

From Line Item To Leverage: How Web Performance Impacts Shareholder Value via @sejournal, @billhunt

Despite years of digital transformation talk, too many CEOs and CFOs still treat the corporate website as a necessary marketing expense, a sunk cost with limited upside. I have far too many CEO's of billion-dollar companies who view it simply as an expensive interactive brochure, setting the tone for the company and dooming the web as just that, a brochure without strategic value.

But the modern website is not just a cost center. It's a capital asset. One that, when strategically managed, generates revenue, lowers acquisition costs, accelerates growth, and protects brand equity.

In my previous articles ("Closing the Digital Performance Gap" and "Who Owns Web Performance?"), I outlined how poor internal ownership and misaligned incentives drag down web effectiveness. Now it's time to reframe the economic value of performance. Because digital visibility, findability, and functionality aren't just tactical wins – they affect shareholder value.

Web Execution: Expense Or Asset?

Let's speak the CFO's language. If you build a new manufacturing line, you evaluate its contribution to output and margin. If you invest in a retail expansion, you track

foot traffic, conversion, and revenue per square foot.

Why don't we evaluate digital the same way?

Here's how most companies *currently* think:

- SEO: Free traffic driver.
- Content: Sales and marketing copy.
- UX: Design polish.
- Analytics: Reporting tool.

Here's how **performance-minded leaders** think:

- SEO: Organic demand capture engine.
- Content: Business development asset.
- UX: Funnel velocity multiplier.
- Analytics: Optimization flywheel.

When you stop viewing digital as overhead and start seeing it as infrastructure, the return on investment (ROI) math changes completely.

How Underperformance Drains Enterprise Value

If your digital infrastructure is fragmented, under-optimized, or reactive:

- You spend more on paid channels to make up for poor organic performance.
- You lose visibility to competitors in AI and search environments.
- You deliver confusing or outdated experiences that erode brand trust.
- You waste employee and agency hours chasing after misaligned key performance indicators (KPIs).

None of these are minor problems. They compound.

They show up in:

- Lower customer lifetime value (CLV).
- Higher customer acquisition cost (CAC).
- Missed revenue from unindexed products or inaccessible content.
- Declines in organic search traffic and authority that paid cannot make up for.

The Invisible ROI Leak: Misalignment

As explored in “Who Owns Web Performance?,” when multiple teams touch the website – but no one owns outcomes – you get:

- Wasted spend on underperforming campaigns.
- Lost traffic due to crawlability errors and excessive technical issues.
- Duplicated content with no central taxonomy.
- Security or compliance risks from unmanaged pages.

These are not theoretical. They show up on the balance sheet as missed revenue, higher CAC, and lower conversion rates.

The Capital Efficiency Of SEO And Organic Visibility

Capital efficiency is one of the most underappreciated components of shareholder value, but increasingly, it's a critical factor in CEO evaluations. Boards and investors are looking beyond topline growth to assess how effectively a company turns investment into output to achieve growth. That means efficient, repeatable, high-margin systems like SEO and web performance become strategic levers, not support functions.

SEO is often dismissed as “free traffic,” but that's

misleading. It's not free and has been rebranded into MBA-friendly buzzwords like "organic visibility" and "owned media." But behind those terms is real effort. SEO teams must optimize content that was often created in a vacuum, retrofit pages with structured data, and resolve infrastructure gaps just to make that content accessible to search engines. These are real costs and costs that wouldn't exist if SEO were embedded earlier in the workflow. When viewed holistically as a strategic function, SEO becomes a high-efficiency, compounding return channel. One that gets stronger with alignment and investment, and weaker with neglect.

Properly funded and governed SEO:

- Reduces dependency on paid media.
- Enables customer self-service and support at scale.
- Increases discoverability across multiple intent stages.
- Builds durable search equity and authority.
- Fuels AI citations and rich result presence.

More importantly, it improves **capital efficiency**, the ability to turn inputs (budget, time, content) into outputs (qualified leads, revenue, brand trust) with minimal waste.

AI Search Just Raised The Stakes

Search is no longer about blue links – it's about recommendation systems. AI Overviews, summary blocks, and generative results are now front and center. If your content isn't:

...then you're invisible. Or worse – you're used as a data source without receiving attribution.

As I wrote in "The New Role of SEO in the Age of AI," platforms now **monetize the experience**, not just the click. They extract content, retain the user, and collect behavioral data to improve their own models.

“If your content can’t be reused, monetized, or trained against – it’s less likely to be shown.”

Your site is not just competing with others – it’s competing with the platform itself.

Let’s Talk Shareholder Value

When SEO and digital performance are working:

- You lower CAC.
- You increase CLV through better segmentation and nurturing.
- You strengthen brand equity via visibility and trust signals.
- You improve operational efficiency through centralized platforms and reusable modules, and reduce customer support costs through effective self-service experiences.
- You protect valuation by owning your digital demand footprint.

When they aren’t working, you erode those same advantages.

Let’s take a real-world example.

I worked with a public company preparing to spin off half its business into a new entity. The leadership’s attention was focused almost entirely on launching the new brand and website, yet there was no plan for preserving or migrating organic search performance. The new entity’s success depended on leveraging an existing client base, maintaining current sales momentum, and hitting aggressive growth targets. But SEO wasn’t even on the radar.

I was brought in to develop the business case for making organic search a strategic pillar of the post-divestiture digital platform. I argue that we would only get senior

executive buy-in not by forecasting traffic loss, but by reframing SEO's contribution across the three drivers of shareholder value:

- **Financial:** Conservative modeling, based on current performance rates, showed that a poorly managed migration could result in \$350 million in lost lead value. In addition, regaining that visibility via paid media would require tens of millions in unplanned ad spend.
- **Operational:** The company continued operating in 45 countries across 10 languages. Without localized optimization and scalable global templates, international lead pipelines would suffer dramatically.
- **Strategic:** To stand apart from the legacy business and support complex enterprise sales cycles, the new digital platform needed to rapidly establish authority, build trust signals, and differentiate itself not only in search but in ease of use and depth of information.

By speaking the language of shareholder value and showing how SEO impacted financial outcomes, operational continuity, and long-term strategic position, we secured executive alignment. SEO was integrated early into the platform roadmap, ensuring scalability, visibility, and global readiness from day one.

A Call To Action For Senior Leaders

If you're a CEO, CMO, or CFO reading this, ask yourself:

- Do we treat the website as a strategic asset or a sunk cost?
- Is there executive ownership of performance or just distributed responsibility?
- Are we capturing, measuring, and maximizing organic opportunity – or plugging gaps with paid media?
- Is our content structured and usable by AI systems, or just accurate but invisible?

This is about mindset and governance, not just tactics.

Final Thought: Web Performance Is A Leverage Point

As digital channels drive more business outcomes, functions once considered tactical (like SEO or load speed optimization) can now contribute meaningfully to operational leverage, customer acquisition, and profitability turning them into strategic priorities.

Your website is where your brand, product, content, and promise converge. It's your most visible, scalable, and measurable asset.

Treating it like a brochure is like owning an F1 race car and only polishing the paint.

When you design for performance, staff for cross-functional excellence, and govern for outcomes – you stop leaking value and start building leverage.

Because in today's market, digital performance isn't just good marketing. It's good business.

And good business drives shareholder value.

More Resources:

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