you on the way to the restroom and lets you know that she is looking for a new ERP vendor.

She wants three quotes by the end of next week, and you know that any recommendations you make will be a direct reflection on your own personal judgment.

What do you do?

My guess is you search along the lines of:

- "Top ERP Software"
- "Best ERP Software"
- "ERP Software Reviews"

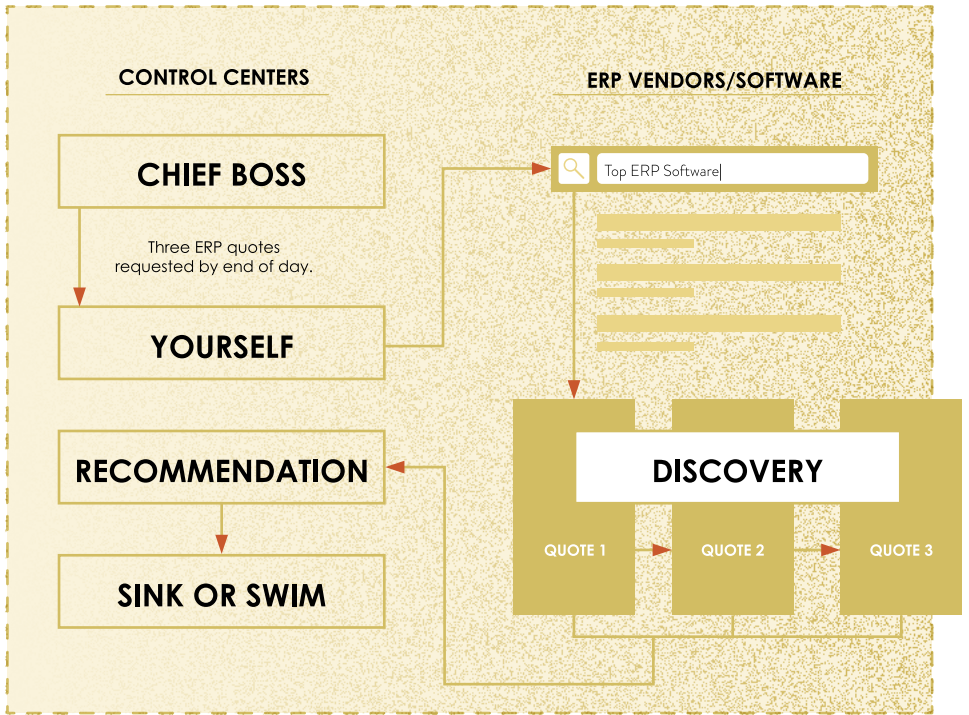
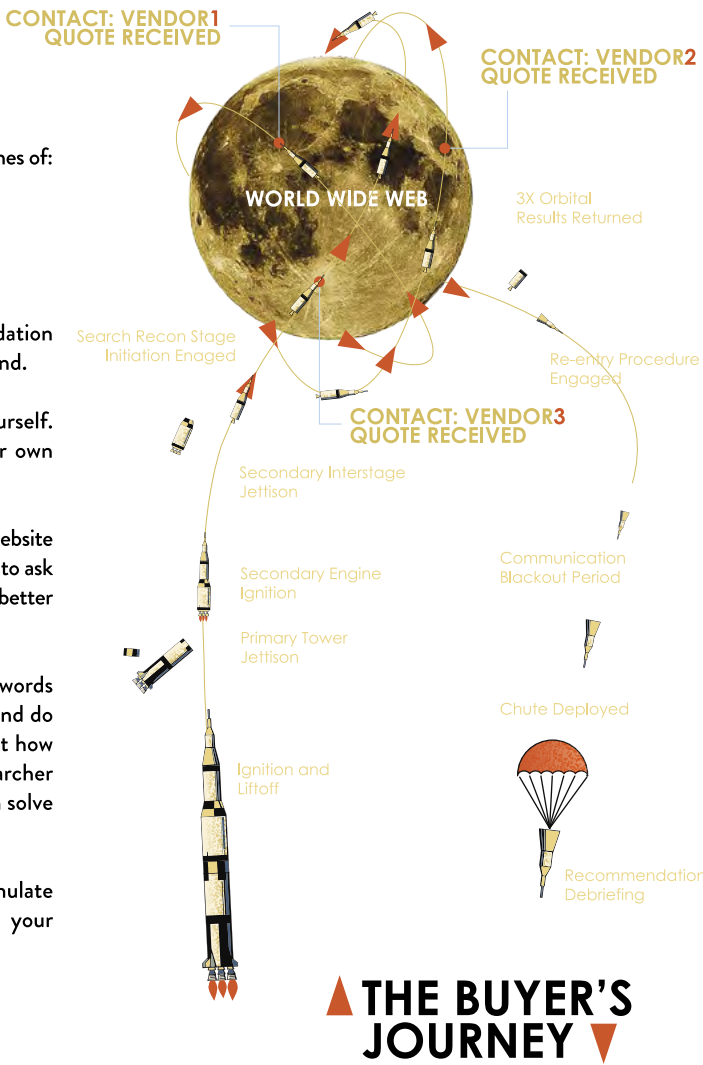
Make sure that any recommendation you make is from a reputable brand.

Now do the same thing for yourself. Replace ERP software with your own vertical. What do you find?

If you do find an individual website ranking, then this is a perfect time to ask yourself, "How could our website better answer the intent of this search?"

The trick isn't to identify keywords your competition is ranking for and do the same. The key is to figure out how to answer the intent of the searcher the best. How can you help them solve the task they have at hand?

From there, you can start to formulate a content strategy and make your brand even more discoverable.



OUR WEBSITE IS A MINOR STAR IN A MUCH BIGGER PLOT

Step 2: Evaluate Your Options

I assume you have found similar sites for your own vertical. If you are in local, you will find Yelp and Google My Business, among other sites.

If you are in professional services, you will find Clutch, 10best, etc. These sites exist in every industry, and the pages, some more than others, exist universally.

Click on the third-party sites that you find in your vertical and explore the results. Do you see your competition present? Is it reasonable to conclude that the middle manager you are pretending to be would have reason to trust these sites?

If you answered yes to either of those questions, I would argue it's time, while purchasing intent is strongest, to make your brand discoverable at the bottom of the funnel.

Each third-party review site varies; however, there are a couple of ways they allow you to make your brand discoverable, as seen above right.

Think of third-party review sites as supplemental. If you are investing any amount of money into search marketing, then I would argue that third-party review sites deserve to be part of your strategy.

Fortunately, these sites rarely require long-term commitments. One of my favorite things to do is to play around with positioning and spend.

What happens if we get the most reviews in our vertical and don't advertise?

What happens if we advertise in the number one spot on a list?

What about the number five spot?

By testing our positioning, I am able to determine the best path forward with each individual ad buy.

THIRD-PARTY SITE OPERATIONS

Each third-party review site varies; however, there are a couple of ways they allow you to make your brand discoverable:

CPC

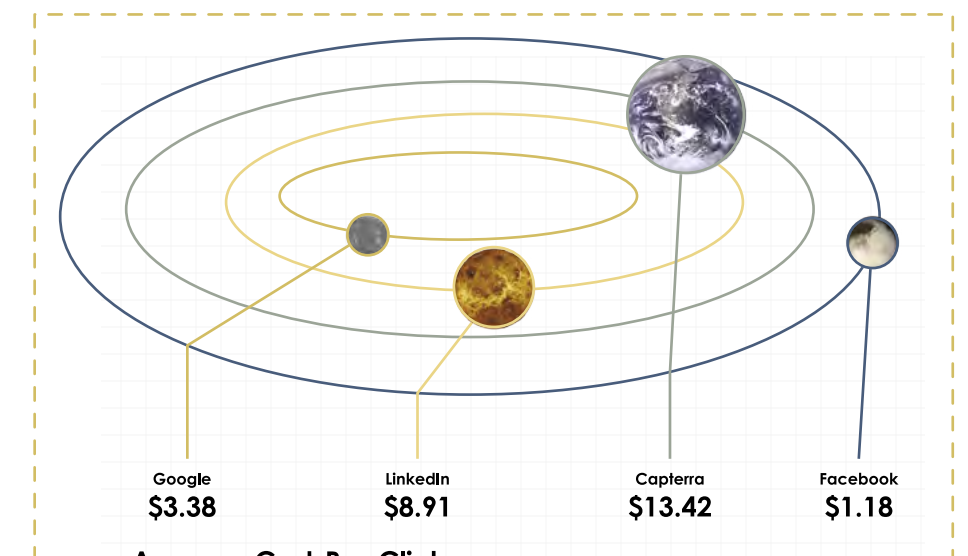
In this model, you set bids similar to Google Ads and pay every time someone clicks on your listing. The great part about this model is that with a large enough budget you can be a new player in a space, and though you have only a few reviews, still be number one — numero uno!

FIXED AMOUNT

In this model, you simply pay for a spot on a list. For example, they might say that the number one spot is \$5,000 a month, while the third spot is \$1,000 a month.

PPL

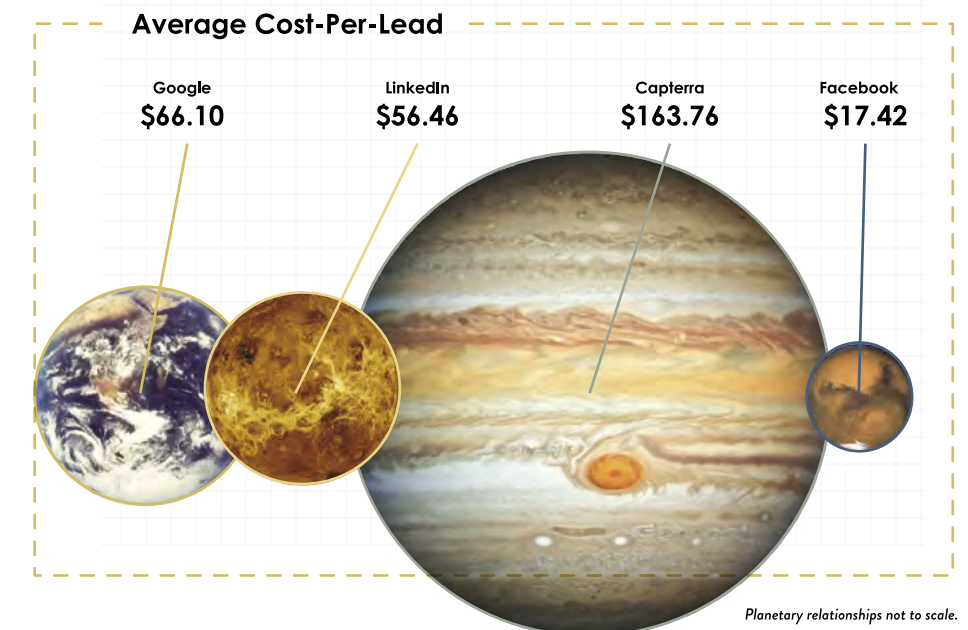
In this model, you pay per lead. The quality on these sites is often best, but the lead is more expensive. These sites traditionally qualify the accounts and then send them to you. We have found that the cost per demo/proposal is actually the cheapest from these sites due to a much higher qualification rate.



Average Cost-Per-Click

Actual data from SaaS clients in our portfolio.

For the full report please visit: <https://directiveconsulting.com/resources/>



Planetary relationships not to scale.

Step 3:
Launch and Test

With this in mind, not all third-party review sites are created equal. In fact, many simply do not work or do not work specifically for certain markets, verticals, or types of buyers.

It's imperative that we have an attribution model in place. If at all possible, we want to base the success of our test on sales data, not marketing data.

The metrics I would look to analyze are the following:

Cost Per Lead
Cost Per Opportunity
Cost Per Deal
Revenue

If I can only see the cost per conversion, unfortunately, I will probably come to the wrong conclusion about the allocation of my time and spend.

You also want to test more than just the third party sites, particularly Google Ads and your own website to get a feel for the best way to bring in leads for your company.

For quite some time now, when marketers have looked to scale their search marketing, their first step has been to increase the number of keywords they target. And similar to third-party sites, there's a problem...not all keywords are created equal.

In fact, we found that when you scale the volume of keywords you target, the most likely scenario is a dip in performance. This is because you should traditionally head toward the top of the funnel and transition from satisfying purchasing intent queries to advertising on informational intent queries.

What if there was a different way to scale?

What if you scaled by showing up more often for the terms that you already know drive the KPIs that matter the most to your business.

This theory does not apply only to search engines. Think about event marketing!

How many times have you crushed an event in your industry, gone home, built out a strategy to advertise at 20 more events that year, and during the next event saw underwhelming performance?

Scale is rarely what we think it will be.

This new way of thinking is advocating this thought: "Instead of doing 20 new events, let's simply have 20 booths at our best event."

If you are seeing success, it's time to turn up your creativity. Take as much market share as possible on the SERP. Make your brand as discoverable as you can and show up in all the places you can, including:

- Google Ads
- Third-Party Review Sites
- GMB
- Organic
- Display

These options exist in some way, shape, or form in almost every industry. Take advantage of them!

In Conclusion:
Tying It All Together

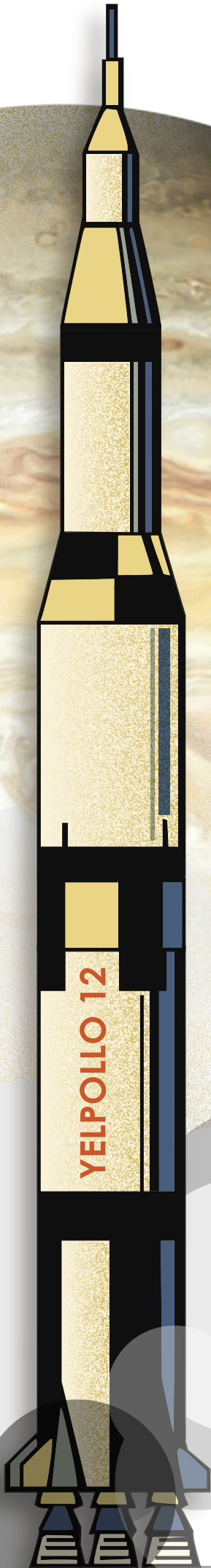
We have discussed the value of third-party review sites, walked through a process for discoverability, and explored a new way to think about scaling. The great news? You can experiment here. You can crawl, walk, and then run with the concept of discoverability.

Hopefully, it's the right time for you to execute and pave the road to search marketing success.

My dream is that you are able to make your brand discoverable, increase your ROI, and make your search efforts worth their while. 🌐



Blast into orbit with
Garrett on Twitter to
stay in tune with latest
discoveries in the search
marketing universe.
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PAGE ONE POWER

THE PLAYBOOK

SCAN THE QR CODE TO BLAST OFF INTO THE PAGE ONE POWER PLAYBOOK



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ISSUE 4
2019

PAGES

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BECOMING DISCOVERABLE *Garrett Mehrguth | CEO, Directive Consulting*

GOOGLE IS NOT A SEARCH ENGINE *Norm Voge | SEO Content Creation, Page One Power*

DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES, DIFFERENT STRATEGIES *Michael Stricker | Marketing Manager, Next Level Performance*

TIME IS MONEY *Wes Marsh, Director of Marketing, BCA Technologies, Inc. & eRep CPQ*

INTERVIEWING FOR AN SEO JOB *Charles Taylor, SEO Manager, Verizon Fios*

USING SOCIAL TO IMPROVE DIGITAL PR & LINK CAMPAIGNS *David White, Director of Content Marketing, Connective3*

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Q4-019

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CHARLES TAYLOR

DAVID WHITE

009.

AS SEEN IN
Q1 2020

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

SEO Mythbusting:

Is there bad organic traffic?...



No.

We've been fielding an increasing number of questions about whether national — or even international — organic traffic is a bad thing. The short answer is no, absolutely not. The long answer is that things are a bit more complicated.

SEO GOALS FROM AN AGENCY PERSPECTIVE

Let's start with the basics: Considering your site, what are the primary goals of SEO? To improve rankings, get more users, earn more goal completions, and sell more products or services. That final goal is key: an agency wants to increase revenue for the client. The easiest way to do that is to reach local users who are closer to the company or service, especially for smaller local businesses like car dealerships or mom-and-pop stores.

One of the best ways for a smaller business to improve rankings is through creating valuable content, with one of the quickest paths being Q&A-style content in their vertical. No matter the industry, there are unanswered questions that potential customers are asking — and answers to those questions can bring significant results to those small local businesses. Tools like Answer the Public and forum topics in a client's industry can help an SEO find those unanswered questions to help drive traffic to a site.

It's not uncommon for a small business to answer one or more of these questions and rank nationally for them. Walla Walla Valley Honda* has an Accord vs. Civic page that addresses common user questions with a direct and comprehensive answer, and the result is a featured snippet that's driving national traffic to that page. If this sounds to you like a clear example of a win, you're not alone, but things can quickly get blurry.



*Walla Walla Valley Honda is a client of Dealer Inspire



The Concern Around Nationally-Ranking Pages

From an agency perspective, a nationally-ranking page shows that we are creating content valuable enough to be shown to users well outside of a local business's customer base. It identifies the business as an authority in their field — growing trust, increasing brand awareness, and drawing traffic to the site. While these are all wins, the concern comes from a mismatch between the goals we mentioned above and the primary goal of the business: to sell more products or services.

The "concern" around nationally-ranking pages comes from the business's perspective. A local business might see they are getting traffic from the other side of the country and be concerned that search engines are confusing where they are and who their customers are. Worse still, what if the search engines are no longer showing the business's site to their relevant, local users?

Pages That Rank Nationally Also Rank Locally

This might seem silly to point out, but the pages that rank nationally also have the same position locally. We reviewed a group of different pages that are ranking number 1 nationally and found that they are in the same position when looking at the top 3 target cities for the business. Again, this is not earth-shattering information, but it's important to remind clients concerned about national traffic that their local customers and users are also looking for the same information — and it's valuable for users to see those answers come from their business.

Expertise, authority, and trust are too often dismissed or ignored by smaller businesses despite Google's insistence on their importance as ranking factors. In addition to highlighting how nationally-ranking pages rank locally, it can be helpful to make an analogy to something more familiar. Point to the reputation of The New York Times or The Washington Post, and how trust in their expertise and in their answers has allowed them to retain readers and survive in the digital age. A client ranking nationally, showing up in position 1 or position 0 in the SERPs, can help them build trust with users and establish a brand awareness that extends beyond that single ranking. Users will continue to trust their site and come to them first when shopping for their product.

Nationally-Ranking Pages Grow Returning Users

Trust matters for SEO. When users get that answer they are looking for, they are much more likely to return to that site when they are ready to make a purchase. When studying the sites from the group of nationally-ranking pages above, we found a 36% increase in returning users after the nationally-ranking page was published.

Returning users aren't just nice to have; they're much more valuable for a site. AnalyticsEdge.com says, "Numerous studies have shown that websites tend to have more new visitors and fewer returning visitors. But the returning visitors tend to have a higher engagement — they bounce less, view more pages per session, and have higher session durations. They also tend to have higher conversion rates and higher sales...much higher. This makes us want more returning visitors."

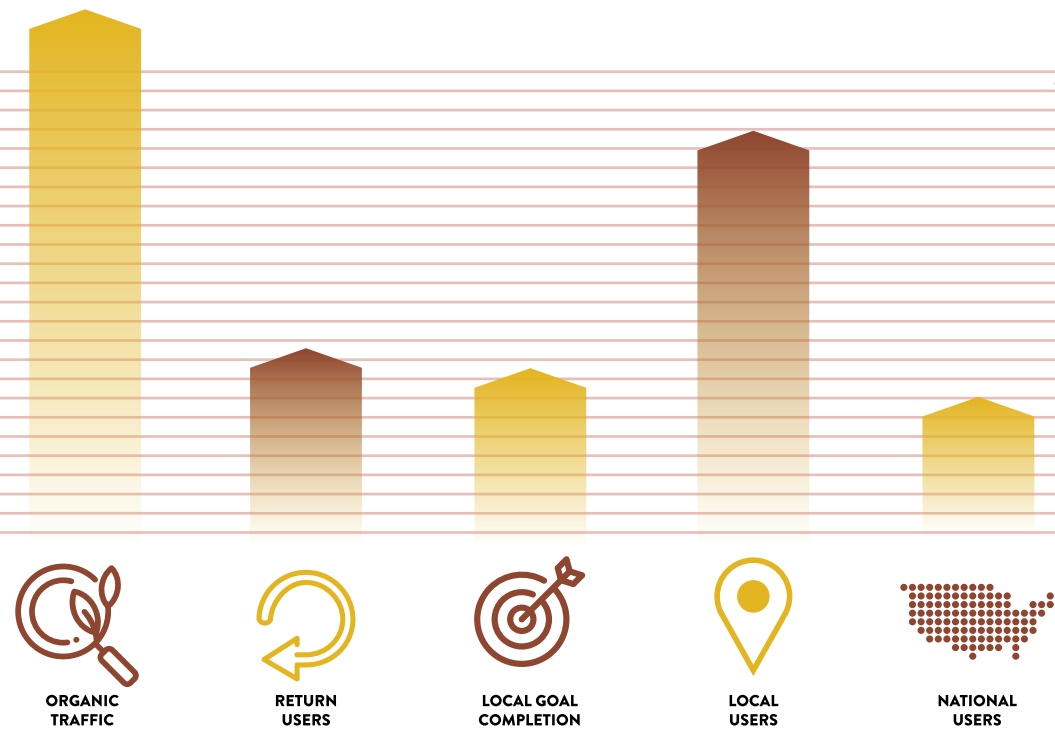
More National Traffic Equals More Local Traffic

Ranking in position 1 or position 0 nationally will bring more traffic from outside a client's local customer base, but it should also bring increased levels of local traffic. When reviewing data for nationally-ranking pages and the sites they belong to, we found that they resulted in a:

100% AVERAGE INCREASE IN ORGANIC ENTRANCES TO THE SITE AFTER THE PAGE WENT LIVE.

272% AVERAGE INCREASE IN OUT-OF-STATE TRAFFIC TO THE SITE AFTER THE PAGE WENT LIVE.

21% AVERAGE INCREASE IN IN-STATE SITE ENTRANCES AFTER THE PAGE WENT LIVE.



Conversions Remain Relevant And Local

National traffic doesn't convert the way local traffic does. Part of keeping a client's name, address, and phone number consistent is keeping it visible; the average Internet user knows when they land on a small business's site and when that site is not local to the user. The address is right there, the phone number will often be in a different area code, and many small businesses have their location in their name (like Walla Walla Valley Honda). This means users aren't likely to fill out a form or request a service unless they're close enough to the business.

When reviewing the nationally-ranking pages and site we mentioned:

91% OF TOTAL PAGE ENTRANCES WERE FROM OUT-OF-STATE USERS.

8% OF TOTAL PAGE ENTRANCES WERE FROM IN-STATE USERS.

27% OF TOTAL CONVERSIONS WERE FROM OUT-OF-STATE USERS.

72% OF TOTAL CONVERSIONS WERE FROM IN-STATE USERS.

While a majority of sessions to those pages were from out-of-state users, a majority of goal completions during that time were from in-state users. The only annoying thing to come from a nationally-ranking page might be a slight bounce rate increase as well as a few forms from someone unaware of where the business is actually located. Depending on the type of business, forms from somewhere far away might not even be an issue. The true benefit of nationally-ranking pages is a 100% increase in organic entrances, a 36% increase in returning users, a 33% increase in local goal completions, and an increase in the authority of the site.

When users get the answer they are looking for, they are much more likely to return to that site.

Now that we’ve covered how nationally-ranking pages can be good — even essential — for small businesses, it’s time to review the best way to get those position 1 and position 0 spots in the SERPs. The best tools to find those questions people are asking are:

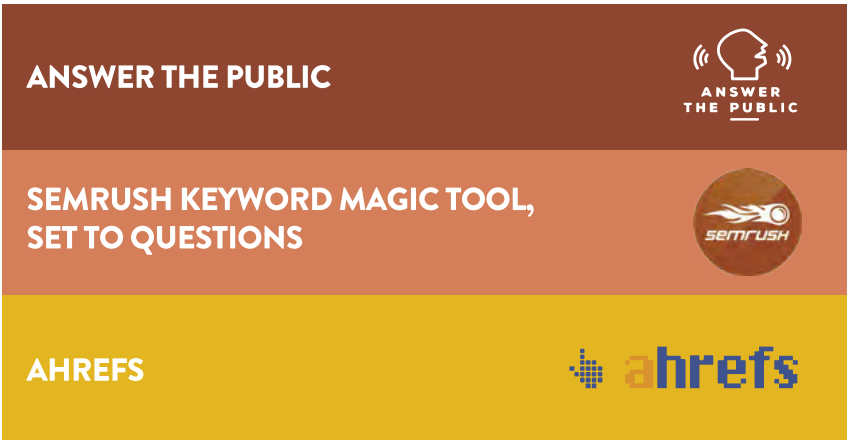
- Answer the Public
- SEMrush Keyword Magic Tool, set to questions
- Ahrefs

Answer the Public offers up all variations on a question, making it an ideal starting point for content ideation. Without search volume or keyword difficulty though, an SEO’s next step should be to head to a familiar tool like SEMrush or Ahrefs. These tools, and others like them, can provide you a keyword difficulty (how hard it is to win that number 1 ranking) and a search volume (how many people are searching for that keyword) so you can be confident those questions are worth targeting. This is just the beginning of the research step, however. Even if you are a subject matter expert in the field you’re working in, it can be incredibly beneficial to visit online communities to see the questions being asked and the answers being offered and accepted. This tier of research can bring up valid answers that may not be showing up in the SERPs at all.

Once you’ve got your question and have thoroughly researched your answer, it’s time to write. Your H1 and title tag should be that question (or the answer to the implied question), and it’s imperative that you make it 100% clear to search engines that you have the answer to this valuable question. Your introduction should lay out the answer clearly and be as direct as possible. In some rare cases you might be finished at this point, but typically you’ll have a few H2s that expand the scope of the topic. You also may need to dive into variations on your answer or offer additional context. If your business has a relevant call to action — to schedule an oil change on a blog about how often you really need to change your oil — a link to a contact form can satisfy a user’s needs and keep them on-site. Otherwise, it can be helpful to have relevant links to other topics on your site to hopefully mitigate any damage to your bounce rate.

Now, go on and answer those questions, get that traffic looking for answers, and don’t be worried about traffic not being “close” to your physical location. ☺

Catch a ride to more tips on gaining organic traffic with Connor and crew on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/connor-bonam-7b6727b1](https://www.linkedin.com/in/connor-bonam-7b6727b1)



Expertise, authority, and trust are too often dismissed or ignored by smaller businesses despite Google’s insistence on their importance as ranking factors.

WE WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS TIME TO THANK OUR AD SUPPORTERS:



SMX
SEJ
AHREFS
MOZ
SEL
WORDSTREAM

VOLUME 3
ISSUE 1
2020

PAGES

AN SEO MAGAZINE

CLEAN
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SEO

HOW TO BUILD QUALITY BACKLINKS FOR YOUR HOTEL WEBSITE

Stephanie Sparks Smith | Founder, Cogwheel Marketing

ARTICLE - No. 1

BUILDING A DISCOVERABILITY POWERHOUSE

Heather Physioc | VM&R

ARTICLE - No. 2

IS THERE BAD ORGANIC TRAFFIC?

Connor Bonam | Dealer Inspire

ARTICLE - No. 3

DITCH KEYWORD SEARCH VOLUME

Cody West | Assisted Reach

ARTICLE - No. 4

3 THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN OPTIMIZING FOR LOCAL SEARCH

Aleh Barysevich | SEO Powersuite & Awario

ARTICLE - No. 5

BUILDING SEO CONTENT: HOW TO EARN TRAFFIC & LINKS

Andrew Dennis | Page One Power

ARTICLE - No. 6

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Q1-020

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010.

AS SEEN IN
Q2 2020

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

NOBODY

IS AN SEO

EXPERT

THROUGHOUT THE MARKETING INDUSTRY, SEOs AND MARKETERS ALIKE HAVE ATTACHED THE TERM **EXPERT** NEXT TO THEIR NAME. SEO IS AN EVER-CHANGING INDUSTRY. EVERY YEAR THERE ARE NEW STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND TRENDS THAT SEOs MUST BECOME FAMILIAR WITH. OVERALL, THIS MAKES IT CHALLENGING FOR ONE TO BECOME AN **EXPERT** IN THE FIELD.

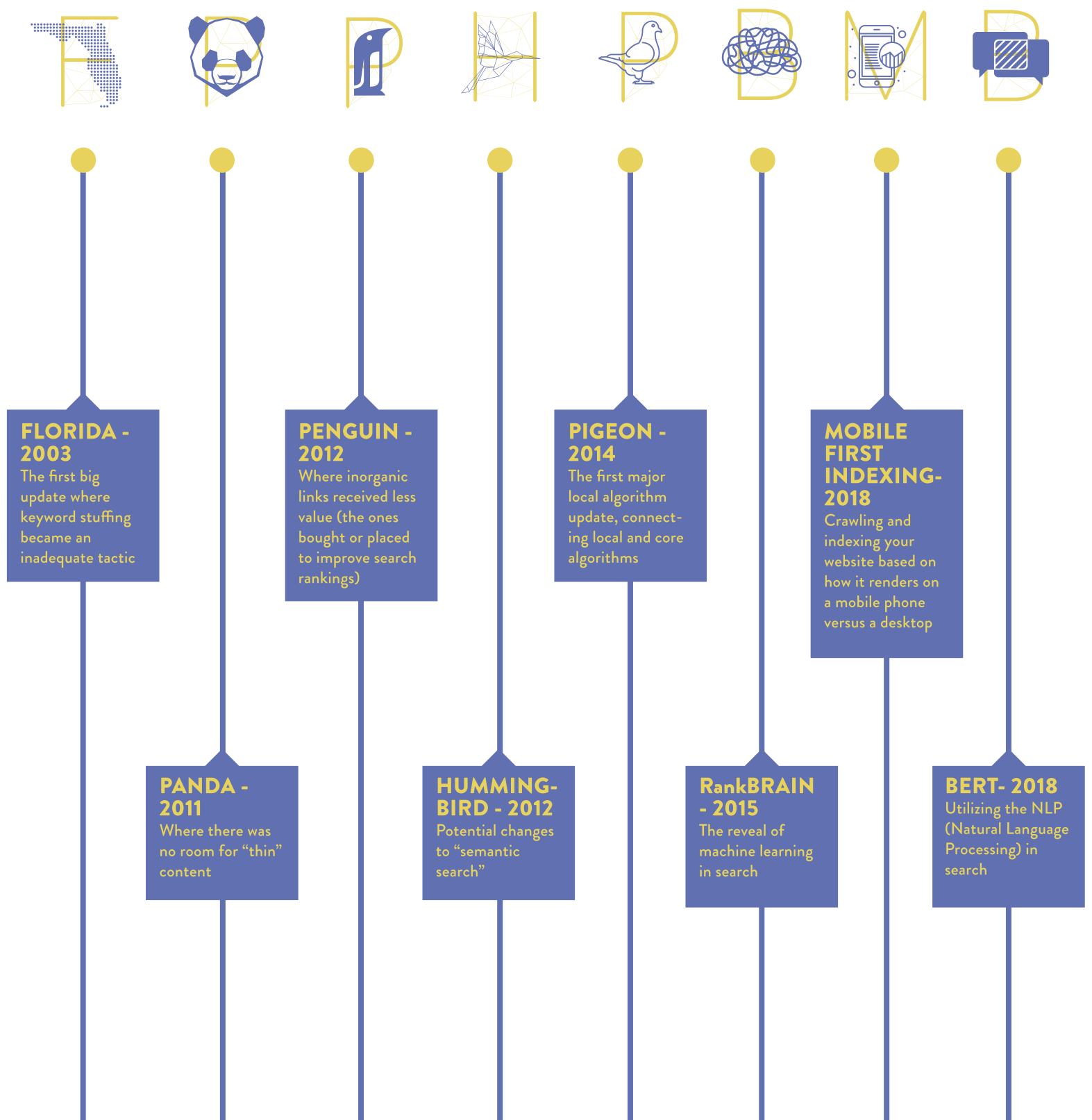
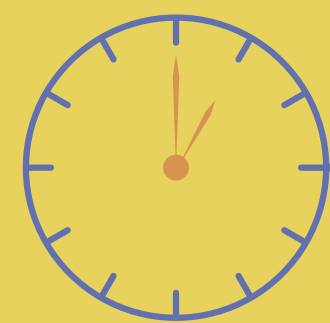
A BRIEF HISTORY

To provide a timeline for this argument, let's start with Yahoo back in 1994. As a directory listing website, this was the first real search engine that allowed users to find companies online.

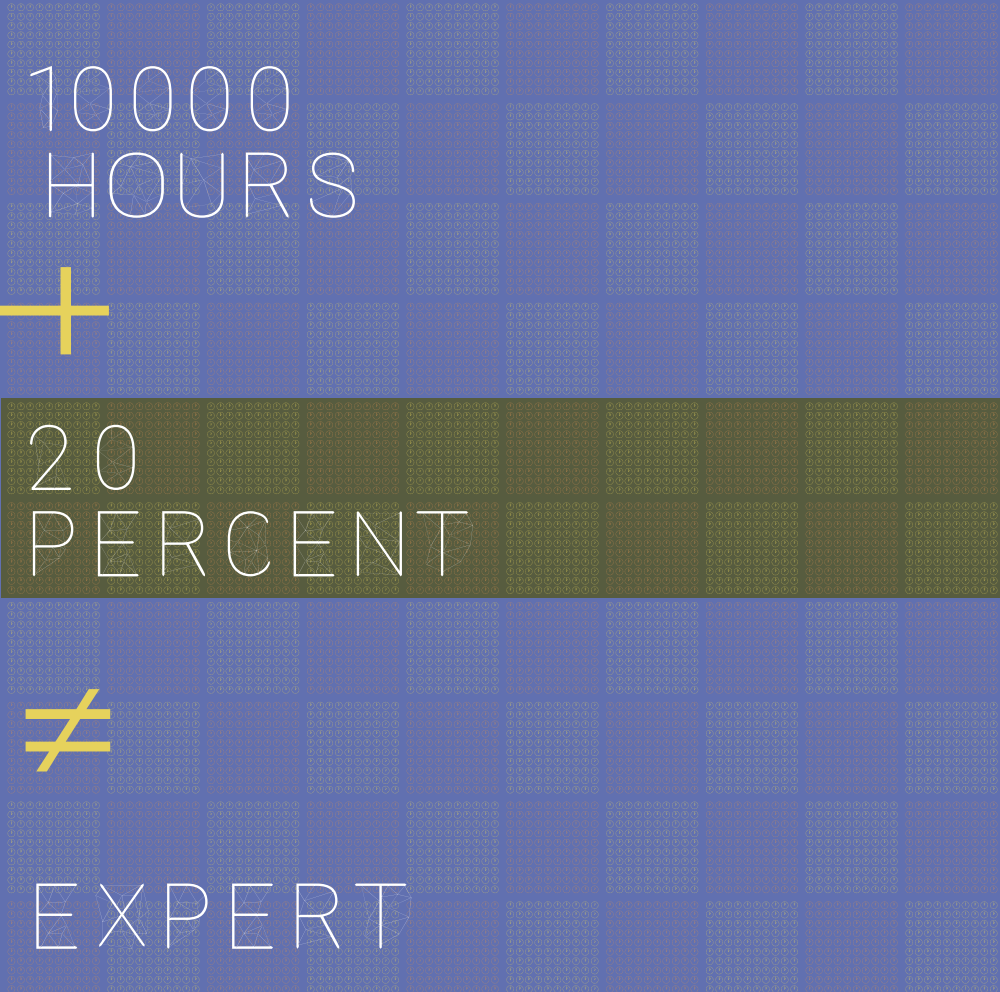
Although up for debate, the first real signs of strategic SEO did not start until 1997. In early September 1998, Google was founded in Menlo Park by Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

Since 1998, Google has dominated the search industry and has consistently updated its algorithm to understand user search behavior better and, ultimately, provide the best user experience for searchers to find exactly what they are looking for.

As we know it today, SEO strategy seems to be driven by Google and its ongoing attempts to optimize its algorithm, and with these eight updates, you can see just how much SEO has changed over the years.



A look at some (not all) significant changes Google has made over the past 20 years.



BECOMING AN EXPERT

There are two outdated rules I would like to reference to make this argument seem more evident: Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours and the Google 20% rule.

Malcolm Gladwell famously said that if you spend 10,000 hours on anything, you will become a master in that field. That means if you spend 20 hours a week practicing your craft, in 10 years, you will become a master at it.

In 2004, Google also highlighted that they encourage employees to spend 20% of their time working on what they think will benefit Google most.

Like I said, for this argument, let's take these two rules and smush them together and call it "Becoming an SEO Expert."

If you take 20% of a typical work week, and you specifically dedicate that time to learning something new about SEO and developing those new skills, you are bound to 8 hours a week. For a 50-week year (considering two weeks of break per year), you are dedicating 400 hours a year to developing those SEO skills.

If you calculate that out, it will take you 25 years to become a master of SEO.

LEARNING WHILE WORKING, WORKING ON LEARNING

On the other hand, most people will read this and tell me they spend more time outside of the 40 hours of work learning, or that they learn while they work. I am not discounting those few and far between, and I am not taking a shot at the SEO world.

I understand the argument for learning while working, as I am one of those who learn best by doing the actual work.

Additionally, I don't want to discount those who I look up to in the SEO industry who have spent their whole career absorbing the search engine and teaching those who continuously want to learn: Brian Dean, Loren Baker, Hamlet Batista, and more.

However, you can read as many blogs, take as many classes, and watch as many instructional videos as you want, but the way to truly become world class at SEO is taking what you learn and trying it on in your work.

Steve Toth of Freshbooks once told me, "You don't know if something works until you yourself have tested it, and even those results are going to have a shelf life with SEO." Continuously A/B testing in SEO is crucial, not only for performance but for personal and professional development.

Take a step back and decide if you are a true "expert." SEO is ever changing, so as soon as "best practices" finally set in for us, there are new ones that take their place that we must learn AND try.

ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.

The SEO community is incredible because there is no tactic that is hidden. People give credit where credit is due, and they genuinely want the world to be better at the craft.

There are numerous ways to learn SEO: podcasts, webinars, blog posts, ultimate guides, videos, conferences, and more. This content not only gives context to what is happening in the SEO world but also provides a diverse way of learning from educators around the world. You are given the opportunity to interact with some of the brightest minds in the marketing world.

Here are some of my favorite ways to keep up with the most innovative SEOs in the world:

Follow various Twitter accounts to step up your everyday SEO knowledge:

@lorenbaker
@moz
@DirectiveAgency
@gmehrguth
@hamletbatista

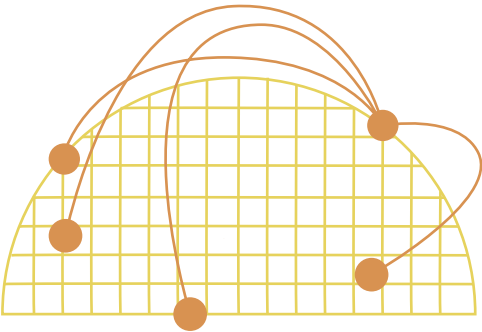
SIGNUP
for Brian Dean's email list.

READ
Search Engine Land and Search Engine Journal daily

TUNE-IN
for Moz Whiteboard Fridays and stay up-to-date with Moz's blog

Although this article leads with a bit of hyperbole, there are a few SEOs I would consider "experts." But even so, these people are human who continually run experiments, learning new things about the industry EVERY day.

Thank you, Moz, Loren Baker of SEJ, Brian Dean, and more for the information presented in this article, and for teaching us how to be better SEOs who never stop learning. ☺



PEOPLE GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE, AND THEY GENUINELY WANT THE WORLD TO BE BETTER AT THE CRAFT.

A FEW POINTS TO TAKE AWAY

Don't stop learning
Test new tactics in your work, even if you've been around for 25 years.

Don't stop teaching others
Even if you've only been around for a year. Sometimes you learn the most by breaking it down for others.

Keep A/B Testing
There are always new insights to unwrap about your targeted audience. However, you won't know what they are until you actually test them.

Dive deeper into other marketing
You'll be amazed at how much better of a marketer you can be with a breadth of knowledge. Ask questions to your design team, see what your sales team has been working on, identify what strategies have been moving the needle on the PPC side. You never know where you can find your edge.

YouTube is your friend
Watch as many explanatory videos as possible on YouTube. The more perspectives you can get, the better. You may not agree with all of them, but they can equip you with answers to potential questions that may arise.



Looking to continue to "learn by doing?" Check out Directive Consulting on Twitter: @DirectiveAgency



VOLUME 3
ISSUE 2
2020

PAGES

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CLEAN
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MITIGATING THE DANGERS
OF A WEBSITE MIGRATION
Helen Pollitt / Arrows Up
ARTICLE - No. 1 - Pg. 14

HOW TO DO LESS
AND GET MORE
Ryan Stewart / Webin1s
ARTICLE - No. 2 - Pg. 22

WHY GOOGLE DOESN'T CARE HOW
YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR CONTENT
Kimberly Brown / Page One Power
ARTICLE - No. 3 - Pg. 40

HOW TO SCALE TITLE TAG AND
META DESCRIPTION CREATION
Charles Taylor / Various Fics
ARTICLE - No. 4 - Pg. 46

NOBODY IS AN
SEO EXPERT
Liam Barnes / Directive Consulting
ARTICLE - No. 5 - Pg. 56

SMALL BUSINESSES CAN'T AFFORD
(TO NOT DO) SEO
Brie Anderson / WSLU Tech
ARTICLE - No. 6 - Pg. 64

HOW TO DESIGN YOUR CONTENT
FOR BOTH USER AND SEARCH
Vince Nero / Siege Media
ARTICLE - No. 7 - Pg. 70

SEARCHING:
For Users

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Q2-020

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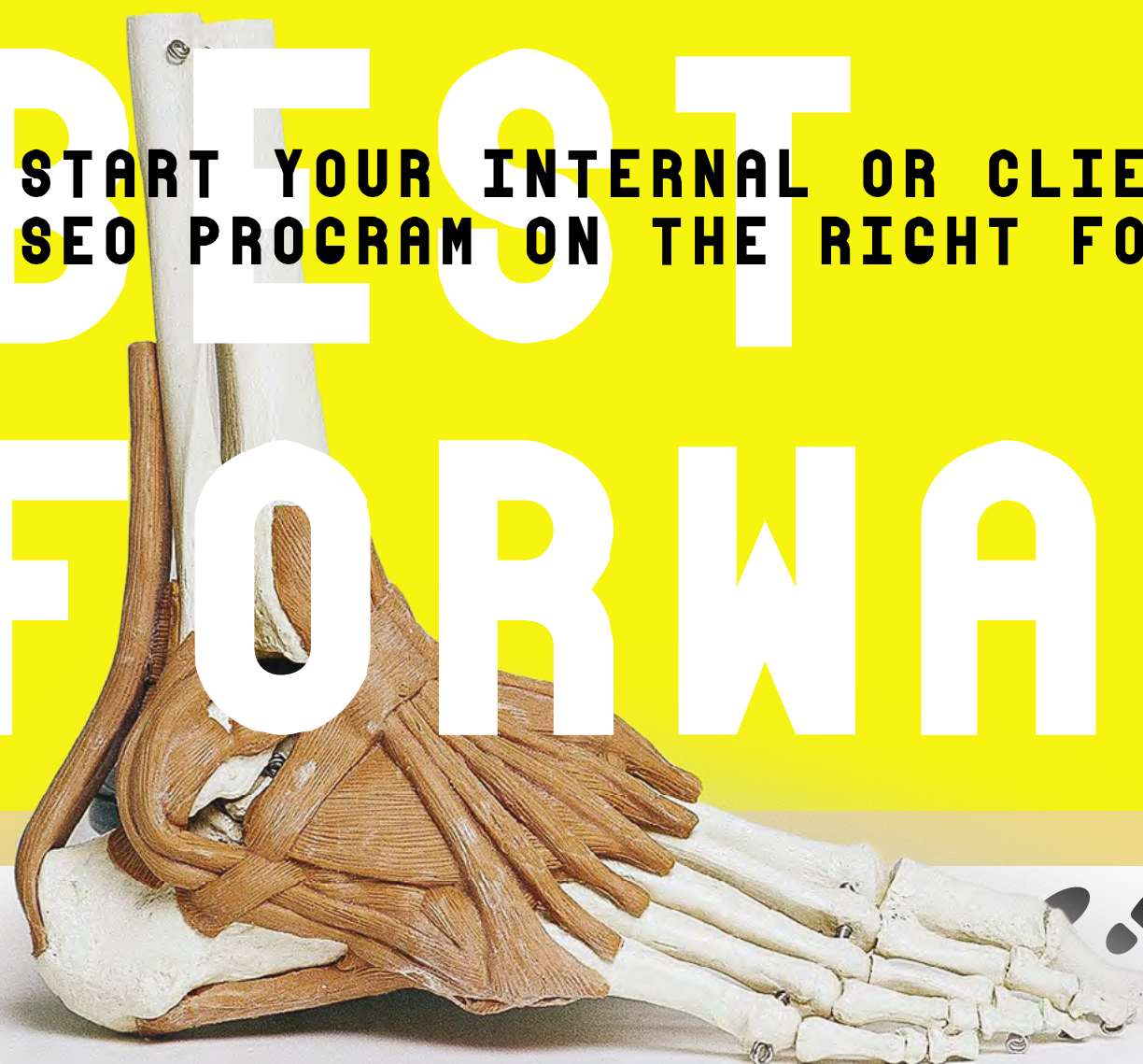
AS SEEN IN
Q3 2020

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD:

START YOUR INTERNAL OR CLIENT
SEO PROGRAM ON THE RIGHT FOOT.

LACK OF BUY-IN. FAILURE
TO PRIORITIZE. LIMITED
BUDGET AND RESOURCES.
LOW UNDERSTANDING OF
SEARCH. CORPORATE SILOS.
ALL THESE AND MORE
ARE OBSTACLES STANDING
IN THE WAY OF GETTING
YOUR TEAM'S BEST SEARCH
WORK IMPLEMENTED --
AND MUCH OF IT CAN BE
PREVENTED BY STARTING
THE SEARCH PROGRAM ON
THE RIGHT FOOT, WHETHER
IT'S YOUR INTERNAL
PROGRAM OR WITH AN
EXTERNAL CLIENT.



WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

Let's say you won a new client or got a new opportunity to start a search program at your job. You are probably feeling antsy and excited to get started, your boss or client is feeling hopeful, and the honeymoon phase begins. What could go wrong?

Then, a few months in, you notice things that don't seem to be what you signed on for. Perhaps the client is constantly challenging you, priorities seem to be changing almost hourly, stakeholders are obsessing over unimportant metrics, or the client is expecting immediate results when you can't seem to push the work through. Or worse, they might be asking, "What am I paying for again?" Before you know it, you're desperately racing around to manage crisis after crisis instead of focusing on the future.

The team might be frustrated and showing signs of burnout, even feeling gaslighted. Meanwhile, you have an unhappy client and your new account is at risk or your boss is questioning whether search is really important at your company.

To quote my colleague, Charles Gooch, "Everything feels like it's on fire, and no one knows where it's coming from."

When situations like this arise, it turns out there are several common causes that are often preventable. Wouldn't it have been nice to have known to look for these pitfalls before you started your project to prevent the stress and swirl?

THE 4 BIGGEST MISTAKES WE MAKE

After one too many painful experiences, I decided to get to the heart of the issue. I reflected on my own past failures with clients and surveyed our search industry peers to look for patterns. From that research emerged four common mistakes we tend to make.

Not Gauging Client Understanding - This can mean your client's understanding of the value and limitations of search, but it can also mean assessing the maturity of their search program and not assuming it's more advanced than it is.

Not Communicating Early, Often, and Clearly - The success of your search program is only partially about how good your actual SEO is. A huge amount of your success is how effectively you communicate with your bosses or clients about search.

Being Reactive Instead of Proactive - This comes from a good place - we're all trying to be a good partner or subject matter expert, so we try to do whatever our boss or client wants, especially early in the program. But instead of steering the ship, we find ourselves meandering and the program becomes ineffective.

Failing to Align On Expectations & Outcomes - This is a chronic issue in search. The gap between a client's expectations and reality is proportionate to the failure your search program could face.

But this isn't our clients' or bosses' fault. All four of these mistakes boil down to one core problem — a failure to communicate. And often that failure stems from an innate fear of — or discomfort with — having hard conversations with our clients and bosses.

TOP 4 COMMUNICATION MISTAKES SEARCH MARKETERS MAKE

01

NOT GAUGING CLIENT UNDERSTANDING ACCURATELY

02

NOT COMMUNICATING EARLY, OFTEN, AND CLEARLY

03

BEING REACTIVE, INSTEAD OF PROACTIVE

04

FAILING TO ALIGN EXPECTATIONS AND OUTCOMES

EVERYTHING
FEELS LIKE
IT'S ON FIRE.
AND NO ONE
KNOWS WHERE
IT'S COMING
FROM.



RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO DIVE STRAIGHT INTO TACTICAL EXECUTION. IF YOU MUST START WORK IMMEDIATELY, NEGOTIATE A PARALLEL PATH.

A GREAT DOCTOR CURES THE CAUSE

You can scramble to treat the symptoms, or you can prevent the problem to begin with. A little leg work up front can help to avoid great pain and suffering in the long term. Proper immersion into a brand can start your search program on the right foot and uncover problems that would otherwise catch you off guard later. Whether your search client is an external partner or an internal executive at your company, an immersion workshop can have a huge impact on the understanding of, support for, and success of your search program long term.

According to an informal survey I conducted, search professionals generally agree that onboarding new clients is important. But onboarding tends to be inconsistent from one client to the next, if proper onboarding happens at all. In order to combat this uneven experience and set search programs up for success, try this robust, standardized immersion process.

This onboarding workshop is an immersive crash course on the brand, the organization, and how search can best serve the business. It helps search experts become knowledgeable fast, develops communication channels, builds relationships with important stakeholders. It organizes people around a common purpose, the strategic roadmap, and what success looks like. Ideally the workshop should be conducted in person, as the knowledge sharing and organic dialogue are important — but digital works just fine too!

Resist the temptation to dive straight into tactical execution. It's common for a client to want "quick wins" and "low-hanging fruit," and it can be tempting to dive straight into SEO tactics without pausing to immerse and understand.

If you absolutely must start work immediately, negotiate a parallel path. While doing the strategic immersion process, perhaps work on a low-hanging fruit tactical win that will earn their trust early. But never minimize the importance of attaining deep knowledge through immersion, and aligning on a strategic, focused direction for the search program. This sets the tone for the rest of the partnership.

Survey says we need to care about more than keywords. The success of your search program is only partially about how good your actual SEO is. A huge amount of your success is how effectively you communicate with your bosses or clients about search.

SURVEY SAYS...

Search experts prioritized these elements of starting a successful search partnership.

PRIORITY	SEARCH PARTNER COMPONENTS
1	Knowing Business Goals
2	Knowing Products & Services
3	Knowing Client Contacts
4	Establishing Search Goals
5	Understanding Client's Processes
6	Learning Search Work History
7	Establishing KPIs & Reporting
8	Gauging Client Maturity
9	Gauging Client Knowledge
10	Securing Technical Resources
11	Learning Legal/Approval Processes
12	Identifying Current Tools & Platforms
13	Securing Copywriting Resources

[HEATHER PHYSIOC]

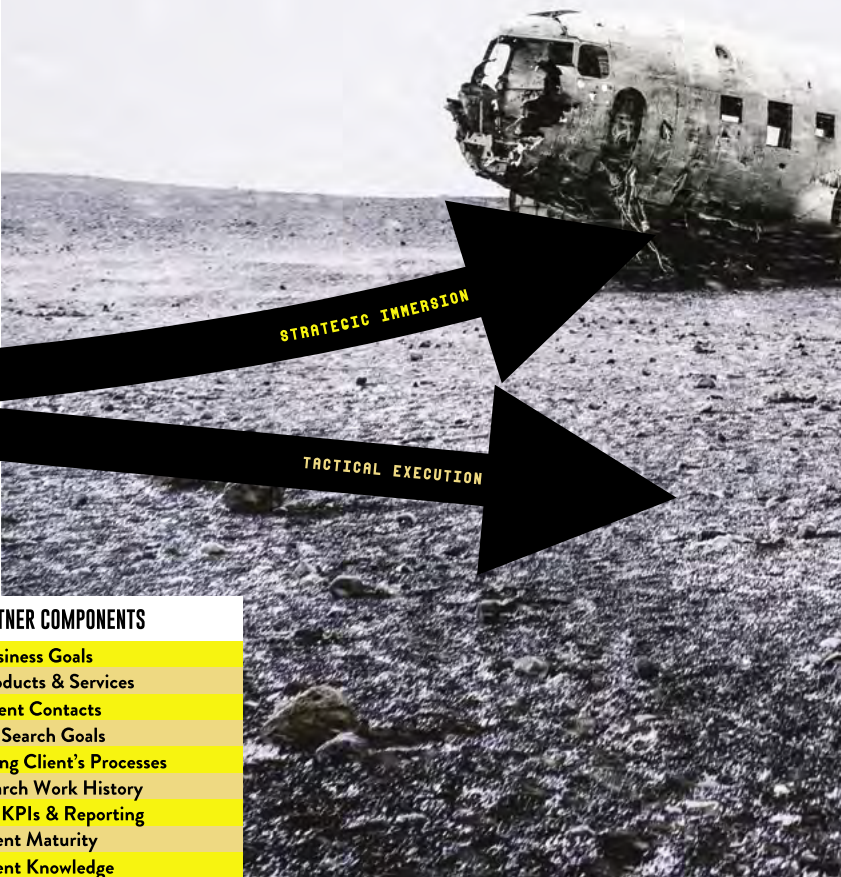


DON'T BUILD THE PLANE WHILE YOU'RE FLYING IT.

Without doing the legwork to get the knowledge you need, you're building a plane while you're flying it. But good news — you can realistically establish strong footing in all 13 of these criteria in just 2 days through a well-designed search immersion workshop.

You may encounter objections like perceiving the kickoff workshop as being a speed bump to getting results, or perhaps you think your client isn't big enough to warrant immersion, or maybe the client thinks it's too expensive.

We have found that it helps to level set with your clients or bosses on the importance of this efficient onboarding and education to the success of the search program. They have been receptive to the concept of slowing down briefly to speed up over the course of the program. They recognize that this is an essential step in order to make the most effective use of their marketing dollars. It earns their confidence that we hear them, we understand their needs, and we are prepared to help them win in search.





SEARCH IMMERSION WORKSHOP ACENDA:

BEGIN THE PROCESS WITH A SAMPLE SEARCH IMMERSION WORKSHOP ACENDA TO LET THE CLIENT OR BOSS REACT AND START THE CONVERSATION. WORK CLOSELY WITH THEM TO COMPLETELY CUSTOMIZE THE ACENDA TO BE AS RELEVANT AS POSSIBLE TO THEIR BUSINESS AND OBJECTIVES. INCLUDING THEM IN THE PLANNING PROCESS ENSURES THEY HAVE SKIN IN THE GAME TO MAKE THE WORKSHOP SUCCESSFUL

There are three types of sessions in a standard workshop — mission, stakeholder, and practitioner. They break down as follows:

Mission - The objective of this session is to understand the brand's DNA, objectives, pain points, stakeholders, roles, and responsibilities. The client or internal marketing lead typically prepares the content for this session. They share about the brand and its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. They share their objectives and priorities for the year, the things that keep them up at night. They know the brand better than anyone, so this session sets the tone for the immersion workshop.

Stakeholders - This is a high-level, strategic set of sessions with the marketing team you'll be working with day to day. You will meet other stakeholders in the organization who will be impacted by SEO outcomes. It includes things like business unit or department deep dives. In large organizations, perhaps one or two business units' objectives can be prioritized in a typical year, and we want to know everything about them. These sessions are highly conversational, and often the best insights come out of the unplanned dialogue. Use discussion guides here to steer your conversations.

Practitioners - This block of sessions is intended for practitioners — like the developers, content creators, or analytics experts — to educate the search team. (Not the other way around.) For technical developers and content writers, it's important to understand their workflows, when and how to include them in the process, how to submit requests, and how they allocate resources and prioritize their projects. For content teams, we want to understand who owns content and how they make editorial decisions. We work with analytics teams to understand goals and KPIs, how they measure things, and the best approach for search reporting dashboards to ensure our search work is always aligned.

Then, we close with a summary session, where we highlight the big themes and takeaways, and agree on next steps across the group. Attendees should leave the search immersion workshop with clear actions and ownership.

This is a rigorous, two-day boot camp when executed in full. This base model greatly increases the speed of ramping up the search program and the likelihood of its success. It can be modified to be digital, have different sessions customized to your brand, as well as a number of other ways.



KEY TOOLS

SEARCH IMMERSION

USE A NICE PEN HERE...

WE USE SEVERAL TOOLS TO MAKE SPINNING UP A SEARCH IMMERSION WORKSHOP A BREEZE, AND ENSURE A THOUROUGH AND COMPLETE ONBOARDING OF OUR CLIENTS EVERY TIME.

STANDARD ONBOARDING CHECKLIST

We always need things from our clients like access to their analytics account, or keys to the website so we can implement changes. This is a completely repeatable process, so there's no excuse for reinventing the wheel every time. This standardized onboarding checklist helps you and your clients get organized early, reducing downtime while you're waiting. Send it to your client as soon as possible and start gathering what you need. It sends the message that this isn't your first rodeo and you came ready to work.

HERE IS A LIST OF GENERAL QUESTIONS THAT WILL HELP US GAUGE ALL EFFORTS AND NEEDED SUPPORT MOVING FORWARD. NOT ALL TOPICS ARE APPLICABLE, AND FUTURE MEETING/CALLS MAY BE SCHEDULED TO GATHER ADDITIONAL DATA.

GENERAL QUESTIONS	NOTES	COMPLETE?
What are the brand's most important goals and objectives?		
What are the desired outcomes, actions or conversions you would like customers to complete online?		
Is target audience and persona information available? Who are your ideal customers?		
What are your highest selling and/or most profitable product or services lines?		
If there are multiple brands or product lines, please elaborate on hierarchy or prioritization for the upcoming year.		
Who do you consider your closest competitors? Any additional information about your competitive landscape?		
Are there style guides, brand manifestos or tone guidelines to follow?		
Who are the client stakeholders responsible for requesting and approving projects?		
Is there a legal approval process? Is there language or terminology that should be avoided, or mandatory legal language inclusions?		
Inventory of links owned assets, including: website(s) domains and subdomains, social media profiles, video channels, etc.		
What are your expectations for continuous support, including communication, check-ins, meetings and follow-ups?		

IMMERSION WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDES

We don't just need access from clients, we need knowledge. When we skip this step up front, it results in backtracking and delays. We create discussion guides to kick off the conversation in the various immersion sessions and ensure we get the most possible value out of them.

Customize these discussion guides to your brand, then send them as prework so attendees can come prepared. But don't just toss these over the fence. Use these to seed a few (not all) of the questions in real-time discussions to get the conversation rolling.

Then, follow the conversation organically. This is an important time to listen more than you talk. Pay attention to the answers, and ask open-ended, follow-up, and clarification questions. These open discussions reveal far more insights than simply sending this list via email.

[Business Unit] Discussion Guide

Description

Kick-off conversations with [Business Unit] team to discuss goals, pain points and strategy. Many of these questions allow for pre-work so the in-person conversation can be dedicated to deeper topics. Our goal is to understand your business model, customers and goals so we can best serve your needs through organic search.

Questions

- Who are the stakeholders in this business unit? What is your role? (BU org chart? How does it intersect with brand level?)
- What are your division's most significant accomplishments? Do you have a favorite case study?
- What are your division's most significant pain points?
- Which products are [Business Unit] responsible for? Which are the most profitable or prolific? (Any priority hierarchy of products? Features/benefits/reasons to believe? How do you talk about your products?)
- What is your sales process and customer lifecycle? Are there bundling options? Cross-selling?
- Who do you consider to be your business unit's most relevant competitors?
- What are your business unit's goals and objectives?
- How do you measure your business unit's success?
- Who do you consider your primary target audience or personas for your business unit? Who is your ideal client?



GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR WORKSHOP

SEARCH IMMERSION

EXPLAIN THE NEED FOR ACCESS AND INFORMATION

Some clients are sensitive to sharing the access and information you need to be successful. Some items are more important than others. For the truly critical items, be sure to articulate the consequences of not getting what you need. A few examples:

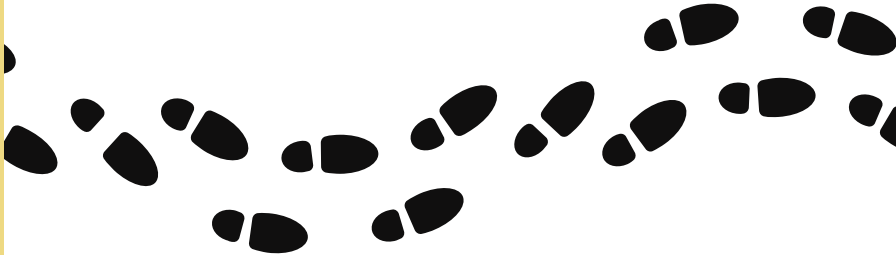
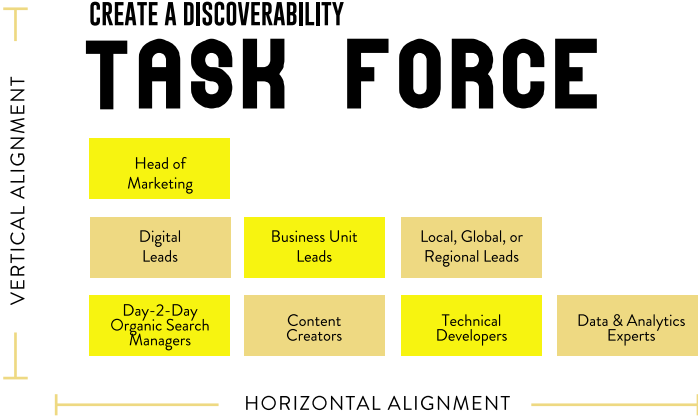
“If we don’t get development resources allocated, these changes won’t get implemented, and you won’t get results from SEO.”

“If you can’t grant us access to your web analytics, our decision-making will be pure guesswork, plus we can’t measure the impact of these search efforts so we can’t prove to you it’s working.

“We’ve seen with other clients that when there is no clear focus area defined for the program in year one, the effort tends to be less effective. It’s important that we decide what your most significant priorities are this year.”

MEET STAKEHOLDERS AND CREATE ADVOCATES

The immersion workshops are an important opportunity to meet with people in the organization, beyond your day-to-day client contact or immediate boss — a chance to seek perspective from people in other parts of the business who may have different goals or incentives. You can better understand broader concerns beyond the rankings and traffic SEOs love, to make you a better search decision maker who considers how search impacts all parts of the business. By knowing who has a stake in the work and bringing them to the table, you create a “discoverability taskforce” of advocates inside the client organization across different roles and business units.



CREATE A "DISCOVERABILITY TASK-FORCE"

A Discoverability Taskforce consists of advocates, allies, and stakeholders who are important in the pursuit of implementing your work as seamlessly as possible. The mix of people may vary. They may be all or partly client side or agency side. Consider the diagram below.

The orange box is the SEO program owner if it's your client, or if you are in-house, that person may be you. This individual is the cornerstone of this search work. Working closely with the search lead are fellow practitioners relevant to search, like content creators, technical developers, or analytics experts. Above that individual may be vertical stakeholders, like the person in charge of all digital marketing efforts, or perhaps the head of marketing like a CMO. Then, parallel to the head of digital might be other department heads in the organization. These are horizontal stakeholders; they may be business unit leads like heads of product or service lines, heads of certain regions or global markets, or other departments like sales and accounting.

All stakeholders have different responsibilities, and SEO outcomes impact them differently. Listen deeply and understand how they fit, any preconceived notions they have about search, obstacles they face, and what success looks like to them. It's important to give them a seat at the table and proactively seek their input and opinions. This dialogue helps you identify the advocates and the skeptics. Getting into the same room at the same time with a common purpose breaks down search program-killing silos. You can leave the search immersion workshop with allies and advocates who ensure your success — these are the people who will break up log jams and fight for your work inside the organization. Empower them to do that through communication, education, and alignment.

ROOT OUT POTENTIAL OBSTACLES TO THE SEARCH PROGRAM

The search immersion workshop is also a pivotal moment to root out potential stumbling blocks. This may include internal politics, resource constraints, or other business challenges. Ask the hard questions and put the onus on everyone to make search successful. Read the room and read between the lines. If you detect any skepticism or tension or discomfort, don't shy away from it. Dig deeper.

One way to do that is a simple sticky note exercise. Include the stakeholders, advocates, and skeptics — we want to hear from them all. We ask two questions:

- 1. What will it take for this program to succeed?
- 2. What obstacles might cause it to fail?

Allow about 10 minutes for people to brainstorm as much as possible on their sticky notes, throw them up on a wall, and then sort and group them. We pull out common themes and discuss as a group. They will reveal the internal actions they need to take, things they have seen work or fail in the past, and political, prioritization, or budget obstacles that put the program at risk. This simple exercise creates ownership beyond the lone SEO expert for the success or failure of search at the company.

DIAGNOSE YOUR CLIENT'S SEARCH MATURITY

We regularly kick off partnerships with a structured maturity assessment, then conduct it annually to show how they are progressing on a search maturity curve over time. Here's a quick crash course.

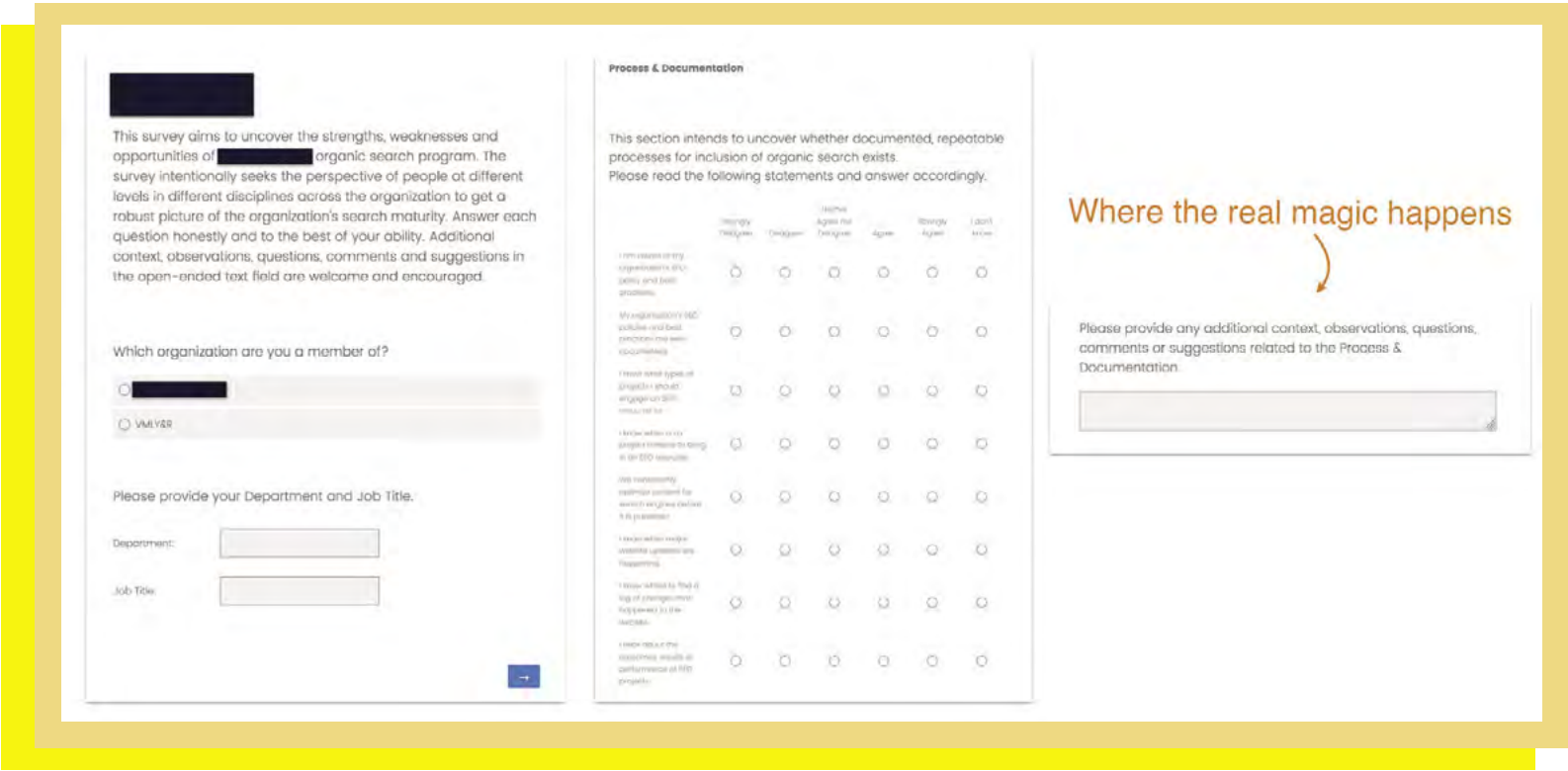
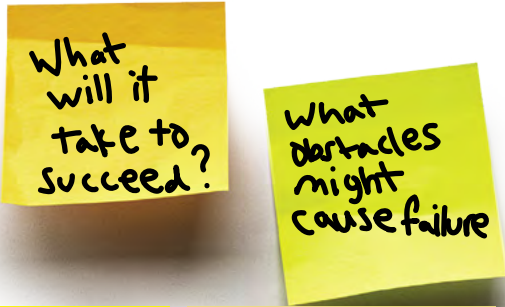
The most difficult blockers any SEO program encounters often have nothing to do with search engines. Instead, they are organizational problems like people, processes, and integration. This maturity assessment exercise can open your eyes to problems a business needs to solve internally before meaningful search work can get done.

This isn't just punching numbers into a spreadsheet or a one-sided assessment. Ask as many stakeholders as possible across many departments and at many levels in the organization to participate in the maturity assessment survey.

We ask questions that help us assess the health of the organization when it comes to having defined processes, necessary staffing, adequate knowledge, enough capacity, and advance planning of important search work.

We collect the survey responses, then score the brand in each category and overall.

We use the scores to help the client visualize where they fall on the maturity curve. The scores are helpful, but we also share eye-opening quotes from the anonymous, open-ended answers to help the truth hit home. Those answers are especially insightful for uncovering pain points and missing links in their search program.



PRIORITIZE KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

Based on the survey outcomes, scores, and open-ended answers, identify no more than three top priority areas for the client to focus on in year one to improve their search program. Too many, and you lose focus. It's unrealistic to tackle three major program challenges for most brands in a year. Some examples may include:

- Developing a clear, aligned strategy for the search program that was missing before
- Breaking down silos and achieving alignment with stakeholders across departments and levels that impact the ability to implement a successful search program
- Increase education and knowledge sharing about search and success stories across the organization
- Developing clear, refinable process and documenting that process for democratization and scale
- Improving technical or content governance that impacts search

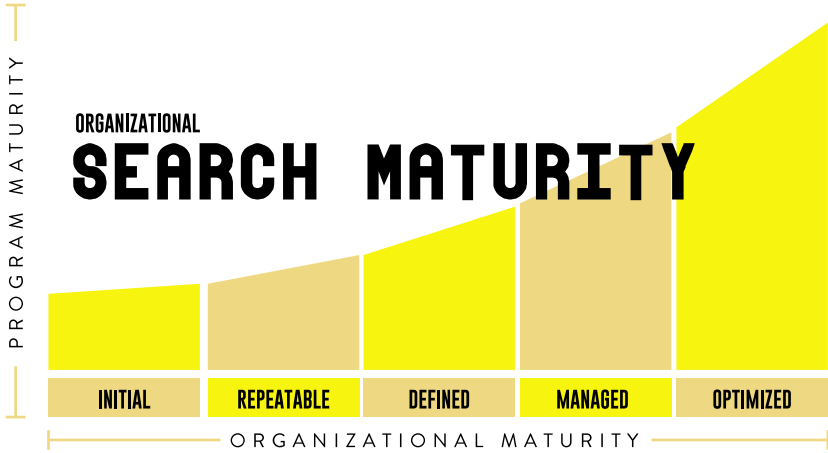
PROPOSE SOLUTIONS AND ASSIGN CLEAR OWNERSHIP

Based on the key areas of focus, identify how to take action and who will own that action. It's essential that you achieve absolute clarity about what, specifically, the client must be responsible for, and what you as their search partner will own. Specific action items based on those priorities may be things like:

- Identifying and creating case studies to market SEO successes to the organization
- Unifying editorial content calendars to align disparate content workflows
- Allocating more points in each dev sprint to dedicate to SEO improvements

MATURITY SCORES

CRITERIA	SCORE
KNOWLEDGE & LEARNING	3.9
PERSONNEL, RESOURCING & INTEGRATION	3.6
MEANS, CAPACITY & CAPABILITIES	3.4
PROCESS & DOCUMENTATION	2.9
PLANNING & PREPARATION	2.7





SELL THE
SEARCH
DREAM.
NOT
THE
PIPE
DREAM.

FINALLY, THE SEARCH
IMMERSION WORKSHOP IS
THE IDEAL PLACE TO ALIGN
ON THE PROMISE AND
POSSIBILITIES OF
ORGANIC SEARCH.

CLEARLY ARTICULATE SHARED PURPOSE

This meeting of the minds to kick off a search program is a chance to get everything out in the open, articulate a shared purpose to a full audience of stakeholders, and build momentum from day one. Be sure to verbalize the goals and ask for verbal agreement like you're in an emergency exit aisle on a plane. It's important to leave the immersion workshop agreeing on what to accomplish and how to get there.

PAINT THE PICTURE, SELL THE DREAM

This is the beginning of the relationship (or perhaps a fresh start on a soured relationship). People are fresh with optimism and hope, and great opportunity lies ahead. Use the immersion workshop to capitalize on this energy and help the stakeholders envision their brand (and themselves) in this new world of search success. Organic search has a ton of great selling points — reaching the hand-raisers, inherently high-ROI, lasting effects, builds on itself over time, integrates seamlessly with other marketing efforts, doesn't stop when the media dollars stop. There's a lot to get excited about; get everyone to buy into the shared mission.

SHOW THE HORIZON TO RESULTS

Don't let your infinite optimism cause you to make grand promises you can't keep. Don't assume everything will go smoothly with zero problems. The consequences are very real. Be realistic and transparent about what's attainable. Acknowledge the obstacles you're likely to face. Be clear about how ambitious or conservative goals are based on projects that get prioritized and how resources are allocated. It's notoriously difficult to forecast ROI and timing to outcomes with SEO, but even a wide range with lots of caveats can help ground the client in what's possible.

ALIGN EXPECTATIONS

A chronically recurring theme in my research is that the gap between expectations and outcomes is directly proportionate to the client frustration when we get it wrong. Misaligned expectations are a huge problem in search partnerships. It happens most often when a client has unrealistic expectations of what search can and cannot do, when they expect ROI to happen faster than is realistically possible, or they expect a larger impact than what they get in return.

If a client doesn't understand the capabilities, drawbacks, and benefits of search, you may have overpromised and underdelivered. If a client thinks they know the right KPIs, but you didn't align in the beginning, success looks different to both of you. If the client thinks they don't have to participate, it's because you weren't clear and didn't hold them accountable. If the client expects every SEO change to have immediate impact, you didn't explain it well, or at best, you were complicit in allowing them to believe it.

It's our responsibility to close the gap between expectations and reality. Attain absolute clarity to reduce misunderstanding. Eliminate the space for them to create their own personal narratives. Let them know what to expect from you, and what's expected of them for this to work. Repeat it, get verbal agreement, and level-set at every opportunity.

IN THE GAP

EXPECTATIONS

DOUBT - UNCERTAINTY - FRUSTRATION - ANXIETY - STRESS

REALITY

RAISE RED FLAGS EARLY AND GET THE PROGRAM BACK ON TRACK QUICKLY

Your clients and bosses are very smart and capable, too. They want search to work just as much as you do. Search practitioners can't shy away from hard conversations. Be clear about what stands in the way, what you need from them, and the processes in place for bottlenecks and conflict resolution. Have hard conversations. This step is essential, but many search experts never do it.

Raise red flags early and get the program back on track quickly. Prevention is much easier than solving a crisis. Trust your gut. If it feels off, it probably is. Flag it with your boss or client as quickly and directly as possible. Inventory the situation and clearly articulate that, "If we are to accomplish X, then we need to do Y." This might be things like:

- "In order to implement SEO recommendations and get results, we need to increase development resources by X points per agile sprint."
- "In order to ensure we can quickly publish content without bottlenecks, we need to establish a content calendar and regular cadence for content to come our way for optimization."
- "In order to make sure we meet your expectations, we need to align on measurable KPIs before deploying SEO projects."

Initiate this conversation before your boss or client has to ask for it. If your boss is calling for the retrospective, you're too late. Not being honest about challenges the search program faces costs critical time, money, and results.

CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

Whether you are starting search for the first time or if you are realigning a program that went off track, try this search immersion workshop to align (or realign) on expectations, outcomes. Even if the route changes, having a roadmap can reduce anxiety and obstacles to successful search efforts for all. Now is your chance to close the gap between expectations and reality, and ensure the success of your organic search program. ☺



HAVING A ROADMAP
CAN REDUCE ANXIETY
AND OBSTACLES TO
SUCCESSFUL SEARCH
EFFORTS FOR ALL.
NOW IS YOUR CHANCE TO
CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN
EXPECTATIONS AND
REALITY.



To keep up with Heather and the ongoing developments & innovation at VMLY&R, give them a follow on Twitter: @HeatherPhysioc @VMLYR

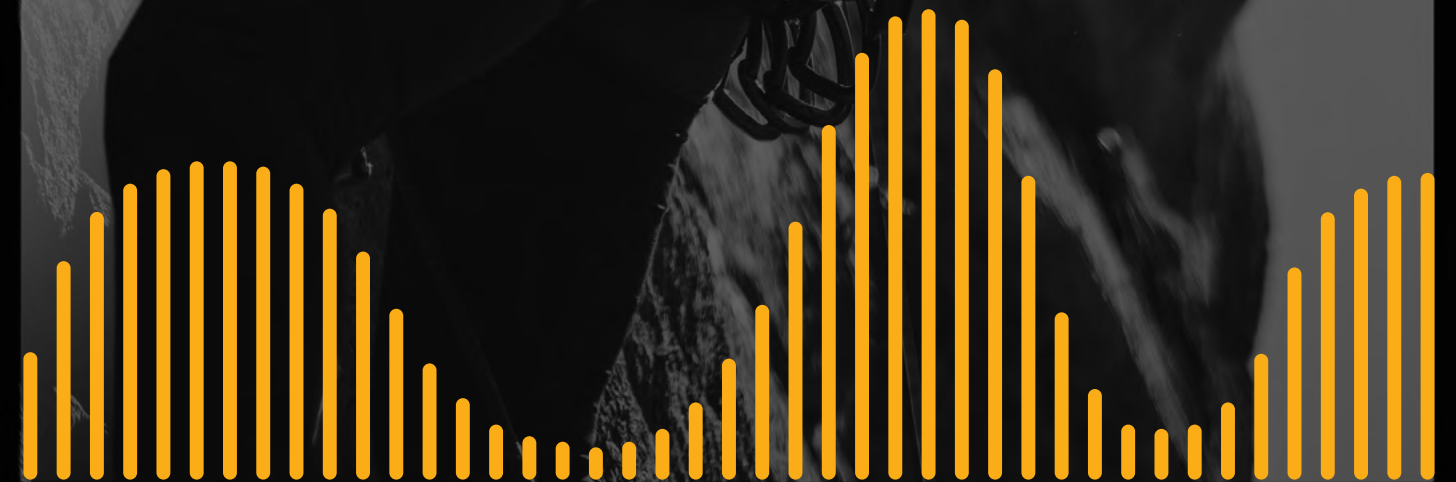


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PAGES

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SEO

ARTICLE - No. 1

**LET IT GO: HOW TO EMBRACE
AUTOMATION AND GET
WAY MORE DONE**

Francine Rodriguez | Wardstream | P. 14

ARTICLE - No. 2

**I WANT MONEY,
LOTS AND LOTS
OF MONEY**

Russ Jones | Max | P. 24

ARTICLE - No. 3

**THE IMPORTANCE OF
UX FOR SEO**

Robin Lord | Distilled | P. 38

ARTICLE - No. 4

**GETTING THE MOST FROM
GOOGLE MY BUSINESS
IN 2020**

Joy Hawkins | Sterling Sky, Inc. | P. 48

ARTICLE - No. 5

**SEO REPORTING:
PROVE YOUR VALUE**

Dana DiTomaso | Kick Point | P. 54

ARTICLE - No. 6

**SEARCH IMMERSION:
PUT YOUR BEST FOOT
FORWARD**

Heather Physioc | VMEY&R | P. 60

ARTICLE - No. 7

**AN SEO REPORTING INTERVIEW
WITH: CYRUS SHEPARD**

Cyrus Shepard | Max | P. 76

ARTICLE - No. 8

**EMPATHY AND PERSUASION:
TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL LINK
OUTREACH**

Andrew Dennis | Page One Power | P. 80

CONTENT
TO THE
USER



SEE THIS AND ALL THE ARTICLES FROM ISSUE THREE 2020 HERE

Q3-020

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

FEATURING:
FRANCINE RODRIGUEZ
RUSS JONES
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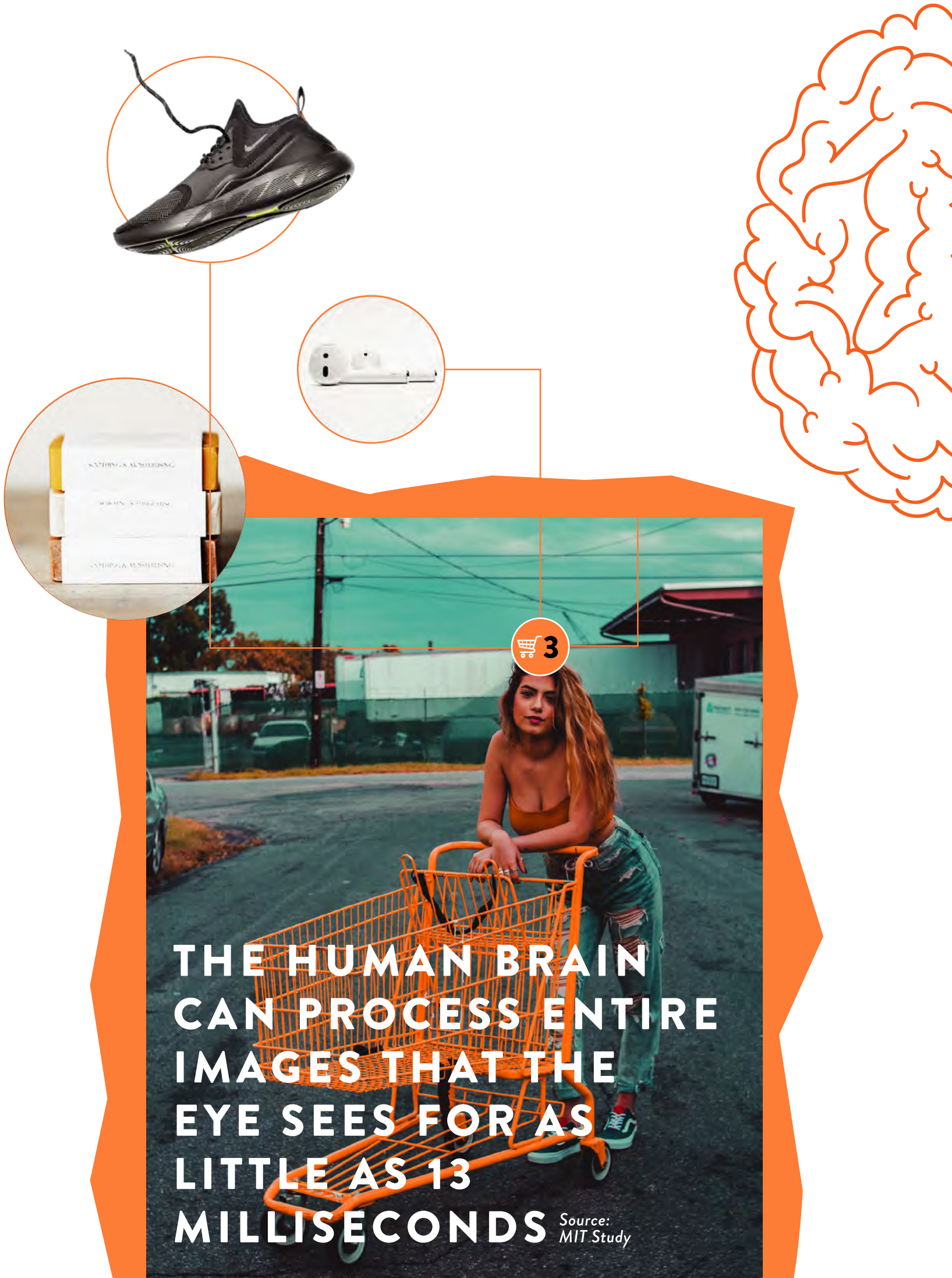
AS SEEN IN
Q4 2020

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

eCommerce #GOALS

OPTIMIZE IMAGES
FOR THE NEW
ONLINE SHOPPER

THERE IS A
TREMENDOUS
OPPORTUNITY
FOR ECOMMERCE
BRANDS TO
INCREASE
DISCOVERABILITY,
IMPROVE ONLINE
SHOPPER
EXPERIENCES,
AND GENERATE
ADDITIONAL
REVENUE THROUGH
IMAGE OPTIMIZATION.



THE HUMAN BRAIN
CAN PROCESS ENTIRE
IMAGES THAT THE
EYE SEES FOR AS
LITTLE AS 13
MILLISECONDS

Source:
MIT Study

SEARCH ENGINES, SOCIAL NETWORKS,
AND ECOMMERCE PLATFORMS HAVE
BEEN PLACING MORE AND MORE
IMPORTANCE ON PRODUCT VISUALS
FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS:

- Consumers want to see what they're getting before they buy
- Improved and increased discovery
- Potential for quick sales
- Potential to increase the average order value
- Reduction in returns

IMAGES ARE EVERYWHERE

Interestingly, the majority of SERP features now include an image, carousel, or video. Search engines also provide additional organic opportunities for product discovery, research, and quick sales with visuals at the core: image search, local, shopping, featured snippets, knowledge panel, visual search, and even voice assistants. At the same time, platforms like Shopify, Pinterest, Instagram, and Amazon provide data-syncing integrations to make it easier for brands of all sizes to sell online. How do you adapt your strategy to take advantage of all of these surfaces while improving the customer experience and generating ROI? Through image optimization, of course.

7 WAYS TO OPTIMIZE IMAGES FOR ECOMMERCE SUCCESS

ONE Create Visual Content Guidelines

Align images with objectives at each stage of your shopper journey. Where discovery calls for lifestyle images, those used for purchase decisions should be product focused. On the flip side, when engaging customers, educational, entertaining and cause-oriented content is more effective.

Discovery

Category pages should contain lifestyle images showing the product in the wild. When customers see a person using or wearing a product, it can help them imagine themselves using it. And including additional related products can potentially increase average order value (AOV).

Engagement

For blog posts, articles, and news pieces, it's best to utilize images that add value which helps the audience visualize the content and keeps them engaged. This content can be useful for customers in both the discovery and research phases. Sharing this content on social media with a compelling story or question is an excellent way to drive engagement.

Purchase Decisions

Customers rely heavily on product images before buying anything online. According to a Field Agent study, 83% of US smartphone users surveyed found product images to be very influential when making purchase decisions.

- Product images should be on-brand and clutter free with a clear focal point. Products should be in the foreground and unobstructed.
- Product pages should include multiple angles of each product so that customers can adequately evaluate before buying. Depending on the product, adding a 360° video or 3D model is a plus. If augmented reality is beyond your budget, size.link is a great alternative to help shoppers visualize the size of a product in their space.

Measuring Success

Keep an eye on referral traffic, new/returning users, and whether additional products on a page resulted in increased AOV. Including feedback forms at different stages of the shopper journey can also help you collect data at the customer level to improve your visual strategy.

TWO Be Conscious Of Diversity & Inclusion

Many eCommerce brands do not recognize the value of diversity in their marketing. When customers are shopping online, they imagine themselves using (or wearing) products before making decisions. If every model is a young, slim, white woman or a fit, white man with a beard, does that accurately represent a brand's consumers? Chances are, not at all. In today's world, representation of BIPOC, BAME, LGBTQ, and different body types of varied ages and genders is paramount. And content should be accessible for all (more on that later).

"Only 9% of Americans say they feel represented in the advertising they see." - Global Web Index, USA Q2 2020

Smaller brands and entrepreneurs may rely extensively on stock photos and illustrations due to budget and resource constraints. But many image banks do not prioritize diversity. Although some have created dedicated image collections (hopefully as a starting point) while others are completely specialized, it would be ideal to see image banks with diversity portrayed throughout their entire catalogues. (I hope to see this in the not-so-distant future!)

Getting Started & Measuring Success

Choose images that are not overused and that tie in with your visual content guidelines whenever possible. Then, edit them to make them unique.

Selecting and adapting photos can seem labor intensive. At the outset, use channel data to determine your best-selling items, highest converting pages, and pages with high bounce rates. Use this data to prioritize which pages to rework. Then compare original data with results to measure success.

Image Banks with Diverse Photos and Illustrations

- [wocintechchat](#) on Flickr
- [nappy.co](#)
- [genderphotos.vice.com](#)
- [blackillustrations.com](#)
- [createherstock.com](#)
- [pexels.com](#)
- [unsplash.com](#)
- [ukblacktech.com/stockphotos/](#)
- [tetraimages.com](#) (blend collection)

THREE Research Queries, Topics, & Trends

Think beyond keywords (and long-tail keywords!). Searchers use natural language in their queries. The copy should be conversational and relatable. Also, consider this when selecting images and writing supporting text. Think about the questions your customers would ask, as well as relevant topics and trends.

Questions to Consider

- What problem does the product solve?
- What questions do your customers ask about the product before deciding on the brand?
- Does the product come in different sizes, colors, etc.?
- What are your products' or brand's Unique Selling Propositions (USPs), and how can you showcase them to stand out? (i.e. free shipping, local, handmade, organic, cruelty free, sustainable, cause supporting)

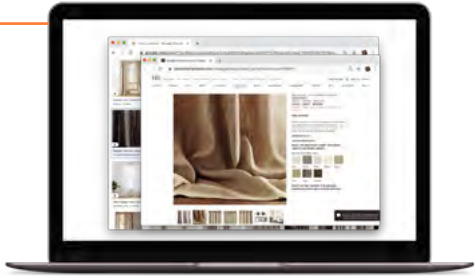
What You See is What You Get: Matching Visuals with Queries

Think of images as answers to the above questions. If someone asked, "What are those curtains made of?" The text may say linen, but a close-up photo or video will help them make an informed decision. Other questions like "Will light shine through these curtains?" can have subjective answers. Visuals provide more accurate representations so that customers are satisfied when they receive their orders, which means fewer returns.

Queries, Topics, & Trends Tools

Stay informed on the latest topics and trends to make sure your visuals are relevant using the following tools:

- [Answer the Public](#)
- [BuzzSumo](#)
- [Rising Retail Categories](#) by Google
- [Google Trends](#)
- [Think With Google](#)
- [Google Search Console](#)
- [Pinterest Trend Reports](#)



FOUR

On-Page & Accessibility-First SEO

As the volume of image results continues to grow in SERPs, optimizing image file size, file names, alt text, titles, meta descriptions, and captions are becoming significantly more important. However, on-page SEO is not only necessary for search engines to understand and display the right content to your audience, it is also crucial for accessibility. For this reason, marketers should always think about the user first.

Getting Started

If you have an existing site, it's best to start with an audit to identify the priority and critical issues. Google has several tools that can help, including Lighthouse Extension, Mobile-Friendly Test, PageSpeed Insights, and Test My Site. Images are one of the key culprits for heavy pages that lead to slow load and poor performance.

Use Screaming Frog to crawl your site to identify duplicate and missing tags. Create a plan with your Product, SEO, Content, Design, Development, and Performance teams to ensure alignment and better results:

- Image file names should be lowercase, separated by hyphens, and should describe what's in the image, being as concise as possible (three to five words).
- Write Alt Text, Alt Titles, Meta Descriptions, and Captions for the user using natural language. And describe the content of the image in the context of the page.
- Image size vs. quality: Compress images without compromising quality using 'Save for web' in Photoshop or use a tool like Optimizilla. It may be worth exploring the enabling of caching and compression on your site and considering the use of a Content Delivery Network (CDN) if you have a lot of images, and if it makes sense for your site.
- Include all images in your Sitemap and submit to GSC so that they can be indexed by Google.
- There are several tools that can be used to QA test and audit sites for accessibility. Using a screen reader app to navigate through your site using sound can help you narrow down areas that need improvement.

Measuring Success

Heat maps are a useful way to see how users interact with the elements of each page on your website. This data can be used to determine the most effective and least effective images on a page. In Google Analytics, monitor high bounce rates regularly to reduce missed opportunities. If someone clicks on an image and leaves immediately, chances are their expectations were not met, and something needs to be adjusted either in the image or on the page.

FIVE

Create Visual Content Guidelines

What would a potential customer be more inclined to click? An image with a product tag, verification that it is in stock and reasonably priced, has reliable reviews, and includes free shipping? Or one with no indication that it is even a product at all? Chances are the former. Unlike many rich results, rich product images are where eCommerce brands can benefit from traffic and potentially quick sales.

Getting Started

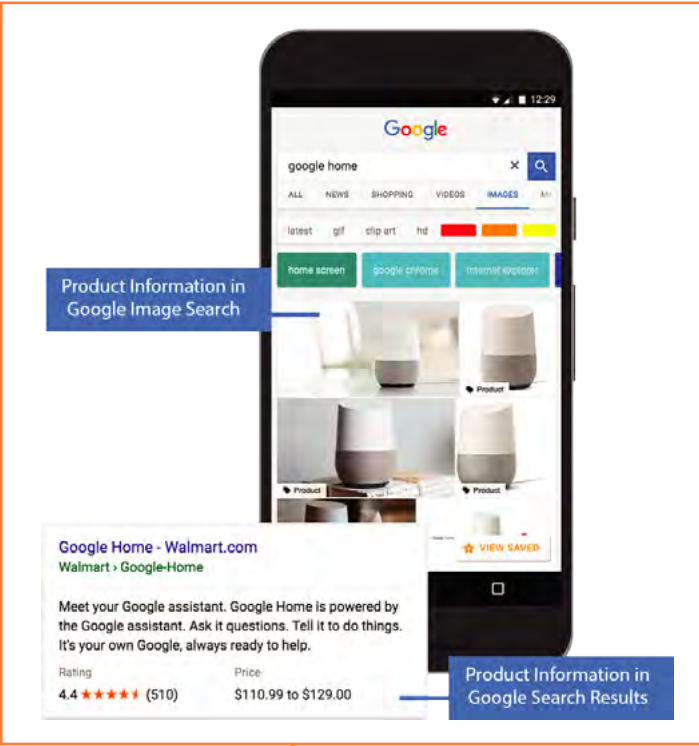
Google's Structured Data Gallery lists supported structured data categories. For eCommerce sites, several are worth exploring, depending on goals and the type of content to be marked up.

Double Check & Monitor

When implementing structured data, use the Rich Results Test to ensure there are no errors and minimization warnings on each page. Then, use the URL inspection tool in Google Search Console (GSC) to see how the page is displayed. And finally, check the rich result status report in GSC regularly to monitor potential errors over time.

Measuring Success

Test structured data on small subsets of products before rolling it out to a full catalogue. The Performance report in GSC shows how often a page appears as a rich result, how often users click on it, and the average position of the page in search.



Source: Google Developers

SIX

Sync Product Data

Leverage marketplaces for added visibility, wider audiences, and opportunities to increase revenue. By providing searchers with the most up-to-date product information directly on these platforms, it can facilitate the discovery process, providing an enhanced user experience and generating quick sales.

Since April, Google has been offering free Shopping listings in the US (with the plan to expand globally by the end of the year) for brands that have synced their products with the Google Merchant Center (GMC). Reach wider audiences by connecting your databases with Instagram Shops, Pinterest Catalogues, Amazon, and eBay, to name a few.

Getting Started

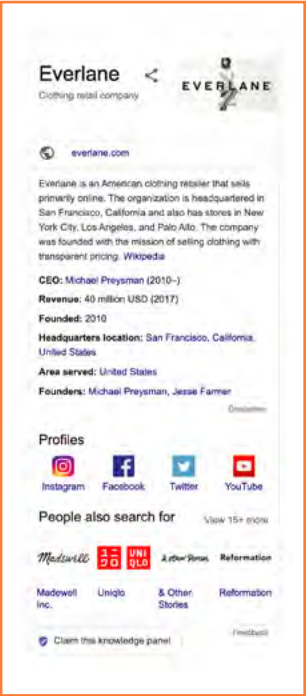
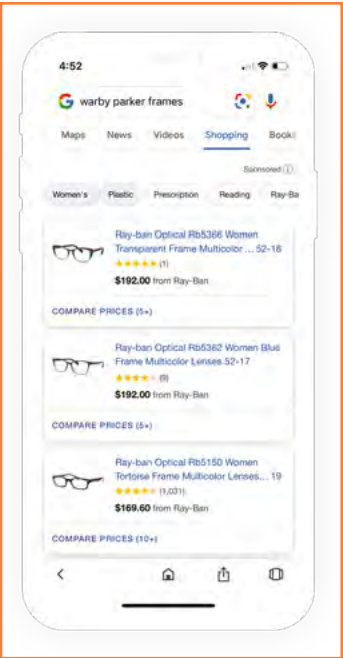
It's best to read the guidelines for each specific marketplace or platform to make sure it's a good fit. Include as many product categories as possible to help the algorithms understand the content and display the best results in search results.

Missed Opportunities

More brands should take advantage of Google's free Shopping listings. Currently, when customers do a branded search in the Shopping tab, if that brand did not sync their products with GMC, their competitors may benefit. See the example below, showing a Shopping search for 'Warby Parker Frames' and consequent 'Rayban' results.

Measuring Success

Google Analytics makes it quite easy to monitor traffic that comes from these marketplaces, clickthroughs to product pages, and conversions. With eCommerce goals setup, you can also track related sales revenue and ROI.



SEVEN

Get Verified

If your brand or entity has a knowledge panel, claim it. Verification helps search engines understand how your brand connects to everything else related to it in the broader Knowledge Graph, including images.

Images & The Knowledge Graph

In July, Google announced that image search would list related topics and entities under individual image results. Google uses deep learning to understand the image and text signals of the image, merges it with the content from the originating web page, and then matches it with entities from the Knowledge Graph. This combination allows users to explore related topics while demonstrating that Google is continuously expanding, innovating, and investing in their visual search capabilities.

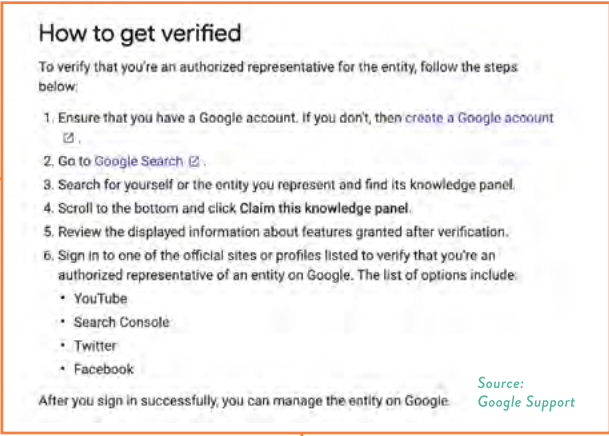
Getting Started

Google provides verification instructions that are quite easy to follow. Once claimed, you can "make suggestions" to update your featured image and content. You may also submit feedback inaccuracies. For example, if there's an unrelated brand with a similar name, you can ask to dissociate it from your entity in the Knowledge Graph.

A well-known precursor for a Knowledge Panel is a Wikipedia page. Do not try to write your own Wiki. It goes against their guidelines, and it will most likely get taken down. If your brand does not have a panel, allocate some time to sharing news about your brand and products with reputable third-party sites. These citations will provide an unbiased Wikipedia editor with sufficient sources to write a Wiki page for your brand when the time comes.

Verification on Other Platforms

Most platforms have a verification badge to help users identify notable people and entities. Although the guidelines are varied, the verification process also relies on citations on reputable third-party sites. However, if you're interested in selling on Pinterest, their Verified Merchant Program is worth exploring. The discovery engine launched this to help shoppers discover and buy from vetted brands. It's free to join, makes your brand stand out, and provides you with access to cool stuff – like data, a shop tab, and inclusion in shopping experiences.



Source: Google Support

TAKEAWAYS

WHEN DEVELOPING YOUR CONTENT AND SEO STRATEGY, REMEMBER THAT IMAGES PLAY A HUGE PART IN EVERYTHING YOUR CUSTOMERS DO ONLINE.

Visuals should be top of mind when planning content on every channel.

Create specific images for discovery, engagement, and purchase decisions to help consumers achieve their goals.

Images should be eye catching and add value to your audience.

Be intentional about infusing diversity.

Optimize image content for accessibility, search engines, and marketplaces.

Test, measure, and adapt your strategy for the best results. Data can only tell you so much about consumer behavior and intent. Ask your users for feedback to dig a little deeper. After all, the customer is always right. 🎯



Let Joelle know how your online shopping sprees go on Twitter:
[@joelleirvine](https://twitter.com/joelleirvine)

VOLUME 3
ISSUE 4
2020

PAGES

AN SEO MAGAZINE

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PROVEN
SEO

ARTICLE - No. 1

HOW TO MAKE SEO SOLVE
YOUR PAID SEARCH
ADVERTISING PROBLEMS

Josh Baumann & Meagan Guise
Rocket Clicks | P. 14

ARTICLE - No. 3

SEO MATURITY: HOW TO GROW
SEARCH AT YOUR COMPANY

Heather Physioc | VMLY&R | P. 36

ARTICLE - No. 5

HOW YOUR OUTREACH
PRACTICES SHOULD CHANGE
DURING & AFTER A PANDEMIC

Danica Barnack | Page One Power | P. 72

ARTICLE - No. 7

TURN EVERYDAY TASKS INTO
SUSTAINABLE WEBSITE TRAFFIC

Dmitri Kustov | Regex SEO | P. 96

ARTICLE - No. 2

CONTENT OPTIMIZATION:
THINGS NOT STRINGS

Charles Taylor | Verizon Fios | P. 24

ARTICLE - No. 4

SEO VS. PPC: TWO WILL ENTER -
TWO WILL WIN

Connor Bonam & Bert Berousek
Deedee Inspire | P. 64

ARTICLE - No. 6

e-COMMERCE #GOALS:
OPTIMIZE IMAGES FOR THE
NEW ONLINE SHOPPER

Joelle Irvine | Executive Growth Marketer | P. 80

SEE THIS AND ALL THE ARTICLES FROM ISSUE FOUR 2020 HERE

Q4-020

[CLICK HERE TO READ](#)

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CHARLES TAYLOR

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CONNOR BONAM & BERT BEROUSEK

DANICA BARNACK

JOELLE IRVINE

DMITRII KUSTOV

013.

AS SEEN IN
Q1 2021

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF SEO



SEO IS AN EXPERIMENTAL FIELD.

When your website is at the mercy of an elusive algorithm, it opens up the playing field to innovate and push the boundaries on traditional tactics and “best practices.”

However, throughout shifting trends and algorithm updates, there's one thing that still holds true: what's good for the searcher is good for SEO.

Yet, in the relentless pursuit for more traffic, many digital marketers continue to forget this — effectively hindering their SEO efforts by making the same mistakes over and over again.

So instead of writing another article about what you should do to have a search-friendly website, I feel that it's more valuable to share what you shouldn't do.

The truth is that you can innovate as much as you want, but if you make one (or multiple) of these common mistakes, it's not going to make much of a difference.

**WITHOUT FURTHER
ADO, HERE ARE THE
SEVEN DEADLY SINS
OF SEO.**

Recognize them,
and avoid them at all costs!

Sin No. 1:

SPAMMY BACKLINKS

Backlinks are essential to SEO. The more quality links you have, the more credible and authoritative your site is in the eyes of a search engine.

However, building backlinks is notoriously difficult.

Over the years, marketers have had to get creative with their tactics. This has also led some people to seek out ethically questionable practices to get more links, primarily by paying for them.

Buying backlinks falls under the category of black hat SEO.

For those unfamiliar, these are bad SEO tactics that violate search engine guidelines in an attempt to manipulate the system.

Basically, it's considered cheating, and your website can get penalized for it. Search engines have no problem taking action against your website if it violates their rules. If you're going to play the traffic game, you have to play it fair.

Aside from being pretty unethical, paying for backlinks is also a generally ineffective tactic. This is because many of the links available for purchase come from spammy, irrelevant websites.

One of the first things you learn in SEO is that not all backlinks are equal in value. Search engines place significantly more weight on links that come from credible websites.

Ten high quality links is much better than 100 shady links.

Spam links can happen organically, too. Sometimes these low-quality websites will link to you on their own, so it's important to mine through your backlink profile periodically and do a clean sweep of the spam.

So while it may feel tempting to go after spammy links for a quick "boost," it's not worth the consequences. Instead, focus your efforts on organically sourcing links by creating high-quality content that will make other websites want to link to you.

Sin No. 2:

MISUNDERSTANDING SEARCH INTENT

Search intent is the purpose or end goal behind a user's query.

The reason search intent is tricky is because the way you understand a term can be entirely different from the way it's interpreted by a search engine.

This is best illustrated with an example:

Let's say you're writing an article on content management systems and want to target the high volume keyword "CMS." This makes sense because CMS is a common abbreviation for "content management system."

However, when you run "CMS" through search, you notice that all of the organic results have to do with an entirely unrelated topic: the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, a government agency.

facepalm

It's time to readjust the keyword targeting of your article.

If you write the entire piece around "CMS," it will likely never rank. This is because you're talking about a type of software, but the search intent for that keyword is related to a federal agency.

The easiest way to avoid a search intent mishap is to always do your due diligence during the keyword research process. As you can see from the example, it's as simple as running a quick search for the target keyword and reviewing the results.

This shows you how the search engine is interpreting the search query based on the content recommendations it provides.

Sin No. 3:

USER EXPERIENCE IS AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Having a website with poor UX is a one-way ticket to diminishing search rankings. Yet, for many marketers, user experience still takes a backseat to content creation.

You'll notice a recurring theme throughout this article: what's good for the user is good for SEO.

At some point, all of us have encountered a website that's slow, glitchy, and filled with pop-ups. When I land on a site like this, my immediate first instinct is to exit. I feel confident that many others would agree.

What's the point of creating world-class content if your audience is unable to or doesn't know how to navigate it?

Plus, solving a UX problem often requires additional help from a web designer or software developer. It's not always an easy fix, but it's a critically important one.

Search engines are designed to deliver the most user-friendly results on the web. So no matter how good your content is, it won't matter if your website makes it impossible to enjoy it.

For this reason, having a website that's functional, accessible, and easy to navigate should be at the top of your to-do list.

So no matter how good your content is, it won't matter if your website makes it impossible to enjoy it.

What's good for the user is good for SEO.

Sin No. 4:

OVER-OPTIMIZING

Believe it or not, there is such a thing as optimizing too much.

In SEO, we like to call it keyword stuffing. This is the process of overusing keywords on a web page in an attempt to achieve improved organic rankings. You're placing keywords in the meta data, body text, or link anchor text of a page in a way that's clearly forced or unnatural.

Here's an example:

"Company X is your one-stop-shop for all things social media marketing. Our social media marketing software is a world-class solution used by social media marketing professionals across the globe. Come here for all of your social media marketing needs."

Not all keyword stuffing is going to be this obvious, but you get the idea.

In the early days of the internet, you could load a web page with keywords as a way to "game the system" and boost rankings. But as time went on and search engines became more sophisticated, the practice quickly became obsolete. Now, keyword stuffing is associated with black hat SEO and can get your website penalized or even permanently deindexed.

It's worth noting that keyword stuffing can sometimes be unintentional. To avoid it, take the extra time to identify multiple keyword variants during your content planning and research process. Brainstorm different ways of saying the same thing — synonyms are your best friend.

When in doubt, remember that you're creating content for humans. Not bots or search engine crawlers.

Ask yourself:

Would a human enjoy reading that sentence? Does it flow naturally? Is it clear and easy to understand?

If the answer is no, it's time to go back to the drawing board.

Sin No. 5:

RELYING ON TRAFFIC AS THE SOLE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

At a high level, the goal of search engine optimization is to drive organic traffic. But that doesn't necessarily mean traffic should be the sole metric you use to monitor SEO performance.

By itself, traffic is nothing more than a vanity metric.

If you have one million monthly web visitors but none of those people converted into leads or customers, then it doesn't really matter, does it?

You have to look at traffic alongside other key metrics such as bounce rate, click-through rate, and conversions. Only then will you start to see the full picture of what's actually happening on your website.

It's also important to know that the data won't always be black and white. Some of your best converting pages can be some of the lowest trafficked. That doesn't mean they're any less valuable.

Don't become fixated on organic traffic alone. Although it is a strong indicator that your SEO efforts are making an impact, it's just one part of a much bigger story.

By itself, traffic is nothing more than a vanity metric.

Sin No. 6:

CUTTING CORNERS WITH CONTENT

It's time consuming to ideate and create great content; it just is. As a result, many marketers fall into the trap of creating lackluster pieces just for the purpose of ranking.

The more content you create, the more chances you have at ranking organically for new keywords. However, you should never compromise quality for quantity.

Adding to the mess of mediocre content won't do you any favors in the long run. If you're rushing through your editorial calendar just to get things published, it's likely that your pieces aren't worth your time and money.

Content without research, data, uniqueness, and somewhat of an entertainment level, rarely attract backlinks on their own and will be less appealing for other quality sites to want to link back to.

Additionally, you risk losing readership. Your content should be for your audience, first and foremost. If all you're doing is writing mindless 700-word articles for the sole purpose of ranking, how does that empower your brand, help your sales team, or encourage your audience to want to work with you?

It's more labor intensive, but taking the time to commit to creating good content is one of the best things you can do for SEO.

Step into your audience's shoes and what they value when you're ideating topics. Conduct research on how they like to consume content. Video or article? Podcast or live show?

Assess the SERP to see what's currently ranking and find gaps that those pieces are missing and make sure your pieces are more robust, data-driven, and easier to digest.

Creating SEO-driven content isn't an excuse to skip out on quality or creativity. In fact, these pieces should be non-negotiables if you want to outrank competitors and build your brand.



Pay attention to what's more interesting to users rather than what's the easiest for you to create.

Sin No. 7:

PUTTING COPY & RESEARCH ON THE BACKBURNER

The copy on your website plays a big role in the way web visitors perceive and understand your business. It also has a major effect on your SEO.

Thorough and strategic copywriting married with extensive audience research is critical to advanced search marketing overall.

By now, most marketers know that you have to perform keyword research before you can start writing content. However, many fail to understand just how granular you have to get with your research if you want to see real SEO results.

Take the time to dive deep into your target customer persona(s). Gain a micro-level understanding of what they care about and what problems they're trying to solve. Run in-depth keyword analyses to understand what terms they use to search. Assess the language your competitors are using.

Then, take those findings and weave them into your website copy.

Remember that traffic without conversions is just a number. Powerful copywriting is the secret sauce that draws users in, captures their intent, speaks to their pain points, and then convinces them to take action.

Not every marketer is an expert copywriter. But by doing the research to deeply understand your audience and their online behavior, every marketer can get better at writing copy that fuels organic traffic and conversions and makes their visitors have a more seamless experience.

Bottom Line

It's unlikely that you can attribute successful SEO to one single tactic, but you can tank your rankings by committing these deadly search sins.

Keep in mind how critical it is to keep the user at the center of your search efforts. In an industry that's constantly evolving, that's the one thing that's withstood the test of time. 🎯

think users first



Follow Izabelle on Twitter for more ways to repent of your SEO sins and get your search efforts saved. @izabellehundrev

VOLUME 4
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FRANCINE RODRIGUEZ
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IZABELLE HUNDREV
The 7 Sins Of SEO

SLOAN ROSEBERRY
Using Research In Your Content & SEO Strategy

THOMAS SWISHER
SEO Meta

ANDREW DENNIS
How To Build Content That Earns Links

JORDAN YOCUM
The Jordan Yocum Interview

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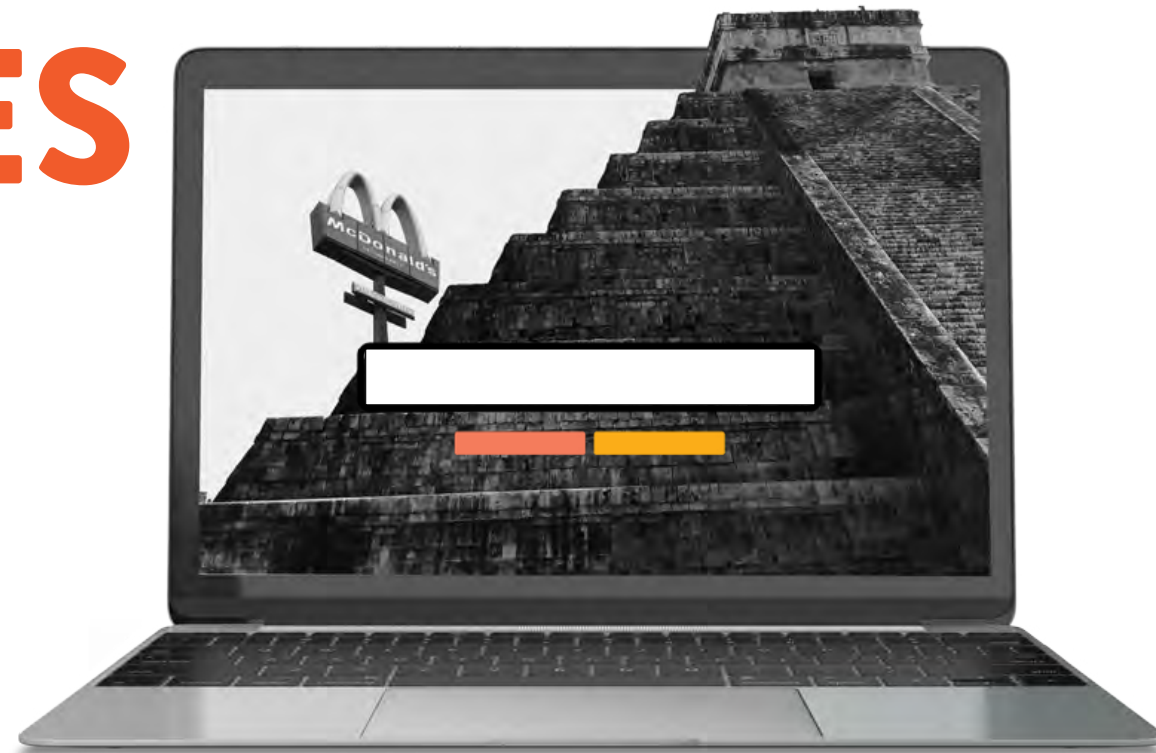
Q1-021

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JORI FORD

THE LOST ART OF BRANDED QUERIES



Britt Hankins

Discoverability Supervisor, [VMLY&R](#)

Searches without a brand name, otherwise known as unbranded or nonbrand searches, have been on the rise since 2016, according to [MomentFeed](#). Brand searches can be the brand name itself; executives at the company; parent companies or affiliates; initiatives; names of services or products; trademarks; and more.

As the consumer landscape has changed to mobile, local, and highly-personalized searching, the demand for optimizing for unbranded content, as marketers and SEOs, has increased. Naturally, this makes sense. We shift to optimize for how people are searching, and this helps us reach consumers who may not have known about our brand, or who hadn't thought of it as a solution to their needs.

But even with this consumer shift, we can't forget about the benefit of owning branded queries.

REVIVE BRANDED OPTIMIZATIONS

Thinking about branded terms became a relic in my previous agencies, until I started working on larger brands which focused more on campaigns, leaning heavily into other channels like media and social and brand awareness. When it came to these larger brands, I had to regain confidence that focusing on branded terms was the right space in which to play. It counteracted all the buzzing in the search industry about what to focus on, and data proved there were more unbranded searches than branded. Still, going against the grain proved valuable for my clients, and now I'm challenging us all to think about and optimize for branded search. It's not just important for the big brands; it's important for all brands.

Why Focus on Branded Queries?

Think of your branded search engine results page (SERP) as the 'homepage' someone lands on before interacting with your owned properties. This is their first impression of your brand before they actually meet you on your website or social media, so it's imperative to make a great first impression with reliable, current, and on-brand information.

This becomes increasingly important if you're running campaigns. When a consumer sees or hears your brand name via other channels like digital ads, radio, TV, or social media, they may turn to Google later on, if not right then, to discover more about the brand they encountered earlier.

When you Google your brand, what do you see? A knowledge card with facts and figures? Organic links to your website and paid search ads? What about People Also Ask (PAA) boxes, featured snippets, maps, news stories, or links to social media?

When you see these results, do you own them all? Are those links going back to the digital properties your brand owns, manages, or is a part of? Or, are there other sites, competitors, or third parties answering questions and taking up space about your brand and business? If you aren't there, someone else will be.



Get more qualified traffic that's closer to conversion, as these searchers are already familiar with your brand and show interest in your product or service.



Build brand awareness like you would with other channels and pair with other marketing initiatives.



Uncover insights about your brand from search data to fuel creative campaigns and inform other business or marketing decisions.



Don't leave your brand terms up for grabs, allowing for third party sites or competitors to overtake you within the search results.

014.

AS SEEN IN
Q2 2021

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

WE CAN'T
FORGET
ABOUT
OWNING
BRANDED
QUERIES.

WAYS TO OPTIMIZE BRANDED SEARCHES

It's likely you own basics within branded SERPs without much effort. There's not much of a need to add branded keywords to your content. Your website is there, along with perhaps a knowledge graph with a logo. But what about the details? There's a multitude of ways to dive in and find opportunities.

- + Claim and update the knowledge panel
- + Target PAA boxes
- + Leverage auto suggestions
- + Look into commonly searched questions

Knowledge Panel
Check to see what else can be owned on the Knowledge Graph or if the proper links are pulling in and pointing searchers to the right destination. Claim your knowledge card, if you haven't already, and be sure to get your social media profiles verified and your social media channels linking back to your main site. To level up, use schema-structured data to markup the social media profile links on your website. If your knowledge panel is inaccurate, make a suggestion with the "Feedback" button within the SERP.

PAA Boxes
Scour the PAAs on your brand name SERPs and see what common questions are being searched about your brand and who is answering. Consider building out FAQ content focusing on these branded questions so that you own the narrative. Remember, you need to have better content and answers than those who are already there. Level up by adding in more FAQ content discovered through customer service teams or community management channels. Don't forget to use schema-structured data here, too. This type of content can help you earn more PAAs and increase your brand's footprint within the SERPs.

Autosuggest
Start typing in your brand name in the search bar and see what autosuggestions pop up. Is there anything alarming? Or are there conversations in which you'd like your brand to be a part or the driver of? Go to these SERPs and see what information is present. Are there myths to dispel or outdated and wrong information still winning? This should be a call to action to either create content to beat these results or reach out to the site to provide accurate information.

A great example is recalls. Creating FAQ content around this topic or a hub to support this ever-changing and easily-outdated topic can ensure that you will successfully direct news outlets and search engines there in order to pull the latest information.

Question-based Queries
But what else can branded searches tell us? Aside from SERP digging, question-based brand terms are a gold mine and something we recommend to our clients frequently. Using different tools like Answer the Public, SEMrush or Moz, you can run your brand terms and pull commonly-searched questions. You can uncover themes and perceptions people may have about your brand, simply by analyzing commonly searched questions. This has led us to not only create content to answer and rank in search, but also to address these common questions in social media or even create brand awareness campaigns using this additional information.

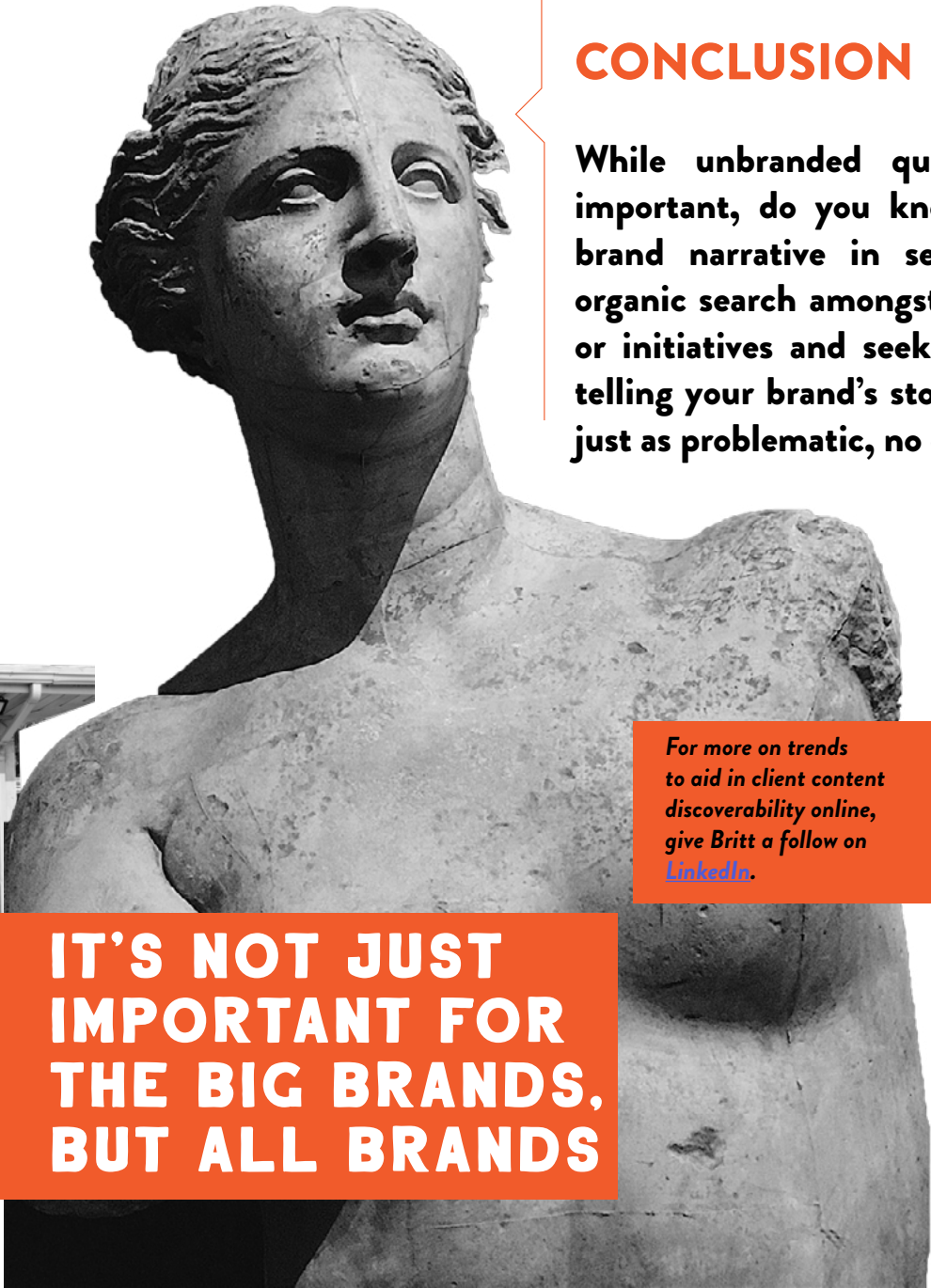


WHEN YOU
GOOGLE
YOUR BRAND,
WHAT DO
YOU SEE?

MONITORING BRANDED QUERIES

Unlike social media, getting brand mentions in search doesn't trigger a notification. There are no @tags or #hashtags to showcase someone using your brand name on the platform. Instead, track and monitor different variations of your brand name, misspellings, and even other ownable terms, such as products or product lines with a keyword ranking tool or Google Alerts.

Leverage tools like SEMrush or SimilarWeb to see search volume trends. If your spot increases in search volume during different months, is this tied to campaigns you've run via other channels? Or is it a result of brand seasonality? These insights can help prioritize when your focus should be on branded vs. unbranded search optimizations.



CONCLUSION

While unbranded queries are popular and important, do you know who is owning your brand narrative in search? Look to include organic search amongst other brand campaigns or initiatives and seek to ensure that you are telling your brand's story, not someone else or, just as problematic, no one at all. ☺

People also ask
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For more on trends to aid in client content discoverability online, give Britt a follow on [LinkedIn](#).

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BRITT HANKINS
ARTICLE No. 1 - The Lost Art of Branded Queries

ANISA AWAD
ARTICLE No. 2 - E-Commerce: Not Your Typical SEO

Daniel Bagley
ARTICLE No. 3 - Why The iOS Update Makes Organic SEO Relevant

STEPHANIE WALLACE
ARTICLE No. 4 - Winning With Barnacle SEO

CHARLES TAYLOR
ARTICLE No. 5 - What Should I Write About

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Q2-021

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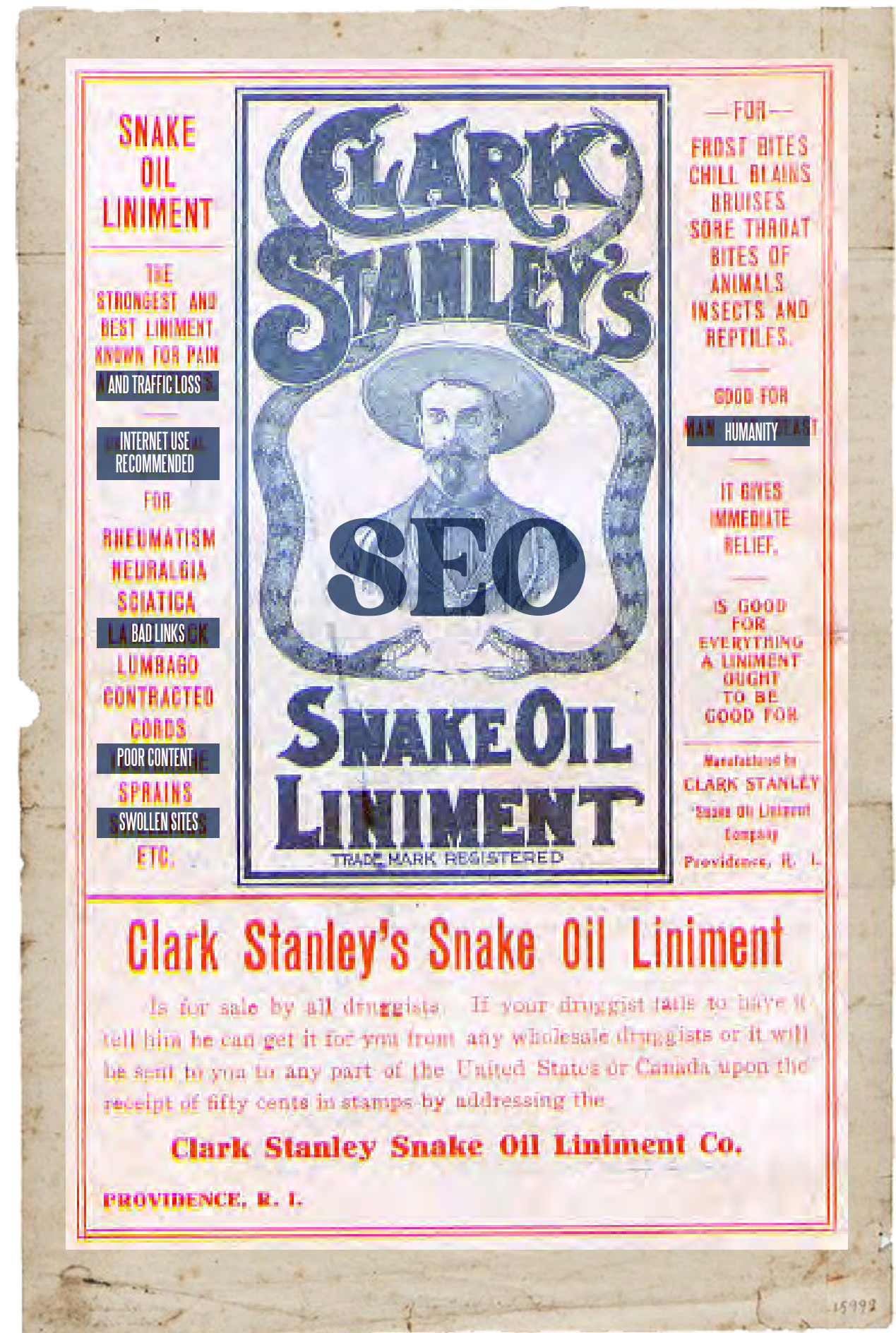
SEO Reporting: Prove Your Value

A common lamentation in the SEO world is that our stakeholders just “don’t get it.” They don’t understand what you do and why it’s valuable. They think that SEO is a bunch of snake oil and you just sit around all day spamming websites asking for links. Of course, it would be great if your stakeholders just inherently knew that the reason their phone keeps ringing, or that the sales continue to roll in, is because of your brilliant SEO work. But if you do a good job of communicating results from the very beginning of your project, you won’t need to convince them (as much) — they’ll know.

015.

AS SEEN IN
Q3 2021

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)



Monitoring VS. Reporting

What is likely happening here is that you may be mistaking monitoring with reporting. Monitoring is the data, the day to day, the checking that the graph is indeed going up and to the right as you expected. Reporting is the result, the proof that you're going in the right direction. Or, if you aren't going in the right direction, the knowledge of what needs to be done to correct your course.

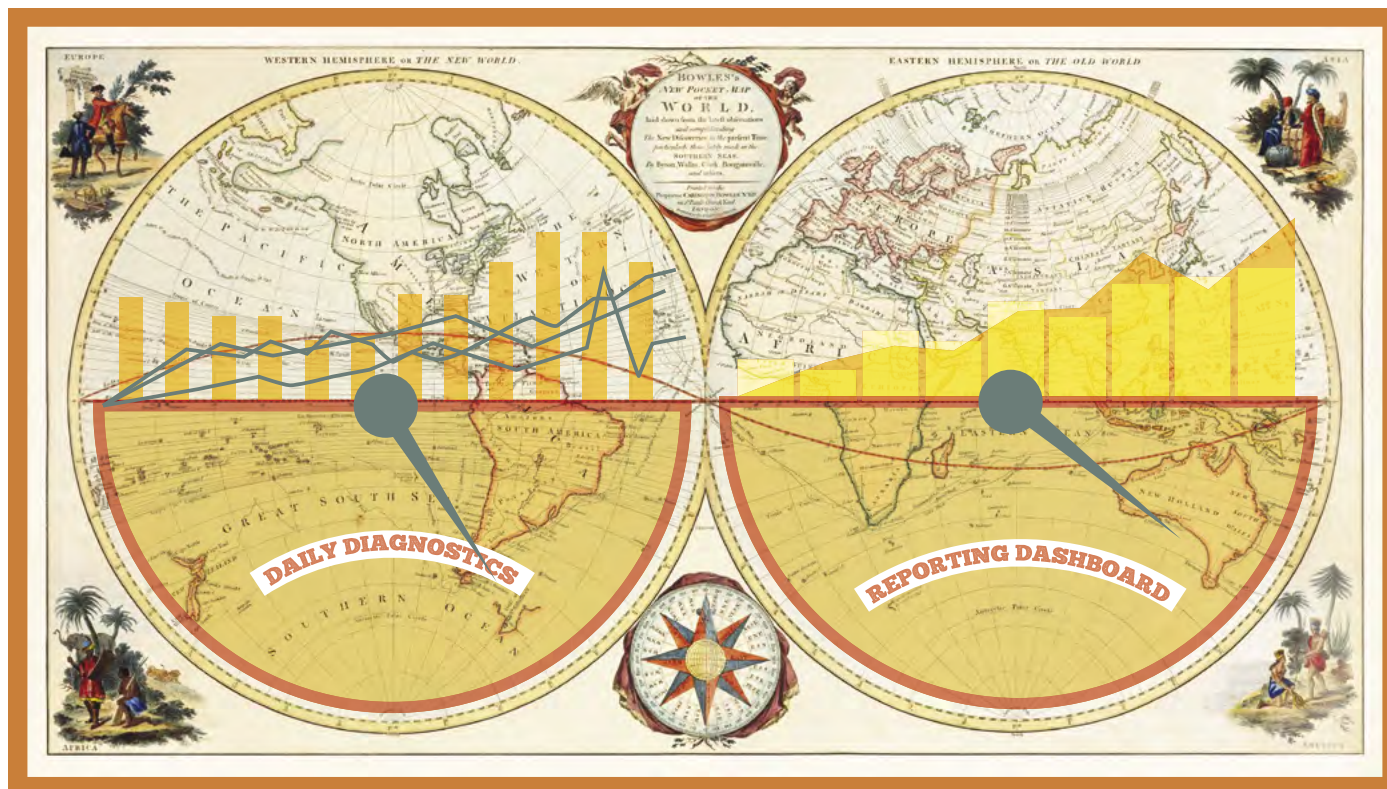
Instead of one report, you should actually have two — a diagnostics dashboard for your own use, and a report for your stakeholders.

The diagnostics dashboard is very much focused on the here and now. Are there errors in Google Search Console that you need to check out? What about that spammy new competitor in the map pack? Rankings have dropped. Why? These are the kinds of in-the-moment, actionable concerns that your dashboard should be bringing to your attention.

Here is a perfect, real-world example of why you need this dashboard. We had a client whose developers were a little heavy handed on the code updates. Knowing this, we were watching the site using Little Warden, making sure that their Google Tag Manager code was still present. Then on the 6th of the month, right after a major site migration, we got a notification that the Google Tag Manager code was gone. We alerted the client and the developers and the code was back on in a few hours. Imagine if we'd waited until the end of the month to pull a report, only to realize that the code had been gone for most of the month — ever since the site migration!

Monitoring for these types of issues is very important, and if you solve the issue in a timely fashion, it doesn't even need to be added to a report. Plus, the presence or absence of your GTM code isn't going to tell you if you're going where you need to go. It's like the difference between strategy and tactics — posting on Instagram three times a day is a tactic, but without knowing the why, you won't ever see the results you want from all this hard work.

Now that you have your diagnostic dashboard complete, what's left to go into your report to your stakeholders? Results. Specifically, results tied to goals. It's time to sit down and have an honest conversation with your stakeholders and find out what matters most to them.



Measure What Matters

Before we dive into the data, let's first take a step back and consider what we actually need to measure. A common mistake we see in marketing reporting is overlong reports. Remember the last time you spent six hours putting together 28 pages of sizzling commentary? Even after all that work, no one was really interested in going through it, page by page or slide by slide. Not even you.

Why is that? Why do we create reports that are so incredibly long, crammed full of charts and data and three letter acronyms? Perhaps it's insecurity — the more information, the better, right? Unfortunately we are not paid by the number of pounds of paper we can use up each month. Instead, we're paid for our marketing know-how. Reporting is very important, but taking screenshots for hours every month isn't exactly a great use of anyone's time. What to do?

Keep it short.



Business Goals to KPIs to Metrics

First, you need to agree on business goals for your organization. Don't just focus on so-called "marketing" goals. Instead, lay out all the goals. What are the major milestones that your organization needs to hit this year? Here is a recent example from one of our clients:

- 1. Increase qualified leads to 200/month
- 2. Have a qualified lead breakdown

These are great, measurable goals. You may have goals that are slightly less measurable. For example, "increase awareness" or "improve stakeholder engagement." Though these can be turned into measurable goals, they're going to need some work. Your job will be to shape these goals from formless nothings into goals that you can actually point to and say, "Yes, we got there!"

Now, back to your stakeholder's goals. Let's start with the first one: Increase qualified leads to 200/month. You might be tempted to track form fills in Google Analytics and call it a day. You can do better.

Note that our client specifically mentions qualified leads, not just any lead. And of course you want to be sure that leads via SEO are just as good as leads that come from other channels. There are several ways to accomplish this but a good way to start is to record the source of every lead and then see how leads via organic search are performing. See if there is a consistent percentage of unqualified to qualified leads each month, then see if you can improve that percentage.

For example, if 75% of unqualified leads become qualified, then you're going to need 267 form fills every month across all channels. If 60% of leads come from organic, that's 160 leads that you're responsible for. Now you know that you need an ongoing form fill counter in your dashboard — essentially a burndown chart for qualified leads. This way, you'll be able to see halfway through the month that you're going to hit (or miss!) your goal and can adjust your time and effort accordingly.

This math also assumes that you don't have leads visiting the site multiple times before they convert, but covering multi-touch attribution is a topic for another article!

Let's turn to that second goal: Have a qualified lead breakdown of 50% parts and service, 25% new equipment sales, 25% used equipment sales. Again, you'll have to rely on your stakeholders to categorize those qualified leads appropriately. You might be able to get this information another way if your website has separate forms for different services or some way to differentiate the type of lead, otherwise you'll have to rely on feedback from the CRM to get this mix. Since you already have the source saved to the lead, you can then map the lead mix by channel.

Working from our previous math, we now know that SEO needs to be responsible for 80% parts and service leads, 40% new equipment sales leads, and 40% used equipment sales leads. With this data, you can break down your burndown chart even further. You'll not only know if you're going to hit your total lead targets, but whether or not you're going to hit your division targets.

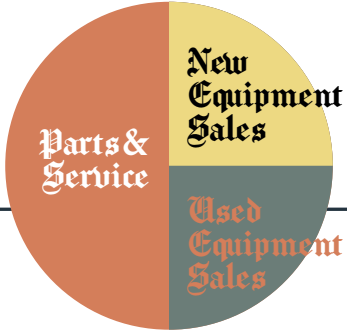
By tracking leads by division, we can also see if one division in particular is struggling. Maybe that mix is starting to skew 60/20/20 instead of the goal 50/25/25. Are there more parts and service leads because overall there are more leads for that sector, or are you struggling to bring in qualified traffic to your new and used equipment pages? Having this information in hand will make a huge difference in how you approach your day-to-day SEO work. Instead of focusing on more traffic, you can laser point your efforts on where you need to be.

MILESTONES TO HIT

- 1. Increase qualified leads to 200/month.



- 2. Have a qualified lead breakdown of 50% parts & service, 25% new equipment sales, and 25% used equipment sales.



Build Your Report

Now it's time to make that report. In this situation we're covering, you only need one page to cover everything you need to report on — leads and lead mix by channel, based against your goal figures. That's it.

It might be a shock to go from that 26-page report to a single-page report, and if you're worried about that, start dialing things back slowly. Start with this one page, and then slowly chop away pages you no longer need off the end. Before you know it, you'll have a single-page report. No one will miss that one page showing how many visitors you received from Luxembourg for your one location business in Chicago.

IT MIGHT BE A SHOCK TO GO FROM THAT 26-PAGE REPORT TO A SINGLE PAGE REPORT.

Use Their Words

In addition to making the report as short as possible, try to use the same language that the people you're reporting to use in their day-to-day speech. When you're having that conversation with your leadership team about goals, try to write down exactly how they phrase things. For example, do they say, "We want phone call conversions." or do they say, "We want to keep the phone ringing."? This will help guide the microcopy in your report and make the report more approachable.

You Shouldn't Need to be There


Additionally, assume that you won't be there to explain the report. Would it make sense without you there to explain it? If not, you need to add in microcopy — little pieces of explanation to accompany your charts and graphs. Not only should the report be understandable by everyone, it should be understandable for years to come.

Avoid Tables

SEO's are big Excel nerds, present company included. This means that we often turn to tables first when a nice graph would actually be a better choice. Not everyone is comfortable with tables and numbers, plus tables take longer to review and understand compared to looking at a line or bar chart. If you must present in table form, try to include bar charts or heatmaps inside each table to highlight your most important information.



Reporting might seem like something you can put off — something that you can focus on when you have more time to do it right, and that your everything-and-the-kitchen-sink-style reports are passable for now. Based on our experience, the best time to start working on a report is when you first start that job or that working relationship with a client. The second best time? Right now.



Prove Your Value

Why? Marketers are good at marketing. Everyone's been sold a bill of goods from a slick-talking marketer who didn't deliver, and while you may be committed to doing things right and getting the job done, you're dealing with years of unmet expectations from others in your industry. A clear report, without any bafflegab or useless metrics, can mean a world of difference in separating you from the rest of the pack.

People don't switch agencies or hire new in-house marketers because they want more of the same. People make changes when they don't understand how what you're doing is meant to help them get to where they need to go. Clearly stated goals and clear, short, and easy to understand reports will get you where you want to go. 🎯

VOLUME 4
ISSUE 3
2021

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PG. #5
JOY HAWKINS
GETTING THE MOST FROM
GOOGLE MY BUSINESS
TICKET

DANA DITOMASO
SEO Reporting:
PROVE YOUR VALUE
.....
WHY DO WE NEED REPORTS
PG. #9

012345678
BRITNEY
MULLER
SEO TASK PRIORITIZATION
PG. #15

DR. PETE MYERS
GOING META
ON YOUR SEO
PAGE #25

BRIE ANDERSON
SMALL BUSINESSES CAN'T AFFORD
(NOT TO DO)
SEO
PAGE #22

CYRUS
PG. SHEPARD #28
A BRIEF INTERVIEW

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Q3-021

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DANA DITOMASO
BRITNEY MULLER
DR. PETE MYERS
BRIE ANDERSON
CYRUS SHEPARD



HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE FUTURE OF SEO? WHERE IS THE INDUSTRY HEADED?

I feel very optimistic about the SEO industry in general. People will always have questions and will always turn to search engines for answers. For that reason, the professionals who know how to rank #1 will always be in high demand.

As for where the industry is headed, I'm quite bad at making predictions, but one of the main problems I see with Google these days is striking a balance between what searchers want to see and what will actually benefit them.

I mean two of the major SEO trends of 2019 were "searcher intent" and "behavioral factors." In other words, satisfy searchers and you will rank #1. The problem is that those searching for "to lose weight" will probably be more satisfied with a cheap weight loss supplement over a tailored diet plan and regular workout routine.

I'm not sure how Google is going to solve this going forward, but far too often the search result that people want is not what they actually need.

Tim Soulo
CMO - Ahrefs



FOR SOMEONE BEGINNING THEIR CAREER IN SEO, WHERE SHOULD THEY START, AND WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO CONTINUOUSLY LEARN?

Newcomers should create a website and make it rank for something. There's no better way to learn and continue to learn. No matter what level you're at in your career, you will learn more by starting a blog or building an eCommerce site and attempting to monetize it than you will from reading any blog or book. If that's not an option, look for the key people blogging about the parts of SEO that interests you most and look for opportunities to try those things out rather than just taking everything at face value.

Mike King
Founder - iPullRank



WHAT IS ONE THING THAT MOST BUSINESSES CAN CHANGE WITH REGARDS TO THEIR APPROACH TO SEO THAT COULD MAKE THE BIGGEST IMPACT ON THEIR SUCCESS IN THE SEARCH CHANNEL?

Talk to current customers and listen to current website data. What are your customers seeking? What do they desire to know before making a purchase, signing up for your newsletter, or contacting you?

Consider how you can provide that information, common questions, and related topics 10x better than anyone else.

In addition, make sure your contact info, footer date, product offerings, hours, location, and "about" page information are up-to-date and accurate. These details can have a huge impact on search results with minimum time-cost.

Britney Muller
Senior SEO - Moz



IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT SEO, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

The one thing I would change is happening now. With the algorithms doing more (and getting better), search marketers are able to look up from their spreadsheets and manual controls to actually focus on the marketing, the strategy, and the branding. As part of a talk I gave in June on the future of search marketing, I said, "Branding is performance and performance is branding." For years, performance and branding have been treated as almost diametrically-opposed strategies, but the reality is they are intertwined. There's a new appreciation for the impact of brand on visibility, click-throughs, CPCs, and ultimately, on conversions, and CLTV that's really exciting to see.

Ginny Marvin
Editor-in-Chief
Third Door Media



HOW CAN SEOs CONTINUE TO BUILD TRUST AND LEGITIMACY WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL MARKETING INDUSTRY?

Many SEOs get a gut feeling about what they think SEO ranking factors are, and then present that as "truth." I wish that would stop. Given that Google's algorithms are not published, it's very smart to try and figure out how they work, to conduct tests, and even speculate. However, we all need to know the difference between what's a fact, and what's an educated guess.

As an extension to that answer, there are many SEO snake oil salespeople out there that hurt us, too. The best thing the rest of us can do is help our clients succeed with sound approaches to SEO. We can help our clients understand what's likely to happen.

Eric Enge
GM - Perfection Digital



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