The untapped value of qualitative keyword data



30-second summary:

- Starcom's Owned Strategy Director Jack Telford argues that it's easy to become over-reliant on Search Volume data when building SEO strategies.
- An approach that combines such information with the bounty of qualitative data that's available around "low to no volume terms" can illuminate a host of new opportunities.
- Jack shares a few tricks and recommendations for getting started with a more qualitative keyword research approach.

Analyzing search volume figures from tools like Google Keyword Planner is a core element of keyword research. However, contrary to popular SEO belief, the magic lies in qualitative keyword data and not quantitative ones. Even though, quantitative data shows numbers that help us filter down our seed list, show trends in the wording people use when they search, and highlight the big opportunities we should be tapping into. You'll be hard-pressed to find a search professional who doesn't agree with this.

I'd argue that most keyword research today is over-reliant on this quantifying of searcher behavior and therefore misses out on the huge value in studying low to no-volume search terms. A more qualitative approach opens up a host of new opportunities, by looking at what the existence of terms can tell us, rather than what the numbers attributed to them can.

Why is qualitative data important?

The main reason I favor this approach is because of the inherent flaws with the data that search tools provide. If these tools were 100% accurate and comprehensive, we could use them as our sole data source when building out a strategy. The fact is though, even the best tools we have don't give the full picture.

Why does this matter? It means that many of the terms and topics we're disregarding due to non-existent search volume figures could actually represent great opportunities.

If you don't need persuading on the limitations of search volume data, feel free to skip to the "how do we find qualitative keyword data" paragraph. Otherwise…

The limitations of search volume data

I've largely focused on Google Keyword Planner here, as this is the tool which *I believe* all SEO tools are at least in-part reliant on.

1. Google Keyword Planner groups semantically-similar terms together. This means you can request data around highly searched keywords and get no result within the platform, just because that term is bucketed with others. Even if you do receive the grouped term back within the tool, you can't tell the difference between the distinct terms

collated in this category and therefore miss an accurate view of how many people search for them. This is exacerbated by the fact that phrases which genuinely have different intent are grouped together. Rand Fishkin of Moz highlights “types of light” vs “types of lighting” as an example in this article, but there are many more out there.

2. Google bundles the volumes that it shows into specific bands. This means you’ll see ranges like “50” and “90” come up often when the real average numbers could be a long way off this. More importantly, you’ll never get a number for anything with under 10 searches a month. Considering 15% of searches have never been seen before, this is a massive hole in what the tool is showing you.
3. Google Trends data doesn’t line up with the Keyword Planner. If you’re looking for proof that Google’s not showing us the full picture, try comparing two terms in Google Trends, then doing the same thing in Google Keyword Planner. There’s a good chance you’ll see totally different results. Some may not even show up on one or other of the platforms.
4. Google doesn’t disclose a good share of keyword volume data. You can easily prove this for your own site. Pick a strong piece of content, then pull out the most clicked keywords it ranks in top spots for from Google Search Console. Run them through keyword planner & you’ll likely find two things. Firstly, some of them won’t show in keyword planner at all. Second, some of them will show as having a lower search volume than you can see they have via your impressions.
5. Google doesn’t show data around a lot of non-commercial terms. This stems from the primary purpose of keyword planner, to help advertisers plan their – largely commercial – PPC campaigns. However, these are often exactly the sort of terms we want to target with awareness content through SEO.

There is an argument for tools like Ahrefs, which don't group terms together, but they too call on Google for search data to a certain degree. What's more, they rely on clickstream for the rest, which itself is only a representative view of searches, based on analyzing the behavior of certain users.

How do you find qualitative keyword data?

OK, so we can't fully trust the numbers. We could see this as a problem, but equally, we could see it as an opportunity.

Suddenly, a 0 in keyword planner is no limitation. We can set our sights on a whole host of other tools and practices to inspire our targeting approach, as well as tackling areas we know from experience that our customers are interested in, even if the data doesn't seem to prove it. Here are a few approaches I've found useful in the past.

- **Use Answer the Public & io –** these tools scrape Google's autosuggest functions to find a huge number of long-tail keywords that you'd miss in standard SEO tools. There are also others out there, including the aptly named Keyword Shitter
- **Use Search Console** – often, a huge range of terms will show up in your Search Console account that you'd totally miss if relying on the likes of Keyword Planner. You also have the benefit of impression numbers here, which give you a rough gauge on the number of searches taking place.
- **Mine social channels and customer forums** – Look at what people are saying online around your brand and similar brands to yours. There are likely to be a lot of FAQ-inspiring questions and comments out there, as well as those which could insight broader informational campaigns, and even new product development.
- **Use autosuggest in Google** – it's a bit manual, but this

again helps you to understand what others have been searching for in your category, and can insight the content you put on your site. Try queries with things like “why is [brand]”, “best [brand] and “which [brand]” as a starting point.

Remember, the fact that terms appear at all through these methods means they are being searched. You can generate a lot of clicks from terms with no recognized search volume on standard SEO tools.

How to combine qualitative with quantitative data

Like I said at the beginning of this piece, I am not suggesting that we should totally do away with search volume data, as it does provide a useful guide as to the most searched terms in your space. In reality, combining niche and high volume targeting will be the key to long term success.

My recommendation is to ensure key pages on your site tackle the most highly searched terms in your vertical, but that you also supplement this with content that addresses the varied and rich data you get from a more qualitative approach. If nothing else, qualitative keyword research will allow you to understand the breadth of your audience’s interests and concerns better. That’s got to be worth a go.

Thanks for reading, let me know in the comments below if you have any questions.

Jack Telford works as an Owned Strategy Director at global media network Starcom. He leads clients’ overall SEO approach and direction, whilst overseeing a team of SEO specialists working on content, technical and off-site plans. He can be found on LinkedIn.

More about:

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