SEO in 2021: What your organization’s executives and senior leaders must know

30-second summary:

- Did you know that 53 percent of trackable web traffic is organic?
- A study from BrightEdge revealed that search (organic and paid) still delivers more traffic to websites than any other channels, including social and display
- These statistics prove that the role of SEO in 2021 is elevated across all industries since an organic flow of traffic is now more critical than ever
- Merkle Inc.’s VP Head of SEO, Eryck Dzotsi discusses six key focus areas that leaders across organizations must clearly understand about the role of SEO to drive organic search performance

2020 wasn’t a year that we will soon forget. Life and the way we do business changed forever. Ecommerce grew more last year than it has grown in the past five years combined. As a result, many businesses had to adapt their marketing efforts to these changes. The role of SEO in 2021 is elevated across all industries since an organic flow of traffic is now more critical than ever.

As we navigate this year, leaders across organizations must clearly understand the role of SEO and focus on driving organic search performance. Let’s dive into some key areas of focus:

1. Define the integration of SEO within other channels going forward

Did you know that 53 percent of trackable web traffic is organic? A study from BrightEdge revealed that search (organic and paid) still delivers more traffic to websites than any other channels, including social and display. This statistic alone demonstrates why brands need to realize that organic traffic is not going away, and they need to value SEO in 2021 and beyond. They need to integrate SEO with their other media channels. Organic search is the only channel that has a touchpoint across each stage of the customer journey.

While TV and display are generally associated with awareness, paid search is typically aligned with the mid to lower funnel as customers are making a decision about the product or service and converting. The story is different for organic search.

- When interested in a product or when they have a problem they are trying to solve, users search (often as a result of interacting with an ad)
- When making a decision and comparing options, users search
- When customers are ready to convert, they search again, and often, after the purchase, search is again involved in learning how to use the product, service, and more

SEO is about answering users' questions and helping them find what they were seeking. As a result, SEO is one of the few channels where the engagement is initiated by the user and the ad does not disrupt the customer journey. This makes SEO the channel that ought to be the point guard to a cross-channel line-up, playing assist to the other channels.

2. Organizations must hold SEO to the same accountability and scrutiny as other channels (ROI)

Organizations need to deploy a clear SEO analytics plan going forward. Often, because SEO does not have an associated cost, marketing prioritization is low, and measurement is laxed. ROI can seem abstract, and teams fail to properly track the measurement of success based on levels of effort, this is not ideal. SEO teams must have a systematic measurement plan and resources in place to make the right level of attribution and adjustments happen.

To start, align your goals with the other media channels – look at the impressions and have a clear understanding of your share of voice within your industry, click-throughs, visits, and conversions as part of the full view – what percent are you gaining compared to the market?

This accountability must be demanded from your SEO team going forward.

3. Organizations must optimize to one search experience by harmonizing SEO and SEM

In the first half of 2020, and throughout some of the social unrest periods that marked the year, many advertisers paused their campaigns. In those instances, this was a real-time experiment in organic vs. paid traffic acquisition. The conclusion many have walked away with is that you need both, but the programs which invested heavily in organic search showed the best results in aggregate.

Since non-branded keywords are becoming increasingly

expensive, it is not always efficient to deploy a non-brand campaign in paid search. As a result, many campaigns have been reduced to maximizing visibility on branded terms. So, how do you win in search when you cannot buy your way out with paid campaigns? Organic search is the answer. An analysis should be conducted to properly find the balance between paid and organic so that you are optimizing the total search experience. Organizations that win here will have a clear strategy around leveraging where they are winning and where they have gaps.

4. Marketing teams must align SEO and user experience

Many lessons were gained in terms of reducing friction in the customer journey and optimizing the conversation between customers and brands. As a result, many brands set out to either redesign their websites or migrate to a new platform. When redesigning or overhauling a website, it is vital to involve SEO in the project from the beginning, or you will likely end up adding an extra step when a botched overhaul of content starts to affect performance. Start the project with SEOs involved from the beginning to save time, money, and headaches in this process. Additionally, ranking factors are becoming more aligned with items that are controlled by the UX team. SEO connects your media team to your user experience team, and collaboration between the two is necessary to bridge the gap in 2021 and beyond.

“Page experience” is already a ranking factor in Google’s algorithm and represents a set of aspects considered important in a webpage’s overall UX (mobile-friendliness, security, and the others). There are a couple of things happening this year that are specifically highlighting Google’s continued focus on rewarding websites that provide a great experience. First, Google is finalizing the switch to mobile-first indexing,

which means all websites and their content will be crawled, evaluated, and indexed from a mobile device standpoint. Then the Core Web Vitals will be included in the larger page experience ranking factor.

5. Technical priorities for web must include SEO, Core Web Vitals, and user experience

If you ask 1,000 SEOs what the big trend for SEO in 2021 will be, 1,000 will tell you that it will be the year of Core Web Vitals. Core Web Vitals are a set of aspects that Google considers important in a webpage's overall user experience. There are several things happening this year that specifically highlight this – the most impactful being Google's switch to a mobile indexing environment, which is the end of an era as we know it. This means that Google will largely use the mobile version of the content for indexing and ranking. In the past, the index primarily used the desktop version of a page's content when evaluating the relevance of a page to a user's query. Many websites have done great work to prepare, but complying with your technical foundation is a non-negotiable going forward.

6. SEO anchors on optimizing content across the entire customer journey

Marketers must create content that caters to the user's journey – answering the demand and questions they will have across each stage of the funnel. As you plan content, have clear keyword governance to manage your content strategy across the organization, clearly defining each owner. For example, for large financial institutions, which business unit

of banking, credit card, and mortgages owns the SEO performance for the keyword “credit score”? It is imperative that copywriters work hand-in-hand with SEO to have a functional content strategy to optimize the journey. You shouldn’t just use SEO to prioritize your content and keywords, but use it to determine the voice and narrative around those keywords.

According to a new Google update on December 3, Google is favoring information and user-focused sites. As a result, there has been a shift in ranking for organizations that are providing value and nurturing their customers. User-focused content across the journey is no longer a nice-to-have for organizations, but a must-have to properly rank.

Organic engagement with customers throughout the customer journey is and will continue to be a key element to marketing success. As the data shows, the channel is healthy. Brands that have invested in an institutionalized approach to SEO have achieved and sustained levels of success that span across other channels. There are many more opportunities for growth, and with ecommerce and customer expectations continue to grow at a rapid pace, the outlook for SEO in 2021 is optimistic.

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https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/25/what-should-your-companys-senior-leaders-know-about-seo-in-2021/