The relation between ecommerce, SEO and SEM

30-second summary:

- What’s the difference between SEO and SEM?
- What are the elements of a successful search strategy?
- How can marketers choose a winning formula for their business goals?
- Goodway Group’s Search Center of Excellence, Lisa Little helps you find the answers.

What’s the difference between SEO and SEM? Why should I bid on my own brand keywords? Should we start with SEO or SEM? Is ecommerce considered search? Where should I invest?

To understand the relationship of these channels within the search function, think about a playground tournament of dodgeball (SEO), kickball (SEM), and tetherball (ecommerce). All games are played on the same playground (search engine results page, SERP) with the same type of ball (platforms) but different rules, gameplay, player positions, strategic play, variables, and objectives to win.

Some players (advertisers) invest everything into playing only one game. The athletes (performance marketers) that play a combination of those games and master the common skill sets (data storytelling, understanding impact to the business, influential communication skills, continual learning, eagerness to test, embrace rapid change) rule the playground.

The SERP is filled with aspects and listings of all types that fall into these three channels to make up the search marketing

function. There are three key benefits of a comprehensive search strategy:

- In tandem, they take up more real estate on the SERP for your brand to own and push out your competition. Combined brands can gain maximum visibility.
- The searcher typically does not know if they are interacting with ecommerce, paid, or organic listings, and the right combination can mean that you will be there for your customer when, where, and how they personally prefer to interact with your brand.
- Regardless of how chaotic the path to conversion can be today, a consolidated search strategy will cover full-funnel bases and ensure you're reaching the customer in a personalized, effective, and efficient way.

Advertisers, brands, categories, verticals, and seasonality all come into play when determining the right combination of SEO, SEM, and ecommerce efforts for your specific brand. It's definitely not one size fits all.

Here's the what, why, and when breakdown to guide brands as they develop their unique search combination.

Search engine marketing or paid search or SEM or PPC

SEM is paid advertising triggered by keyword searches. There is a real-time blind auction (a combination of bid, quality, relevancy) each time a keyword is searched to position on SERP with the other advertisers competing in that same auction.

Why?

SEM provides messaging and targeting control that serves at the top of SERP. If you're not participating, your competitors are.

When?

Marketers use SEM when they need immediate awareness, traffic, and results. The need for controlled, promotional messaging and measurement of activity is driven by tangible dollars. Getting to know your customer behavior acts as a behavior learning engine. To best utilize SEM, marketers should have a budget to spend on paid digital media.

SEO or organic search or location listing management

SEO provides listings based on relevant search terms to the SERPThis can be in the form of knowledge graphs, SEO listings, map listings, social media, ratings/reviews, and more.

Note: Additional SEO areas include app search optimization, location listing management, content mapping, free shopping listings, web development, and more.

Tip

Understand and dig into what overarching terms like “SEO” or “Reputation management” really mean to brands, what marketing problems are they trying to solve, or what they are hoping to achieve.

Why?

SEO is the fundamental and foundational infrastructure of your brand’s DNA online. Even the most beautiful mansion (paid advertising) crumbles under a weak foundation. The internet shares everything organically so you may not even be aware of what is out there around your brand without a strong SEO strategy and consistently mindful and smart messaging.

When?

Every brand that has a website should have some participation in SEO and work within organic listings to accomplish company brand guidelines and goals. Marketers should regularly update and optimize location listings for those brick and mortar businesses. This is an ongoing process, but it typically starts with an assessment or opportunity evaluation.

Ecommerce, shopping ads (formerly product listing ads)

Ecommerce is the broad term for online retail, which includes paid and unpaid aspects that work in tandem. This ranges from shopping ads on search engines and open marketplaces like Amazon/Walmart to integrations like Shopify.

Note: You will need merchant center accounts to house structured product data feeds.

Tip

Automation and machine learning is key to ecommerce success. Try leveraging a management platform like Kenshoo to consolidate holistic ecommerce stories and gain advanced capabilities in the ecommerce program.

Why?

Ecommerce is vital to drive online sales effectively, efficiently and maximizing impact on the bottom line.

When?

If you sell products online, the entry point is shopping ads on search engines. From there, it depends on merchants, supply chain, and marketplaces your products are sold.

Every brand's needs will be different and require a unique combination of SEO, SEM, and ecommerce. Marketers will have to assess the brand's goals and capabilities to determine what programs are necessary, how they will help achieve goals, and what data is required to achieve the goals.

Brands will have similar goals when implementing SEO, SEM, and ecommerce, like establishing a SERP presence, but there is ample opportunity for creativity within these platforms to achieve a brand's unique goals. It is important that marketers stay focused on these goals throughout the campaign but also be agile as the industry changes and reallocate funds to different platforms if the desired results are not achieved. Tracking results in real-time will help marketers refocus their strategies quickly to ensure the goals will be met.

Now that we know the relationship, use cases, and benefits — let's look at some questions you can ask to help determine the next steps to take your search program to the next level.

1. What's your primary business objective?
2. What pain points are you trying to solve?
3. Do you have the right partner who has strength, expertise, tools, and capabilities across all search channels?

Looking at channels holistically, marketers should implement strategic planning with a nimble approach to adjust for results is what will drive excellence in your overall marketing program. While they each play different roles and bring different benefits to advertisers, these channels should never be pitted against each other, compared on a 1:1 basis or replace one another's role in the marketing mix. Instead, they should be considered supplemental to each other and pivotal to success.

Lisa Little is Search Center of Excellence at Goodway Group.

More about:

The relation between ecommerce, SEO and SEM

A comprehensive guide on using Google Trends for keyword research

30-second summary:

- Keywords are still important for SEO, but what's increasingly important is their relevance, uniqueness, and popularity over time.
- Google Trends is a powerful tool that lets you gauge this and more.
- With Google Trends, you can get a view of what keywords to include, what to avoid, and what to plan for.
- You also get deeper dives into related topics, predictions, and how to overcome blind spots.

As an SEO professional, we're sure that there's one word you've heard and used often, and that is, "keywords". After all, if you know what people are searching for, you can create content that guides them to your site. A great way to identify effective keywords is by using Google Trends, one of the world's largest real-time datasets. It can give you an insight into what people are searching for, interested in, and curious about.

With more than 3.5 billion Google searches conducted every day, this is a powerful tool you can't ignore. In the words of the Google Trends team, "you can now explore minute-by-minute,

real-time data behind the more than 100 billion searches that take place on Google every month, getting deeper into the topics you care about.”

Now, you may be thinking that this sounds great – but where do I begin? Take a deep breath and pay attention because we’re going to outline the 11 best ways you can use Google Trends to come up with apt keywords.

Ready? Let’s go.

1. Understand keyword search volume

Keyword search volume refers to how many times specific words were searched for during a given time frame. If sites contain words with a high volume, it’s clear that they’re going to get more traffic.

If you enter any keywords into Google Trends, you get to see how interest in that topic has increased or decreased over the course of time.

Here’s an example. Type in “coronavirus” and see for yourself the peaks and valleys in consumer interest. You can also see which regions it is more or less popular in.

Here, we should point out that the popularity of the keywords shown is relative. The graph represents the ratio of the number of times that word was searched relative to the total number of all searches during that time.

2. Identify seasonal trends

One of the great advantages of having search data mapped on a graph is that you can easily spot the highs and lows of how many times keywords were searched for.

As a savvy marketeer which you must be, or you wouldn't be reading this – you know that capitalizing on seasonal popularity means attracting more customers. You can craft campaigns around such trends and adjust your sales plans and inventory accordingly.

Here are some obvious examples. If you type in "pizza", you get a graph that's fairly consistent and more or less flat. But if you type in "Christmas pudding", you'll see a flat line rising to a very high peak in December.

Correctly identifying such trends means being able to plan in advance and then taking advantage of heightened interest. Sounds like something you'll want to do.

3. Avoid jumping onto the trendy keyword bandwagon

When doing keyword research, you need to know whether a search term is going to remain popular or whether it's just a result of short-lived buzz. Here again, Google Trends can help.

There’s a table on the page that lets you view search interest for a specific keyword over the last few years. This way, you’ll immediately see whether a topic has just spiked once and then dropped or whether it’s of lasting interest.

Here’s another example. Type in “fidget spinners,” and you’ll see that there was a huge spike in 2017 when no-one could get enough of those toys. So if you were counting on attracting people to your site using “fidget spinners” that isn’t going to happen.

4. Stay away from unicorn keywords

Hold on. Aren’t unicorns what they call start-ups valued at over USD one billion? Yes, that’s right, but there are other types. Unicorn keywords, for instance.

These are generic industry terms that may sound good to include in your content but don’t necessarily make much of a difference. They are high volume but low competition. For example, “cloud computing” or even “courier services”.

It’s always better to use more precise keywords. For example, you could modify unicorn keywords to more accurately reflect your services. Checking Google Trends will provide you with information on such generic keywords, which you can then adapt for your needs.

5. Find relevant trending topics

Trends. We all want to stay on top of them as this will attract more customers. Well, Google Trends can obviously help in this case, too.

You can check Google Trends to find out which topics are trending in your niche and then keep track of traffic.

6. Find related topics

Often, even keywords not directly linked to your business can be helpful. There are other keywords that may be related but will still boost traffic.

It’s simple to do this with Google Trends. After you type in a relevant keyword, you can scroll down to find tables of related topics and related queries.

Typing in courier services, for example, will show you rising and falling trends for this search phrase. But in the related queries section, you’ll see “overnight courier services”. If you can use this as a relevant keyword, chances are your traffic will increase. Overnight.

7. Use trends predictions

You can look at Google Trends as a mirror to show you what people are interested in at this moment. But this tool can also help you use forecasting and trend data to suggest which keywords are going to rise in popularity in the future. This lets you plan ahead and prepare for traffic boosting opportunities that will arise in the days to come.

As a start, you can look at this prediction from the Google team on themes that are rising in 2021: equality, data ethics, and reaching the at-home consumer.

8. Use local SEO tactics

You already know the importance of leveraging local SEO strategies. There are many consumers near you, and they are the ones that can easily be targeted with effective digital and keyword tactics.

Google Trends can be a great help with this approach, too. You can use local keyword trends to see which regions need your products or services. And then, you can fine-tune your strategy to reflect this.

For example, you could type in “cloud computing”, with a USA filter to get overall trends for that keyword phrase. And then drill down further to see in which towns and cities the phrase is most used.

9. Video SEO

A statistic on HubSpot indicates that 86% of businesses use video as a marketing tool. That’s not surprising, after all, 85% of all internet users in the United States watched online video content monthly on any of their devices. And 54% want to see more video content from a brand or business they support.

[Source.]

Hence, video SEO is critical. It’s the process of optimizing your video to be indexed so that it ranks on the results pages for keyword searches.

How can Google Trends help you with this?.

Enter your search term, and then change web search to YouTube search. You can find the relevance and also related queries, as well as which words are trending. This should give you invaluable insights to tweak your video titles and descriptions for better results.

10. Use long-tail key phrases

Long-tail keyphrases are defined as those that are different from general keywords. They are specific to whatever product or service you're selling.

For example, while "running shoes" can be a generic keyword, a long-tail version of this could be "men's running shoes with thick soles".

As you can see, such phrases have low competition and high conversion. This is why they are so important for effective SEO.

With Google Trends, you can cross-reference the popularity of different keywords. And then, you can combine related terms to get a good idea of relevant long-tail keywords. Whether you're into cloud computing or running shoes, it makes a difference.

11. Identify blind spots

Blind spots exist in life and also in keywords.

There are keywords that we feel are important, even though they may be generic and high-volume. There are other keywords that somehow never occur to us, even though they may be of interest to consumers.

Intelligent use of Google Trends means that you can probe these areas to arrive at insights that let you capitalize on what's trending with your target audience.

Use various combinations of keywords, always check the related queries box, and get a wider view of the timeline. Combine these to check whether keywords are popular over time, whether there's just a specific spike, and if there are other aspects that consumers feel are important.

All this will let you get over the blind spots to give you

20/20 vision.

In conclusion: Google Trends is your powerful keyword partner

At a time when every online expert is hunting for keywords, Google Trends can give you the edge.

You can use it to come up with powerful, popular keywords to boost traffic in surprising and positive ways.

It can help you discover keywords that make sense in context. It can help you to spot profitable trends. And it can help you come up with long-tail keywords that consumers are searching for.

The 11 principles outlined above should go a long way in setting precise and effective keywords for your business. After that, if you want more of a deep dive, head on over to Google's own training center for more lessons.

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More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/12/a-comprehensive-guide-on-using-google-trends-for-keyword-research/

A small business's step-by-step guide to dominating local search in 2021

30-second summary:

- Optimizing a small business for local search is a powerful way to boost local traffic and increase sales.
- With the large majority of web users actively seeking products/services in their vicinity, building local leads is essential.
- Joseph Dyson offers a step-by-step guide to improving local visibility for small businesses.
- He focuses on the importance of Google My Business, keyword research and implementation, internal and external links, reviews, and more.

Do you want your business to appear in the top local search results on Google? Do you want to attract high-quality traffic that helps you boost sales and grow your business in the long run? Do you want to achieve and sustain target KPIs?

If you answered these questions in the affirmative, you may want to optimize your business for local search if you haven't already.

An astounding 80% of all local searches on mobile phones result in a transaction.

While you may have created a winning social media marketing strategy and revamped your brand identity, the work doesn't end there. In fact, it only begins. With the competition

becoming increasingly cut-throat each day, standing out among the crowd has become more important than ever—especially for small businesses that are struggling to navigate the digital marketing learning curve during the ongoing pandemic.

To make things easier without compromising efficacy, you need to start off on the right foot by focusing on local SEO.

We'll break down the basics and offer a step-by-step guide to dominating local search in 2020 so your business can hit the ground running.

What is local SEO and why does it matter?

Local SEO is the process of optimizing your business to improve its visibility in local search results on Google.

Why does this matter? Because local consumers are actively looking for products/services close to them.

If you run a small business, it's very likely that you operate within a certain area, i.e. a specific city or state. If you fail to optimize your business for local search, you'll attract generic leads that aren't capable of making a transaction because of geographical constraints. You'll also reduce your chances of appearing in the top local search results each time someone runs a "near me" or "close to me" search.

Instead of appearing in the Google 3-Pack (attached below for reference), your business will show up on the eighth, ninth, or 30th SERP.

And while earning a not-so-favorable spot among Google search results may not sound too bad, the large majority of web users never scroll past the first SERP.

So what do you do? You optimize your business for local search.

We've rounded up some of the most effective local SEO strategies for small businesses in 2021 to help you get started.

Claim and optimize your Google My Business listing

Leveraging Google My Business is a surefire way to give your business a much-needed visibility boost. The popular platform allows businesses to drive local traffic by creating and maintaining a strong online presence on Google Search and Google Maps.

As you share relevant information about your business, Google will effectively crawl, index, and rank your business.

The outcome? Improved local rankings.

Claim and optimize your Google My Business listing to maximize your chances of appearing in the Google 3-Pack.

We suggest sharing the following information:

- Name
- Address
- Phone Number
- Business Hours
- High-Quality Photos and Videos
- Categories
- Description
- Website
- Reviews
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Attributes and Amenities

Google’s algorithm determines the legitimacy of a business by checking for consistency across the board. For instance, if your business hours are inconsistent across multiple platforms, your business will not be perceived as credible or reliable.

Even the slightest deviation can lower your chances of appearing in the Google 3-Pack.

Ensure consistency to dominate local search and increase the visitor-to-lead conversion rate.

In addition, keep your listing updated by sharing fresh content and interacting with customers through Google My Business Messages.

Become a pro at keyword research

Keyword research is undeniably the crème de la crème of local search. If done right, the process can help your content stand out among the massive pool of competition.

Why should you use keywords in the first place?

Let’s break it down.

If you own a small salon in Los Angeles, most people looking for salon services will search for very specific phrases like “salons in Los Angeles” or “best hair stylists in Los Angeles.” These keywords are a set of industry-specific and location-specific phrases that help customers find what they’re looking for.

If you want your products/services to appear in the top local search results, you have to incorporate these phrases into your content to give users exactly what they’re looking for.

Use Google’s Keyword Planner to find local industry-relevant keywords. It’s important to note that keywords are constantly

evolving based on current trends, events, and news. So while you may have assiduously compiled a list of the most relevant keywords, it’s unlikely that they’ll dominate search engines within a few months.

Stay at the top of your game by actively researching and re-researching keywords. You can also use third-party tools based on your preference.

If you’re unsure about how to incorporate keywords based on regional trends, use Google Trends to discover what’s trending.

Use actionable on-page SEO techniques

On-page SEO is the process of optimizing web pages to boost rankings and attract high-quality local traffic.

How does this work? As you focus on specific on-page optimization factors, your website will become more visible on the web.

These factors include:

- **Title Tag:** The title/topic of each page
- **Meta Description Tags:** A short description that summarizes the content
- **Robots Meta Tag:** A piece of code that helps web crawlers determine which pages on the site should be indexed
- **URL:** The web address of a specific page
- **Header Tags:** Headings that add structure to a page, for example, H1, H2, and H3
- **Image Alt Tags/Alt Text:** Short and clear description of an image
- **Canonical Tags:** An HTML link tag that helps crawlers prioritize the main page instead of indexing duplicate page URLs

Each time you create new content, incorporate high-volume keywords in the aforementioned on-page optimization factors, especially the title tag, meta description, URL, and header. This will help you attract local traffic and make your website more search-friendly.

Leverage internal and external links

Focusing on your website's link structure is a great way to optimize your business for local search.

Internal links are hyperlinks that take readers to content or products/services on your own website. Here's an example to help make things a bit clearer. If you're writing a new blog for your website and hyperlink an old infographic on your own domain, this will qualify as an internal link. Of course, you can link any type of content, including blogs, articles, press releases, infographics, videos, product pages, service pages, etc.

How does this help? As web users interact with your content, they're more likely to engage with the internal links. This, in turn, helps Google determine the relevance of your internal pages and rank them accordingly.

If you're already ahead of the game, you can link location-specific keywords, thereby organically improving your website's visibility for local search. These factors collectively play a big role in ensuring your business climbs local SERPs and maintains a strong online presence.

External links work in a similar manner. If an external (third-party) website links to your content or products/services, this qualifies as an external link, also known as a backlink.

For instance, if an established website like Forbes links to a

value-added blog you wrote a few months ago, you'll earn a high-quality backlink. As a plethora of potential customers is redirected to your website, you'll reap the benefits of high traffic for your local business.

High-quality backlinks from websites with a high domain authority (great rankings on SERPs) help Google determine the validity and reputability of a business.

If a considerable number of established businesses are hyperlinking to your content, it's very likely that you're producing engaging, informative, and impactful content.

Google's reward system is quick on its toes. Their algorithm will immediately process the information and make sure your business gradually climbs SERPs. If you were stuck on the 15th SERP, you could climb a few pages.

Of course, if you continue to produce winning content and earn quality backlinks, you'll manage to break into the first search page.

How should you use internal links?

- Create more content so it's easier to include internal links in new content
- Check the domain authority of pre-existing content to use internal links accordingly (for example, link to popular content more frequently)

How should you increase external links?

- Write high-quality and engaging guest blogs
- Leverage broken link building
- Convert unlinked mentions into backlinks
- Collaborate with non-competitor businesses in your industry to build quality backlinks
- Repurpose and syndicate content

- Offer to write authentic testimonials for other businesses in return for a backlink

Optimization isn’t enough, create high-quality local content

Optimization isn’t the be-all and end-all of content marketing. If you haven’t produced high-quality content in the first place, it’s unlikely that optimization will help you get any further.

The best way to dominate local search is to strike the perfect balance between optimization and quality. Losing sight of either one of the two could end up doing more damage than good.

Create impactful content around local events, trends, movements, and news.

For instance, find a way to incorporate popular holidays like the 4th of July into your content plan. If you sell pool accessories, you could create a blog titled “Five Tips for Having a Lockdown-Friendly Fourth of July Party This Weekend.” One of the tips could include having a family pool party and ordering fun pool accessories online.

Building these connections will go a long way in helping your business become a familiar sight in local search results.

Of course, don’t forget to incorporate location-specific keywords to make sure you attract high-quality leads that can easily buy your products/services.

Request and respond to reviews to

climb SERPs

Reviews are a gold mine when it comes to improving visibility for local search.

A whopping 53% of Americans carefully read product/service ratings and reviews to guide their shopping experience. In fact, 15% of the ranking factors for the Google 3-Pack comprise review signals.

If you run a local search, you'll notice that each business in the Google 3-Pack includes a plethora of positive reviews.

Here's an example:

Google doesn't want to take any risks. The entire point of the Google 3-Pack is to display the top businesses for a specific search. The factors used to determine whether a business should appear in the Google 3-Pack include NAP consistency, relevance, reputability, experience, and—you guessed it—reviews.

If your business has a great review rating and flattering reviews, you're very likely to earn a spot in the Google 3-Pack.

But how should you generate positive reviews? The most obvious way is to offer excellent products/services and ensure great customer service.

But there's a little more than meets the eye.

Here are some expert strategies to increase positive reviews for your business:

- Use Google My Business to encourage your customers to share reviews
- Request reviews from customers who recently invested in your products/services by sending a short,

individualized, and engaging email
- Use social media to encourage customers to share their feedback
- Create a testimonials page on your website and include a short form that allows customers to share their experience with your products/services

Actively respond to positive reviews to encourage customers to share reviews in the future. In addition, take correctional measures to make it up to your customers who leave negative reviews. If done right, you can end up turning a bad experience into a good one.

If you've been struggling to give your business the boost it deserves, implementing these strategies will go a long way in turning things around.

Closely monitor your progress using Google My Business Insights and additional tracking platforms to determine where you stand and realign strategies accordingly. Ensure consistency to view concrete results in local search rankings and traffic.

We also recommend keeping up with your competition to develop an edge as a small business with relatively less experience. Go over their strategies and replicate certain aspects that seem relevant.

As you develop a holistic local SEO strategy, your business will begin to reach milestones and gear up for long-term growth.

Conclusion

Local SEO is undeniably one of the most powerful weapons in the digital marketing arsenal for small businesses. Polishing these skills can help a business actively climb SERPs for local search and build a wide audience that continues to grow

organically.

While implementing local SEO strategies may seem challenging at first, it’s less complex than many small businesses think. The right tools, resources, and expertise can make the process much easier.

Incorporate these strategies into your current marketing campaign to get started. If you have any concerns, feel free to connect with an expert. Good luck!

Joseph Dyson is a renowned content marketing manager at Search Berg. He offers expert small business SEO services and has headed various local SEO campaigns over the years.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/10/a-small-businesss-step-by-step-guide-to-dominating-local-search-in-2021/

Solving the agency search intelligence gap

30-second summary:

- Agencies are particularly struggling to find ways to gain a broad view of the search market.
- Many agencies rely too heavily on Google tools which on provide top-level search insights and need better tools.
- COVID-19 is resulting in surprising search results and

agencies are having trouble explaining these outcomes without proper data.

Search advertising is one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving areas of the advertising ecosystem today. And as search continues to emerge as the barometer by which all other advertising activities are gauged, the need for sophisticated search intelligence has never been higher.

Yet, agencies, in particular, are continuing to have difficulties deriving the search intelligence they need and finding ways to unlock the potential of the insights that they already have on hand. Moreover, as agencies continue to invest in more data-generating tools, they are having to sift through more data than ever, and are struggling to keep up.

With that in mind, below are some key items agencies should keep in mind when it comes to their search intelligence infrastructure and how they can get the best out of it.

Agencies only have a fragmented search view

The search landscape is vast and continues to reshape itself on a daily basis. Therefore, having the most comprehensive view of the search landscape and all its nuances is imperative to driving success and making the most informed decisions possible. And data is the key component in building this holistic view.

Incomplete and inaccurate data can not only depress campaign effectiveness but can also have detrimental impacts on an advertiser’s standing versus competitors. For example, without high-quality data insights, it becomes impossible for advertisers to detect when competitors start to encroach on their brand terms – among other things. However, with the proper data tools in place, agencies can build better

strategies for clients so that they can achieve maximum ROI and protect their market position.

Google tools don’t allow for proper performance analysis

While Google does provide a top-level view of search performance it does not nearly do so in the depth that is needed for agencies to be able to properly explain performance to their clients, particularly as it relates to competitor activity. Agencies need to be able to quickly justify why performance has changed and what steps can be taken to address these fluctuations – positive or negative. And Google simply does not allow them to do this. Additionally, without a comprehensive set of insights, it can be very hard for agencies to justify budget needs to their clients as well, and how to counteract the spends that other competitors are dedicating to certain segments. So agencies should be very wary of only relying on Google’s analytics tools.

Explaining the COVID-19 effect

As COVID-19 has disrupted consumer online and search behavior it has also materially impacted the search industry. From differences in the types of searches to a growing prevalence of local search as individuals looking to stay closer to home amid the pandemic, the entire search industry is scrambling to make sense of what may unfold next as a result of the current crisis. In addition, as we continue to move towards the conclusion of the pandemic, search professionals are also being tasked with figuring out which pandemic era trends may stick around and which ones won’t, adding a further layer of complexity to this already hectic period. Questions like, “which industries will emerge first?”, as well as, “which competitors will emerge fastest?” all need to be

answered.

Luckily, by embracing a more ‘whole-market’ approach to data, agencies can quickly make sense of the changes that are occurring and deliver data-driven explanations to clients seeking answers for why an unexpected outcome took place. Furthermore, agencies can keep track of which pandemic era trends seem to have “staying power” and game plan accordingly.

Enabling a holistic view

Given how many different silos exist organizationally at agencies, it isn’t surprising that synthesizing all of the data that exists and reporting on it is hugely labor-intensive. This can be particularly challenging for agencies that are assessing strategies across the full complement of clients’ advertising activity, including traditional channels such as TV and radio along with other digital channels like mobile and paid social in addition to search.

Breaking down the walls that exist between the different branches of agencies is the only way to get the “truth” when it comes to reporting. This means making sure that the data is fully harmonized, comparable, and accessible through an integrated tool that provides the right capabilities for each agency role. AI can also play a critical role in creating fast, highly usable insights that can quickly translate into action. . This integrated and intelligent approach will cut down significantly on time spent generating reports while also making an agency’s performance much more agile, effective, and accurate.

After having to deal with a tremendous amount of upheaval and rethinking over the last decade, the idea of having to adapt is not a new one for agencies. Yet, while agencies have done well to roll with the times thus far, search still represents a bit of a pain point. However, by re-examining the current state of their data operations, agencies can boost

their search intelligence exponentially, while making their entire business more intelligent as well.

Ian O'Rourke is CEO at Adthena and Stephen Davis is the Global Product Leader for Media Intelligence at Kantar, a leading British market research company.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/09/solving-the-agency-search-intelligence-gap/

Image SEO: Best practices and tips for optimization

30-second summary:

- Optimizing images is an often overlooked aspect.
- While images might look great, they often end up with a filename that looks something like IMG982713.jpg that is not very descriptive.
- According to Internet Live Stats, there are 3.5 billion Google searches made every day.
- CannonDesign's Vice President, Communications Director shares some key image SEO tips and best practices to help you use images as an asset in your SEO strategy.

SEO involves a lot of different parts and strategies, some of them can be quick fixes and others can take much longer to implement. So you can see why it's easy to forget something especially for a company that is not used to doing these things and are trying to do SEO for the first time. It's easy

to perhaps overlook some of the smaller steps involved in practicing good on-site SEO. It’s important to remember that every little thing you can do to strengthen your site’s SEO efforts makes a difference and this is especially true if it’s something that other sites may be overlooking.

Optimizing images is an often overlooked aspect. As a site gets planned, designed and images get added more often than not, the images get added without being properly optimized, as long as they look good, the thought of images tends to end there. While the images might look great, they often end up with a filename that looks something like IMG982713.jpg and as you can see, that is not a very descriptive image file name. So without the proper optimization and planning, you’re wasting a valuable SEO asset.

Why is image SEO important?

According to Internet Live Stats, there are 3.5 billion Google searches made every day. And in 2018 Google Images accounted for 22.6% of all internet searches.

Optimizing your site’s images will help with your site’s UX, load time, and improve your site’s rankings in the regular SERPs as well as image search. Image SEO is especially important if you’re an ecommerce site, as you will most likely have hundreds of images, and if not properly optimized you will be missing out on lots of potential traffic and rankings.

Image optimization will play an even larger role in search with the advancement of visual search, by being able to use images to purchase products for example. Google and Bing both use for visual search, Google has their Google Lens and Bing has their visual search.

If the images on your website aren’t properly marked up and optimized, now’s the time to focus your efforts towards that aspect of your site’s SEO.

Ecommerce image optimization

If you run an ecommerce business then you know that SEO is a different beast and how important every little change or tweak that you can do to your site is to help you to gain an edge on the competition.

One of these things is image optimization. Images account for more bytes than any other part of a website, and this is especially true for ecommerce sites, as they tend to have hundreds if not thousands of products and therefore product images. All these product images can have a large impact on your site's performance which can also impact your customer retention and conversions.

This is why optimizing your site's images is one of the best ways to improve website performance and SERP rankings, which is especially beneficial when it comes to large ecommerce sites as all the images can potentially slow down your site and with Google's new upcoming core web vitals update your sites speed is more important now than ever.

Here are six tips on what you can do to help with your site's image optimization + three bonus tips.

1. Create customized image filenames

This is where your image SEO starts, with the image file name. When you are naming your image file names, you'll want to use a descriptive file name that also contains the right keywords for the image. The reason for this is that your image file name will be used to help Google understand what the subject matter of the image is.

It's important to remember that your image's file name is what will inform Google and other search engines as to what your image is about.

For example, a typical let’s take this image file name will look something like “IMG-1234” or something similar. as you might imagine, that image file name will not be of much help to users or Google as nobody would search for that and having that as a file name gives no information to Google either.

Now let’s look at this picture from GSC or Google Search Console for example.

You could simply name it “GSC” or “google-search-console” but if you get more descriptive and name it “google-search-console-traffic-spike” you would be helping users and search engines to better understand the image.

Now, this doesn’t mean you can go back to the days of stuffing keywords in your image file names. Doing that will surely get you penalized and or even banned from Google. Keep your filenames descriptive and straightforward and you’ll be ahead of the game.

Remember, it doesn’t take much effort to rename images to something a little more descriptive unless you have an ecommerce site with hundreds or thousands of products, then it

will take So it’s worth doing and something that will help with your site’s rankings in the long run.

2. Write SEO-friendly image alt text

Alt-text is important for your site’s images as it is what you can use to help provide better image context that in turn will help search engines index your images properly. It is also what will appear if there is something wrong with your image and it fails to load.

Google even mentions the value of alt text in images, saying that alt text provides them with useful information about the image that they can use to help determine the best image to return for a user’s query.

3. Image file size

Your image file size plays an important role in how your site will load for both users and search engines. Having large (file size) images on your site can cause your site to load very slow. With page speed becoming a ranking factor, it’s even more important than before to make sure your site loads in seconds.

Your site’s images can be massive files and that is not helpful when it comes to user experience. This is where optimizing your site’s image file size plays a large role as all the huge file sizes can directly affect your ranking in SERPs and image searches, especially if you have a large ecommerce site with hundreds or even thousands of images.

You can’t afford to reduce your image file size in a haphazard manner, this is something that needs to be done properly, otherwise, you will end up with a low quality looking image. Adobe Photoshop’s ‘Save for Web’ functionality offers one of the best options for you to reduce the image file size without affecting the quality of the image.

If you don’t have access to Adobe Photoshop, there are lots of other great online tools that you can use for free to make these changes. Tinyjpeg is a great tool and so is Google’s very own image compression tool Squoosh.

Squoosh allows you to preview the changes in the quality of your images when you start making changes to your images. You simply just have to drag and drop your image into the web app and you are all set to make the adjustments to your image file size.

As you can see with the above Las Vegas sign image, the left side is the newly reduced file size at 27% smaller than the original on the right. Can you spot the difference in quality?

Once you have made all the changes to your image file sizes, you can then test your site’s page speed with one of the many tools available online.

There are lots of tools that you can use to test your site’s speed, such as WebPageTest.org or Pingdom. Google has a few

great tools that you can use for free to check your site's speed, Lighthouse, Pagespeed Insights, and their page speed tool Test My site.

Loading times are important for UX and SEO, so make sure that you reduce your site's image file sizes to ensure that you have a fast loading site. This tweak to your site will pay off in the long run and is worth the little effort that it takes to make the change.

4. Choose the best image file type

Three main image file types are the most common that you can use across your site, they are JPEG, GIF, and PNG. Each one has its pros and cons. JPEG tends to be the best option as it's the format that provides the best options for maintaining image quality when compressed or resized.

PNG is often used for logos as it gives you the ability to create a small image with a high-quality resolution. You need to be careful though as the higher quality display will result in a larger file size, which could cause issues with your page's performance.

GIFs are similar to PNG files as they are good smaller images, they shouldn't be used on product photos or lagers images.

JPEG is the best option format as it keeps file sizes small without losing image quality and it is also universally supported.

5. Create an image sitemap

Just like a sitemap that you would create for all the pages on your site, creating an image sitemap or adding your images to your current sitemap, will help Google to discover your site's images, increasing the likelihood that your images will be displayed in image search results and generating more site traffic.

> *“Image sitemaps can contain URLs from other domains, unlike regular sitemaps, which enforce cross-domain restrictions. This allows you to use CDNs (content delivery networks) to host images. We encourage you to verify the CDN’s domain name in Search Console so that we can inform you of any crawl errors that we may find.”*
>
> *, says Google*

It’s important that you add your site’s images to a sitemap and especially important if you run an ecommerce business and want all your product images to be indexed. You can add your images to your existing sitemap or create a new sitemap for your images. The main idea is that you want all of your images somewhere in your sitemaps.

Placing your images in a sitemap increases the chances of search engines crawling and indexing your images which can then result in more site traffic.

There are lots of different tools that you can use to help generate your site’s sitemap, these two are a great starting point, but feel free to choose the one that is best suited for your needs.

1. Screaming Frog: Screaming Frog is one of my go-to tools in my SEO arsenal, it’s great desktop software that offers a wide range of SEO tools. It’s also free to use including generating a sitemap as long as your website has fewer than 500 pages. For those of you with larger websites, you’ll need to upgrade the paid version.
2. Yoast: Yoast is a must-have SEO plugin if you are running WordPress, they make it super simple to create a sitemap, by simply toggling a switch.

6. Open Graph and Twitter Cards

By using Facebook’s Open Graph and Twitter Cards on your site,

you will be making sure that your site's content is more clickable, shareable, and noticeable on social media.

Facebook has a comprehensive list of OG tags that you can use across your site but I find that these are the ones that you will want to focus on.

- Og:title
- Og:url
- Og:image
- Og:type
- Og:description

You will want to pay special attention to the og:image tag as this is the most essential Open Graph tag as it is the one that occupies the most social feed real estate.

Twitter Cards work in the same way that Facebook's Open Graph tags work.

Using Twitter's 'Summary Card with Large Image' tag is one that you will want to focus on when it comes to images.

> *"The Summary Card with Large Image features a large, full-width prominent image alongside a tweet. It is designed to give the reader a rich photo experience, and clicking on the image brings the user to your website."*

Once you have your tags in place on your site, you can test them to make sure they're working as expected and are ready for sharing.

You can use these tools to check your site OG tags:

If you take the time to add the HTML code to your site for both Open Graph and Twitter Cards, you can guarantee the image will appear on the social platforms each time your link is shared.

Bonus image optimization tips

Now that you have gone through the six tips for image optimization in 2021, here are three bonus tips to help you further optimize your site's images.

7. Mobile-friendly images

With Google's mobile-first indexing, it's important to think about how your site's images will work on mobile. Just like you would make your site responsive, one thing you might not know is that you can make your sites responsive as well. Having responsive images will ensure that your images will work well on devices with widely differing screen sizes.

8. Image file structure

Google mentions in their updated image guidelines that they use the file path and file name to rank images.

> *"Create good URL structure for your images: Google uses the URL path as well as the file name to help it understand your images. Consider organizing your image content so that URLs are constructed logically."*

So what does this mean for you? Well, let's look at ecommerce optimization again as they usually feature multiple products. A good practice would be to place your images into different category folders that would correspond to your different products instead of just lumping them all into one generic folder.

9. Structured data

To help your images stand out even more you will want to add structured data. By adding structured data to your images, your images can then be displayed as rich results, which would then give users relevant information about your page, which

could then drive better-targeted traffic to your site.

Google Images supports structured data for:

- Product
- Video
- Recipe

Conclusion

Image SEO involves a few different aspects and elements to work to its full potential and search engines like Google and Bing are only going to get better at recognizing these elements.

For comparison, image SEO is relatively easy, as far as SEO goes. It’s not as complex as other aspects of SEO. If you take the time and put a little extra effort into properly optimizing your site’s images for both users and search engines every time you add an image to your website, you can give your pages a little extra edge in the search engines.

Remember, Google, Bing, and other search engines aren’t perfect, so you should try and do everything in your power to help them understand your images and you’ll reap the benefits.

So, before you start uploading and adding images to your site, make sure to follow the image optimization tips and best practices mentioned in this article.

Key takeaways for image SEO best practices and tips for image optimization:

- Create an image sitemap or make sure your images are featured in your sitemap for crawlability and indexability
- Choose the right image file format
- Compress your images for faster page load speed
- Create unique images

- Create optimized image file names
- Write SEO-Friendly alt texts and make sure they are relevant to the page
- Like your site, make sure that your images are mobile-friendly
- Use high-quality and relevant images
- Customize file names
- Add structured data
- Create responsive images
- Create an optimized file structure

Feel free to share your image SEO practices and queries in the comments section.

Michael McManus is Vice President, Communications Director at CannonDesign.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/08/image-seo-best-practices-and-tips-for-optimization/

Seven enterprise SEO strategies and tactics that really work

30-second summary:

- A well-planned Enterprise SEO strategy includes everything that helps a business to dominate Google search.
- Voice search optimization is critical to your SEO

success.

- Striking keyword targeting helpful to get more results in a short time.
- Internal linking can boost time-on-site as well as boost your website’s visibility and rankings.
- Scalability is the key to implement a large scale link-building campaign.
- Structured data is helpful to decorate your content on SERP and boost CTR.
- To add content to capture early to mid-stage, even transactional content, a blog is a great way
- Improving your website EAT is one of the important things to future proof SEO.

Enterprise sites often belong to large corporations, even mid-sized companies that offer a wide range of products and services. A well planned enterprise SEO includes on-page optimization and high-quality content creation. It also helps to penetrate the local market by focusing on local SEO. Enterprise sites have to face cutthroat competition at every stage, particularly from brands with sophisticated SEO strategies.

Let’s take a leading example, Airtel has a good position in the telecom sector but was not in the top three search results. It formulated a comprehensive enterprise SEO strategy by listing over 2000 keywords and by doing complete local optimization. The methodology paid off, and Airtel managed to be in the top three positions with 2100 keywords.

Given below are some beneficial tools to help you in making successful Enterprise SEO strategies:

1. Adopt voice SEO

As the world of search continues to evolve by using voice technology, enterprises must revolutionize their SEO strategy to keep up with these changes. Voice technology has

drastically improved and has become a major digital trend with a vast range of voice-activated technology like Siri, Alexa, Echo, Cortana, and Google Assistant.

Google reports that 27% of the online global population is using voice search on mobile. Moreover, with voice searches, users are provided with the top result rather than a full search engine result page. Hence, enterprises need to stay on the top of their game to attract the highest inbound traffic.

The number of enterprises successfully integrating voice SEO in their marketing strategy is increasing by leaps and bounds. Nestle, the largest food and beverage company, has created a custom-skill for Alexa, supporting voice cooking instructions while the user cooks.

2. Target striking distance keywords

A striking distance keyword is a phrase used to describe a keyword that is not quite at the top of a Google SERPs but, with a little time and planning, could rise to the top of Page 1. In short, we can say it is the keyword that is within striking distance of the top of the first page of Google search. By targeting striking distance keywords, you can easily find the best opportunities by providing better visibility, increasing traffic, and conversions.

If you want a quick way to get keyword wins, identifying Striking Distance keywords, and refreshing your content with them is hands down the way to go.

It gives you a golden opportunity to revisit older content, and optimize the meta, adding new internal/external links, etc. The best thing about this strategy is that it takes little time while giving impressive results.

3. Internal and external linking

Internal links help a viewer stay engaged with your website longer and encourage them to become a customer or follower. These links are easily accessible to viewers and increase the authority of your web pages and website. They are often used as a call-to-action as they might prompt a viewer to read or learn more about a topic by clicking on the internal link, or else ask a viewer to contact you or schedule a visit. Internal links also improve your website’s visibility and rank.

Backlinks (external links) are still one of the top-ranking factors. External links are outbound links from other websites that link to your site. These links improve your site’s credibility by proving that your content is valuable. Moreover, these links are a great way to reach out, make connections, and get your content in the desired limelight. An external link is a source of free traffic for your website and is a crucial element of Google’s search engine algorithm.

4. Featured snippet optimization

The short snippets of text that appear at the top of Google’s search result are called featured snippets. They can be a paragraph, tables, steps, or list. Its matter is automatically taken from web pages in Google’s index. The featured snippet box is referred to as Position 0 as it comes before the no.1 spot on the search page.

The easiest way to earn this spot is by making your substance worthy by bringing forth relevance and quality. Keep your section concise, use headers to break up content sections, and ensure that each section is between 40 to 50 words.

It is mostly questions that bring up featured snippets. Hence, make sure that your sections answer how, when, where, who, what, and why. Include photos and videos as people love to learn visually.

99% of all featured snippets are from pages already ranked in the top ten SERPs in Google search. Hence, if you are already on the first page, you just need to format your matter the right way for featured snippets. If you have missed that slot, then no need to be disheartened as, by the end of this article, you will earn the best ways to get there.

5. Structure data

If you are looking forward to making Google understand your site better, start using structured data. It is a standardized method to provide information about a web page.

Just like any other programming languages, structured data needs to be in the correct syntax to provide immediate and easy to follow facts and figures. There are different sets of

vocabularies like Schema.org and Microformats.org, and different syntaxes, like JSON-LD and Microdata, used for structured data. Google has laid down quality guidelines for using schema markup.

One-third of Google search results include a rich snippet with Schema.org markup. The rich snippets help your web page appear eminently on the search engine result page (SERP).

One of its benefits is enhanced search results by making your data visually appealing and providing relevant information that accelerates traffic and improves CTR (click-through rate). In case your enterprise site uses AMP (Accelerated Mobile Pages), then include structured data markup on both AMP and regular pages.

6. The E-A-T approach

If you are planning to take the spotlight in an online search, then you have to strengthen your E-A-T strategy, meaning expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. As per Google’s Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines, EAT is used to assess content creators, web pages, and web sites.

Google wants to make sure that the information it suggests is authentic and comes from the experts in that niche. So, how do you make your content and website more authoritative and trustworthy? Links, mentions, shares, and reviews can help you build your authority and enhance your online reputation.

Google looks for the highest level of standardization for the Your Money, Your Life (YMYL) sites that have a crucial impact on your safety, security, and stability.

There are no shortcuts to gain expertise, authority, and trustworthiness. With proper E-A-T strategies, your business can have a positive online presence and undoubtedly the top spot in Google search.

7. Become a content machine (blogging)

Around 20 years ago, Bill Gates said, “Content is king”. This phrase is pretty relevant even today. Having a blog for your company website is still important and useful. Blogs bring forth the multimedia representation of your business, they keep the audience interested, generate trust, and creatively present your services.

By utilizing various SEO techniques like titles, keywords, internal and external links, the blog post can attain high visibility, thus helping your brand to get in front of hundreds of people. Every new blog adds a new page to your website, giving search engines more reason to re-crawl your website to find new subject matter. It also helps in keeping your website updated and fresh. Blogging works well to generate more diverse search results that your website is not able to attract otherwise.

Conclusion

As the search engines’ algorithms are getting smarter day by day, the competition to rank on Page 1 is getting more difficult. Enterprise SEO can boost rankings, drive more organic traffic, and increase conversions. Right now, you may not be at the top of the search page, but with the right tactics and strategies, you can be a master of your game. Moreover, this is not an exhaustive list. You can try Page Speed Optimization, multi-channel marketing, and more. But the mentioned SEO strategies are the most fundamental ones that every enterprise must follow.

In the end, remember, a successful Enterprise SEO campaign attunes the short-term and long-term goals and contributes to the overall marketing plan.

Harpreet Munjal is the Founder of SEO services company, LoudGrowth.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/08/seven-enterprise-seo-strategies-and-tactics-that-really-work/

The future of Google and what it means for search

30-second summary:

- Something that all of us in the search industry are guilty of is our over-reliance on Google telling us what is coming next.
- Understanding Google's considerations as a business, provide context to many of its recent decisions and provides a sense of what is coming down the road.
- Global digital agency Croud's Organic Strategy Director looks discusses the future of Google, right from Google's antitrust lawsuit to Apple as a future rival, and more.

It occurs to me that I am part of a cult.

Or at least, something that displays the hallmarks of one. An unchallenged authoritarian leadership, prophets and oracles who deign to share only select information from a mysterious entity, who engage in coercive behaviors, who punish for non-

compliance, and followership who are indoctrinated into special teachings and practices and whom parrot back the mantras and sayings of the leaders. Yes, I of course refer to the SEO industry and yes, you may take a small pause here to go through the above statement to see if it works. It does.

Something that all of us in the search industry are guilty of is our over-reliance on Google telling us what is coming next. Whether through announcing prescriptive updates on Google Search Central or retrospectively announcing algorithm updates on Twitter – we rely too heavily on the limited information Google shares with us and, as such, only get a very short-sighted view on the future of our industry.

This needs to change, and in order for that to happen, we need to stop thinking of Google as a search engine.

Google is first and foremost a business, and as such has a responsibility to its shareholders to continue to defend and grow its market capitalization. Understanding Google's considerations as a business, provide context to many of its recent decisions and provides a sense of what is coming down the road.

Section 230 in the spotlight – Google to factor truth in determining search results

The Storming of the US Capitol came as the culmination of a five-year disinformation campaign that went unchallenged and unadulterated by big tech. They cited concerns over the First Amendment, freedom of speech, and public interest as the reasons for a lack of intervention on even the most palpable mistruths, but the events at the Capitol prompted a shift change. Twitter and Facebook de-platformed Donald Trump, Google removed dangerous channels that called for violence

from YouTube, and Apple, Google, and Amazon joined forces to take down Parler.

Though the events at the Capitol provoked big tech into action, the shadow of the incoming Biden-Harris administration had already moved them into action (Twitter flagging Trump's tweets, for instance). As part of the ongoing swathe of antitrust cases against big-tech, protections currently available for platforms under Section 230 will be thrust into the spotlight for review. The crux of it is whether or not platforms are treated as the publisher of third-party content. Currently, platforms are not treated as the publisher and therefore resign any responsibility for the content that appears on their platforms.

Biden, during his election campaign, said,

> *"The idea that it's a tech company is that Section 230 should be revoked, immediately should be revoked, number one. For Zuckerberg and other platforms." He added, "It should be revoked because it is not merely an internet company. It is propagating falsehoods they know to be false."*

His recent appointee, Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo, has told lawmakers that she will pursue changes to Section 230.

If – and it seems likely – Section 230 is at least amended, this evidently raises issues for big tech. It is unlikely that it will be completely revoked – such a decision would likely have a net negative effect. It is more likely that Google will need to demonstrate efforts to moderate content at scale, and have a mechanism by which content flagged by users or other parties. Such mechanisms already exist – such as the 'Right to be Forgotten' (in the EU) or DMCA takedown requests for copyright infringements. In these cases, individual URLs can be flagged by users and organizations. Though a much bigger undertaking, in this case, it is likely that such a process will be used to deal with issues of veracity, libel,

incitement to violence, and so on. The difficulties here will be firstly manpower to deal with these requests, and secondly the criteria by which these complaints are assessed.

What does this mean for search?

Websites that produce editorial and opinion-based content will need to be confident that what they produce will not contravene guidelines agreed by big tech and governments. Individual infringements might see de-indexing of individual URLs, but continued and flagrant non-conformity could see full domains removed from search results entirely (as is the case with DMCA takedowns).

Antitrust – Google loses market share in search

There are numerous antitrust lawsuits currently filed against Google, which examine its monopoly status in the search market. Google has an estimated almost 90% share of the search market in the US, and this is the foundation upon which its gargantuan online advertising business rests. Its path to monopoly may have seemed organic to most, but the tactics the company used to secure such dominance are now under scrutiny. The purchase of DoubleClick in 2007 gave Google end-to-end ownership of the process of matching advertisers to users, which many at the time raised as a concern, in that it would give Google too much power in this space. The purchase of the Android operating system also allowed Google to push its apps, such as Google Search, YouTube, Gmail, Maps, and more onto nine out of 10 mobile devices sold globally each year.

All of the above, and more, will be considered in the DoJ's case against Google. The precedent for such a case was set by the EU Commission where it determined that Google had broken antitrust laws by abusing its market dominance with Android and had to pay a fine of five billion dollars. Included within

the decision, was a ruling that for all new Android devices, Google must offer users a choice in their default search engine. Google created an auction system for rival search engines to appear in the “choice screen”, leading many to once again accuse it of abusing its market dominance for profit, and placing barriers to entry for smaller players that cannot compete. DuckDuckGo wrote a blog post that stated, “This EU antitrust remedy is only serving to further strengthen Google’s dominance in mobile search by boxing out alternative search engines that consumers want to use and, for those search engines that remain, taking most of their profits from the preference menu.”

There is precedent for such an approach to introduce competition, with a similar case launched by Russia’s competition watchdog, and Yandex growing market share by 20% in the years post its introduction. However, it seems to have had little impact in the EU thus far, with smaller search engines either unable to afford to compete in the auction or, even when doing so, getting little traction from it. This could be because the choice screen is only displayed on new Android devices, and, according to the rather cumbersomely named Executive Vice President of the European Commission for A Europe Fit for the Digital Age, Margrethe Vestager,

> *“very few Android phones have been shipped due to the Covid crisis.”*

In this case, it may be too early to make a strong conclusion as to the effectiveness of measures.

Watching this all from across the Atlantic, the DoJ has slowly collected and built evidence to take on Google. There are a number of different cases, some looking over the aforementioned issues and some looking at new potential avenues to introduce competition to the search industry. The Justice Department has cast its net wide and spoken to third

parties within the advertising industry, as well as search competitors as to their thoughts on how to reduce Google's market share. One such line of enquiry was around which parts of Google's vast ecosystem it could be forced to sell off. One leading suggestion; Chrome.

Now, they didn't ask me but had they, I would have said why not force them to spin off the second biggest search engine – YouTube.

Apple – A future rival to Google Search?

Another big investigation point is Google's continued payments to Apple to remain the default search engine on its devices. It pays $12 billion to do so and has said that if this were ever challenged, it would amount to a code red scenario for the business. However, as an active part of the antitrust lawsuits, this could be something that becomes a reality for Google. In such a scenario, would Apple open up a bidding war for the opportunity, or would it do something fairly shocking… create its own search engine.

Apple has already begun to tantalize the market with a couple of nods in this direction. First, in 2018 it hired the former Head of Search from Google, John Giannandrea. Second, it is hiring a huge amount of search engineers. Third, Applebot has significantly increased its crawling activity recently. Fourth, in the iOS 14 update, Apple has started showing its own search results when a search is made from the home screen. Fifth, it updated its Applebot guidelines last year in a way that is remarkably similar to guidelines in Google's Developer Blog. Included are guidance for webmasters around the robots.txt and noindex tags and even what it takes into account for 'Search Rankings'.

If Apple were to enter the space, it would be the first true

contender for Google from a search perspective. Although Google's years of development and investment into its search ecosystem would certainly be a high barrier to entry, Apple's massive user base and commitment to privacy would certainly capture a significant portion of market share. In such an event, how would this impact the web? If Google and Apple deviated from each other in search ranking factors – could SEOs be in the position where we have to dance different dances for different masters. Even if Apple does not enter the market, effective antitrust legislation would open up the market for new compelling offerings such as Neeva, You, and Mojeek, as well as existing search engines – such as DuckDuckGo, Ecosia, Baidu, and Bing – attracting more market share. Many of these offer Privacy as a major selling point – and as these issues become more evident in the public consciousness, there will likely be a gradual ebb of users to these other engines. There is a greater risk, however, that in the very public antitrust case, if any major news breaks around how Google uses data collected in search engines, that it could see a max exodus of its user base, as happened recently with WhatsApp and the flocking to Telegram and Signal.

What does this mean for search?

- If Google loses dominance in search, SEOs will need to be fluent in multiple search engines' best practices. Though likely to be similar in some regards, other search engines may not use, or weight, ranking factors in the same way. They might also have different features in their search results. Consider how different Google and Baidu search results are for instance.
- Adoption of different search engines could vary across markets, demographics and audiences, and therefore specific verticals may align their websites more to the best practices of one rather than another.
- Reporting and analysis of the 'Organic' channel will

become more complex and have a higher cost base.

The battle for ecommerce heats up

Covid has created many new trends and behaviors but has just as importantly served as a catalyst for many pre-existing trends. The penetration of ecommerce as a percentage of total retail sales skyrocketed during the early stages of the global pandemic and has remained high ever since. Amazon was the largest beneficiary of this trend, with its share of ecommerce sales in the US at a whopping 47%. This statistic, and the fact that more product searches begin on Amazon than any other platform, spurred Google into action.

In 2019, Google made clear its intent to recapture market share in this space, with a somewhat understated relaunch of its Shopping platform. It seemed the plan was to slowly capture market share with a gradual introduction of new features across its platform. With the arrival of Covid, however, it began to release features rapidly. Free organic shopping listings came out of nowhere, and the new Google Pay app, which allows retailers to offer targeted coupons and deals to users, is a bold offering.

One of Google's more unique offerings in this space is enabling and facilitating ROPO (research online, purchase offline) behavior. Its acquisition of Pointy, a software allowing local retailers to list their inventory online and appear in local results, will greatly increase the importance of listing optimization for products and services. Product searches already have a filter for nearby – which will certainly abet impulsive purchases.

Additionally, local has already slowly been building up its integration services with booking engines to allow users to book or buy directly through local listings.

Google will continue this process of "ecommercification" of

its ecosystem. With the likes of Instagram and Pinterest looking to commercialize their content by allowing people to buy products directly from their platform, Google has been fairly transparent about its intentions to do the same with YouTube in the near future. The role of video has largely been seen as an awareness medium up until now, but changes here could very quickly see the video platform having a much more immediate relationship to conversion.

What does this mean for search?

- Local search becomes far more important as both an awareness and conversion channel – especially for brands that invest in joined-up experiences across online and offline.
- The value of video and YouTube content is made clearer, playing an increasingly important role in both awareness and conversion for brands. Image search too.
- Augmented Reality features may be integrated into search results. This has already been tested with Dogs and Dinosaurs, but the early adopters' program documentation demonstrates this is clearly to be used for ecommerce.
- Expect further opportunities for brands listing their product inventory on Google and a more advanced version of the fairly rudimentary analytics product currently on offer.

An ever-changing landscape

The above outlines just a few examples of the challenges facing Google as a business, which will likely have a tangible impact on search. Here are a few other areas we'll be keeping a close eye on in the coming months:

- Google's acquisition of Fitbit and how this might be used in its Google Health arm
- Drone delivery legislation, which could enable

Alphabet’s drone delivery company Wing to enter the fulfillment space
- Australia’s new law forcing Google to pay news publishers for the right to link to their content, and the way News might appear in search results
- Android being installed as a leading main operating system in driverless cars, and the potential impact on search

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More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/05/the-future-of-google-and-what-it-means-for-search/

Semantic search drives expanded outreach to potential customers

30-second summary:

- Semantic search enables retailers to reach a broader audience of potential consumers who are outside their traditional targeted approach.
- For semantic search to be effective, websites must provide a rich landscape of relevant content for

context.
- Effectively influencing semantic search requires the right tools and technology to achieve results.

Search capability is an obvious, integral aspect of any online marketing. But, more savvy marketers look beyond the traditional lexical search capability where the search engine looks for exact matches to a query or search term and respond with a text tag to a specific keyword set to also explore the viability of semantic search. Taking intent and contextual meaning into account broadens the search and is beneficial to those retailers attempting to reach an audience who might not know exactly what they want but are interested in starting a purchase journey.

Taking search to the next level

Using retargeting and social ads is effective to reach out to a group of potential consumers based on what you think your customer base looks like and your established profiles. You need to be visible in that space for a chance to win that business. However, it’s not enough to reach out to those who likely fit your traditional personas. It’s vital to think both in terms that are broader and more refined by being visible to those who are interested in what you have to offer but might not yet know about your product or brand.

Paid search is a tried and true method for reaching customers who already are raising their hand to say they’re interested in what you have to offer. It’s the digital advertising channel to ensure you show up in the right space to meet customers where they’re already searching. That’s great if you sell lawnmowers or boat lifts and someone is searching for a specific type or brand of lawnmower or boat lift. However, what if a customer has only a vague idea in mind and isn’t searching for a specific product or service? Semantic search takes paid search to a new level by considering both

contextual meaning and the intent behind the search. It leverages machine learning to better understand what a customer is looking for and appropriately applies a response.

Making semantic search work

To influence semantic search, you must have current content, with all your alt tags, and image tags that are current and relevant to the specific audiences you want to reach. The algorithms within the search change constantly, so to stay in the game you have to offer enough relevant content to provide surrounding context. Everyone knows about SEO, but you need enough substance around the terms for them to rank. For semantic search to be effective, there has to be enough content material to support the full meaning of the concepts.

That content runs the gamut from localized landing pages and website experiences to specific brand pages on a retailer's site. It includes key product descriptions, promotional information, and local dealer information. Whether it's a product catalog page, a promo page, or a basic conversion landing page, all the content feeds into the algorithms to give the site a fair chance to rank in a search.

Moving from search to viable consumer action

If you're a retailer who sells a range of products, channeling a prospective customer to the right information is critical. A dealer who sells lawn equipment, power tools, and hardware might show up when someone searches for mowers but the key is to direct that inquiry to specific information on the brand and product at your store. The customer might only know he wants to find out about lawn equipment, the context of semantic search can help you to direct him to the section of your site with information about a specific brand of mower you

want to sell.

By responding to a potential customer’s search with relevant, contextual information, you’re streamlining the search process and putting them on a more concentrated conversion path to purchase. From the retailer perspective, there’s more actionable information on a viable sales lead. This consumer has let the retailer know of a valid interest, now the retailer can follow up and close a sale.

By taking advantage of semantic search opportunities, a retailer offers a potential customer more tangible, relevant information on a product of interest, and the retailer has a clear path to an already interested buyer for a specific product. The consumer learns about what he wants to find without having specific product knowledge beforehand, and the retailer has direct access to an interested customer.

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More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/04/semantic-search-drives-expanded-outreach-to-potential-customers/

Taking your SEO content beyond the acquisition

30-second summary:

- The typical advice around merely improving on the content already ranking at the top of the SERP is fundamentally flawed.
- SEOs often limit their content possibilities by thinking of SEO content from purely acquisitional point of view.
- Thinking of content from a branding perspective leads to differentiation and aligns with Google's focus on topical expertise and authority.
- Emerging AI writing technology may not be symmetrical with Google's evolving algorithm.

I have a bone to pick with the way our industry thinks about content. In general, I think we often don't appreciate what good content really is. Nor do I think we consider what should go into creating great content. Here, in specific, I want to challenge the notion that all content is "acquisition" content.

I don't just mean landing pages, but blog posts as well. That's right, not all content should be created with the objective of getting more conversions or even more traffic to your site.

Does that sound outlandish? Perhaps. But by the time you finish reading this, you might agree with me. (Although let's be honest, you probably won't).

SEO from a branding perspective

I often think of SEO from a branding perspective. I know, you're probably thinking, "Well, that's a crazy statement right there!". Outlandish as it might sound, thinking of SEO in terms of branding will greatly impact how you see "SEO content". Why? Because in terms of mindset, content creation and branding are very similar.

Let’s substitute “your brand” with “your site” because your site is your brand to both users and search engines.

Think of your site as your brand. Just like you think about your brand’s identity and perception—that’s how you should think about your site because that’s how it’s seen by Google.

We, as SEOs, might refer to this as your site’s “trust” and “authority.” When you break those concepts down fundamentally, what you’re really talking about is how your site is being perceived based on what it’s meant to be doing (that is, its identity).

In other words, what would the fundamental problem be with a site that offered cancer treatment advice while peddling payday loans? It would be the perception that the health advice is, at best, “tainted”. Even if the site wasn’t “seedy” and offered cancer treatment advice as well as investment advice, there would be a severe lack of identity.

In many fundamental ways, things like E-A-T and brand identity (and subsequently, perception) are the same thing.

So let’s ask, if you wanted your brand to be perceived as trustworthy and authoritative how would you go about writing your content? What would your content look and sound like?

That kind of content would have to be substantial, nuanced and detailed. Most importantly, it would have to be unique. Having brand identity that is borrowed from another brand is entirely antithetical to having your own brand identity. This would apply to everything from an in-depth blog post to a product image or description. Brand identity and differentiation go hand in hand. Differentiation and nuance go hand in hand. Do you see where I’m going here?

Does your “SEO content” sound like this? Are we hyper-focused on differentiation?

Quite the opposite. A lot of the basic advice you hear about writing “good SEO content” is about replicating what the top-ranking sites are doing already.

The typical “content for SEO” is irksome

The typical advice about creating “SEO content” flies in the face of content that has a unique identity and brand value. Namely, it often calls on folks to see what’s ranking on the top of the SERP and make sure the topics that the top-ranking sites cover make their way to your content as well. Differentiation is damned.

Worse, this advice is often directed to new SEOs and it’s presented without a hint that there’s more to the story here.

Obviously, surveying the top-ranking pages and taking some ideas away is a fine thing to do. However, it does not create unique value. Skyscraper content, as it’s often called, doesn’t help you differentiate your content in any substantial way.

For those of you who adhere to the notion of simply improving upon what currently ranks let me ask you, would you take the same approach with your brand?

Would you be happy with a brand identity that was simply a take on another brand’s identity? That kind of feels a bit cheap and it isn’t a truly effective branding strategy.

Why is your content any different?

Is regurgitating what’s already out there going to help your content stand out or be memorable? (The answer is no in case you were really wondering)

By the way, there is a fundamental flaw in this approach.

Namely, it rests on the assumption that what is there already is the best that it can possibly be. But, isn't it entirely possible that Google would prefer content that took the topic from a totally different angle? Isn't it possible that the content already ranking isn't the best, but is simply the best Google has at the moment? What if you were to take a new approach or introduce new relevant subtopics that other pages don't? Isn't there a chance that you would rank and not those other pages?

However, if you only look at content that's already ranking, you won't think about the content that people really want and need, that doesn't exist yet. That's potentially a huge opportunity that you'd be missing out on.

So, why is this tolerated? Why do we spread the idea that all it takes is a wee bit of keyword research and some surveying of the ranking sites?

I believe it comes down to mindset. We generally think of content as acquisitional and that's a bit problematic.

The problem with thinking about content as purely acquisitional

When you think of content as being purely acquisitional, you become blinded by the drug that is acquisition. When your sole goal is acquisition you're not thinking about things like:

- What's genuinely good for the user?
- How do I differentiate my content?
- What does my content say about my brand?

The idea of content being acquisitional is not intrinsically problematic. Content should bring in new users, it should generate traffic, it should result in sales…but it should also do more.

Content should help give identity to your site. It should create relationships with users. It should lend an air of authority and expertise to your site. (We're right back at the whole E-A-T thing again because branding and E-A-T are two peas in a pod)

However, we don't live in a world of identity, relationships, and authority. Our world consists of clicks, traffic, conversions, sales, and so forth. In turn, we distort content, which in this author's opinion is not fundamentally about acquisition, into only being about acquisition.

It's not hard to see how a mentality that revolves around seeing what already works and replicating it came to dominate our industry. Things like identity and consumer trust, well those are "marketing" concepts. What do they have to do with SEO? SEO is about traffic. Let's create content that brings in that traffic, no?

Except, I would argue, SEO is not that at all. Search engines are looking at who your site is and what it claims to be (and if the content you have aligns with that). They are judging your expertise and authority. They want to match the user with helpful content that aligns to query intent.

Search engines don't care about your traffic and conversions. They care about users, much the way that a more 'brand-centric' outlook on SEO would care about how a user perceives a website.

What should content be created for if not the acquisition of more sales or traffic?

So if you're not writing content for acquisition then who and what are you writing content for? I don't know, how about your audience or potential audience? (I'm referring to creating

content for the user, so cliche, I know.)

There are various starting points when thinking about content that serves users. One of which is thinking about yourself and your site and how the content you create represents you. Because once you do, you sure are not going to want to put out anything that presents you the wrong way.

I don't want to get into the whole "is keyword research dead" debate (it's dead, it's not really a debate). Do what you want with your keywords. I don't care about your keywords, I care about your content.

Your content is you. The content you have on your site is who you are to the users who visit your site. Your content is branding. There isn't a way around that. So while you've been focused on scraping every topic and subtopic you can from your competitors, your users (can we call them readers?) are asking why your content looks and feels like every other piece of content they've come across. Congratulations.

(By the way, I personally believe search engines are most likely saying the same thing. That is, what is the real value in ranking this page over what's already there, if fundamentally, they are the same?)

Traffic and growth and conversions or however you want to frame this is not a linear equation. Driving more traffic or getting more conversions is a complex and messy endeavor. You can't just think about what is immediately in front of you. How users feel about your site and perceive your brand over time is an important part of the equation. The content your readers consume, whether it be a product description or a blog post, define you and your brand. That can determine if they return to your site, recommend your site, link to your site, mention your site, and so forth.

Is this not part of SEO? Because if it is, that only happens when you do things like thinking about content from a

“perception” or “branding” (or whatever you want to call it) point of view.

Moreover, thinking of your content and your site overall from a brand authority perspective naturally hones your topical focus. It forces you to create substantial content that reflects well on who you are. And as I mentioned earlier, that topical focus gives your site identity to both users (in the form of brand identity) and to search engines (in the form of, “hey, this site comprehensively tackles this topic over multiple posts, let’s rank them for this topic across the board”).

But this only happens if you step back from the acquisition mindset and think of your content from a wider and less strictly “traditional SEO” perspective. This only happens when you write content that’s differentiated, that focuses on quality, and that isn’t about making sure you cover certain topics for the sake of covering a certain topic.

What I am trying to say is that content is naturally closer to branding than it is to SEO (at least SEO as many of us know it). If you don’t look at your content from a branding/perception point of view you are fundamentally missing out on what content is.

That, in turn, means creating strong and quality content will be an uphill battle for you. And that means that ranking long term is also going to be an uphill battle for you, as Google continues to refine how it understands language and how it profiles sites.

Succinctly, instead of asking “how will this content get me more traffic?”, ask yourself, ‘“How will this content make me look to my users?”. That will put you on the path to writing unique, helpful content.

GPT-3, it’s a trap!

I could end the piece here, but I have one more “concern” that needs to be addressed. AI writers.

Do I think AI writers, namely GPT-3 will be good at writing a product description? Yes, I do. I think AI writers will ultimately do a wonderful job with something like a product description.

Do I think AI writers, namely GPT-3, will be good at writing something titled, “A Speculative Critique of Relativity from a Quantum Physics Perspective”? Absolutely not. Do you?

As this field rapidly develops I want to issue a warning: don’t fall into the trap. Don’t think that you can get away with using something like GPT-3 to write a deeply nuanced and differentiated article or blog post.

Yes, I do think people will try to do just that. Why? Because of the same acquisition mindset, I complained about earlier. When it comes to more substantial content, an AI writer just can’t deliver the nuance and quality that you need to make a difference.

As I see it the danger is that it’s easy to get caught up in emerging technology and go all-in on it. Just remember, Google is also an emerging technology, and a lot of what it’s doing in the algorithm stands in contradiction to the full-on adoption of AI written content.

While the emergence of AI writers might make it easier to create content, you could be creating the very content that Google does not want. And while something like GPT-3 would, all things being equal, work well on a landing page, the content it produces for a topic your blog handles may need more nuance and depth.

Of course, all of this hinges on thinking there is a world of

content beyond acquisition fluff. (If you love fluff, go ahead GPT-3 yourself to death.)

Feel the perception pressure

How do users perceive your site? How do they feel about you after reading the content on your site or interacting with your site? Thinking about your site's perception can be a pathway to creating content that is substantial and ultimately effective (and I mean from an SEO point of view).

The problem is when we get so caught up in linear metrics that we don't even feel that pressure. When SEO content creation becomes a hustle to outrank whatever is currently at the top of the SERP it sacrifices perspective. That perspective can be the difference between being another piece of the same ol' content versus being something both users and search engines value.

End the hustle.

Mordy Oberstein is Liaison to the SEO Community at Wix.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/02/taking-your-seo-content-beyond-the-acquisition/

Five ways to use VPN in digital marketing

30-second summary:

- 26 percentage of the marketers think they misuse their budgets, so they constantly look for innovative tools to work more efficiently – and VPN might be an answer.
- Virtual private network (VPN) ensures browsing privacy, but marketers can also benefit by connecting to its various servers around the globe.
- With VPN, marketers can watch YouTube ads as they're shown in particular countries, improve their SEO with trending keywords or perform competitor analysis in other markets.

As over 90 percentage of money spent on digital banners is wasted and up to 69 percentage of websites' content passes unnoticed, marketers think they misuse 26 percentage of their marketing budget. With expenditures on digital marketing reaching up to $332.84 billion in 2020, marketing teams around the globe are employing innovative methods to improve brands' digital presence and stay in the spotlight. Instead of relying solely on human input, they utilize marketing automation tools and adjust their strategies according to analytics data. On top of that, to avoid further costs, some employ Virtual Private Network (VPN), a tool mainly used for establishing a secure and private connection to the internet.

> *"VPNs are associated with security and privacy, but users are also able to connect to the servers around the globe. This means a marketer from the US can view the website as if they resided in Asia or Europe",*

says Juta Gurinaviciute, the Chief Technology Officer at NordVPN Teams.

Although security doesn't seem to be among the biggest concerns for marketing agencies, the example of WPP, the world's largest advertising agency, shows otherwise. The

cyberattack cost them up to $15 million to remediate, not to mention the value of compromised marketing data of both company and its customers. Agencies across the globe, however, can also discover VPN’s wider applications in marketing.

Five VPN benefits for marketers

1. SEO improvements

Trending topics and search keywords differ around the globe and VPN can help access the web as if your marketing agency was located in the designated country or region. Thus search engines show marketers the results pages according to the chosen location. Understanding what dominates organic search in the chosen country is rewarding, as businesses that are listed on the first page of search engine results draw 92 percentage of organic traffic.

2. Search engine marketing

Google’s Economic Impact survey assumes that enterprises receive $2 revenue for each dollar invested in Google Ads and it makes paid ads as important as the organic reach. To make the most out of it, marketers have to know what the top bidders in specific locations are and analyze their ads in detail. Instead of relying on statistics and metrics, with VPN they can study the digital marketing landscape “in the wild” – just as the customer sees it.

3. YouTube advertising

In recent years the most popular video platform also ranks as the second most popular website. VPN services allow marketers to peek at the YouTube ads as if they are shown in other regions and change their strategy and content accordingly.

4. Competitor analysis

Marketers can utilize VPN to change their IP address in order to skim through competitors' websites, blogs, ads, or keywords without them knowing the origin of web traffic. The constant monitoring of the competition helps find SEO backlink opportunities or discover the negative customer feedback. Sneak-peeking your competition shouldn't resort to espionage and other grey-zone techniques, but leaving no digital footprint is understandable.

5. Secure connection

The primary purpose of a VPN is to ensure a safe and private connection to the internet. The secure connection is crucial to every marketer, be it an in-house professional working from home or a freelancer using a café's public Wi-Fi. Attackers always try to leverage unprotected networks and get their hands on sensitive data – and there's plenty on every marketer's devices. For example, by exposing several environment config files, the digital marketing agency, teamDigital, has put the sensitive data of their clients – big names, such as NFL, Mastercard, or Soundcloud – in danger. Until such vulnerability is fixed, VPN allows marketers to work securely by encrypting their entire web sessions.

In a world of cyber-threats and ruthless competition, a VPN isn't an optional extra: it's part of an overall security strategy and could be also utilized as a well-configured marketing operation.

Word of advice

VPN ensures browsing privacy by routing your network traffic through remote servers worldwide. In the event of a breach, that information can be compromised, therefore it is recommended to use the service that also encrypts the data and

protects it against cyberattacks. Some providers also offer the so-called KillSwitch feature which cuts the connection if the VPN network suddenly drops. Users should carefully evaluate free VPN services as it has its own pros and cons. It is also crucial to use the service properly: make sure it is always on, especially when connecting to a public Wi-Fi network or an unfamiliar hotspot, and don’t forget to secure your end-user devices with antivirus software and firewall to further enhance security.

Juta Gurinaviciute is Chief Technology Officer at NordVPN Teams.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2021/02/01/five-ways-to-use-vpn-in-digital-marketing/