

## SEO Best Practices Evolve with Google

There's a lively argument underway among online marketers about the benefits of Search Engine Optimization, although the reported death of this art and science, as Mark Twain might say, has been "greatly exaggerated." The days of old-school SEO may be gone, but the key to boosting your website ranking is still based on the words you put on the page.

SEO as a visibility tool is still very much alive, but is evolving fast to keep pace with search engine changes. The basic goal of SEO is to improve a website's visibility through higher search-engine rankings. Whether your customer uses Google, Bing or some other search engine, there are 10 results to a page – and page 1 is where you want to be. Cornell University conducted an "eye-tracking" study that shows nearly 90 percent of the clicks on page 1 of a search result go to the top 5 websites. Less than 5 percent of Google users go deeper than page 1 of a search result to choose and click a link.

So SEO is still important. Problem is, it can also be expensive, which is why you want to keep up with Google's changes so you are getting the best value for your SEO dollars. There's no point in continuing with outdated strategies – or SEO companies that still use them.

Google is famous for tweaking its algorithms without warning to improve the user experience. Whenever Google makes a change, some websites are inevitably penalized. But Google still offers some transparency behind the dark curtain of its algorithms. Google says it wants to put the best, most relevant content in front of searchers. The key word here is "content." Google's intentions couldn't be clearer. Content is Internet royalty. Content is king. Google rewards websites that deliver on their promise of useful information relevant to what people search for on any given topic. Over time, Google says quality websites will move higher in the search engine rankings. So how does Google define quality?

Take a long, critical look at your site. Is it organized logically? Is the content clear, recent and easy to read? Does it answer the customer's questions? How often do you post new information? For content to work effectively, each page of the website should focus on a specific topic, product or service. That topic is identified with two or three keywords, say, "Cloud computing, software as a service, and SaaS." These words are used judiciously throughout the content on the page. SEO experts say the optimal density is 1-3 percent.

Here's where the arguments begin:

Back in the day, SEO was often seen as a way to game the system by pandering to whatever makes Google happy. Because search engines are essentially a word-matching tool, the idea was to stuff meta tags, headers and title tags with keywords relevant to the business. People typed those words into the Google search bar and Google matched their queries with the websites it deemed most relevant, based on a complex mathematical stew involving Google's vast database of indexed websites as well as the user's geographic location (if you're in New York City searching for a good French restaurant, you really don't care about French restaurants in Chicago). This strategy often worked, although SEO got a bad rap for what many perceived as manipulation and trickery. Think of all the websites you've encountered that used the same words repeatedly and were virtually unreadable. Google responded in an effort to protect its own brand.

Google's new algorithms now look first at fresh content, clean link structure, then meta tags, how fast the website loads in a browser, page layout and the placement of advertising, how well the site functions on mobile devices, and whether you moderate any comments section (unmoderated comments are a red flag). Google now warns users when a site is not optimized for mobile viewing, a critical development because marketing studies show almost a third of all online search occurs on smart phones and tablets.

What's the answer?

We're talking high-quality, original content reinforced by fundamental SEO techniques – descriptive headers, title tags, meta tags – that help Google match people with your website. It's not enough to pack a page with keywords or build up backlinks for their own sake. At least some portion of your website needs to be updated regularly. Posting company news as it relates to customer benefits is a good way to do this. On-site images should be optimized for the web, which means small file sizes so the page loads faster in a browser. Cross-pollinate the website with all of your social media sites to boost awareness, drive more traffic to the company site and present a consistent brand identity.

An effective SEO campaign produces free organic traffic – people find your website on their own. Paid advertising such as Google AdWords delivers guaranteed placement of your business, right at the top of the search page, but it does not necessarily engender the same level of confidence as search results your customers find themselves. Customers may perceive a lack of bias in organic search. Some people simply will not click on an ad link.

There's another factor to consider. Google has always said that AdWords and page rankings for organic search are completely unrelated. So using AdWords does not mean your site will receive any preferential treatment in page rank no matter how much money you spend with Google.

Studying the data is the only way you can gauge success. Some SEO companies will tweak a company's website, add some nice content and send a bill. That's no good if Google adjusts its algorithms a month later. You want follow-through. You want to see the data. Where does your traffic come from? Where do people spend their time on your site? What's the conversion rate? Conversions can be defined in many ways, usually whatever is most favorable to the SEO company doing the work. Bottom line, a conversion ought to be a paying customer. Before you hire any SEO firm, find out what they report and how often. A good SEO campaign will produce actionable information about your potential and actual customers, including their location, spending habits, even comparison shopping.

With this in mind, a well-planned SEO strategy should take a multi-pronged approach, with content as the top priority. Targeted keywords and descriptive meta tags should be complemented by a vibrant social media presence and supplemented with a pay-per-click advertising campaign like Google AdWords. Although AdWords campaigns are really limited only by your budget, effective keyword targeting can still reap high click-through rates on a small spend. Work with an SEO company that not only keeps up with Google's own algorithm changes, but is nimble enough to adapt to them. By deploying all of these strategies, over time your site can move higher in page rankings – and stay there with regular infusions of fresh, information-rich content.