Four brand-building activities that lay the foundation for SEO



At Google's inception, one innovation differentiated it as a search engine: It used information gained from off-site sources to inform its estimation of the relevance, importance and quality of pages in its index. Originally, this source of off-site information was the network of links found by crawling the web.

Nearly two decades later, in 2017, with countless other rich data sources at its disposal, Google uses a more diverse and sophisticated set of data to determine just how big a deal you really are in the marketplace. In my experience over the past 10 years working in SEO, Google has always been pretty good at making this determination, and the signals have become harder and harder to fake over time.

At this point, the most efficient and sustainable path to making your company look like it is a significant player in the marketplace is to become a significant player in the marketplace. What does that mean for SEO folks? It means it's time to stop thinking about how to build links and instead focus on how to build your brand online.

Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive – but if you're doing any kind of activity with link-building as a primary objective, I would be skeptical of that activity if you don't believe it also has the ability to boost the strength of your brand in some way, independent of the SEO impact of the links you're getting.

With that in mind, I present the four major pillars of digital

brand growth. If you can achieve wins in each of these four areas, you will be making rapid progress toward the kind of brand growth that creates positive SEO signals, while boosting the perception of your brand in the hearts and minds of your prospective audience:

1. Improving the product

Have you done user testing on your website? Have you watched people try to perform a specific action on all devices and media available? Have you tested all the major elements of the conversion funnel? Do you know how well people like using your website versus your biggest competitor's? Do your pages load in under two seconds?

Not many companies can answer "yes" to all these questions. Testing needs to be a standard part of the development process. The more you believe you don't have time or resources to test, the more badly you probably need it – especially if your site architecture is a mishmash of "urgent" mandates from upper management. The bottom line is that if your site design is based on hunches and intuition, your success is being left to chance.

Make time to test, improve and repeat. If you make a fast site that people love using, your chances of success go way up.

2. Creating valuable resources

What topic can you make your site the best resource for? Ideally, it would be something that is unique in some way and at least somewhat challenging for others to replicate. Here are some starter ideas:

- A tool/calculator/selection guide that solves a common problem.
- A searchable archive of a unique data source you have

access to.
- An educational resource that makes a complex topic easy to understand.
- An interview with an expert or influencer in your field.
- A tutorial that teaches people how to do something for themselves.

The more evergreen staying power your resource has, the more it can pay dividends for years to come!

3. Increasing repeat visitors

If I had to identify one defining characteristic of successful online brands, it would be the ability to convert first-time visitors into repeat users. If you have that, then you can build a brand. Without repeat visitors, you may be able to find a niche that produces positive ROI, but you can forget about being an online powerhouse.

Some ideas for encouraging repeat visitors include:

- Giving people really good reasons (value) to sign up for regular emails from you.
- Offering a loyalty plan or discounts for repeat customers.
- Personalization/being able to give good recommendations.
- Building on-site community features where users can interact with you and each other.
- Finding ways to reward especially active members of the community.
- Adding high-value content on a regular basis and creating channels where people can be notified when new offerings are available.

The bottom line is, you need to find a way to create value on an ongoing basis – and make sure people know about it.

4. Being newsworthy

I've never heard anyone claim that you should have low-level employees write half-hearted blogs and then post them to your social media in order to build your brand. Yet that might be the most common content marketing "plan" being used today. There's too much content out there to waste time creating stuff you don't care about. And if you don't care about it, why on earth should anyone else?

Start your thought process with "What can we do that would be truly valuable and remarkable?" instead of "How can we get some links?" You just might get a different result – including more and better links.

It's okay and often even helpful to be controversial, but if you do so without a purpose that is in alignment with your brand and core audience, the attention you get may not be worth what you end up paying for it.

Here are some positive ways of being newsworthy:

- Solve a challenge no one else has been able to solve.
- Run an original study that brings real insight to a common question in your field.
- Create something that inspires strong emotion in people.
- Create something that is massively funny or entertaining. (Be careful here, as you want to make sure that this still adds value to your brand.)
- Create something that shatters people's expectations – surprise them in a good way.
- Make a significant contribution to your community.
- Create a valuable resource (see section 2) that has mass appeal.

The stronger the alignment between your brand and your newsworthy activities, the more it will benefit you.

Final thoughts

If you continuously improve your site, create valuable resources, get people to come back and do newsworthy things, your online brand will grow and thrive. It’s easy to say, but not as easy to do.

Being mediocre is easy. Being outstanding requires planned action, disciplined follow-through and the willingness to test and try different things until you get it right.

Am I saying SEO is dead? No! Structuring your campaigns for maximum SEO impact is still a hugely important part of the campaign planning process and can dramatically improve the results you get. Organic search is a major traffic channel, and it needs to have people who are looking out for it. That’s not going to change. But if you’re going to be a market leader in 2017, SEO has to be the cart and not the horse. Your brand is the horse, and the stronger it gets, the bigger you can build your cart.

Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

About The Author



Brian Weiss is a Managing Consultant at Stone Temple, the US Search Awards 2016 Large SEO Agency of the Year. During Brian’s 10 years in SEO, he has worked with brands in diverse verticals including automotive, health care, recruiting, publishing and e-commerce, including a number of Fortune 500 retailers. He was previously head of SEO for Opticsplanet, an

Internet Retailer Top 200 site.