How to future-proof your SEO for 2018



We're (frighteningly!) almost to the end of the year, and with just a couple of weeks left in December, it's time to start preparing for what SEO might look like in 2018.

A little while ago, we highlighted our seven SEO trends for 2018 that you should be watching out for. But what practical steps should you be taking with your SEO to prepare for next year?

In this article, I'll break down some key trends you should be preparing for in 2018, and what you can do to future-proof your SEO for the year ahead.

Let's dive into it.

Voice search and digital assistants

As Tereza Litsa wrote in our 2018 trends article, we can expect voice search and digital assistants to reach even greater prominence in 2018.

Digital assistants in people's smartphones have been around for a while, but their accuracy has greatly improved over the past couple of years as natural language search improves, to the point where search increasingly resembles a fluid and intuitive conversation. This is important for widespread adoption.

Add to that the fact that a new legion of smart home hubs from Google, Amazon, Apple and others is being installed in people's homes (think how many of your consumers might be getting a 2nd generation Amazon Echo or an Echo Plus for

Christmas), and it’s crucial to optimize for voice search if you want to stay competitive.



Here are some basic principles to adhere to when optimizing for voice search and digital assistants:

Optimize for natural language queries – long-tail keywords, full sentences and questions

Although keywords are still important, people are searching less with disconnected individual keywords like “Barack Obama age” and more with full questions like “How old is Barack Obama?”

To optimize for these, think about the questions you want your website to surface for, and search them to see how well you rank. Can you produce Q&A-style content that will answer these types of queries? Consider also producing content with a slightly more conversational tone that will match the way that people are phrasing their queries.

Aim for the featured snippet

Featured snippets, or Answer Boxes, have long been known as “position zero” on the SERP, but with voice search they become even more crucial. If a search result for a voice query has a featured snippet, that’s what will be read aloud to the user as the answer to their question.

Incorporating a numbered or bullet point list or table with the key points of your content can help your chances of grabbing a featured snippet, as can creating Q&A style content.

Optimize for actions and apps

People don’t just ask questions to their digital assistants; they also give them commands, like “search for [keyword] on [app]”, so think about ways to optimize for these.

If you do have an app, deep linking or app indexing will allow users to access it via search, and thus via their digital assistants. Apple has already produced SiriKit, which will enable your iOS and watchOS apps to work with Siri – an important future-proofing move for the advent of Apple’s HomePod.

For a deeper dive into voice search optimization, check out the following guides:

Linkless link-building

This one might seem like a contradiction in terms, but let me explain. Link-building is still a valuable tactic for SEO: we recently looked at a study on enterprise SEO strategy which found that small businesses are particularly likely to benefit from link-building as an SEO strategy.

But link-building for SEO also isn’t as simple as it used to be even a few years ago, with Google algorithm updates like Penguin and Fred cracking down on sites with poor link profiles, and Google issuing warnings to bloggers over freebie links.

To future-proof your SEO for 2018, therefore, you need to do two things: focus on quality, long-term link-building, and learn to appreciate the value of linkless backlinks. Here’s how.

Cultivate long-term relationships for quality backlinks

In a presentation at Brighton SEO this year, Greg Gifford espoused the value of building real-world relationships in order to score backlinks that your competitors can't get. He was talking about local SEO, but while this might be especially true for local SEO, it's key for SEO on a broader level as well.

The enterprise SEO study that I mentioned earlier found that PR is by far the single most effective link-building tactic for businesses of all sizes (though for small businesses, guest blogging was almost comparable). Good PR and outreach can allow you to build invaluable relationships with those quality publications that will give your site a ton of referral authority.

Even if you don't manage to score a backlink, a mention will go a long way – read on to find out why.

Track and build linkless mentions

Search engines are increasingly able to associate mentions with brands, and use them as a trust signal to determine a site's authority.

At SMX West 2016, Duane Forrester, former Senior Product Manager at Bing, asserted that Bing figured out how to associate mentions without a link "years ago", and SEO experts have noticed a patent by Google which indicates Google has long been doing the same.

So along with your regular backlink monitoring, make sure you invest in a web monitoring tool that can help you track mentions of your brand, as well as focusing on PR, reputation management, brand awareness and online reviews.

For more on this, check out:

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Mobile-first indexing

Google’s long-awaited mobile-first index is already being rolled out, so if you aren’t already mobile-first in your approach to SEO, you need to be in 2018.

Mobile traffic (traffic on smartphones, tablets and similar devices) has already outstripped desktop traffic and is continuing to climb, which means that it’s a fair assumption that users who reach your site will be on a mobile device, and possibly searching on the go.

Here’s how you can be prepared.

Be fast

Speed is of the essence in SEO regardless of device, but it’s even more crucial on mobile, as mobile users have been shown to be considerably less patient when waiting for sites to load. Be sure to test for issues with your mobile site speed, and be aware of the things that can bloat your site and slow it down, like images and JavaScript.

Design for context

Google has been emphasizing for some time in its search quality evaluator guidelines that mobile users approach their searches with a radically different context to desktop users.

While someone on a desktop computer is likely to be searching

in a limited number of settings (in the office, at home or possibly in a café), mobile users can be absolutely anywhere.



Therefore, a truly future-proof mobile website will be able to respond to user context. This sounds futuristic, but there are already subtle ways that this can be accomplished, particularly with m-commerce websites. For more on how to achieve this, check out why mobile commerce sites should be designed for context.

Set up AMP, Instant Apps or Progressive Web Apps

Thanks to Google's recent drive towards improving user experience on the mobile web, brands now have several options for a streamlined, hyper-fast mobile app or site. If you're already confident that your mobile site or app provides an optimum experience, then stick with what you have; but if you've been looking to upgrade, consider implementing one of these options.

- **Accelerated Mobile Pages:** Google's "lightning-fast" mobile web solution has been hit and miss with SEOs since its launch in February of last year, but Google is still keen to push it and has continued to implement upgrades to make it faster and more engaging.
- **Android Instant Apps:** Android Instant Apps are apps that can be shared and accessed via a link without a full download, combining some of the advantages of mobile websites with an app experience.
- **Progressive Web Apps:** PWAs are an "app-like" take on the mobile web which can function offline and be pinned to a home screen, incorporating some of the advantages of apps into a mobile website.

Here are some more guides that will help you get your mobile

SEO into shape:

AI and machine learning

If 2017 confirmed one thing, it's that the old days of discrete, name-able Google algorithm updates are behind us. Google's Gary Illyes confirmed as much in a flippant keynote at Brighton SEO in which he stated that Google makes two to three updates to its ranking algorithm per day, 95-98% of which are "not actionable for webmasters".

The reason for this is due to Google's increasing use of AI and machine learning in its ranking algorithms. Google's algorithms are no longer a set of clearly-defined rules set down by humans, but a constantly learning and fluctuating entity.

This, of course, has thrown webmasters and SEOs into a spin about how, exactly, they can optimize for artificial intelligence.

We've addressed this in a number of recent articles on Search Engine Watch, and the overriding message is: don't worry about "optimizing for RankBrain" or "optimizing for AI". If you stick to fundamental SEO best practices, you'll be fine. Gary Illyes spelled this out in his Brighton SEO keynote:

> *"Every single update that we make is around quality of the site or general quality, perceived quality of the site, content and the links or whatever. All these are in the Webmaster Guidelines. When there's something that is not in line with our Webmaster Guidelines, or we change an algorithm that modifies the Webmaster Guidelines, then we update the Webmaster Guidelines as well.*
>
> *Basically, if you publish high quality content that is highly cited on the internet – and I'm not talking about just links, but also mentions on social networks and people talking about*

> *your branding, crap like that … Then you are doing great.*
>
> *And fluctuations will always happen to your traffic. We can't help that; it would be really weird if there wasn't fluctuation, because that would mean we don't change, we don't improve our search results anymore."*

Some further reading and sage advice:

General tips for future-proofing your SEO

In this article I've explored how you can optimize for specific trends that will likely be prominent in 2018, but there are also general actions you can take that will future-proof your SEO regardless of what year it is, and what trends shape the industry.

Rebecca Sentance is the Deputy Editor of Search Engine Watch.

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