Agile SEO: Moving From Strategy to Action by @jes_scholz

Impactful SEO is rarely executed by a lone wolf.

You need buy-in for resources. Often from someone higher up.

Say, your CMO.

Well speaking as a CMO, I'm sorry to tell you, that those detailed multi-page SEO documents where you lay out your objectives, target audiences, competitive landscapes, keyword research and that Gantt chart for the next six months of vaguely detailed optimization projects…

I never read it in detail. And I never will. They don't allow me to quickly sign off on a task or write a few line email to get you the resources you need.

The fundamental problem with long SEO strategy documents is that as soon as you finish writing them, they're out of date.

Business objectives change. Competitive landscapes change. Algorithms change.

SEO is executed in a constant state of flux. You need to be flexible on a monthly, if not weekly, basis.

Focus on getting sh!t done. Not on writing long strategy docs.

Why Agile SEO Strategies Work

Agile SEO involves incremental iteration.

Break complex, overarching projects down into small, frequent changes.

Enable continual progress.



It isn’t about getting it perfect the first time, it’s about getting a minimum viable product (MVP) out the door and monitoring the impact on metrics.

Once you are armed with data, you can move on. The KPI impact will get you buy-in for the resources you need.

Let me give you an example.

Say your overarching goal is to completely overhaul the website architecture of an e-commerce site. All the URL routes, page titles, meta descriptions and H1s for the homepage, category pages and product pages.

Traditional Approach

Try to get buy-in for the entire SEO project. Your argument is that it’s good for SEO.

The site will rank higher and significantly impact the overall sessions on the website. Which is true.

But the document to communicate all the requirements and reasons behind them will be long and complicated.

It seems like too large a project as it will likely not make it onto IT’s roadmap. They will likely feel your request will overload their development cycle.



Agile SEO Approach

First, try to get buy-in to change the title tag and meta description of the homepage.

Reason being Google has recently updated the meta description character count allowances and it will help us better communicate the brands CVP, driving additional sessions for the homepage.

This documentation is less than one page. The change request equivalent of snackable content. And due to the ease to get it implemented, it’s much easier to get it into a sprint.

Now say this quick change produces a positive impact on KPIs, let’s say a 3 percent lift of homepage sessions. You can then argue for similar changes for the category pages, pointing out, if we get a similar KPI lift as we did for the homepage, this will achieve X more sessions.

You have already proven such tactics can increase KPIs. So there is more trust in your approach. And it’s, again, a small request. So IT is more likely to do it.

And you can proceed in this manner until you have the whole site migrated.

How to Document an Agile SEO Strategy

So now we know to stop writing long SEO strategy documents.

To start creating agile, “snackable” tactics.

But we still need to understand what:

- Has been completed in the past?
- Is being worked on now?
- Is coming up next?
- Are all our ideas?

This information must be easy to digest, centrally accessible, and flexible.

One solution for this is an “SEO calendar” document.



Elements of an SEO calendar:

- **Date column:** Ideally matched against IT sprint cycles. This does not mean every SEO initiative involves IT. But if you do need a developer’s assistance, it will make cross functional team project simpler. Having it set, for example, every two weeks, also promoting small but constant releases from the SEO team.
- **Backlog:** Provides space for ideas to be recorded by team members, without having to make any significant commitment of time. Assess all idea on a regular basis as you fill your next available calendar slot.
- **Change column:** A clear and concise sentence on what has been or will be changed.
- **Tactic brief:** A link to the detailed information of that test. More details coming below.
- **Sign off:** Ensuring all SEO changes pass a four eye principle from a strategic point of view lowers the risk of any errors. And these quick to read, snackable briefs as easy to get your managers buy-in and sign-off for resources.
- **Outcome:** One short sentence summing up the KPI impact.

The benefit of a calendar layout is it is fully flexible but time relevant. To change priorities, it’s as simple as moving the de-prioritized item to the backlog.

It can act as a website change log for SEO. Everyone can know the timetable of changes, both past and planned upcoming.

Those interested in why the KPIs increased on a certain date have the answer in one glance. And more detailed information in one click. This can be invaluable for troubleshooting.

And, for team leaders, if any gaps appear in the iteration cycle, you can see this as gaps will appear in the calendar, allowing you to address the root cause.

Snackable Tactic Briefs

The benefits of tactics briefs are twofold:

- **Pre-launch:** They concisely answer the Five Ws of your SEO change to get buy-in from stakeholders. Once aligned, it will act as the specification if you need someone else to execute it.
- **Post-launch:** Be the record of what was actually changed. What impact did it have on the KPI funnel? What did we learn? And what are the next steps, if any?

My team's tactics briefs have five sections:

1. Overview
2. SMART Goal
3. Specifications
4. Results
5. Learnings & Action Items

Overview

The overview section should cover the basics of the test:

- Who is the one person ultimately responsible for leading the execution of the test?
- When will it (pre-launch) did it (post-launch) go live?
- When will we (pre-launch) / did we (post-launch) assess results?
- Who proposed the change? (This may be important to know if you need more information on the background for the test or to know if an action has come from senior management.)
- Who has agreed to this execution? (This may be IT, the

line manager in marketing or another key stakeholder. Allowing everyone to see who is on board.)



SMART Goal

The SMART goal is the high-level tactical approach.

Align your goal with your stakeholders before detailed documentation effort goes into a task. This also ensures the change is in line with business goals.



Specifications

This section will vary based on your test. But always try to communicate what it was, and what it will be. This way, you have a historical record you can refer back to for any interested party.

Key is to have only the details needed. Nothing more, nothing less.

You can use tables to keep it easy to scan.

For example, it could be as simple as a single table, in the case of a meta description change.



Or more complex, for example, detailing the configuration of parameters in Google Search Console.



They key is to avoid long paragraphs of text.

Focus on clearly communicating the outcome.

What was it before and what will be it after?

Don’t explain how the task was executed.

Results

This section should contain one table to effectively communicate the percentage difference between the benchmark weeks and the SEO change from a full funnel perspective, as well as any additional tables to drill down for more insights.

An example of a table could be similar to the below.



Learnings & Action Items

Here is where you can succinctly analyze the results.

Remember, you have the data clearly available in the table above, so you don’t need to list the numbers again.

Explain what the numbers mean and what actions will be taken next.

Final Thoughts

Having worked in an agile SEO system for the past year, I can tell you as a CMO that I appreciate the flexibility and the visibility.

At any time, I can understand what actions my team is driving and what has shifted our KPIs without having to ask.

This is how we get sh!t done.

I’d love to hear how you have approached the challenge of documenting SEO. Let me know on Twitter.

More SEO Resources:

Image Credits

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