User-generated content for SEO: The cost-benefit analysis you need

Reviews, videos, photos, questions and answers, comments and other user-generated content (UGC) can give search crawlers more information to figure out what your pages are about and how relevant they are to a searcher's query. UGC also creates a sense of community that makes your brand stickier, gives you a vehicle to collect feedback and lets your audience source information directly from their peers.

But those benefits can come with baggage: UGC can be low quality, spammy, duplicated from other sites and redundant.

How your SEO may benefit from UGC

"What I'd recommend … is to find a way to get more content onto the page. A simple way to do that could be to let people comment," Google's John Mueller told an SEO looking to optimize image-heavy pages during a Reddit AMA last year.

Providing more context for search crawlers is one of the biggest advantages of UGC, and allowing visitors to comment, post, leave reviews and everything in between is like crowd-sourcing your on-page SEO since users are likely to employ diverse terms to discuss your content – think of it as users helping to target long-tail keywords on your behalf.

But a wealth of context won't mean much for your SEO if your page is seen as outdated. That's why having a replenishing source of fresh content is also one of the most referenced benefits of UGC. As our Periodic Table of SEO Success Factors shows, keywords and freshness – both of which can be generated by your users – can help improve search visibility for

relevant queries.

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, each type of UGC comes with its own advantages.

- **Reviews and testimonials** – "Customer reviews can be helpful for assessing the reputation of a store or business," states Google's own Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines. Search engines contract thousands of human search quality raters to help evaluate their results and letting your users leave reviews can appeal to them.
- **Discussion forums and Q&A sections** – By hosting one of these, you can moderate some of the conversation surrounding your brand. Users can also answer questions and provide one another with useful insights, taking some of the workload off of your staff. The "Customer questions & answers" section on Amazon's product pages is an excellent example because it lets users ask the community and sort through existing answers to find the information they're looking for.

- **Posts** – This type of UGC is often more shareable than reviews or discussion threads and can increase traffic to your domain.
- **Comments** – The flexibility of commenting lends itself to many sectors, can work in tandem with other types of UGC and may help increase site engagement.
- **Images** – Nearly a quarter of all web searches are

conducted through Google Images alone, so letting users upload their visual content may draw in more page visitors through image searches.

- **Videos** – User-submitted videos are shareable, can invite a lot of social engagement and even opens up the door to viral marketing.

The costs and risks associated with UGC

"The biggest risk to UGC is, of course, control," says David Stein, VP of SEO and content at Wunderman Thompson Memphis. "When you solicit UGC you give up some level of control on the outcome. It'd be great if you could ensure good reviews and the conversations around your product/service would all be positive. But, that's just not the reality."

For businesses that have a very specific vision for their branding, this may already be a nonstarter. Generally speaking, if a user can add their content to your site, so can a spammer. Numerous publications, including this one, have turned off comments due to spam outweighing constructive comments. If left unchecked, spam can negatively impact your search rankings, not to mention suck up internal resources trying to manage it.

"Yes, there are a slew of moderation tools and armies of agencies and services looking to help with comment moderation or respond to ratings/reviews, but that removes the cost benefit of UGC and often creates a cumbersome burden. Depending on the brand, the product/service it offers, and the reputation it has, UGC might be more hassle than it's worth," Stein points out. "Oh, and I didn't even mention the legal and brand hurdles you, as an SEO, are likely to face from your client."

In addition, an abundance of UGC won't work to your advantage

if it’s low quality. That’s why vigilance is required to ensure that your audience has a safe environment that encourages them to contribute and hopefully add to your SEO efforts.

Some more format-specific UGC considerations that may pose significant challenges for your brand:

- **Reviews** – Having a low average rating for the services or products you sell can be a red flag for prospective customers and clients. Unfortunately, with the increase of fake reviews on major e-commerce sites, a really high average rating may also strike potential customers as suspicious.
- **Discussion forums and Q&A sections** – Users may create redundant discussions or spammers may infiltrate your threads, both of which will negatively impact your SEO and user experience.
- **Posts** – Your site may be associated with the views that your users publish and their behavior; if left unchecked, that can negatively affect your branding. Users might also re-publish their content on your pages, splitting your ranking signals for relevant queries.
- **Comments** – Spammers may attempt to funnel off traffic from your content or mislead your audience.
- **Images and video** – Users may upload inappropriate content or, if you allow embedding, the embedded content may change without your knowledge (as it’s hosted elsewhere).

Getting the most SEO out of your UGC

Many of the downsides presented above can be eliminated or at least mitigated to a manageable level. Here’s what you can do to reap the rewards of UGC without suffering all the costs.

Eliminate spam. “Moderate, moderate, moderate. It’s that easy, and it’s that difficult. You have to control quality, even on something like a Q&A forum,” Dr. Pete Meyers, marketing scientist at Moz, advises. “Some of this can be automated, such as detecting and filtering out content with links (or at least flagging them for human review), but a lot takes human intelligence.”

An anti-spam plugin that leverages CAPTCHA technology and reveals linked URLs is an automated solution that can help protect your discussion threads, reviews and comments section.

“When you’re talking about articles and more in-depth content, it’s going to take significant time from a qualified editorial team,” Meyers adds. If your user base is a manageable size, you can manually approve comments yourself before they go live. You’ll also want to monitor accounts that post abnormally frequently in relatively short time periods to remove users with malicious intent.

Applying nofollow tags to all of the links that appear within your UGC can also help preserve your SEO by showing search engine crawlers that your site isn’t vouching for potentially questionable destinations.

Manage duplicate and low-quality content. Contrary to popular belief, there is no duplicate content penalty – unless it’s intended to manipulate search results. If search engines find that you’re engaging in deceptive practices, they may remove your pages from search results altogether.

Duplicate UGC can occur if your users are posting a lot of similar content (such as a commonly asked question) or if you allow them to re-publish their content on your site. When the same content is posted in multiple places on the internet, search engines have to determine which one to return to the searcher as a result (since they don’t want to provide the same result multiple times).

When someone conducts a search and multiple websites surface the same content, the search engines will then select the most relevant result based on a per-URL evaluation. Essentially, your duplicate UGC is competing with versions of itself on other sites.

Decreased organic visibility for all the pages hosting the duplicate content is another possible outcome. This is because backlinks may be distributed to more than one page for that specific topic, instead of pointing all the link signals to a single page and boosting that page's PageRank.

You can work towards resolving instances of duplicate content by consolidating your UGC (more on that below) and by adding a feature that lets users designate a canonical URL so search engines know which version is the original one.

"Even when you've done your best to moderate along the way, there will be times when you need to go back and clean up old, low-quality content. This could range from restricting that content from search engines (using META NOINDEX, for example) to outright deletion," says Meyers. Applying the noindex meta tag may seem contradictory to the very reason you're letting users contribute, but (hopefully) not all of their posts will be duplicate and it's better than being seen as attempting to win more traffic by stealing someone else's content.

With regards to hosting stolen content uploaded by users, there are actions you need to take to stay on the right side of the law, whether or not it puts a dent in your SEO. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act dictates that site owners must promptly remove the offending content if they receive a notice from the copyright holder.

Consolidate your UGC. By combining overlapping content into fewer pages, you can improve your user experience and decrease the chances that a search crawler misses anything. This will require patience, but it's especially useful for forum

discussions and Q&A sections.

As you're migrating comments, closing inactive threads and unpublishing the unnecessary URLs, make sure to add a 301 redirect to your newly consolidated pages.

Curate your own UGC. This method allows you to exert more control over what appears on your site and, by extension, what gets associated with your brand. Embedding social media content using your branded hashtag or running a contest can be a great way to gather UGC that you can screen before publishing.

If you use this technique, keep in mind that embedded content is out of your control, so you'll have to check in on it from time to time to make sure it hasn't been altered and that it's still hosted at the original location. And, remember, UGC belongs to the user and not obtaining permission before featuring it can quickly turn a UGC win into a PR loss.

Properly configure your reviews. Using a third-party plugin or platform can help fight off the impression that your reviews were artificially created in-house. To add to that, you'll also want to make it easy to verify that your reviews are created by real users or verified purchasers. Allowing users to rate reviews can also make this form of UGC more useful.

"Let's say you're U-haul," Craig J. Mount, founder of digital marketing agency Classy Brain, posits as an example. "You want to rank each of your locations, but creating and maintaining location pages at scale is logistically resource intensive. So you can create a stock template, switch out the location information on each, but still make each location unique to Google (as in not duplicate content) by using first-party review UGC." Using this technique, businesses can get their customers to help improve their local SEO and skip all the trouble of creating unique pages for each individual location.

And, if you're already letting users leave reviews, consider

structuring your data with schema so search engines can display your star ratings in SERPs. This may not impact your SEO, but it can convince a searcher to click through.

This is how star reviews can display in SERPs when structured data is applied.

Let’s conclude with a bit of insight from John Mueller: “We don’t differentiate between content that other people have published on your website and content that you’re publishing,” he stated during a Google Webmasters Central office hours hangout in May. That means that the content your users are sharing on your pages can make the same impact on your SEO as your original content.

Tapping into UGC can enhance your SEO and increase engagement, and even though you may not be paying users for their content, those perks don’t come for free. You’ll have to weigh the benefits against the risks, see which ones you can mitigate and assess whether it’s the right move for your brand.

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