

# **SEO competition research: The complete guide**

How to learn SEO competition research or in fact anything at all? Well, there's actually doing it, of course. But doing it without knowing what to aim for and what's actually working doesn't do you much good. There's, of course, reading about it. But as far as I'm concerned, the most effective way to learn to do something is to watch somebody do it well.

A large part of SEO efforts is about monitoring what actually works for other people in your particular niche.

So you need to keep an eye on the people that rank higher than you. Then, using specialized tools you'll be able to reverse engineer the strategies they used. From then on, you'll be able to implement those same things in your own campaigns.

## **What do we talk about when it's about competition research?**

Doing SEO competition research means analyzing your competitors' SEO efforts in order to augment your own. So how to actually research your competition? Generally, it all boils down to the following steps:

# Whitepaper

1. Picking the right competitors – people from your own niche, that consistently rank higher than you.
2. Figuring out what you're looking for – from researching their ranking keywords to backlinks, there's a bunch to discover, and you have to know what it is that you want to find out.
3. Using a tool to extract the data you're interested in.
4. Applying those insights to your own website.

## Where in the world are your SEO competitors?

So this might seem like a trivial point. Anybody can name six to eight competitors off the top of their head, right? But, as usual, it's not quite as easy as it appears.

For any SEO campaign, what you need first (if not foremost) is a list of main keywords you want to rank for. That's the most basic function of conducting keyword research. Create a so-called "semantic core" for your website and its pages.

Your overall business competitors might not necessarily be the same as your SEO competition. SEO competition research is a part of competition research in general, sure. But SEO competitors are specifically those websites and pages that receive traffic targeting the same keywords as you.

Once you've settled on a list of keywords, you can research who in the world is already ranking for them. Those will be your main competitors. Now, you can, of course, use Google and type in all of the different keywords you want. Then you can monitor who's ranking on Google yourself, no tool involved.

For some this "sans tool" approach works, sure. But for those of us monitoring dozens, if not hundreds of keywords? And

those of us who don't actually relish an opportunity to spend ten hours doing research one keyword at a time? This sounds exceedingly inconvenient.

Of course, the easy way is to use an SEO tool.

So there are two overall types of competitors you want to find

- The “topic” competitors – the pages and websites that are ranking for the keywords you are interested in.
- The “domain” competitors – those websites that come up in a search for the whole cluster of keywords that are associated with your entire domain.

## **1. Topic competitors**

Those are simply the pages that currently rank in the top 10 for the specific keyword(s) that you want to target with a particular page. Those competitors should be researched before actually creating a piece of content. Try and figure out which keywords in what order work best for this particular topic right now. Look at the headings and subheadings, the keywords they put in bold, and what is a “de rigueur” of this topic, that is – what absolutely must be mentioned for Google to consider that content helpful. A great tool to use when preparing to create a page is TF-IDF.

It analyzes the competition currently holding the highest rankings and gives you a list of ideas for keywords and topics that you should include. For instance, if you're writing an article on competition research, TF-IDF might reveal that all of the ranking pages have a point about keyword gaps. That is a signal that Google considers "keyword gaps" an important part of the topic, and you should also put something about it in your piece. Or maybe you'll need to restructure your entire piece. Let's say that you see in your analysis that your top competitors for a particular page are all galleries with little text. That's an indication that Google considers this topic to be in its most "user-friendly" form as a gallery.

Alternatively, if you see a competitor for your particular

topic in a Featured snippet, look up what they're doing and try to get position zero too. That's what competitive research is really all about: there are best practices out there for everything. Organic search is a lot of things, but never random. Using the best working practices on the web, you can beat your competition much easier.

## **2. Domain competitors**

Those are the domains that rank for the overall keywords you've collected, for your semantic core. Those are not just your "ad hoc" competitors. Your site is targeting a certain topic, and those are the websites that specifically aim at the same niche. With any competitor analysis tool, you will get a list of domains ranking for the same cluster of keywords you are aiming at. You can compare not just the amount of keywords you have in common, but also how your website performs against other websites covering your topic in general.

By this point, you've put together a manageable list of your main competitors. From then on, you can start analyzing them to find out why they are getting your traffic in organic search.

## **Analyzing your competitors' SEO**

Once you've got a list of your main SEO competitors, you can start working on looking up what goes into their rankings.

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# **This part of competitor research consists of**

1. Looking up your competitors' overall SEO health
2. Seeing your competitors' ranking keywords
3. Analyzing your competitors' backlinks both to their entire domains as well as to any webpage in particular

So let's start from the beginning – analyze your competitors' overall SEO health

Before you start going into specifics, you first need to get an overview of your competition's SEO success. This will serve as a foundation for your future efforts – you'll know immediately if they outdo you in terms of backlinks, get information on their domains, and so on.

Different tools represent this “overall SEO health” parameter by different metrics, but nearly all of the modern market heavyweights give you an opportunity to look it up. So Rank Tracker indicates this by the term “domain strength”, while Moz chose “domain authority”, and so on.

Get a list of your top competitors' domain strengths compared to your own. From social media signals to the number of pages currently indexed by different search engines, there's a whole lot of information you need to collect about your competitors' domains.

From here on, you can start drilling down into the details of your competitors' ranking pages.

## **Fill the keyword gaps**

A very important thing to take care of are your keyword gap competitors. What is the keyword gap? Those are the keywords that your competitors are already targeting, that you aren't.

By identifying the keywords that your competition is using on

their pages, you are seeing what particular topics they are currently targeting that you aren't.

You should try and find the keywords for which you could start ranking or start ranking better than you already are.

Then you'll know which keywords you should be adding to the pages you already have, and even formulate a precise content plan that is based on the keywords that your niche competition is already ranking for. For precision, you should perform analysis on a page by page basis. Check any of your pages and compare them to your competitors' pages ranking for similar keywords.

This will show, in a very direct way, what exact keywords you should be using on your page. You'll also get pretty detailed information on the actual keywords, so you will be free to decide which ones are a "must", and which ones could be just a "maybe".

## **Look up your competitors' backlinks**

You are, of course, free to disregard things like PageRank, which, for the record, still matters.

But we all know how important your backlink profile really is. As far as rankings are concerned, getting more quality backlinks is one of the best things you can do. That goes for your website in general, and for any page in particular.

Having quality backlinks is so vital, on my blog we even ran a guide on how to find an expired domain with some quality backlinks "built-in". But of course, that's for new website owners only.

In this context, it's understandable why researching your competitors' backlinks belongs among the most effective link building tactics used by SEO experts.

How to make it work? Well, in reality, niche websites that already partner with your direct competitors might gladly provide you with a backlink as well!

So how to find what websites link to your competitors' pages? This is one of the points which you can't really do manually and will have to resort to a tool's help.

An especially important metric to monitor here is the amount of "dofollow" links, as those links actually directly impact your rankings. The importance of nofollow links for rankings is moot, but we definitely know that dofollow links are paramount to ranking.

But by far the most important feature that is needed for proper competitor research is a list of your competitors' intersecting links. Those are the linking domains that a few of your SEO competitors have in common, which link to a number of them but not to you yet.

I prefer using SEO SpyGlass for this since I'm its developer and can vouch for its functionality. In the tool you'll get to see all of the domains linking to your one or a number of your competitors, but not to you.

If you find a certain source that links to two-to-four of your competitors in your niche, there's a pretty high chance that you'll also get an opportunity to partner with them if you do some outreach.

Link building is just as vital for SEO as anything else, and doing it right can make or break any website's ranking success.

Monitor the opportunities presented by your competitor research and seize on them in your own SEO efforts.

## **Keep an eye on their backlink history**

There's another great angle to analyze your competitor's

pages. Try and look up when exactly your competitors received which backlinks for their content.

If you see a sudden rise, that could mean, for example, that the page has been updated. Checking out the page itself you might see that your competitor has stumbled upon a viral topic that ranks very highly right on.

You can seize on that opportunity and update your existing content. Or, if you consciously didn't cover a certain topic thinking that it would not be relevant, and you find that it's now become viral, you can create some new material.

## Conclusion

There are different tools that can be used to boost your SEO success. Getting into the top of Google's organic search requires quite a lot of analysis, and work.

Along with keyword and backlink research, link building and website audits, competition research is a fundamental part of a successful SEO campaign.

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