

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO



A COMPLETE GUIDE TO GETTING STARTED IN SEO



A complete guide to getting started in SEO.

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Journal

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What's The Changing SEO Landscape in 2016?

If you haven't noticed, we dig SEO in a big way here at Search Engine Journal. And while we love spiders and all things that crawl (no, we're not talking about prepping for our Halloween party), we get especially jazzed when sharing our insights with SEO beginners.

SEO is great. We love SEO. You might say we're a little obsessed with improving the way people, brands, and strategists (whoever!) do SEO. And while there are many awesome ways to learn SEO as a beginner — keyword research, competitive analysis, and site audit — right now, we're going to cover the changing landscape of SEO to catch you up to speed.

If you're going to begin your path in SEO, knowing what you do and how you do it is important, but knowing what changes have been made and staying in-the-know will be ever more meaningful in your ongoing efforts.



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Anna is the Features Writer for Search Engine Journal and an SEO-whisperer at Hello Anna & Co. Over the last 5 years, Anna has successfully developed and implemented online marketing, SEO, and conversion campaigns for 100+ businesses of all sizes; from the Fortune 500, to startups, and nonprofits. In her spare time, she moonlights as a volunteer soccer coach.

For example, whenever you begin an SEO audit, there are prerequisites that need to be completed such as crawling the site's HTML, checking robots.txt for blocked pages, and measuring PageRank of your competitors. But, if you don't have a basic understanding of SEO history or changes being made over time, how would you know that [Google turned off its Toolbar PageRank](#) from its browser in March 2016? And, how does that affect your SEO audit process? AND, how will you know the authority of your website going forward?

For a long time, I viewed my SEO audit process as a task that needed to be done rather than a craft that gives my forthcoming strategies a fighting chance to win new clients or improve organic traffic for my current clients.

Because of the changing SEO landscape and with a little help from the SEJ news Slack channel, the idea of "This is a boring audit that needs to get done" turned into an opportunity to be one of the first to try new SEO tactics or prepare for Panda algorithm update.

After years of working in SEO, I've accepted that it's hard to keep up with every new algorithm change and the hottest trends conference goers chat about. So, in hopes to spare you, all SEO beginners can check out the latest SEO changes below. Huzzah!

Misconceptions Around SEO

There are a lot of misconceptions related to SEO. This is likely because context, personal preference, experiences, and lack of knowledge often muddy the effects SEO have on our websites. So, to clients, the idea that SEO strategies such as building high-quality backlinks or updating your local listings with accurate information are able to evoke some sort of large increase of traffic to your website seems about as realistic as having a psychic predict your future.

There's still a lot to learn and consider if we look for practical ways to begin our SEO strategy. First, let's start with the basics.

Ummm SEO, What Does That Mean?

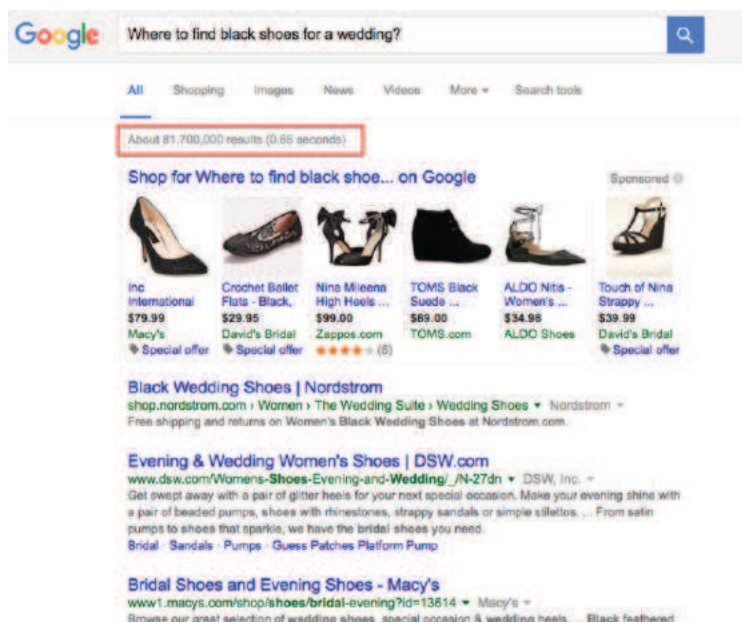
It's human nature to change.

From **I Am Jackie Robinson** to **A Christmas Carol**, the characters in these narratives (whether truth or fable) help represent the lifeblood of how it's human condition to change. With that, technology changes. From Pong to MacBooks, technology adapts just as humans do.

The same goes for search engines: at the end of the day, SEO evolves with humans and technology, but what you do with those changes rely on your ability to adapt.

The same goes for search engines: at the end of the day, SEO evolves with humans and technology, but how you react to those changes is based upon your ability to adapt and change.

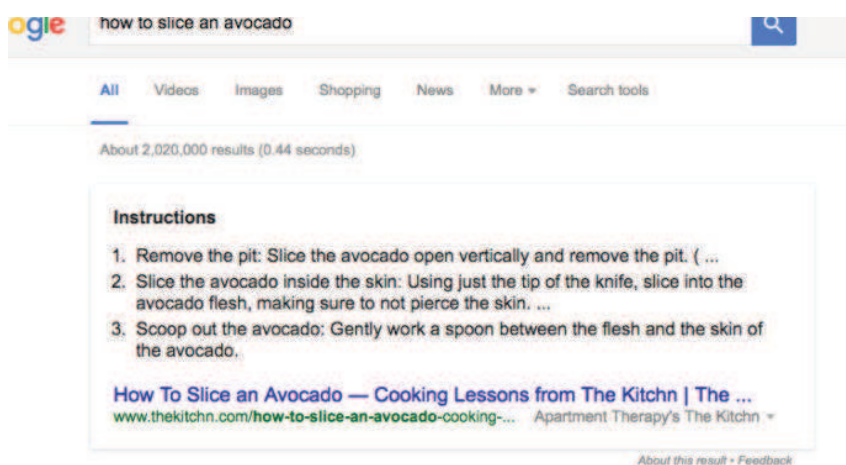
Google, a search engine, is the middle man for searchers (like me!) and the content on the internet. As search engines become more sophisticated, these 80 million results become tailored to my search history and preferences to serve up more high-quality content that I'll most likely be interested in clicking.



SEO, SEM, PPC, (and other triple-lettered iterations) serve as the driving force behind getting your content to perform well in the search engines. If you're curious about looking deeper into the secret inner workings of Google's algorithm, the new Search Quality Ratings Guidelines Google announced at the end of March 2016 is about as close as you're going to get. This document was originally released in November 2015. The guidelines emphasize local and mobile and reduce the supplementary content. You can view the full PDF format [here](#).

The Transformation of Organic SEO

I still regret not saying anything when I heard this SEO guru, the person signing my paycheck, promise page 1 in the search engines for a highly competitive keyword by month three of signing the contract.

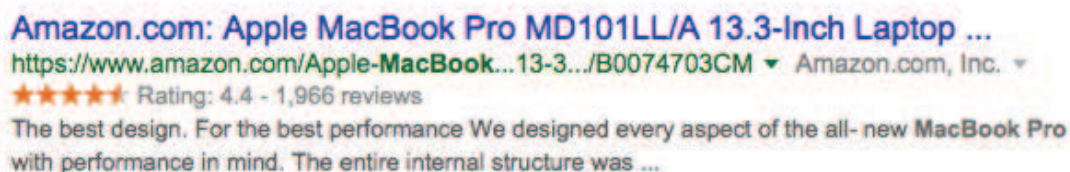


As an SEO consultant in training (years before my role at SEJ), I should have stopped my colleague before the client signed, but being too inexperienced, I didn't say anything. The result: We landed a new client, my colleague got a chunky payday, and I was stuck explaining to the client on month three why they weren't ranking on page 1 for the keywords we promised.

Keywords are one of the most talked about misconceptions in SEO. Keywords are vital to beginning every SEO campaign, as you'll learn further in this guide. Back in the ole' days, you could "stuff" your meta titles and meta descriptions with keywords to manipulate ranking positions. Now, choosing the type of keywords based on conversational search (also known as [Hummingbird](#)), transac-

tional use, or informational structure is more aligned with search these days than a goal fixated on ranking page 1.

For example. Google's Rich Answer Box has become a prominent aspect of Google's result pages. Have you seen their introduction of [symptom-related answers](#)? As Pete Meyers from Moz said, SEO in 2016 is about "[being the answer](#)." We're going to continue to see brands shift their keyword strategy to achieve Answer Box status.



Amazon.com: Apple MacBook Pro MD101LL/A 13.3-Inch Laptop ...
<https://www.amazon.com/Apples-MacBook...13-3.../B0074703CM> ▾ Amazon.com, Inc. ▾
★★★★★ Rating: 4.4 - 1,966 reviews
The best design. For the best performance We designed every aspect of the all- new MacBook Pro with performance in mind. The entire internal structure was ...

With changes like Google's Answer Box, SEOs cannot depend on keywords to target and optimize their content. There's not doubt about it: structuring your content around keywords or topics can influence the SERPs. But, with Google performing over a trillion searches per year, how does Google organize this all? Well, inside Google, the old model of using engineers to process search results has progressed to having a machine-learning artificial intelligence system called RankBrain. Google uses RankBrain to sort and manage relevant search queries. Google Search Quality Senior Strategist, Andrey Lipattsev, announced in March 2016 at [Google Q&A](#) that RankBrain was the third ranking signal. The other two? Links and content. Andrey went on to say these rank in no particular order.

Another potential ranking signal in 2016? Structured data. John Mueller, Google's Webmaster Trends Analyst, mentioned on a [Google+ Hangout](#) that search results with rich snippets might start to rank higher. Rich snippets make sense because they add a degree of relevance to your content and helps RankBrain categorize your content in its correct entity.

RankBrain is a part of Google's overall search algorithm Hummingbird. Those who aren't living in SEO day-to-day may see this as confusing. Hummingbird proves to us that Google's algorithm (whatever it's called these days) is understanding the meaning of words and phrases. These search engine algorithms are learning to adapt to the way the human brain works and functions. They are becoming more complex and accurate when identifying relevant, quality content. (Have you heard of Panda yet? More than once? Okay. Moving on.) These changes to the algorithm allow us and search engines to connect the dots between keywords and search queries for a better overall organic search experience.

The Hidden Revisions of PPC

The remarkable benefit of learning organic search is that you have an easy entryway into discovering paid search. While many paid search analysts would like me to hypothesize how exactly PPC works, I'd rather explain to you the recent changes that will affect your overall SEO strategy. Meaning how changes to paid search are affecting organic search.

For example, what would happen if the right-hand PPC ads were removed from the search results? Well, at the end of February 2016 Google rolled out a new search result page and surprise, surprise...no ads on the right panel.

At the same time, Google also introduced a fourth ad position above the fold on top of the organic listings. While industry experts below this had a low impact on click-through rates, it's still a pretty big update.

Next, let's talk about Google switching their ad label from yellow to green in mid-April. Google stated they researched if the color change impacted the way users determine paid versus organic listings, and they found none. This was Google's goal. PPC analysts over at [Wordstream](#) confirmed Google's theory when they detected click-through rate with the new green URL went up 15% in

their controlled group study. The green ad label doesn't stand out as much compared to the organic results.

Google also unveiled the “next generation” of [local search ads which appear in Google Maps](#) (desktop and mobile). The ads include brand logos and offers that surface directly on the map vs. the side of the map. Taking a cue from another search engine rival, Pinterest, Google is launching promotional pins on Maps as well. With more than a billion users and 1.5 billion destinations being visited based on their searches, Google Maps is something you're going to want to become very familiar with as a newbie.

Improving Mobile Optimization for SEO

Successfully optimizing your website for mobile search is a must for any business looking to provide users with what they need on the SERPs. Plus, with Google's constant updates to mobile algorithm ([also known as Mobilegeddon](#)) it's vital to understand the basics.

Mobile page speed, app indexing, and AMP pages are factors that help inform the search engines of your mobile-friendly and influences your mobile search roadmap. It's also essential for measuring mobile traffic and the user journey across multiple devices.

Getting a handle on how customers view your website on desktop and mobile is invaluable. This is why we see most big publishers (and [recipes!](#)) taking advantage of Google AMP (Accelerated Mobile Pages) pages. AMP pages were created as a slimmed version of a content page to make it load fast on mobile. And, we're also seeing Google roll out updates to their mobile algorithm.

Gary Illyes, Webmaster Trends Analyst at Google, mentioned at the Search Marketing Summit in June 2016 that the page speed ranking signal will begin to look at the speed of your mobile website pages. This new update could potentially hurt your mobile rankings if your site isn't up to speed.

Mobile is also shifting with rising technologies like voice search. During Sundar Pichai's, Google CEO, Google I/O keynote he announced that [20% of queries on its mobile app are voice searches](#). This announcement comes at the same time Google is prepping for its in-home speaker and Amazon Echo competitor, Google Home.

Another win on mobile is if your brand or client has invested in an app, take the extra time to get your app indexed. Indexing your app can help driving more traffic, interaction, and therefore conversions. And, could potentially appear higher up in the SERPs.

Once you begin to the behaviors and differences of mobile and desktop, you will develop habits that become routine when working with a client for the first time.

The Search Engines are Your Friend

You launched. You celebrated. You waited. It's now six months later, and you realized you may not have spent enough time on optimizing your website. Sound familiar? Creating an SEO-friendly website may seem like a daunting task, but it will change the way you do business digitally.

Once you've converted your biggest SEO fears into strengths or confirmed or stomped all those myths based on your actual real-life experiences, you'll arrive at the hard part: implementing your SEO strategy and explaining it to your clients or stakeholders at your company.

Start by asking yourself, "How does SEO add value for you, your customers, and the organization's bottom line?" Use data and your knowledge of the changing landscape to show the impact SEO can have on your website and online presence.

Go into your analytics archives. Dig into the [algorithm's history](#). Find the answer

and use it to increase traffic to your website. Yes, you might have to go back to the drawing board; you might not know the answer right away. This is OK.

The idea is to create value for the consumer before asking anything from the search engines in return. When all parts of your SEO strategy work together smoothly, you'll have an awesome synergy where it really counts — helping your consumers convert.

This SEO guide will give you the foundation and resources you need to discover trends to fix technical SEO issues and improve user experience. With an understanding of SEO best practices, there are plenty of opportunities for you to rank your site. And, we are on it.

The Three Pillars of SEO: Authority, Relevance, and Trust

For just a moment, remember a time before the Internet and search engines. What did we do if we needed information? In most cases, we began our own quest for a source to supply the needed information.

Let's say you wanted to know the difference between Einstein's General and Special Theories of Relativity. You could ask your next door neighbor, but you probably wouldn't, unless you happened to know that your neighbor was a physicist, a science teacher, or was at least well-read on the topic. If you had access to a nearby university, you might seek out a physics professor to get your question answered. Alternatively, you could go to a library and ask the librarian to recommend the best book on relativity.



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In each of those cases, you're making a decision about authority. You know the closer the connection of your information source to deep knowledge about physics, the more likely you are to get a good answer. In other words, you want the most authoritative answer, which will come from the most authoritative source.

Of course, we need more than information. Sometimes we need stuff! Say you're looking for a new dishwasher. Before the web, you might have picked up a copy of Consumer Reports. Or you might have asked friends or neighbors if they were happy with a particular brand. Unlike the physics example, in this case people you know might actually be good authoritative sources.

As soon as it was apparent that the World Wide Web was going to become the major repository for human knowledge—not to mention the primary source for products, services, entertainment, and much else—the need for search engines was obvious. Search engines help connect us with authoritative sources for our questions and needs, whether that's a physics professor's blog or dishwasher reviews by real users.

There were a few early attempts to do human indexing and categorization of web pages, but it didn't take long to realize that effort would never keep up with the growth of the web.

Modern search engines use complex algorithms to find, read, and ascertain the topicality of web pages. They can then match those pages with search queries looking for the information they contain. It's at this point that the importance of authority emerges.

For any given query, there are typically a great many pages that potentially satisfy that query. Users expect the search engine to take the role of the knowledgeable librarian and direct them to the best pages for the query. That's a judgment, then, of the relative authority for the topic of the query of all the possible pages, and search engines must be able to assess that authority at a huge scale.

How Search Engines Evaluate Authority

In reality, modern search engines such as Google use hundreds of factors in evaluating the authority and relevance of web pages, but we can boil them down to two main categories: Content (relevance) and Links (external citation authority).

First, a search engine must read and analyze the actual content and other features on a page. From this, the engine associates relevant topics with the page. In the early days, on-page assessment pretty much ended there, but now search engines are much more sophisticated and are able to analyze a page's language, structure, and other features to determine things like how completely the page addresses a topic and how useful it might be to a visitor.

Once the search engine understands the page and adds it to its index, it turns next to external signals that help validate and gauge the level of authority of the page for any given topic. Ever since the invention of PageRank by Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, links have been the primary signal used for such assessment. Search engines use links much like we might treat scholarly citations. The more scholarly papers relevant to a source document that cite it, the better. The relative authority and trustworthiness of each of the citing source comes into play as well.

In the next two sections, we will go into more depth about how search engines use content and links to assess authority, as well as what you need to do to gain such authority for your own site.

Why Links Still Rule the Roost

The big innovation that made Google the dominant search engine in a short period was that it used an analysis of links on the web as a ranking factor. This

started with a paper written by Larry Page and Sergey Brin called “[The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine.](#)”

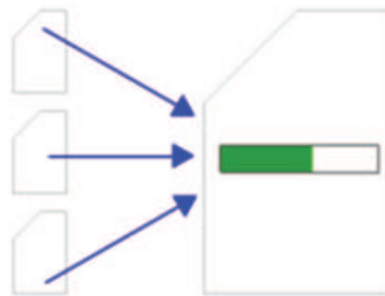
The essential insight behind this paper was that the web is built on the notion of documents inter-connected with each other via links. Since putting a link on your site to a third party site might cause a user to leave your site, there was little incentive for a publisher to link to another site, unless it was really good, and of great value to their site’s users.

In other words, linking to a third party site acts a bit like a “vote” for it, and each vote could be considered an endorsement, saying the page the link points to is one of the best resources on the web for a given topic. Then, in principle, the more votes you get, the better, and the more authoritative a search engine would consider you to be, and you should therefore rank higher.

Passing PageRank

A significant piece of the initial Google algorithm was based on the concept of PageRank, a system for evaluating which pages are the most important based on scoring the links they receive. So a page that has large quantities of valuable links pointing to it will have a higher PageRank, and in principle will be likely to rank higher in the search results than other pages without as high a PageRank score.

Pages Gain PageRank When Other Pages Link to Them

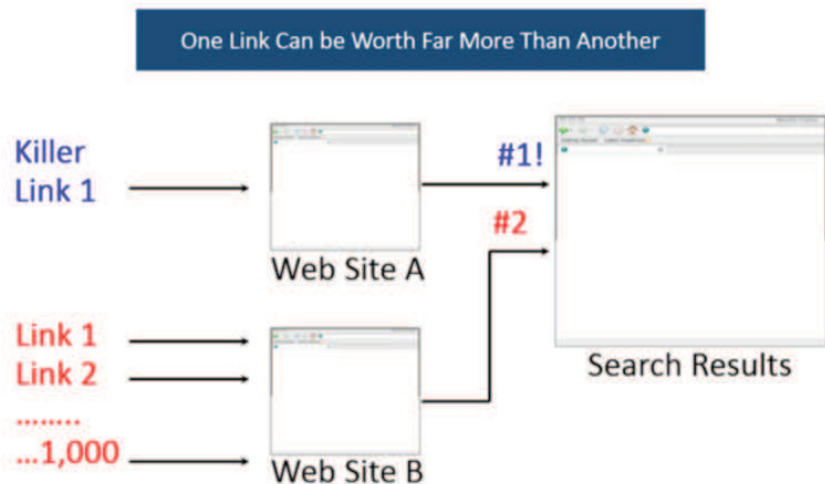


How this works is that when a page links to another page, it passes a portion of its PageRank to the page it links to. Thus pages accumulate more PageRank based on the number and quality of links they receive.

Not All Links are Created Equal

So more votes are better, right? Well, that's true, but it's a lot more complicated than that. PageRank scores range from a base value of 1 to values that likely exceed trillions. Higher PageRank pages can have a lot more PageRank to pass than lower PageRank pages. In fact, a link from one

page can easily be worth more than one million times a link from another page.



Let's use our intuition for a moment. Imagine you have a page that's selling a book, and it gets two links. One is from Joe's Book Store, and the other one is from Amazon. It's pretty obvious which one you would value more as a user, right? As users, we recognize that Amazon has more authority on this topic.

As it turns out, the web has recognized this as well, and Amazon has a much more powerful link profile (and higher PageRank) than any other site involved in selling books. As a result, it has much higher PageRank, and can pass more PageRank to the pages that it links to.

The Role of Relevance

Of course, you have to be relevant to a given topic. If you have a page about Tupperware, it doesn't matter how many links you get—you'll never rank for queries related to used cars. This defines a limitation on the power of links as a ranking factor, but relevance also impacts the value of a link.

Consider a page on a site that is selling a used Ford Mustang. Imagine that it gets a link from Car and Driver magazine. That link is highly relevant. Also, think of this intuitively. Is it likely that Car and Driver magazine has some expertise related to Ford Mustangs? Of course, they do.

In contrast, imagine a link to that Ford Mustang from a site that usually writes about sports. Is the link still helpful? Probably, but not as helpful, because there is less evidence to Google that the sports site has a lot of knowledge about used Ford Mustangs.

So in short, the relevance of the linking page, and the linking site, impacts how valuable a link might be considered.

Google Doesn't Publish PageRank, So What Can We Do?

Google used to make a version of PageRank visible to users of the Google Toolbar, but they no longer do that. Instead, we have to rely on third-party metrics such as:

1. Domain Authority and Page Authority from [Open Site Explorer](#)
2. Citation Flow and Trust Flow [from Majestic SEO](#)
3. Domain Rank and [URL Rank from](#) ahrefs

Each of these metrics does a good job of helping you evaluate the merits of a page, and offering a working estimate for how much PageRank it has to pass.

The Role of Anchor Text

There is another aspect of links that matters as well. Google looks closely at the anchor text in the links to your site:

The anchor text helps Google confirm what the content on the page receiving the link is about. For example, if the anchor text is the phrase “iron bathtubs” and the page has content on that topic, the anchor text plus the link acts as further confirmation that the page is about that topic. Thus the links act to evaluate both the relevance and authority of the page.

imes from licensed data. These are also
ch results. Implementation of schema can
ir search listings.

“Anchor Text” is the text that appears highlighted in a link and that can be clicked to open the target web page

Be careful, though, as you don’t want to go aggressively obtaining links to your page that all use your main key phrase as the anchor text. Google also looks for signs that you are manually manipulating links for SEO purposes, and one of the clearest indicators of that is if your anchor text looks manually manipulated.

The Concept of Trust

You may hear many people talk about the role of trust in search rankings, and in evaluating link quality. For the record, Google says they don’t have a concept of

trust they apply to links (or ranking), so you should take those discussions with many grains of salt.

These discussions began because of a Yahoo patent on the concept of Trust Rank. The whole idea was that if you started with a seed set of hand-picked, highly trusted sites, and you then counted the number of clicks it took you to go from those sites to yours, the smaller number of clicks that represented, the more trusted your site was.

Google doesn't use this type of metric. If, for your own purposes, you want to assess the trustworthiness of a site as a source of a link, that's not a bad idea. If they sell links to others, have less than great content, or otherwise don't appear reputable, even if they have great PageRank, then it probably isn't a good source for a link.

Google may not be calculating trust the way you do in your analysis, but chances are good that some other aspect of their system will devalue that link anyway.

Fundamentals of Earning and Attracting Links

Now that you know that obtaining links to your site is critical to SEO success, it's time to start putting together a plan to get some. The key to success is understanding that Google wants this entire process to be holistic. They actively discourage, and in some cases punish, schemes to get links in an artificial way. This means certain practices are seen as bad, such as:

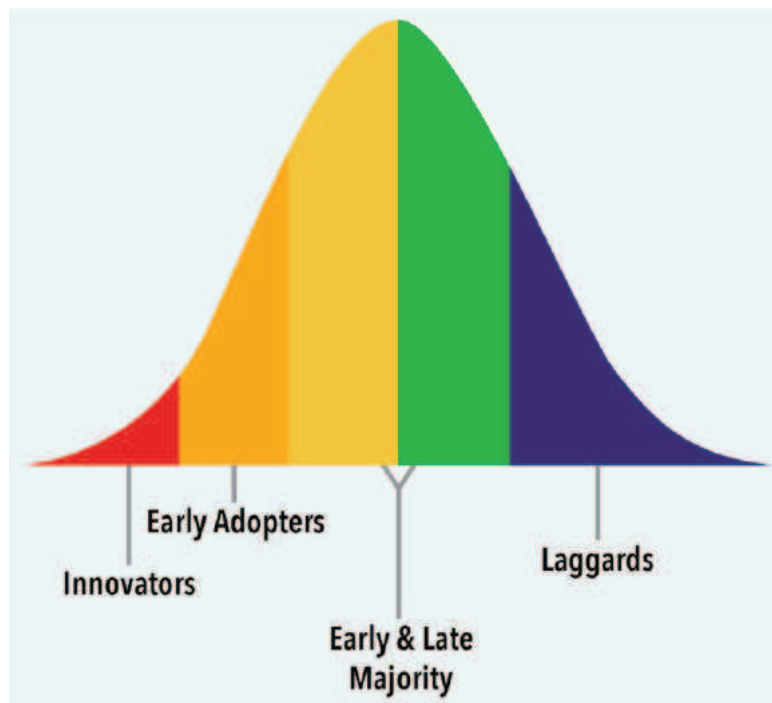
1. Buying links for SEO purposes
2. Going to forums and blogs and adding comments with links back to your site
3. Hacking people's sites and injecting links into their content
4. Distributing poor quality infographics or widgets that include links back to your pages

5. Offering discount codes or affiliate programs as a way to get links
6. And, many other schemes where the resulting links are artificial in nature

What Google really wants is for you to make a fantastic website, and promote it effectively, with the result that you earn or attract links. So how do you that?

Who Links?

The first key insight is to understand who it is that might link to content that you create. Here is a chart that profiles the major groups of people in any given market space:



Who do you think are the people that might implement links? It's certainly not the laggards, and it's also not the early or late majority. It's the innovators and early adopters. These are the people who write on media sites, or have blogs, and who might add links to your site.

There are also other sources of links, such as locally oriented sites, like the local chamber of commerce or local newspapers. You might also find some opportunities with colleges and universities if they have pages that relate to some of the things you're doing in your market space.

Create Expert Content

Now that we know who the potential linkers are, the next step is to create content to which they want to link. The problem is, it's pretty easy for them to find better content than yours on the web, if it exists. The best way to cope with that reality is to create expert content. If you can do this, your chances of getting people to link to you go way up.

People want to be part of sharing expert content with their friends and their followers online. And, if they write on a media site or on a blog, some of them will want to write about it as well.

If you want this to have a huge impact on your SEO, then start thinking about creating "Elite Content" or "**10X Content**," i.e. content that is 10 times better than anything else ever published on the topic before. This is content that causes you to be seen as a thought leader, and it's the best type of content to create to boost your reputation, visibility and yes, your SEO online.

Trust and Relationships

This all sounds good, but it's not enough to publish great stuff. If people don't trust you, or if they're not willing to take a chance on you, progress will be much slower. It's important to realize that any given marketplace represents an ecosystem. If you're seen as only looking out for yourself, people will be slow to support you.

Instead, find ways to work the ecosystem. Help others out on social media. Respond to comments in your social media feeds, and on posts that you publish online. Go to conferences and make completely non-commercial presentations that inform the audience on topics of interest in your market. Go to local events and share advice and counsel.

Become an active and contributing member of the community (that forms your marketplace), and actively share the smart advice and contributions of others. If you share and link to great content that others publish, the chances that they will share and link to your stuff goes way up.

Bylined Articles (Guest Posts) and Publishing on Third Party Sites

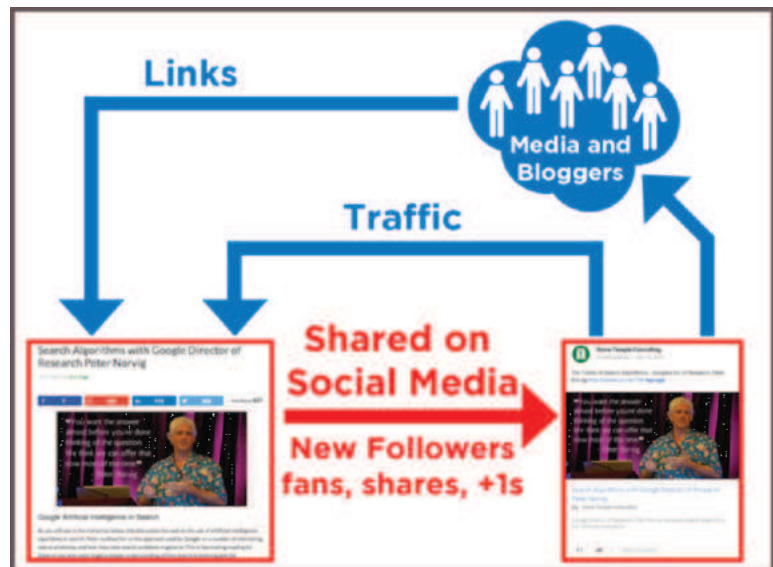
Publishing content on third party sites can be a smart thing to do, too. Consider trying to get a column on a major media site that covers your market niche. This will certainly contribute to your reputation as an expert, and help with your reputation and visibility.

Also, most media sites will give you an attribution link at the bottom of each article, or they'll give you an author bio page that links back to you as well. These types of bylined articles can be invaluable in driving SEO benefits.

Be careful, though, to focus on the high end of potential target sites. If there are 100 sites that cover your market, then there are no more than 20, possibly 30 targets, that will do, and it's the top 20 or 30 sites in your space. How do you get there? Ah yes, we're back to your ability to create expert content again!

The Role of Social Media

If you're able to leverage a strong social media presence, you can expose your content to a large number of people. However, this depends on your building a positive image with that audience. If you do that through positive interactions with your community, including the pre-existing influencers in the community, you have a strong chance of netting good results.



Obtaining good results from social media depends on creating the right types of content. A recent study by Moz and Buzzsumo analyzed one million articles to try and determine the correlation between shares and links. This study showed that across the complete article set, there was almost no correlation at all.

However, a deeper analysis showed that certain types of content performed far better. In particular, opinion-forming journalism from recognized experts, and data-driven research studies. These kinds of content showed a strong correlation between shares and links.

This ties in well with the idea of writing content for innovators and early adopters, and recognizing this should be a cornerstone of your overall link-earning/attraction strategy. Once you have established this position in the market, the role of social media becomes easy. You use it to create exposure to great new content, and the rest takes care of itself!

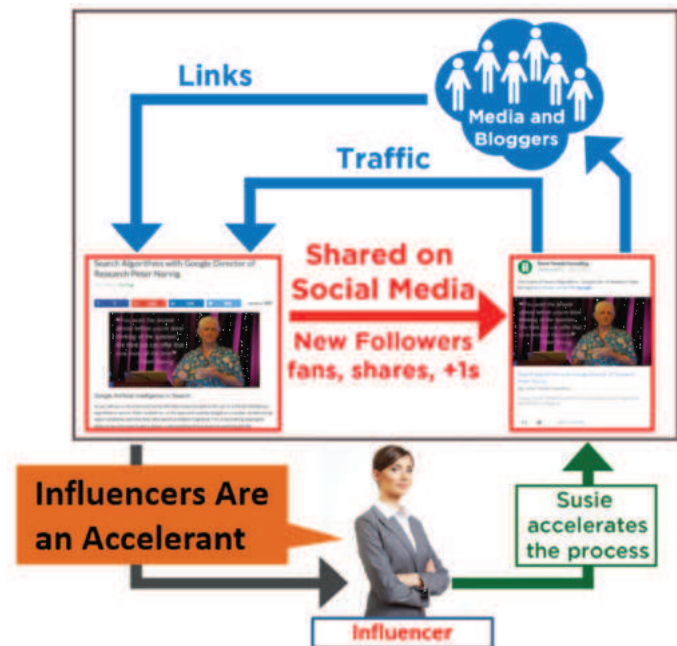
Influencers

Earlier, we spoke about the role of innovators and early adopters. Another term people use for these two groups of people is influencers, because others (including your potential customers) are influenced by them.

So social media can help provide visibility for your content, and potentially result in links, but this goes even faster if influencers are involved in sharing your content.

Once that starts happening, the growth of your reputation, visibility, and links will accelerate.

Getting influencers interested in sharing your content is heavily dependent on the trust and relationships you build with them, your willingness to share/link to their stuff, and, of course, the quality of the content you create.



Building a Content Marketing Plan

Last, but certainly not least, create a real plan for your content marketing. Don't just suddenly start doing a lot of random stuff. Take the time to study what your competitors are doing so you can invest your content marketing efforts in a way that's likely to provide a solid ROI.

One approach to doing that is to pull their backlink profiles using [Open Site Explorer](#), [Majestic SEO](#), and ahrefs. With this information, you can see what types of links they've been getting, and then based on that figure out what links you need to get to beat them.

Take the time to do this exercise, and also to map which links are going to which pages on the competitors' sites, and what each of those pages rank for. Building out this kind of detailed view will help you scope out your plan of attack, and give you some understanding of what keywords you might be able to rank for. It's well worth the effort!

Putting it All Together

In a Google Hangout sponsored by [WebPromo-Expert](#), Google engineer Andrey Lipattsev was asked what the top ranking factors are for Google. He replied that the top two were links and content (but not necessarily in that order). It's easy to misunderstand that statement (in reality both links and content are probably made up of and influenced by a great many particular factors), but the import of the statement is clear: To do well with search engines, you must have high-quality content and authoritative, relevant links.

Remember where we began this chapter: Search is the quest for authority. Search engines want happy users who will come back to them again and again when they have a question or need. The way they create and sustain that happiness is by providing the best possible results that satisfy that question or need. To do that, the search engines have to be able to understand and measure the relative authority of web pages for the topics they cover.

When you create content that is highly useful (or engaging or entertaining) to visitors, and when those visitors find your content reliable enough that they would willingly return again to your site, or even seek you out above others,

you've gained authority. The search engines work hard at continually improving their ability to match that human quest for trustworthy authority.

As we explained above, that same kind of quality content is key to earning the kinds of links that assure the search engines you should rank highly for relevant searches. That can be either content on your site that others want to link to or content that other quality, relevant sites want to publish, with appropriate links back to your site.

Remember what we said above and treat your SEO as part of an ecosystem. Serving your audience, building relationships (especially with influencers), and increasing the reputation of your brand will all increase the opportunities for your content and make link-earning easier.

You have everything you need for SEO success. Now get to work!

A Complete Guide to Panda, Penguin, and Hummingbird

Google has multiple named parts of the algorithm that influence search rankings. Google Panda is part of the algo that is specific to the quality of content, Penguin is specific to the quality of links, and Hummingbird is Google's part of the algo for handling conversational search queries accurately.



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Google Panda takes the quality of a site's content into account when ranking sites in the search results. For sites that have lower quality content, they would likely find themselves negatively impacted by Panda. As a result, this causes higher quality content to surface higher in the search results, meaning higher quality content is often rewarded with higher rankings, while low-quality content drops.

When Panda originally launched, many saw it as a way for Google to target content farms specifically, which were becoming a major problem in the search results with their extremely low-quality content that tended to rank due to sheer volume. These sites were publishing a fantastic amount of low-quality content very quickly on topics with very little knowledge or research, and it was very ob-

vious to a searcher who landed on one of those pages.

Google has now evolved Panda to be part of the core algorithm. Previously, we had a known Panda update date, making it easier to identify when a site was hit or had recovered from Panda. Now it is part of a slow rolling update, lasting months per cycle. As a result, it is hard to know whether a site is negatively impacted by Panda or not, other than doing a content audit and identifying factors that sites hit by Panda tend to have.



User Generated Content

It is important to note that Panda does not target user-generated content specifically, something that many webmasters are surprised to learn. But while Panda can target user-generated content, it tends to impact those sites that are producing very low-quality content – such as spammy guest posts or forums filled with spam.

Do not remove your [user-generated content](#), whether it is forums, blog comments or article contributions, simply because you heard it is “bad” or marketed as a “Panda proof” solution. Look at it from a quality perspective instead. There are many highly ranking sites with user-generated content, such as Stack Overflow, and many sites would lose significant traffic and rankings simply because they removed that type of content. Even comments made on a blog post can cause it to rank and even get a featured snippet.

Word Count

Word count is another aspect of Panda that is often misunderstood by SEOs. Many sites make the mistake that they refuse to publish any content unless it is above a certain word count, with 250 words and 350 words often cited. Instead, Google recommends you think about how many words the content needs to be successful for the user.

For example, there are many pages out there with very little main content, yet Google thinks the page is quality enough that it has earned the featured snippet for the query. In one case, the main content was a mere 63 words, and many would have been hard pressed to write about the topic in a non-spammy way that was 350+ words in length. So you only need enough words to answer the query.

Content Matches the Query

Ensuring your content matches the query is also important. If you see Google is sending traffic to your page for specific queries, ensure that your page is answering the question searchers are looking for when they land there. If it is not, it is often as simple as adding an extra paragraph or two to ensure that this is happening.

As a bonus, these are the types of pages – ones that answer a question or implied question – that Google is not only looking to rank well but is also awarding the featured snippet for the query to.

Technical SEO

Technical SEO also does not play any role in Panda. Panda looks just at the content, not things like whether you are using H1 tags or how quickly your page loads for users. That said, technical SEO can be a very important part of SEO and ranking in general, so it should not be ignored. But it does not have any direct impact on Panda specifically.

Determining Quality

If you are struggling to determine whether a particular piece of content is considered quality or not, there is one surefire way to confirm. Look in Search Analytics or your site's analytics program such as Google Analytics and look at the individual page. If Google is ranking a page and sending it traffic, then clearly it is viewing it as quality enough to show high enough in the search results that people are landing there from those Google's search results.

However, if a page is not getting traffic from Google, it does not automatically mean it is bad, but the content is worth looking at closer. Is it simply newer and has not received enough ranking signals to rank yet? Do you see areas of improvement you can make by adding a paragraph or two, or changing the title to match the content better? Or is it truly a garbage piece of content that could be dragging the site down the Panda hole?

Also, do not forget that there is traffic outside of Google. You may question a page because Google is not sending it traffic, but perhaps it does amazingly well in Bing, Baidu, or one of the other search engines instead. Diversity in traffic is always a good thing, and if you have pages that Google might not be sending traffic to, but is getting traffic from other search engines or other sites or through social media shares, then removing that content would be the wrong decision to make.

Panda Prevention

How to prevent Google Panda from negatively impacting your site is pretty simple. Create high-quality, unique content that answers the question searchers are asking.

Reading content out loud is a great way to tell if content is high-quality or not. When content is read aloud, suddenly things like over usage of repetitive keywords, grammatical errors, and other signals that the content is less than quality will stand out. Read it out yourself and edit as you go, or ask someone else to read it so you can flag what should be changed.

Google Penguin

The second major Google algorithm is Penguin. Penguin deals solely with link quality and nothing else. Sites that have purchased links or have acquired low-quality links through places such as low-quality directories, blog spam, or link badges and infographics could find their sites no longer ranking for search terms.



Who Should Worry about Penguin?

Most sites do not need to worry about Penguin unless they have done some sketchy link building in the past or have hired an SEO who might have engaged in those tactics. Even if the site owner was not aware of what an SEO was doing,

the owner is still ultimately responsible for those links. That is why site owners should always research an SEO or SEO agency before hiring.

If you have done link building in the past while tactics were accepted, but which are now against Google's webmaster guidelines, you could be impacted by Penguin. For example, guest blogging was fine years ago, but is not a great way to build links now unless you are choosing your sites well. Likewise, asking site visitors or members to post badges that linked to your site was also fine previously, but will now definitely result in Penguin or a link manual action.

Algorithmic Penguin and Link Manual Actions

Penguin is strictly algorithmic in nature. It cannot be lifted by Google manually, regardless of the reason why those links might be pointing to a website.

Confusing the issue slightly is that there is a separate manual action for low-quality links and that one can be lifted by Google once the links have been cleaned up. This is done with a reconsideration request in Google Search Console. And sites can be impacted by both a linking manual action and Penguin at the same time.

Incoming Links Only

Penguin only deals with a site's incoming links. Google only looks at the links pointing to the site in question and does not look at the outgoing links at all from that site. It is important to note that there is also a Google manual action related directly to a site's outgoing links (which is different from the regular linking manual action), so the pages and sites you link to could result in a manual action and the deindexing of a site until those links are cleaned up.

Finding Your Backlinks

If you suspect your site has been negatively impacted by Penguin, you need to do a link audit and remove or disavow the low quality or spammy links. Google Search Console includes a list of backlinks for site owners, but be aware that it also includes links that are already nofollowed. If the link is nofollowed, it will not have any impact on your site, but keep in mind, the site could remove that nofollow in the future without warning.

There are also many third-party tools that will show links to your site, but because some websites block those third-party bots from crawling their site, it will not be able to show you every link pointing at your site. And while some of the sites blocking these bots are high-quality well-known sites not wanting to waste the bandwidth on those bots, it is also being used by some spammy sites to hide their low-quality links from being reported.

Assessing Link Quality

When it comes to assessing the links, this is where many have trouble. Do not assume that because a link comes from an .edu site that it is high-quality. There are plenty of students who sell links from their personal websites on those .edu domains which are extremely spammy and should be disavowed. Likewise, there are plenty of hacked sites within .edu domains that have low-quality links.

Do not make judgments strictly based on the type of domain. While you can't make automatic assumptions on .edu domains, the same applies to all TLDs and ccTLDs. Google has confirmed that just being on a specific TLD it does not help or hurt the search rankings. But you do need to make individual assessments. There is a long running joke about how there's never been a quality page on a .info domain because so many spammers were using them, but in fact, there are

some great quality links coming from that TLD, which shows why individual assessment of links is so important.

Beware of Links from Presumed High-Quality Sites

Do not look at the list of links and automatically consider links from specific websites as being a great quality link, unless you know that very specific link is high quality. Just because you have a link from a major website such as Huffington Post or the BBC does not make that an automatic high-quality link in the eyes of Google – if anything, you should question it more.

Many of those sites are also selling links, albeit some disguised as advertising or done by a rogue contributor selling links within their articles. These types of links from high-quality sites actually being low-quality has been confirmed by many SEOs who have received link manual actions that include links from these sites in Google's examples. And yes, they could likely be contributing to a Penguin issue.

As advertorial content increases, we are going to see more and more links like these get flagged as low-quality. Always investigate links, especially if you are considering not removing any of them simply based on the site the link is from.

Promotional Links

As with advertorials, you need to think about any links that sites may have pointed to you that could be considered promotional links. Paid links do not always mean money is exchanged for the links.

Examples of promotional links that are technically paid links in Google's eyes are any links given in exchange for a free product for review or a discount on products. While these types of links were fine years ago, they now need to be nofollowed. You will still get the value of the link, but instead of it helping rankings, it would be through brand awareness and traffic. You may have links out there from a promotional campaign done years ago that are now negatively impacting a site.

For all these reasons, it is vitally important to individually assess every link. You want to remove the poor quality links because they are impacting with Penguin or could cause a future manual action. But you do not want to remove the good links, because those are the links that are helping your rankings in the search results.

Promotional links that are not nofollowed can also trigger the manual action for outgoing links on the site that placed those links.

Editor Note: Removing links and submitting a disavow request is also covered in more detail in the 'What to Do When Things Go Wrong' section of our SEO Guide.

Link Removals

Once you have gone through your backlinks and determined that there are some that should be removed or disavowed, you will need to get these links removed. You should first approach site owners and ask them to remove the links pointing to your site. If removals are unsuccessful, add those URLs to a disavow file, one you will submit to Google.

There are tools that will automate the link removal requests and agencies that

will handle the requests as well, but do not feel it is necessary to do this. Many webmasters find contact forms or emails and will do it themselves.

Some site owners will demand a fee to remove a link from a site, but Google recommends not paying for link removals. Just include them in your disavow file instead and move onto the next link removal. Some site owners are using link removals to generate revenue, so the practice is becoming more common.

Creating and Submitting a Disavow File

The next step in cleaning up Penguin issues is to submit a disavow file. The disavow file is a file you submit to Google that tells them to ignore all the links included in the file so that they will not have any impact on your site. The result is that the negative links will no longer cause negative ranking issues with your site, such as with Penguin, but it does also mean that if you erroneously included high-quality links in your disavow file, those links will no longer help your ranking. This is another reason why it is so crucial to check your backlinks well before deciding to remove them.

If you have previously submitted a disavow file to Google, they will replace that file with your new one, not add to it. So it is important to make sure that if you have previously disavowed links, you still include those links in your new disavow file. You can always download a copy of the current disavow file in Google Search Console.

Disavowing Individual Links Versus Domains

It is recommended that you choose to disavow links on a domain level instead of disavowing the individual links. There will be some cases where you will

want to disavow individually specific links, such as on a major site that has a mix of quality versus paid links. But for the majority of links, you can do a domain based disavow. Then, Google only needs to crawl one page on that site for that link to be discounted on your site.

Doing domain based disavows also means that you do not have to worry about those links being indexed as www or non-www, as the domain based disavow will take this into account.

What to Include in a Disavow File

You do not need to include any notes in your disavow file, unless they are strictly for your reference. It is fine just to include the links and nothing else. Google does not read any of the notations you have made in your disavow file, as they process it automatically without a human ever reading it. Some find it useful to add internal notations, such as the date a group of URLs was added to the disavow file or comments about their attempts to reach the webmaster about getting a link removed.

Once you have uploaded your disavow file, Google will send you a confirmation. But while Google will process it immediately, it will not immediately discount those links. So you will not instantly recover from submitting the disavow alone. Google still needs to go out and crawl those individual links you included in the disavow file, but unfortunately the disavow file itself will not prompt Google to crawl those pages specifically.

It can take six or more months for all those individual links to be crawled and disavowed. And no, there is no way to determine which links have been discounted and which ones have not been, as Google will still include both in your linking report in Google Search Console.

Speeding Up the Disavow Process

There are ways you can speed up the disavow process. The first is using domain based disavows instead of individual links. And the second is to not waste time include lengthy notations for Google's benefit so that you can submit your disavow faster. Because reconsideration requests require you to submit more details, some misunderstand and believe the disavow needs more details, too.

Lastly, if you have undergone any changes in your domain, such as switching to https or switching to a new domain, you need to remember to upload that disavow file to the new domain property in Google Search Console. This is one step that many forget to do, and they can be impacted by Penguin or the linking manual action again, even though they have cleaned it up previously.

Recovery from Penguin

When you recover from Penguin, do not expect your rankings to go back to where they used to be before Penguin, nor for the return to be immediate. Far too many site owners are under the impression that they will immediately begin ranking at the top for their top search queries once Penguin is lifted.

First, some of the links that you disavowed were likely contributing to an artificially high ranking, so you cannot expect those rankings to be as high as they were before. Second, because many site owners have trouble assessing the quality of the links, some high-quality links inevitably get disavowed in the process, links that were contributing to the higher rankings.

Add to the mix the fact Google is constantly changing their ranking algorithm, so factors that benefited you previously might not have as big of an impact now, and vice versa.

Compensated Links via Badges and More

Also be aware of any link building campaigns you are doing, or legacy ones that could come back to impact your site. This would include things like badges you have given to other site owners to place on their sites or the requirement that someone includes a link to your site to get a directory listing or access something. In simple terms, if the link was placed in exchange for anything, it either needs to be nofollowed or disavowed.

When it comes to disavowing files that people are using to clean up poor quality links, there is a concern that a site could be hurt by competitors placing their URLs into a disavow file uploaded to Google. But Google has confirmed that they do not use the URLs contained within a disavow file for ranking, so even if your site appears in thousands of disavows, it will not hurt. That said, if you are concerned your site is legitimately appearing in thousands of disavows, then your site probably has a quality issue you should fix.

Negative SEO

There is also the negative SEO aspect of linking, where some site owners worry that a competitor could buy spammy links and point them to their site. And many use negative SEO as an excuse when their site gets caught by Google for low-quality links.

If you are worried about this, you can proactively disavow the links as you notice them. But Google has said they are pretty good about recognizing this when it happens, so it is not something most website owners need to worry about.

Real Time Penguin

Google is expected to release a new version of Penguin soon, which will have one very notable change. Instead of site owners needing to wait for a Penguin update or refresh, the new Penguin will be real-time. This is a huge change for those dealing with the impact of spamming links and the weights many have had to endure after cleaning up.

Hummingbird

Google Hummingbird is part of the main Google search algorithm and was the first major change to their algorithm since 2001. But what is different about Hummingbird is that this one is not specifically a spam targeting algorithm, but instead an algorithm to ensure they are serving the best results for specific queries. Hummingbird is more about being able to understand search queries better, particularly with the rise of conversational search.



It is believed that Hummingbird is positively impacting the types of sites that are providing high-quality content that reads well to the searcher and is providing answers to the question the searcher is asking, whether it is implied or not.

Hummingbird also impacts long-tailed search queries, similarly to how Rank Brain is also helping those types of queries. Google wants to ensure that they can provide high-quality results for the longer queries. For example, instead of sending a specific question related to a company to the company's homepage, Google will try to serve an internal page on the site about that specific topic or issue instead.

Hummingbird cannot be optimized for, outside of optimizing for the rise of conversational search. Longer search queries, such as what we see with voice search, and the types of queries that searchers tend to do on mobile are often highlighted with a conversational search. And optimizing for conversational search is easier than it sounds. Make sure your content is highly readable and can answer those longer tail queries as well as shorter tail ones.

Like Rank Brain, Hummingbird had been released for a period before it was announced, and SEOs did not particularly notice anything different regarding the rankings. It is not known how often Hummingbird is updated or changed by Google.

What SEOs Need to Know About RankBrain

Ever since RankBrain was introduced by Google as the latest part of their search algorithm, there has been a lot of misunderstanding about precisely what it is and how it works. Wondering if Rankbrain will affect SEO? Read on for everything SEOs need to know about RankBrain, as confirmed by Google.



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How RankBrain Works

RankBrain is Google's machine learning algorithm that they launched in 2015. Its goal is to better help Google understand certain types of search queries, particularly the ones that Google hasn't seen before. This means RankBrain has a more significant impact on the 15 % of search queries daily that Google has never seen previously. But it can also affect popular queries, too.

RankBrain helps Google with the ability to serve search results when specific types of keywords that are usually omitted when ranking search results are instead given more emphasis in that query. This includes keywords like the word without. One example that Gary Illyes from Google often gives is "How to beat Super Mario Brothers without cheats."

Traditionally, Google would omit the word without and end up serving search results for beating the game with cheats. But with RankBrain, Google can better serve results that match what the searchers are looking for – results “without cheats”.

In other words, RankBrain wasn’t meant to replace ranking. Instead it was to help better understand queries to deliver the best search results, particularly for negative oriented queries, such as queries using words like “without” or “not”.



RankBrain Learning

RankBrain does learn, but it does not learn on-the-fly. The data gets periodically refreshed, although Google has not confirmed how frequently this happens, other than to say it updates as needed and as they “test new models that do a better job than the existing one.”

Influence on Search Results

Direct Impact

Surprisingly, the way RankBrain impacts the actual search results isn’t as significant as many believe. Yes, Google did state that it is the third most important part of the Google search algo, but Gary Illyes revealed that while RankBrain is “touching” all the search results, it doesn’t necessarily change the order or how those results appear for many searches.

Languages

RankBrain impacts queries in all languages and all countries. The way RankBrain works means that it can be applied regardless of languages.

RankBrain Misconceptions

There are also plenty of misconceptions about RankBrain, along with much speculation by many SEOs in the industry. Here are the most common misconceptions debunked by Google.

Advertising

Advertising spend does not influence RankBrain. Just like with the regular organic search results, it does not make a difference whether a website spends \$1 million a month on AdWords advertising or \$0. The role of AdWords has no impact on RankBrain (or organic search results) at all.

Gary Illyes also confirmed that advertising on social media, such as through Facebook or Twitter ads, does not impact RankBrain.

Social Sharing

Social sharing is also another thing mentioned by some SEOs. But Google has also confirmed that no matter how many times a website has been shared or favorited, it does not have any influence over RankBrain at all.

Both Gary Illyes and John Mueller from Google have previously said that social signals are too noisy to be used in search rankings, and they have no control over future access to social data. For this reason, social sharing is not used for either the regular search algorithm or RankBrain.

Market Areas

RankBrain does not play a more significant role in more competitive market areas. It can potentially influence a highly competitive search query just as much as one that rarely anyone searches.

Optimizing for RankBrain

From an SEO perspective, RankBrain is not something that can be specifically optimized for in the way that other aspects of Google's ranking algorithm can be. For example, with other parts of Google's core ranking algorithm, you can optimize for it through things like title tags, keywords, and page speed. But RankBrain is a little bit different for optimization.

Earlier this year, Gary Illyes from Google revealed that there is one way that site owners can optimize for RankBrain. Surprisingly, that is by simply optimizing for natural language.

Writing in natural language is writing your content in a way that sounds human. When assessing quality content, one of the checks many do is reading content out loud. When you read content aloud, things that make your content sound unnatural, such as excessive use of keywords, become very apparent. So if your content sounds perfectly natural when read aloud, then your content is naturally optimized for RankBrain.

Local SEO Guide for Beginners

Just like with regular SEO, [local SEO](#) has many misconceptions about strategy, tactics, and what should be happening when you put together a campaign. In this chapter, I aim to dispel the myths and misconceptions by going through every part of the process from beginning to end, starting with a local competition analysis. From there we will talk about the building blocks of local SEO: keyword targeting, technical SEO, content, and links.

When approaching any SEO endeavor, it is best to approach with the mindset of not gaming Google, but using white hat, holistic optimization best practices that will help make your site stand the test of time. Without further ado, I'd like to get right into it, because this guide is long. Grab a cup of coffee, sit back, relax, and feel free to comment, like, and share when you're done.



Brian Harnish

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Since 1998, Brian Harnish has been developing websites using a thorough foundation of knowledge gained through a solid education and practical experience solving problems on many websites. Brian has been doing SEO professionally for over 8 years now, and has acquired in-depth web design and web development skills. He now works with ymarketing as an SEO Specialist in Newport Beach, CA.

Local Competition Analysis

A local competition analysis can make or break your local SEO campaign. By analyzing your competition, you can find out about the most important things they are doing to achieve organic results. From this competition analysis, you can move forward knowing that the information you have will help you achieve the results that you are looking for.



By looking at content, it is possible to figure out: what topics the competition is writing about, how many words are they writing on average, and the frequency of their content updates. By looking at content thoroughly, you can gain a clear understanding of what they are doing so you can adapt your strategy and beat theirs accordingly.

By looking at links, it is possible to figure out things like how many links the competition is getting, what kind of links, who they're getting their links from, how often they are getting links, and when they are usually getting their links.

By looking at on-site factors like on-page optimization, it is also possible to develop a strategy that will outlast and beat their local strategy.

The factors you analyze in this local competition analysis will help you create a winning strategy.

Factors to Include in a Local Competition Analysis

Focusing on your market, your niche, and your locale, you will want to perform a deep local competition analysis. On the surface, a local competition analysis will include the following factors: content, links, and on-page SEO. Diving deeper, the local competition analysis should include the following in order to gain a clear picture of the local competitiveness of the market. Please make note that not all of these factors will increase local rankings – some will, but they are here in order to help you create a winning local strategy based on everything the competition is doing.

Links

- Local SEO Directories
- Niche local sites
- Editorial local links
- Chamber of Commerce Links
- Local .GOV links
- Local .EDU links

Content

- Who is writing the content?
- What is the content about?
- When is the content being written?
- Where is the content focused (locally)?
- Why is the content being written?

How many social shares is the content getting? (While not a ranking factor*, this metric will help you in terms of finding quality content topics that resonate with the social audience).

*Source: [SERoundtable](#)

John Mueller: “So in general, I don’t think we even see what people are doing on your web site. If they are filling out forms or not, if they are converting and actually buying something... So if we can’t see that, then that is something we cannot take into account. So from my point of view, that is not something I’d really treat as a ranking factor.

But of course if people are going to your web site and filling out forms or signing up for your service or newsletter, then generally that is a sign that you are doing the right things. That people are going there and finding it interesting enough to take a step to leave their information as well. So I’d see that as a positive thing in general, but I wouldn’t assume it is something that Google would pick up as a ranking factor and use to kind of promote your web site in search automatically.”

On-Page Technical SEO Includes:

- High quality, validated HTML and CSS coding
- Schema.org coding for local SEO
- Locally-optimized title tags
- Locally-optimized meta descriptions
- Locally-optimized URLs
- Locally-optimized on-page copy with tight topical and keyword focus

What You are Attempting to Obtain During the Competition Analysis

This competition analysis should focus on the top ten results on Google. Do a search for your local area + keyword phrase in an industry you are targeting. For example, “Orange County personal injury lawyers”.

Use a combination of link analysis tools like [Google Search Console](#), [Majestic](#), [SEMRush](#), [Raven Tools](#), and [AHREFs](#); export all the data; put together that data; and analyze the link profile. I recommend using at least two or three link profile analysis tools because single tools by themselves do not always have all of the data available.

What you are looking for in this link profile are things like:

Local SEO Directories

What directories do these sites have? What niche local links do these sites have? What kind of editorial local links do these sites have? Do these sites have any chamber of commerce links, and if so, which ones? Do these sites have any local .GOV or .EDU links?

Directories still work as a linking tactic, if it is done with high enough quality links and they don't all appear to be spam. Really, though, it's just a directory – pretty self-explanatory here. You're looking for directories that aren't all ad spam, meaning they do not contain many, many ads above the fold, and the ads don't interfere with people looking for the link. The directories are generally clean, of high quality, and can drive high authority link equity.

Niche Local Sites

Niche local sites are those sites in your industry that are local authorities on their topics. They can be anything from animal rights organizations to charities to other sites that will help lend an air of authority when they link to you. The main idea when going after these links is to ensure that they are of high quality and not spammy in any way. These sites can also take on the guise of local partners. Please note that I am not advocating link exchanges in this way, because that is

a bad idea. I am advocating for creating partnerships with other local businesses in order to obtain links that will help your site in the SERPs.

What we are trying to do is gauge the feasibility of beating the site in the search results. We don't want to actually copy their link profile. By gauging ranking feasibility, it will be much easier to determine an overall linking strategy afterward. And the reason we don't want to copy their link profile is this: I can't be there to guide you every step of the way. If you slip up and optimize with a low-quality link, you could eventually get yourself a penalty by getting too many of them. It is very easy to continue old habits once you start.

Chamber of Commerce Links

Chamber links are essential to good local SEO. They provide high authority, can be a great partner-type link, and can also refer local business. However, it is important to note that not every Chamber of Commerce link will be a .GOV.

Local .GOV and .EDU Links

These links can be anything from local government offices or charities to local schools. The fact that they are .gov and .edu links are all just a major bonus. Things have not changed regarding the weight of .gov and .edu links. They still tend to be some of the highest quality links available.

Content Considerations for the Competitor Analysis

- Who is writing the content?
- What is the content about?

- When is the content being written?
- Where is the content focused locally?
- Why is the content being written?

When gathering data for the local competitor analysis, it is important to consider things like who is writing the content, what the content is about, when the content is being written, where and how is the content being focused on locally, and why the content is being written. All of the above factors will help determine the content you will ultimately put on the site, and how to go from there.

Please note that Google's [John Mueller has stated](#) that content doesn't have to be long content in order to rank well.

John Mueller wrote: "There's no minimum length, and there's no minimum number of articles a day that you have to post, nor even a minimum number of pages on a website. In most cases, quality is better than quantity. Our algorithms explicitly try to find and recommend websites that provide content that's of high quality, unique, and compelling to users. Don't fill your site with low-quality content, instead, work on making sure that your site is the absolute best of its kind."

On-Page Technical SEO

Basic URL Best Practices are Still King

This means: always makes sure your site is crawlable from a local standpoint. When using highly targeted, niche keyword phrases, use them in the URL as you name your page. If your site is not crawlable and technically accurate, you can't expect Google to be able to rank it appropriately.

High Quality, Validated HTML and CSS Coding

Yes, I realize what most SEOs are going to say: high quality, valid HTML and CSS coding does not matter. While Google doesn't have any such requirements in place, high quality coding does matter and can help rankings significantly as a quality attribute. When you code correctly, you reduce the chance of the browser having to "guess" what you're trying to have it render. When you code and develop a website correctly, you reduce page speed and browser render speed. Page load time has become a factor in [Google's ranking factors](#).



Regardless, high quality, validated HTML and CSS coding should always be the end result of your site's development work. If your competitors' sites in the competitor analysis do not have such validation or high quality coding in their framework, then you have an attribute you can use against them – make sure your site's coding and page speed is far better than theirs in all areas: well-optimized code, make server bottlenecks non-existent, etc.

Schema.org Coding for Local SEO

Schema.org coding should be on every website that has Schema data type information on it. It is crucial to getting that site to show up in rich snippets and the carousels of Google's search results. If those sites don't have Schema.org coding for the data types that are present on your site, here is yet another useful ranking signal you can optimize for towards your benefit.

Locally-Optimized Title Tags, Meta Descriptions, and URLs

Every site being optimized on a local basis should have locally focused title tags, meta descriptions, and URLs. What does locally focused mean? This means, if

you are trying to optimize for keyword phrases like “Garden Grove personal injury lawyer” you should be using the city name in your target keywords.

Here are examples of locally optimized title tags, meta descriptions, and URLs:

La Habra, CA - Personal Injury Lawyer Los Angeles

www. [REDACTED] .com/personal-injury-lawyer-la-habra.html ▼

Have you been injured in an accident in La Habra, CA? Do you believe that someone else is responsible for your injuries? Are you confused or worried about ...

Locally Optimized On-Page Copy With Tight Topical and Keyword Focus

In the competitor analysis, you are also looking for competitors who may or may not have locally optimized on-page copy with tight topical and keyword focus. This will tell you what the competition is actually doing for that on-page optimization.

Cheating With Your Competitor Research

If you really want to get nitty-gritty with the competitor research, I highly suggest performing an audit of your competitor sites with Screaming Frog. Just set the Screaming Frog settings to your desired specifications, crawl each competitor site, and after you export the Excel spreadsheet data, filter out all of the data so that only the titles, meta description, and URLs are showing up. You can even look up what they are doing to their H1 header tags as well.

Looking at all of this useful data will show you exactly what your competition is doing on-site—and will help you make yours better.

Keyword Research

Start With Locally Focused Versions of Keywords Your Clients are Actually Looking For

Keywords and topical relevance are important factors to ensuring that your on-page optimization is properly targeted and fully optimized. When you perform your keyword research, you are looking for keywords that have a good search volume (above 70 or so average searches per month is a healthy number to shoot for), lower competition, and highly targeted niche keywords. A locally focused version of a keyword phrase for lawyers may look like this: Fountain Valley personal injury lawyers. If you try targeting personal injury lawyers by itself without a local focus, good luck. It will take massive amounts of links, authority building, and market penetration in order to expand to the type of reach that you want your marketing to accomplish.

When doing keyword research like this, it is important to consider the size of the market as well. If you don't consider the size of a market like Los Angeles (with millions of pages in Google's index and businesses that have already built up their authority), you will be in for a rude awakening if you promise a client they will see rankings in Los Angeles within three months. Not going to happen. It will likely take a year or more to achieve results on the first page of Google in a market the size of Los Angeles. And that is assuming that you have what it takes to beat the competition at their link acquisition and other optimization efforts.

Get Good Search Volume, Lower Competition, Highly Targeted Niche Keywords

Good search volume, lower competition, highly targeted niche keywords are diamonds in the rough. These keyword phrases will usually bring the most sought-after improvement to an important metric for your client: conversions. While lower competition is nice, good search volume should be at the top of your list when performing local keyword research. The higher the search vol-

ume, the higher the interest searchers have in that topic. If you don't pay attention to search volume, you may get lucky with a couple of conversions. But, that kind of luck will run out eventually. Solid research is at the helm of any SEO endeavor.

Highly targeted niche keywords are those keywords that are targeted towards people who are performing searches for specifics within your industry. You have to dive deep into the details of your industry when trying to unearth these keyword gems. For example, if you know that people frequently perform searches for lawyers in Fountain Valley for auto accidents, you would want to use a keyword phrase like "Fountain Valley auto accident attorney".

If you know that people frequently perform searches for specialized items in a particular industry, there is usually intent and questions behind those searches. By analyzing and thinking through potential intent of people searching for these phrases, it is possible to build a keyword list that includes questions about these topics that you can use to build even further, deeper, highly targeted topical content pages. These types of pages can end up being real converters for your client. The reason behind performing keyword research this deep is that you can then figure out what keywords are going to perform best for your client as a result.

Create Content That Will Entice Searches and Bring Traffic to Your Site

Using these keywords, you can then build a content editorial calendar focused around these topics. Once you have these topic ideas and a plan with goals set to create these articles by such and such a date, you can start really driving local SEO performance through these types of keyword phrases.

This is only one solution of several. I encourage you to experiment with this solution and find your own methods of developing lists of highly targeted, highly

focused keyword phrases. From these keyword phrases you can develop content that even the most savvy industry regulars will love. This is what will help you grow that success metric that your client is counting on.

Content: What Not to Do for Local SEO

I think it's important to discuss some of the things you should not do, while also discussing what you should do. Sometimes, bad habits creep in that never should when you are performing the SEO properly. These include things like Wikipedia-type content, not being focused enough with your content, not being unique enough with your content, and keyword-stuffing.



Avoid, Avoid, Avoid Wikipedia-Type Content

I get it. You can't visit the location, so the easiest thing to do is use Wikipedia-type content, write about the county seat, change a few words, and forget about it. The problem with this approach is that it has been done several million (billion?) times already. The real estate industry does it, the law industry does it. Everybody does it. The problem with this type of content is that the quality has become so diluted, thanks to millions of people copying and pasting, that it provides very little value.

Instead, the best thing to do is to take the content, perform your research, re-write it in a quality way, and provide something of unique value that the reader will enjoy.

Maile Ohye from Google talked about this during SEJ Summit 2016 in Santa Monica: “Focus on delighting your user.” I can’t think of any area of content writing that this applies to more so than local SEO content. Create this content in that way with the end goal of delighting your user in mind.

Create Your Content With a Niche, Local Focus

Just like how we created keywords with a niche, local focus, we want to make sure that we create our content with the same focus in mind. Create content in a way that aspires to this niche, local-focus content, while also focusing on what people in the industry want (all the information we learned from our competitor research earlier).

This content should be highly targeted and specific, being tailored to the end SEO goal in mind. You wouldn’t want to create informational text-based content when videos are all that’s necessary. And you wouldn’t want to create 10,000-word articles on sites where the only information people are searching for are local brick and mortar businesses.

The key is to tailor your content to that niche with the proper local and topical focus that creates a high-quality experience for users who are searching for these topics. It is pointless to just create bland, uninteresting content that reads like Wikipedia content. That is not delighting your user.

Put more thought and effort into creating your content and make sure that it fulfills all of these goals, as well as your end SEO goal.

Create Unique Content Per Page, and Per Site

It is extremely easy to fall into a trap of creating the same content per page, and the same content from site to site. I get it. You hate writing. You don't wanna do it, you'd rather focus on SEO. What are you doing in SEO if you hate writing? It boggles the mind! Anyway...



When creating localized content it is important that this content from local page to local page is unique and provides unique value. Don't just create bland, uninteresting content where the only thing that you change from page to page is the local keyword phrase. That is no longer going to work as a good content strategy. Instead, you may end up finding yourself slapped by Panda if you are doing that enough.

The other pitfall is creating the same content per site. This can happen especially if you operate an agency that has clients throughout the same entire niche. Like law. Or real estate. It can be especially challenging to come up with unique content where there are only so many ways you can say things in law. But, by doing the work to come up with unique, stellar content ideas that resonate with your website's audience, you won't have to constantly come up with content that sounds awful in its 100th variation.

Stay Conversational, Natural, and Avoid Keyword-Stuffing

The latest updates from Google, when they publicly discussed RankBrain, cover everything they have been saying for the past 15+ years: write your content nat-

urally, focus on your user, and don't keyword stuff. Gary Illyes discussed at [SMX Advanced 2016](#):

“It's a new signal. But the reason I asked about optimizing for RankBrain is because you don't. It's about making sure the user gets the result that is deserved for the query. If you write in natural language, you're all set. If you keyword-stuff your content, that will almost certainly not be good for you.”

Links for Local SEO

Local SEO ranking factors typically are centered around on-page and off-page factors with a razor focus on local. Just like content, links are an important part of local SEO ranking factors. In the beginning, it is important to perform an analysis of the site and figure out where it's at locally. Using a tool like [Whitespark](#) or [Brightlocal](#) can help you perform a local analysis of your site's link profile. I would recommend starting here, and building on that.

If you have some local citations already, but not all, then you know where you need to be to get all of the others. But, if you have never done link acquisition for local SEO before, then it can be quite the daunting task to go after all of these local citations.

Including the Correct N.A.P. Information, Every Time

When claiming your local profiles and obtaining local SEO citations, it is important to make sure that your NAP info (Name, Address, Phone number) are all exactly the same. Don't use Ste., Suite, and # in various instances of submitting the information on your site. This is not going to result in improved performance. In

fact, it can actually sink your ship because this introduces too many noisy local ranking signals. We want to make sure that your links and citations are as strong as they can be. So, if your address is:

Some Business, Inc.
123 Standard Way Suite 400
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Don't submit it as:

Some Business, Incorporated
123 Standard Way, Ste. 400
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Or:

Some Business, Ltd (when there isn't an Ltd)
123 Standard Way, #400
Costa Mesa, CA 92626

Getting Started With Claiming Your Local Profiles and Local SEO Citations

When you first start out with claiming your local SEO citations, you may be asking: OK, so where do I start? Ideally, you should be sifting through the competitor research we performed earlier and looking at your competitor's link profiles. By examining link profiles thoroughly, it can generally be a good way to figure out what local sites your competition is using. However, I say "generally" because doing it that way can only go so far: not every local site is going to have the URL local.business.com in it, and others will have regular .com domains.

That's why I recommend using in-depth competition research along with tools as mentioned above.

Final Thoughts on Local SEO

At the heart of it, there is not much that is 100% different from organic SEO. You still have keywords, content, and links at the heart of optimization strategy. The difference comes when you consider the part of local SEO where the local focus comes into play.

It is so important to approach these strategies with a white hat, holistic, relationship-building approach in mind. The wrong approach to take on any of these tactics is a constant strong-arm approach that results in a penalty for your site. Focus on link acquisition, not link manipulation. Focus on delighting the user, not stuffing your content with keywords. Focus on creating a compelling user experience. Not haphazardly designed digital ecosystems.

In short, if you build it with high enough quality, the people you want will come.

SEO Basics: What You Need to Know

An Introduction to Mobile SEO

Even before the first Apple iPhone was released in 2007, marketers were asking the question: “What should my mobile strategy be?” And it’s a question that many are still asking today. One thing is for sure, though: the mobile web is here to stay.

A recent report from [BI Intelligence](#) [projected](#) by the year 2020, there will be 3.5 billion smartphones shipped worldwide. And users are increasingly shifting to mobile as their primary device for accessing the internet. In fact, Google [announced last year](#) that now, “more Google searches take place on mobile devices than on computers in 10 countries, including the US and Japan.”

This makes sense, because ([as Benedict Evans recently wrote](#)), “It’s actually the PC that has the limited, basic, cut-down version of the Internet...it only has the web.”



Bridget Randolph

**Consulting Team Lead
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Bridget is a New York-based consultant with digital marketing agency Distilled. She holds an M.Sc. degree in Social Anthropology from the University of Oxford, and since making the move into the world of digital she has worked with a wide range of clients across many verticals, from financial to B2C to publishing. In her spare time she enjoys blogging and speaking on various marketing topics.

Our mobile devices have much more information to draw on than a desktop device:

- Photos
- Geolocation
- Friends
- Physical movement

As well as greater interactivity:

- with the external world (through technology like beacons)
- with you when you're not using it (through notifications)
- with your personal identity (because a phone is always signed-in and it is almost always an individual device rather than a shared one).

So how do search marketers ensure that this boom in mobile web usage won't leave them behind? By staying on top of the basics of mobile search.

How Google Deals with Mobile Search

Google has many different crawlers for different use cases and different indexes, such as:

- Googlebot
- Googlebot News
- Googlebot Images
- Googlebot Video

For mobile search (specifically for smartphones), they use a version of Googlebot which uses a smartphone's user-agent, so that the crawler can have the same user experience as actual mobile users (such as redirects to mobile versions, etc.).

This is the current Googlebot user-agent for smartphones:

```
Mozilla/5.0 (iPhone; CPU iPhone OS 8_3 like Mac OS X) AppleWebKit/600.1.4 (KHTML, like Gecko) Version/8.0 Mobile/12F70 Safari/600.1.4 (compatible; Googlebot/2.1; +http://www.google.com/bot.html)
```

For comparison, this is the regular Googlebot user-agent:

```
Mozilla/5.0 (compatible; Googlebot/2.1; +http://www.google.com/bot.html)
```

It is worth noting that Google does not consider tablets to be the same thing as mobile. Although they do consider tablets a separate class of device from both mobile and desktop, nonetheless, [their view](#) is that “Unless you offer tablet-optimized content, you can assume that users expect to see your site as it would look on a desktop browser.”

The mobile-friendly pages discovered by the smartphone Googlebot crawler, as well as mobile page versions discovered by the desktop crawler, are indexed as usual. However the SERP may include a different set of results for a mobile user than a desktop one, and mobile-friendly pages will be given a slight ranking boost, all things being equal.

Note that Google judges mobile-friendliness on a page-by-page basis rather than across an entire website, so if you have limited resources it is best to start by making your most valuable pages mobile-friendly first and branching out from there.

Google's Mobile-Friendly Update (“Mobilegeddon”)

In 2015, Google announced a new rankings update for mobile search, which was nicknamed “Mobilegeddon”. On April 21, the rollout began, and the internet started to see the effects.

Some websites were directly impacted, losing up to 35% of mobile rankings within the 1st month — and some more indirectly, by the incentive to move towards mobile-friendliness before the update hit.

Google announced a 4.7% increase in the number of mobile-friendly sites in the time between announcing that the update was coming and when it actually rolled out.

Around the same time, Bing also announced they would be rolling out a similar update, although they haven't provided as much information on the timeline of this. However, generally speaking, a site which is well-optimized for Google mobile search should perform well in Bing.

A new version of Google's mobile-friendly update has recently been released (in May of 2016), so we can expect to see a further impact from this as a ranking factor over time.

So how do you make sure your site is correctly designed and optimized for mobile search?

Making Your Website Mobile-Friendly

There are three main approaches to making a website mobile-friendly. These are:

- **Responsive Design:** the page – URL, HTML, images, everything – remains the same, but the CSS rearranges the page layout depending on-screen width.

TIP: Google has expressed this is their preferred approach, although they support the other two as well. This is primarily because responsively designed sites don't require any additional technical implementation to optimize them for search.

- **RESS/Adaptive/Dynamic Serving:** the URL remains the same, but the server sends a different version of the HTML (and CSS) based on what type of device is requesting the page.
- **Separate Mobile Site:** as the name implies, this is when you simply create a second, “mobile-friendly” website for mobile users. Separate mobile sites usually sit on a subdomain (e.g. m.domain.com) or sometimes a sub folder (e.g. www.domain.com/mobile).

When [creating a separate mobile site](#), the best approach is to keep all the same pages and content in the same structure (e.g. www.domain.com/first-page and m.domain.com/first-page). This makes it easy to redirect based on user agent/device, and also to indicate to Google what pages are equivalent on the mobile vs desktop version.

But since it's a separate set of pages, you could choose to have a completely different site structure, in which case the mobile URLs might be different.

Configuration	Does my URL stay the same?	Does my HTML stay the same?
Responsive Web Design	✓	✓
Dynamic Serving	✓	✗
Separate URLs	✗	✗

If you're wondering how best to implement a mobile-friendly design for your site, check out this guide from my company, Distilled, on [“Building Your Mobile-Friendly Website”](#).

How to Figure Out if Your Site is Mobile-Friendly

Here are a few tools you can use to check whether your site is mobile-friendly:

- [Mobile friendliness testing tool](#)
- [Responsiveness testing app](#) for Chrome
- [Fetch as Google](#)

SEO for Mobile Search

If you have a responsive site which is optimized for search, you won't need to do anything different for the mobile crawler. Note that when you are auditing the site, it is worth crawling it using a mobile user agent in addition to your regular crawl. This will allow you to identify any crawl issues which only occur on mobile.

Site performance (around things like speed and page load time) may also impact results for mobile search. An effective responsive site serves appropriately sized assets for the user's screen size, even if the underlying HTML/CSS is the same. It's worth checking site speed separately for mobile and desktop (and easy to do with Google's [PageSpeed Insights tool!](#)).

If you have a dynamically served site or a separate mobile site, you'll also need to add a couple of things to your pages to make sure that Google understands that the two versions are connected.

Optimizing an Adaptive Website for Mobile Search

An adaptive (or dynamically served) site uses a single URL, but serves a different version of the HTML/CSS depending on the type of device requesting the page. While basic SEO principles remain the same as for a responsive site, you also need to make sure you avoid the appearance of cloaking.

Cloaking is when you show one thing to a search engine, and something different to a human user, and Google will devalue sites that are doing this for SEO gains. (Note that visually hiding or minimizing content for UI purposes, such as including a menu which is collapsed on load, do not count as cloaking as long as the content is accessible to users and crawlers alike.)

In the case of a dynamically served site, you want to signal to Google that you are showing different content based on user agent to provide the appropriate version of the page for the device accessing the page, rather than to trick the Googlebot user agent for nefarious SEO purposes.

To make it clear that this is what you're doing, you should [use the Vary-HTTP Header](#).

Using this header has two additional benefits:

- It will let the mobile crawler know there is separate mobile content on this URL, and therefore encourage it to crawl the site.
- It will signal to caching servers that they should consider the user agent (e.g. the type of device) when deciding whether to serve a page from the cache.

Optimizing a Separate Mobile Website for Mobile Search

A mobile site on a separate URL is effectively a different site, so you'll need to optimize these pages in addition to optimizing the desktop version. Again, the basic SEO principles remain the same, with a few extra guidelines:

- Create a parallel URL structure

Unless you've built your mobile site with very different content than your desktop site, the URL structure for your mobile site should mirror the relevant pages on your desktop site as closely as possible. So `www.example.com/funny-story` should become `m.example.com/funny-story`, not `m.example.com/different-page`.

- Add mobile switchboard tags

A separate mobile site with the same or similar content as the desktop version could potentially be seen as a case of duplicate content, which may be suppressed by search engines.

This is where the mobile switchboard tag comes in. This tag indicates to Google crawlers that this is an alternate version of the site intended for mobile devices. A version of this tag is placed on both the desktop and mobile versions of the page.

To set up switchboard tags correctly:

1. On the desktop version, place a mobile-specific `rel="alternate"` tag indicating the relevant mobile page.

2. On the mobile version, place a rel="canonical" tag indicating the relevant desktop page.

These annotations can be included in the HTML of the pages themselves and sitemaps (but you don't have to do both).

As an example, where the desktop URL is <http://example.com/page-1> and the equivalent mobile URL is <http://m.example.com/page-1>, the tagging for this example would be as follows.

In HTML:

On the desktop page (<http://www.example.com/page-1>), place the following:

```
<link rel="alternate" media="only screen and (max-width: 640px)"  
href="http://m.example.com/page-1">
```

and on the mobile page (<http://m.example.com/page-1>), include:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.example.com/page-1">
```

The rel="canonical" tag on the mobile URL indicating the desktop URL is always required.

In Sitemaps:

You can place the rel="alternate" tag for desktop pages in your sitemaps, as follows:

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>  
  
<urlset xmlns="http://www.sitemaps.org/schemas/sitemap/0.9"
```

```
xmlns:xhtml="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml">  
  
<url>  
  
<loc>http://www.example.com/page-1/</loc>  
  
<xhtml:link  
  
rel="alternate"  
  
media="only screen and (max-width: 640px)"  
  
href="http://m.example.com/page-1" />  
  
</url>  
  
</urlset>
```

The required rel="canonical" tag on the mobile URL must still be included in the mobile page's HTML.

- Consider user-agent redirects

Some visitors will arrive at the wrong version of your site for their device, and you may want to redirect them. Use server-side redirects rather than Javascript redirects. You may use either 301 or 302 redirects.

- Additional guidance for handling redirects to a mobile site:

1. Don't redirect all desktop pages to the mobile homepage; instead, point them to a mobile page which is relevant to the original.

2. Include a link to ‘view desktop version’ on your mobile site (and vice versa). Use cookies to ensure that if a user clicks on this option the user agent detection will be overridden, and they will not be redirected again (unless they choose to switch back via the ‘view mobile version’ option).

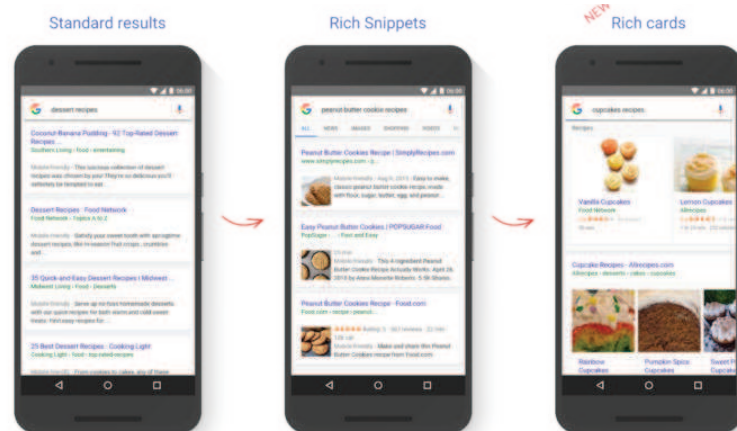
3. Send tablet users to the desktop site, rather than the mobile site (unless you have a tablet-specific version). Tablet browsing patterns typically resemble desktop browsing patterns more than mobile.

- Keep both versions crawlable

Make sure you’re not blocking the Googlebot smartphone user-agent from your desktop version in robots.txt and don’t block regular Googlebot from the mobile version.

Schema.org, Rich Snippets, and Rich Cards

As Google shifts towards more of a card-based format in the SERPs, and especially on mobile devices where the screen height means limited screen real estate, any steps we can take to obtain enhanced results like rich snippets and **rich cards** (through the use of **structured data markup**) becomes increasingly valuable.



If you aren't sure what type of structured data might be right for your website, you can use my [guide for performing a structured data audit](#).

Other Key Mobile Search Trends from Google

In addition to trends around mobile-friendliness as a ranking factor, Google has been working towards a few other key trends which relate directly to mobile technology and user behavior:

- [The Accelerated Mobile Pages Project](#) to improve site speed and page load times for mobile content, and allow this content to be cached and served directly within a SERP (rather than sending the user to the original website)
- Removing sidebar ads from the desktop SERP layout for a more streamlined, “mobile” look
- Integrating app content with web search through support for app indexing and app streaming

We don't have space to go in-depth on these topics here, but here are a few recommended resources you can check out if you'd like to learn more:

AMP

- Google's [AMP homepage](#)
- Moz Whiteboard Friday – [What You Need To Know About Accelerated Mobile Pages \(AMP\)](#)

SERP Layout

- SearchEngineLand: [FAQ: All About The Changes To Google's Ad Layout On Desktop Results](#)

App Indexation and Streaming

- Google's guidance on [app indexation](#)
- My post on the Moz blog – [How To Get Your App Content Indexed By Google](#)
- Emily Grossman's excellent [SMX Munich presentation](#)
- Emily Grossman and Cindy Krum's 3-part series on App Indexation:
 - [Part 1](#)
 - [Part 2](#)
 - [Part 3](#)
- Google's recent (Nov 2015) announcement about [app streaming](#)

Conclusion

Mobile technology is changing rapidly, and this has created major shifts in user behavior and mobile web usage worldwide. More than ever, mobile search is becoming the future of SEO, and with that comes a host of new challenges. But the key principles remain the same: ensure that crawlers can access, read, and understand your content, ensure user experience is working well for all devices, and keep testing and iterating for better results.

What are the PPC Best Practices For 2016?

SEO strategies play a key role in the success of search engine campaigns because of the importance of relevant content in the search marketing space. If search engines find the content of a page relevant to the keywords in a campaign, they will consider the page relevant and assign the keyword a higher quality score.

In the following guide, we will introduce the most important SEM campaign types and share [best practices](#) that have been developed after advertising and testing more than 10,000 campaigns, in more than 20 countries, and more than 25 industries.



Rocco Baldassarre
Founder & CEO at
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Rocco Baldassarre is a digital marketing consultant and entrepreneur. He is best known for being the founder of the award winning digital marketing agency Zebra Advertisement and being the youngest Google Partners All-Stars Winner at the age of 24. Clients include Bing Ads and he has been featured by The Huffington Post, The New York Times, and oDesk's Annual Impact Report among other publications.

Search Network Campaigns

Search campaigns are the most common campaign type on Google and Bing and they are very effective because they are based on the concept of the pull system. A pull system is any advertising methodology that delivers ads to an existing demand in the market. Pull systems are very effective because the potential target audience is aware they have a need and is looking for an immediate solution.

Search network ads are definitely the most expensive ad type on Google and Bing and they are the most likely one to get a higher conversion rate. The main downside of search ads is that sometimes the cost per click (CPC) might end up being too expensive which makes it difficult for small businesses to compete. Additionally, some industries might have a low search volume for their products and this causes advertisers to look for additional traffic sources.

Each search network campaign includes keywords, ad groups, ads, and extensions. Using best practices during the campaign setup and optimization is key to achieving successful results.

There is a strong bond between search campaigns and SEO strategies. Optimizing your website pages for keywords that you are actually targeting in your search campaigns will help your quality score. The better the quality score is the lower the cost per click will be. If you work hard to rank a page for a specific term you will end up benefiting Google AdWords and Bing Ads which will eventually find the page relevant for that target keyword.

Let's now have a look at the most important elements of a Google AdWords search campaign and find out what best practices can be used to improve the overall performance.

Introduction to Keywords

Keywords are the terms that advertisers target in search campaigns because they believe that showing an ad for them is likely to generate clicks that will eventually generate new customers. However, there are thousand of new searches each month on Google and Bing for search terms that have never been searched before. This means advertisers needs to target keyword variations as well.

This can be done using keyword match types. There are four main keyword match types in Google AdWords and Bing, and each of them retrieves different keyword variations. Here is an explanation of what they are and what they can be used for:

- **Broad Match:** Your keyword can be matched with the exact keyword, a similar phrase phrases, singular or plural version of the keywords, misspellings, synonyms, related searches, and other variations that Google considers relevant for your business.
- **Broad Match Modifier:** Your keyword can be matched with any search term as long as all the words in your keyword are in the search query of the user on Google no matter in what order.
- **Phrase Match:** Your keyword can be matched with the keyword itself and with terms including anything before and after the keyword. If your keyword has 2 or more words, all words have to show up in the search query with the same order. Words before or after are triggered by this match type.
- **Exact Match:** Your keyword has to be identical to the search query, no words before or after. All words have to show up in the search query with the same exact order of your target keyword. This match type doesn't show your ad for any variation.

Here is an example of search queries that are retrieved by each of the keyword types:

Keyword Match Type	Keyword in Google Adwords	Triggered Search Queries
Broad Match	Dog Store	Dog Food Dog Store Pet Store Dog stores near me

Keyword Match Type	Keyword in Google Adwords	Triggered Search Queries
Broad Match Modified	+Dog +Store	Best dog store Stores for dog Affordable dog stores
Phrase Match	“Dog Store”	Dog Store Directions Direction to the nearest dog store
Exact Match	[Dog Store]	Dog store

The keyword formatting we have used in the table above is the one you will need to use in the live AdWords and Bing interface to add keywords in it.

Choosing what keywords to advertise for and what match type to use is a very important decision and will have an important role in the success of your campaigns. Here is a list of best practices for keywords:

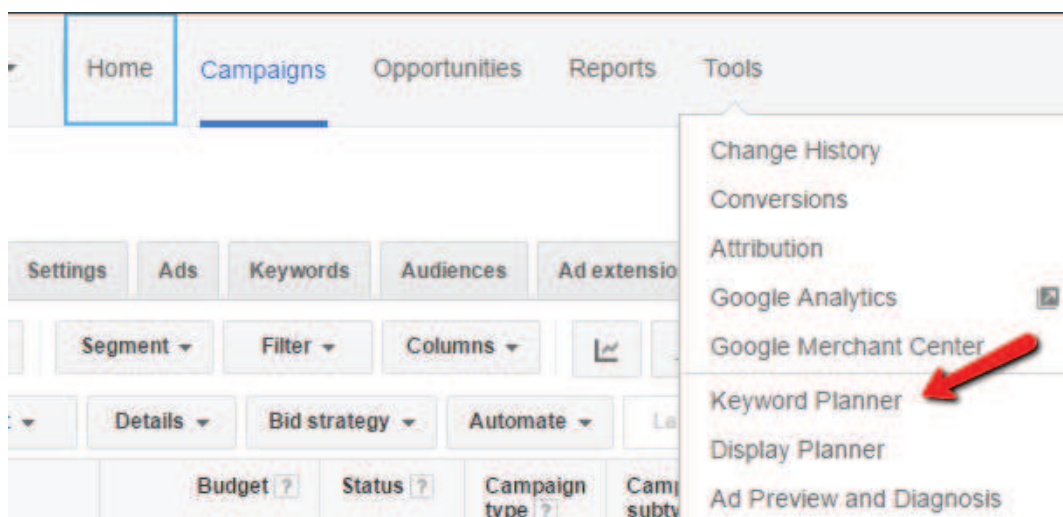
- **Limit the use of broad match keywords.** They are likely to generate clicks for terms that are too broad and might end up using the daily budget with little or no results. Broad match keywords perform quite well for some companies that have had them running for some time because Google and Bing use performance indicator such as the CTR to eventually understand what search terms are good or not in your campaign and optimize traffic delivery accordingly.
- **Broad match modified keywords are a good compromise between reach and targeted traffic.** This is the match type most businesses decide to get started with. Another good alternative is to start advertising

using targeted keyword match types at first and then broaden up the targeting later on.

- **Use negative keywords.** These keywords limit a number of keyword variations you will show up for. For instance, if your product isn't free, you can stop your ads to appear for all searches that include the word free in them. Negative keywords have three match types which are broad, phrase, and exact. They work the same way of keyword match types but with the opposite goal.

Keyword Research

Finding the right keywords is extremely important and requires thorough research. Google offers a great keyword research tool that can be accessed directly from the live interface in AdWords:



The tool enables users to insert a term or a group of terms and then suggests related ad groups and keywords. You can also insert terms you want to have in the suggested keywords or insert negative terms that you don't want to be suggested:

Keyword Planner

Where would you like to start?

 Find new keywords and get search volume data

Search for new keywords using a phrase, website or category

Enter one or more of the following:

Your product or service

For example, flowers or used cars

Your landing page

www.example.com/page

Your product category

Enter or select a product category

Targeting ?

United States

English

Google

Negative keywords

Date range ?

Show avg. monthly searches for: last 12 months

Customize your search ?

Keyword filters

Keyword options

Show broadly related ideas

Hide keywords in my account

Hide keywords in my plan

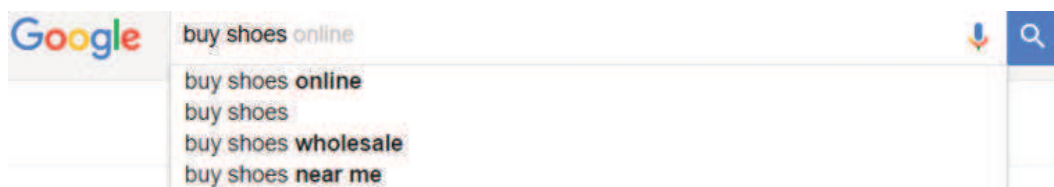
Keywords to include

The keyword planner is going to be the place where most of the campaign planning will start. There are a few strategies that allow the advertiser to make the most of this tool:

- Use as many negative keywords as possible. This is going to massively increase the quality of the suggested keywords.
- Research terms by related topics. Run multiple searches in the keyword tool and focus each search on a different topic to get the best amount of quality keyword suggestions

- Only select terms that indicate an intent to potentially needing your products or services. Stay away from searches that are too general such as searches including the work “picture”, “video”, “how to”, etc..
- Refine the research adding “keywords to include” to get laser targeted suggestions for terms that are extremely important for you.
- Quality is more important than quantity. Don’t add keywords to your campaigns simply because you want to have many terms.
- It is a best practice to use the keywords you research on Google in your Bing ads account. Then, optimize Bing campaigns based on the unique behavior of this platform

There are also two other ways for you to find additional terms. The first one consists of using the autocomplete function on Google.com. All you have got to do is to start a search and look at the autocomplete suggestions from Google. This will show you common combinations with the keywords you inserted in the search box and can be a gold mine for quality long tail keywords.



The second method to find additional keyword is keyword spy tools. These tools use large keywords databases to estimate with great precision the keyword being used by your competitors.

Sorting Keywords in Ad Groups

Once the keywords have been found, advertisers need to sort them in ad groups. Each ad group should contain keywords that are related to each other.

For instance, if you are selling animal products, ad groups could include but may not be limited to:

- Dog Food
- Hypoallergenic dog food
- Dog Puppy Food
- Cat Food
- Hypoallergenic cat food
- Rain Coats for dogs
- Dog t-shirts

As you can see above, each ad group has a theme. This theme indicates each of the keywords in a specific ad group are strictly related to each other. This carries several advantages. First of all, you will be able to have a panoramic of your performance by keyword “theme”. This is helpful to get an immediate snapshot of performance at any point in time.

Additionally, creating a structured ad group layout gives you the possibility to write laser targeted ads that are specific to the keywords in a given ad group. Including keywords in the ads is always recommendable, because it will increase the quality score of the keywords and consequently decrease the cost per click that you pay to show up in a given ad position.

Your quality score increases even more if you align keywords, ads, and landing page. This is why it is highly recommendable to optimize the content of your landing pages based target keywords the same way you do for SEO.

Getting The Hang of Ad Copywriting

Ads and extensions are the only part of your campaign set up that a potential client sees. Ads are more important than extensions because they show up on top and are seen first.

Google's standard search ad is composed of four visible and one hidden field. The visible fields are the headline (25 characters maximum), the first description line (35 characters maximum), the second description line (35 characters maximum) and the display URL (35 characters maximum). Bing has the same structure but with one only description line of 71 characters. The display URL needs to include the root domain of your site, which is what comes after the www. All the way until the .com/ (or .org/, .edu etc...). Anything after the “ / “ can be customized and doesn't need to correspond to an actual page on the site.

The hidden field is called final URL and it is the actual landing page that you want to send traffic to.

The screenshot shows the Google Ad Editor interface with the following fields and content:

- Headline:** Looking for Ad Copy Tips?
- Description Line 1:** You Are in The Right Place
- Description Line 2:** Free Guide - Learn More Now.
- Display URL:** Example.com/Ad-Copy-Guide
- Mobile:** ☐ Mobile ?
- Final URL:** https:// www.example.com/seo-guide
- URLs for mobile:** + URLs for mobile ?
- Ad URL options (advanced):** + Ad URL options (advanced) ?
- Review Notice:** Your edited ad will be reviewed by Google, and might not run until that review is complete. We review most ads within 1 business day. [Learn more](#)
- Buttons:** Save, Cancel

Google recently starting to roll out a new, extended ad type. The new ad type will include two headlines of 25 characters each, a full 80 character description line, and two URL Paths which are nothing more than the possibility to include up to two “ / “ after the display URL as long as it won't exceed the character limit of 35 (e.g. example.com/Buy-Now/Promo).

The final URL will be a hidden field, and this is where you will send your traffic to. The display URL will automatically pick up the root domain to use in your ad. There are a lot of best practices that come in place with ads. Here are some of the most important ones that should help improve your performance right away:

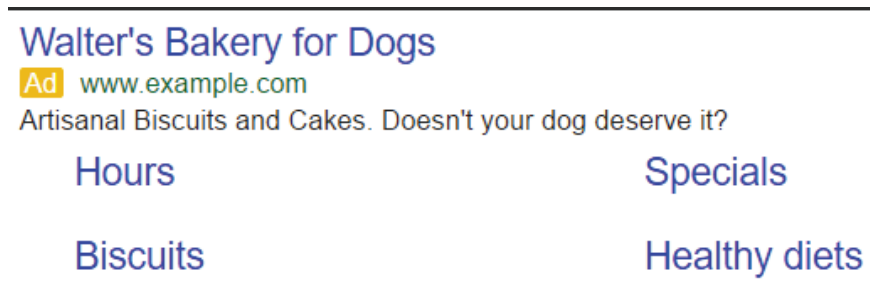
- **Test one element at the time.** As we have seen before, each ad is organized in different lines of text. Each time you test ads with different elements in each line you won't know the specific line of text that performed better because there are too many variables in the test
- **Test different features and benefits of your products or services in the description lines and find the ones that earn the best CTR and conversion rate.** Once you figure out the features or benefits that work best, you can test them in other marketing channels and see if they improve their performance.
- **Tell people what you would like them to do on your site.** Using a clear call to action such as learn more, buy now, and call us increases the chances of actually having people perform that action. People are subconsciously influenced by what you ask them to do.
- **Use a period at the end of the description line one.** It will move the first description line next to the headline creating a bigger ad. A bigger ad is going to grab more attention and generate more clicks to the website.
- **Select landing pages that are relevant to the ads and keywords that you selected.** If your page is not optimized for your target keywords, there is a high chance you will not perform well from a quality score standpoint

Extensions Will Increase Ads' Performance

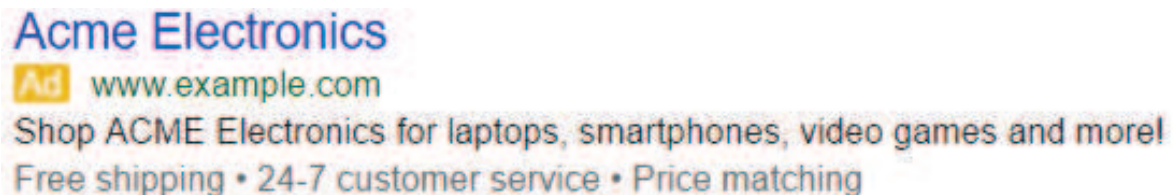
Google offers a lot of extension types for the search network. Extensions provide additional information about a business and help searchers make better decisions.

The most important extensions are:

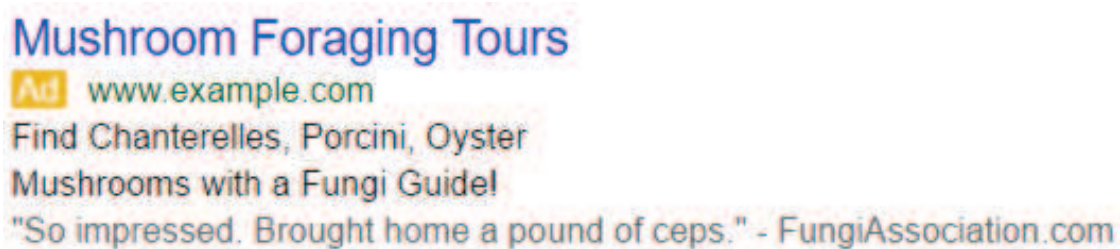
- Sitelink extensions: these are additional lines of text that appear below the ad and direct people to different pages of your site other than the final URL. Searchers can use site link extensions to navigate to a page that is the most relevant to their needs



- Callout extensions: These are additional lines of text that appear below an ad and provide additional information about a product or service. They are not clickable and therefore cannot send users to a specific page of the website



- Call extensions: Your ad will display a phone number that people can call to get in touch with your business. Call extensions have a click to call function on mobile devices.
- Location extensions: This extension adds the address of your business in an ad. You cannot manually insert the address, but this is automatically picked up from Google MyBusiness.
- Review extensions: This extension provides the opportunity to showcase our product or service mentioning reliable third-party websites that are positively talking about it.



You can find a complete list of [extensions here](#).

As a rule of thumb, extensions should always provide additional information to what you are already writing in the ad. This is going to engage the searcher and increase clicks to the website.

Choose The Right Campaign Settings

The last step in setting up a campaign on the search network is selecting the right settings for the campaign.

Here is a collection of best practices for campaigns' settings:

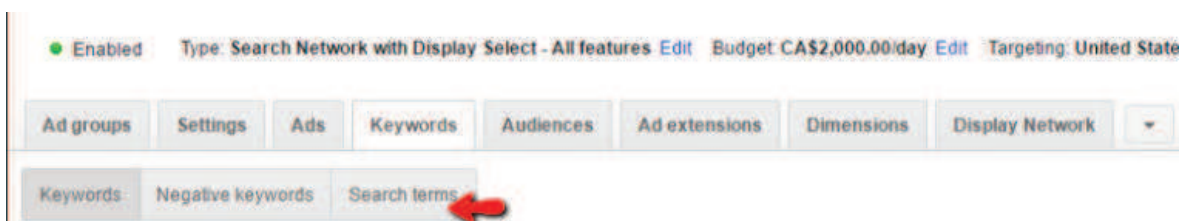
- Rotate ads indefinitely: There is nothing worse than creating a lot of ad tests and not distributing traffic evenly across the different ad variations. Indefinite rotation is more work because it requires frequent tune-ups, but it's the best way to effectively test ads.
- Show your ads for people searching for products or services in your area if they are physically located outside of your geographic target. Show your ads only during the days and hours you know perform well for your business. If you don't have this information you can start advertising 24/7 and then tune it up once have data.
- Apply bid modifiers for geographic locations, hours, days, and devices. This will help you use your budget more effectively. The more data you have, the more bid modifiers you should use.
- Test search partners to check whether they are worth running or not. Search partners are high-quality search engine websites that are affiliated with Google and show ads from AdWords Accounts. You will be able to breakdown performance and see how search partners are doing at any point in time.
- Google offers a display campaign that can run a search campaign called display select. Don't use it right away. Wait until you collect a month worth of conversion data and then test it. Over time, display select will likely become an essential component of your whole Google AdWords strategy.
- Automatic bidding is a great option if you don't want to set up bids for each single keyword. However, you will be losing some control over key words and won't be able to create keyword specific bid strategies. Start with manual bidding and then switch to a cost per acquisition (CPA)

bidding once your campaign has accumulated enough conversions to be able to predict how to automatically serve your ads to get more conversions at a lower cost. Google requires 15 conversions a month to be able to run CPA bidding, but the more conversions you have, the more effective this bidding strategy will be.

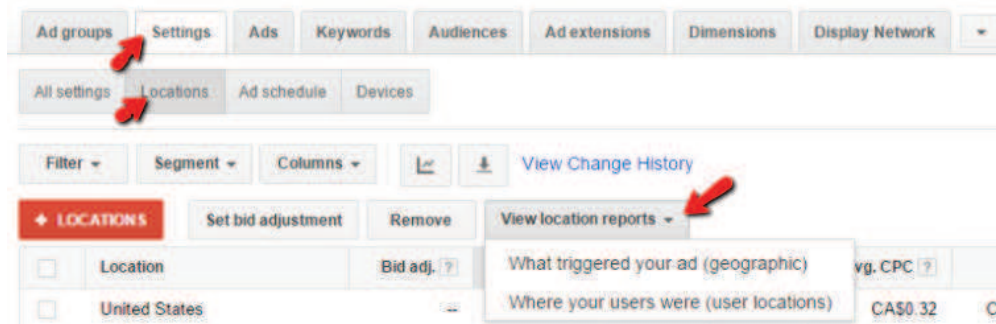
Maintenance and Optimization Best Practices

Having an effective optimization strategy has a huge impact on the cost per acquisition. Each account is going to need custom optimization strategies depending on performance and how it has been built out. However, there is a set of best practices that can be used in all accounts on a regular basis to maximize performance:

- Analyze search term reports with the goal of finding long tail search terms to add to your campaigns. Long tail keywords are keywords with three or more words in them. They are very targeted and usually don't have huge search volumes but they can convert at a better CPA.
- Analyze a search term reports with the goal of finding terms to add as additional negative keywords to your account. This is going to help decrease budget that is being used on irrelevant search terms.



- Look at the geographic performance of each campaign at the city or even zip code level. Smart advertisers will apply geographic bid modifiers based on performance. This information is available in the location tab of each campaign.



- Periodically run ad tests to find out what ads perform the best. Once you find them, don't stop testing but keep trying new variations that could improve your CTR or conversions.
- Check your performance on different devices and adjust your bidding accordingly. You shouldn't simply turn off mobile if it is underperforming, but you should rather consider optimizing your mobile site for better performance.
- Adjust your bids based on the performance by day and hour. The more data you collect, the better it is because it allows you to take statistically relevant decisions.

Shopping campaigns are Google specific campaigns and are most often used by retailers. These campaigns are highly automated and advertise all or selected part of the products of a business based on a feed which can be manually or automatically uploaded in Google. This campaign type cannot be used by companies offering a service. It also doesn't use keywords, but Google will look at the content of the feed to determine whether a search could be relevant for

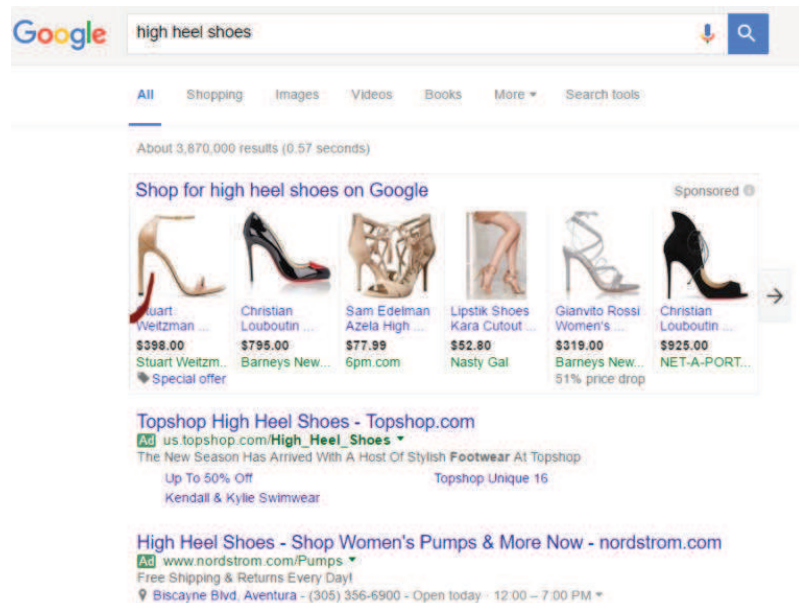
a business or not. Shopping campaigns are displayed on the search network together with regular search ads:

Most businesses use website plugins that automatically create product feeds based on the content of a website. This means the more each product page is optimized for the best keywords, the more impressions it will receive.

Shopping campaigns can also be organized in ad groups which can each target a specific section of the feed, such as different product categories, brands, or custom parameters. The advantage of breaking down the feed in ad groups is the possibility to easily get a snapshot of the performance of your group of products but also to assign custom negative keywords for just one ad group rather than for all products in a feed. For instance, if you are selling used and new clothes you would need to add the negative term “used” only to new products.

Shopping campaigns can assign custom bids all the way to the product level. You can decide to assign a standard bid for a product category (or brand or any other variable) and then increase or decrease the bid for the needs of a specific product.

Shopping campaigns aren't as easy as it might seem, and optimizing the feed to appear for more searches is extremely important. Here is a list of best practices to generate better performance:



- Segment your campaign in as many product groups as possible to customize the bidding strategy accordingly to your goals.
- Create custom bids for each item in your feed. Customizing your bids is the best way to increase traffic for well performing terms and reduce it for the ones that are not profitable.
- Have keyword rich product titles and descriptions in your feed. As mentioned earlier, shopping campaigns don't have keywords, and therefore the feed quality is extremely important. Think of a shopping feed as a piece of content that needs to be optimized for SEO purposes. Create one feed per country you want to advertise in.
- Segment your shopping campaigns by mirroring the structure on your website. This will also simplify your work in the account since you will know where to look for in AdWords if you need to optimize a specific item.
- Use the bid modifier as you would do for a search campaign. This is going to help improve the overall performance of the shopping campaign.

Display Campaigns

Display campaigns are another great option for advertisers that are looking to generate solid traffic at a good cost per click. Display campaigns promote text ads or banner on websites that partner with Google and agree to host ad spaces on their pages.

Advertisers can target potential clients based on four target criteria and any combination of them: Placements (which are pages you want to show ads on),

keywords, topics (group of websites that have content about similar topics), and remarketing.

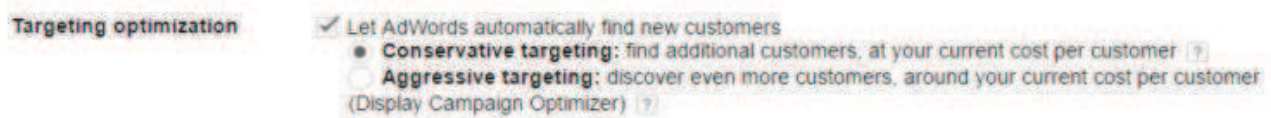
The Google Display Network also has a quality score metric that influences ad performance. Once again, the quality of the content plays a big role in increasing the quality score. The biggest elements influencing the quality score on display network are:

- The ad performance on similar sites
- The alignment between keywords and landing page
- The alignment between the content of a placement and the landing page

Setting up and managing display campaigns can be done much more effectively by using some best practices that will save you time and money. Let's have a look at some of them now:

- Break down campaigns in ad groups similar to the way you would in a search network. This allows you to customize the landing pages you send traffic to and boost the quality score.
- Block ads from appearing on mobile apps. Most times these placements generate involuntary clicks due to the small dimensions of the screen. Some business types might benefit from ads in mobile apps, so you need to evaluate this best practice on a case by case basis.
- Create a list of placements that you don't want to show up for and add them as negative placements. Also look for placements that aren't performing well and add them to the negative placements list.

- Increase the bid for placements that are performing well. This is going to help get more traffic from websites that are generating sales.
- Use advanced remarketing targeting options and have AdWords find additional customers based on the analysis of your own conversion data.



- Test text ads and banner ads in different ad groups to have the maximum control over the performance of the campaigns.
- Always run tests at the creative level to constantly improve performance. You shouldn't be testing more than one element at a time or you won't be able to tell what element of the ad is helping.

Conclusion

There are different ways to create a search network campaign, researching the best practices that apply to your strategy is key. Analyzing your current market will bring forth crucial information needed to make your campaign a success. The most important thing is to remember there is a strong bond between search campaigns and SEO strategies.

Optimizing your website pages for keywords you are actually targeting in your search campaigns will help your quality score. The better the quality score is, the lower your the cost per click, which means you can get more clicks within your budget. Additionally, if you work hard to rank a page for a specific term you may end up benefiting Google AdWords and Bing Ads, which will eventually find the page relevant for that target keyword.

The 2016 Guide to Keyword Research

Search engines have been minimizing the importance of keyword relevance signals for ranking for many years.

It is a fact that keywords are no longer necessary or mandatory to be present in the title tag or in heading tags (H1, H2, H3) in order to rank in the top five of the search engine results pages. Even using the exact keyword phrases within the text of a web page is no longer required.

Should you abandon keyword research and focus more effort on content creation? Surprisingly, the answer is no.

Keyword research is still important, but in a different way than has been practiced in the past. For example, the different meanings of a phrase and the popularity of each meaning is vitally important. The skillful use of words continues to be important, and this guide will show you how to research keywords in a manner that is appropriate for the way search engines work today.



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Roger Montti is an independent web publisher of popular websites, a consultant and a Moderator of the Link Building Forum at WebmasterWorld.com since 2004. He has presented at Internet marketing conferences such as SES, SMX, PubCon and Affiliate Summit.

The goal of this guide is to show how keyword research continues to be useful, to shine a light on numerous misconceptions, and show you how a scientific understanding of how keywords are used by search engines today can help you rank for high traffic/high conversion keywords.



The principles outlined in this guide apply equally to mobile content and is appropriate regardless of how textual content is delivered to the consumer.

Define Your Goals: What Do You Want to Accomplish with Search Traffic?

The biggest mistake search marketers make is to define success as more traffic. But more traffic should never be your goal. Increasing sales should always be the goal. Traffic is simply a means to solving the sales problem. Traffic is never the end goal. Increasing earnings should always be the focus.

When developing a keyword strategy for an e-commerce website, the first step is to define the sales problem the business wishes to solve. These are your real goals.

Examples of Typical E-Commerce Keyword Goals:

1. Sales
2. Feeding different segments of the sales funnel
3. Ad clicks and ad impressions
4. Building awareness of your site, services, and products

That last one, building awareness, is of major importance because it will help you rank for major keyword phrases in addition to driving direct sales. More on this strategy a little later. Keep reading!

Once the keyword goals are defined you can then develop keyword categories to address those goals, and begin categorizing your keywords in order to build a content and marketing strategy.



The first two categories are directly sales related; they solve a business problem directly. The second two categories (Feeding research levels of the sales funnel/ building CPM traffic) can be seen as consumer-related because they generally revolve around solving a problem for consumers.

Money Phrases

The sales category focuses on what the SEO industry calls Money Phrases. Money phrases are keyword phrases that are associated with a high level of sales. Examples of money phrases are “cheap widgets” and “where to buy widgets.”

Money phrases are important (and competitive!) because they almost always result in a sale. Money phrases are also important to ad-supported sites because the site visitor, being predisposed to making a purchase, is also more likely to click an ad unit and earn revenue for the web publisher.

Advertising associated with money phrases usually have a higher cost per click resulting in higher advertising earnings. That's why these keywords are called Money Phrases!

The Problem with Money Phrases

Money phrases are highly competitive and difficult to rank for. That's a given. A more important consideration that many are unaware of is that Pay Per Click ads will siphon off traffic that is (arguably) more inclined to make a purchase, with the rest of the traffic distributed to the organic results.

A sizable portion of the money keyword traffic is skimmed off through the Pay Per Click ads.

I'm going to show you how to solve this problem. Stay with me because the solution I am going to share is not entirely well understood in the search marketing industry.

Anatomy of Money Phrases

Aside from the obvious phrases containing words like "buy" in them, there are an additional set of keyword phrases that indicate a user intent to make an immediate purchase. These are so-called longtail "money phrases" that are important to rank for. I have categorized longtail money phrases into five categories. Each category represents a multiplicity of keyword phrases and their variants (singular and product name variants).

Top 5 Money Phrase Keyword Categories

1. Competitor comparison
2. Discount price searches
3. Product reviews and ratings
4. Coupon code searches
5. Searches for sales

I have developed many spreadsheets of valuable keyword phrases in a variety of industries. While I can't publicly share them, I have shared the five categories I use so you can develop and categorize your own list of money phrases.

Money Phrase Keywords and Site Architecture

Now here's the important thing to understand: There are good reasons to not use the list to build a site architecture that revolves around the money phrases. The reason is because that is the way to build a site tuned for keyword relevance. But if you read [Google's Quality Raters Guidelines](#) you will see that Google (and presumably the algorithms) aren't ranking web pages for their keyword relevance signals. They are ranking web pages for their expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. This is an important point that I will return to later. But for now, understand that many sites that the search engines are ranking today are not built with a site architecture that revolves exclusively around money phrases.

The Value of Non-Money Phrase Keywords

Money phrases are so-called because visitors using those phrases tend to convert and put money in the till. These are the most important keyword phrases for making immediate sales on a regular basis. If your company is not ranking for money phrases then someone else is. So it might as well be you that ranks for

the money phrases, right? Not always. There is another keyword path to building online sales.

Often the barrier to entry for a competitive money phrase is too high because the established companies in the search results have a seemingly insurmountable lead in terms of backlinks, content, social media reach, and other factors that cannot be easily copied, at least not without years of work. There is another way to building traffic and that's with non-money phrases.

It may sound counter-intuitive that the way to attract buyers is with keywords that do not convert. But it's a viable path toward eventually ranking for the money phrases. Here is how it works:



The Advantage of Being Comprehensive

Most money phrases are awarded to the most authoritative sites. Yes, quantity and quality backlinks plays a role. However, content is a highly important ingredient. And not just any content but comprehensive content. A site that

is comprehensive is authoritative. Authoritative sites are the kind that search engines prefer to rank. Google's Search Quality Raters Guideline states in section 3.1

“Page Quality Rating: Most Important Factors

Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness: This is an important quality characteristic.”

Later on in section 3.2 the guidelines states:

“The amount of expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness... that a webpage/website has is very important.”

An Alternate Money Phrase Ranking Strategy

Although visitors to an authoritative site may not convert via the non-money search queries that the site ranks for, the authority strategy does have the effect of cultivating awareness, building goodwill, stimulating word of mouth referrals, links, and ultimately money-phrase ranking and sales. This is one of the secrets to ranking for money phrases.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the money phrases focus on the authority building long-tail phrases.

The old way of ranking for money phrases was with a full-frontal attack on those phrases. Over the years it's become increasingly evident that comprehensive sites tend to rank for the best phrases.

Focusing exclusively on keyword relevance has been showing diminishing returns for the past ten years. Focusing on depth of content, expertise, and authority is a solid path to ranking for money phrases.

Keyword Strategies for Building Awareness and Ad Impressions

In general, if you want to rank well for the high traffic, two-word phrases then you must be authoritative for the three, four, and five-word phrases. In general, a site that is authoritative for a high traffic money phrase is only authoritative because they are comprehensive on a granular level. Once the granular content is in place, the links attracted to the granular topics builds topical relevance for the entire site.

Should You Worry about Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI)?

Latent Semantic Indexing (LSI) is a very old technology, developed nearly twenty years ago, whose purpose was to strengthen a search engine's ability to identify the correct context of a word.

Words often have more than one meaning (this is called Polysemy). Thus, a word or phrase appearing on a page did not guarantee that the page was relevant to a search phrase.

LSI technology was used to overcome polysemy, to help a text-based search engine identify the context of a web page and thus better match a search query.

Background Reading about Latent Semantic Indexing:

<http://www.cse.msu.edu/~cse960/Papers/LSI/LSI.pdf>

<https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1301/1301.6705.pdf>

<http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~pxt/IDA/plsa.pdf>

History of LSI

In 2003 Google acquired an important contextual analysis technology. The technology was known as Circa and it was acquired by Google when it purchased a company called Applied Semantics.

In a nutshell, Circa was based on an understanding of language through the use of the Open Directory Project categories to create themes that a web page could be classified under. Thus, a web page could be understood as belonging to a particular thematic topic.

Applied Semantics created the technology that powered Google's AdSense program, enabling Google to better match website content to keywords associated with advertising. This a kind of contextual analysis that was used as a foundation for the AdSense program, which has since added additional technologies such as placement targeting, interest-based targeting and language targeting to improve and expand the AdSense program.

In fact, [according to Google](#), their contextual targeting uses the overall link structure of the entire web to determine what a web page is about, which is far more sophisticated and advanced than simple LSI.

Seeing how LSI has a diminished role in the AdSense program it is likely that it does not play a significant role in search ranking as well. It is reasonable to surmise that LSI plays a small to insignificant role in search ranking because the science of information retrieval has come a long way since 2003.

Should You Use Keyword Synonyms?

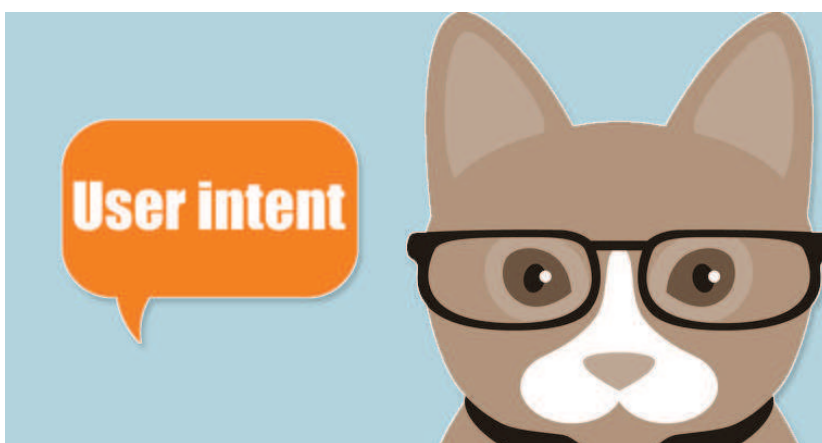
Synonyms (and LSI) were initially used as a way to combat keyword spamming. Although Google was never a keyword based search engine, it was not entirely immune to keyword spamming, more formally known in scientific circles as [Term Spamming](#). It's called Term Spamming because this kind of spam focuses on search query terms, hence, search query Term Spamming.

With the advent of the Hummingbird update and the increased ability for natural language processing (an attempt to understand language beyond keyword relevance), the search marketing industry responded by recommending the use of synonyms in order to rank better.

The thinking goes that in order to be topically relevant for a phrase that you would have to salt your web page with synonyms. But this strategy is a “back of the napkin” solution to a highly complex problem. The advice to use synonyms in a web page is literally a joke: Did you hear the one about the SEO who walked into a bar, a speakeasy, a dive, a gin joint?

Clearly, using synonyms is a simplistic approach to being topically relevant. It's the tired old term spamming trick rooted solidly on ranking for keyword relevance, a strategy that no longer works. In my opinion, it's not necessary if you are

focused on expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. Even way back in 2005, in the research paper cited above, it is stated that the goal was to present the most relevant and most important web pages.



Keywords are About User Intent

Words and phrases have multiple user intent. The SERPs are ordered to satisfy the user intent of the most people. Thus if the user intent you choose to satisfy is less popular you will never rank at the top of Google's search results. And that's ok! There's nothing you can do to change that situation when it happens. Not to get too technical but there is other research and patents that deal with using prior searches, location, and other factors to personalize the order of the sites that are shown in the results. However that likely isn't the norm across a wide range of search queries.

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that the best use of words is important. Understanding the user intent of a keyword phrase is paramount because it will guide the purpose of a page. The search quality guidelines state that every page is judged according to how it satisfies a site visitors goals. The quality guidelines state that the best pages "fully satisfies the user intent" of the search query.

There is a ratings category called Fully Meets. It is applied to situations where the user intent is unambiguous. This applies especially so for e-commerce phrases where the intent to buy is clear. Fully Meets is the gold standard for satisfying a user query and becoming the number one ranked page for an unambiguous query. In my opinion, it should be your goal for satisfying the user intent even of ambiguous queries, where you identify all the possible user intents then choose which user intent you are going to satisfy.

How Google Defines a Site that “Fully Meets” a Users Needs

- The query and user need must be specific, clear, and unambiguous.
- The result must be fully satisfying for mobile users, requiring minimal effort for users to immediately get or use what they are looking for.
- All or almost all users would be completely satisfied by the result—users issuing that query would not need additional results to fully satisfy the user intent.

In other words, the Fully Meets rating should be reserved for results that are the “complete and perfect response or answer” so that no other results are necessary for all or almost all users to be fully satisfied.”

The top ranked sites rank in the top ten because their web pages satisfy the most popular user intent for that keyword phrase.

Keyword Popularity

Understanding the user intent of a phrase is important because it will guide your content creation strategy. In the case of an ambiguous user intent, where a keyword phrase has multiple meanings, it is important to make a list of all the different user intents. If you search on Google you may be able to discern the different user intents. The most popular variation is most likely to be the one that is highest ranked.

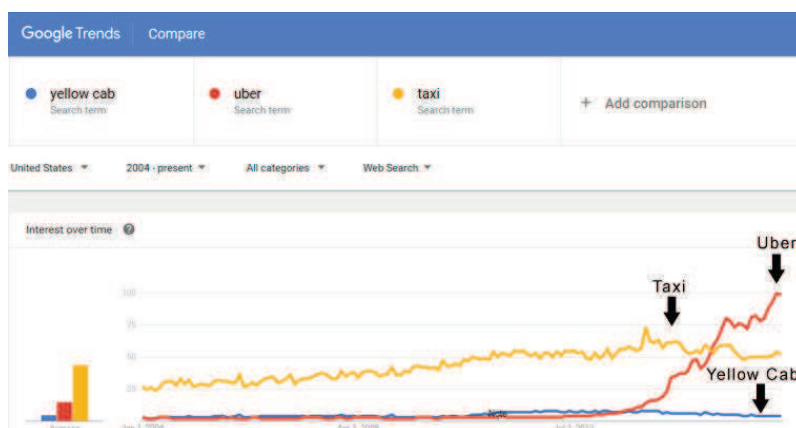
Here’s an important insight: For many search queries, the top ranked sites are not ranked at the top because they have more links pointing to their pages. Nor

are they top-ranked because they contain all of the keywords. The top ranked sites rank in the top ten because their web pages satisfy the most popular user intent for that keyword phrase. If there are three user intents for a search query, it is the most popular user intent that will be featured at the top- not the site with the most keyword anchor text. This literally gives the phrase Keyword Popularity a whole new meaning!

If the user intent is split between more users who are researching for academic purposes and users who are researching to make a purchase, Google will rank web pages that are informational than transactional. No matter how many links you amass to your page, if the user intent of your page is unpopular then you will never crack the top five of any search engine.

Ranking for keyword phrases is no longer about ranking the web pages with the most links and the most complete content. It's about ranking the web pages that most fully satisfies the most popular user intent. The word paramount means that something is of

extreme importance, more important than anything else. This why I used that word when I said that understanding the user intents of keyword phrases is paramount. This also relates to what was stated at the beginning of this guide, that keywords continue to be important, but in a different manner in which they have been used.



Google Trends Tool

Keywords are a window into what users want, the user intent. Google Trends is a good tool to identify changes in how keywords are being used. Google trends will help you see how phrases are trending up, trending down, trending in a cyclical pattern and identify regional patterns. Understanding cyclical and regional patterns will better help you know when to roll out certain kinds of content and also to understand to focus your link building in certain regions for certain phrases, since those phrases will be more popular in those regions. This is an important insight!

In the example illustrated above it is abundantly clear that the phrase Uber is wildly popular compared even to the generic phrase taxi. The trend line also shows that the phrase taxi is trending downward, in recent times the search inventory plummeted to as low as it was in 2004. Comparing keywords with brand names is highly useful. For example, the keyword trends for digital cameras trends downwards with the introduction of the iPhone. This data can be used to confirm a hunch about a correlation in consumer spending habits.

Another example is a comparison of the trends between the phrases radio station and the brand name, Spotify. The phrase radio station is trending downwards while the brand name Spotify is trending upward. There's no correlation between the two trends but it does show a change in how people are consuming music. When you see a traffic decline even though your rankings are unchanged, it can sometimes mean there is a change in consumer behavior tied to the introduction of a new product or service.

And here is an important insight into how to use the Google Trends tool: Compare keyword phrases with keywords whose actual search volumes you are familiar with- even if the known keyword phrase is unrelated. Consequently, it makes analyzing the search trends for an unfamiliar keyword phrase easier because you have a baseline for comparison.

Three Important Takeaways

1. Keyword strategies are not about synonyms

A proper keyword strategy is predicated on creating a topical map of your niche in order to help you grow your site to become authoritative, expert, and trustworthy.

2. Identify the user intent, then set about satisfying that intent

Algorithms are tuned to satisfying user queries by answering questions. They are no longer matching search queries to keywords on a web page. This does not mean that you should phrase your pages as questions and answers. It means understanding the user intent and constructing your content so that it satisfies the user intent implicit in the keyword phrase.

3. Integrate user experience into your keyword strategy

Web pages rank because websites link to those pages. Websites link to those pages because those pages solved a problem, because it scratches an itch. Nobody ever linked to a web page because of its keyword relevance. Only an SEO walks into a bar, a dive, a speakeasy. Nobody links to that. People link to a site because of positive user experiences. View your keyword list through the framework of user intent and then consider how the resulting content can be used to create a positive user experience.

How can a web page use a keyword phrase in a way that results in better rankings? You now understand the answer. Go forth and make some money!

Making SEO and User Experience Work Together

I've been in the web marketing industry so long that I get to tell “back in the day” stories that leave today's younger generation of SEOs scratching their head wondering what the heck I'm talking about. It's kind of like explaining to your children that cartoons used to air on TV for only three hours a week! And you had to get up at 7 AM to watch them live!

Just to prove my point, when I started doing SEO (“back in the day”), rankings were the only thing that mattered. I'm ashamed to admit it, but in my very earliest days, my optimization practices constituted getting the keyword on the page as many times as possible without ruining the visitor's on-page experience.

It's heartening to know that I, and the industry at large, have come a long, long way since then. In fact, if there was just one very significant evolution that has happened over the years (and there have been many), I would say it would be the transition of SEOs (aka digital marketers, web marketers, inbound marketers,



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etc.) growing up to be real marketers. We realized things like search engine rankings were important, but what was even more important was helping businesses do a better job at reaching, attracting, and converting their target audience.

But SEOs aren't the only ones who have grown up; search engines grew up as well. In an interesting pattern, search engines grew up because "SEOs" forced them to (yes, I deliberately used scare quotes.) Spammers have always sought the lowest bar for entry (easiest way to achieve rankings) and brute forced attacked the hell out of it. Search engines were forced to raise the bar, which forced SEOs to raise the bar. This is a cycle that repeated year after year to where we are today.

Yet, the smart SEOs are those who got ahead of the search engines long before any new algorithm rolled out. [Panda](#), [Penguin](#), [Hummingbird](#) and all the other algorithm updates had nary an impact on the web marketers that were focused on marketing their clients' websites. Those who were still looking for the easy way to get rankings got hit and hit hard, time and time again. Yet, a small handful of SEOs through the years breezed through each algorithm update like it was expected. Because, well, it kinda was.

We were busy working for our clients' larger goals rather than working for rankings that may or may not help them achieve what they wanted: Growth. And for any business to grow, they have to focus on their customers first.

User Experience is Critical to SEO

There is a whole field of UX optimization that requires its own level of expertise. The typical SEO, however, doesn't have to be a full-fledged UX expert, but they should have an understanding of many of the basic website UX principles.

UX optimization is nothing more than focusing on the visitor. Everything we do in the sphere of web marketing has to have the visitor in mind. Yes, we do certain things for search engines, but search engines (almost always) require those things because they have learned it's what their users (searchers) want.



Search engines have some of the most advanced data mining operations in the world. They aren't just helping people find what they want; they're collecting data that helps them understand user behavior. From that data, the algorithms get tweaked in order to give searchers more of what they want and less of what they don't.

Which means websites that do a better job of meeting the needs of searchers have a better chance of landing on the first page of the search results. In this sense, anything we do for search engines we are doing for the searchers.

User experience shouldn't just be a by-product of SEO, however. We don't do UX because the search engines tell us to! Wise SEOs are going above and beyond the requirements of Google and Bing and looking for ways to improve their user experience overall. And one really good reason is because search engines can only assess certain aspects of searcher behavior. If they see someone is bouncing back to the search results after hitting your site, they just know they bounced, they don't really know why.

That bounce could be the result of one or ten things wrong with your site. It doesn't matter to the search engine; they just see the bounce and, perhaps, factor that into how well you should rank. Your job as the SEO is to determine

what's causing this behavior and then figure out ways to provide a better result for the visitor overall.

SEO / UX Best Practices

As I said above, you don't have to be a UX expert to take some strong strides in providing a better user experience that complements your SEO efforts. In fact, the best place to start is with conventional wisdom.

Before we get into some semi-universal best practices for SEO/UX, keep in mind that not all "best practices" are going to be the best thing for you, your industry, or your visitors. In fact, something that may work wonders for the website around the corner could end up being disastrous for you. Just because Amazon does it doesn't mean you should too! (Of course, it doesn't mean you shouldn't, either.)

Keyword Research

The base starting point for almost all online marketing is keyword research. This affects everything from web design to site messaging to navigation to the content of the site. While keyword research isn't a "best practice" that you can implement into your website, it is essential to for most of the best practices outlined here. Which means this is where you should start.

There is a whole art to keyword research, and I recommend you read up on it. Once you've got the hang of how to do keyword research, there are a few other points that are helpful to understand before deciding which keywords will be important to your overall marketing efforts.

- **Searcher Language:** Keywords give us extremely valuable insight on how searchers think about our products or services. Far too often, businesses use language that is native to those within the industry. However, many searchers aren't in the industry and may not even know the "official" words that describe any particular product or service. Keyword research not only uncovers the words they use to describe what they want, but also the problems and solutions they are looking for. This is valuable information that can inform your content later.
- **Searcher Intent:** Not all keywords or phrases will mean what we think they mean. For example, one person searching with the phrase "website audit" may be looking for someone to perform the audit, while another may be looking for tips on how to do the audit themselves. Often, the intent becomes clearer as you get into more long-tail phrases, but be careful about making assumptions. You always want to deliver searchers to pages that match their intent.

Entice the Click

Optimization isn't just about rankings, but about getting searchers to click to your site. All things equal, the higher up on the page you are, the more likely you are to get clicked. But there is no reason you need to be equal when you can be superior to the competing search results! It's entirely possible to get more clicks to your site than a competitor who is ranking higher than you.



This can be accomplished by making sure that your search listing captures the visitor's attention while using language that encourages them to click your result rather than another. Bland language in the search results leads to poor click-through rate. Give searchers a reason to choose you over the 10-20 other links on the page.

- **Title Tags:** This is (typically) the clickable link in the search result. You have very limited space (about 70 characters), so use it wisely. Make sure you use language that fits the search (keywords!) and provide additional, relevant information that is more likely to get the searcher's attention as they scan the results.
- **URLs / Breadcrumbs:** The URL of the page or the breadcrumb trail follows the title tag. This provides an additional signal to the searcher regarding the relevance of the result. If the URL or displayed breadcrumb trail doesn't add value, or match the searcher's intent, they may choose to disregard your site as a viable option.
- **Meta Descriptions:** This comes after the URL in the search result. Here, you're given a bit more room to reinforce and expand on the title tag message that caught their attention. You have about 150 characters or so to provide information that searchers might find valuable and, again, encourage them to click through to your site. Remember to address their needs using their language.

Keep the Scent

Getting visitors to click into your site is a job well done, but not a job completed. There is still a lot more to do. You have to remember that visitors are always in a hurry. They don't want to take a lot of time trying to figure out where they are or

whether or not the page they landed on fulfills their needs. In fact, if searchers don't find what they are looking for within a few seconds of landing on your page, they often leave. Which means you have to make sure you do everything you can to confirm your page is the right one.



That's called keeping the scent. There was something about your search result that made them click into your site. They have started down a path based on that scent. Now, you have to keep the scent by quickly confirming that you have what they came looking for, and encourage them to continue engaging with your site until they get a resolution. Don't let them lose the scent at any point; if they lose the scent you lose them!

- **Site ID:** One of the first things visitors see when they land on a page is the Site ID, aka logo. Your logo should be obvious, and not surrounded by clutter. And, of course, it helps if your logo (or accompanying tagline) provides some association with what the visitor needs.
- **Header Tags:** Aside from the logo, visitors will often look to the header at the top of the page content to confirm that the page they landed on provides the information they came for. The topmost heading tag (which should be an H1—and the only H1 on the page) should provide a similar message as the page's title tag. You have no limitations here, other than what makes sense visually for the page, but use this to reinforce the message and to "title" the content that is below it. You can also use additional headings to break up long content. Visitors will often scan content looking for particular answers or solutions and heading tags can help them do that.



- **Navigation:** Another signal many visitors use to confirm they are on the right site overall is to scan the navigation. This offers a nice chance to display your full value to the visitor. Do you meet one need? Well, maybe you meet many others! Don't hide your solutions or services under a "shop" or "services" menu link. Display them proudly in your navigation, grouping them into relevant headings. You want visitors to be able to articulate exactly what you offer by looking at your navigation alone. Oh, one last thing about navigation. This is a great place to use keywords! Each navigation link can be a relevant keyword phrase that leads to the content for that topic or solution.
- **Content Optimization:** This is where you fulfill the searchers' needs in full. It's not just the scent but the meal you deliver here. Whatever they were looking for, the content must deliver. Keep the content focused on a single need and use links to direct the visitor to more information as needed. Each page of content should have a primary goal, and everything on the page should direct the visitor toward the completion of that primary goal. Use keywords as needed (and relevant), but focus the content on a single topic that addresses the visitor's needs and your goals for them.

- **Calls to action:** Navigation is important, but you need to incorporate other calls to action for the page's goal(s). Make sure your calls to action explicitly state what the visitor will get when they click. While each page may have one primary goal, not every visitor will be ready to pull the trigger, so to speak. It can be beneficial to provide some secondary goals with calls to action that will keep the visitor engaged on your site but through a less direct route to the goal.

Be Fast

Speed is an increasingly important component of optimization. Regardless of what platform (desktop, table, phone) the search is performed on, if your pages are slow to load, the search engines will likely limit your exposure to searchers, especially those working from slow connections. That means you want your site to be lightning fast.



Searchers and site visitors are very impatient. They are more apt to leave and start a new search than they are to wait around to see what you offer.

- **Image Compression:** Large images can take up a whole lot of bandwidth, but with HD resolution screens so common, you cannot compromise on image quality for speed. Instead, make sure to save images in the best format (jpg, gif, bmp) depending on what provides the best quality for your image. You can then run your image through compression tools to decrease the size without decreasing the quality.

- **Streamlined Code:** Technology has improved quite a bit since back in the day. We can do things today with just a few lines of code that required a gluttony of code just a few years ago. And it keeps getting better! While this is good for the web at large, it often means if you're not keeping up, you're slowing down. Keep your code lean and clean to keep your site speed up to par.
- **Fast Servers:** Your web host can also play a critical role in your site speed issues. Sharing server space is likely to slow you down, so consider getting a dedicated server. This is especially critical for businesses with a lot of traffic. Talk to your web host about what you can do to speed up your site for a minimal cost. Every host will have different options, but it's imperative not to let your server bog you down.

Always Be Testing

There is always room for improvement. Just because a change you made works well doesn't mean it can't work better. Everything that can be tested should be tested, and it's okay to fail. Even a test that turns out poorly is a learning experience for what not to do. You'd never know unless you test it, right?

In a perfect world, you'd test every UX change you make to see if the result improved performance before moving on to the next. Unfortunately, we rarely visit—let alone live in—that perfect world. Most sites are in such poor condition that taking one best practice at a time would take far too long to get measurable results. If that's you, you can probably make good headway implementing the best practices here and then going back to test variations and additional changes later.

What user experience best practices would you add?

How to Know Your Audience to Master Your Marketing Campaigns

Keywords. Conversion. User Experience. Search Engine Optimization. What do all of these words and phrases have in common? They all relate to how you will attract, engage, and convert your target audience.

The crux of any good digital marketing campaign is to identify the specific characteristics of your ideal customers, including geographic, demographic, and psychographic variables. The more you know about your audience, the more powerful your digital marketing efforts will become.

At some point, whether it was in a Marketing 101 course you took or from



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self-learning, you have heard the concept of getting to know your audience. But what does that concept really mean? It's not enough to know the demographics and location of your prospects; you have to know as much as possible about them, including their personality traits, interests, values, and opinions.

It is how you will come up with the right keyword list, set up your pages for conversion, create a great user experience, and optimize your content. It will also help you craft the perfect message to cause your readers to take action and will put you on the right track in finding key influencers in your market.

Below is a step-by-step approach to getting to know your audience, which will, in turn, help you create a successful digital marketing campaign and turn you into a marketing rock star.

Step One: Conduct Market Research

When you want to know more about the audience you are targeting, you need to conduct good old-fashion market research. The goal is to get as many details as possible about the group you are targeting, which you can later use to build personas (step two). There are many ways you can go about gathering this information, including the following methods.

Reach Out to Other Departments

Many times, we work in silos, meaning we stick within our own team or department and don't reach out to anyone outside of our group. When you are in digital marketing, you need to take advantage of the wealth of information that exists among other departments. For example, the sales team will know the types of questions that prospects ask and will also know their interests and desires. If your company has a customer service team, they will be able to provide insight into the words customers use (i.e. possible keywords for SEO) and

what concerns are commonly brought up. Even if your company is not that large, there are still people on the frontlines who are fielding questions and comments both from prospects and customers. Take the time to sit down with them and ask them questions about your target audience. You can use this information to build personas.

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Research Social Networks

If you ever wanted to read your customers' minds, social media is the closest you will get. This concept is known as **social listening** and consists of monitoring the various social networks to discover what is being said about your brand, your competitors, and topics relevant to your business. You can even identify trends in your audience's interests and problems. You can also determine what social networks they are the most active on, not to mention who the influencers are in that space. Instead of asking your audience questions, you can listen to their social conversations and determine what type of content will be the most valuable and relevant to them.

You can even identify trends in your audience's interests and problems. You can also determine what social networks they are the most active on, not to mention who the influencers are in that space. Instead of asking your audience questions, you can listen to their social conversations and determine what type of content will be the most valuable and relevant to them.

Create a Quantitative Survey

You will need to gather more information about your audience than general demographics. However, that doesn't mean you are going to dismiss demographics, such as age, gender, income level, education, employment, etc. To gather this information fairly quick, you can take a quantitative approach. This research method is ideal for surveying a large population of interest, such as your existing customer base or potential market.

The easiest way to go about this research is to use an online questionnaire. The data is then quantified, giving you statistical results about your population. You will be able to see general characteristics about your target audience. Keep in mind that this approach won't give you specific insight into individual experiences. It instead reflects trends and commonalities among your audience.

Conduct Interviews

Interviews are considered a qualitative research method, which delves into motivations, thoughts, and even opinions. It is a way to get to know your audience on a more personal level, but because it is a time-consuming process, the population you research will be smaller. Generally, you will aim for 10 to 20 interviews.

One of the simplest ways to go about qualitative research is to conduct interviews with several existing customers and prospects. The questions should

be prepared in advance and designed in such a way that they reveal the respondent's personality traits, buying preferences, interests, and motivations.

The interview itself should be treated as a conversation, and there should be a lot of listening on your end. Be careful not to put words into the respondent's mouth, but instead take the time to allow the person to get deep into his or her thoughts. One tactical piece of advice, ask permission to record the conversation. That will ensure you don't miss important insights and will also allow you to capture the exact words used.

If you truly listen to these interviews, you will discover a wealth of information that can be used to successfully market and sell to your potential customers.

Step Two: Build Your Personas

Now that you have collected detailed information about your target audience, you can start to build buyer personas. [Aberdeen Research](#) reported that marketers who use personas achieve 73% higher conversions. A persona is not a simple buyer profile. [Hubspot](#) provides a great definition of a buyer persona, which explains that it is a representation of your ideal customer based on market research and actual data about your existing customer base. Step one helps you put together this information to discover your target customers' demographics, motivations, interests, and behaviors.

Step one helps you put together this information to discover your target customers' demographics, motivations, interests, and behaviors.

Personas offer a voice from your ideal target customers that tie right back to your digital marketing efforts. Think and refer to your personas as real people instead of an abstract audience. That will help you engage in genuine conversations with your current and potential customers.

Below are some tips to help you build personas for your digital marketing campaign.

Identify All the Personas You are Targeting

After conducting your market research, there is a strong chance you identified more than one buyer persona, and that is okay. In fact, it is pretty common. All of these personas should describe different target customers. You will tailor your content and SEO efforts to connect with each of these customer segments.

For example, if you identified millennials as one of your buyer personas, you will develop a content marketing strategy that speaks directly to them. You will also consider what words they use and the websites they frequent.

Write a Detailed Description of Each Persona

It's not enough to jot down a "type" of a persona you have identified. Instead, you want to describe, in detail, each one. You would include basic demographic data, but also other pertinent information, such as the person's interests, pain points, priorities, goals, concerns, and personality traits. Be very detailed in your persona description, as you should refer to this information often. Include real quotes for your personas, which should be taken from the interviews you conducted during your market research.



You might consider including a picture of your persona and even a name or archetype, such as Frugal Freddy, Motivated Mary, etc. If you need a little

guidance in describing these personas, there are plenty of free persona building templates out there. Just do a quick online search and you will find some great ones that can help you.

Put Personas Into Action

Once you create personas, you should refer back to them on a regular basis when you are working on any facet of digital marketing, including SEO, content development, and social media marketing. For instance, if you are thinking about redesigning your website, creating a social media strategy, or going after new keywords, refer to your personas.

View them as your real customers and focus on how you can best connect with them. You should also map your content to the various personas you identified.

Step Three: Identify Influencers of Your Target Audience

Once you have done your market research and defined your personas, it's time to consider the influencers, as they can help you grow your brand's visibility. That means you need to identify the people who have a direct influence on your target audience. These are the people who can significantly impact your customer's purchasing decision.

While influencers can include celebrities, journalists, and even industry analysts, the focus here is on social influencers. These individuals are the ones who have built a substantial social following and engage with their audience on a regular basis.

Social influencers are going to be different in each market. For example, if you are trying to reach young mothers, you might want to find and reach out to a

popular mom blogger. Or, if you are trying to reach teenagers, look at popular Snapchat celebrities or YouTubers. If you are unsure who is an influencer in your market, you can use tools, such as [BuzzSumo.com](https://www.buzzsumo.com), [Mention.com](https://www.mention.com), or [Hashtagify.me](https://www.hashtagify.me).

When you are looking for one of these influencers, consider the following.

- **Pay attention to engagement:** The number of social followers is a metric to view when considering an influencer, but just as important (if not more) is the level of engagement. You want to work with an influencer who has a high engagement with followers. Snapchat celebrity Shonduras is a great example. He gets an average of 125,000 opens per photo, which might not seem as high of a level of engagement compared to some YouTubers who receive millions of views. However, according to a quote from Shonduras on Adweek.com, half of his followers instantly respond to what he's saying. From a marketer's perspective, engagement is critical.
- **Make sure the influencer likes your brand:** You want the influencer to be a genuine brand advocate. This genuineness will come through in his or her messaging. Consumers are savvy and can often identify when an influencer is truly a fan of the brand or not. Trying to fool consumers has the potential to hurt your brand image.
- **Know how much the influencer is worth:** When you involve an influencer, expect to pay money. According to [GroupHigh](https://www.grouphigh.com), 85% of influencers accept monetary compensation for posts. GroupHigh also revealed that 70% of influencers would rather have monetary compensation per post than ads on their blogs, affiliate partnerships or product trade. Keep in mind that the FTC requires you to signal to consumers if a post is sponsored. Make sure you

are abiding by the law. GroupHigh reported that even when a post is labeled with “sponsored” or “paid,” it doesn’t affect how much the consumer trusts the influencer’s brand recommendation.

Reach Out to Influencers

When you determine the influencer(s) who are relevant to your target audience, you can start your outreach. You should take the time to get to know the influencer, just like you would take the time to get to know your target customer.

Read or view his or her posts and get a feel for what is important to the influencer. Tailor your message to each particular influencer, but at the same time, be sure to clearly communicate your brand objectives and deliverables. You should also explain your expectations. As mentioned in the previous section, you will likely need to compensate the influencer, so start that conversation right away.

Final Advice

The majority of the information shared up to this point has to do with marketing. The reason is that to have a great SEO, PPC or social media campaign; you have to apply tried and true marketing principles. While some of these principles have evolved over time, what hasn’t changed is that you are still marketing to people.

It is trendy to talk about the evolving consumer, but a good marketer should also be focused on what has remained unchanged—human instincts, motivations, desires, and needs. The more you know about your audience, including your target customers and key influencers, the greater success you will achieve through your digital marketing.

Turning Link Building into Link Earning

To build a high-quality backlink profile, you need to stop working on building links and start working on earning links, as Rand Fishkin shared in a [Whiteboard Friday](#).

Real talk: Link earning is about creating trustworthy, awesome content and promoting it like crazy...you know Beyoncé style.

The discipline of link building is perceived to the public as negative, created by the mammoths at Google spreading fear into link building with the reboot of Penguin and penalizing big name companies.

Check out how Google's own John Mueller responded to a webmaster's question on "Is link building in any way good?" in [this Google+ hangout](#). He responds "In general, I'd try to avoid that."

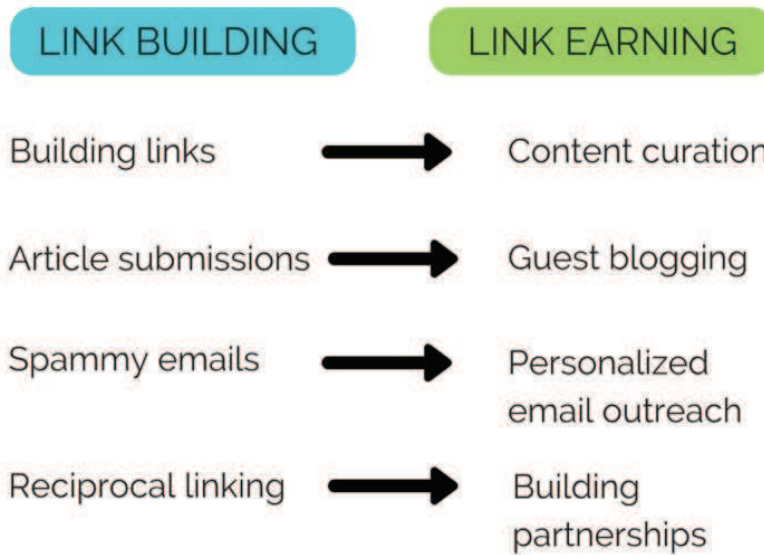
Yet as I witness a rise in content marketing, it's clear that a shift is occurring in how SEOs create an off-site SEO strategy. Take a look at how links have evolved:



Anna Lea Crowe

Features Writer at Hello Anna & Co.

Anna is the Features Writer for Search Engine Journal and an SEO-whisperer at Hello Anna & Co. Over the last 5 years, Anna has successfully developed and implemented online marketing, SEO, and conversion campaigns for 100+ businesses of all sizes; from the Fortune 500, to startups, and nonprofits. In her spare time, she moonlights as a volunteer soccer coach.



Why Do You Want to Earn Links?

This is a common question I get from my clients a lot. What is the value of a link? Why do I want to earn a link from these prospects?

Increase Traffic

Gaining links organically grows your website traffic. A link from another site will send you more visitors. A link doesn't guarantee a conversion, goods bought, or social shares, that's the website's job.

Brand Awareness

When you gain a link, you're gaining additional exposure. So, if you get a link on New York Times you'll most likely be seen by a lot more people. If you gain a link on a small blog, most likely you're not going to get a ton of exposure. But, if it's your niche audience, it's completely worth it.

Search Engines Care about Links

As much as we want to believe the myths that links don't matter, that is simply not true. Links add authority, trust, and value to your brand so, therefore, search engines boost your brand if other trustworthy sites are linking to you.

When trading the labor-intensive [link building strategies](#) for the earned, it's more effective to view the big picture. A content strategy — as you might have heard “content is king” — can give you a structured way to assess what value you offer, who is listening, and where to distribute. Developing a solid content strategy that integrates link earning into the promotional phase will have the most impact for long-term success.

Link earning isn't a marketing tactic, it's how you impact your community to earn the actual links. So, how do you not only create ah-mazing content but help nurture relationships that make people want to share your content?

In Creating Awesome Content, Strategy is Everything

You can employ a number of marketing tactics to improve website traffic — email drip campaigns, community management, pay-per-click ads, the list goes on. Before you start with a campaign, give it the content it needs to succeed by creating a strategy. It makes a difference. A strategy is the first thing you should do when creating content for link earning.

Who do you want to target? Where do you want to get links from? What are your competitors doing? These are all things to consider when making a successful link earning strategy.

How to Create a Roadmap for Link Earning

Creating a roadmap for link earning is essential for making decisions about your content. But, how do you decide where to start?

Researching your competitors and listening to your customers allows you to effectively process the type of content that is generating the most links and what engages your audience.

Developing a system of researching, content mapping, and promotion is the lifeblood of link earning.

Here are the four steps strategy for turning content into links:

1. Research

One of the hallmarks of developing your strategy is finding data-oriented information on your audience and competitors to create actionable takeaways.

To quickly find competitor information, I type in a keyword I want to rank for in the search box (using incognito). I'll take the top five to eight competitors listed and ignore the big players, like Amazon product pages and Facebook pages.

Then, I plug those URLs into [link-building tools](#) like Moz and Ahrefs to begin pulling data. For example, in Moz, you're able to view the most linked pages of that site. I'll note the top 10 articles that are being linked for each competitor.

Next, I'll add my competitor URL into Buzzsumo. I'll note the top 10 articles that are being shared. Buzzsumo also gives you the option to "View Sharers" which is great to start adding to my persona discovery list.

After I have all my data pulled, I'll build my personas. The information from Buzzsumo, social media, and Google Analytics will help me to define demographics, goals and challenges, values, and any additional insights I might uncover.

2. Creative

[Mindmeister](#) has an amazing tool for content message mapping. I use this tool to help clearly define my message for the content I want to publish. Content mapping will also identify if there are any gaps within your strategy.

At this stage, I begin building my editorial calendar with [Trello](#). I give myself the freedom to throw as many ideas out there as I can pulling the resources from the research phase. I'll pair each idea with a topical keyword phrase to keep it structured.

Once Trello is planned out, I'll begin pairing my content with design ideas. I try to be purposeful in connecting the dots for each visual. For example, would a video or podcast work best for an interview article? Or, perhaps an infographic or e-book for a research oriented piece?

And, I'll also decide what types of content upgrades I can feature for each article.

3. Promotion

After the article is written, I'll run through my content promotion workflow. Again, this process is laid out on Trello. First, I'll go down my on-site SEO checklist. The usual meta titles, alt tags, h1 tags, etc. are all in play here.

Once I hit publish, I'll submit my articles to social bookmarking sites and answer

any relevant questions on Quora or Reddit. Then, I'll email my the team at SEJ with pre-populated tweets and links to the social bookmarking sites for a little extra love.

Next, I'll schedule the article in Buffer to be published on Twitter three to four times throughout the next week or so and once on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google+. Depending on the direction of my personas, I'll also allocate \$50 to \$100 social ad spend.

And then, I'll schedule a dedicated blog post email newsletter to my audience with a pre-populated tweet.

In addition to the email newsletter, I'll send a personalized email or tweet to all of the people I mentioned in my article. And, any influencers I think might be interested in this particular piece.

Within a month or so, I'll look to start syndicating my content. Whether this is on my own platforms like LinkedIn or Medium or I pitch it to Huffington Post.

And, lastly, I'll look for any opportunities to fit my article in a guest blog post.

Bonus Tip: Set-up Google Alerts for the long-term growth of the article.

4. Measurement

Now that you've hit publish, you want to start tracking your metrics. Ask yourself how does promoting your content increase awareness, deliver links, contribute to social shares, or add to the bottom line?

Jay Baer shares metrics of content marketing in one of [my favorite SlideShare decks](#). Baer separates these metrics in four categories:

- **Consumption metrics:** How many people viewed, downloaded, or listened to this piece of content?
- **Sharing metrics:** How resonant is this content, and how often is it shared with others?
- **Lead-gen metrics:** How often does content consumption result in a lead?
- **Sales metrics:** Did we actually make any money from this content?

You can also measure month-over-month how many links each piece of content is generating within the sharing metrics.

[Here is a spreadsheet I use to track my metrics.](#)

High-quality content is one thing, but if you don't build a strategy that leverages social shares and link earning the right way, then you're wasting your time.

With that in mind, let's look at a few core link earning techniques to consider when planning out your content strategy.

5 Link Earning Ideas to Try

By now, it's well-documented that link earning is more than a one-trick pony at gaining organic space in the SERPs. During a #semrushchat, Julia McCoy [tweeted](#) "I like to think of good content marketing as tactic free. Be of real use. Give readers excellent content, you'll earn back." Link earning is not something that happens overnight. It takes time to build relationships, be a part of a community, and develop content ideas that actually worth sharing.

Let's take a look at some link earning ideas to try:

1. Data-Backed, Long-Form Resources

[serpIQ](#) did a study of the average length of the content in the top 10 results of search queries and found that the top-rated posts were over 2,000 words. Now, I'm not advising that you hold yourself to these length restrictions. Each piece of content should match your audience's needs.

However, creating valuable content that is backed by statistics, quotes from authoritative sources, or your own data can help people. This [one article](#) has 103 linking root domains because they did their own research.

Let's take Vero's [40 Tips for Dramatically Better Emails](#) article, for example.

This article currently has 60 linking root domains, over 8,000 social shares, and a Page Authority of 52. What makes this piece so successful?

- It's very well-written and researched spiking at over 8,000 words.
- The design is clean and each tip is coupled with a real-life example.
- It provides relevant data for key points.

Vero's content is useful to its email marketing targeting audience.

This style can also be used in ego bait or interview style content. Groove does a great job at interviewing up-and-coming top tech company entrepreneurs. [The article](#) they wrote with Zapier's CEO, Wade Foster, has 19 linking root domains, 1,500 social shares, and a Page Authority of 34.

2. A How-To Guide

How-tos, tutorials, ebooks, and guides all create valuable content that helps to attract and convert potential customers. When you begin educating people, you begin to earn their trust which trust eventually converts to links and revenue. Take a look at the partnership between Chupamobile and KISSmetrics. They needed a conversion carrot for their emails and, so this [lead gen page](#) was created. The page [converted 44%](#) right off the bat.

Or, how about [this repair guide](#). This guide currently has 31 linking root domains, 13,841 social shares, and a Page Authority of 74. Why does this work?

- The interactive features engage the audience.
- The content helps customers solve problems, in turn, making them happier.

3. Engaging Visuals

Content with relevant images gets [94% more views](#) than content without relevant images. Engaging visual content builds your digital story. Visual content is like the Nutella to your peanut butter. Without it, it's just not that good.

Let's take a look at some visual content:

- Interactive Infographic: [Only 9% of America Chose Trump and Clinton as the Nominees](#) by New York Times
- Memes: [Bill Nye Takes One Badass Photo, Becomes Hilarious Meme](#) by Nerdist

- Comparisons: [Video Game Characters with Realistic Body Types](#) by Bulimia.com
- Graphics: [Perceptions of Perfection](#) by Superdrug Online Docter

Or, what about this interactive map, [Your State's Favorite Reality TV Show](#). This map currently has 71 linking root domains, 984 social shares, and a Page Authority of 52. Why is this map killing it?

- It makes a personal connection with every reality TV show binge watcher in the United States (guilty!).
- The visual content is done very well.
- The content pairs nicely with data.

This also includes video. Robbie Richards discusses in a very [detailed case study](#) how he used long-form engaging content with visuals and video to earn links.

He talks about this article, [How To Fly A Quadcopter](#), which now ranks number 2 for “how to fly a quadcopter.” This article has nine linking root domains and over 1,000 social shares.

4. Community Building

Building a happy community around your brand takes time, trust, and authority. Your community represents a lot of things: your brand, your ideal customer, and your ongoing support system. They're the ones who convince others to use your products or services. They help expand your reach and represent the voice of your company when you're not there.

[Sephora built a forum](#) for their community. With 23 linking root domains, 1,173 social shares, and a Page Authority of 54.

Groove built got [1000+ subscribers from one blog post in 24 hours](#). This article currently has 32 linking root domains, 2,197 social shares, and a Page Authority of 49. What did they do right?

- Groove is transparent, honest, and they share real data in their posts.
- They talk to their consumers within the post.
- Content upgrades can also be seen scattered throughout the post.

5. Tools

Creating tools or quizzes is an extension of your brand. These typically require a user to interact with your content. It's a fun personalized experience for both the brand and the user. This requires you to truly understand who your audience is and what their needs are.

HubSpot is the pretty much invented the idea of using tools for inbound marketing. Their [website marketing grader](#) has generation 313 linking root domains and a Page Authority of 79. What makes this work?

- It requires users to plug in their email address before even playing. Lead generation tool already!
- It gives the users personalized information based on their website.

CoSchedule also created a similar tool called the [Headline Analyzer](#). Again, the personalized interactive content makes this a win-win.

And, my personal favorite, Android's [Find The Phone For You](#).

Why Link Earning Matters

Link earning is not a solved problem. But, there are many who are experimenting with ways to legitimately earn high-quality links. It's high time for SEOs to unite to build the groundwork link earning for businesses to grow organically in the search engines.

Steve Sheinkopf, president of [Yale Appliance and Lighting](#), stated content marketing strategy is the engine that drives their engagement. Their traffic tripled from 40,000 to 150,000 monthly visits. And, they've built a Page Authority of 46 with 23 linking root domains.

River Pools and Spas is another small business that has benefited from link earning. Just one blog post "[How Much Does a Fiberglass Pool Cost?](#)" has generated [over \\$2 million in sales](#), eight linking root domains, and a Page Authority of 39

It's proven that a fierce commitment to strategizing, creating, and promoting content plays an important role in pushing your content and links forward.

Your SEO Needs Content and Inbound Marketing

Content marketing and **inbound marketing** are not separate from SEO at all. Content marketing has become an integral part of today's SEO.

Its umbrella offers the widest, most effective reach for online visibility and real ROI. And SEO is just one part of what's under that umbrella: the fragment of "optimizing for search," which is the meaning of SEO by itself.

Content Marketing vs. SEO: One and the Same?

Businesses simply can't ignore the big picture of content and inbound marketing, with SEO as a part of the whole, if they want an effective online presence today.



Julia McCoy

CEO at Express Writers

Julia McCoy is a bestselling author of *So You Think You Can Write*, podcaster, and avid content marketer. She's the founder and CEO of Express Writers, a leading online content creation agency with over 60 content writers and strategists. Julia leads her team to serve hundreds of worldwide businesses with the highest-quality content for their online presence.

Yes, you should be optimizing your content for Google if you want Google to find your content. But, it's not just about keywords—or SEO as a single concept—anymore. For all marketers, content marketing should be the focus of their investment for online exposure that will provide real results.

So how and why has SEO become an integrated part of content and inbound marketing, as a whole? Let's delve in.

Reason #1: The Big Picture

The best way to start discovering how SEO is an integrated piece of the overall puzzle of content and inbound marketing is to actually look at the definitions of these three things (content marketing, inbound marketing, and SEO).

Hubspot: “Inbound marketing is about creating and sharing content with the world. By creating content specifically designed to appeal to your dream customers, inbound attracts qualified prospects to your business and keeps them coming back for more.”

Search Engine Land: “SEO stands for ‘search engine optimization.’ It is the process of getting traffic from the ‘free,’ ‘organic,’ ‘editorial’ or ‘natural’ search results on search engines.”

Content Marketing Institute: “Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”

Content marketing and inbound marketing are synonymous: they include the approach of creating the best content tailored to your audience, consistently, which then drives ROI and brings customers from your audience.

SEO is the process of getting traffic from Google.

If we were in an era where the web was a baby, you might get by with just having a presence on Google.

But today, the web is a raring, partying adult: you're in a sea of content.

You have to do more than just have a presence. You have to stand out in the sea.

And content marketing is the big picture that gives you the real blueprint on how to do just that.

Reason #2: Optimize for More Channels

Here's a simple fact: your readers aren't just coming in from Google anymore. With the rise of more social platforms, content types and channels, and the growth of existing social platforms, you can't afford to overlook your presence there. Here are some other channels besides Google where you could be earning qualified targeted, conversion-oriented traffic:

- Email
- Referral
- Social media
- Direct
- Sponsored ads
- Live video platforms (Periscope, Blab, etc.)

Even [Matt Cutts said it](#): "Don't just rely on Google anymore: rely on a wide variety of avenues where you can reach people that will want to know about you."

Reason #3: The Mindset Shift

Let's go back in time to see how content and inbound marketing has become the new mindset of SEO.

Pre-2011, when I started out in online marketing as a freelance copywriter, there was a totally different mindset about SEO. Consumers who wanted a web presence would just fork over money to SEO guys for results. It was an industry that very often gamed Google.

Their tactics included dark link schemes, mass forum posting, comment back linking, multiple interlinking domains, and having content written stuffed with keywords. It was all about how to one-up Google.

Things drastically changed after Google Panda came out (the Panda/Farmer update in late February of 2011). That's when Google started looking at content from a truly human perspective. I saw marketers completely change how they approached Google. Stuffing keywords throughout every page of copy was no more. Recycling duplicate copy from someone else's site was now a huge no-no. And no one used the keyword density formula any longer. Marketers started investing in content that would match up to and interest their target audience. Content marketing began happening.

And since then, Google has continued to get smarter and smarter. Today, they use real people to evaluate websites. Their [Search Evaluator Quality Guidelines](#), a 145-page document explaining what their human reviewers look for in websites Google subsequently ranks well, was released in November 2015. The acronyms notated there, E-A-T (Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness) and Y-M-Y-L (Your Money or Your Life), are guidelines on what Google looks for in solid web content, and great foundations to go by for us creators.

This mindset shift has been tremendous in creating a better web for all of us.

A low-quality web became a high-quality web simply because Google shifted towards what works best for their users, the real people on mobile or desktop doing quick searches to find results to give them the best answers to their problems. They needed to access solid information quickly. What was the best pizza store nearby, or what guide offered the most insightful advice on how to promote their latest blog post?

Algorithm gaming isn't the way to go today, creating real content that matters is.

SEO as a Part of the Content Creator's Strategy

Since Google looks at content from the user's perspective today, you can't go wrong if you go by this one guideline for creating great content: Write engaging content your target readers will be most interested in. Google will appreciate it too.

So, creating content, from blogs to web pages and videos, should be centric to what your audience wants and needs if you want to do well in the SERPs. And if the usefulness, engagement, and quality factor is truly there, Google will appreciate and love it, too.

However, optimizing your content with your best keywords, discovering and researching what keywords offer the best opportunities, and publishing well-optimized content is in your best interests. Google certainly appreciates websites that publish content that is easy to read and optimized correctly: it saves their crawling time and shows up effectively, ready to rank immediately.

Let's talk about two key fundamentals that will help you optimize your online content for SEO.

Two SEO Practices You Should be Using Consistently to Publish Rank-Worthy Online Content

Here are two key basic SEO skills you should be consistently doing to optimize your online content.

1. Perform Keyword Research

Tools are a must if you want to find your best keyword opportunities. I like [SEM-rush](#) for powerful overall keyword research, and [KWFinder](#) for hardcore niching down to find your long-tail keywords.

Once you have the tools, how do you select the best keywords? Let's explore briefly.

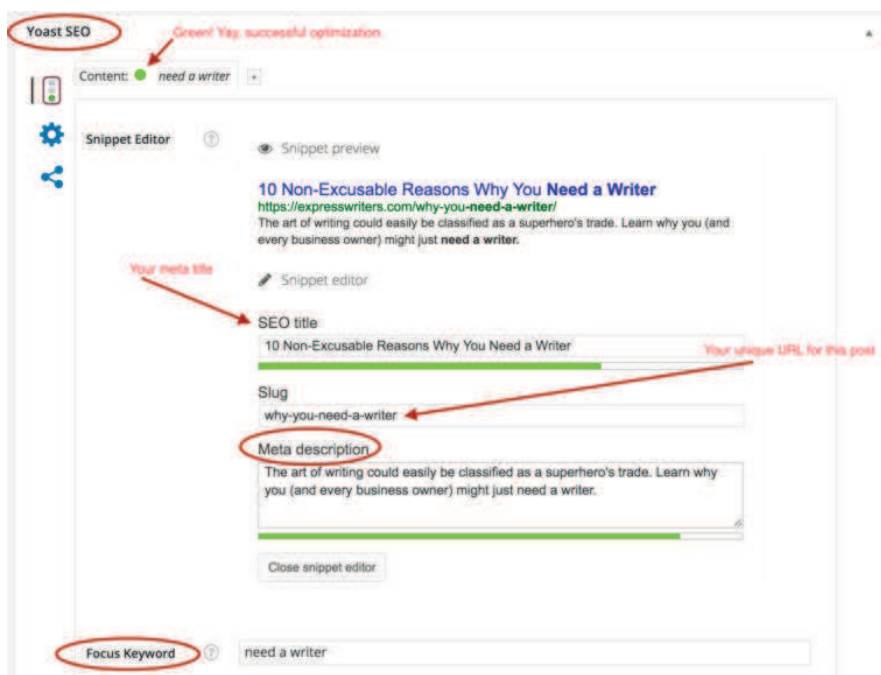
How to do your best keyword research:

- Look for low competition numbers (easy wins), a presence in CPC (that values your keyword at what the going bid for it is in the Adwords area, \$0 usually means a non-valuable keyword), and relevancy in the key term itself to what you offer as a service or product.
- Think long tail in terms of keywords. They are usually more relevant and can bring in more visitors with buying intent.
- Traffic amount metrics matter last when evaluating your best keywords. Why? Well, if you have a high traffic keyword, but it's not relevant enough, or you have very little opportunity with it at a high competition, you're

probably going nowhere. So it's better to have 140 people potentially visiting you per month than 5,000 if the keyword with 140 searches has a legitimate opportunity (it matches your service in relevancy, and it offers low competition in ranking opportunity).

2. Optimize Every Piece of Web Content

Never, ever let a blog post or web page go un-optimized. (One of my biggest online pet peeves.) That typically means leaving the “Yoast” section of your post blank—the most commonly used SEO plugin for WordPress sites.



Here's a rundown of key areas you'll need to optimize for a post you're publishing (my visual above shows these areas in the Yoast plugin):

- **Your focus keyword:** This is the key term of your post. Tip: Don't force it; pick one that's relevant.

- **Your meta title:** Make this slightly different from your post title itself. Making it unique means you add a boost of additional content power to the optimization.
- **Your meta description:** These are 160 characters (roughly 20-30 words) long. You want to stay within the just-right length on this—Yoast will turn green when you’ve hit it. Don’t be too long, and don’t be too short.
- **Your URL for the page:** Ideally, this should be a) short and succinct and b) include the focus keyword.

These are the two consistent practices you should be doing for ongoing content publication that meets Google’s standards. There are more things you should be doing for your overall presence, especially if you’re launching a new site or need to update current sites.

Here are a few resources to look at:

- How to do [a content audit](#) (effective for ongoing, up-to-date SEO optimization of your entire site)
- Moz’s [on-page ranking factors](#) discuss how to do links in your content and overall SEO best practices

Benefits of Having a Set Content Marketing Strategy: My Content Success Story

76% of marketers say they’ll produce more content in 2016: yet only 42% of marketers say their content marketing is effective. And even worse: only 32% of marketers have a documented content strategy. (Stats: [CMI](#))

In a world where customers are flooded by content, having a documented content strategy can spell the difference between making content that converts and counts, or disappearing into the online abyss of “just like everything else.”

Don't be the one left behind in the pile of 68 percent of marketers who don't know how to do effective content marketing. Be the smart marketer: have a set content marketing strategy in place where you can succeed.

The benefits of a set content marketing strategy are huge. Content marketing has long been argued as one of the best long-term winning strategies for online presence today. I wholeheartedly agree.

The best evidence I can present is how it's actually worked for me and my copywriting agency startup. I've been 100% personally invested, with no outside investors for my business' lifetime (and we're working in an industry where competitors have millions in outside funding).

Content marketing is the fuel of how I exist.

Here's a brief rundown of how I grew my online presence 100% through content marketing:

Blogging on my site: Since 2011, I've published over 700 blogs on the Write Blog, at the rate of three per week consistently. We've seen some of them convert tremendously because of the presence many of these blog posts have now achieved in Google. It's taken a lot of a) hard work and b) patience. We vary our content with infographics, gifographics, and long-form blog posts, and have even hired a custom artist to draw illustrations for some of our blogs. And the rankings have taken time. It took over eight months for us to hit #1 for “what does a copywriter do” in

Google with our infographic on that keyword, posted as a blog. 94-95% of our conversions, income, and entire company clientele base is built off of the leads and traffic that come in from Google.

Guest blogs: I see real ROI happen off many of the guest blogs I've published. For example, last year I saw a \$5000 client walk in from a guest blog I published on SiteProNews. He was so impressed with my current, up-to-date knowledge in SEO and content marketing showcased in the guest piece, that he hired my writing team on the spot to do all his online content. He was already convinced when he walked in, and needed very little convincing to sell (a few minutes in a phone call was all it took).

Podcast: I created [a podcast](#) with bi-weekly, 30-minute episodes of audio content, myself hosting and a guest speaker with a few solo episodes. I posted these and 6,000+ word transcriptions on my site. I hit New & Note worthy in iTunes soon after launch and saw a 10-15% jump in overall monthly traffic to [expresswriters.com](#).

Twitter chat: I created a weekly Twitter chat, #ContentWritingChat this January, announcing to my email list (blog subscribers and clients) that it was coming out. I hired a social media manager to help me run it, schedule guests, and create questions/answers and a blog recap of the weekly live chat. Inside just six months we hit the trending sidebar on Twitter and were the #11th most talked about hashtag on Twitter during its live hour.

Published book: I self-published [a book on Amazon this April](#), without an ounce of advertisement money and solely reliant on my existing audience built through content marketing. I had a list that I groomed for a year: I worked on the book for more than 12 months and talked about it online in my groups the whole time, building anticipation. Without a publishing

firm to help me, I sold over 100 copies in the first month, and it continues to sell on its own at two to three copies per day. It hit bestseller on Amazon the second day after launching and has stayed in the #3-#4 spot in its category since launch.

The Verdict? SEO and Content Marketing Go Together

Content marketing is your best route for online marketing that works: there's no other way to put it. And SEO is just a part that makes it a whole.

Whether you're looking for more conversions, reputation building, brand faith, revenue streams, or low-cost advertising that will outperform traditional advertising methods: if you work within the right parameters, content marketing is your key to online success.

I believe it, and have seen inbound and content marketing work so effectively for me that it has become the primary channel of my entire business. And, I've seen an audience (like my Twitter chat) sprout up out of nowhere, all because I simply created a topic and conversation that was needed in the internet universe.

If you go the route of content marketing, just don't go at it superficially.

Put a whole-hearted passion into it, bring in your expertise, focus on solving a real need, and stay consistent in what you create online: and you'll come out on top.

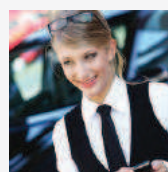
A Beginner's Guide to Social Media Strategy

The role of social media in SEO and the question whether SEO is impacted by social media at all is often debated. This section will briefly sum up if and how SEO is impacted by social networks and go over instantly implementable best practices that are proven to be effective.

The role of social media within a marketing strategy is changing. When people refer to SEO, they more often mean marketing online in general. If you have started to dive into the world of digital marketing, you already know SEO is not a term that encompasses all kinds of online marketing, but one of many significant online marketing streams.

Here are some of the most common abbreviations in online marketing:

- **SEO (search engine optimization)**
- **SEM (search engine marketing)**



Christina Baldassarre
Founder & Managing
Partner at Zebra
Advertisement

Christina Baldassarre is an entrepreneur. She is best known for co-founding the award winning digital marketing agency Zebra Advertisement and speaking about entrepreneurship at international conferences such as the SMX and Pubcon. She also co-founded a number of other successful businesses including 1DollarAd and International PPC. In her free time, she is a passionate equestrian rider and trains together with her horse to compete in dressage. She also enjoys working on new business ideas, spending time with her husband and their dog as well as meeting like-minded people who want to get the most out of life. Christina was featured by The Huffington Post and The Richest among other publications.

- **PPC (pay per click)**
- **SMM (social media marketing)**
- **SMO (social media optimization)**

All of these different streams impact each other directly or indirectly. It is important to understand the differences because the importance of the role of each of these streams has changed over the years. To understand what role social media plays now and where it's going, let's have a look at how we got here.

A couple of years ago, it was widely assumed that social media marketing and social media optimization impacted SEO directly and even well executed SEM and PPC campaigns could increase page ranks. Businesses and agencies globally integrated their social media efforts with their SEO strategies to help Google's algorithm recognize quality content, popularity, and influence. Companies ran campaigns for keywords they wanted to rank higher for.

While not all marketers agreed there was a direct influence on ranking, it certainly was supported by many. Especially after a video aired in December 2010 stating that social signals were a factor when it came to ranking.

Interestingly, the same person from that video, Google's Matt Cutts, released a video three years later that stated that Google's algorithm does not pick up on social signals to determine the page rank (Source: Kissmetrics).

Where does this leave social media in terms of SEO? Let's see the proof:

Google stated in 2013 that its algorithm doesn't pick up on social signals. I think that is still the case because Google says it doesn't have the capacity to index all social media posts. This means Google does not index everything that is indexable.

We do know that profile and page URLs are frequently showing up on the top of the first page of Google, so having social profiles and choosing the right profile and page names are important for SEO.

The video from 2010 was based on insights from Google and Bing. Bing has not issued a public announcement that discredits their statement that social media impacts rankings on Bing. The company stated it takes “into consideration how often a link has been tweeted or retweeted, as well as the authority of the Twitter users that shared the link.” (Source: [Kissmetrics](#)) Why should we care about Bing? Around 30% of searches in the United States alone are on Bing and devices and platforms like Apple’s Siri, Kindle Fire, Amazon Fire Phone, Xbox, and Twitter are powered by Bing. (Source: [Entrepreneur](#))

Additionally, social networks are search engines, too. You can search for tweets on Twitter and use Facebook to find businesses, products, and service providers. Instagram is a great sales generator for industries such as fashion, beauty, food, and fitness just to name a few. Let’s not forget about YouTube.

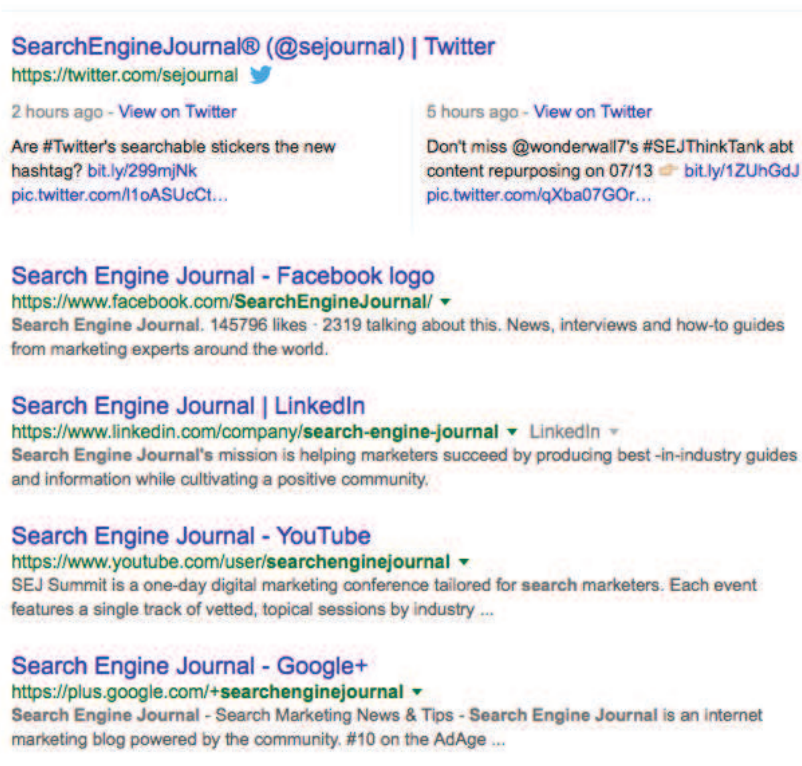
In each case, chances are a potential customer will check out your social profiles and pages sooner or later and they typically show up – you guess it – in organic search results on Google.

A Note on Featured Social Posts on Google and Timeliness

Some social media posts such as tweets can show up on the top of the first page of Google like this:

What you post on social does get indexed on top of the first page on Google if it is popular enough at the right point in time. This is often referred to as featured social posts. You are already familiar with featured content, for instance, the latest news articles or Wikipedia extracts that show up on top.

You can optimize a social media post by inserting the respective keyword and publishing it at the right point in time or getting a lot of traffic at the right point in time. Keep in mind that Google doesn't have the capacity to index all social media updates, but that doesn't mean they aren't indexed. With access to Twitter's firehose, Google can see tweets in real-time – which is important when it comes to the timeliness of posts.



Dominate Your Geographic Area

Social media posts are your ticket to dominating your local area. You can check-in to locations with Facebook, post Instagram content at a specific location, and even be selected as one of the few people to live stream an event for Snapchat.

Post engagement – meaning getting comments, likes, shares, or clicks – is essential here. Luckily, it doesn't have to be organically generated engagement, so you can push this with ads if you need to.

Setting Up an Effective Social Media Strategy

No matter what business or industry you are in, a social media strategy is based on three main pillars:

1. Connect
2. Communicate
3. Coordinate

Let's have a look at each of those pillars and see how to apply these to your business.

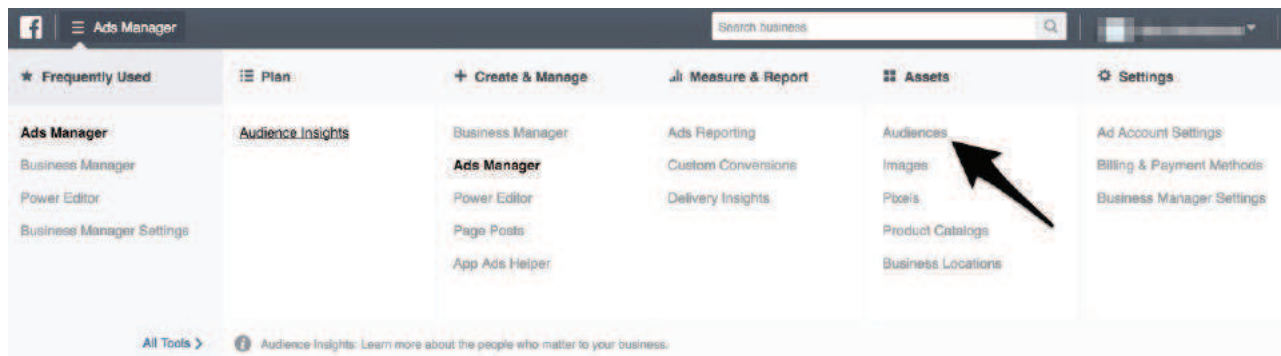
1. Connect

The first step when setting up a social media strategy is to connect with your audience on the right platforms. To do that, you first need to determine who your audience is. No guessing, no assuming. Get the stats. You can use any analytics tools you have to figure out who your audience is. A common mistake is to limit yourself to one customer profile, e.g. mostly 25-45, male. Instead, use Google Analytics and Facebook Audience Insights to figure out who your audience is.

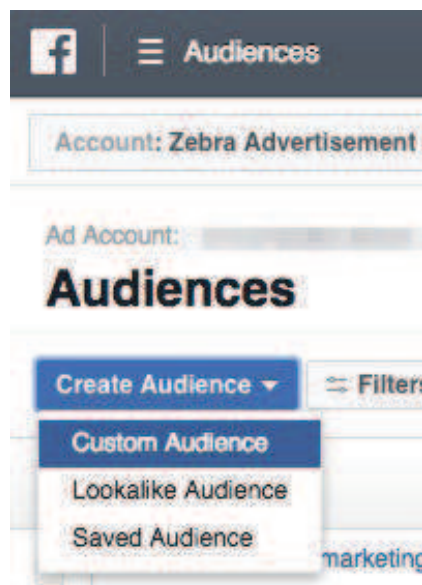
How to Use Facebook Audience Insights to Identify Customer Profiles

Ideally, you are looking to define three to five customer profiles. This does not mean all of these are part of your ideal target audience, but typically this is the amount you will find if you are looking into who your existing audience is. The trick here is not only to look at who likes your page but to plug-in conversion data. For instance, you can upload a list of email addresses you retrieved from your newsletter subscriptions or customers' accounts and Facebook will cross reference those with email addresses linked to Facebook profiles.

To upload an email list and analyze it with Facebook Audience Insights, go to your Facebook Ads Manager. Then click on the top left corner and select “Audiences:”



Then create a new custom audience:





A window will pop up. Select the first option, “Customer File:”


Create a Custom Audience


How do you want to create this audience?

Reach people who have a relationship with your business, whether they are existing customers or people who have interacted with your business on Facebook or other platforms.

**Customer File**
Use a customer file to match your customers with people on Facebook and create an audience from the matches. The data will be hashed prior to upload.

**Website Traffic**
Create a list of people who visit your website or view specific web pages

**App Activity**
Create a list of people who have taken a specific action in your app or game

**Engagement on Facebook** NEW
Create a list of people who have engaged with your content on Facebook

This process is secure and the details about your customers will be kept private.


Cancel


Then choose the option to upload:


Create a Custom Audience

How do you want to add customers to this audience?

Information you provide will be matched with people on Facebook to create an audience. Your contacts won't be notified that you've added them to an audience, and we'll never contact them without your permission.

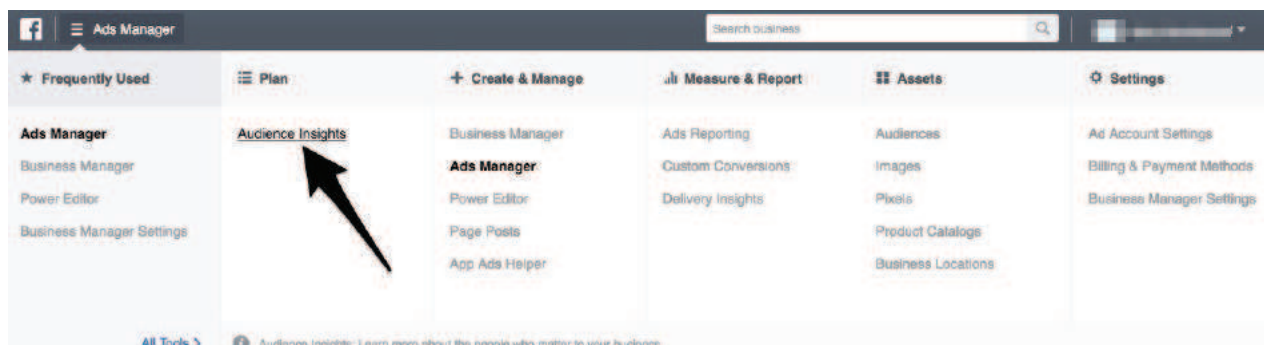
**Upload a file**
Upload a data file that contains emails, phone numbers, Facebook user IDs or mobile advertiser IDs

**Copy and paste your custom list**
Copy and paste emails, phone numbers, Facebook user IDs or mobile advertiser IDs of your customers and create a Custom Audience

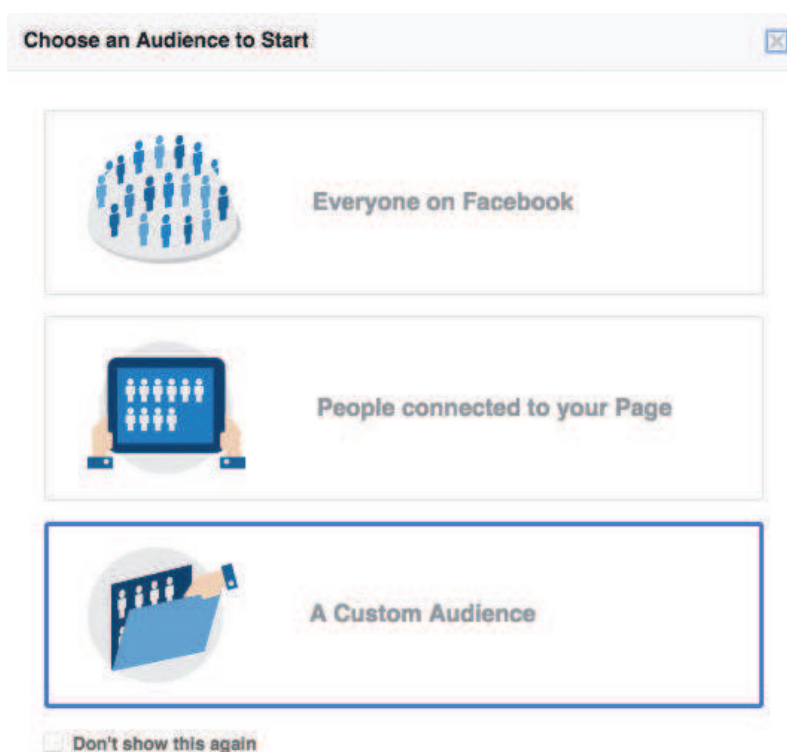
**Import from MailChimp**
Import a customer list from a third-party email service.

Back

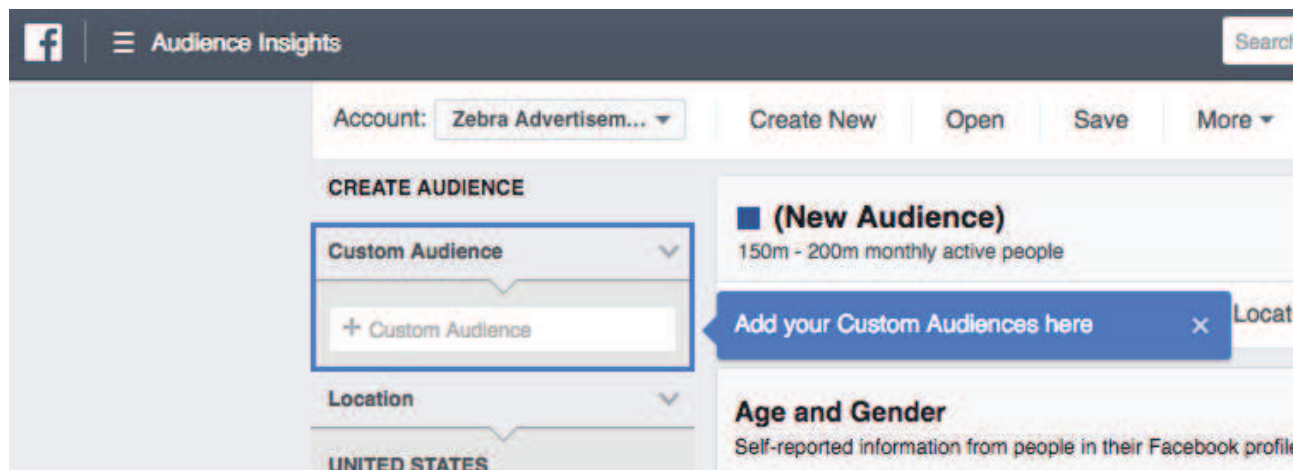
Once the email list is uploaded, click on the top left again and choose “Audience Insights:”



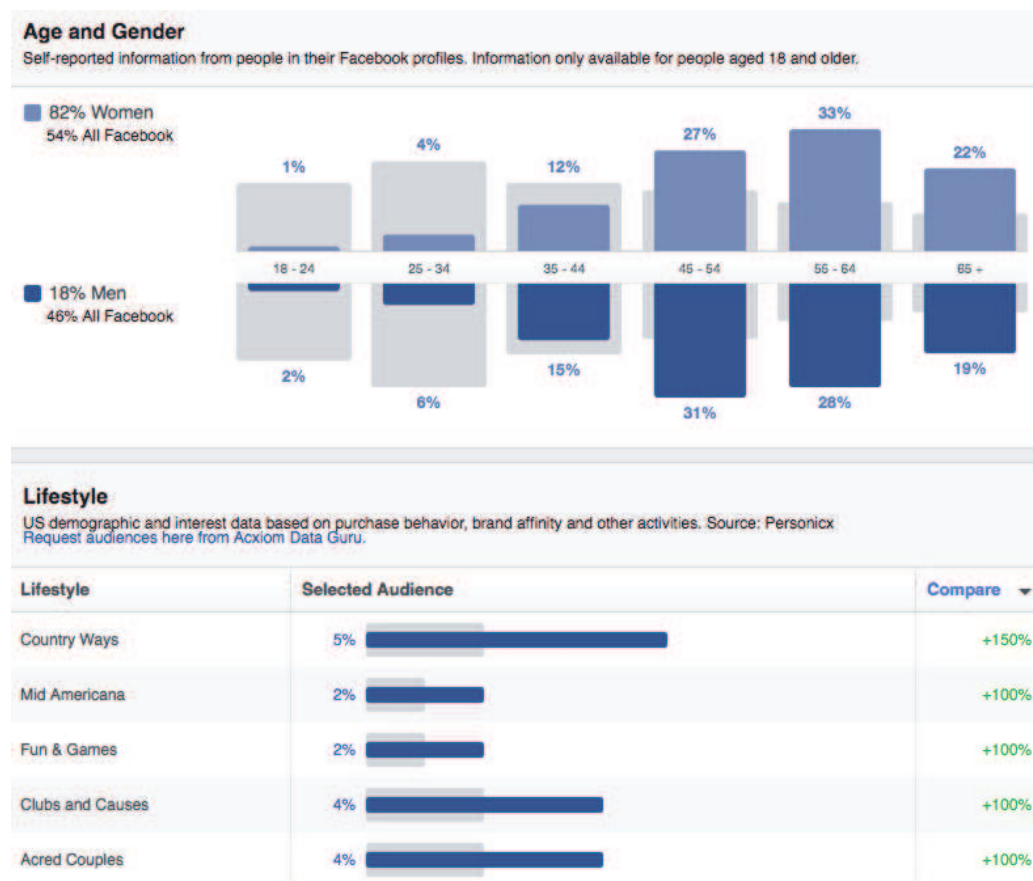
Then tell Facebook that you want to analyze a custom audience by selecting “A Custom Audience:”

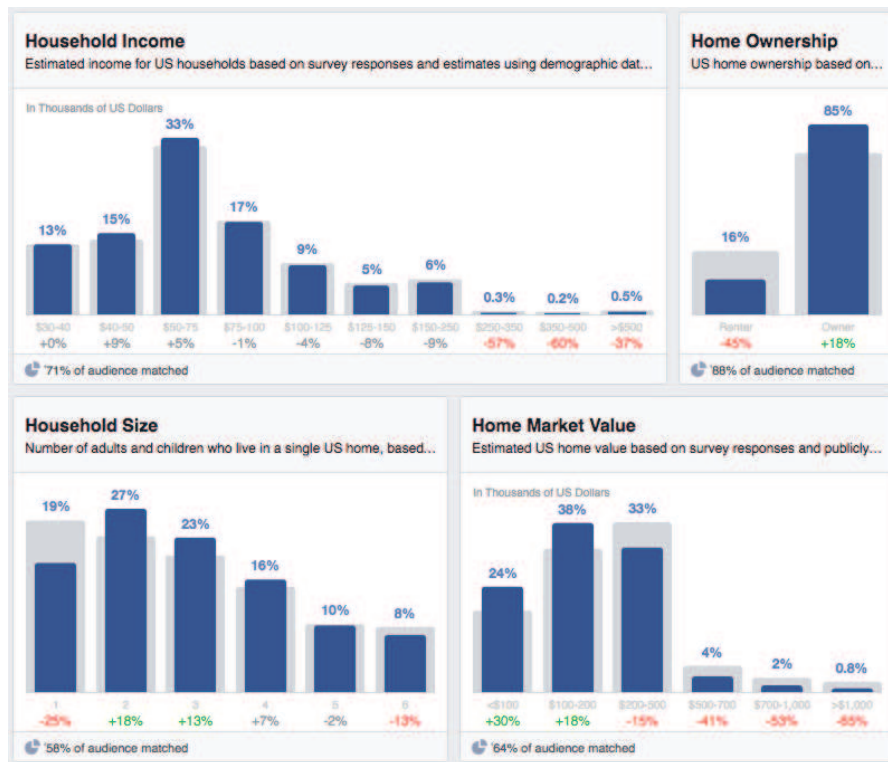


The next step is to select which custom audience you want to analyze, in this case, your email list:



Once you select the custom audience you want to analyze, Facebook provides you with demographics including, but not limited to gender, education, income, household composition, what cars they drive, if they have children, how old the children are, and more:





For startups:

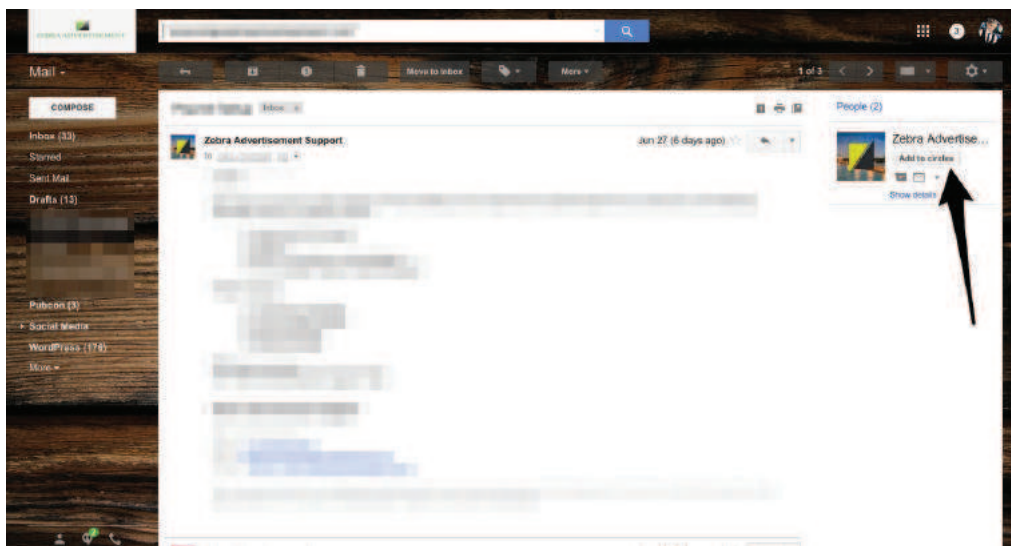
It's possible that you don't like the results of your audience analysis because it's not who you were looking to target or you don't have an audience yet because it's a new business. In this case, knowing who you would like to target in the future is essential when choosing the right social media platforms.

Choosing the Right Social Media Platforms

The first question to ask yourself is how many social media profiles and pages you want to manage in total. If you are a startup or small business, my recommendation would be three to five. If you have the funds and time to manage more, my recommendation would be 8 to 10.

When deciding what social media platforms, start with the core platforms and add other platforms based on the content format they feature.

Different platforms have different advantages. For instance, Google+ pages show up in organic search results with your location on Google maps on the right-hand side of the first page of Google. Additionally, if you are using Gmail or Gmail for Work, your page will show up next to emails with a follow button or your latest updates.



Having a Facebook page is a must, not only because people use Facebook as a search engine to find products and service providers but also to get reviews. Facebook reviews, as well as Google+ reviews, **are great for social proof**. Additionally, Facebook gives you detailed demographic insights as we've just seen in the Facebook Audience Insights tutorial.

When choosing a social network, you should consider what kind of content you can produce, what content format would be most useful to your business, and where your audience is.

According to my research with over five thousand brands, the social networks that generate the most engagement are:

- YouTube
- Facebook

- Twitter
- Instagram
- Pinterest
- Google+
- Tumblr
- LinkedIn
- Snapchat

Of course, there are many more social networks, and depending on your type of business and target audience, the core platforms may be different. You should review all major social networks as well as smaller ones if they offer you exposure or traffic in a relevant niche.

2. Communicate

Social media is always a two-way street. You connect with your audience, and they connect with you. You communicate with them through your content and timelines just as much as they communicate to you. This means there are two components to communicating on social, one requires us to listen to what our customers have to say, and the other one requires us to stay true to the brand and communicate clearly.

One way to make sure your timelines are on point is to determine what the goal of using each platform is. For instance, are you looking to increase brand awareness or sales? Are you attracting new customers or increasing customer loyalty? The communication on each social network should adapt to your respective goals.

Your brand should be represented visually every time you post something by using your brand's HTML color codes, related colors, characteristic filters, and other things that help followers or potential followers identify your brand.

3. Coordinate

An important part of creating a social media strategy is to create a publishing plan so you get an idea of how frequently what content will be published where. Based on that, you can then estimate how much and what kind of traffic that generates.

Things to consider when creating a publishing schedule are the time you share the content and the format.

Typical publishing times are:

- Automatic sharing instantly when content is on blog / website / journal / profile
- Same day as content was been posted
- Day after
- Week after
- Two weeks after
- Month after
- Specific date
- Repeated posting date

When scheduling your content, consider the content turnover within the respective platforms. Twitter, for instance, is very fast paced and it's up to you to make sure your content gets attention. Social networks like Pinterest and Tumblr, on the other hand, allow your content to resurface again so the content turnover is slower and in repeating waves.

Typical content formats are:

- Title + link
- Text posts
- Infographics
- Videos
- Video loops
- Gifs
- Photos
- Images

Depending on what content formats you know you can regularly generate, you can then think about how to distribute the content on the social networks you selected. For instance, do you want to adjust the image dimensions for each platform or do you want to repost the same image regardless of how it will look?

Here are some of the most common dimensions for social media posts (as of July 2016):

- Instagram 1080 x 1080
- Facebook 940 x 788
- Tumblr 540 x 810
- Twitter 1024 x 512
- Pinterest 735 x 1102

If you can only choose one dimension, my recommendation would be to use the Instagram dimensions. They look great on all platforms and the square format is both mobile and desktop friendly.

In Conclusion

The best social media strategies not only consider where the market is at but look forward to where the market is going. It is no longer enough to discuss the impact social media is having on SEO. Social networks like Facebook are more and more being treated like search engines, which means that SEO will soon have to be applied within social networks.

Additionally, SEO is moving more towards intent driven rankings and searches rather than determining where things show up based on just one keyword. Long-tail keywords and the intent behind the search matters more now than ever. You can adapt your social media by including long-tail keywords in titles and content, as well as offering formats that are easy to read.

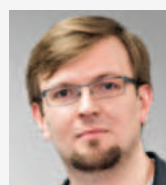
For instance, vertical content is ideal for Pinterest, Snapchat, and most social mobile apps, while horizontal content looks great in a Twitter and Facebook desktop feed.

Overall, the more engagement you can generate with your content, the higher you rank and the more you learn about your audience. The key is to know your audience well, so you know what kind of content to post when to increase engagement. This results in reaching a larger audience and helps you achieve the social media goals you set.

A Complete Guide to SEO Conversions and Metrics

In the world of SEO, how do you plan on [measuring your success](#)? In other words, what metrics will you use to ensure that your SEO strategy is working? When your boss or your clients ask you the million dollar question of whether your SEO strategy is creating ROI (return on investment), where will you get the data to supply the answer?

In this portion of the SEO guide, we're going to discuss the metrics you can track to determine the overall progress of your SEO strategy along with some specific ways to determine actual conversion goals from particular SEO tactics.



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Start by Setting up Conversion Goals in Google Analytics

If you haven't already, the first thing you need to do beyond the basic installation of [Google Analytics](#) is set up [Google Analytics goals](#). Goals will help you track

actions visitors take on your website, such as submitting a lead generation form, submitting a quote form, signing up for your email list, or making a purchase.

You will find the goal setup area in your website's Google Analytics admin area under the view column. The easiest way to get started is to choose a template.

1 Goal setup

Template

Select a template to start with a pre-filled configuration:

REVENUE

- ☐ Place an order: Completed purchase or pre-order request

ACQUISITION

- ☐ Create an account: Guest user sign up, account, or view created

INQUIRY

- ☐ Contact us: Viewed phone number, directions, chat or email
- ☐ Read reviews: Viewed reviews and ratings
- ☐ Get callback: Requested service or a phone call
- ☐ Live chat: Contacted via chat
- ☐ Update: Downloaded or installed new version

ENGAGEMENT

- ☐ Compare information: Compared features, products, or options
- ☐ Add to favorites: Saved product or information to a list
- ☐ Media play: Played interactive media, like a video, slideshow, or product demo
- ☐ Share / social connect: Shared to a social network or emailed
- ☐ Sign up: Subscribed to newsletter, update alerts, or join group

Smart Goal Smart Goal not available.
Measure the most engaged visits to your website and automatically turn those visits into Goals. Then use those Goals to improve your AdWords bidding. [Learn more](#)

☐ Custom

Continue **Cancel**

2 Goal description

3 Goal details

Cancel

Choose the Destination type.

Goal setup **Edit**

Template: **Contact us**

2 Goal description

Name

Contact us

Goal slot ID

Goal M2 / Goal Set 1

Type

- ☒ Destination: ex: thanks.html
- ☐ Duration: ex: 5 minutes or more
- ☐ Pages/Screens per session: ex: 3 pages
- ☐ Event: ex: played a video

Smart Goal Smart Goal not available.
Measure the most engaged visits to your website and automatically turn those visits into Goals. Then use those Goals to improve your AdWords bidding. [Learn more](#)

Continue **Cancel**

3 Goal details

Cancel

Enter the URL that a visitor would land upon after completing the goal that you are tracking. You would enter the URL of a thank you page, for example, that the visitor would go to after submitting a form or the URL of a confirmation page that the visitor would go to after making a purchase.

From here, you have the option of filling in a goal value, if known. If your average order is \$100, you will enter that. Or, if you just want a dollar amount to show up in your Google Analytics reports, you can just enter \$1. You'll see how that can come in handy later.

Once you have created all of the goals you need to track, you will be ready to start tracking the metrics that count for your SEO strategy. But before we get into that, there are some other things that you should also keep an eye on to determine if your SEO strategy is working.

Monitor Your Keyword Rankings

One of the things you will need is a keyword rankings tool that can help you keep an eye on your keyword rankings. As you put more time and effort into

your SEO strategy between optimizing key web pages for specific keywords phrases, creating keyword-optimized content, and building links to your website, your target keyword phrases should start to get higher in search results.

That's when you know you are doing things right.

Find out Which Keywords Lead to Conversions

In the past, you would have also been able to link specific keywords that visitors used to find your website in organic search to the conversion goals you set up in Google Analytics. Unfortunately, thanks to Google's change in privacy settings for Google search users, Google Analytics shows (in most cases) over 90% of organic keywords used to drive traffic to a website as not provided.

Keyword	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions: All Goals ▾		
	Sessions ↓	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions	Goal Value
	1,310,654 <small>% of Total: 67.21% (1,950,103)</small>	71.41% <small>Avg for View: 67.96% (5.08%)</small>	935,945 <small>% of Total: 70.62% (1,325,310)</small>	85.14% <small>Avg for View: 84.12% (1.22%)</small>	1.26 <small>Avg for View: 1.29 (-2.59%)</small>	00:01:10 <small>Avg for View: 00:01:11 (-1.43%)</small>	0.63% <small>Avg for View: 0.86% (-27.23%)</small>	8,222 <small>% of Total: 49.91% (16,810)</small>	\$8,222.00 <small>% of Total: 49.91% (\$16,810.00)</small>
1. (not provided)	1,260,306 (96.16%)	71.08%	895,817 (95.71%)	85.12%	1.26	00:01:11	0.63%	7,924 (96.38%)	\$7,924.00 (96.38%)

While you will be able to see a small percentage of keywords and how they translate into conversions, you will be missing a large majority of the data, making it mostly useless.

An alternative way to get this data is to look at the Landing Pages report under the Behavior section of your Google Analytics to see what pages visitors enter your website upon. Then determine what keywords they used by looking at what you optimized those pages for.

Landing Page ?	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions All Goals ▾		
	Sessions ? ↓	% New Sessions ?	New Users ?	Bounce Rate ?	Pages / Session ?	Avg. Session Duration ?	Goal Conversion Rate ?	Goal Completions ?	Goal Value ?
	1,950,103 <small>% of Total: 100.00% (1,950,103)</small>	68.06% <small>Avg for View: 67.96% (0.15%)</small>	1,327,236 <small>% of Total: 100.15% (1,325,310)</small>	84.12% <small>Avg for View: 84.12% (0.00%)</small>	1.29 <small>Avg for View: 1.29 (0.00%)</small>	00:01:11 <small>Avg for View: 00:01:11 (0.00%)</small>	0.86% <small>Avg for View: 0.86% (0.00%)</small>	16,810 <small>% of Total: 100.00% (16,810)</small>	\$16,810.00 <small>% of Total: 100.00% (\$16,810.00)</small>
1. /	71,993 (3.69%)	51.35%	36,969 (2.79%)	53.50%	2.27	00:03:04	1.38%	993 (5.91%)	\$993.00 (5.91%)

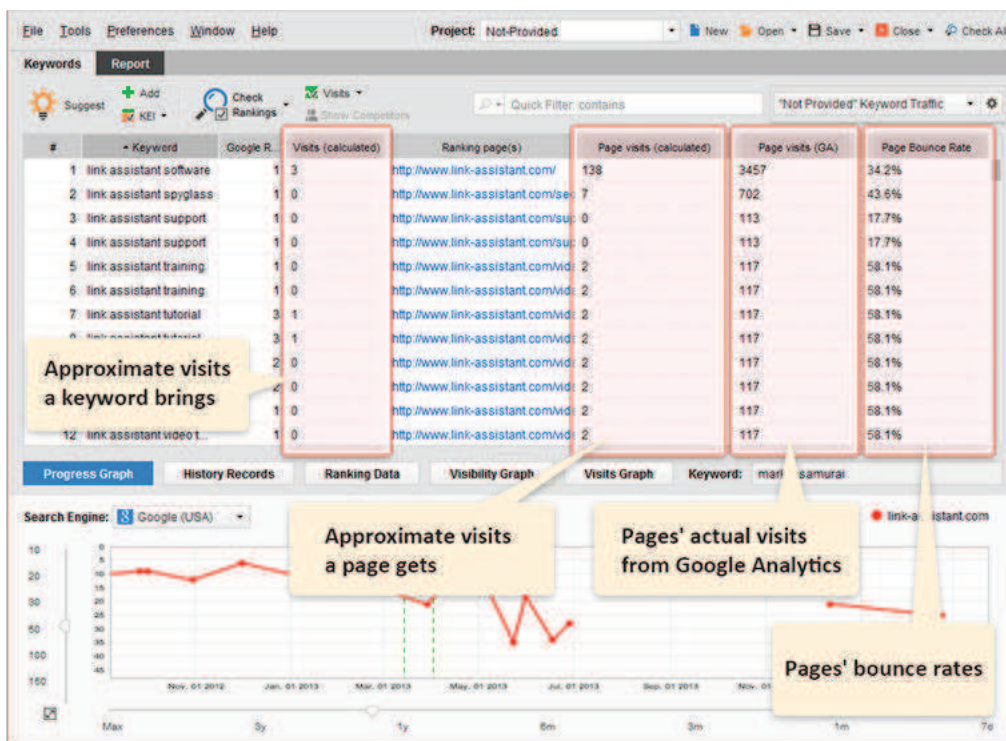
For example, if your homepage (/) is your highest converting landing page, that might tell you that the keyword phrases your homepage ranks for are the highest converting keywords.

Of course, unless you target only one keyword phrase, it's still going to be hard to determine the exact one that drove traffic to your homepage and led that specific visitor to a conversion.

If you have set up [Google Search Console](#) (formerly Google Webmaster Tools) you can get a clue into the top keywords for your top converting landing pages by going to the Search Analytics report, selecting Pages, clicking on the landing page that gets the most conversions, then selecting Queries again.

This particular report in Google Search Console will allow you to see the top keywords that visitors clicked upon from organic search to that particular landing page. You can then assume that it is one of those keywords that is your highest converting keywords. Do this for your top converting landing pages to collect your highest converting keywords across your entire website.

You can also resort to third-party tools to unlock the ‘not provided’ keywords. In **Rank Tracker**, there’s a special “Not Provided” Keyword Traffic tab that brings in the crucial data to substitute your Google Analytics stats.



Determine the Link Building Methods That Lead to Traffic and Conversions

In most SEO strategies, links are built with the goal of boosting the rankings of a website’s target keyword phrases. But let’s think about link building in a different

way. Let's think about link building with a goal of driving traffic and conversions to your website.

If you approached link building with that in mind, instead of the usual what site has the highest Mozrank and how many links do we need this month to meet our quota, you would automatically be building links that were relevant, high quality, and good for your website's authority as a whole. And that is what is going to benefit your website's positioning in search in the long run.

So with that in mind, how do you determine what link building methods are leading to traffic and conversions? First, let's back up for a moment and look at why we need to see what link building methods are leading to traffic and conversions.

Let's say that you're investing in a few different link building strategies, such as:

- Local directories
- Niche directories
- Guest blogging
- Forum posts
- Q&A networks
- Media outreach

Whether you are doing them yourself or outsourcing them, you are investing time or money into them. Hence, you'll want a return on that investment.

So here's what you can do. You can go into Google Analytics and use the Segments feature to create segments for each of these different link building strategies using the traffic sources (domains) that you posted your website link upon. For example, take the local directories.

You would create a segment that looked like this.

The screenshot shows the Google Analytics segment creation interface. On the left, a sidebar lists various categories: Demographics, Technology, Behavior, Date of First Session, Traffic Sources, Enhanced Ecommerce, and Advanced. The 'Advanced' section is expanded, showing 'Conditions' with a count of 2. The main area is titled 'Conditions' and includes a sub-header 'Segment your users and/or their sessions according to single or multi-session conditions.' Below this, there's a 'Filter Sessions' dropdown set to 'Include'. A list of conditions is shown, each with a 'Source' dropdown, a 'contains' operator, and a specific domain name. The domains listed are: yelp.com, merchantcircle.com, yellowpages.com, whitepages.com, thumbtack.com, citysearch.com, yellowbook.com, manta.com, and foursquare.com. To the right of each condition are 'OR' and 'AND' buttons. On the far right, a 'Summary' box displays a circular gauge showing '0.01% of users', with 'Users: 195' and 'Sessions: 174 (0.01% of sessions)'. Below the summary, a 'Conditions' list repeats the criteria used in the segment.

The downside of segments is you can only compare up to four at a time. The upside is you can see data like this.

Source / Medium	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions	
	Sessions	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Local Directories	790 % of Total: 0.06% (1,216,576)	76.96% Avg for View: 80.23% (-4.08%)	608 % of Total: 0.05% (976,102)	82.91% Avg for View: 79.50% (4.29%)	1.36 Avg for View: 1.43 (-4.94%)	00:00:43 Avg for View: 00:01:19 (-45.38%)	1.52% Avg for View: 2.72% (-44.10%)	12 % of Total: 0.04% (33,060)
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Q&A Networks	767 % of Total: 0.06% (1,216,576)	77.05% Avg for View: 80.23% (-3.96%)	591 % of Total: 0.05% (976,102)	82.40% Avg for View: 79.50% (3.64%)	1.30 Avg for View: 1.43 (-9.56%)	00:01:00 Avg for View: 00:01:19 (-24.31%)	0.00% Avg for View: 2.72% (-100.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (33,060)
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Guest Blogging	14,234 % of Total: 1.17% (1,216,576)	66.45% Avg for View: 80.23% (-17.17%)	9,459 % of Total: 0.97% (976,102)	75.91% Avg for View: 79.50% (-4.52%)	1.73 Avg for View: 1.43 (20.94%)	00:01:42 Avg for View: 00:01:19 (28.61%)	2.30% Avg for View: 2.72% (-15.20%)	328 % of Total: 0.99% (33,060)
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Forums	1,889 % of Total: 0.16% (1,216,576)	55.16% Avg for View: 80.23% (-31.25%)	1,042 % of Total: 0.11% (976,102)	48.01% Avg for View: 79.50% (-39.61%)	2.34 Avg for View: 1.43 (63.15%)	00:04:17 Avg for View: 00:01:19 (223.64%)	13.02% Avg for View: 2.72% (379.23%)	246 % of Total: 0.74% (33,060)

Here, you can see that guest blogging and forums are killing it when it comes to conversions, compared to Q&A and local directories. Of course, this isn't a local

business, so it's no surprise. If you switch over to a local business website's analytics, you get a completely different perspective.

Source / Medium	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions All Goals		
	Sessions	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions	Goal Value
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Local Directories	49 % of Total: 1.02% (4,822)	83.67% Avg for View: 84.28% (-0.72%)	41 % of Total: 1.01% (4,064)	65.31% Avg for View: 65.55% (-0.38%)	1.67 Avg for View: 1.99 (-16.07%)	00:01:01 Avg for View: 00:01:24 (-27.35%)	0.00% Avg for View: 0.93% (-100.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (45)	\$0.00 % of Total: 0.00% (\$0.00)
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Q&A Networks	0 % of Total: 0.00% (4,822)	0.00% Avg for View: 84.28% (-100.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (4,064)	0.00% Avg for View: 65.55% (-100.00%)	0.00 Avg for View: 1.99 (-100.00%)	00:00:00 Avg for View: 00:01:24 (-100.00%)	0.00% Avg for View: 0.93% (-100.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (45)	\$0.00 % of Total: 0.00% (\$0.00)
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Forums	0 % of Total: 0.00% (4,822)	0.00% Avg for View: 84.28% (-100.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (4,064)	0.00% Avg for View: 65.55% (-100.00%)	0.00 Avg for View: 1.99 (-100.00%)	00:00:00 Avg for View: 00:01:24 (-100.00%)	0.00% Avg for View: 0.93% (-100.00%)	0 % of Total: 0.00% (45)	\$0.00 % of Total: 0.00% (\$0.00)
[TRAFFIC SOURCE] Niche Directories	474 % of Total: 9.83% (4,822)	74.89% Avg for View: 84.28% (-11.14%)	355 % of Total: 8.74% (4,064)	55.49% Avg for View: 65.55% (-15.36%)	2.31 Avg for View: 1.99 (15.76%)	00:02:16 Avg for View: 00:01:24 (60.92%)	4.22% Avg for View: 0.93% (352.13%)	20 % of Total: 44.44% (45)	\$0.00 % of Total: 0.00% (\$0.00)

On that site, you see that it's not the local directories, but the niche directories that are driving conversions.

Does this data mean that you shouldn't build links if they don't provide traffic and conversions? No, of course not. But, it does mean that if you can focus on links that can provide traffic, conversions, and SEO value, why not do that instead?

That way, you don't have to wait on your organic search rankings to make it to the first page for your target keywords to start getting traffic. You can start getting traffic directly from the links you build while you grow your rankings in search.

Determine Whether You Should Focus on SEO or Other Digital Marketing Strategies

If you ever come to a point where you decide you have to focus your efforts on search, social, content, or advertising, then again, look at your Google Analytics

to see what your best bet would be. You can start by looking at your Acquisition Channels to see what channel drives the most traffic and conversions to your website.

Let's say you have a report that looks like this.

Default Channel Grouping	Acquisition			Behavior			Conversions All Goals ▾		
	Sessions ↓	% New Sessions	New Users	Bounce Rate	Pages / Session	Avg. Session Duration	Goal Conversion Rate	Goal Completions	Goal Value
	4,822 <small>% of Total: 100.00% (4,822)</small>	84.28% <small>Avg for View: 84.34% (9.05%)</small>	4,064 <small>% of Total: 100.00% (4,062)</small>	65.55% <small>Avg for View: 65.55% (0.00%)</small>	1.99 <small>Avg for View: 1.99 (0.00%)</small>	00:01:24 <small>Avg for View: 00:01:24 (0.00%)</small>	0.93% <small>Avg for View: 0.93% (0.00%)</small>	45 <small>% of Total: 100.00% (45)</small>	\$0.00 <small>% of Total: 0.00% (\$0.00)</small>
1. (not set)	3,673 (76.17%)	88.54%	3,252 (80.02%)	72.99%	1.70	00:00:59	0.00%	0 (0.00%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
2. Direct	467 (9.68%)	71.52%	334 (8.22%)	46.90%	2.75	00:02:36	3.21%	15 (33.33%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
3. Referral	388 (8.05%)	72.94%	283 (6.96%)	38.14%	2.88	00:02:58	5.41%	21 (46.67%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
4. Organic Search	259 (5.37%)	67.18%	174 (4.26%)	38.22%	2.98	00:02:27	2.70%	7 (15.56%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)
5. Social	35 (0.73%)	60.00%	21 (0.52%)	40.00%	5.29	00:04:05	5.71%	2 (4.44%)	\$0.00 (0.00%)

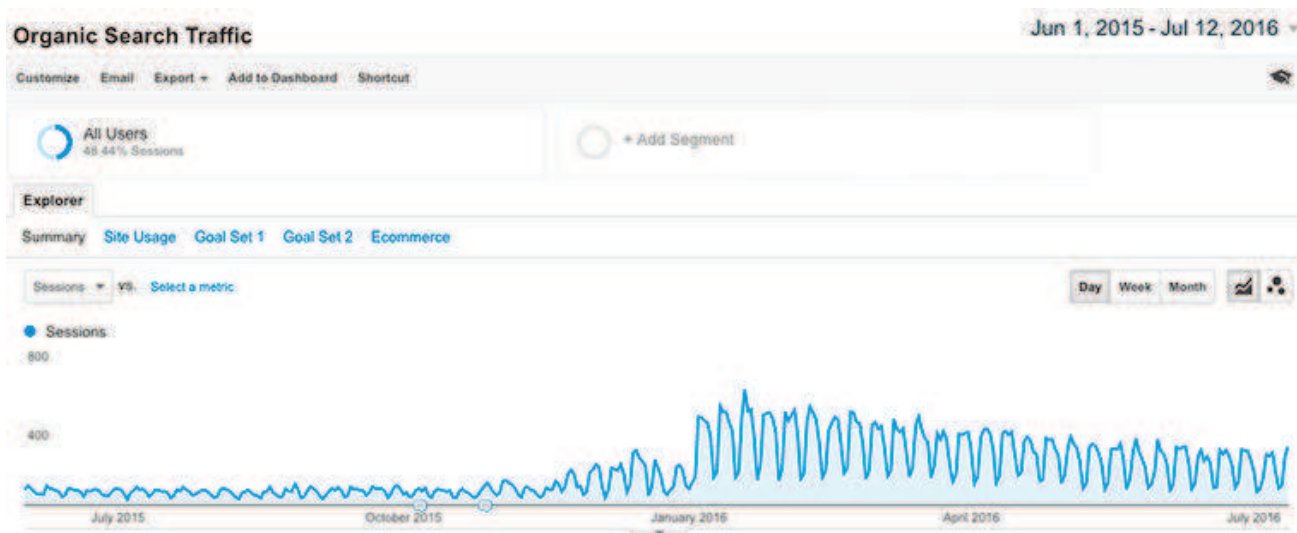
Here, you can see that organic search traffic and referrals are your bread and butter (since direct traffic can't be directly linked to a source). Since your referral traffic is likely linked to your link building activities, it's a good sign that SEO should be a top priority.

In most cases, organic search and referral traffic are going to be the winners, with exception to direct traffic. If, however, you find you have stronger social, paid search, or email channels, you may want to focus more of your energy (time or money) there. But also note that if those channels are stronger than your organic search, you may want to do the following.

Diagnose Why Organic Search Isn't Driving Traffic

Google Analytics isn't just useful for ascertaining your SEO successes. It's also designed for diagnosing SEO issues. For starters, you can go to your Organic

Keywords report under the Acquisitions section, change your date range to the last year, and see if your organic search traffic has stayed consistent.



If you see steady growth, then that's a good thing. If you see stagnation, it's a sign that whatever you have been doing for SEO hasn't made a dent. But if you see a decline in organic search traffic, you know you have a problem.

First, look at the time your organic search traffic started to decline and think if there might be a reason for the decline on your end. For example, maybe you redesigned your website, changed the URL structure of your links (such as going from <http://yourdomain.com/page-title> to <http://yourdomain.com/category/page-title>), and forgot to redirect the old links to the new ones.

That can make for a huge SEO problem as you lose the link "juice" you acquired to your old URLs, leading to an overall loss of domain authority in search and thus, a loss in keyword rankings. Depending on how long it's been since you made the switch, simply creating 301 redirects from the old URLs to the new ones may help you recover some of your losses.

If that's not the case, the next place to look is [Google Search Console](#) (Webmaster Tools). If you've been using it for a long time, you may have been alerted to a

manual action that might have affected your website's rankings in search. So be sure to check your messages there.

If you don't see any messages, then the next thing to check is the time of your organic search traffic decline in relationship to Google search algorithm updates. There are tools that can help you do that, like the [FEI Website Penalty Indicator](#) or [Rank Tracker's Google Penalty Detection](#). Both tools will use your public or private analytics data (respectively) to match your decline in organic search traffic to specific Google search algorithm updates.

When a Google search algorithm update is to blame for a loss in organic search traffic, your next goal is to learn what the update focused upon and how that relates to your website. For example, if the update focused on bad link building techniques, you will need to go through your backlink profile to see if you have any bad backlinks that you will need to prune. Or if the update focused on "thin content," you will need to look at your web pages to see if you have any that have useless content and weed them from your website.

In Conclusion

You may have expected us to talk about monitoring your Mozrank, other authority rankings, your number of backlinks, the authority rankings for those backlinks, or the authority rankings and number of backlinks your competitors have. Surprise, we didn't.

Why? Because the truth is, what your website ultimately needs is traffic, and what your business needs is conversions. Getting to the first page in search results for your top keyword phrase is just a piece of the puzzle in getting the traffic and conversions you need. The way you get there can make a huge difference in having a successful website and business. That's why you should focus on the metrics that count and achieving actual goals for your business.

What to Do When Things Go Wrong in SEO

One unfortunate part of the world of SEO is sometimes things go wrong. This can happen because you get over-aggressive with SEO tactics, because you make mistakes in Google because you don't know any better, or if you hire an SEO firm that uses shady tactics. This chapter will go through what you need to do get back on track.

Diagnosis

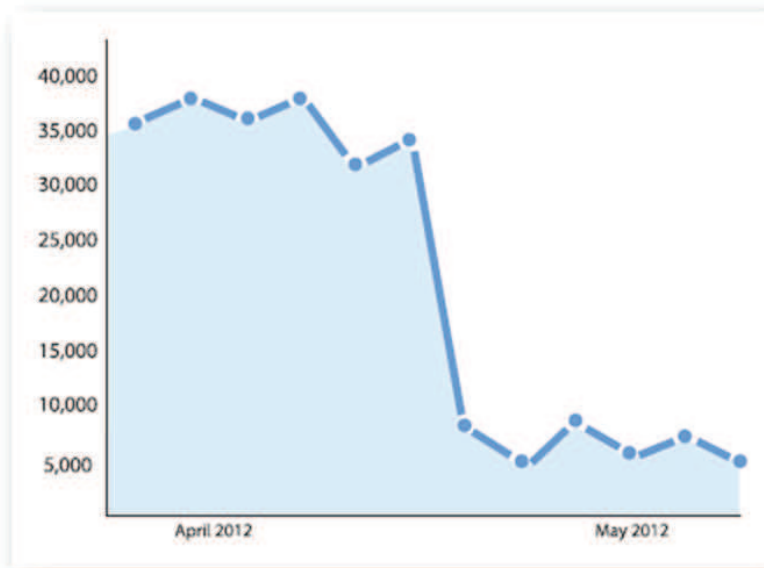
There are two major ways to learn you have a problem. The first is if you see a large drop in the organic search traffic to your site. Sometimes that drop can be catastrophic in nature, and it might look something like this:



Eric Enge

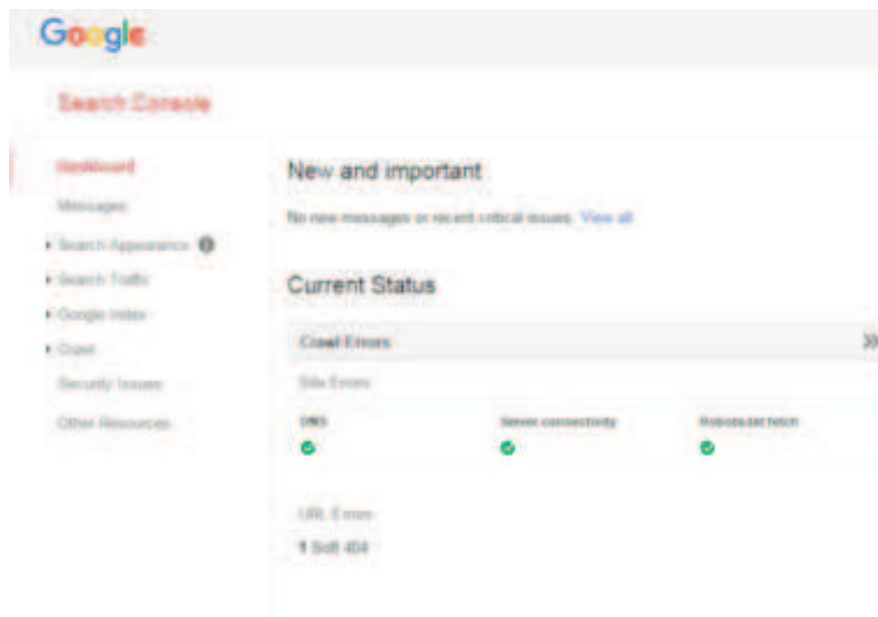
CEO at Stone Temple Consulting

Eric has been involved in digital marketing since 1990, and regularly keynotes conferences on related topics. He is also CEO of Stone Temple Consulting, a 70 person digital marketing agency



The other way you might learn about a problem is if you get a message directly within Google Search Console telling you about it. If you're not signed up for Search Console, you should do that immediately. In fact, pause reading for a moment, and go set it up now.

Here is a look at where you can find these messages in Search Console:



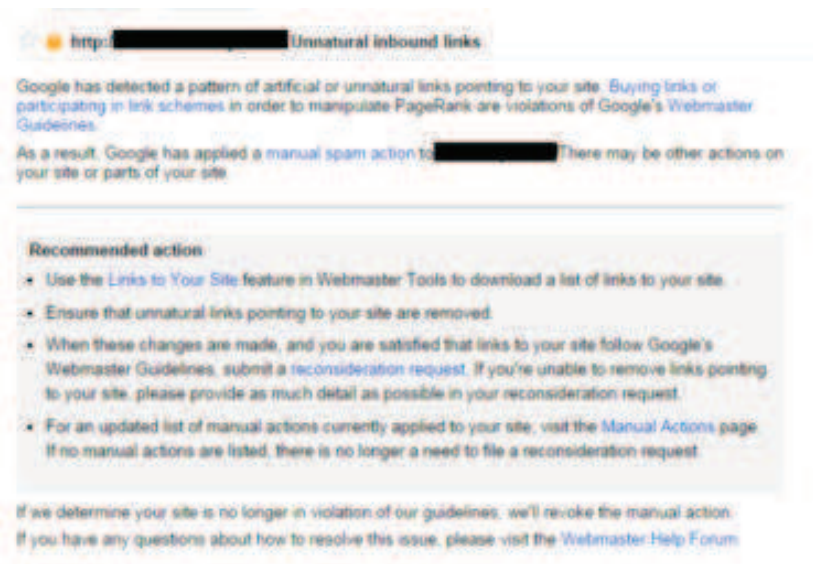
Overview of Manual Penalties

When you get notified about a problem within Search Console, this is considered a “manual penalty.” What this means is a person at Google actually analyzed your site, and as a result, assessed a penalty to the site.

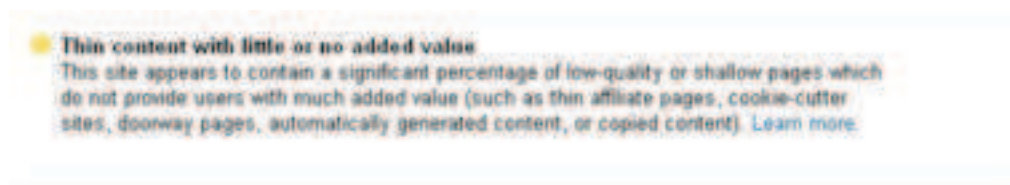
When this happens, the message in Search Console normally gives you some high-level description of the problem. The most common manual penalties are:

1. Site-wide link penalties
2. Partial link penalties
3. Thin content penalties

Here is an example of such a Search Console message focused on links:



Here is an example of a manual thin content penalty notice:



Once you have a manual penalty, the basic process must follow these three steps:

1. Determine the cause of the penalty. (For example, if you have a link penalty, you need to determine which links Google doesn't like.)
2. Remedy the problems.
3. Submit a [Reconsideration Request](#) to Google asking them to remove the penalty.

Overview of Algorithmic Penalties

These are caused by algorithms Google uses to identify sites they consider to be poor in quality, and then lower your rankings. The most well-known of these are:

1. Panda: Focuses on identifying poor quality content.
2. Penguin: Targets poor quality links.
3. Search Quality: A lesser known algorithm that evaluates site/page quality.
4. Top Heavy Ads: Focuses on sites that have too much advertising on them.
5. Payday Loans (Spammy Sites): Identifies spammy SEO practices that Google has seen as a common practice on payday loan sites, but the algo is applied to any site using those practices.

Technically, Google considers these to simply be algorithms, and not penalties, so we'll go with their terminology. But the practical impact on you is the same: you see a drop in your traffic. If you have one of these algorithms hurting your traffic, you need to try to figure out what the cause is, as Google doesn't tell you about these with a message in Search Console.

Google used to announce updates to algorithms like Panda and Penguin, but that doesn't generally happen now, so that will leave you with the challenge of working it out on your own. This will require a strong understanding of what the algorithms do, and then a harsh look at your site to see if you can figure out what the problem is.

Links Google Doesn't Like

If you've received a manual link penalty, or you believe that you've been hit by the Penguin algorithm, this section will help you determine what types of links may be causing the problem.

As you saw earlier in this guide, Google considers links to be an important part of their ranking algorithm. For that reason, many publishers are anxious to get as many links as they can, but unfortunately, there are certain types of links that can hurt you. What Google really wants you to do is obtain links that are editorial in nature.

What that means is the links can't be something that you paid for, provided compensation for, or that otherwise were given to you for reasons other than the linking party genuinely wanted to reference your site.

This is because Google relies on these links to act as votes for your content, and each vote is an indicator that your site has some level of importance. More votes signify more importance. However, as you saw in the chapter on links and content marketing, all votes for the content of your site are NOT created equal. Some are far more important than others.

The reason why Google penalizes certain types of links is that those links indicate to Google that they are non-editorial in nature. If you have too many of

these links pointing to your site, it starts to impact the quality of their search algorithms, and this is why Google takes action on them.

With that in mind, here is a look at some of the most common links that can cause problems:

- **Paid Links:** Any form of payment is considered a problem by Google. If you're buying ads and getting links to your site in return, the best policy is to implement a "NoFollow" attribute on those links so Google won't think you're trying to spam their search results.
- **Web Directories:** These are sites that organize websites into hierarchical directories, and there are really only a very few decent ones (such as Best of the Web, Business.com, DMOZ.org). If you want to get links from these places, and perhaps one or two others that are specific to your market place, fine, but don't pursue any more than that.
- **Article Directories:** These are sites that allow you to submit your article content, and they usually include a link back to your site. However, these links are not editorial in nature. You can simply upload the article and no one reviews it, so for that reason, it doesn't act as a true endorsement for your site.
- **International Links (from countries where you don't do business):** There is no reason for you to have many links from countries where you don't operate, so if you have lots of these, that could be a problem.
- **Bad Anchor Text Mix:** As you've seen earlier in this guide, the words used in the anchor text of links does help Google understand better what your pages are about. In the past SEOs abused this by going out and obtaining many links using "exact match", or "rich" anchor text (i.e. the anchor text

of the link was exactly the main keyword associated with your page). Too much of this rich anchor text is a clue to Google that you are over-aggressive in your SEO. See the image below for an example of bad anchor text.

- **Coupon Codes:** If you have been handing out coupon codes to other publishers and getting a link in return, that's considered to be very similar to a paid link. If you have these types of links, you'll have to deal with them.
- **Poor Quality Widgets:** if you created a neat widget that publishers can place on your site, and in return you get a link, this might be a problem.
- **Affiliate Spam:** If you are paying a publisher for clicks to your site, or a rev share or commission on sales generated by traffic they send to you, that's considered a purchased link.
- **Comment Spam:** If you've been going to blogs and forums all over the web, and implementing links back to your site, Google isn't going to like that. This is black hat SEO, so avoid it altogether.
- **Link Exchanges:** There is nothing wrong with exchanging links with close business partners or major media sites, but if a large percentage of your overall link portfolio comes from link exchanges, that will raise a red flag. So do this only in moderation.
- **Other Non-Editorial Links:** The list above isn't a complete list of problem links. To make the final diagnosis, you have to try and evaluate whether or not it makes sense for Google to consider a link editorial or not.

St. Mary's

St. Mary's is a town just under an hour's drive from Bicheno, or an hour and a half's drive from Launceston. You can challenge yourself to a climb to the St. Patrick's Head, or the South Sister's Peak, or a relaxing drive in the Elephant Pass – all of which give spectacular views. In town, have a browse through all the craft galleries, bakeries and shops that this small town has to offer.

In terms of getting yourself a vehicle, scope out rental options, or if you're going for an extended holiday, you can consider looking at second hand cars to [buy](#). Cars should be reliable, safe and road worthy of course, so don't buy something that's run down just because it's cheap.

Once you've got a set of wheels, it's time to hit the road!

The above image is an example of bad anchor text, simply because it's obviously contrived. The writer couldn't even take the time to write the article in such a way as to put the words “buy” and “cars” in the same sentence.

Note that it's not bad if some links to your site use rich anchor text, but if you are getting a large percentage of links that do so, that's not normal, and Google will see that as a problem.

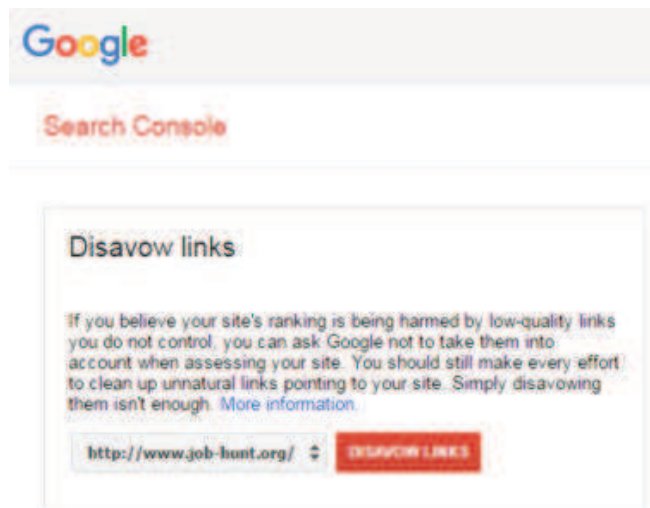
Cleanup Up Link Related Problems

If you've received a manual link penalty, believe you've been hit by Penguin, or are worried that your site is in danger of having either of these things happen, you should work on cleaning up your link profile. The basic process for doing this is as follows:

1. Build a complete list of links to your site. Google Search Console provides a list of links, but unfortunately, that list isn't complete. For that reason, we recommend that you also obtain data on links to the site from [Open Site Explorer](#), [Majestic SEO](#), and [ahrefs](#). The reason we use all 3 of these sources plus Search Console is that each will find links that none of the others do.

2. Dedupe the list as much as possible, as each tool will show many of the same links that the other tools do.
3. Begin analyzing all of the links. Generally speaking, you don't need to look at more than two or three links per domain linking to you
4. Mark links that you see as problematic as you'll need to address them.
5. Repeat three and four until you've been through links from each of the domains linking to you.
6. Reach out to sites that you want to remove links from, and request their removal.
7. Repeat the outreach to those that don't respond to increase your chances of success. Don't make this request more than three times.
8. For those links that you can't get removed, use [Google's disavow tool](#) to tell Google you want to discount those links.
9. Once steps 7 and 8 are complete, nearly all of the labor is done.

In step 8, I reference Google's disavow tool. This tool allows you to list all the links pointing to your site that you think might be bad, and to tell Google to not credit them to your site. Basically, it acts as a shortcut to removing potential links.



This might lead you to ask, why should I take the time to manually request link removals, then? Can't I just list all the bad links in the disavow tool? The reason you should still request removals is that Google likes to see the extra effort.

From their perspective, you were over the line in what you were doing, and they want to see clear evidence that you won't do it again. When they see that you make the manual removal effort, it acts as a signal that you are sincere in your intent to not violate their guidelines again. This is particularly important in the case of manual penalties.

As the last step in a recovery process, if you cleaned up your links because you received a manual link penalty, you will need to fill out a reconsideration request. You can read more about that below. If it's a Penguin problem, then you simply need to wait (more on that below too).

One last point: Recovering from link problems is aided by attracting high-value links as well. This is something you should be trying to do on an ongoing basis. How to do that is beyond the scope of this section of the guide, but learning how to do this is a cornerstone to the success of any SEO strategy.

Penguin Recovery Process

Unlike a manual penalty from Google, there is no value in filing a reconsideration request if you've been hit by the Penguin algorithm. You need to clean up the link problems, and then wait.

However, Google's Penguin algorithm is one that has historically run very rarely. It was first released on April 24, 2012, and has only been updated five times since then. This means sites have been hit by Penguin can wait very extended periods of time before recovering.

However, Google has been working on a new release of Penguin for quite some time, and in theory, this one will act much more real time. In a recent keynote event, [Gary Illyes](#) said that once this update is out: "If your pages are affected by Penguin, then generally you will be able to get rid of that effect much faster." This is an important change.

But for now, you have to wait until this new release comes out. Perhaps the hardest part is that there is no guarantee that when you think you're done cleaning up your bad links you've done enough. It takes a very experienced eye to recognize all the different types of links that Google thinks of as poor quality.

For this reason, it's important that you use a harsh approach to judging the value of your links. It's better to take the risk of cutting out some links that may be good (i.e. overshoot the mark a bit) than it is to not cut out enough. It's important to get the link cleanup and recovery phase behind you, so you can focus your efforts on moving your business forward.

Content Google Doesn't Like

Just as there are types of links Google doesn't like; there are also types of content that Google doesn't like. Some of the most important types of these are:

1. Thin Content: If you have a large number of pages with only a sentence or two on them, and they make up a large percentage of your overall site, that can be a problem.

2. Curated Content: Sites that simply curate content from third parties and add little unique value are also problematic.

3. Syndicated Content: It's OK if you have some syndicated content on your site, but if a large percentage of the pages are syndicated from 3rd party sites, and you add little of your own value, then that will be seen as a problem.

4. Scraped Content: If you're scraping content from other sites, that will definitely be an issue. This is one of the more egregious forms of poor quality content.

5. Doorway Pages: These are pages that have been created largely for the purpose of capturing search engine traffic and immediately driving sales. These are often pages that are poorly integrated into the site, and focus on driving an immediate conversion.

6. User Generated Content (that is not properly moderated): This almost always leads to large amounts of low-value content. If you are allowing users to add comments or reviews to your site, this can be a great thing, but take great pains to use human review to screen out poor quality contributions.

7. Advertising Dominated Content: This is content where the value added content is somewhat obscured or dominated by the presence of ads. I.e. these pages may have multiple ads above the fold, and the user needs to scroll before they see much of the value added content they were looking for.

8. E-commerce Sites with the Great Majority of Pages Being Product Pages with Nothing but Manufacturer's Supplied Descriptions: This is common with many lesser brand e-commerce sites. Be careful though, simply rewriting those product descriptions, but saying more or less the same thing isn't enough.

Google wants to see the unique value add of your site. They aren't going to let you receive search engine traffic if you are simply not adding much unique value to users who visit your site. To be clear, the mere existence of your site, or having a nice navigation hierarchy, aren't examples of unique value.

Better examples of quality content are:

- Unique articles that you've created that help users solve problems of interest to them.
- Reviews of products placed on your site by users. Important note: reviews that you repost from other sites don't count as unique content.
- How to videos that walk users step by step through something they want to learn about.
- Interactive content that engages users and attracts lots of attention.

- Data-driven studies that reveal key information that others haven't seen or created before.
- Access to expert advice and/or interaction with experts.

These are just a few examples, and the bottom line is that Google wants to see what it is that makes you special. It's OK if you have the best plumbing site that services Rhode Island, or the best marriage counseling site in Pasadena. If you serve broader markets, such as all of Europe, then the challenge content-wise is greater, and you have to be prepared to step up to meet it.

Continually Improving Content Quality

It's easy to say that if you've been hit by a thin content penalty, or Panda, that you need to improve your content quality. But, it would be better to say you need to improve your content quality whether or not you've been impacted by either of these.

If you publish a website, then continual improvement of the quality of the content on it needs to be a core mission of your website team. It's a competitive world out there, Google loves quality content, and there's no win in letting your competition get an edge on you.

Invest the time and energy to make your site the best it can be, from the perspective of adding value to users who come to it. Of course, keep the focus tight to the marketplace you serve.

If you've been hit by a manual thin content penalty, and you believe you fixed the problem, then the next step is clear: file a reconsideration request.

Panda Recovery Process

Google's Panda algorithm is a bit further along than the Penguin algorithm in the sense that Google already considers it a part of the main algorithm. That means you won't have to wait for up to a year to see a recovery in the event of having been hit by Panda.

However, that doesn't mean that recovery will be instantaneous. Plan on fixing the issues and then having to wait and see. It may take Google a few months to re-crawl your site, see the improvements, and then rerun the Panda portion of their algorithm on it.

As with Penguin, this is another reason why you should make a point of being very thorough in your efforts to improve content quality. Don't settle for the bare minimum and wait. Do more than you think is needed, and then keep going and do even more.

Reconsideration Requests

If you've been hit by a manual penalty, and you believe you've fixed the problem, you must file a reconsideration request. Google won't notice that you've fixed it, and you must notify them before they will take a look at it.

There are some key elements to a reconsideration request. Here is a summary of the most important ones:

1. Don't file one until you have made a very thorough effort to clean up the issues reported by Google. Just don't. If the reviewer at Google sees you haven't taken their concerns seriously, they will reject your request, and the bar to getting a future reconsideration request approved could get higher.

2. Keep your reconsideration request short and to the point. Explain you saw the penalty, made a good-faith effort to fix the problem, explain what you did, and tell them that you will endeavor to meet their guidelines going forward.
3. Don't complain about the fact that you were penalized. Don't complain about the impact on your business. From their point of view, they gave you a penalty because you were doing things to negatively impact their business, and they deal with thousands of these requests every day, so you're more likely to aggravate them than get their sympathy.
4. Remember they are human. You can't use a reconsideration request to become their friend, but you can write it in such a way that you are considerate of their time, and not make yourself a burden on them.

Those are the basics, but it bears repeating – Don't send one in until you've made a very serious effort to address their concerns. If you have no idea what it is they're complaining about, get expert help.

Otherwise, you're wasting the reviewers time, your time, and delaying the eventual recovery of your website.

Other Types of Penalties

There are many other penalties that are beyond the scope of this guide. For the most part, these arise from more advanced forms of trying to deceive Google, so hopefully you will never encounter them. Here is a brief list of those other types:

- **Cloaking and Sneaky Redirects:** This happens when you serve different content to Google than you do to users. Google considers this to be a major no-no.

- **Hidden Text and Keyword Stuffing:** SEOs used to find ways to put text on web pages that users couldn't see (such as white text on a white background) to feed content only to Google. Or, they would repeat the main keyword over and over again on web pages. Don't do these things!
- **User Generated Spam:** You might get this message if you are accepting user generated content (UGC) on your site, and you aren't carefully moderating it. UGC is a great way to add unique content to your site, but you should only do it if you are actively screening out bad submissions.
- **Unnatural Links from Your Site:** If you appear to be selling links to other publishers with a goal of providing them SEO benefit in return for money, Google may spot that you're doing this and give you this message.
- **Hacked Site:** This is Google trying to flag you that you have a problem because a third party has hacked the code for your web site. The best way to keep this problem from happening is to be ruthless about keeping all the software involved in publishing your site up to date.
- **Pure Spam:** Google will give you this message in Webmaster Tools if they believe your site is using very aggressive spam techniques.
- **Spammy Freehosts:** This is related to where you are hosting your site. Make sure you are working with a reputable hosting company!

Summary

Recovering from a penalty (or Panda or Penguin) should only be viewed as the first step. Treat it as a warning shot across the bow. Just because you're able to recover doesn't mean you can't get hit again. In the future, you should avoid the behavior that led to the problem.

But look beyond that. All the work that you did to recover should be a clue as to what you need to do to thrive in Google. If you had to deal with thin content, then take that as a signal to keep focusing ongoing energy on improving your content. Or, if you have a link-related problem, keep investing energy in doing the types of things that attract high-quality links to your site. Then you can move past survival, and into a world where your traffic keeps growing over time.

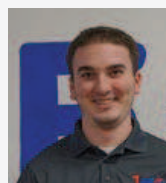
Improve Your SEO Campaign Using These Tools

As you begin to focus on your SEO and digital marketing campaign, you'll need to regularly make updates and changes. The way we think, act, and talk about SEO continues to change. You'll need to stay up to date on the latest trends in the industry and utilize numerous tools and resources to get the most of your digital strategy.

Learning and understanding SEO is something any marketer or business owner can do if they remain passionate and driven. Further education will always be required to increase your presence in the search results.

While the previous chapters have provided top-level information to get you started down a path to success, you will undoubtedly need further education to continue learning. Create a strong brand and continue to maintain value.

As you focus on a particular aspect of SEO to hone your skills, whether keyword research, link analysis, social media, mobile, on-page optimization, website per-



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formance, or are simply looking to enhance your understanding through metrics and tracking, utilize these tools and resources.

The one constant in SEO is that it's always changing. Follow best practices and implement the right approach while you continue to learn and grow.

SEO Tools

You can determine how your SEO campaign is functioning and performing with a number of tools. Review your metrics with these platforms and figure out areas you can improve to get the most of your marketing strategy.

Google Analytics: (FREE) Google provides you with the most valuable data to dig into your user behavior and understand how your overall website is performing. Are there certain pages where users consistently drop off? How long are they on your site? How many pages did they view?

Google Analytics does a fantastic job at providing the data that will improve your bottom line. While many of the keywords shown will be “not provided,” you can get an idea of how users are finding and landing on your site. This tool is one you can depend on and is free to install tracking on your website.

Important metrics you'll be able to see include audience insights, traffic sources, content that is engaging, and conversion metrics.

Audience insights allow you to dive into the number of visits your site has received, the pages viewed, how long visitors stayed on the site, visitor flow, new and repeat visitors, and bounce rate. Traffic sources include organic, paid, referral, and direct.

Consistently review your metrics to see your traffic grow, and make adjustments to your campaign as you see high bounce rates or pages that have high exit rates. Track and test your performance to increase leads and sales.

Google Search Console: (FREE) Formerly Google Webmaster Tools, the Search Console delivers reports and data to control your site in Google. Monitor performance and be notified that Google can access your content, remove any content you don't want to appear in SERPs, and resolve malware issues.

You can see how users are discovering you through Google Search, including specific queries that resulted in your site appearing in front of users. Determine which queries brought traffic, and review your backlink profile to see which sites are linking to your website. This is a perfect tool for webmasters, marketers, and business owners to help make informed decisions to optimize your performance and increase your traffic.

Get alerts for any issues found on your site, and analyze clicks from search. Google gives you the diagnostics you need to gain a better understanding of how your website is performing and where to make adjustments.

Google Mobile-Friendly Test: (FREE) Make sure your website is mobile-friendly. The importance of having a mobile website continues to increase, and the number of searches on mobile has surpassed those on desktop. With mobile domination, you must take advantage of this to determine if you pass the mobile-friendly test. See a screenshot of how Google sees the page and receive feedback based on whether the site is ready for mobile or not.

Google PageSpeed Insights: (FREE) One of the most vital aspects of your user experience is the speed of your website. Google's PageSpeed Insights tool measures how the page can improve its performance on both desktop and mobile. Plus, it will tell you if you're doing well by showing a green check mark.

Google alerts you of issues that could be a huge impact with a red exclamation point, or those that you should consider fixing with a yellow exclamation point. Implementing the suggesting you see on the tool will improve the performance of your site and the user experience.

GTmetrix: (FREE) Similar to Google PageSpeed Insights, GTmetrix plays a critical role in your SEO toolkit. A free tool that examines your page speed and informs you of areas for improvement, GTmetrix notifies you with scheduled monitoring to keep track of your campaigns performance. The reports and features deliver you data to improve your user experience.

Screaming Frog Spider Tool: (FREEMIUM) This website crawler checks for proper indexing and provides on-page elements from a complete SEO perspective. Crawling your website in minutes, you'll see data for every URL on your domain. Find and identify redirect loops and issues, find 404s and server errors, review URLs blocked by robots.txt, and generate XML sitemaps. Plus, gather insights into the meta descriptions of each page, adjusting those that are too long, short, or are missing from the page.

Panguin Tool: (FREE) Log into the free tool through Analytics and analyze the data to see organic traffic, as well as fluctuations in rankings. The best thing about the Panguin tool is you'll see when Google updates have struck and if your site has been affected. Filter between Penguin, Panda, Hummingbird, or structural (Phantom) updates. If there's a significant drop in rankings after an update has struck, you'll know that your strategy must be altered to increase your web presence.

QuickSprout Website Analyzer: (FREE) Connect your Google Analytics account to analyze your visibility and content performance. You'll be presented with insights on how to create better content and grow your traffic. See page shares per social media platform, competitor analysis, page load speed, and more. Use this tool for content marketing and SEO alike.

WooRank: (FREE) A Google Chrome extension, WooRank’s “[SEO & Website Analysis](#)” gives you a deep analysis and SEO tips to improve your performance on Google, Yahoo, and Bing. As you click your extension, you’ll see a report detailing your visitors, including traffic estimations and AdWords traffic, your social impact, a mobile report, and SEO basics and usability factors. Download your extensive report in a PDF.

The tips and techniques provided in your report are invaluable as you enhance your understanding of website performance. You’ll be able to report on a few sites before the extension asks you to pay to move forward. The free version is ideal for marketers and webmasters looking for a thorough report of the website before beginning an optimization campaign.

Use WooRank for competitor analysis, and understand the criteria you need for better SEO. You can get a 14-day free trial, and pricing begins at \$49 per month. The Pro level includes keyword tracking, technical analyses, backlink analyzing, monitoring, and alerts.

Raven Tools: (PAID) While the site auditor is free, its marketing insights start at \$99 per month. Designed mainly for agencies, it’s one of the most proficient auditor tools, alerting you of any and ALL issues that appear on your site. Log in and quickly see what aspects of your website and overall digital campaign are working and what’s not to adjust your strategy.

With 30 tools combined in the single platform, you can manage and monitor all aspects of your strategy, from organic to paid and social. Find issues within your site, monitor your rankings, view your competitors, and run reports on this powerful platform.

Varvy SEO Tool: (FREE) Use this site auditor to see recent Twitter and Facebook mentions, external links, social shares, and technical SEO issues. See if

your Robots.txt files are found, if your site is secure, mobile friendliness, page speed, and accessibility. Completely free, this tool is an educational resource with free information available that most paid sites only offer.

Social Media Marketing Tools

Social media is one of the best ways to ensure you stay in front of your target audience. Through sponsored posts and campaigns, or engaging posts that generate sales, you can see a massive return on your social media marketing investment. Each platform delivers a unique audience. Leverage your profiles to attract new customers and utilize these tools to fine-tune your strategy.

Buffer: (PAID) Try out all the features with a 30-day free trial, then get started for as little as \$10 per month. Set up your profiles, posts, and content, and let Buffer share your posts at the most ideal times throughout the day. Select which accounts you'd like to post to, and the content that you want delivered to your audience on those platforms.

As you're browsing and come across an article you'd like to share or add to your queue, download the app and enjoy the convenience of sharing while saving time. You can upload your videos and share your images. Buffer offer the convenience to allow you to get the most of your social campaigns.

SproutSocial: (PAID) Manage your social media profiles and find opportunities to engage with your audience when they're active on a particular platform. As you begin to publish and schedule posts across the platforms, download reports that show various metrics and data outlining the success of the post. Starting at \$59 per month, you can manage your calendar, export reports, link up to five profiles, and monitor keywords all from one platform. Similar to Buffer, measure analytics and monitor engagement for each post you publish.

Link Analysis Resources

Links remain a vital component of your SEO campaign. Without a link profile, you'll be hard-pressed to rank above your competition in the search results. You consistently have to check your profile, creating a strategy to build links back to your website while approaching and reaching out to others in your industry. How can you analyze those links? By utilizing these advanced tools that deliver answers to all of your questions.

Open Site Explorer: (PAID) Presented by Moz, Open Site Explorer helps you find opportunities for backlinks from authoritative and reliable sites. This improves your link profile and bolsters your SEO campaign. Learn what links your competitors are gaining, and those you can get for your website.

See the anchor text of the links to your site, as well as the page and domain authority of the linking site. Research the backlinks, find opportunities for improving your link profile, and see which links are damaging.

The free version allows you to see limited information—the first five backlinks for your domain. See whether they are dofollow or nofollow links, and run up to three reports per day as a free user. The paid platform allows you to run unlimited reports and use the other SEOMoz tools for \$99 per month.

Majestic SEO: (FREEMIUM) If you want the best data available to analyze your link profile, Majestic SEO is the premier tool for backlink analysis. Presented with both a free and paid version, the free tool gives you limited information.

See insights into external backlinks and referring domains, the anchor text, and the trust ratio of your domain. The trust flow divided by the citation flow results in your trust ratio, or the strength of your backlinks—and your site as a whole. All

of Majestic's unique metrics are defined in their [glossary](#). Understand the industries and websites that are linking to your website by looking at the growth of your link profile over time.

Ahrefs: (FREEMIUM) One of the most reliable link analysis tools on the market, Ahrefs gives you a detailed and advanced backlink profile. Track your link growth over time, seeing which websites link to yours and how strong they are. Plans begin at \$99 per month.

More than just a backlink analyzer, research your competition and discover content that is working for you and others in your industry. Identify top-performing content and see which keywords were used in the content. Their data is of the highest quality and it's easy for users to read the reports. Find all of your link targets and content ideas with Ahrefs.

Buzzstream: (PAID) Stay organized and manage campaigns across multiple projects. Send personalized outreach and gather metrics for your benefit. Email outreach and link building is made easy with this tool, helping you to focus on your business while the platform shares task progression with your entire team at the click of a button. Structure the account well, or you'll end up frustrated.

Content and Copywriting Tools

Well-written copy and topics help you rank higher in search. Content adjustments and tweaks remain a core component of your search engine optimization strategy. Many of the SEO tools mentioned above deliver insights into your content's performance, helping you adjust to get the most out of your campaign.

How are you going to leverage your content to generate clicks through to your site and engaging your audience? These tools show you topics you can leverage, as well as if you have any internal or external issues with the content on your site.

Google Trends: (FREE) View trending searches, top charts, and explore what's popular. Learn how to use hot topics to your advantage and generate traffic to your website through trends. A way to get unique keywords ranking for your site, you can get ideas and potential suggestions on topics and phrases you can leverage in an effort to have your piece of content go viral.

For your targeted keywords, you can analyze search trends to ensure you take advantage of the most valuable keywords for your brand. With charts that show changes for query volumes, keep up to date with the market to get ahead of your competitors. Business owners and marketers should test and analyze queries that are driving traffic to see if there are similar terms or phrases you can be targeting.

When you understand what is trending, this tool can give you a powerful advantage.

Siteliner: (FREEMIUM) Siteliner is a valuable tool that gives you insights into your content, as well as underlying issues within your pages. Offering you more than just content analysis, Siteliner will let you know if you have any broken links, related domains, or redirects that cause the tool to skip a page.

Duplicate content can be detrimental to your website, and Siteliner lets you know which pages you should adjust and update to minimize the duplication. It checks for duplication within your website, not external sites, so you can easily make the changes to avoid lowering your search engine rankings.

Broken links affect the user experience, and should be fixed to ensure they are working. Working must like a search engine, when you place your URL into Siteliner and the tool skips a page, chances are Google will too.

Analyze up to 250 pages of your site, or pay for Siteliner Premium to analyze up to 25,000 pages.

Portent's Content Idea Generator: (FREE) As you're just starting out with your SEO campaign, you may not know how to write blog posts frequently enough to build a following. Perfect for the beginners, you will receive ideas on topics to post about. It suggests some clickable, catchy titles for you to utilize in your blog posts. Create attractive headlines and understand how to appeal to your audience.

Buzzsumo: (PAID) Find the content that is appealing to your target audience. Type in a topic and see which articles have the highest amount of shares and backlinks. It highlights the major influencers and has become a must-have tool for marketers. See what works and what is trending in your industry. For content and SEO, Buzzsomo provides compelling data that you can use to boost your search presence. Through Buzzsomo Alerts, see whenever a keyword gets mentioned around the web.

Keyword Resources

As you launch your campaign, it starts with the selection of keywords. How do you know which keywords will help your campaign? You could think of a great industry term, but it could have zero searches on the major search engines. Through research, you'll learn which keywords will have the highest impact for you. It starts with these tools and resources.

Keyword Planner: (FREE) The relied-upon tool among marketers, the Google AdWords Keyword Planner helps you get a sense of how competitive your keywords are in Google search. You'll see the volume per month in which a particular query is searched. Your SEO Campaign should begin with keyword research, and the Keyword Planner is the place to start.

Depending on the query you want to rank for, the planner will show you relevant keyword ideas, as well as ad group ideas centered on a particular search. Ideal for starting your AdWords campaign, the Keyword Planner is a vital tool for SEO

marketers looking to get an idea of keywords that will help beat competitors. Learn what people are searching for, and exploit those searches for your benefit.

SEMRush: (FREEMIUM) Browse through your competitors top keywords, see the landing page each keyword is ranking to, and the value of the keyword for PPC reasons. Free users can run 10 keywords per report. You'll find the domain's organic ranking, search volume, percent of traffic generated, ad competition, and trends from the last 12 months.

Full reports show the domains ranking, if it has been hit by a penalty and how it has recovered over time, and how many keywords it is ranking for over the past couple years. The paid version delivers this full report, and the PRO Plan begins at \$69.95 per month.

AuthorityLabs: (PAID) Take advantage of a 30-day free trial to receive reliable keyword insights. Keep tabs on your keyword rankings and recover the (not provided) keywords through this software. Track your rankings and competitors side by side and share your reporting with the entire team. For small businesses, AuthorityLabs tracks local results for granular data at your fingertips. Pricing starts at \$99 per month.

SpyFu: (FREEMIUM) Research what is working for your competitors. Learn what keywords are generating a profit for them and what can you take advantage of to grow your campaign. Look at data from the last nine years to see every keyword your competitors have bought and the places they've ranked organically. Find the profitable keywords to benefit your campaign and outrank your competition.

SECKockpit: (PAID) If you want an advanced tool to measure keywords and find suggestions, you need SECKockpit. Starting at just \$40 per month, the features and capabilities within the platform are endless. Find keywords in seconds, from

low competition to the lowest CPC in AdWords. Get up to 200 keywords per minute to keep your SEO campaign on track. Find more keywords that lead to better results and stay ahead of your competition.

Übersuggest: (FREE) Enhance your keyword research and learn new queries that are relevant to your search. If your keyword is “seo services,” you’ll see results with long-tail keywords coming from every letter of the alphabet. For example, you can navigate to the letter “M” and see that Übersuggest provides “seo services monthly” and “seo services montreal” as other relevant keywords. Copy and paste the keywords or download them in a CSV and choose the ones that will benefit your strategy.

Its Word Cloud query allows you to visualize terms associated with your query. As you filter the results you’re presented, view Google Trends data in real-time to see how that query is trending. This free tool is easy to use and contributes valuable information to identify if you can be doing more with your campaign.

Keywordtool.io: (FREEMIUM) This tool provides plenty of insights based on the autocomplete function in Google search. Find out which terms your audience is looking for with hundreds of suggestions for every query. In many ways similar to Übersuggest, you’ll see a list of keywords based on autocomplete examples from Google, Bing, YouTube, and the App Store.

You’ll be presented with many long-tail queries that you won’t find in Google’s Keyword Planner due to the very low volume of search. Long-tail helps you narrow your audience and draw traffic from clients closer to the end of the sales funnel.

Use the Keyword Tool for SEO, content creation, PPC, and more, covering more ground and leveraging your website for more visitors. You can choose to see results based on a single Google domain and language combination. Expand your keywords groups and begin targeting more long-tail keywords.

Blogs and Resources

While you're testing these tools to enhance your campaign, read up on the latest strategies and changes in the search marketing industry. The only constant is change, so you can gain valuable intel by reading these blogs and resources to enhance your understanding.

WordStream: Focusing on PPC and social advertising, the WordStream blog is filled with useful information. You'll learn all the news associated with Bing Ads, Google AdWords, Social Advertising, and Content Marketing. WordStream remains a steady source of valuable search marketing information.

Moz: The inbound marketing company has a blog that offers some of the best insights and advice on the web. With Rand Fishkin's [Whiteboard Friday](#) series and informative posts to enhance your online marketing, there is an archive of data that you can use to your advantage. Learn the tips and techniques that have helped many businesses become success with online marketing, and learn how to influence your brand for search. Browse by topic to read relevant articles to your industry and strategy.

QuickSprout's Advanced Guide to SEO: Written by Neil Patel, this extensive guide goes in-depth for the modern search marketing to gain a better understanding. In an infographic style, it's easier to read and retain the information you're seeing. This guide helps you perform better on the web when you implement the tips into your strategy.

Content Marketing Institute: Building your audience and advancing your content strategy is the focus of Content Marketing Institute's blog. Learn about the latest news in content, social media, and how to enhance your overall strategy. With contributions from the industry's top influencers, these posts will help you fine-tune your strategy and master your content marketing campaign.

Social Media Examiner: How are you utilizing social media? With the rise in live video, instant articles, and AMP, social media continues to advance. It can be difficult to stay on top of all the changes. Social Media Examiner is one of the most informative social blogs that help businesses discover tips and techniques to bolster their campaign. Connect with more customers and drive brand awareness by implementing the helpful hints from this platform.

Utilizing These Tools and Resources

Digital marketing and SEO continue to evolve and advance. Their importance lies on various aspects of your campaign. You'll constantly be testing, making adjustments, and diving into the metrics to understand how your website is performing.

Make sure your SEO campaign is helping users who are looking for you. Provide real value with your site structure, user experience, and content. In today's digital era, your customers are searching online. If you find yourself behind your competition, analyze the reasons why. Is it a poor backlink profile? Are you targeting the wrong keywords? Is your content thin or duplicated across the site? Do users have difficulty finding what they need on your website? It could be any number of reasons, and these tools will help you understand how to alter your approach.

SEO is complicated. There are many tools that you can use to leverage your success and ensure you stand out online. Utilize some of the tools mentioned to learn how your website performs as compared to your competition.

What's Next in Search?

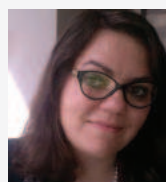
The nature of SEO is changing more rapidly in the last year than it has for the last five. The search engine game is evolving to accommodate new and exciting technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). The rise of these technologies is altering the way people are accessing the internet, and that means businesses will need to evolve their strategies or face being left behind.

This is a titillating time to be an SEO, and if it's not then you're doing it wrong.

From desktops to laptops, and mobile devices to wearables, there's a continuous stream of newer, more inviting devices consumers can use to access the internet, and sites must strive to stay visible on them.

As SEOs, we have to consider the WWW is not what we're dealing with anymore; we have the social graph, open graph to think about. Tim Berners-Lee coined the term Giant Global Graph (GGG), but for the record, I'd like to update that to GINORMOUS global graph.

The immediate future of SEO lies in the mobile web and with local search. The explosive growth of smartphone usage indicates that the world is rapidly



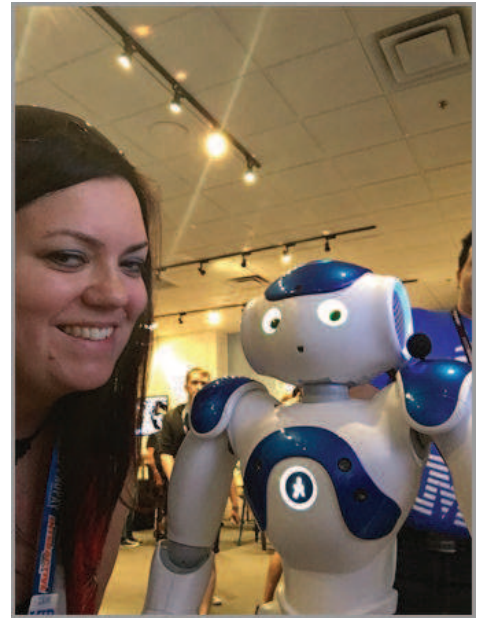
Anne Ahola Ward

CEO at CircleClick

Anne Ahola Ward is a Futurist, O'Reilly Author and CEO of CircleClick Media, founded in 2009. She was a web developer for 10 years, and through her love of analytics, Anne transitioned into the field of SEO as the field was forming. Ward is currently writing the next SEO book for O'Reilly, entitled The SEO Battlefield, due to be published November 2016.

shifting its focus to the mobile internet, as evidenced by Google's recent revelation that more than 100 billion searches per month are now being made via mobile devices.

Using smartphones and tablets, consumers now have the world's information at their fingertips, wherever they go. That translates into more people accessing the world's information than ever before, whether they're walking around the shopping mall looking for a specific product, booking a cab, searching for a great restaurant and in many other situations. People are always on the hunt for something, and they inevitably end up asking their smartphone where to find it.



The Rise of Mobile SEO

The mobile web has grown so much that it's now arguably even more important than the "real" web itself. But while many businesses are seeing the shift to mobile and realize this is where the future lies, many more are neglecting the importance of optimizing their marketing for the smaller screen.

As marketers, we have to think beyond platforms, moving towards Nth screen; the merging of people, places and things around screens. Marketing can be anywhere. Devices are connected, and where there's connection there's search.

Mobile Search is Different

The first thing businesses need to realize about mobile SEO is it's a whole different ball game from the "old" SEO they used to know. For one thing, only about

half of all mobile searches actually happen on search engines like Google, with the rest taking place on branded websites and in branded apps.

Mobile search also looks very different for results of searches that take place on desktop or laptop computers. Thanks to Google's latest Hummingbird algorithm, the world's biggest search engine now prioritizes what it calls "mobile-friendly" websites over those not optimized for mobile devices. The immediate impact of this algorithm change was that numerous unoptimized websites no longer appear in Google's search results when a query is made using a mobile device. Indeed, some 62 percent of organic searches now display different results on smartphones versus desktops, and it's likely this trend will only increase as others race to make their sites mobile-friendly.

"Mobile Search" is "Local Search"

If you're not yet convinced of the need to optimize for mobile search, consider that a significant majority of mobile searches are in fact "local searches". Proximity means income for retailers. Consumers are on the go, looking for products and services near them.

Recent data from Google suggests that almost half of all consumers who carry out a local search using their smartphone end up visiting a local store within 24 hours of that search. This trend shows us that consumers are increasingly using their mobile devices to search for products in local stores, before they rush out to buy them. And that means more often than not, they're not purchasing the items they find online.

Another unique aspect of local search is that consumers are demanding results tailored to their specific location. For example, Google's research also reveals that more than half of consumers would like to use an address or phone number displayed in an online advertisement, and they expect that ad to be fully cus-

tomized with both a city and a ZIP code. In addition, some two-thirds of consumers actively use the “Get Directions” or “Call” buttons they see displayed on a mobile ad or website.

Voice Search is Now En Vogue

The rise of mobile search can be directly linked to the emergence of a new phenomenon we believe will have a massive impact on the way businesses will need to optimize their websites in future.

Voice search is rapidly growing in popularity as text to speech technologies improve, with research indicating that fifty percent of consumers are using voice search more frequently now than they did 12 months ago. Last year, voice search rose from “statistical zero” to account for more than 10 percent of all searches globally, [according to Timothy Tuttle of the voice interface](#) specialist MindMeld. That amounts to a staggering 50 billion voice searches per month. Further proof of voice search’s importance comes from Google, which confirmed at its 2016 I/O conference that 20 percent of all searches now have voice intent, while Microsoft’s Bing said in May 2016 that 25 percent of searches in Windows 10’s taskbar were voice searches.

The reason behind the explosive growth of voice search isn’t hard to figure out. These days, with digital assistants like Apple’s Siri, Google Now and Microsoft’s Cortana becoming increasingly more capable and reliable, it’s easier to just pick up your phone and ask it a question rather than take the time to type a full query, particularly if you happen to be out and about. Digital assistants are overwhelmingly the medium through which consumers interact with voice search and carry out natural language queries, so it makes sense that they, too, are on the rise as companies compete for a larger share of this rapidly expanding market.

These digital assistants have come a long way. Thanks to advances in machine learning and AI, the capabilities of Siri, Cortana, and Google Now are much more robust than their earlier iterations. These technologies are able to interpret and respond to much longer, multi-part and very specific queries, something they were unable to do just 12 months ago.

For example, a recent public demonstration of a new digital assistant called Viv (built by the creators of Siri) showed off its ability to respond accurately to complex questions such as “Was it raining in Seattle three Thursdays ago?”.

All of this means consumers no longer have to type blunt and sometimes disjointed queries into their phones. Now, all they have to do is pick up their phone and ask it “where can I find wide-fit, red women’s shoes for under \$100?” and Siri, Cortana, or Google Now will instantly provide the answer they’re looking for. As such, the growth of voice search is sure to lead to many more natural language queries that provide much greater amounts of contextual information and data about the searcher’s true intent.

What’s Next for SEO?

Looking further, it seems clear the evolution of search has only just begun. Terms such as augmented reality and virtual reality may be buzzwords today, but they are technologies that SEOs need to take an interest in because very soon those same consumers we rely on to find what they are looking for on Google could be looking through a VR or AR headset to do so.

“We are called to be architects of the future, not its victims.”

— R. Buckminster Fuller

Augmented Reality

Augmented reality is actually a fairly old technology in terms of the last decade. The now defunct Urbanspoon app allowed users to view where they were through their smartphone and overlaid information, including user reviews on the screen.

Research is going to soon influence almost every aspect of our lives, and the market could approach \$600 billion in the near future.

While Augmented reality headsets like the Microsoft Hololens are still fairly new, this technology when widely adopted will pose a huge challenge to SEOs. No longer will users rely on results from raw results from a Google search but will simply look at their surrounding area for everything from where to eat, to where to buy anything they should want.

While creating a new paradigm for SEO, the results people find using AR will still have to come from somewhere, and there are still strong possibilities to influence those results.

Google+ Local Listings are a great example. Although Google is not currently offering AR search results it's not a matter of if they do, but when they do, and those search results offer an opportunity to SEOs to target customers.

While Google created the Local Listings to lift data businesses created to serve to customers, many businesses remain unaware of the option, or even how best to utilize it. SEOs can assist in helping businesses with their listings, as they can in even a more traditional sense of using various methods to make sure their listings appear before those of their competitors.

Geolocation is the key to making sure potential customers are able to find your business, but the challenge ahead is to cater for a future where the search ecosystem is everywhere you look.

Virtual Reality



While augmented reality has been around for a while now, virtual reality is the market getting more attention and is predicted to be a massive industry in a matter of a few years.

Search is always changing, but once millions are immersed in a virtual reality world, online search will rapidly change across markets, audiences, and verticals. Retailers have already jumped on board.

According to some, VR will create an interesting twist when it comes to reviews of products and services. People will no longer simply read a review, but may well instead be presented with immersive 360 videos, complete with a written review as to why the particular product or service is recommended or not.

The question becomes, “How do SEOs tap into a new market that only a decade ago was hard to even imagine?”

It may be speculation, given we are only at the dawn of the new age of virtual reality, but the best way SEOs can tap into this new world today is by targeting its social angle.

One way is to develop a strategy for getting consumers to click on the content you want them to click on, and that means being a part of VR as it develops. This can range from participation in review sites (a rule that applies to both VR and AR) through making sure a business has its own presence in virtual reality. That may mean a virtual storefront where potential buyers can view the goods being offered for sale, or the ability to test, or “play with” the item being offered.

Naturally, as is the case with a website today, those experiences can not be second-rate, because although consumers do like bargains, perceptions of quality are influenced by the look and the experience. It is quite likely that in five years it will be unheard of for established businesses not to have a VR presence, such as today it is completely unheard of for businesses of any size not to have a website.

Savvy SEO professionals who play the VR game will set themselves up to reap the benefits of high sales for their, or their customer's, products and services. According to a report issued by SuperData Research, consumer VR will be a **\$5.1 billion** industry this year, up from just \$660 million in 2015. It is not going away, and the earlier an SEO embraces the market, the better they will be placed.

Another aspect to consider with virtual reality is it can offer live experiences for sold out events, without the standard ticket fee. SEOs looking to market event access will have the world at their feet: imagine selling tickets to a mass music concert, and UFC event, or countless other experiences. While one person takes up one seat in real life, millions could potentially be sitting that seat virtually. We're at the beginning stages of this with the live streaming industry; virtual reality is quickly catching up.

Like internet adoption in the home, which took 10 to 15 years, it may take a similar time for virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence to become ubiquitous, but it will. Change is always scary, even with things such as Google Panda updates, but the smart SEOs will learn all they can about these markets.

How to Stay Up-to-Date in The SEO Industry

“Practice. Learn and then unlearn — that’s the trick in finding your own style of playing. You can’t merely emulate, you have to innovate, or at the very least create your own path into the process,” said writer, actress, and musician Carrie Brownstein, the co-creator of Portlandia.

While Carrie is no doubt talking about her superwoman business status from Portlandia, I like to apply this boss lady advice to my SEO career as well. I’ve always loved learning more about SEO.

What makes it work?

Why is it so different?

How does it affect my website traffic?



Anna Lea Crowe

Features Writer at Hello Anna & Co.

Anna is the Features Writer for Search Engine Journal and an SEO-whisperer at Hello Anna & Co. Over the last 5 years, Anna has successfully developed and implemented online marketing, SEO, and conversion campaigns for 100+ businesses of all sizes; from the Fortune 500, to startups, and nonprofits. In her spare time, she moonlights as a volunteer soccer coach.

There is no faster path to implementing exceptional SEO practices than by learning from others who have done it before. I could take a course, but I don't have time for that. I learn with every new client, but not everyone has clients to work through those growing pains. The quickest, easiest way, and the one with the most minimal impact on your day-to-day is to freshen up your skills by reading advice from experts.

The right SEO tactic can be a huge timesaver, helping you avoid common pitfalls and grow beyond the limits of your personal experience. But there are so many tools and so much news published every day that you could spend your entire day just reading them. So, how do you choose which SEO tools are the best, and where do you look for the most up-to-date information? It's unbelievable how much easier tools make our lives.

Take, IFTTT, for example. IFTTT lets you connect with just about every other tool available. You can track tweets, receive text messages when the weather changes or track your package with Google Calendar. These may seem like small wins, but when you combine these over time, you have hundreds — or maybe thousands — of hours saved each year, just by using tools and staying efficient in your knowledge base.

How can you apply this to SEO?

If you're starting, growing or working on SEO, I've collected these tools and tips I think are most worth your valuable time to gathering data.

1. Email Newsletters

I read a lot. I mean a lot. I look at my inbox every day. And, nearly every day, there is a newsletter from a blog that I subscribed to. There is a blog for every SEO topic under the sun on the interwebs.

There are an estimated **152 million blogs on the internet**. My inbox delivers custom, hand-picked (by me!) articles. Here are a few of my favorite email newsletters to stay up-to-date on the latest SEO trends (and some fun ones too!):

Digg

When Digg redesigned a simpler, better, and easier to use home page, it made finding the relevant content a pretty darn good experience. Now, like other search engines, I get results catered to my historical data. Take a look at the Digg Deeper section in the right of the homepage. See anyone familiar?




The Digg Deeper organizes the top stories from people I follow on social media. Digg combined forces with the **News.me app** to bring you this excellent feature. Every morning at 7 am, I read through Digg's daily email to catch me up on yesterday's top stories. Digg uses a combination of individual human selection and algorithmic curation to choose the highlighted stories, many of which have been known to become viral.

To sign-up for the daily email, create a Digg account. Then, hop over to your settings. Here you'll see the daily news topics along with the frequency you wish to receive emails.

Send me a daily email of the most interesting stories on Digg		<input type="checkbox"/> On	<input type="checkbox"/> Off
Send me a daily email of the best stories from these channels		Election	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		Funny	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		Long Reads	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		News	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		Science	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		Sports	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off
		Tech	<input type="checkbox"/> On <input type="checkbox"/> Off

Another impressive feature? There is a **DiggBot for your SlackBot**. Instead of getting my daily newsletter emailed, I can get it delivered daily via Slack. Just turn it on! There are so many cool things you can do with the DiggBot. See below!

 **Digg BOT** 8:37 AM
Hi, I'm DiggBot. Thanks for inviting me here. Love what you've done with the place!

Here's what I can do for you:

Basics
I'm constantly scouring the internet for the the best stories from around the Internet. I can tell you about them right here, in your channel.

- `/digg` I'll find you a timely and interesting story.
- `/digg [keyword]` I'll find you something related to your keyword.
- `/digg [domain]` See the top trending stories for a domain. e.g `/digg nytimes.com`

Trending News Alerts
I'll send you stories that are trending on the Internets.

- `/digg trending` See a list of latest trending stories.
- `/digg trending on`, `/digg trending off` Turn alerts on and off.

Digg Editions
Every morning, I'll catch you up on the news and the latest interesting stories.

- `/digg edition` to check out the most recent edition.
- `/digg edition on` or `/digg edition off` Turn Digg Edition delivery on and off (once a day, in the AM)

Fun
`/digg fun` Gives you something... fun!

Settings & Help

- `/digg settings` See your alert and delivery settings.
- `/digg help` See what else you can ask me.

SmartBrief

SmartBrief covers over 200 niche topics for their email newsletters. Their full list of subjects is pulled from 180 different trade publications, media outlets, newspapers, and corporations. From AdAge, MediaPost, to the Washington Post, SmartBrief is aggregating content of important industry movements.

The Moz Top 10

The Moz Top 10 is the inbound marketing, SEO, and social semi-monthly email newsletter you want to subscribe to for a quick snapshot of the top stories, all hand-picked by the editorial team at Moz. In addition to subscribing to Moz's Top 10, I'd suggest doing the same for the [Moz blog](#) and [Rand's blog](#).



Amazon search went down! It must be time to rethink everything! This week you'll find 10 articles that change your perspective and give you new tools to master the future of digital marketing.

1

Mary Meeker's 2016 Internet Trends Report: Seven Data Points Worth Paying Attention to

Noah Kulwin sums up some of the most important information from this much-anticipated annual report.

2

Will Intelligent Personal Assistants Replace Websites?

Speaking of the future of the internet, Tom Anthony imagines how changes to the ways we're searching will revolutionize your sales funnel.

3

UX Reality Check: 14 Hard Truths About Users

Robert Hoekman, Jr. tests some of your deeply held assumptions about your customers (and makes you a better marketer as a result).

4

Facebook Starts Selling Offsite Ads Targeting Non-Users Too

On the other hand, Facebook knows all. Even if you aren't a user. Find out how you can use this to your marketing advantage.

SEO By The Sea

If you're looking for search engine patents, Bill Slawski, the president and founder of SEO by the Sea, covers it all! From PageRank to semantic closings to assigning geographic relevance, Bill talks about it in his blog. Bill started his career in trial court as a court manager and administrator for 14 years before transitioning to SEO in 2005. So it's safe to say he knows his stuff.

Google Webmaster

Stay up-to-date with all things Google Search by subscribing to the Google Webmaster Blog. Google typically shares its big announcements in these blog posts. For example, when they recently [launched Rich Cards](#) or [introduced their new mobile friendly testing tool](#). If you want to dive even further into Google's search, [subscribe to the Google Webmaster YouTube channel](#). The office hours Google+ hangouts are filled with great advice!

Search Engine Journal

Of course, I have to mention SEJ! At SEJ, we work hard to bring you the top on-line marketing stories. We cultivate content from a mix of established expert authors like Ann Smarty, Larry Kim, [Jenny Halasz](#), and our in-house editorial team. There is also a few other search marketing related news sources worth mentioning:

- [Search Engine Roundtable](#)
- [SEO AllTop](#)
- [Search Engine Land](#)
- [Search Engine Watch](#)

Bonus tip: After you've subscribed to all your favorite email newsletters, download [Unroll.me](#) to help manage your inbox. Unroll.me takes pulls your newsletters into one daily digest and sends it to you at a time you choose.

2. Communities

Subreddits

Reddit is one of the best platforms for discovering highly valuable content on specific topics. Reddit has almost [10 million unique visitors and boasts over 72 million pageviews in June](#) alone. It's a large forum that's categorized into smaller forums called "subreddits." This is where you can share links and comment. The engagement begins when you upvote or comment on one topic. You can view the entire list of subreddits [here](#). I use it for tracking upcoming links to use in articles.

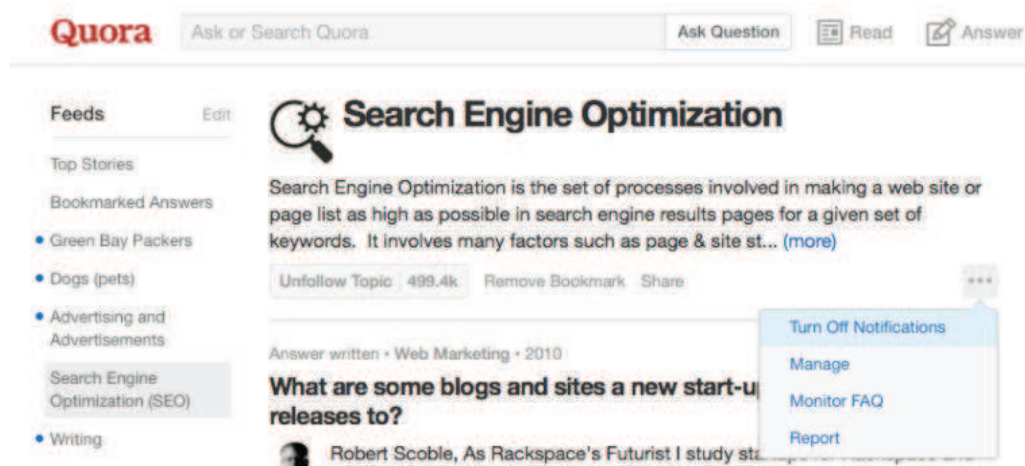
If you're new, it can be slightly overwhelming, so here's a list of subreddits I use:

- [R/SEO](#)
- [R/Bigseo](#)
- [R/Linkbuilding](#)
- [R/Digitalmarketing](#)
- [R/Inboundmarketing](#)
- [R/Contentmarketing](#)
- [R/Internetisbeautiful](#)
- [R/Askmarketing](#)
- [R/Socialmedia](#)

Quora

Yes, Quora is a question-and-answer site, but tons of amazing content can help generate fresh ideas and establish authority. Quantcast **estimated 2 million people visited Quora in May 2016**. I would say that's worth spending five minutes or so, wouldn't you?! Even celebs like [Rand Fishkin](#) and [Barack Obama](#) are getting in on the Quora action.

Once you start following topics, you can turn on the notifications via email.



StumbleUpon

If you're searching for a subject, but you're not sure where to start, head over to StumbleUpon. Once you sign up, you're immediately taken to a browser where you'll get suggested content for you to vote up or down. Plus, you can share it with your community. It's also saved to your dashboard in StumbleUpon if you vote up.

Here's a look at the different topics you can search:



GrowthHackers

This community is home to over 150,000 marketing specialists dedicated to building innovative ideas. It's like taking social media, content marketing, A/B testing, and all the other wonders of online marketing and turning it up 110 degrees.

GrowthHackers is divided into different sections: posts, questions, AMAs, growth studies, videos, and jobs. Similar to Quora, Medium, and LinkedIn Posts, you can repurpose your blog content (if relevant to growth) to the GrowthHacker community in hopes for engagement in the form of upvotes.

Inbound

Spawned by Dharmesh Shah of Hubspot and Rand Fishin of Moz, Inbound has built a community similar to Reddit or Hacker News for insights on marketing, social media, and SEO. What started in 2005 as a small community has now grown to over 150,000 members. And, [Ed Fry](#) does an incredible job at keeping the Inbound community supportive and helpful.

[If you choose](#) to get the daily emails (or weekly) through the Inbound Digest, you're greeted with the top seven stories for that day.

inbound.org

[Join today's discussions](#)

MONDAY, MAY 30TH

[How 22,032 Local Listings Launched My Reputation Management Software Startup](#)

54 upvotes - 14 comments - Submitted by Brodie Tyler

Over the course of a grueling couple of weeks, I manually analyzed over 22,000 Google local listings with the help of my 9 and 11 year olds for data e...

[Guest Blogging is it still effective and worth the effort?](#)

7 upvotes - 9 comments - Submitted by Muhammad Elitli

i just joined SEO team working with a franchise mobile repairing services in NY. they mainly focus on guest blogging to build backlinks. i think it'...

FEATURED JOB



Closing Soon: Content Marketing Manager

GlobalGiving in Washington, DC, United States

[Apply Now](#)

[View 175 Marketing Jobs in New York, London, Boston & Worldwide!](#)

[What other analytics tools do you use besides Google Analytics?](#)

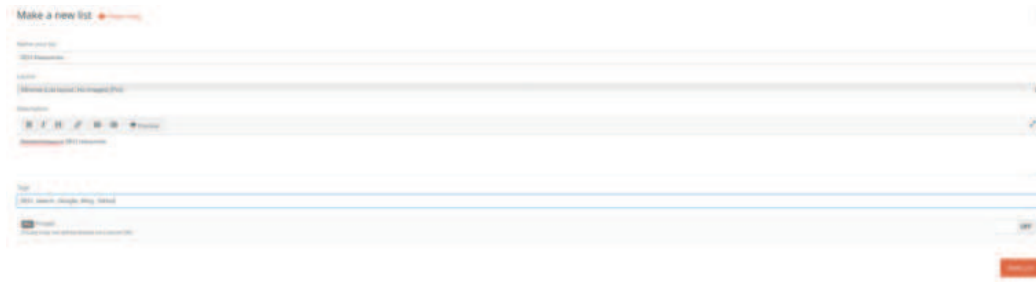
68 upvotes - 50 comments - Submitted by Casey Henry

5 years ago, the answer to this question would have been 1 of 4 different vendors but in 2016 there are hundreds of analytics tools to help you measur...

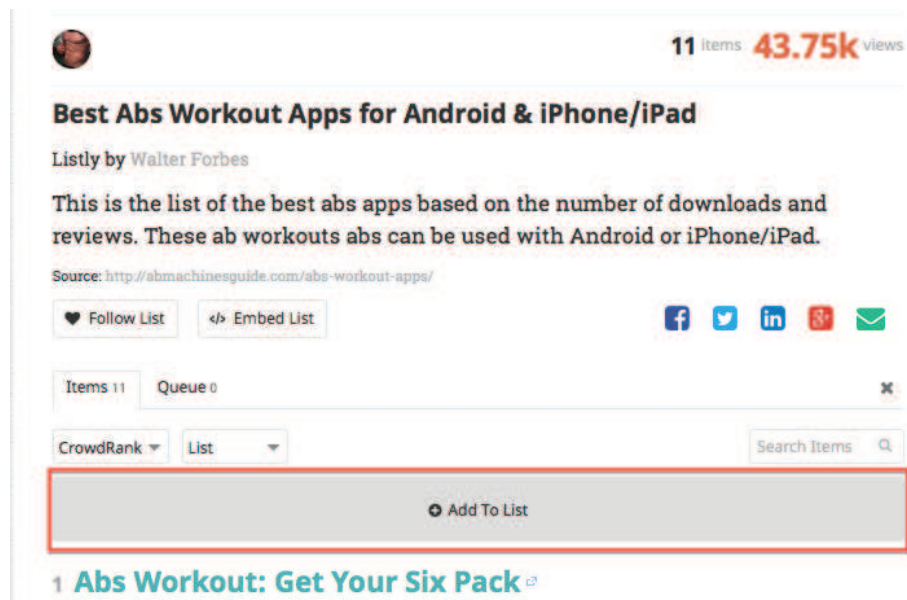
3. Bookmark Content

List.ly

Another awesome tool is List.ly. I create lists for everything under the sun for SEO. From schema markup, local citations, to AMP resources, if it's related to SEO, I've created a list for it. This is where I store all my articles, video, quotes, whatever! Why? Mostly because it's so easy to filter what I'm looking for.

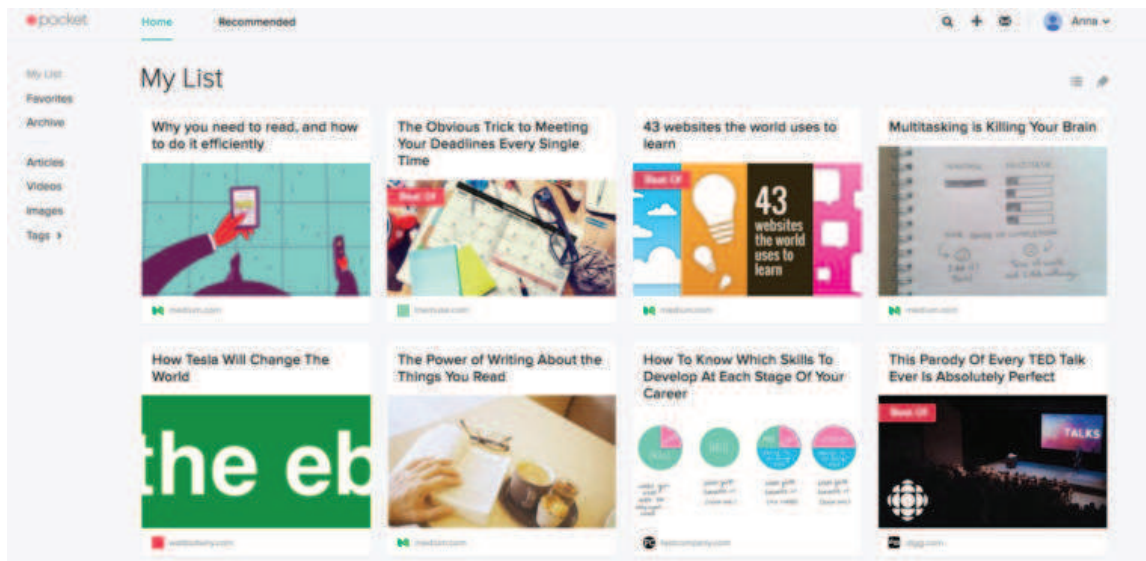


With List.ly you can also embed interactive lists that allow your users to add to your lists to help crowdsource content. Here is a live List.ly where it says “Add to List.” Super cool, right?!



Pocket

Pocket is an easy-to-use, streamlined approach to finding content. First, you can save articles to read later and tag them with a category so you can search them later. And, inside the app, Pocket shares “Recommended” items that are trending.

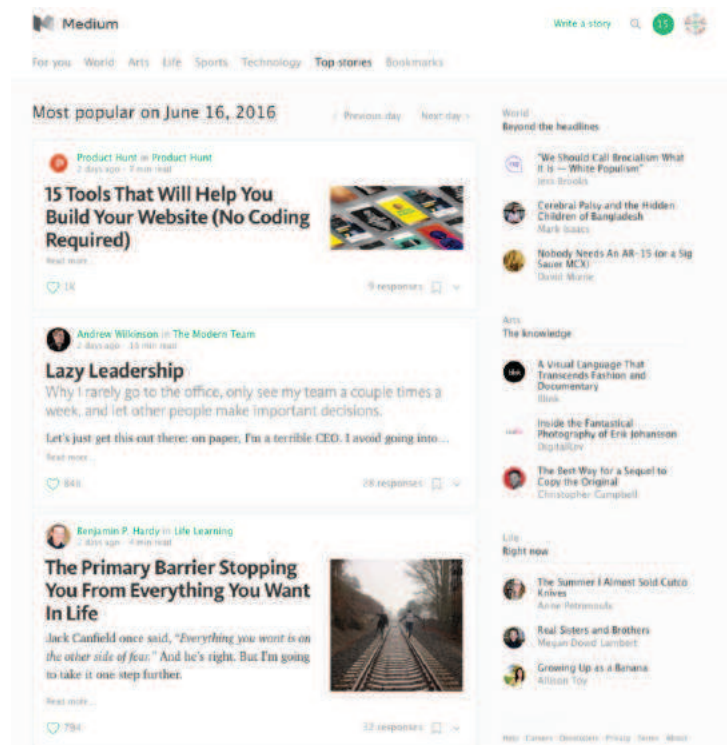


4. Content Platforms

Medium

I regularly browse the stories and collections on Medium's "Top Stories" tab. Medium makes it easy for me to discover content that I like.

Medium also shares a wealth of shareable, authentic, well-written stories the homepage that are based on my needs and my all my favorite writers I follow.



Here're a few of my favorite writers on Medium:

- [Jay Baer](#)
- [Jason Fried](#)
- [Ryan Hoover](#)
- [Gary Vaynerchuk](#)
- [Buffer](#)
- [Gregory Ciotti](#)
- [Product Hunt](#)

You can also get the top stories from Medium delivered to your inbox daily.



Panda

Panda has a gorgeous interface for discovering content. They segment their content from the beginning to provide you custom content to your industry needs — developer, designer, entrepreneur. The collection is sorted by stories and visuals from different communities in a variety of layout options (or email!).

You can search multiple sites without clicking away from the homepage. Here's a list of some of the main pages:

- Angel's List
- Behance
- FastCo.Design
- Fast Company
- GitHub
- GrowthHackers
- Inbound
- Quora
- Tech Crunch

LAYOUTS

Enjoy Panda in different perspectives. Use keyboard shortcuts to switch between layouts, e.g. **ALT + 1** goes to layout El Classico; for the full list of keyboard shortcuts press **?**.

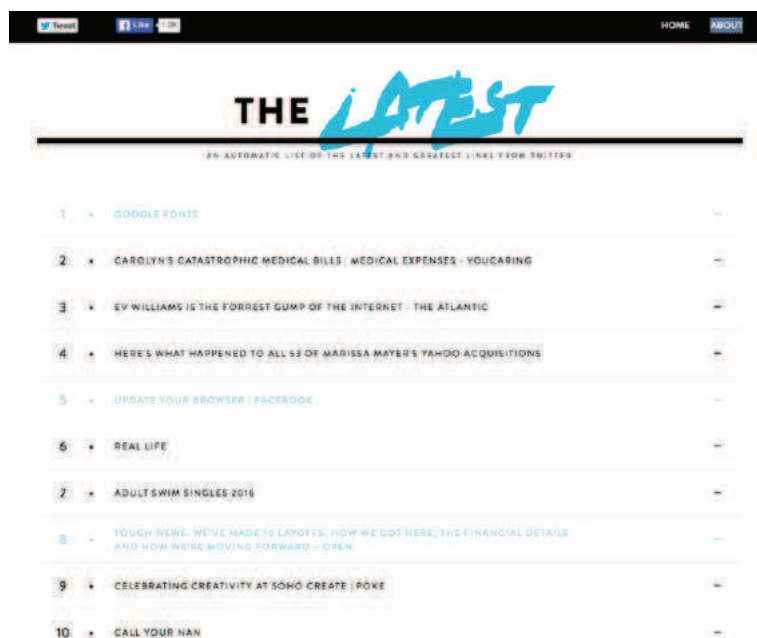


5. Social Media

The Latest

The Latest was created to track what's trending on Twitter. They follow the tweets from top influencers, then analyze the top links they share to pull in what

the top links are at that moment. The Latest homepage is a collection of the best tweets without actually going to Twitter. But, if you want to pop over to Twitter, you can [watch the top tweets here](#) too.



Twitter Lists

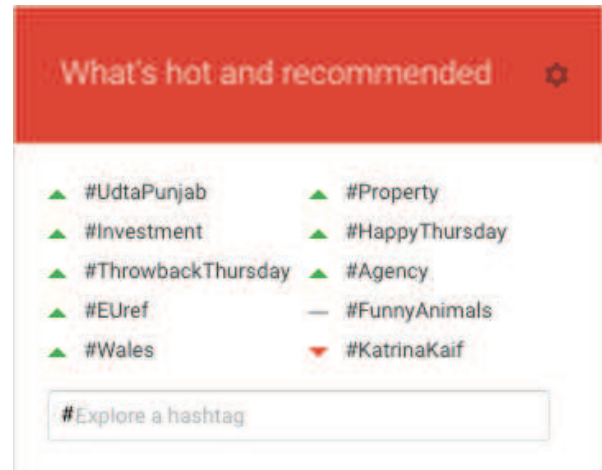
As a Twitter power user, Twitter lists are the jelly to my peanut butter. I use them to save time by allowing me to bucket users (SEO idols, funny brands, Tampa locals) and topics (cat videos, design) into different lists to keep myself focused on specific streams of content. You can also follow Twitter lists to help you streamline your content stalking process.

Here are a few I follow:

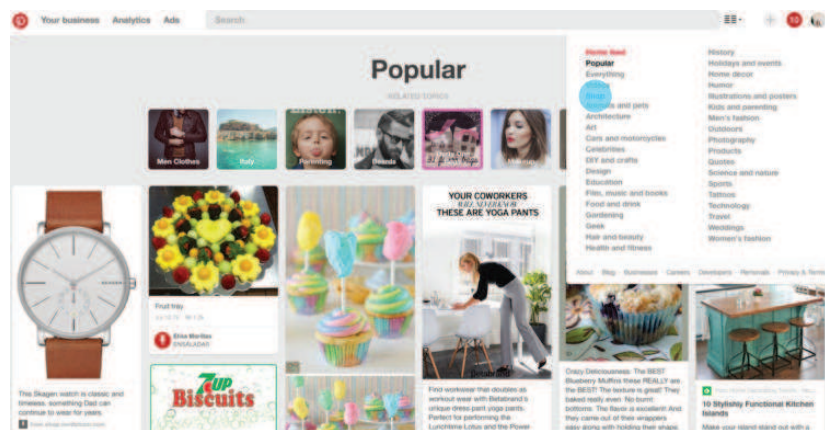
- [Search Marketing](#)— curated by Danny Sullivan
- [SocMedia Editors](#) — curated by Sree Sreenivasan
- [Copywriting / Writing](#) — curated by Unbounce
- [Tech News People](#) — curated by Robert Scoble
- [BI Editors & Reporters](#) — curated by Business Insider

What's Popular on Google+ and Pinterest

Let's not forget about Google+ and Pinterest. When you're exploring content in Google+, you can search for "What's Hot" and Google will use its algorithm to sort through trending content and your past search history to pull content most relevant to you and today's hot topic.



Pinterest will also use its algorithm and your past searches, followers, and current trends to populate your "Popular" feed.



Facebook Groups

Facebook Groups are an awesome resource for feedback, new content, and talking about new ideas with your peers. I actively participate in multiple Facebook Groups and not only have I gained credits for my articles, but they've sparked exciting concepts for upcoming pieces I'm working on. Plus, I get a nice bump in traffic to my website now and then.

Here are a few Facebook Groups to take a look at:

- [Social Journalism](#)
- [The Secret Team](#)
- [SEO Tips](#)
- [Search Engine Marketing](#)

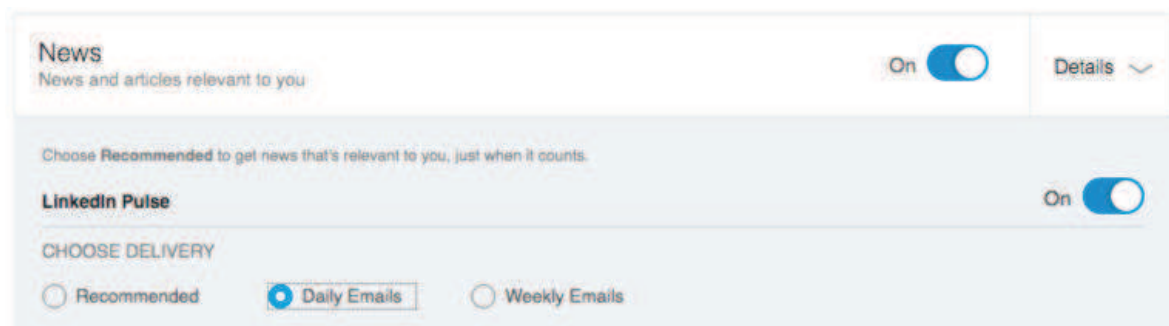
LinkedIn Pulse & Groups

I typically come to LinkedIn for industry insights or company specific information.

[According to LinkedIn](#), this is what people are searching for:

- 60% of members are interested in industry insights
- 53% are interested in company news
- 43% are interested in new products and services

Many industry experts are sharing their expertise on LinkedIn Pulse. Pulse is very similar to Medium in that you can use it to repurpose content. So, it all depends on where you like receiving your content from and where your industry is sharing. LinkedIn Pulse also lets you choose between daily, weekly, or recommended email frequency in your settings.



LinkedIn Groups is another great place to source content. The groups are filled with like-minded people to network with and brainstorm new ideas. Here's a list of top LinkedIn Groups to check out:

- [Digital Marketing](#)
- [Community Managers](#)
- [Moz](#)
- [Marketing – Digital SEO SEM Mobile](#)
- [Search Engine Journal](#)

Slideshare

Slideshare is one of my favorite visual social networks and probably one of the most quickly forgotten. Slideshare is host to some of the best keynote presentations from the best speakers in marketing today. And, the content is engaging with memes, graphs, etc.

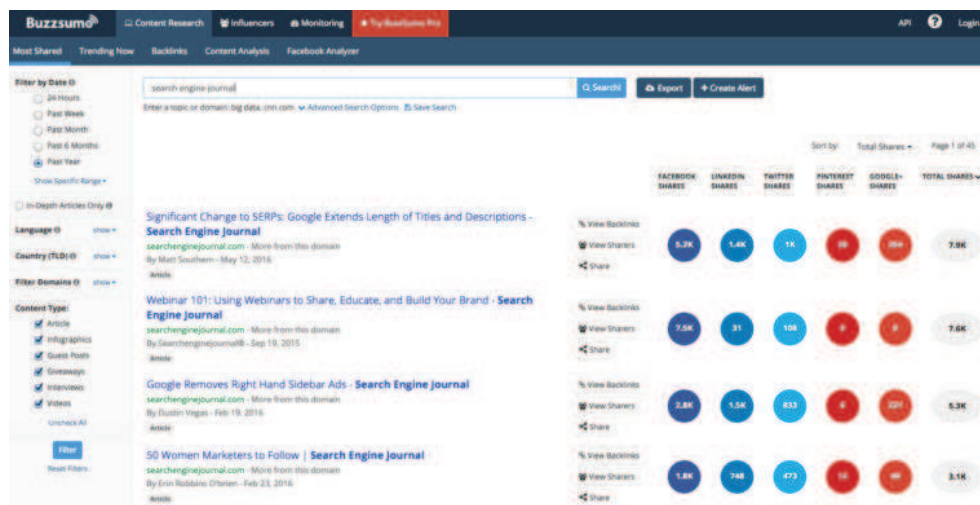
After the rebranding with LinkedIn, Slideshare's homepage looks very much like the visual search engine, Pinterest, with the deep scroll and image structure. Here are some of the best Slideshare presentations:

- [How Google Works](#) – by Eric Schmidt
- [Why Content Marketing Fails](#) – by Rand Fishkin
- [Networking Tips for Introverts](#) – by MarketingProfs
- [The Other C'Word](#) – by Velocity Partners

6. Alerts

BuzzSumo

Buzzsumo uses magical unicorn powers to signal what the top performing posts are on the interwebs. Just kidding! Type in a keyword, brand name, or URL, and BuzzSumo will sort the top performing articles, videos, infographics, guest posts, etc. based on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, LinkedIn, and total shares. And, you can pull in backlinks. BuzzSumo can help gauge what the possible virality of an upcoming article you're working on might receive.



Google Alerts

I have set up a few different Google Alerts for research studies and relevant SEO topics (AMP, RankBrain, etc.). Using search operators you can set these up to receive the kind of results you're looking for:

study OR research + SEO

harvard OR stanford + "research"

Once you have the alerts set up, you can choose the frequency (as-it-happens, daily, weekly) that works best for you. Then, add to your Pocket app for later use.

Final thoughts

Where Do You Look to Stay Up-to-date on SEO Content?

I've found that newsletters and the tools listed above work best for me to discover stories, case studies, and best practices. Plus, it saves me tons of time! While some of these are not-so-secret, these are the methods that are tried-and-true for me. And, when you write a piece of content that everyone loves, it's a win-win.

It's up to you to find your groove and get creative when discovering new content.

What are some of your favorite ways to in-the-know on SEO? I'd love to hear your ideas in the comments.

Conclusion

Building a Cohesive Strategy

“Strategy.” Strategy is something we talk about internally on our weekly SEJ editorial calls.

“Strategy is hard.” As an SEO writer and consultant, I spend all day, every day strategizing. Keywords, meta data, competitive analysis, analyzing data, creating custom content for different channels, and sending outreach emails.

And getting it right every time? Hard. Making sure your user experience and website structure flow is solid? Also hard, argh! So, I’m trying to make it easier.

Building a [cohesive SEO strategy](#) isn’t just all meta titles and sitemaps. When I create a strategy for my clients, I actually use a plan that’s custom to their needs, wants, and market landscape. Your SEO strategy should be reflective of your client or brand. It should sound, act, and move consistently and authentically—just as they do. Because, after all, search marketing puts your client or brand in front of their ideal customer.



Anna Lea Crowe

Features Writer at Hello Anna & Co.

Anna is the Features Writer for Search Engine Journal and an SEO-whisperer at Hello Anna & Co. Over the last 5 years, Anna has successfully developed and implemented online marketing, SEO, and conversion campaigns for 100+ businesses of all sizes; from the Fortune 500, to startups, and nonprofits. In her spare time, she moonlights as a volunteer soccer coach.

Five years ago I started keeping track of my SEO strategy — the processes I use, the ones I don't — and I've shaped my ideas into this guide to help this ever-evolving landscape remain a steady, solid platform for increasing organic search traffic to your website. But, the number of [algorithm updates](#) is growing fast, and it's important to stay focused on not only how, but why you build a cohesive SEO strategy.

So, here it is: I've built this SEO strategy from my internal experiences working with 100+ clients into an external resource that can help empower other SEO beginners from the ground up.

So, to start off, let's take a look at your audience.

Searcher Persona

Understanding who your target audience is, then building different [searcher personas](#) surrounding this can help you reach your ideal customer base. It gives you a structured look at how your business goals align with their goals. And, you can match your content, messaging, and product with what matters most to them. It's like profiling your customers in a non-mug shot prison kind of way.

Creating an SEO strategy without building a searcher persona profile is like getting dressed in the dark. It's not pretty. And, you come out looking like you're in a bad 90's music video with [The Hoff](#). To begin building your searcher persona profiles, start by identifying your customer goals. Ask yourself these questions:

1. What words would my customer or target audience use to describe their current problem?
2. What is the biggest hesitation before trying out my product or service?
3. What is the best possible way for me to engage with them?

While this may feel a bit like mind-reading, there is no crystal ball or feather hat involved. It's all about understanding your audience. If you can answer these questions, your keywords, content, and link building strategy will, ultimately, create meaningful, authentic content that converts searchers into customers.

Keyword Discovery

Keywords are still valuable. They give a theme to your site, structure to your pages, and benefit your site by guiding searchers to a specific page: keywords don't just help content, keywords craft content. Don't take my word for it, just look at Rand Fishkin's comment on [this Moz article](#).

I've always viewed keywords as another avenue to help guide my clients talk to their customers the way their customers talk to search engines. And, customers don't talk to search engines any differently than the way they talk in natural conversations. With new technologies being introduced, like [voice search](#) and natural language, conversational queries and questions are becoming an even bigger footprint. Having worked on sites with over six million visitors in one year, I thought it might be useful to see the process behind the curtain to my keyword discovery.

Here are the key principles that power my keyword discovery:

Break Out Your Keyword List Based on Your Ideal Searcher

Using Google Sheets, I start by making a list of words I think my ideal customer or searcher would type into the search box. I Google it and scroll to the bottom for Google Suggestions. And, I'll even pop over to the Thesaurus to check out different variations of words. Then, I'll use tools like [Ubersuggest](#),

[Keywordtool.io](#), [Keyword Shitter](#) (No, I did not make that up and yes, it really exists) and Wikipedia to give it a little umph! Here's what my list looks like right now:

	A	B	C
1	Keyword	Volume	Competition
2	keyword research		
3	keyword tools		
4	keyword tool		
5	keyword tool free		
6	keyword free		
7	keyword planner		
8	keyword research free		
9	keyword analysis		
10	keyword generator		
11	keyword suggestion tool		
12	free keyword tool		
13	key word tool		
14	keyword research tips		
15	keyword research seo		
16	keyword research 2016		
17	keyword research template		
18	keyword research definition		
19	keyword research webinar		
20	what is a keyword research tool		
21	keyword research best practices		
22	keyword research benefits		
23	keyword research blog		
24	keyword research checklist		
25	keyword research case study		

Next, I'll do a little trick my good friend Brian Dean taught us all in Google Keyword Planner. Take a similar blog topic you're writing about that a competitor wrote about and copy the URL into the Google Keyword Planner under the "Your landing page" section. See below:

Keyword Planner

Where would you like to start?

 Find new keywords and get search volume data

▼ Search for new keywords using a phrase, website or category

Enter one or more of the following:

Your product or service

For example, flowers or used cars

Your landing page

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/4-voice-search-tools/164965/>

Your product category

Enter or select a product category

Targeting ?

United States

English

Google and search partners

Negative keywords

Date range ?

Show avg. monthly searches for: last 12 months

Customize your search ?

Keyword filters

Keyword options

Show broadly related ideas

Hide keywords in my account

Hide keywords in my plan

Keywords to include

Get ideas

Here's a list of keywords I can add to my list that my competitors are ranking for:

Ad group ideas		Keyword ideas	
Keywords (by relevance)		Avg. monthly searches ?	Competition ?
seo		135,000	Medium
search engine marketing		4,400	Medium
what is seo		12,100	Low
seo services		9,900	Medium
seo company		12,100	Medium
seo optimization		4,400	Medium
seo tools		9,900	Medium
voice recognition software		18,100	High
seo website		1,000	Medium
website seo		2,900	Medium
speech to text		22,200	Low

Pretty awesome, right?!

Crunch the Numbers

After I pull around 50 keywords or so, I'll paste the list of keywords into the Google Keyword Planner. I delete all the other mumbo jumbo that comes with it, but I keep the goods. The goods meaning keyword, competition, and volume. Then, I remove all the keywords that aren't relevant to my article. So, for example, if I'm writing an article on keyword discovery in 2016, I wouldn't need a keyword like 'keyword research 1999' unless we're linking to [this Matrix meme](#), in which case it's completely necessary.

Bucket Keywords into Categories

[\[Insert scary music scene\]](#) It's time to make the big decision: What keywords are you going to go after? I bucket my keywords based themes or topics into different categories. I segment these based on pages or blog posts I can write about. This allows each page or blog post to target a different set of keyword themes. Under each keyword theme or bucket, I list my five or so keywords by volume, including any geographical elements that may be helpful. This also allows me to identify any gaps or opportunities I may be missing to drive relevant traffic.

Stalk Your Competitors

Stalking your competitors is often an overlooked but super important part of creating an SEO strategy that your client (or your business) will love. Understanding what your competitors are doing and your differences allows you to understand what sets you apart from your competition. Then, you can focus your energy on creating things that get your ideal searcher personas to click.

This competitive analysis can be a daunting process for depending on your market landscape if you're new to this particular field. You don't know what sep-

arates you from competitor to the next. It's your job to find out what makes your client's brand memorable, what makes them better than the rest? Professor and [author](#), Theodore Levitt, says: "Differentiation is one of the most important strategic and tactical activities in which companies must constantly engage."

To follow Professor Levitt's advice, I break my competitive analysis into three phases:

1. List All Potential SEO Competitors

When I'm starting my SEO process for a new client or industry, I use my Google Sheets to start making a list of all potential competitors. Think about location, services, content, keywords, and don't limit yourself to one specific industry. I'll plug and play using the standard Google search box, Google Maps, and Alexa.

2. Research Your Competitors

Now, I take my list and analyze each competitor to see if they are ranking for any keywords I may be targeting and if they have any organic search data that may be useful using SEMRush. I'll also pull any inbound link data available using Open Site Explorer from Moz.

3. Compare My Site to Competitors

With all the relevant data and keywords listed, I'll analyze the information and compare it to my own site to see what competitor I can target and who I think I can beat as a starting point in terms of content.

Search marketing is just as much about the user as it is about the search engine. It's important to stand out in the search results, but for the right reasons. Knowing your competitors gives you insights into who your customers really are and

what they want from you. You can make a positive difference in their lives and yours by learning how to isolate data and dive into competitor research.

Content Gap Analysis

As an SEO manager at a startup, larger company, or even working for yourself it feels surreal to do what you love and see your efforts achieve a positive endeavor. Chances are, the content you produce prides itself on creativity, thought leadership, authenticity, and grit. [Owning your content](#), keyword research, and finding your own distribution channels makes your organic traffic increases all the more meaningful.

Alas, like all SEO's, you are also apt to conduct a content gap analysis to identify where you can grow and what assets you're missing. It's important to assess where you stand compared to your competitors and current content for certain keyword terms — what is the consumer's path to purchase, and how can I improve? Every now and then, I use tools like MindMeister to map the customer journey. [Here is an awesome example of a customer journey map](#). Mostly, I open up [Screaming Frog SEO Spider](#) to perform my content audit using Google Sheets.

Here are the following data pieces I pull from Screaming Frog:

- Meta Page Title
- URL
- Format (HTML, Image, etc.)
- Word Count
- Author
- Persona (This matches up with my client buyer personas)
- Phase (What phase of the buyer cycle does this fall under?)
- Link-Worthy (Yes/No)

- Share-Worthy (Yes/No)
- Outdated or redundant? (Yes/No)
- Suggestions

After I pull this information from Screaming Frog and make my own personal suggestions, I'll pop over to Google Analytics to add more data to each page:

- Overall traffic
- Organic traffic
- Organic conversion rate
- Inbound links
- Social traffic
- Bounce rate
- Time on site

Next, I sort my spreadsheet from lowest to highest. So, the pages with no traffic and no inbound links were at the top of my spreadsheet. Then, I'll manually review all these pages and make the notes you see above. I'll make sure to mark any pages or posts I believe to be low quality and low performing to recommend to delete these later. If I want to preserve these, I'll 301 redirect these instead.

Note: If you have a big website, I recommend starting with your blog first. This can be a tedious task.

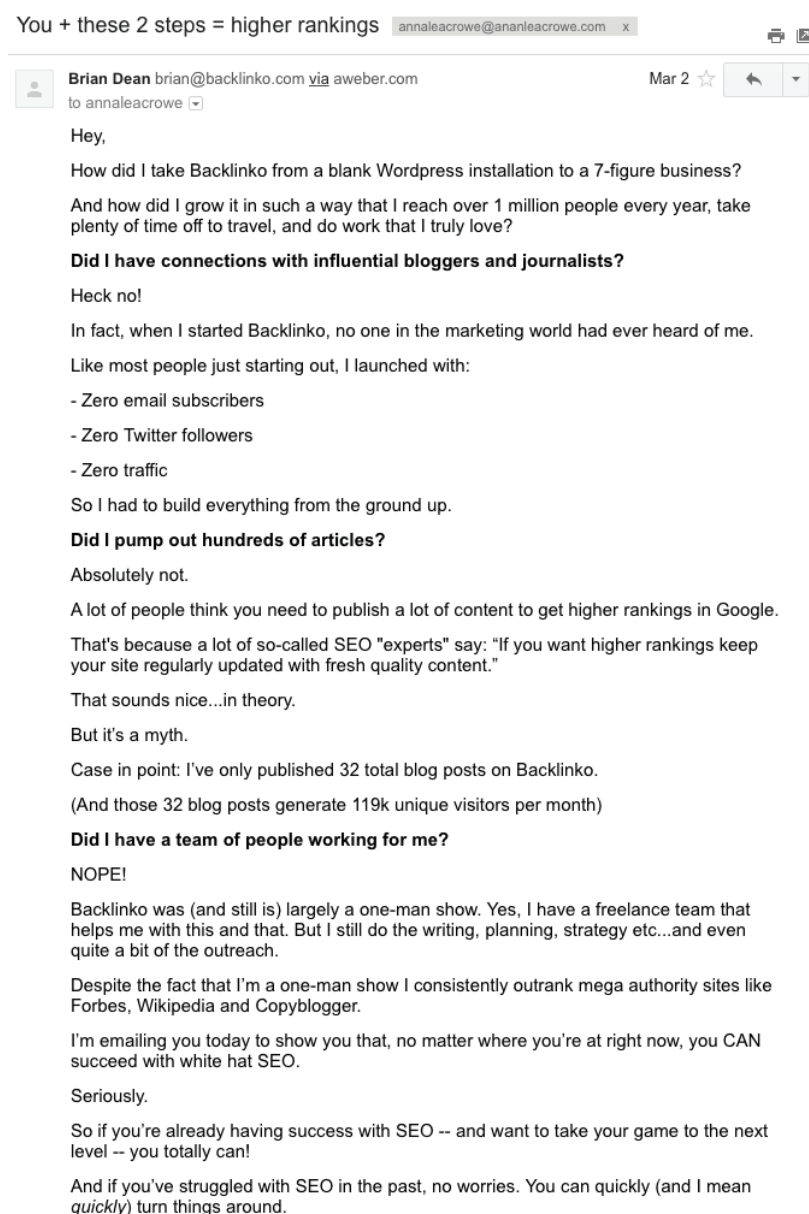
These are the preferences I use, but feel free to adjust for you and your clients' needs. Ideally, after your content gap analysis, you should have a list of action items that will improve your content. These action items are the holes you identified in the customer journey.

These holes could be anything from repurposing old content into white papers or webinars or webinars that can be turned into evergreen blog posts. The trick is to find content that is not serving a purpose for any of your key searcher

personas and revamp it. Find out what type of content performs best for you and at what phases, then do more of that!

Crafting awesome content takes a lot of time to create, especially if you're targeting a competitive set of keywords. My super talented friend Brian Dean publishes one post a month on Backlinko, but I know every single time I get an email it's going to be something worth reading, sharing, and linking to.

Check out this email he sent (and yea, I clicked it!):



Learning From Your Data

Website traffic is worth a lot and costs little. This opens opportunity: when you can't out-pay your competition, the solution is to out-smart them. When SEO strategists are given the chance and time to analyze data, only then do companies get to truly see what SEO is all about. After six years in the industry, I'm able to identify trends and patterns in data by looking at numbers in analytics. Data should tell a story. Plug your numbers into Google Sheets, Excel, or [Google Fusion Table](#) (my favorite!) to watch the story unfold.

Think about this way: Visually mapping your data allows you to interactively display your variables and allows you to draw conclusions quicker. You can pick through the data and identify your pain points much faster. Visually telling your story of data helps you to tell your client or your company why there was a spike in traffic this week or why our domain authority dropped one month. You can see the data mold together.

Your SEO strategy has one main objective from which it should never stray: Send quality traffic to your website and provide a positive user experience for high conversion rates. SEO can either be nothing more than a few keywords sprinkled into your blog posts, or it can be a dynamic part of your whole marketing strategy. Creating an engaging user experience and establishing a cohesive SEO strategy will give customers a reason to love your company. Cultivate these tactics, and I guarantee you'll be on your way to Google page 1 status.