

The Problem With Always-On SEO: Why You Need Sprints, Not Checklists via @sejournal, @coreydmorris

There's a lot that goes into SEO. And, now, more broadly into being found online and online visibility overall, whether we're talking about an organic result in a search engine, an AI Overview, or through a large language model (LLM).

With SEO being a discipline that often takes a long time (compared to ads and some other channels and platforms), with a large amount of complexity, technical aspects, contradictions of how it works, and even disagreements, it has to be organized in a way that can be implemented.

Over the years and decades, this has resulted in the acceptance of specific "best practices," along with the fact that it is a longer-term commitment. That, ultimately, has led to the use of checklists and specific cadences to accomplish what is typically seen as an "ongoing" and never-ending discipline.

In full disclosure, you'll find articles written by me that talk about checklists and ways to structure the work that is important to be visible and found online. I'm not saying we have to throw them out, but we can't simply do the list or activities.

"Always-on SEO" sounds great in theory: ongoing optimization, constant monitoring, and steady progress. But in reality, it often becomes a nebulous set of tasks without priority,

strategy, or momentum.

This article challenges the default mindset of treating SEO as a perpetual checklist and proposes a sprint-based approach, where work is grouped into focused time blocks with measurable goals.

By approaching SEO in strategic sprints, teams can prioritize, measure, adapt, and improve – all while staying aligned with larger business goals.

The Problem With Perpetual SEO Checklists

What I often see with SEO checklists is a lack of prioritization. Everything becomes a task, but nothing is deemed critical.

The checklist might have “right” and “good” things in it, but it isn’t weighted or prioritized based on any level of strategic approach or potential level of impact.

And, when there’s a lack of direction, we often can end up with a set of actions, activities, or tactics that have no clear end or evaluation defined. This ends up getting us into a place of just “doing SEO” without being able to objectively say what the result was or how things were improved.

Like any digital marketing channel, activity without the right anchor or foundation, in SEO, can result in wasted effort.

Technical fixes and content updates may not support meaningful business goals and can be a huge investment of time and money that ultimately don’t impact the business. And, activity without results or clear direction can drive SEO teams and professionals to boredom or burnout.

I’ve taken over a number of situations where a business

thought SEO didn't work for them or that the team was not competent enough due to stakeholder confusion.

When activity doesn't generate results and you find it out a year into an investment, it is hard to recover, especially when no one really knows what "done" or what success looks like in the effort.

I say all of this not to bring up pain, say that checklists aren't good, or even that the ongoing tactics aren't right. I'm simply saying we have to have a deeper understanding and meaning behind what we're doing in SEO.

What Sprint-Based SEO Looks Like

SEO sprints are focused and time-bound (e.g., four weeks) efforts with specific goals tied to strategy. Rather than working on everything at once, you work on the highest-impact priorities in chunks.

Common sprint types:

- Content optimization sprints.
- Technical SEO fix sprints.
- Internal linking improvement sprints.
- New content creation sprints.
- Authority/link building sprints.

You can also combine types into a custom sprint. Regardless of whether you stay in a category or make one that contains blended themes or tactics, it needs to be anchored to an initial strategy, plan, or audit for your first one.

Each sprint ends with measurable outputs, documented outcomes, and clear learnings. The first one might be rooted in an initial plan, but each subsequent sprint will include a retrospective review from the previous one to help fuel continuous learning, efficiencies, improvements, and ultimate impact.

Benefits Of SEO Sprints

A quick win benefit is gaining focus. Pivoting away from a generic checklist to sprint structure results in solving a defined problem, not tackling a vague backlog.

As noted earlier, sprints are time-based as well. By having the right length (not too short or small of a sample size, yet too long and repeating tactics that aren't effective), you gain the benefits of agility and an adaptable longer-term approach overall.

Agility in sprints allows you to adjust based on performance and new insights. Checklists are not only generic or often disconnected from strategy, but are getting out of date constantly with shifts in online visibility optimization sources and methods.

Accountability and team clarity come more naturally as well. It's easier to report on and justify value with clear before/after comparisons and to keep people engaged and in the know on what's happening now and what's next.

This matters for overall business alignment of key performance indicators (KPIs) and not getting too deep and lost in the jargon, technical aspects, and "hope" for return on investment (ROI) versus seeing shorter-term, higher-impact efforts.

Sprints can be tied directly to goals (revenue, lead generation, funnel support) and not just rankings or other KPIs that are upstream and further removed from business outcomes, and shorter-term expectations can take pressure off of long-term waiting for something to happen.

How To Implement Sprint-Based SEO

Start with strategy. Identify what matters to the business and where SEO fits. Define sprint themes and objectives, and make

them specific enough to be meaningful and measurable.

Example: “Improve organic conversions for top 5 services pages” vs. “Improve rankings.”

Build a backlog or tactics plan, but don’t treat it like a checklist. Use it to feed sprint plans, but not overwhelm day-to-day work.

In short:

- **Plan your first sprint:** Choose one clear objective, timeline, and outcome.
- **Track and review:** Report on progress, document what was done, and define what’s next.
- **Iterate:** Use learnings from each sprint to improve the next.

When (And Where) “Always-On” SEO Still Applies

Certain things do need continuous attention. I’m not saying that it is right for 100% of your sprints to be 100% custom.

There are recurring things that could, or likely should, go into sprints or be monitored and maintained by regular or routine audits or checklists, e.g., crawl errors, broken links, technical issues, etc.

But, this maintenance work shouldn’t be the SEO strategy. It should support it. Use “always-on” as infrastructure or basics, not direction, and remember that the checklist isn’t the strategy, and if you have one, it is a planning tool, not necessarily your tactical plan and roadmap to ultimate SEO ROI.

Why It's Time To Rethink "Always-On" SEO

I've hit on it enough, but I will wrap up by reminding you that endless to-do lists don't move the needle.

Checklists can be good things and full of the "right" tactics. However, they often lack strategy and don't serve shorter attention spans or allow for enough agility.

Sprint-based SEO helps teams be more strategic, productive, and aligned with the business overall, with room to implement prioritized tactics, tied to overall goals, and adjust to market and business needs and conditions.

Shifting your team from "always-on" to "intentionally paced" is a move to start seeing results and not just activity.

More Resources:

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