PHASE 1

PLANNING

CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage for an Optimized State of Mind

Several years ago my family established a tradition of celebrating the tenth birthday of each of our children by taking them on a trip to a city of their choosing somewhere in North America. My son Dominic picked New York City. While I travel to New York several times a year for business, I really had no idea what kid-friendly activities we could find for a five-day vacation in one of the world's greatest cities. Where did I go for advice and information? Some people reading this book will think of a search engine like Google or Bing. For others, Facebook or Twitter will come to mind. Some might even know specific people they could e-mail for travel tips or specialty travel websites that focus on New York. What did I do? I used all of these ideas.

I posted on Twitter that I would be bringing my son to New York for his tenth birthday and that we were looking for kid-friendly activities and places to see. Numerous suggestions were offered, and from them I made a list. Dominic and I used Google to research each destination and to find out details such as available activities, location, fees, and schedules. Based on what we found, we further refined our search phrases, which influenced follow-up questions posted on social networks. Some of the websites we found posted ratings from customers; others had links to blogs, photos on Flickr, and Facebook fan pages.

From our research conducted through a combination of search engines, social networking websites, and e-mail, we settled on our itinerary and had a fantastic time.
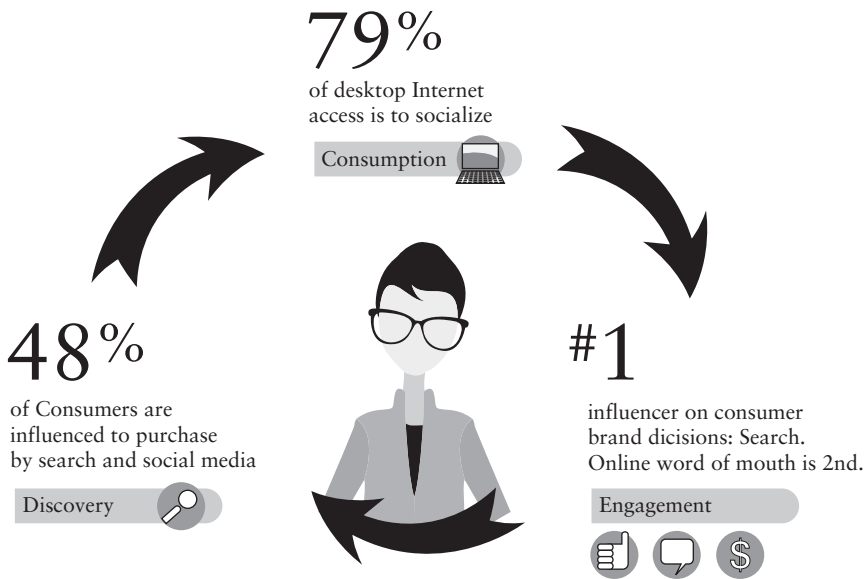
We didn't stop there, though. As we explored the city from Manhattan to the Bronx Zoo to Broadway to see *The Lion King*, I tweeted comments about our experiences and uploaded photos to Flickr, Twitter, and Facebook so the people who had made suggestions for our trip could see the impact they had on this once-in-a-lifetime experience. My social network experienced our adventures right along with us interacting, sharing, and engaging from all over the world. The content and media I posted online became findable on Google and has undoubtedly provided helpful ideas to others who are looking for information on kid-friendly activities in New York for years to come.

Our experience in planning that trip to New York with content discovered through search and social media represents a fundamental change that's emerged in consumer behaviors for information discovery, consumption, and engagement. While search engines continue to represent the most popular method of finding specific information, the influence of social networking, shared social media, and the proliferation of platforms for individuals to publish content all intersect to create tremendous opportunities to better attract and engage customers.[1] Recognizing the importance, relevance, and need to master each of these changing consumer preferences is essential for businesses to succeed online.

CONTENT MARKETING TRILOGY: DISCOVERY, CONSUMPTION, AND ENGAGEMENT

The web is flush with change and innovation. Gone are the days of linear information flow and incremental growth. Content flows in every direction through a variety of platforms, formats, and devices. The mass adoption of the social and mobile web has facilitated a revolution of information access, sharing, and publishing at a scale never before experienced. (See Figure 1.1.)

Access to information for discovery is most often associated with search engines. For people who have some idea of what they want or need, it's second nature to search and then sort through the results for

79%
of desktop Internet
access is to socialize

Consumption

48%
of Consumers are
influenced to purchase
by search and social media

Discovery

#1
influencer on consumer
brand dicisions: Search.
Online word of mouth is 2nd.

Engagement

FIGURE 1.1   Discovery, Consumption, and Engagement

the best answer. When my eight-year-old points to the Google Chrome browser icon on a computer desktop, she doesn't call it Google or Chrome. She calls it "the Internet," because it represents the interface she uses to search and connect with information online. For her, Internet access isn't thought of as anything special and certainly is not limited to a computer. Her perception of information transcends devices, whether a smart phone, an iPad, a PlayStation 3, an Apple TV, or a laptop. Just as she is growing up in a digital age where information access is ubiquitous, companies and their customers are "growing up" digitally and finding a wealth of opportunities to connect and engage.

While search plays an important part in how we connect with what we need online, the revolution occurring on the social web has had a global impact, from neighborhoods to entire nations. Recognizing the synergies of search and social media plus the role they play with content marketing will help businesses realize the impact on their ability to connect, engage, and grow revenue.

THE INTERSECTION OF SEARCH OPTIMIZATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Google handles a staggering 11 billion queries a month.[2] But did you know Twitter delivers more than 350 billion tweets each day?[3] Facebook has nearly 1 billion users, and Google Plus is likely to reach more than 100 million users in 2012.[4,5]

With two in three adults using social networks, social media is hot, but is by no means mutually exclusive of search.[6] The notion of search has expanded beyond Google and Bing, and marketers from companies of all sizes and industries must now consider other search channels, ranging from internal Facebook search to innovations such as Siri on the iPhone 4S, as opportunities for content creation, optimization, and social promotion.

The blur of all this change is an opportunity for brands and marketers to engage in an active marketing strategy that converges the disciplines of search, social media, content, and online public relations. To meet brand needs to engage customers in an always-on digital world, whether it's B2B or B2C, the convergence of marketing and public relations, search, and social media are inevitable.

Because there are so many information sources online, sales cycles are getting longer. Customers expect more than to be presented with features and benefits followed by a call to action.

For marketers, more isn't always better. Relevance, timeliness, and ease of sharing are better. That means better content and visibility in all the places customers might be looking or might be influenced by. It also means a better experience with brand and consumer interactions.

For example, searchers expect not only to find what they're looking for on a search engine, but also to interact with what they find through commenting, rating, joining, as well as buying. Purchase is just the start of social engagement with the customer, which extends across a life cycle that takes the customer from prospect to evangelist. Adaptive Internet marketing pays attention to those customer needs and creates a dynamic cycle of social and search interaction.

Creating experiences that are easily discovered through search or social media and continuously evaluating what works and what doesn't helps to fuel the most critical aspects of an effective editorial, optimization, and social media marketing effort.

WHATEVER CAN BE SEARCHED CAN BE OPTIMIZED

There's nothing static about Internet marketing, but the one constant we can all count on is the persistent effort by search engines to improve search quality and user experience. Such continuous improvements, including the Google Search, plus Your World implementation in late 2011, have significantly affected how search engines interact with content ranging from discovery, indexation, sorting in search results, to what external signals are considered to determine authority.

It's essential for results-oriented marketers to monitor both the front- and back-end landscapes of search to be proactive about what it will take to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage. Continuous efforts toward progressive search strategy for marketers are important, because we cannot rely on Google to send us "Weather Reports" every time an update is made.

In 2007, Google and other search engines like Ask.com made some of the most significant changes ever, affecting search results by including more sources such as Images, Maps, Books, Video, and News for certain queries.[7] In an effort to capitalize on the opportunity for improved search visibility for the array of media types included in search results, concepts like Digital Asset Optimization came about.[8]

Fast-forward to 2011 and you'll find that search results have evolved from 10 blue links to situationally dependent mixed-media results that vary according to your geographic location, web history, social influences, and social ratings like Google+. At any given time there are from 50 to 200 different versions of Google's core algorithm in the wild, so the notion of optimizing for a consistently predictable direct cause and effect is long gone.[9]

The potential influence of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook with Google, Bing, and Yahoo! as link sources has changed what it means to build links for SEO and how we view whether PageRank is still important. (See Figure 1.2.) Social signals are rich sources of information for search engines, and old ways of link acquisition simply don't have the same effect in the same ways.

As the world's most popular search engine, Google says its mission is to "Organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." Marketers need to understand the opportunities to make information—including various types of digital assets—easy for
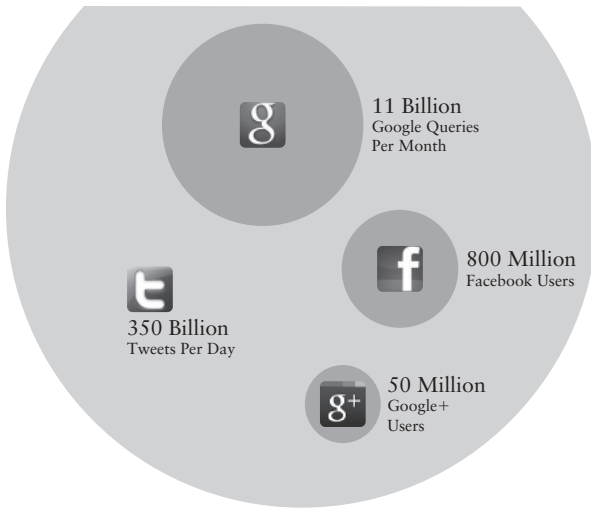
FIGURE 1.2   Channel of Discovery: Search and Social Networks

search engines to find, index, and sort in search results. Structured data in the form of markup, microformats, and rich snippets, as well as feeds and sitemaps, all play an increasingly important role in helping Google achieve this goal.

At the same time, so does understanding myriad data sources and file types that can be included in search results. By understanding these opportunities, search marketers can inventory their digital assets and deploy a better, more holistic SEO strategy that realizes the benefit of inclusion and visibility where customers are looking.

Increasingly, marketers are approaching search optimization holistically under the premise, "What can be searched can be optimized." That means more attention is being paid to the variety of reasons people search as well as the variety of reasons companies publish digital content. Content and SEO are perfect partners for making it easy to connect constituents and customers with brand content.

In the past, SEO consultants have typically been left to deal with whatever content they could optimize and promote for link building. Now the practice of SEO involves content creation and curation as much as it does with reworking existing content. When SEO practitioners examine the search results page of targeted keyword phrases on a regular basis,

review web analytics, and conduct social media monitoring, they can gain a deeper sense of what new sources and content types can be leveraged for better search visibility.

Monitoring search results might show that the keyword terms being targeted may trigger different types of content. Certain search queries might be prone to triggering images and video, not just web pages. An understanding of the search results landscape for a target keyword phrase should be considered when allocating content creation and keyword optimization resources.

For many companies, it can be very difficult and complex to implement a holistic content marketing and search optimization program. Substantial changes may be necessary with content creation, approval, and publishing processes. But the upside is that a substantial increase in the diversity of content and media types indexed and linking to a company website will provide the kind of advantage standard SEO no longer offers.

As long as there are search engines, and search functionality on websites, there will be some kind of optimization for improving marketing performance of content in search. Companies need to consider all the digital assets, content, and data they have to work with to give both search engines and customers the information they're looking for in the formats they'll respond to.

OPTIMIZE FOR CUSTOMERS

No doubt, you've searched Google or Bing and found web pages that were clearly "optimized" in the name of SEO. That kind of copy might help a page appear higher in search results but doesn't do much for readers once they click through.

When I see those pages, it reminds me of the increasing importance of optimizing for customers and user experience versus the common overemphasis on search engines. Keep in mind, technical SEO and understanding how bots interact with servers and web pages are timeless best practices, but it just makes sense to write web copy that's more useful and a better reflection of what customers are looking for versus chasing the most popular keywords alone. (See Figure 1.3.)

I recall reading an SEO blog a long time ago that advised creating websites, copy, and links as though search engines didn't exist. That seems a bit naive—especially if you're in a competitive category. Creating,
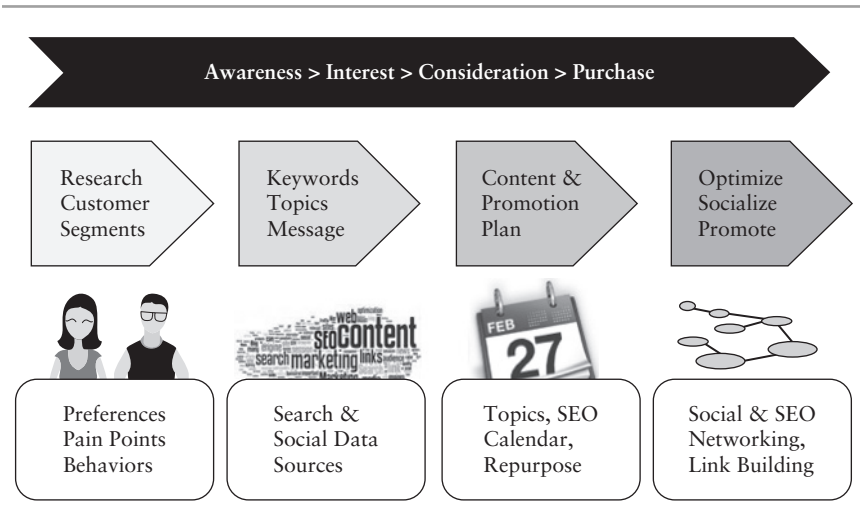
FIGURE 1.3 Optimize For Customers

optimizing, and promoting content based on customers' interests that leads them to a purchase makes the most out of both useful content and SEO best practices. Great SEO copywriting doesn't read as a list of keywords, but instead balances keyword usage with creative writing that appeals to the reader, thus educating, influencing, and inspiring action.

Consider the difference between these general SEO copywriting recommendations:

> Use the most popular keywords at the beginning of title tags, in on-page titles, body copy, anchor text, and image alt text in combination with attracting relevant keyword links from other websites so the pages rank high on Google. Higher-ranking web pages can result in more visitors and sales.

In comparison, try this advice, which is absent any explicit SEO lingo:

> Use the words that matter most to your customers in titles, links, and body copy to inform and inspire them to take action. Text used in titles should make it easy for readers to understand the topic of the page quickly, in the first few words. Text used to link from one page to another should give the readers an idea of what they'll find on the

destination page. A consistent approach to titling, label-
ing, and copy in web page text, image annotations, video
descriptions, and links will create confidence for the reader
in the subject matter and inspire sales.

Both recommendations should result in more focused and relevant
content for search engines. But the focus in the first instance is only on
keywords and search engines. The advice in the second instance is less SEO-
specific, but emphasizes relevance from the customer point of view and at
the same time is search engine–friendly. Marketers need to take a step back
and review which audience and outcomes they're optimizing for: search
engines and rankings or customers and sales. What about all of the above?

OPTIMIZE FOR EXPERIENCES

My friend Bob Knorpp had a good piece about the fallacy of content in
Advertising Age, "Why Marketers Should Break Free of the Digital Content
Trap." He made some good points about companies going through the
motions of creating and promoting content on social channels with motiva-
tions of retweets, likes, shares, and links instead of real engagement. I have to
agree when he says, "Content alone is a dead end for ongoing engagement."

Savvy online marketers don't see content as a shortsighted substitute
for social strategy or simply as an SEO tactic but as a proxy to creating
better customer experiences. Content is the mechanism for storytelling,
and if social and search optimization are also involved in a qualitative
way to aid in discovery and sharing of those stories, then all the better.

In that *Ad Age* article, Bob also makes great points about the need to
think of new ways to approach digital storytelling beyond single dimensions
like videos that go viral and infographics that spread like wildfire on Twitter
and Facebook. Engagement is indeed more than a click, a share, or a link.

In the same way that many business bloggers and marketers approach
online marketing with an egocentric perspective, promoting messages in
which they try to persuade audiences instead of empathizing with cus-
tomer needs and interests, many agencies that create content are more
interested in creative self-expression than in experiences that are truly
meaningful to customers.

In our hub/spoke and constellation publishing models for con-
tent marketing (covered more in-depth in Chapter 8), we emphasize

an understanding of customer needs and behaviors through persona development and attention to variances during the buying cycle. Those insights, combined with ongoing monitoring and engagement, drive content marketing strategy and the creative mix of content objects designed to help prospects have meaningful experiences with the brand.

The content itself is made easier to discover in more relevant ways through search engine optimization and social media optimization. A "socialize and optimize" approach to content marketing increases the connections between consumers who are looking (i.e., searching) and discussing (social networking) topics of relevance to the brand solution.

I've said it before: Great content isn't great until it's discovered, consumed, and shared. Littering the social web with scheduled tweets, status updates, and blog posts alone is not engagement, and it certainly does not create the kind of experience that builds brand or motivates customers to buy, be loyal, or advocate.

ARE YOU READY TO BE OPTIMIZED?

From an overall marketing and customer engagement perspective, all content is not created equal. Any kind of content isn't appropriate in any kind of situation, despite what recent content marketing SEO advocates would have you believe. Since much of the focus of online marketing is on customer acquisition, many SEO efforts emphasize transaction or lead generation outcomes. That's what they're held accountable for. Unfortunately, search to purchase or social to purchase are not the only ways people interact with information online. Research before purchase and education and support afterward are also important.

Being in the "brand as publisher" business is better than not creating any content at all, but it's a much more effective thing to be purposeful in content creation and marketing according to the full customer experience. Seeing content engagement opportunities holistically can provide a company more ways to initiate, maintain, and enhance customer relationships.

For example, in the context of online marketing, there are many different touch points during the customer relationship. Using the buying cycle model of Awareness, Consideration, Purchase, Service, and Loyalty, marketers can best plan what kind of content may be most appropriate to engage customers according to their needs.

For a holistic editorial plan, here are a few types of content and methods of communication to consider:

Awareness

- Public relations
- Advertising
- Word of mouth
- Social media

Consideration

- Search marketing
- Advertising
- Social media
- Webinars
- Product and service reviews
- Blogs
- Direct response

Purchase

- Website
- Social commerce

Service

- Social media
- Social CRM
- Online messaging
- E-mail
- Search

Loyalty

- E-mail newsletter
- Webinars
- Blog
- Social network, forum—community

In the development of a content marketing strategy, there are numerous opportunities to be more relevant and effective. Planning content that's meaningful to the customers you're trying to engage according to where they are in the buying cycle and overall customer relationship provides greater efficiency in content creation and in the repurposing of content.

Holistic content marketing and editorial planning also help make better use of tactics that transcend the relationship timeline, like SEO and social media. It's especially the case with holistic SEO that content producers can extend their reach and visibility to customers who are looking not just to buy, but to engage with brands in other ways.

By considering the content needs across the customer life cycle, not just acquisition or conversion, companies can become significantly more effective and efficient in their ability to connect relevant messages and stories with customers who are interested. The result: shorter sales cycles, better customer relationships, and more word of mouth.

Now we've set the stage for an "optimized" approach to search, social, and content marketing. Chapter 2 digs into where this mind-set fits for B2B, B2C, small and large companies, as well as within specific business functional areas ranging from marketing to customer service. Let's get optimized!

ACTION ITEMS

1. Think about your current content, optimization, and social media marketing efforts. How could you start integrating those programs?
2. What areas of your content marketing could you start optimizing related to content discovery, consumption, and sharing?
3. Is your content optimization more focused on keywords or customers? Consider how you could begin to evaluate customer needs as inspiration for keyword research and content.
4. Look at your current social media content. Where might you begin to optimize for better social engagement and customer experience?
5. Identify the spectrum of content types used from the top of the buying cycle to customer support. Consider how you might optimize and socialize content more holistically.