SEO Is Not an On/Off Switch – Whiteboard Friday

When business is struggling, budgets are tight, and resources limited, your company might be tempted to cut back or cut off SEO efforts to save time and money until things stabilize. But halting SEO altogether – even for a short time – is actually a bad idea, as it means more work for you and your business in the long run.

Dr. Pete is here with a brand new Whiteboard Friday to tell you why SEO should not be treated like an on/off switch, and provide some suggestions on what to do instead.

Click on the whiteboard image above to open a high resolution version in a new tab!

Video Transcription

Hey, everybody, Dr. Pete from Moz here. I want to welcome you to my first recording from Whiteboard Friday Studio Chicago, aka my basement. I want to thank the content team, first of all, for getting me set up with the equipment, but especially for their patience. I am not an AV guy, so this has taken a little while longer than I had hoped. You've already seen some remote Whiteboard Fridays from Russ and Britney and Cyrus, and they're doing a great job. So hopefully we can have some fun, and now I know the ropes and can get this going a little easier.

So I want to talk about a serious topic today. Obviously, we're going through some tough times. Budgets can be tight, and when that happens, you're tempted to scale back marketing.

Obviously, we're in the business of selling SEO tools, and we don't want you to do that because that's where our food comes from and the roofs over our heads. I'll be transparent about that. But I do think there are some real dangers to treating SEO like it's an on/off switch. So I want to talk about the reality of that, and what can happen, and some of what to do to mitigate that.

You can't do more with less

A friend reached out to me and she said, "My boss is worried about budgets, and he wants to cut back paid search, and he wants to cut back content, and cut back social, but get the same results. What do we do?" Before the pandemic, I might have laughed at that. But it's a serious question and a serious situation, and the reality is there's no magic to this. We can't expect to do more with less.

It's a nice thing to say. But especially when people are struggling, and when our workers are having problems, and they're stressed, and their time is being taken up doing mundane things – like grocery shopping – that are three times harder now, we can't expect them to do more with less, and we can't expect to do nothing and get results. So what do we do, and how do we deal with this problem?

You can't treat organic like paid

So first of all, I just want to say that I think sometimes we look at the situation like this. If we scale back marketing, we can just wait until times are better, and then we can push it back up. So we turn on our search marketing. We get the traffic and things are great. We shut it off. Okay, that sucks. We don't get the traffic, but we're not paying. Turn it

back on and boom the traffic is back.

That’s not how it works, not even close.

This is more like how paid search works. I don’t want to oversimplify. I used to work in paid search. Obviously, you’re optimizing and improving and adding negative keywords and doing A/B testing and all these things to hopefully get better and better performance. But, generally speaking, one of the advantages of paid search is that when you turn it on, the leads come. You get traffic right away that day. When you turn it off, you get nothing. The money is not there. You don’t get the leads. Okay, that’s rough, but you expect that, right? But you turn it back on, the leads come back that day. So this is the double-edged sword in a sense. It’s not that one is better than the other, but this is how paid search works. It’s a machine that you can flip off and on.

That’s not how organic works. Organic does take time. So what happens is you turn it on, and you see this gradual ramp-up. Finally, it starts to peak and level off, and then you turn it off. Let’s say budgets are tight.

Okay, I understand that you’re not producing new content and you’re not optimizing. It’s not a thing you can just turn off frankly. But you still see positive results. You still see that traffic until this starts to trail off over time. Now that’s a good thing about SEO. It doesn’t immediately turn off. You still continue to get that traffic.

But the problem with SEO is when you turn it back on and when the money comes back, you’re going to have to go through this ramp-up again. The curve may be different shapes, and it may not go all the way down and it may not go back to where it was. But it’s going to take time. There’s going to be a lag, and it could be weeks or it could be months. So I think we make two mistakes. One we’ve already discussed.

One is number two ironically, that this is going to take time to come back. So if you count on just turning the switch back on and things recovering, you're going to be disappointed, right? That's going to take time. So it's not just a situation of a pandemic. Let's say you close down for remodeling or let's say you had some kind of flooding or some kind of damage or something you needed to do to shut down for a month or two.

You can't expect that, when you turn things back on, it will immediately come back. So you may have to get ahead of that. You may have to start spending again before things pick up. I know that's a difficult thing, but you have to anticipate this lag. You have to be realistic about that. The other problem, though, is I think sometimes we hit this point, and we shut off our efforts.

We cut down content production. We don't optimize. We switch agencies, whatever we do. We don't see an immediate drop, and so we start to say maybe this isn't really working. I think it's a bit like exercise. I have this habit certainly over the years. You get motivated.

You do really well for a few weeks or a couple of months. You're feeling good, and you start to plateau. You get a little frustrated, and then you stop. For a while, you still feel good, right? You have these dividends. That's how it works, and that's how organic search works. So you think, well, maybe it wasn't that big of a deal.

Maybe it wasn't really helping me. Until two or three or six months later, when you realize how much worse you feel. Then by then, to start back up again takes effort, right? You don't feel good when you start exercising again after that six weeks of sitting around. So it takes a couple of months to get back to where you were. So I don't want you to go through that, and

I want you to be a bit careful about that.

What you *can* do

So what can we do? By the way, I have no artistic skills. This is from my 10-year-old daughter. Any drawings you see on my Whiteboard Fridays will be probably from her. So thank you, Jordan. So a couple suggestions I have that are general.

1. Have a pulse

First of all, and I mean this quite literally, you need to continue to have a pulse.

If you shut down your business or your marketing, you may just think, “Well, okay, we’re going to get less leads. We’re going to get less of a good thing, but nothing bad is going to happen”.

But the problem is this may be the only place people see you, and this may be where they come looking for you. So if you disappear, and especially in an environment like the pandemic where businesses are going under, people may look at that and say, “Oh, I guess they’re not around anymore. I guess they’re gone.”

They might not come back. They might not come looking for you again. I think there’s a very real danger of that, especially for small local businesses. So you want to make sure that your presence at least continues to exist. You have that pulse.

It doesn’t have to be as frequent – you don’t have to do as much work, you don’t have to put out as much content, you don’t have to be as active on social – but I think you have to at least show people that you’re still alive and kicking so

that they know to come back when things improve. Otherwise, they might just forget and go somewhere else.

2. Tell your story

I think it’s okay, especially during times like this – and really any time that something is kind of going wrong – if you’re remodeling, you’re going to be closed for a couple months. That’s a real negative thing that’s hard. It’s okay to be personal. It’s okay to tell some of that story.

My kids’ orthodontist, they’re a family-owned business locally here. They were really great when they were closed. They were closed for a couple of months, about two or three months. They were as responsible as I think they could be about it. They communicated their plans, but they talked to us. They sent emails. They told us about their story. They told us about being a family-owned business and why this was hard and why they thought it was the right thing to do. So when they reopened, there was a real trust there, and I was willing to send my oldest back and get her checked out and get the normal stuff done, that I might not have been if I wasn’t sure what was going on.

But I knew their procedures. I knew their story. I empathized with them, and I think that was a big deal. That’s something you should do. It’s okay to tell that, “Hey, this is hard. This is what’s going on. Here’s what’s going on with us. We hope you come back. We’re still here.”

3. Try new things

Then I think this is an interesting time to try new things. And maybe that sounds counterintuitive because when you have less money, trying something new seems like a bad idea.

But it’s okay to try new things. Maybe not as well as you normally would have. Ironically, this is a problem we’ve had

with Whiteboard Friday. I've been remote my whole time at Moz, and so I've had to fly to Seattle to do recordings. So you see very few Whiteboard Fridays from me. There's a handful over the years and one that gets repeated a bit. Because we have a studio there, we were afraid that the quality might not be as good.

It might not be up to par. It might hurt our brand, honestly. But when the pandemic came, we said, "Hey, you know what? Now we have no choice. The studio is closed. We can't go into the office for a while." Actually, currently we're moving the office, so again we're delayed. So it opened up this opportunity to try something new, try something different. Even with equipment, it costs less than one of us flying out there and staying for a few days one time.

So it made sense, and we realized that during this time people were going to naturally be forgiving. If we could get to 70% or 80% quality and improve back up over time, it was going to be okay. So I encourage you to do that. Try some formats you might not have tried before. Try some video. Use some basic equipment. We did home recordings for MozCon this year.

It was great. We had some basic equipment, Logitech web cam, a clip-on USB mic, much less sophisticated than what I'm using right now, a couple of ring lights. Maybe 200 bucks' worth of equipment and a backdrop that really I thought looked great. It was really professional once we got used to it. Try podcasting.

Try something you haven't tried before. Don't worry about it being perfect, because I think this is a time that people will be okay with that. You can try some new things and hopefully come out stronger and come out with a new thing and resume what you were doing and maybe be ahead of where you were. So again, I just don't want you to think that if you turn this thing off, you can flip it back on.

Be realistic. Don’t disappear. Try something new. Tell people what you’re going through. Be human. I hope you all get through this okay and that things are going all right. It’s great to see you. Thank you.

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