How to handle unprofessional SEO treatment: tips and guidelines

I am what might be called a veteran search engine optimizer. I have many years of experience speaking at multiple SEO events (conferences, webinars, training and so forth). I often get involved in controversial SEO debates on various social media outlets.

I have also had my share of bullying.

However, I have also learned much from other SEO veterans. They have been outstanding role models for people in our industry.

In this article, I want to share what I've learned from participating in so many SEO events and my experience on social media platforms. Here is what I have learned about handling unprofessional treatment.

1. Listen to multiple perspectives on any SEO or SEM topic

I know this might seem counterintuitive. If you are in a real-time situation, it is perfectly normal to have an initial defensive reaction.

Go past this reaction. If you listen, you will likely learn things you might never have thought about or encountered. Listening to and reading about different approaches to SEO can make you a more effective SEO.

I learned this from Danny Sullivan, now Public Liaison for Search at Google. Whenever he put together a session for one

of his conferences, he always included a panel of experts with diverse opinions.

At first, I thought Sullivan was nutso. However, once I realized he was showing his journalist side by doing thorough research, my viewpoint also changed.

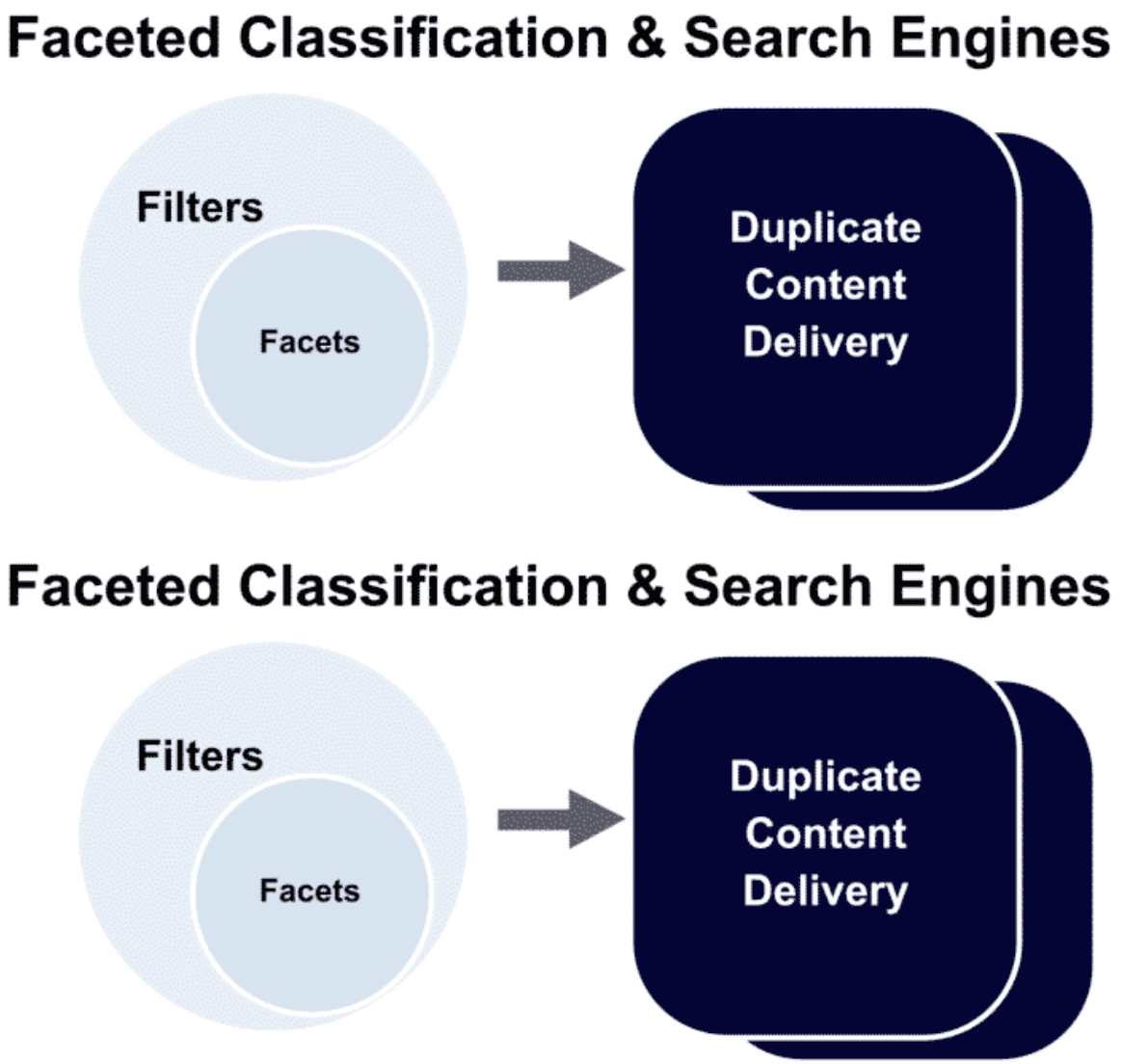
I wasn’t initially the greatest at keeping my opinions to myself. In fact, Sullivan pointed out to me, privately, that I was shaking my head when I sometimes disagreed with a fellow panelist. I was not consciously aware that I was doing it. Yet it allowed me to stop myself in order to pay attention to what other speakers were communicating.

I did not necessarily have to agree with others’ perspectives. Nor do you. However, listen to others’ perspectives. Try to understand each point of view. It will help you become better at SEO.

2. Be courteous when taking notes

If you are at a real-time or recorded event, learn how to mute your keyboard, even if you have a quiet keyboard. The sound will distract attendees from speaker content, especially if multiple attendees are typing at the same time. Mouse clicks can also be a distraction.

This tip might seem obvious given high school, college and university settings. With professional events, however, the point is to listen to the speaker, not to distract him or her.



Faceted Classification & Search Engines
Filters
Facets
Duplicate
Content
Delivery

My note-taking would become quite vehement whenever I heard the word "facet." Faceted navigation leads to duplicate content delivery. The same content is organized in many different ways. The more facets you place on your website, the more costly it is to manage duplicate content delivery to both web and site search engines.

I learned this tip from Michelle Robbins, former Search Engine Land Editor-in-Chief. I once took notes on my tablet when I was on panels. It looked unprofessional even though I was only taking notes. Using my tablet gave the impression that I was ignoring the other panelist, not paying attention even though the opposite was true.

As of this writing, the COVID-19 epidemic has limited in-person events. Nevertheless, do your best to be civil and courteous when taking notes once we return to in-person events.

3. Show common courtesy when asking for clarification and challenging an opinion

Nobody has the exact same frame of reference as another person. For example, my frame of reference for SEO is viewing it as a form of communication among content providers, searchers, and search engines. I believe that SEO is optimizing for **people who use** search engines. People first, technology second.

In my previous definitions of SEO in my books, I used different definitions. These definitions emphasized the marketing aspect of SEO more than the communication aspect. So my frame of reference has evolved. In fact, I once was miffed at the U.S. Congress for not having basic knowledge about web search.

That doesn’t mean that others have the same SEO definition that I have. It also doesn’t mean that my approach to SEO is the same as others. For example, I have never spammed search engines. I never will, either. I feel it is biting the proverbial hand that feeds you.

It’s okay to challenge an SEO opinion. Our world would be quite boring if we all agreed with each other. I learn more from challenging opinions than blindly accepting everything I read and hear.

What do I mean, really? Do not label people unfairly. Do not be rude or condescending. Avoid stereotypes. Whenever I hear name-calling or personal attacks, it means that my point of view is likely correct because an antagonizer does not challenge my research. He or she resorts to personal attacks.

Stick to your facts, data, and research. Don’t take the “unfairness” bait.

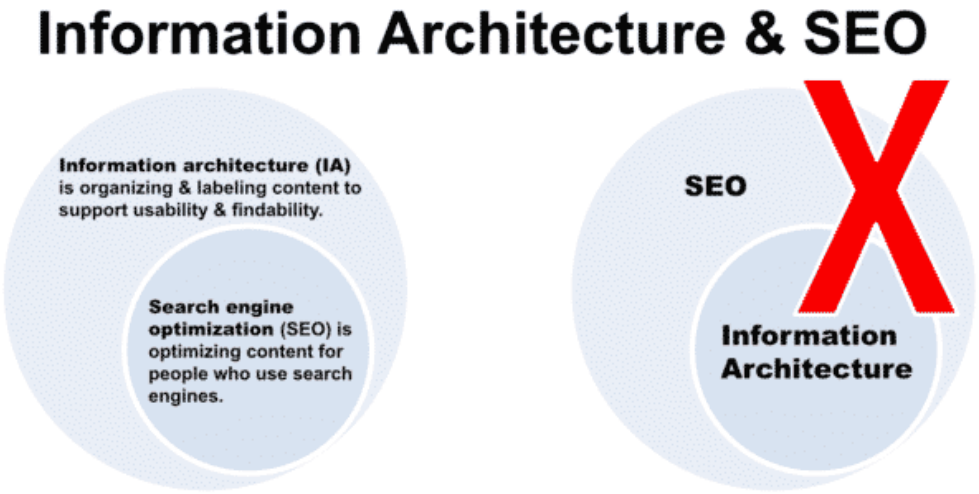
4. Follow people you disagree with on social media

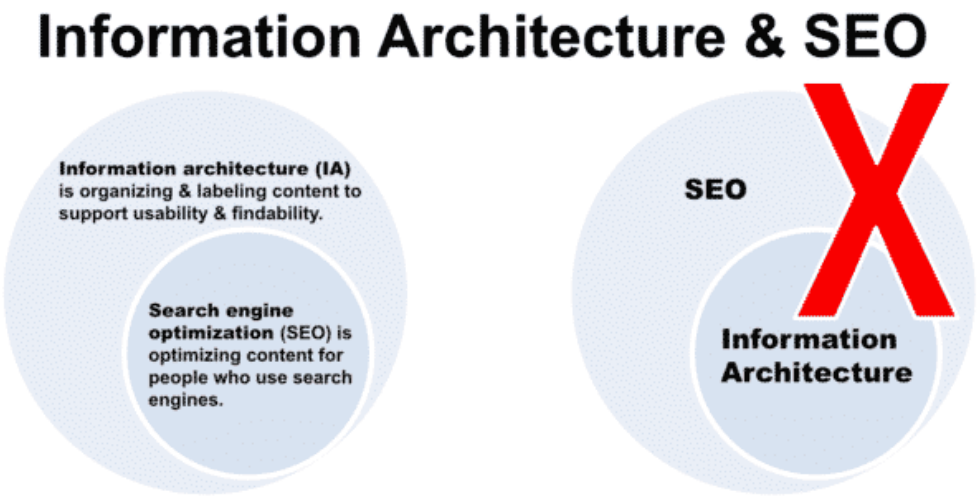
This piece of advice also might seem counterintuitive. Again, my point is to learn from other people. That means learning from people who have different perspectives than you have.

It has helped to follow SEOs who disagree with me. I want to know reasons why we disagree. It might be something as simple as our perspectives on search engine spam. I do not do it. Other SEOs believe it is up to a company or organization to take the risk. Different approaches, different business models.

I've learned that many SEOs do not understand information architecture. information scent and fundamental principles of search-engine friendly design. I'm a technical SEO as well as a web designer/developer. Some people do not have the same technical skills I have. Many SEOs have greater technical skills than I have.

I've learned that many SEOs consider taxonomy to only be hierarchical. When in reality, a hierarchical-only taxonomy can lead to orphans and silos, two things that negatively impact search engine visibility. Link building guru Eric Ward taught me so much about silos. So did information-architecture guru Peter Morville.





SEOs who don't understand IA often misunderstand IA as a part of SEO. The information architecture (IA) process should begin ***before*** *actual SEO on a website. In fact, a search-engine friendly and accessible labeling system should be a part of a website's style guide.*

Following them on social media, reading their books, and implementing their suggestions have proved invaluable to me both as an SEO professional and as an information architect.

I should note the contrary situation. One colleague who disagreed with me on just about every SEO topic would constantly challenge my points of view. She did not hesitate to stereotype me to colleagues and her friends. Nevertheless, I still followed her on social media. I wanted to learn why she treated me so poorly.

I learned the reason. Somehow, she "looked down" on my

education and training. Granted, I do not expect my colleagues to go to the extent that I do for formal education. Ph.D. programs are not for everyone.

My education is my choice. My selection of training and certification programs is also my choice. My choices do not have to be others' choices.

Whenever I am challenged at a search event, I often provide resources: books, articles, training classes, certification programs, and so forth. I provide sources of my information and data.

Lesson learned? I unfollowed this particular colleague. Her posts and articles did not add to my search knowledge. I gave her a fair chance.

Don't be afraid to give colleagues who disagree with you a fair chance. You will often learn things that never occurred to you.

5. Give SEO colleagues each a fair chance

I am grateful to two specific people for this tip, Barry Schwartz and Bill Slawski. I used to disagree with both of these gentlemen for years.

Now? I have a deep respect for what they have done for the SEO industry. They have become SEO archivists. (I once wrote about SEO and archiving here.)

If you need information about SEO and patents, Slawski is the best go-to person. If you need information about algorithm updates, Schwartz's articles are an outstanding resource.

I admit I wasn't always supportive because I initially did not understand that both Slawski and Schwartz were becoming two of

the best SEO archivists in the industry. However, I kept giving them fair, objective observations over the years. Once I realized that it was **my** perspective that needed adjusting? I did it.

Now I do not hesitate to refer to both of my colleagues for support and even jobs – ones where I believe they are more qualified than I am.

Ignore your initial defense mechanism when being challenged

Here is a quick summary of how to handle unprofessional SEO treatment:

- Genuinely listen to multiple perspectives on any SEO or SEM topic.
- Be courteous when taking notes.
- Show common courtesy when asking for clarification and challenging an opinion.
- Follow people you disagree with on social media.
- Give SEO colleagues each a fair chance.

You can professionally disagree with other SEO colleagues. While doing so, you might learn things that are crucial to your SEO career. You never know. You might just learn information from them that never otherwise would have occurred to you.

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About The Author

Shari Thurow is the Founder and SEO Director at Omni Marketing Interactive Omni Marketing Interactive and the author of the books *Search Engine Visibility* and *When Search Meets Web Usability*. Shari is currently a contributing editor for the ASLIB Journal of Information Management. She also served on the Board of Directors of the Information Architecture Institute (IAI) and the User Experience Professionals Association (UXPA).

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