



MARKETING RESOURCES

SEO Optimization



INTRODUCTION

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SEO Optimization

We marketers like to think we have our fingers on the pulse — of pop culture, technology, web use, consumer habits, etc. But SEO has experienced some pretty major changes in the last few years, and it can feel like you're swimming upstream just trying to keep up.

Chapter 1: What is SEO?

SEO still stands for “search engine optimization,” and it's still about getting your content as high on search results pages as possible. That much hasn't changed.

But the landscape of search itself has evolved. It's not just on desktop. It's not just on the web. It's not just a list of links to various web pages. And most importantly, it's not just about cramming your pages and alt tags with as many keywords as your character limits will allow.

In 2018 and onward, search providers are trying to think like searchers. They're taking into account synonyms and broad topics, they're guessing what you want, and they're serving you results even before you're finished asking. If you, the content provider, want to be at the top of the game, you'll need to understand how all those systems coalesce.

Chapter 2: Not Just On Desktop Anymore

Mobile Internet is the New Internet

There's a quote floating around marketing circles recently that sums up the state of the mobile web: “talking about ‘mobile internet’ is like talking about ‘color TV.’” The point is that it's a distinction without a difference. From a search point of view, mobile is the internet.

According to Smart Insights, [over 70% of US web traffic goes through mobile devices](#) — not computers. Remember that kind-of-annoying iPad commercial

with the tech-savvy teenager asking “what’s a computer?”

That ad generated a lot of snark in response, but Apple had a point. Mobile web usage is on the rise across all generations, and lots of people rarely — if ever — use a computer for casual web use any more.

Perhaps more surprisingly, all that mobile internet use isn’t coming through the browser. On the contrary, [over 90% of the traffic coming through mobile devices is through apps](#). Google Maps is a great example. It used to be that you’d use Maps to find the address of a place you wanted to go and a set of directions on how to get there. Maybe there’d be a phone number too.

Now, Maps is a one-stop shop. Want to find a new restaurant for date night? Just open up Maps. Not only can you search by cuisine, price, take-out or sit-down, and a whole host of other options, but you can read the menu, read reviews, and of course get directions. You can even order an Uber to take you there, all without leaving the app.

Social Channels Aren’t Just Channels

In the old days (and by old, we mean 5-10 years ago), social media channels were just that — channels through which you attempted to direct traffic to your website. To an extent, that’s still the case, in that social media is a great way to attract website traffic, but social has become so much more than that.

Facebook’s business tools and accounts have made it easier than ever for you to supplement your business’ website — even replace it entirely — with little to no coding or web design experience.

Just plug in all the appropriate information and Facebook can show people your address, contact info, logo, maps to your locations, menus, and whatever else they might need. Facebook’s “Instant Articles” feature even allows readers to read an entire article directly on Facebook, rather than clicking through to another site.

Instagram and Twitter are becoming content hosts too. Each one deals in a specific type of media experience — photos and videos on one, bite-size thoughts and quick conversations on the other — that many users prefer to stay in without ever being redirected to a homepage.

Voice Assistants: Electronic Search Butlers

Between Siri, Cortana, Google Home and Now, and Alexa, there are now tens of millions of devices in consumers' homes that can listen directly to the user's voice.

When you talk to one of these devices, whether through a smartphone or a dedicated piece of hardware, you generally use vague prompts in conversational language, without keywords, site-specific searches, or keywords.

When you ask “what’s the weather like,” you don’t get to specify whether your Google Home searches Yahoo, NOAA, Weather Underground, or DarkSky. You don’t know where the answer came from and, as long as it’s accurate, you don’t care.

What this means is that the voice assistants are using context and history to conduct search in a whole new way. If you ask Alexa to order you toilet paper, she doesn’t give you a list of the available brands and sizes of toilet paper. She asks you if you want to buy Cottonelle, because that’s what you last bought on Amazon.

Messaging Apps Are The New Search

Your grandma was right: no one calls anyone anymore. Younger generations don’t like to talk on the phone at all, and people across age groups are finding that calling for information just isn’t the best way to find out information any more.

With the increased prevalence of Facebook Messenger, on-site chat, and even chatbots that can answer basic questions with no human supervision,

calling isn't the best way to get your question answered any more, and neither is searching.

Chapter 3: Behind the Scenes

Is Hummingbird Killing SEO ... Again?

It seems like every 18 months we have to have a big conversation about some new tech or another that's going to kill SEO. Hummingbird launched in 2013, and it was the biggest change to the search algorithm that Google has ever made.

The idea behind Hummingbird was to turn search into a more natural, human experience. No more quotation marks or specific word order, no Boolean operators, no site-specific searches or being lost because you didn't know how to spell what you were searching for.

First on the list was conversational search. You wouldn't walk up to a librarian and say "Wikipedia Mark Twain novel minus Tom Sawyer," and now you don't have to say that to Google either. [You can just ask it "what's the Mark Twain novel that isn't Tom Sawyer," and the first result is The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn](#), which is probably what you were referring to.

Google also analyzes synonyms, turns of phrase, and past searches both by you and by other users — [billions of them every day](#) — to guess what you meant. If you ask it for Korean food, it will assume you mean Korean restaurants near you, not Korean recipes or grocery stores in Korea.

Hummingbird also wants to account for human mistakes. Search engines used to be very literal — if you didn't know how to spell a word or someone's name, you were out of luck. Now, Google knows what you mean better than you do.

If you search for the "president of Canada," you'll get results for the Prime Minister, because Canada doesn't have a president. If you ask if "is icland an icland," you'll find out that yes, Iceland is an island, and here's a link to its

Wikipedia page.

The RankBrains of the Operation

All this fancy new search functionality is powered by something called RankBrain. As Greg Corrado, senior research scientist at Google put it, the way RankBrain thinks can be summed up thusly: “That phrase seems like something I’ve seen in the past, so I’m going to assume that you meant this.”

Using machine learning — a tech buzzword that refers to computer programs designed to teach themselves new things — RankBrain takes into account your previous searches, everyone else’s previous searches, what you click on, and what seems to be popular to deliver you the most relevant results.

That’s why some search queries return Maps listings, some return Wikipedia pages, some return dictionary definitions, and some return sports scores. RankBrain has noticed that most of the people who search for “rockies” are interested in the baseball team, not the mountain range, so it’s making an educated guess that you’d like to know the score or the time of the next game and delivering that info right up front — sometimes even in the search bar before you hit enter.

Chapter 4: Now What?

The real reason for all this background information is to tell you that the world of search is very different than it was even a few years ago. And the practical upshot is that Google and other search providers — Bing plays second fiddle to Google, but it also powers Facebook search, so it can’t be written off entirely — are trying to create a web where you can’t game the system.

You can’t just set your site up as a slideshow to get 30 page views instead of one. You can’t cram the metadata full of keywords so your results seem more relevant than they actually are. You can’t just trick Google into thinking you have useful content — you have to actually have it.

Though it might make your life more difficult in the short term, this is a good

thing. If you can't game the system, neither can your competitors. You know you're not losing traffic to someone who knows the loopholes better than you do.

The most important thing to do is to research keywords before you put in the work to optimize for them. Google is trying to learn not just what people are searching for, but why. You'll have to do the same.

One area where you'll have to be especially careful is the world of technical jargon. You may use all kinds of terminology in your industry, but if the colloquial terms don't match up, you're losing out on traffic.

To a web designer, terms like "dithering" and "crunching" are common, useful ways to make an image smaller so it'll load faster. But if your clients are searching for "how to make my site load faster," optimizing your content around "dithering" and "crunching" might not help you.

Chapter 5: Blogging for SEO

Blogging is already helping your site's SEO, just by keeping your website fresh, relevant, and helpful. The more you write on a subject, the more traffic you'll get and the more likely Google is to suggest your site to future searchers.

In broad terms, your goal is to make your site more visible to people who enter keywords related to your business, but Google's algorithms make that trickier than it sounds. Here are a few tips to stay relevant in your blogging practices.

Focus on long-tail keywords. Optimizing for keywords isn't about cramming as many keywords into your posts as possible — that's not fooling search engines and it makes your content harder to read, which hurts your rankings.

Instead, optimize for a few longer, often question-based keywords that keep your post narrowed in on the specific goals of the people searching for it. Visitors who search for long-tail keywords are more likely to read the whole post, and more likely to convert to leads and customers — the real reason

we're doing this in the first place.

Once you have your long-tail keywords, put them in the title tag, the headers, and the body of your post. The variety of locations shows Google that your post is focused on a particular topic, so it's more likely to be relevant to searchers.

Use your whole meta description. The meta description is the additional text that appears below the title of your post on a search engine results page. If you don't create a meta-description for your posts, that text will be filled anyway, so make sure you're writing something reader-friendly that elaborates on the title of the post and draws the reader into clicking.

Use internal links. Chances are, you'll be blogging about a lot of similar topics that all relate to each other. If you run a landscaping company, your blog post about proper drainage will dovetail right into your blog posts about installing your own water feature and xeriscaping.

Not only are those internal links helpful for people on your site wanting to learn more, but they'll help float your less successful posts to the top of search results.

Finally, use [Google's Search Console](#) feature. This software allows you to analyze clicks through to your site from Google search, showing you what specific queries brought people to your site. It can really help you to learn how people are referring to your products or services — especially if it's not how you've been referring to them yourself — and best of all, it's free!

Chapter 6: Developing an SEO Strategy

So you've started to get a sense of how all this stuff works, and what you need to do to your site going forward. But you need everyone in the company who created outward-facing content to be on the same page. You need a well-defined, consistent SEO strategy to make sure future content is the best it can be. Where do you start?

Create Long-Tail Keywords

First, think of a list of topics that relate to your business. Think of 10 or so short, single-word topics — the kind of thing you get asked about a lot, or the things that you’ve encountered misconceptions about, or maybe the things you have a particular expertise in.

Use [Google’s Keyword Tool](#) to see which of those topics gets the best search volume, or if there’s a variation on them that’s more popular. Narrow them down to a group of short or single-word topics — these are your “pillars” going forward.

You’re not going to write individual blog posts on each of those topics — they’re too broad and competitive to float to the top of the list. They’re just your guiding categories that future posts will fit into.

Once you have short keywords, you can start turning them into long-tail keywords that are more specific and this easier for you to become an expert in. As an added bonus, more specificity means more individual posts, giving you fresh content and extra relevance.

Let’s go back to the landscaping example. Say one of your short-tail keywords is “xeriscaping.” That’s a huge topic, so it’s too big a task to try to cover everything there is to know about dry-weather landscaping in one post.

You can, however, start to write more specific posts in that topic cluster, like “5 Ways To Save Water While Keeping Your Grass Green” or “Which Trees To Plant In A Dry Climate.” By mimicking the kind of language that people actually search for, you’ll tick all of Google’s boxes for relevant, conversational information, and you’ll fare better in search as a result.

Build Pillar Pages For Each Topic

A pillar page is just what you’re reading right now! It’s a long-form, detailed explanation that dives into a particular topic in far more detail than an individual blog post. Use your long-tail keywords as headers within that pillar

page, as well as in the body copy itself.

Eventually, each pillar page will link to other relevant blog posts, and they'll link back to the pillar page. Google can see all the internal links and start to paint a picture of a large, interconnected web of content, all on a particular topic that you're an expert in.

Start a Blog

If you don't have a blog, you need one. In order to stay fresh and relevant in search results, you'll need to be putting out timely, informative content on a regular basis, and a blog is the single best way to do that.

Don't overdo it with the long-term keywords in each post. Google can see that you're keyword-stuffing and they'll penalize you in their results for it. Also, remember to link each post to the relevant pillar page on that topic to cement that cluster of ideas together. Finally, remember to link to the blog from the pillar page. The more you can relate the specific long-tail keywords to the shorter, broader topic, the better.

Blog often. Not everything you write about needs to relate to a specific topic cluster — it's also useful to write about tangentially related topics or current events that your customers care about. But blogs drive traffic, and the more the merrier. [Sites that blogged more than 16 times a month got over three times the traffic of site that only blogged once a week.](#)

Finally, go back and fix your old content. Lots of companies started putting content up on the web before they really had a plan to stitch it all together, so it's a good idea to get your old stuff up to snuff. Get rid of irrelevant posts, update your titles, headers, and meta tags, and check your work against these best practices — a post stuffed full of keywords might have been great ten years ago, but now it's actually dragging the rest of your site down.

Chapter 7: Use Analytics To See What's Working

All this SEO optimization is a lot of effort, and you want to know that that effort is being rewarded. The main metric that'll tell you if your SEO efforts are helping out your company is organic search — when people search for a topic and click your site in the results page.

There are tons of software options out there, including Google Analytics, that will break down where your traffic is coming from, what keywords are driving views to your site, and how your pages rank under each search term you're trying to optimize for.

Track those metrics over time. You should be able to see which of your topics are working, which aren't, and which to pump a little more effort into.

One final note: don't panic! All these tips can be confusing, and though they're helpful, the bottom line is that content is king. Don't try to trick Google into thinking you're relevant — fooling people into reading your site won't get them to spend money.

Instead, be relevant. If Hummingbird, RankBrain, and whatever comes next in the world of SEO are working properly, then the best, most useful content will naturally rise to the top. And that's exactly how it should be.