How to recognize a lost cause in SEO projects and request for proposals (RFPs)

Like many of my search colleagues, I genuinely enjoy seeing my search engine optimization (SEO) projects succeed. I like seeing client sites in Position Zero. I like seeing client listings in the People Also Ask section of a search engine results page (SERP). I especially like seeing top search listings with rich snippets – such as recipes – because I know how technically challenging they can be.

Even a second-page listing pleases me. People often feel that not being on the first page of search results is a bad thing. I don't. Reason? I've seen plenty of sites get great conversions with listings on the second page of search results. Serious, knowledgeable searchers know to dig deeper into search results when they want reliable, timely, and accurate information.

And this brings me to this article's topic: lost causes or no-win situations in SEO. I am not perfect. I make mistakes. Sometimes, I get involved with an SEO project without initially knowing that I'm proverbially walking into a lost-cause situation.

I hope that sharing my experiences will help my fellow SEOs.

Content management system doesn't support SEO

First, I do not agree with some of Google's statements about BERT. You see, BERT is all about words, writing, linguistics, keywords (yes, I said it) and context.

When searchers arrive at a site via a web search engine, they usually do not arrive via the site's home page. They tend to land on the page in the middle of a site. This concept is known as **Inceptor's Pyramid**.

Figure 1: *Inceptor's Pyramid. The inverted pyramid illustrates that most entries into a website are not via the home page.*
Searchers want to know that they arrived on the right page and the right website. For these reasons, communicating aboutness on web pages near the top of the screen is extremely important. Validating information scent is also important for individuals performing search queries. They want to see their keywords, or query words, on the page.

In other words, the landing page should validate and support searcher mental models. If websites can achieve these three items, they normally receive qualified search engine traffic over time.

In summary, any content management system should support the following items:

- Inceptor's Pyramid
- Aboutness
- Information scent
- User/searcher mental models

Question: If a CMS does not support these four items, is this SEO situation a lost cause?

Answer: Maybe.

The aforementioned four items are SEO principles. They are not flavor-of-the-month SEO concepts. They were fundamental concepts 20 years ago. They are fundamental concepts now.

I understand that search engine algorithms change. Before

BERT, there was RankBrain. How many Google updates have we seen over the years? Medic, Panda, Penguin, Top Heavy, Hummingbird, Pirate, Pigeon – to name a few. Even with all of these changes, these four SEO principles still apply to all types of web documents.

After I sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), I will want to know if a prospect's CMS will support our firm's SEO recommendations.

What I look for is willingness to:

- Modify the existing CMS to be more search-engine friendly,
- Purchase a different (and less expensive) CMS that better accommodates searchers and search engines, or
- Create a custom CMS that is 100% tailored for website owners, their target audience(s), and technology.

I do not give away specific recommendations in a proposal. I simply want to know whether or not: (a) implementing our recommendations is possible and (b) client teams will support our recommendations.

Website design doesn't support SEO

This type of situation is a tricky one. Many organizations use pre-formatted design templates. Website owners might like a particular design. They might like the "cool features" on them that they believe will elevate their site in terms of UX (user experience). In the usability industry, aesthetic design refers to the aesthetic-usability effect:

> *Definition: The **aesthetic-usability effect** refers to users' tendency to perceive attractive products as more usable. People tend to believe that things that look better will work better – even if they aren't actually more effective or efficient.*

In addition, many design-template sellers make the claim that their designs are search-engine friendly. I find that claim to be somewhat misleading. Most of the time, it simply means that the design template creates URLs (web addresses) that search engines can crawl.

Search-engine friendly design involves far more than a URL structure. Color matters. How text is formatted and placed is important. A visual hierarchy that supports task completion is critical for both SEO and usability. And 10 design templates are reasonable for a small site. An enterprise site should have considerably more design templates.

Question: If website owners are too attached to a site design that you know is not completely search-engine friendly, is this SEO situation a lost cause?

Answer: It depends on the site design.

Some design elements are easy to modify via cascading style sheets (CSS), such as modifying the color, font/typeface, alignment and other formatting.

Some design elements are more difficult to modify, such as navigation elements that appear in the wrong place…where users/searchers do not expect to see them. Some navigation elements are not in the design at all, like location-based breadcrumb links and fat footers.

My answer to this question is similar to the answer I gave for an allegedly search-engine friendly CMS. After I sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), I will want to know if a prospect is willing to modify and/or add design templates

What I look for is willingness to:

- Modify the existing design to be more search-engine friendly,
- Purchase a different (and less expensive) site design

that better accommodates searchers and search engines, or
- Create a custom design that is 100% tailored for website owners, their target audience(s), and technology.

I do not give away specific design recommendations in a proposal. Again, I want to know whether or not implementing client teams will support our design recommendations. Sometimes, I use one example of design modification to measure how intense (or not) the pushback is. I can do this during pre-bid phone calls.

Let's use location-based breadcrumb links as an example. Reason? Even now, I constantly encounter resistance to: (a) their usage, and (b) the way they should be formatted.

My firm is very much in favor of location-based breadcrumb links because one to two lines of text communicates a lot of very important information to both human users and technology. Furthermore, when implemented properly, they communicate context…something that is important for the BERT algorithm.

Do you know what I've heard the most complaints? From designers. The most common complaint? "They ruin our design."

Well, that is not exactly true. The issue isn't the presence of breadcrumb links. The issue is their design.

Breadcrumb links can be formatted in multiple ways. (But if you want them to appear in search listings, you will have to follow breadcrumb structured data guidelines.) It's the design team's job to make them look good and to follow usability, UX, and search engines' guidelines.

If the design team is unwilling to modify content to make it more user-friendly and search-engine friendly? And if other teams kowtow to the design team's decisions? In all likelihood, the proposal will be a lost cause until all teams learn to work together to accomplish common goals.

Information architecture doesn’t support SEO

According to the former Information Architecture Institute, **information architecture** (IA) is organizing and labeling content so that it is: (a) easier to use, and (b) easier to find.

Ideally, information architecture should PRECEDE (come before) website design and development. Many web design and development issues arise because the content isn’t organized well in the first place. Furthermore, a website’s labeling system won’t be as effective because the content isn’t organized properly.

I am an educated, trained, and experienced information architect. I can practically look at a website and tell if its information architecture and corresponding navigation system is problematic. What I want to know before I submit a proposal are two questions.

Questions: Are website owners willing to modify information architecture? Will there be one or more executive and/or managerial champions to ensure that recommendations will be implemented by design, development and content teams?

Answer: Both answers should be a resounding YES.

I once had a client with a successful e-commerce site. However, search traffic had leveled off and was beginning to decrease.

What was great about working with this large organization is that they had very talented UX/usability staff. This group knew when to use specific tests to solve specific problems. They knew how to use qualitative data to understand quantitative data in context.

For example, they learned that a faceted classification scheme was the best IA for organizing the major portion of their website. They even minimized duplicate content delivery to both human users and search engines.

Figure 2: *A* ***facet taxonomy*** *allows an item to be assigned to multiple taxonomies (sets of attributes), enabling the classification to be ordered in multiple ways, rather than in a single, predetermined order (as in a strict hierarchy). This definition is from one of my favorite books: Introduction to Cataloging and Classification by Arlene G. Taylor.*

The problem? The web development team took it upon themselves to mix in a facet that had little to do with the classification system. You could even observe the confused expressions on users' faces (test sessions were videotaped) after the facet was added.

The solution was simpler than anticipated. The unusual facet should be removed. Instead, the facet links should be modified as contextual navigation (upsells, in particular). We could even show the search-traffic decrease corresponding with the addition of the confusing facet.

We were able to present this solution to all of the company's teams (marketing, content, design, development, UX, etc.) I admit I was surprised when we dealt with the development team. They did not argue. They did not debate or ask for further clarification. It seemed as if they were in agreement.

Boy was I wrong. The answer came to me in an email. "We don't believe you."

Nothing I said to this team mattered despite my years of experience. To them, I didn't know what I was talking about. Other teams agreed with our solution…just not the development team.

Was this particular SEO situation a lost cause? Yes, it was. This company clearly needed an executive champion and a development manager to ensure that all tickets from the UX/usability team were implemented properly.

Until that happened, there was little else we could do for this company. The problem was the architecture. The solution was to fix the architecture.

I understand that many SEO firms specialize in link development. Websites can get instantaneous, allegedly high-quality link development in a short amount of time. That solution sounds attractive to many design, development, and architecture teams. Team members don't have to admit that there might be issues with how they implemented findability best practices.

A website is a form of communication to both human users and technology. On large sites, teams should work together to ensure they are communicating clear and consistent messages to human and technology users. There's usually give-and-take on all sides.

Overall, though, I hope all readers understand that we are all on the same team, even outside consultants. We want what's best for the users of your site.

Shari Thurlow will be speaking at the SMX East session, "Making The Pitch: Putting Your Best Foot Forward Without Giving Away The Goods" on Nov. 13.

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