Social media: How does it affect SEO?

Does social media have an impact on your SEO? Do retweets, shares, and likes of a page actually boost that page in search engine results?

Studies like this one by HootSuite have suggested that there's a correlation between social media shares and higher rankings. You might have noticed that yourself: content that ranks well on Google often also has a lot of shares, retweets, and likes.

Most experts agree, though, that rankings aren't directly affected by social signals. (And that's what ex-Googler Matt Cutts said on the subject a few years ago, too.)

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Google+, which once included the promising Authorship markup, is soon going to be shut down.

So what's going on? Why do posts that get shared a lot also tend to be posts that rank more highly?

Social media and SEO: Correlation, not causation

While social media shares might be correlated with better rankings, that doesn't mean that the social media shares cause better rankings.

A piece of your content could get shared thousands of times on Twitter without necessarily budging at all in Google's search engine results.

Instead, when social media appears to be causing a boost in ranking, this is what's happening:

- Content that gets shared a lot gets seen a lot.
- Content that gets seen a lot is more likely to get linked to from other websites.
- Those additional backlinks are the cause of the better rankings.
- The improved rankings also lead to increased social media activity.

As AJ Kohn puts it, ***"It's not the actual social activity that matters, but what happens as a result of that activity."***

And, back in 2017, Simon Ensor suggested here on Search Engine Watch:

> *"We should not be worried about whether links from social media platforms are valued in the same way as a link from a high quality and highly relevant website. Instead we should look at the benefits of utilizing social media to help boost ranking signals that we know search engines care about."*

In that post, Simon took a look at the impact of link earning, co-citation and co-occurrence and brand authority and CTR – it's well worth a read if you want to dig deeper into why social media tends to have an impact on SEO.

Here, though, I want to focus on the practicalities: what can you do to harness the power of social media?

#1: Create content that's worth linking to

If your site has very little content, or if the content is poorly written or uninteresting, why would anyone feel moved to link to it from their site?

A common culprit here is self-promotional content: standard web pages that advertise your services or products, or tell readers all about your company. These are important for your site – but they're not likely to get much traction on social media.

Instead of producing more of the same on your blog, focus on creating content that's more informational and less salesy. Maybe it's a tutorial helping readers to do something, a collection of useful tips, a well-designed infographic, or something else that people will want to share with their audience.

You don't need to invest a lot of time in this (though if you do have the time, it's well worth mapping out a full content marketing strategy). Simply having a couple of really good in-depth blog posts, or some interesting and useful data, can give you the opportunities to get not only lots of shares but also links from influential websites.

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#2: Don't try to build links on social media

If you’re thinking about “building links” on social media for SEO, you’re thinking about it wrong.

Yes, sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn themselves are authoritative – but links from personal accounts on those sites tend not to be.

Firstly, most links from personal accounts are “no-followed” which means that they don’t strictly pass search engine reputation.

And secondly, from a search engine perspective, even if they did pass reputation, it would likely be from the personal user and not the social media site (so it wouldn’t be worth a lot unless that user was very influential).

On top of that, links on social media tend to get buried deep into a news feed within minutes or hours – they don't stay visible like links on websites.

Instead of approaching social media as a way to build links, then, you need to think about it as a way to build a following. That doesn't necessarily mean going after as many people as possible, though.

#3: Build (the right) social media following

Having a huge social media following probably won't hurt, but it may not help as much as you'd imagine, either.

Instead of focusing on the sheer quantity of people following you, think about the quality of your following.

Being followed by just 100 people can be better for SEO than 10,000 if it includes the top 5 influencers in your industry who publish content on a regular basis.

To get noticed by these people, it's a good idea to:

- Avoid pestering them for links: take the time to build up a relationship, and you want to think in terms of (as Michael Keating puts it on Business.com) "a partnership that lasts rather than a one-off engagement".
- Share their content. Don't just retweet it or share it without comment, but craft your own tweet or post where you talk about how good their piece is and why people should read it. This will make far more impact on the influencer than yet another retweet.
- Help them with their link building by linking to them from your guest posts on large blogs. As Darren Rowse from ProBlogger explains, "A few years ago now, a blogger I'd never heard of before wrote an article for a large business publication that sent me a huge amount of traffic. It definitely got them on my radar."

If you want to harness the power of social media to – indirectly – help your SEO, try creating valuable and interesting content, building the right following on social media, and helping out your followers (without expecting anything immediately in return).

You'll likely see that you naturally gain valuable backlinks – and that your content, and site as a whole, begin to rank better as a result.

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