Rewriting the Beginner's Guide to SEO, Chapter 1: SEO 101



Back in mid-November, we kicked off a campaign to rewrite our biggest piece of content: the Beginner's Guide to SEO. You offered up a huge amount of helpful advice and insight with regards to our outline, and today we're here to share our draft of the first chapter.

In many ways, the Beginner's Guide to SEO belongs to each and every member of our community; it's important that we get this right, for your sake. So without further ado, here's the first chapter – let's dive in!

Chapter 1: SEO 101

What is it, and why is it important?

Welcome! We're excited that you're here!

If you already have a solid understanding of SEO and why it's important, you can skip to Chapter 2 (though we'd still recommend skimming the best practices from Google and Bing at the end of this chapter; they're useful refreshers).

For everyone else, this chapter will help build your foundational SEO knowledge and confidence as you move forward.

What is SEO?

SEO stands for “search engine optimization.” It’s the practice of increasing both the *quality* and *quantity* of website traffic, as well as exposure to your brand, through non-paid (also known as “organic”) search engine results.

Despite the acronym, SEO is as much about people as it is about search engines themselves. It’s about understanding what people are searching for online, the answers they are seeking, the words they’re using, and the type of content they wish to consume. Leveraging this data will allow you to provide high-quality content that your visitors will truly value.

Here’s an example. Frankie & Jo’s (a Seattle-based vegan, gluten-free ice cream shop) has heard about SEO and wants help improving how and how often they show up in organic search results. In order to help them, you need to first understand their potential customers:

- *What* types of ice cream, desserts, snacks, etc. are people searching for?
- *Who* is searching for these terms?
- *When* are people searching for ice cream, snacks, desserts, etc.?
    - Are there seasonality trends throughout the year?
- *How* are people searching for ice cream?
    - What words do they use?
    - What questions do they ask?
    - Are more searches performed on mobile devices?
- *Why* are people seeking ice cream?
    - Are individuals looking for health conscious ice cream specifically or just looking to satisfy a sweet tooth?
- *Where* are potential customers located – locally, nationally, or internationally?

And finally – here’s the kicker – *how* can *you* help provide the

best content about ice cream to cultivate a community and fulfill what all those people are searching for?

Search engine basics

Search engines are answer machines. They scour billions of pieces of content and evaluate thousands of factors to determine which content is most likely to answer your query.

Search engines do all of this by discovering and cataloguing all available content on the Internet (web pages, PDFs, images, videos, etc.) via a process known as "crawling and indexing."

What are "organic" search engine results?

Organic search results are search results that aren't paid for (i.e. not advertising). These are the results that you can influence through effective SEO. Traditionally, these were the familiar "10 blue links."

Today, search engine results pages – often referred to as "SERPs" – are filled with both more advertising and more dynamic organic results formats (called "SERP features") than we've ever seen before. Some examples of SERP features are featured snippets (or answer boxes), People Also Ask boxes, image carousels, etc. New SERP features continue to emerge, driven largely by what people are seeking.

For example, if you search for "Denver weather," you'll see a weather forecast for the city of Denver directly in the SERP instead of a link to a site that might have that forecast. And, if you search for "pizza Denver," you'll see a "local pack" result made up of Denver pizza places. Convenient, right?

It's important to remember that search engines make money from advertising. Their goal is to better solve searcher's queries

(within SERPs), to keep searchers coming back, *and* to keep them on the SERPs longer.

Some SERP features on Google are organic and can be influenced by SEO. These include featured snippets (a promoted organic result that displays an answer inside a box) and related questions (a.k.a. “People Also Ask” boxes).

It’s worth noting that there are many other search features that, even though they aren’t paid advertising, *can’t* typically be influenced by SEO. These features often have data acquired from proprietary data sources, such as Wikipedia, WebMD, and IMDb.

Why SEO is important

While paid advertising, social media, and other online platforms can generate traffic to websites, the majority of online traffic is driven by search engines.

Organic search results cover more digital real estate, appear more credible to savvy searchers, and receive *way* more clicks than paid advertisements. For example, of all US searches, only ~2.8% of people click on paid advertisements.

In a nutshell: SEO has ~20X more traffic opportunity than PPC on both mobile and desktop.

SEO is also one of the only online marketing channels that, when set up correctly, can continue to pay dividends over time. If you provide a solid piece of content that deserves to rank for the right keywords, your traffic can snowball over time, whereas advertising needs continuous funding to send traffic to your site.

Search engines are getting smarter, but they still need our help.

Optimizing your site will help deliver better information to

search engines so that your content can be properly indexed and displayed within search results.

Should I hire an SEO professional, consultant, or agency?

Depending on your bandwidth, willingness to learn, and the complexity of your website(s), you could perform some basic SEO yourself. Or, you might discover that you would prefer the help of an expert. Either way is okay!

If you end up looking for expert help, it's important to know that many agencies and consultants "provide SEO services," but can vary widely in quality. Knowing how to choose a good SEO company can save you *a lot* of time and money, as the wrong SEO techniques can actually harm your site more than they will help.

White hat vs black hat SEO

"White hat SEO" refers to SEO techniques, best practices, and strategies that abide by search engine rule, its primary focus to provide more value to people.

"Black hat SEO" refers to techniques and strategies that attempt to spam/fool search engines. While black hat SEO can work, it puts websites at tremendous risk of being penalized and/or de-indexed (removed from search results) and has ethical implications.

Penalized websites have bankrupted businesses. It's just another reason to be very careful when choosing an SEO expert or agency.

Search engines share similar goals with the SEO industry

Search engines want to help you succeed. They're actually

quite supportive of efforts by the SEO community. Digital marketing conferences, such as Unbounce, MNsearch, SearchLove, and Moz's own MozCon, regularly attract engineers and representatives from major search engines.

Google assists webmasters and SEOs through their Webmaster Central Help Forum and by hosting live office hour hangouts. (Bing, unfortunately, shut down their Webmaster Forums in 2014.)

While webmaster guidelines vary from search engine to search engine, the underlying principles stay the same: Don't try to trick search engines. Instead, provide your visitors with a great online experience.

Google webmaster guidelines

Basic principles:

- Make pages primarily for users, not search engines.
- Don't deceive your users.
- Avoid tricks intended to improve search engine rankings. A good rule of thumb is whether you'd feel comfortable explaining what you've done to a website to a Google employee. Another useful test is to ask, "Does this help my users? Would I do this if search engines didn't exist?"
- Think about what makes your website unique, valuable, or engaging.

Things to avoid:

- Automatically generated content
- Participating in link schemes
- Creating pages with little or no original content (i.e. copied from somewhere else)
- Cloaking – the practice of showing search engine crawlers different content than visitors.

- Hidden text and links
- Doorway pages – pages created to rank well for specific searches to funnel traffic to your website.

Full Google Webmaster Guidelines version here.

Bing webmaster guidelines

Basic principles:

- Provide clear, deep, engaging, and easy-to-find content on your site.
- Keep page titles clear and relevant.
- Links are regarded as a signal of popularity and Bing rewards links that have grown organically.
- Social influence and social shares are positive signals and can have an impact on how you rank organically in the long run.
- Page speed is important, along with a positive, useful user experience.
- Use alt attributes to describe images, so that Bing can better understand the content.

Things to avoid:

- Thin content, pages showing mostly ads or affiliate links, or that otherwise redirect visitors away to other sites will not rank well.
- Abusive link tactics that aim to inflate the number and nature of inbound links such as buying links, participating in link schemes, can lead to de-indexing.
- Ensure clean, concise, keyword-inclusive URL structures are in place. Dynamic parameters can dirty up your URLs and cause duplicate content issues.
- Make your URLs descriptive, short, keyword rich when possible, and avoid non-letter characters.
- Burying links in Javascript/Flash/Silverlight; keep content out of these as well.

- Duplicate content
- Keyword stuffing
- Cloaking – the practice of showing search engine crawlers different content than visitors.

Guidelines for representing your local business on Google

These guidelines govern what you should and shouldn't do in creating and managing your Google My Business listing(s).

Basic principles:

- Be sure you're eligible for inclusion in the Google My Business index; you must have a physical address, even if it's your home address, and you must serve customers face-to-face, either at your location (like a retail store) or at theirs (like a plumber)
- Honestly and accurately represent all aspects of your local business data, including its name, address, phone number, website address, business categories, hours of operation, and other features.

Things to avoid

- Creation of Google My Business listings for entities that aren't eligible
- Misrepresentation of any of your core business information, including "stuffing" your business name with geographic or service keywords, or creating listings for fake addresses
- Use of PO boxes or virtual offices instead of authentic street addresses
- Abuse of the review portion of the Google My Business listing, via fake positive reviews of your business or fake negative ones of your competitors
- Costly, novice mistakes stemming from failure to read the fine details of Google's guidelines

Fulfilling user intent

Understanding and fulfilling user intent is critical. When a person searches for something, they have a desired outcome. Whether it's an answer, concert tickets, or a cat photo, that desired content is their "user intent."

If a person performs a search for "bands," is their intent to find musical bands, wedding bands, band saws, or something else?

Your job as an SEO is to *quickly* provide users with the *content* they desire in the *format* in which they desire it.

Common user intent types:

Informational: Searching for information. Example: *"How old is Issa Rae?"*

Navigational: Searching for a specific website. Example: *"HBOGO Insecure"*

Transactional: Searching to buy something. Example: *"where to buy 'We got y'all' Insecure t-shirt"*

You can get a glimpse of user intent by Googling your desired keyword(s) and evaluating the current SERP. For example, if there's a photo carousel, it's very likely that people searching for that keyword search for photos.

Also evaluate what content your top-ranking competitors are providing that you currently aren't. How can you provide 10X the value on your website?

Providing relevant, high-quality content on your website will help you rank higher in search results, and more importantly, it will establish credibility and trust with your online audience.

Before you do any of that, you have to first understand your

website’s goals to execute a strategic SEO plan.

Know your website/client’s goals

Every website is different, so take the time to really understand a specific site’s business goals. This will not only help you determine which areas of SEO you should focus on, where to track conversions, and how to set benchmarks, but it will also help you create talking points for negotiating SEO projects with clients, bosses, etc.

What will your KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) be to measure the return on SEO investment? More simply, what is your barometer to measure the success of your organic search efforts? You’ll want to have it documented, even if it’s this simple:

> *For the website _____, my primary SEO KPI is _____.*

Here are a few common KPIs to get you started:

- Sales
- Downloads
- Email signups
- Contact form submissions
- Phone calls

And if your business has a local component, you’ll want to define KPIs for your Google My Business listings, as well. These might include:

- Clicks-to-call
- Clicks-to-website
- Clicks-for-driving-directions

Notice how “Traffic” and “Ranking” are not on the above lists? This is because, for *most* websites, ranking well for keywords and increasing traffic won’t matter if the new traffic doesn’t

convert (to help you reach the site’s KPI goals).

You don’t want to send 1,000 people to your website a month and have only 3 people convert (to customers). You want to send 300 people to your site a month and have 40 people convert.

This guide will help you become more data-driven in your SEO efforts. Rather than haphazardly throwing arrows all over the place (and getting lucky every once in awhile), you’ll put more wood behind fewer arrows.

Grab a bow (and some coffee); let’s dive into Chapter 2 (Crawlers & Indexation).

We’re looking forward to hearing your thoughts on this draft of Chapter 1. What works? Anything you feel could be added or explained differently? Let us know your suggestions, questions, and thoughts in the comments.

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