CHAPTER 1

Getting on the Same Page

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The goal of this book is to provide marketers and business leaders with an understanding of how to gather and optimize free traffic to their brand. This book is designed to offer an exponential return on investment. If you follow the tactics laid out in this book, I am confident that you will see significant increases in traffic and revenue.

The ensuing chapters of this book will provide a roadmap and understanding of how to best optimize your overall web presence through search engine optimization (SEO) and content marketing, as well as how to raise your organic traffic footprint and performance. There are many books on the market that speak to SEO and content marketing, but they do not speak to both. SEO and content marketing depend on each other these days. This is because of the way Google's algorithm works and the way digital marketing and user experience have evolved. Do not focus on one without the other.

This book is essentially a guide for how to leverage both sciences to create a higher amount of free traffic to your brands. It is a framework that modern-day marketers should know, and it's a low-cost way for business owners and marketers to gather a basic understanding and skill set and learn how to provide exponential traffic and marketing effectiveness to their clients and businesses.

Free Traffic

Capturing free, high-quality, high-qualified traffic is a core function and goal of an effective digital marketing strategy. Getting free traffic is not an easy thing. There are many levers that need to be pulled and optimized. Free traffic can benefit an overall marketing program in a lot of ways, especially if there are paid or media tactics involved. The levers of free traffic can help boost paid media performance as well. There are many instances where applying organic optimization techniques through SEO, user experience, content, and other organic strategies can yield a better sales conversion process, more search engine keyword rankings, and stronger traffic levels.

However, it's not easy to make all the free traffic cylinders work well together. There are several things that are required.

Responsive Teams

You need a cooperative IT and website management team. This is necessary so that optimization recommendations can be quickly implemented and rolled live. Oftentimes, IT can prove to be a hindrance in implementing recommendations that ultimately fueled better website performance and traffic. The more responsive the IT team is in making changes quickly, the better the performance output can be.

Strong SEO

You also need a strong SEO expert. Over the years, I've come across many different types of SEO experts. Some were strong technically and only technically, while some were strong on the content side. Some are not strong in either and are generally unhelpful. As we will discuss later in this book, the SEO strategist is the quarterback for a lot of the tactics that generate free traffic. It's important you have a strong quarterback who bridges the gap between technical and content opportunities. Additionally, SEO experts should be well-versed in emerging search channels like social media sites, Amazon, and other platforms beyond your website.

User Experience Expertise

It's extremely important to have a well-seasoned and strong user experience expert. A lot of the conversion or sales process online can be hindered by bad user experience techniques. As the user experience transforms

from devices to other things like voice or conversational commerce, it's important to have a strong user experience expert who is well-versed in these channels and can stay in tune with emerging channels to better position your site for changing user behavior and dates.

Ongoing Content Production

Content production is critical. Having a strong content team that is able to create content quickly and effectively is paramount to having a successful free traffic or organic traffic program for your brand. Content, as we'll get into later, essentially creates your free traffic footprint and is necessary for capturing organic traffic. Think of content as a fishing net. The larger it is, the more fish you're going to catch. It's no secret that news sites tend to drive the most traffic because they are constantly pushing out new content and have a strong content discovery and promotional strategy in place. All these things help sites with a large amount of content and web pages capture the most free traffic around. Back in the day these were called *content farms*, but now many of those low-quality content farms have dissolved, and high-quality websites that offer a broad spectrum of quality content tend to capture the most free traffic these days.

Strong Analytics

Digital marketers require strong analytics. Data-driven initiatives and content have become the norm nowadays. For a marketer to showcase their effectiveness, there have to be data points and evidence around performance. Strong data analytics and experts are critical to the organic and free traffic process. This book will discuss the different processes needed for achieving strong SEO and content marketing results. A core lever to the organic traffic process is having strong analytics with a frequent cadence of reporting to inform the types of content users are interested in and the effectiveness of your brand's content. It also shows whether the traffic coming to your side is incrementally growing from free channels as a result of good SEO and effective content marketing. Without analytics, you will be a ship lost at sea.

Data-Driven Culture

We live in a data world, and it's imperative that creative ideas and concepts begin with data. Data should inform the ideation stage, and the analytics team should provide this to help ideation and creative concepting.

Process Management

Marketing projects live and die depending on process management. Marketing projects have gotten more complex and technical, which require detailed planning, communication, and process execution. Brands need dedicated and strong project or process managers.

If you're a brand that cannot provide these levers, it is better to wait on free content initiatives like SEO and content marketing, whose results will be severely impacted and compromised. Instead, I would increase the budget for paid media and paid advertisements and focus more on a paid traffic strategy. Paid strategies are clearly more costly, but they do work and provide short-term workarounds until you get your free traffic levers and infrastructure in place.

Learning SEO

I remember my first foray into a search marketing agency, where I was initially a project manager. Search engine optimization seemed so complicated and foreign to me. My manager at the time said some people get it, but most people don't. He rolled his eyes and I felt like taking a gulp, little did he know I thought I was destined to be one of those people who don't get it. At the time I felt I would never understand all the different terminology, the algorithm factors, the definition of content, and the different website management systems. It seemed so overwhelmingly complex, and I was discouraged. I started being thankful that I was a project manager and not the actual subject-matter expert who was in charge of compiling deliverables and educating clients on how it all works. It took me a year of intensive client meetings, several walk-throughs of deliverables, and many repetitions of executing an SEO program to get a comfortable high-level understanding of what it's all about. I am so thankful for that overwhelming time because it not only gave me a thorough knowledge of search engine optimization, but it gave me a great perspective and understanding of how to simplify it and spoon-feed it to the common marketer who is first learning about it.

I also recall the first time I saw a website that I was working on rank #1 for a broad product term, *women's swimwear*, and the thousands of website visits and sales it yielded. It was an unbelievable, homerun feeling. That was more than 13 years ago, and the core fundamentals of good SEO have not changed.

It might be surprising to know, but SEO is actually not that complicated on a strategic level. Understanding the vision that search engines hold is a great first step in understanding the system of how search engines work.

> **"Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." Google:** `https://about.google/`

As this quote says, it's Google's mission is to **organize** all the world's information so users can universally **access** it and are provided with the most **useful** information. We can dissect each key term in that quote to the following areas:

- *Organize* relates to Google's algorithm, which ranks and organizes content for search results.
- *Access* relates to conduction web crawls, which are essentially programs that scour the Internet to discover websites and content and then provide users with links via the search page to the content.
- *Useful* describes the content Google finds, which is also the most trustworthy and authoritative around a given subject.

How Search Engines Work

Search engines are constantly seeking new information on the Web. They have their own software programs that scour or crawl the Web looking for information. These are sometimes also called *spiders* or *bots*. They go from site to site and collect information. They use a *ranking algorithm* that determines which sites to rank and in what order (Figure 1.1). This is done to provide users with the most relevant and useful content and with an experience that allows users to easily consume content. If you aren't providing that as a brand or website, you are likely not ranking or visible to search engine users. If that's the case, it is time to educate yourself and/or employ a search engine optimization expert to help provide services that help you. Google provides its own "Starter Guide" for websites looking to learn about SEO, but I would argue that you should always employ a search engine expert who understands SEO on a very detailed level and whose job it is to stay up-to-date on the latest Google algorithm processes to help you build and maintain a strong presence on

the search results page. Also, it's important to think beyond the technical and HTML code aspects of SEO. It's evolved into much more of a comprehensive game that requires a longer view around tech, content, and popularity aspects. In fact, according to Andrey Lipattsev, search quality senior strategist at Google, high-quality content and link building are the two most important signals used by Google to rank your website for search (source: Search Engine Watch, 2016; `https://searchengineland.com/now-know-googles-top-three-search-ranking-factors-245882`).



Figure 1.1: How search engines work

Executing Search Engine Optimization

Whether you are a brand marketer with the benefit of having an SEO subject-matter expert on hand to provide you guidance or a small business owner who is trying to do SEO themselves, it's important to understand the key levers that are needed to affect and optimize your search engine presence and rankings. It's actually quite simple; the science and art of search engine optimization can fall into three pillars that must be executed together and in order (Figure 1.2).

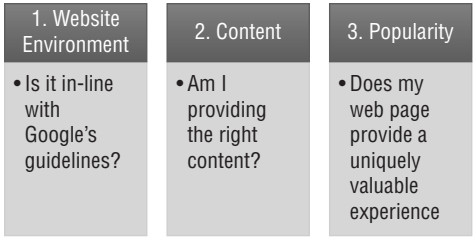


Figure 1.2: The three pillars of good SEO

An SEO initiative should provide guidance on how to drive and optimize these three areas of website environment, content, and popularity. Let's dive into each of these because they are essential to understanding and executing the right SEO program that will get you ranking higher in search results for most search engines.

Priority 1: A Great Website Technical Environment

A sound and fully optimized website technical environment is critical and the top priority when it comes to SEO and capturing strong organic traffic levels. If you don't have your website technology set up correctly, your content will not get crawled, so it's useless and pointless to not focus on your website technology first and foremost. Websites are usually managed via a content management system housed on a website server. Both the content management system and website server have important influence on how search engines crawl your content when reaching your website. Most SEO crawling tools and SEO platforms look at these key areas as part of their auditing features. Typically, they crawl the site and pull a list of issues around the following topics into a report.

There are some important areas that must be "set up" correctly to ensure the ideal crawling of your website. While not an exhaustive list, these are typically the most critical:

- **Redirects:** Redirects are used when a page has been moved to a different location or URL. These can be temporary or permanent. There are many kinds of redirects, but it's important to know that search engines recognize and pass SEO value only for permanent redirects. These are also called *301 redirects* (whereas temporary ones are called *302 redirects*). Both are managed through the web server. As a website, you almost always want to use permanent redirects because pages are rarely moved temporarily (a few days). SEO audits typically scan your website to identify the kinds of redirects your site is using. If you are using a redirect for temporary purposes, it should be flagged and evaluated as to why you are using it and for how long. Otherwise, an SEO subject-matter expert will likely instruct your IT team to change it to a 301 permanent redirect so SEO value is transferred to the new location of the page.
- **URL structures:** URLs are an important area for search engines. The actual URL string provides a unique identification for the page, almost like what a Social Security number does for a person. Additionally, URLs are a key area search engines look to when identifying what the page is about. In fact, it is critical that URLs and their folder structures include keywords. It's also best to use hyphens when separating terms. For instance, this is the number-one ranking for the search *men's adidas shoes*: `https://www.adidas.com/us/men-shoes`. The terms are all in the URL and spaced out

by hyphens. Hyphens communicate to search engines to separate out the terms versus merging them and ranking them for the merged phrase search results. Additionally, the closer to the root folder of the URL, which is the folder closest to the `.com`, the more emphasis the keyword gets. The more competitive and general the search ranking you might be trying to rank for, the closer the phrase should be to the root folder. Additionally, it's critical to use only one URL for a page throughout your website. Some sites use variables to track users or to display dynamic content based on where the user clicks throughout the site, which is generally bad for SEO performance results and rankings and, in the case of creating duplicate content, may result in ranking penalties from search engines.

- **Web page and website load time:** How quickly a web page loads, or page speed, is one of the most important ranking factors right now. The top search engine ranking is typically dominated by faster-loading pages, especially on mobile devices that are at the center of Google's design. Furthermore, quick-loading pages positively affect user experience and may increase your conversion rates. According to a study by the Aberdeen Group, every one-second delay in load time equates to a 7 percent drop in conversions. Google will reduce your search engine rankings if your site or web page loads slowly. Slow load time is typically attributed to your server performance and the density of your web page's HTML code. Keep code simple, clean, and easy to process. If your server is causing the issue, work with your website host to determine why and/or consider moving to a different provider that may be closer in distance to your target audience and your location.
- **XML sitemap and robots.txt files:** XML sitemaps and `robots.txt` files are files that allow you to communicate to search engines the web pages that should get into the search results and rankings. Be sure to leverage your CMS tools to build a complete XML sitemap and `robots.txt` files and have them validated and submitted via Google's Search Console tool.
- **Broken pages or 404 errors:** A 404 error page means that a web page is not accessible or no longer there. This is usually a result of a broken link or a link using the wrong URL for a web page. The 404 error hampers the user experience by preventing a user from connecting to a desired page. Because of this, websites that produce many 404 errors can lead to a drop in SEO rankings and traffic.

- **Duplicate content:** Duplicate content was one of Google's original spam checks and part of its algorithm early on. Web pages are considered duplicates if their content is 80 percent or more similar. Sites that have duplicate content are usually significantly affected by penalties and lower search engine rankings. Sometimes duplicate content happens by accident due to CMS or URL structuring reasons, so it's important to ensure there is only one URL created for a web page.
- **Page linking:** Page linking within a website is extremely important. Search engines follow them while crawling the site, and the anchor text that links use are another area search engines look to for determining what a page is about (also called *relevancy*). Every page should have at least one internal link pointing to it and should include the term that you'd like the page to rank for in the anchor text. It's also recommended that the number of links to a page from within a site (not external sites) be no more than 3,000.
- **SEO meta tags:** HTML tags are extremely important to search engines. They explain what your site is about, what to display in the search engine result copy it ranks for, and what type of page it is (recipe, product page, etc.). Each page should have its own unique set of tags. Similar to duplicate content, tag duplication can be a big hinderance to search engine rankings. Be sure to keep tags within the right character limits, and be sure you have an ongoing tag management strategy that uses the latest Schema.org tags, which are constantly changing.
- **HTTPS encryption:** Providing users with a secure website has become a top priority to search engines. Security has become part of the search engine ranking algorithm. Google says, "HTTPS is an internet communication protocol that protects the integrity and confidentiality of data between the user's computer and site" (`https://developers.google.com/web/fundamentals/security/encrypt-in-transit/why-https`). Websites that do not support HTTPS connects should expect a lower ranking in search engine results and be surpassed by sites that are using HTTPs in search results.
- **Global SEO elements:** Global brands understandably need to have multiple versions of their website for each country and language. Ideally countries should have a different ccTLD for each country (Amazon.com for the United States versus Amazon.ca for Canada), which is the preferred method to tell search engines which content to rank in each country. If that's not possible, another option is to

use a subdirectory (`spotify.com/fr`). Once you determine your URL style, be sure to use `hreflang` tags (`rel="alternate" hreflang="x"`) on each page as they communicate to search engines which pages should be shown to web page visitors based on their location. Also, if you offer multiple languages in the same country (e.g., a Canadian site that offers French and English content for respective audiences), it's even more important to use this tag.

- **Page layout and text usage:** The top-ranking pages typically offer long-form content, so it's important that your pages have a lot of text around a given subject. Search engines tend to reward fast-loading pages that offer a lot of basic text copy (some even more than 500 words) with the top rankings. Be sure your web pages offer a lot of text, especially in the "above the fold of the page" area, or the area at the top of the page that is initially displayed upon loading, without scrolling. Copy that's within an image does not count since search engines have a difficult time reading the image and typically just scan a page and extract basic HTML text.

These are the key "website environment" areas that take top priority before moving to the content pillar of good SEO. Be sure these are set up and implemented correctly before moving to the next step: content.

Priority 2: Creating the Right Content

During my early days in the SEO world, and still to this day, I remember constantly hearing the saying "Content is king." This is still the case today, but I believe this applies across all of marketing. I believe the marketing world is still trying to define what good content means and what's included when it comes to defining content types. I will break down content in much more detail in Chapter 5, "Data-Informed Creative." In my opinion, the list of marketing content is vast. It's not just a blog article or website landing page. Content can mean a lot of things in the marketing world, and SEO can help inform and regulate its creation so it gets the most views possible.

Content is extremely critical to the SEO process because content allows you to rank for the searches you are targeting. Unlike a paid search, to show up for an organic search, a website must typically have a piece of content with the phrase you are targeting. For example, a brand may consider itself an auto insurance provider, and their site solely uses the term *auto insurance*. They task their team with ranking for *car insurance* or *motorcycle insurance* as well as their core term, *auto insurance*. To rank for car insurance or motorcycle insurance, the brand would have to build content on their site that specifically mentions and is optimized around

those terms. For the best chance at ranking, a brand should build a dedicated web page for each search term they'd like to rank for. There are a few exceptions to this, and sometimes content will rank without specifically mentioning the term, but it's rare, usually a fluke, and does not last.

Creating the right content takes a lot of research and understanding of your audience, and that effort is worth it only if you have a sound, SEO-friendly technology environment to house it. If you follow the top-priority tech environment tips discussed earlier, you should be in good shape.

Identifying content ideas can come in many ways, but in general there is nothing like the insight search keyword data provides. I would argue that it's the best way to identify what content you should create. The process is fairly simple, and there are many keyword tools available on the market for purchase. Google also provides keyword data in its AdWords Keyword Planner tool. Once you identify what phrase or category of phrases you'd like to rank for, you need to identify what kind of content you'd like to create.

If you are looking for your website to rank for a phrase, you need to create a long-form piece of content that speaks to that phrase in several key areas, including the URL, the title of the page, throughout the copy, and the link text on the page. Figure 1.3 shows an example of an actual page for *diamond buying guide* that ranked #1 for the term.

As time has gone on, it's even more important to have long-form content, especially for search terms that are extremely common and competitive and have a lot of content already ranking in search engines. The average Google first-page result contains 1,890 words (source: Backlinko, 2016).

The example in Figure 1.4 for *best car insurance* is a page that has more than 4,000 words and 12 mentions of the exact phrase. The phrase is also in the URL and SEO HTML tags (like the earlier example).

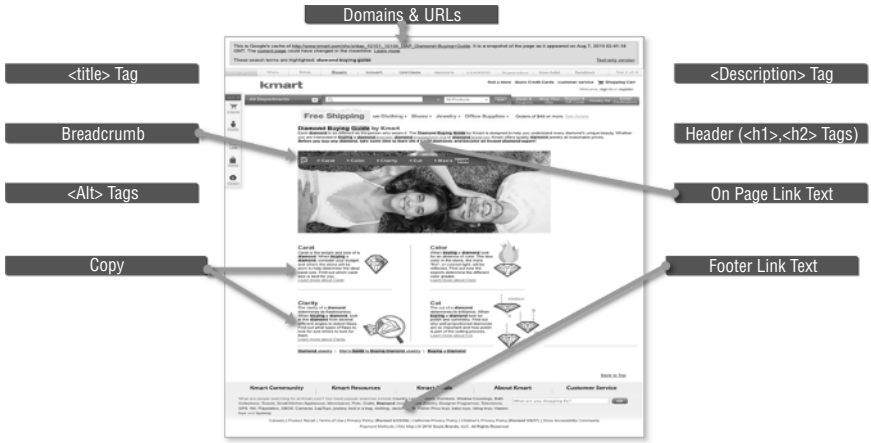


Figure 1.3: Kmart diamond buying guide



Best Car Insurance Companies of 2019

By Andy Bowen

Auto insurance is pretty much a given for anyone who owns a car. Not only does almost every state have minimum protection requirements but if you financed your car, your lender also typically requires enough coverage to protect its collateral.

Car insurance can be expensive if you're not careful, though. To help you save money, we've compiled a list of the best car insurance companies that offer great coverage at a fair price.

The Simple Dollar's Top Auto Insurance Companies for 2019

- Amica: Best Overall
- State Farm: Best for Customer Service and Interaction
- The Hartford: Best for Policy Options
- GEICO: Best for Tech-Savvy Consumers
- USAA: Best for Members of the Military

Find the Best Car Insurance

Enter your ZIP code below and be sure to click at least 2-3 companies to find the very best rate.

Ex: 20004

Compare Rates

Amica: Best Overall Car Insurance Company

Amica was the strongest company overall in our research, and received the second-highest rating across all regions in J.D. Power's 2019 customer satisfaction report — that means out of 44,622 surveyed drivers, it had the second highest satisfaction rating among more than 20 different companies.

The insurer also received the highest Consumer Reports rating among auto insurance providers — as it has every year since at least 1999. Consumer Reports noted that an overwhelming number of customers reported "relatively few" problems during the claims process.

Pros

- **A high J.D. Power satisfaction rating:** With a score of 879, Amica Mutual ranked as the No. 1 car insurance company in the New England region in J.D. Power's 2018 auto insurance study and among the very best in the nation.
- **High financial stability ratings:** Amica boasts a "Superior" financial stability rating from A.M. Best, which is the highest rating available.
- **No repair-facility restrictions:** Unlike most every other insurer, Amica has zero restrictions on which body shop you use for repairs.
- **"Platinum Choice" coverage:** Amica offers an additional tier of coverage called Platinum Choice, which costs more, but includes identity fraud monitoring, full glass coverage, prestige rental coverage, and rewards for good driving.
- **Best array of coverage options:** Amica offers the most driver and vehicle coverages of all our top recommendations. Its list includes GAP insurance and interior vehicle coverage, which aren't offered by State Farm, The Hartford, GEICO, or USAA.

Cons

- **Can't get a quote online:** Whether you start online or over the phone, you will eventually wind up on the phone to get an official quote — that can rack an extra 20 to 30 minutes to the process.
- **Fewer driver discount opportunities:** Amica is missing a few key driver discounts, including pre-pay, low-mileage, and military discounts. Consequently, it scored only 46 out of 100 in our driver discount evaluation.
- **Few online resources:** There are a few FAQs on the site, but Amica lacks in-depth online materials to help customers get a complete grasp on their purchases without having to talk to someone. Additionally, some policy changes require direct assistance from an Amica agent, which can be time-consuming.

State Farm: Best Car Insurance Company for Customer Service and Interaction

State Farm is the largest car insurance company in the nation, per the Insurance Information Institute in 2018. Fortunately, it's also one of the best — especially when it comes to the customer service experience. In 2018, State Farm received high praise from J.D. Power for its service interaction and claims handling. And of all the insured drivers we surveyed, it received the most positive remarks by far.

It is incredibly easy to get in touch with State Farm. You can call one of the company's 18,000 agents, go online, or even send a picture of your damaged car with your smartphone using the Pocket Agent mobile app. Compare that to Amica, which doesn't allow you to connect with an agent via an app, or file a claim through an agent.

State Farm also gets high marks for a pain-free shopping experience that lets prospective customers call their local agent or chat with a representative online if they have any questions.

Pros

- **Superior claims handling:** No other insurer makes it easier to file a claim — a fact corroborated by its high service rating. 18,000 agents nationwide, and excellent mobile app. Most other auto insurers offer the basic trifecta of phone, app, and email contact to agents, but State Farm's is the easiest to use.
- **Great financial standing:** State Farm has an A.M. Best outlook of stable, and a "Superior" overall rating — the highest given.
- **Best online quote tool:** Out of all the competition, State Farm has the simplest online quote tool. In less than five minutes, their tool will guide you completely through the process, replete with thorough examples of coverage options.

Cons

- **Missing a few common driver discounts:** Like Amica, State Farm lacks two extremely common discounts: pay-in-full, and automatic-pay discounts. These two discounts don't save a ton of money, but they are definitely nice options to have.
- **Lacks a couple of important coverages:** Unlike its competitors, State Farm doesn't offer stacked uninsured motorist or new car replacement coverages. That could be a deal breaker for someone who lives in a state with a very high rate of uninsured drivers.

The Hartford: Best Car Insurance Company for Policy Options

The Hartford is only the nation's 11th largest insurer, but it still packs a punch. In fact, it had the highest score in our 12-category feature evaluation (92 out of 100).

It also offers a wide range of policy options and benefits, including rates based on how much you actually drive your car and a new car replacement program for cars totaled shortly after purchase. The Hartford was also the only insurer to score a perfect 100 in our vehicle discount evaluation.

Pros

- **Mechanical breakdown coverage:** Mechanical breakdown insurance helps cover the cost of repairs that aren't covered by your car's warranty. The Hartford is the only one of our top picks that includes this coverage.
- **Useful policy benefits:** The company provides not only a solid set of coverage but also a great selection of policy benefits. For instance, frequent travelers will appreciate The Hartford's towing and roadside assistance programs.
- **Excellent purchase experience:** The Hartford is one of two national providers to receive a perfect "Overall Purchase Experience" score from J.D. Power.

Cons

- **Merely average claims satisfaction:** The Hartford received a perfect score in our claims management evaluation, but according to J.D. Power, customers are less impressed — it received a middle-of-the-pack 3-star rating for service interaction.
- **Fewest online educational resources:** The Hartford offers the fewest online learning materials among this field of competitors.

GEICO: Best Car Insurance Company for Tech-Savvy Customers

We've all seen the ads: The gecko with the charming accent, the caveman, the "west" piggy, and that camel who loves Wednesdays. But

Figure 1.4: Car Insurance long-form copy example that ranks #1

For extremely general and common search phrases, a more comprehensive content approach may be necessary. This will be outlined in Chapter 5. The key takeaway is to provide an SEO-optimal web page for each term you'd like to rank for.

Priority 3: Popularity of Your Web Page and Website

The third pillar of good SEO, popularity, is the most difficult to affect. Oftentimes, search engines find your website and web pages through links from other sites. They assign a "trust factor" or quality factor to those links to determine whether a piece of content is popular and should be trusted. Links from `.gov` or `.org` websites are traditionally looked at as having even more power and quality because they are looked at as strong authorities and very trustworthy due to their affiliation with the government or an association.

As often as a few years ago, brands could easily manipulate the link factor. There were all kinds of link networks and vendors that you could subscribe to that would essentially allow you to "rent" links in their website network. In essence, you were buying links artificially. There have been several algorithm updates since then, and search engines have penalized sites that seem to be acquiring links from low-quality sites. The best way to build links to your site is do so organically and to be deserving of them by providing useful, high-quality content. This requires long-term, strategic thinking. It also requires a combined approach that leverages online assets a brand may create outside of their website on other high-traffic websites and to embed links in those assets that go to their content (that they're trying to rank).

Additionally, brands need to be vigilant and regularly monitor that low-quality sites aren't pointing links to them; these are also called *toxic links*. Fortunately, search engines provide a link disavow option via their Google Search Console or webmaster website monitoring tools, which allow you to mark incoming links as low quality and instructs them to "disavow" or essentially ignore them. Many SEO tools have a feature that checks the quality of links pointing to your site and provides you with a list that you can upload into each search engine's platform to disavow poor-quality links.

To boost links, nothing works better than offering useful and unique content. I once had an automotive brand that we were working with that was looking to build links. When we started working with them, their site had only about 1,200 links pointing to it. This is incredibly low considering many websites in their industry had more than 1 million

links pointing to them. We were at a major disadvantage to ranking well and leapfrogging the competition. We conducted a content and search term analysis to determine what topics people were searching for and provided a gap analysis to show where they were missing content. We built many "how to" and other types of help content.

As a result, the link counts increased significantly. Within two years, the link count went to more than 100,000. When we dove deeper, we found that a huge number of local auto dealers were linking to their site and content because they found it useful and complementary to their dealer sites. Additionally, we saw that other channels were driving a lot of traffic to them, email and social media in particular. As a result, we saw our total website rankings increase exponentially. Table 1.1 shows the dos and don'ts of building links.

Table 1.1: The Dos and Don'ts of Building Links

DO	DON'T
Aim for getting links from high-quality sites, especially `.org` and `.gov` websites	Get links from low-quality sites
Point links to your home page and other important pages that you are trying to rank	Just link to your home page
Include the term that you are trying to have your website rank for in the anchor text of the link pointing to it	Use a general anchor text like "click here"
Consider *content promotion* tactics to help boost awareness of your content	Forget to use the search term in the anchor text that you would like to have the page rank for
Use a link quality tool to run monthly checks to determine if your links are low quality and disavow them using Google Search Console	Buy or rent links

The key is to understand that acquiring links should be done organically, by providing high-quality content that other sites link to. There are some additional organic ways to build awareness of your content and links.

- **Paid media:** Paid search or content promotion vehicles can drive a significant amount of traffic to your content, which can yield links or shares of your content.
- **Custom content strategies (bloggers, influencers, publication sites):** Custom content pieces are often collaborative and allow brands to provide an "assignment brief" where they can discuss the guidelines for the project. When soliciting proposals and completing assignment briefs, brands can often ask for links in the copy to important web pages of the brand website. This can increase the awareness of your content and could increase links as well.
- **Social media updates:** Sharing content on social media channels (Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, etc.) can be a great way to bring awareness of your content, particularly if you have a robust following.
- **Email newsletters:** For brands that publish email newsletters and have a large email list, adding a link to a new article can be a great way to build awareness and attract views of content that may lead to links. See Figure 1.5.
- **Digital news releases:** For brands that drop online press releases, consider using a newswire service like PR Newswire. These services push out your release to hundreds of news publications at once and typically allow for embedding links to content and other owned media assets that you are trying to increase links to in the release. Including search terms in the anchor text is an excellent way to build links. It's a really quick and passive way to bring awareness of your content and your site.
- **YouTube videos:** YouTube is considered the second most popular search engine according to the *New York Times*. For brands that have videos on YouTube or a program on YouTube, they should employ SEO best practices (to be discussed later) to maximize free views of video content. They should also include a link to a relevant web page for each video.

While the factors that affect search engine rankings are constantly changing, I've found that the three pillars of good SEO that I just outlined have lasted since the beginning of Google. I am confident that if brands focus on optimizing the three pillars of good SEO and optimizing the factors underneath them, they will see significant improvements to their organic traffic levels and search engine rankings.

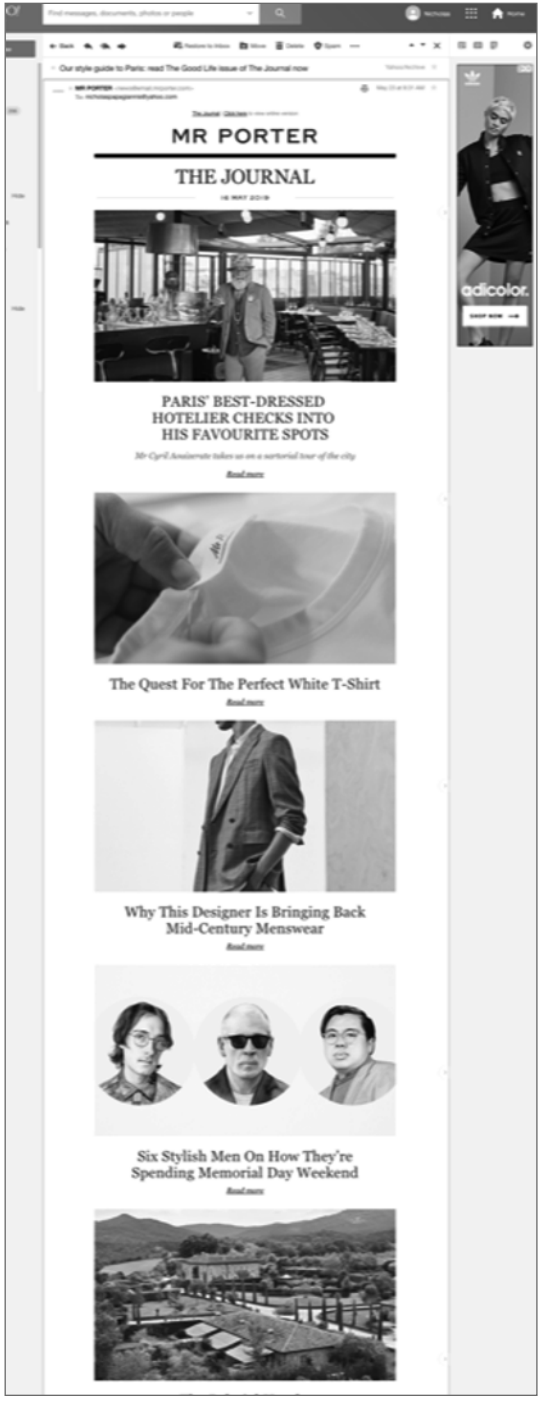


Figure 1.5: Example of rich newsletter promoting content on website from mrporter.com

Focusing on Google First

The big three search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing) focus on most of the same elements of a web page but weigh them a little differently. This makes it difficult to optimize around all three search engines at the same time, so we recommend focusing mostly around Google since it controls the largest share of users by far. See Figure 1.6.

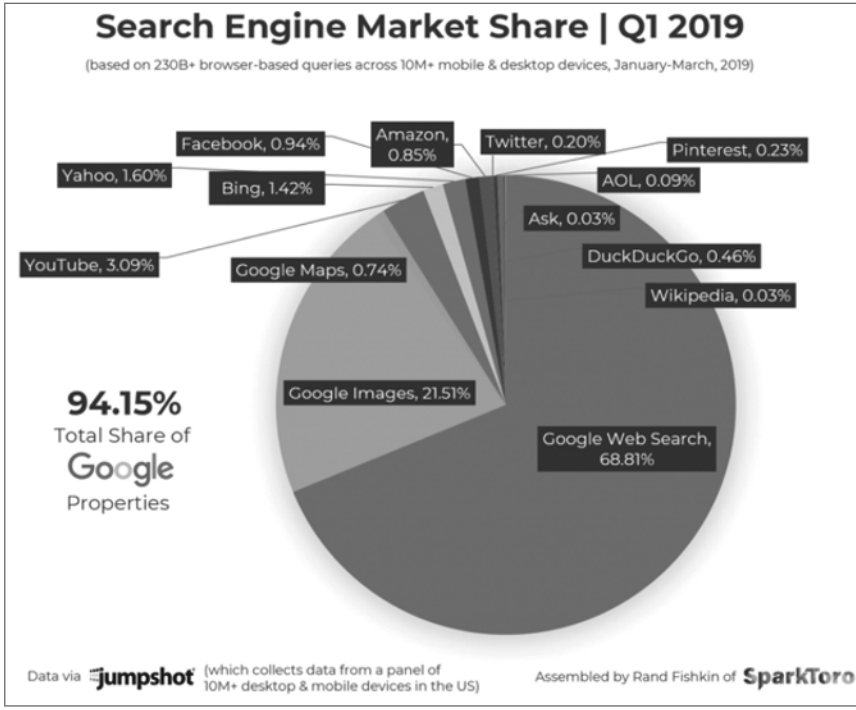


Figure 1.6: Search engine share study, Jumpshot 2019

At the end of the day, Bing and Yahoo look at page, domain, and link quality but weigh them slightly differently. If you are not ranking well on Bing or Yahoo but are ranking well on Google, consider looking at the following factors:

- **Your domain characteristics:** Bing and Yahoo favor older domains with keywords in them, for example, if your target search term is in your domain (`www.mensshoes.com`).
- **Link quality:** Yahoo and Bing weigh links from `.edu`, `.org`, and `.gov` websites and exact match anchor text more heavily.

- **On-page elements:** Yahoo and Bing favor web pages that include the specific phrase you are targeting in key web page areas like the header, title, web page copy, and description tags.
- **Social media signals:** Bing has come out and said that it factors social media factors into its results, so content that is shared more on Facebook, Twitter, and other channels typically will rank better.

If you are concerned about a lack of rankings on Bing or Yahoo, work with your SEO expert to craft a plan specific to ranking on those engines. You have to remember that some of the factors they weigh might look "spammy" to Google and could risk your rankings on Google since they are more stringent around exact match links and exact match domain structures.

Preparation for Algorithm Updates

Search engines typically make several updates to their ranking algorithms throughout the year. The most news chatter is usually around updates that Google makes. It's important to monitor Google's blogs and search engine trade websites like SearchEngineLand.com and SearchEngineWatch.com to keep up with the latest news.

This book provides general usability and search engine practices that should position your site to rank well and be in line with current search engine guidelines. However, since usability requirements change and search engines make updates to accommodate for them as well as spam filtering and security needs, be sure that you or your SEO expert stay in tune with any published updates that might affect your SEO performance.

Google does several different algorithm updates throughout the year to help sift out spam content and low-quality websites. Over the last few years Google has done several updates every few months, including the following through June 2019:

- **August 2017:** Google did the Hawk local algorithm update. Google was trying to force similar businesses that were near each other to be filtered out of local search results. Google then followed up that update to essentially correct it and put businesses near each other even if they're similar.
- **November 2017:** There were rumors that Google did another update in November 2017. It decreased the search engine ranking on many small sites with minimal content that offered ads. Essentially,

Google penalized sites that were trying to rank for search results to capture traffic and solicit advertisements to that traffic.

- **December 2017:** Google confirmed that it did an update that targeted websites that had way too many limited landing pages targeting different keyword derivatives, as well as sites with too many ads or thin content on them. This update essentially targeted spam sites.
- **March 2018:** Google representatives confirmed that they did a ranking algorithm update but did not disclose what exactly they penalized.
- **April 2018:** Google representatives again confirmed that they did a core algorithm update and gave no significant feedback as to what they filtered out. Many sites did not see a significant impact from this update.
- **August 2018:** Google representatives confirmed that they released a major search algorithm update to reward quality websites with higher search engine ranking results. According to Google, the update was not focused on demoting low-quality content but rather providing more relevant results to users that offer high-quality comment content.
- **September 2018:** Google representatives confirmed that they released a minor search algorithm update on the company's anniversary, September 27. They did not disclose any details regarding the impact of this update and the types of content it penalized or rewarded.
- **March 2019:** Google representatives confirmed that there was a broad algorithm update dubbed the Florida2 update because it was discussed at the Pub Conn Florida conference. Since it was a broader update, they didn't disclose any specific changes or impacts to look out for. In general, it was rumored to just focus on the quality of search results and how well content how well content is mapped to search query or phrase.
- **April 2019:** Google confirmed that there was a glitch in its algorithm and the company had to do an update because it led to some websites and content being in the index and removed from search engine results. The update was essentially to fix the indexing issue. Normal sites were typically not impacted unless they were deindexed.

- **May 2019:** There was rumored to be another algorithm update because Google had issues indexing new content. This update was rumored to be a fix for that issue.
- **June 2019:** Google rolled out the well-publicized domain diversity update. It was aimed to improve search results in that instance where a single domain dominated all the search results for a search phrase. As Google says, going forward, it will generally not show more than two URLs (listings) from the same domain as a result of this update.

The big takeaway from this timeline is that Google *frequently* updates its algorithm that ranks content and websites. It's extremely important that marketers pay attention to the latest news on Google algorithm updates because they can severely impact your websites and content performance. These updates could compromise free traffic as well and decrease the overall return on investment (ROI) of your web assets. In my opinion, it's extremely critical to have an experienced SEO expert on hand at all times to ensure your website is positioned well to handle the turbulence that comes out of these frequent search algorithm updates. Google is constantly tweaking its ranking algorithm and rewarding users with a better user experience by molding irrelevant content and low-quality sites. It's critically important that brands stay ahead of the curve by offering high-quality content and a great user experience.

Quiz

1. What redirect type is best for SEO?
   a. 302 meta refresh redirect
   b. 301 permanent redirect
   c. 301 meta refresh redirect
   d. 404 permanent redirect

   Answer: b

2. What are the three pillars of good SEO?
   a. Content, website environment, trust
   b. Technology, linking, copy

c. Copy, website environment, linking
d. Content, website environment, popularity

Answer: d

3. True or False: Google's mission is to optimize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.

Answer: True

4. True or False: For good SEO, links should be high-quality *and* numerous.

Answer: True

5. Content should be:
   a. Unique
   b. Long-form
   c. Useful
   d. Search informed
   e. All the above

Answer: e.

6. True or False: Typically, link building is the toughest of the three pillars to affect.

Answer: True

7. Which of the following is not a good example of a content promotion tactic to build awareness and links to content?
   a. Influencer strategies
   b. Partner content: custom content on a partner site
   c. Placing links to brand web pages in the YouTube description of highly viewed videos
   d. Social media sharing
   e. Adding a link to your content from a website's XML sitemap file

Answer: e

8. If you are trying to get a page to rank for *black shoes*, where should you include the exact search phrase that you would like to have the page rank for?
   a. HTML title tag (page title)
   b. Header tag (or h1, h2)
   c. The URL
   d. Anchor text
   e. Image/alt tags
   f. In the page copy
   g. All the above

   Answer: g

9. To have a free-traffic oriented marketing program, which of the following do you *not* need?
   a. Analytics
   b. Content production process
   c. SEO expert
   d. News-writing expert
   e. User experience expert
   f. Data-driven creative team members
   g. All the above

   Answer: d

10. How often does Google conduct algorithm updates?
    a. Several times a year
    b. Once a year
    c. Every few years
    d. Once a week
    e. Every day
    f. Every few days
    g. All the above

    Answer: a