Search competition: Who are you really competing with?

Competition is constant.

No matter what business you're in, there will always be other people competing with you for customers, subscribers, viewers, partners, etc. Even Google *technically* has competition – maybe you found this article through Bing?

The point is…you have competitors trying to beat you. Do you know who they are?

"Of course, I know who my competitors are!" – You (probably)

But do you know who your search competitors are? Do you know who you're really competing with for organic traffic? It may not be who you think…

Search is a unique channel, where competition can shift and change as the search results themselves change. Also, the only barrier to entry for new competitors is much lower than in other channels – they just need an optimized website.

And finally, search is a zero-sum game where if you're not ranking on page one, you're losing. If a new competitor sneaks up and bumps you off the first page for an important keyword, you're going to feel it in your bottom line.

In this post, I'm going to dive into these questions to help you better understand and identify which brands, websites, people, etc. you're competing with for the attention of your audience so you can position yourself accordingly and win.

Start with known competitors

As you (probably) said to yourself earlier, you know who your

competitors are…so they are a good place to start your research. The companies that are traditionally your competitors in other channels are likely competing with you for many keywords as well.

To better understand *how* they are competing with you in search, you'll likely need to invest in an SEO tool – Ahrefs, Moz, and SEMrush all offer viable options for analyzing competitor keyword rankings.

Using these tools, you can build lists of your competitors top keywords and compare them against your own. As you compare rankings, ask yourself:

- Are they competing for the same terms you view as important?
- Are some competitors investing in paid search rather than SEO?
- Are they beating you in critical search results? If so, what strategies and types of pages are they using?
- Are there gaps in your own keyword rankings that seem to be driving substantial traffic to competitor websites?
- Are there potential opportunities where a competitor is ranking with thin or weak content?
- Are competitors siphoning organic traffic from you through long-tail keywords and phrases?

You won't truly know how or where these brands are competing with you in search until you analyze their keyword rankings. But analysis goes beyond simply notating which position they're in for a given keyword, instead you need to analyze that SERP to understand why they might be ranking there and whether your site should rank there too. Pay attention to other ranking sites as well, because if this SERP is relevant to your audience, you've just uncovered more competition.

Expand competitive research to ‘SERP competitors’

Did you notice some new websites consistently ranking amongst your competitors for the keywords you’re targeting? Are media sites or news publications dominating the top spots on many of your relevant SERPs? Do government websites take up valuable real estate for key head terms?

The answer to some or all of these questions will be yes – I call these types of competitors “SERP competitors” and they are the reason you must dig into the actual search results to find out who you’re really competing with for your target keywords.

A SERP competitor could have only one page that competes with you, but if that page is ranking above you on an important SERP, they are your competition and you need to understand why they are beating you.

For example, if we look at the search results for [link building] an important term for my company, we can see this concept:

While we do rank on this page, there are also a few results above us from sites like:

- Moz
- Backlinko
- Wordstream
- Ahrefs

These sites provide consultation, paid search services, and SEO tools – none of these are direct competitors to our service offerings, yet we ARE competing with them for real

estate on this SERP, these sites are SERP competitors for us.

Like how you would analyze a direct competitor, you need to review SERP competitors in terms of:

- Content structure (format, length, depth, media, etc.)
- Number of referring domains
- Keyword focus and optimization
- SERP feature optimization (quick answers for snippets, videos for video results, FAQs for "People Also Ask" boxes, etc.)

Understanding how these pages are designed for the specific SERPs you're competing for will help you better optimize your pages.

Become a 'SERP competitor' yourself

While the intricacies and ever-changing nature of search means there is more competition for attention from your customers, it also means there is more opportunity.

If your website is new to the space and your primary competitors are firmly entrenched at the top of the SERPs for your relevant head terms, you need to become a SERP competitor yourself.

While you should still optimize both on and off-page elements for those highly competitive terms, that will be a long-term project and you need to find ways to attract traffic now. Instead of investing all your resources in the long-game, find opportunities where you can compete for specific, long-tail search rankings. Rather than trying to compete with big name brands or domains with thousands more backlinks, you just need to be a better result than the pages in those first ten results.

Look for tangentially related topics to your business, where the search volumes might not be as high, but the topic still

intersects with your audience and can bring relevant visitors. As you research topics, look for search result pages with the following:

- Poor results in terms of answering searcher intent
- Poor results in terms of formatting, aesthetics, number of ads on the page, etc.
- Pages with few or no backlinks ranking
- And suboptimal keyword targeting by ranking pages.

These are opportunities for you to rank a page on your website and earn organic traffic while you build towards better rankings for your head terms. Secure these opportunities again and again, and it will add up to meaningful results for your website.

Recap

As a business, you'll always face competition, and the first step to overcoming these competitors is, obviously, identifying them. However, in search it's not always obvious who you're competing with for attention and visibility.

Assessing what your traditional competitors are doing in search is critical, but it's only part of the picture. You need to suss out SERP competitors, or those who compete with you purely through search rankings, as well and analyze how they are winning in search.

With a complete picture of who you're truly competing with, you'll have the knowledge and understanding necessary to succeed in organic search.

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