SMX Overtime: Enterprise SEOs explain tactical approaches for large implementations

Senior Director of SEO at Apartments.com, Jordan Silton, was a panelist during the SMX West “Enterprise SEOs, Unite!” session. Tactical and technical approaches for large enterprises were discussed during this session and attendees had a lot of questions. Jordan took the time to answer some of them for us.

Q: What’s the best way to augment internal SEO knowledge with

external experts?

Silton: We have a knowledgeable team of SEO experts at Apartments.com and across CoStar Group overall. One thing I like to do to expand our SEO perspective is to collaborate across internal teams and learn from each other. We have teammates that work on a variety of marketplaces including commercial real estate, businesses, land and international real estate. Each team has distinct perspectives that are helpful, so we dedicate time to check in with each other, problem-solve together, and I find myself learning a lot in the process and coming up with new ideas. In addition to our wealth of SEO knowledge internally, we do partner with specific agencies or consultants to come up with new ideas for us, or approach a challenge where they are uniquely positioned to help. You may be surprised how willing your peers are to connect and share ideas when you form a mutually beneficial relationship. I particularly enjoy connecting with other talented SEOs in related, yet non-competing, companies and find this to be an underrated opportunity.

Q: How do you handle listings that are no longer available? Do you redirect them, no-index them, keep them live with an expired message or something else?

Silton: There is likely no perfect way to handle inactive listings. We approach this challenge differently on a variety of our marketplaces. We have had some success at preserving inactive listings and still providing a compelling and helpful user experience. Multifamily apartment communities often have unit availability changes daily. For example, an individual community may have no availability on a given day, but that the community would still be relevant for a prospective renter that wants to move in a few months. We have seen inactive listings earn significant organic traffic to our site, and we have also seen renters have a great experience arriving on an inactive listing then navigate via the options we provide to find a place to rent and reach out to a community to schedule

a tour or get started on a lease.

Q: What SEO tests that you've done have been most meaningful for your business? What did you learn?

Silton: Testing is fundamental for our SEO strategy, and we are actively running several tests on our site. One noteworthy test we ran recently involved breadcrumbs. We noticed that breadcrumbs take a lot of space at the top our site both on desktop and mobile devices and also observed that some industry-leading sites in other industries moved breadcrumbs lower on the page, particularly in their mobile user experience. So, we tested it and found there was no statically significant impact when we moved breadcrumbs to a different location on the page. We were able to maintain organic traffic and UX metrics while also saving some space to use for other product features to further improve renter experience on our site.

Q: How much do you rely on dashboards for proving (or just analyzing) your results? If you do use dashboards, do you recommend Data Studio or something else?

Silton: We like to use dashboards to monitor the health and performance of our site at a high level. For example, I have a weekly dashboard that I review to the organic search performance of Apartments.com and our network of rentals marketplaces. This helps us stay on top of recent algorithm changes, major releases that impacted traffic, and even changes to conversion rates and related performance metrics. From there, we tend to dive deeper for ad-hoc analyses to explore hypotheses and dig deeper to reveal insights and make a recommendation. In terms of dashboarding and data visualization tools, we use several tools for different purposes. Google Data Studio is quite good at connecting to Google Analytics, Google Search Console, and BigQuery for simple visualizations, so that's a worthwhile free option to explore.

Q: What keyword research tool do you use?

Silton: We use them all. For example, we like using the SEMRush Keyword Magic tool since it's easy to add positive and negative matches to your list. Ahrefs does a good job with questions and topics. Our team also uses Answer The Public for topic clustering and related keyword visualizations. Moz has a robust tool too. Finally, Google's Keyword Planner does a good job at breaking the tie if we get conflicting signals from a couple of other tools. You can get value from any or all of them.

Q: In regards to testing, do you use something like Google Optimize to do specific A/B testing?

Silton: We leverage Google Analytics as our analytics platform, and it connects well to Google Optimize. Although we don't use Google Optimize to configure our tests and run the back-end logic, we do use it for reporting. Google Optimize experiment IDs match up well in Google Analytics, and that enables us to perform statistical analysis in BigQuery or other tools leveraging the existing event tracking and goals that we already have in Google Analytics, which simplifies our A/B testing tracking configuration.

Q: How would you manage taxonomy changes and guidelines for changing category names, URLs, etc.?

Silton: We are quite careful when adjusting taxonomies since even a small change can have ripple events throughout a large website. Especially as a site scales, changing a name on only one or a handful of categories can impact thousands or millions of pages on a site. Keeping URLs the same should help to minimize disruption, particularly if the name change is close. For example, we have a filter on our site for low-income housing, which is also known as affordable housing or income restricted housing. They are all synonyms and we changed the way we labeled it to help renters find the

appropriate housing options. Even though we made changes, we kept the URL consistent, which hopefully helped us capitalize on the name changes by labeling the page appropriately while also keeping things consistent for search engines, so they do not need to adjust to a ton of redirects and reconsider a whole new set of pages.

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