

MAKE THE MOST OF SEO

HOW TO BRING CUSTOMERS TO YOUR DOOR

INTERNET SEARCHES ARE BUSINESSES' NEW FRONT DOORS. More than half of the people who visit company websites get there because the site comes up in search results.¹ And because those visitors are on the hunt for products or services, they are often ready to buy. In a 2014 survey, for example, 85% of retailers cited search engine marketing (SEM)—which uses paid strategies to improve search results—as one of their most effective tactics for generating new customers.²

But your website won't show up in searches without a little help. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of adapting your website (and your other digital marketing) to improve your site's ranking in the results for specific search terms. Search engines poke around your site to see what it's about and then match that to users' search queries. The good news is you can improve your search results, bringing more ready-to-buy consumers to your site—and to your product or service.



THE FUNDAMENTALS OF HIGH RANKINGS

With millions of websites competing to be at the top of search engine rankings, it makes sense to do everything you can to improve your position. To do that, you need to understand how search engines work—and that’s a moving target. Search engine algorithms get smarter, quicker, and pickier every day, and it is up to marketers to make sure their SEO strategies keep pace.

How search engines work

Google, Bing, and other search engines use complex, proprietary algorithms to determine which websites are most relevant to the words that users type into the search box. While these algorithms have many components, some of the most important (and the most useful for marketers) are:

- Keywords
- Links
- Content
- Speed

KEYWORDS

To show up in a search result, your website must contain words that users are looking for. These are called keywords, and optimization involves identifying the most effective keywords for your business. Keywords are

important even when you produce non-text-based content, such as voice or video. They’re crucial if you want potential customers to find you.

How to find your keywords

Start by studying which keywords people most often use to find your business. These typically describe a product or service you offer—such as “HVAC installation” or “yoga”—along with a geographic location or another descriptor that narrows the search. You can learn the keywords most frequently used to find your business by examining your website’s traffic data.

TOOLS

There are many options for analyzing that data, including the granddaddy of them all, Google Analytics, a free tool that shows which search terms currently bring the most visitors to your site. You can also look for keywords using these other powerful tools:

- Keyword Combination Tool
- Google Keyword Planner
- Keyword Tool
- KWFinder
- Moz Keyword Explorer
- SEMrush



LONG-TAIL KEYWORDS

As you look at the data you collect, know that keywords are what connect you with your audience. Those may include not only single-word or simple keywords but also collections of terms, known as long-tail keywords. A keyword might be yoga; a long-tail keyword might be yoga for people recovering from an injury. Long-tail keywords have the potential to bring searchers who have a clearer focus—and possibly a greater readiness to purchase—to your site.

Putting Keywords Into Practice

Once you have a good grasp of which keywords and long-tail keywords might be effective, be sure to make them prominent wherever your company appears online, including:

- Blogs
- Website
- Ads
- Content

CONTENT

Search engines also consider the context of keywords to determine a page's relevance, so it's essential to incorporate your keywords into content that provides value to your customers. Provide clear, detailed descriptions of all the products and services you offer.

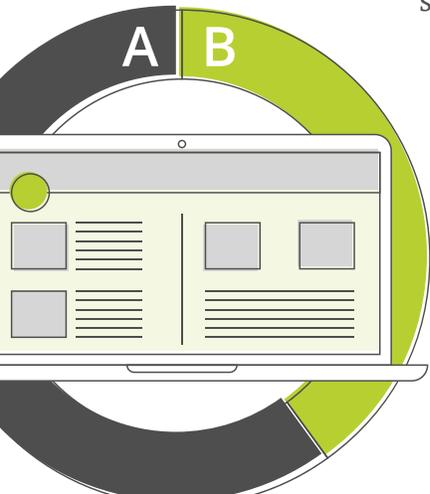
Options for great keyword placement:

- How-to articles
- Blogs
- Q&As with company experts
- Industry glossaries

Make sure to update your content on a regular basis, because search engines give higher rankings to sites that routinely add fresh material. Maintaining a company blog is a great way to keep your site up to date.

Fine-Tune with A/B Testing

Make your content even more effective with A/B testing, in which you create alternative versions of the same page and see which is more popular. This could help you find ways to improve pages that have high bounce rates or low session duration. There are tools that let you test two versions



of your content to see how people respond. This can help you gauge the effectiveness of formats, headlines, calls to action, and other elements of your content.

Make Sure Your Content Is Top-Notch

Search engines are getting smarter in their ability to help users find just what they're looking for, and part of that involves weeding out poor-quality websites or blogs. Redundant or duplicated content, 404 errors, and pages with very little substance will negatively affect your search engine rankings. Beyond avoiding such mistakes, writing a blog with relevant, useful information is a great place to start improving the quality of your content—and improving your search rankings. Longer articles of more than 1,000 words that incorporate long-tail keywords can be especially algorithm-friendly.

LINKS

High-quality content can also generate links from other sites, which are important for SEO because search engines consider links an endorsement of your site's value. However, quality matters more than quantity: 50 links from respected, high-ranking sites will make you more attractive to search engine algorithms than 500 links from low-quality sites.

The following strategies can also make other sites more likely to provide links to yours:

- Sponsoring events in your community
- Asking your suppliers to add links to your business on their websites
- Spreading the word about your content through social media and other channels
- Encouraging content sharing



Adding social sharing buttons on your site is a good place to start, but you can also reach out to people who might link to your site and content. Asking them to write a guest blog, or offering to write one for their website, may be an effective way to gain visibility and authority—and, ultimately, to improve your search rankings.



SPEED

The speed of your website has a significant impact on search engine rankings. These ideas could help:

- Minimize HTTP redirects, which cause visitors to bounce around your site before finding what they're looking for.³
- Optimize your images so they take less time to load by cropping them to the correct size for your website. Use JPEG or PNG formats whenever possible.
- Reduce the number of plug-ins and redirects on your site.

If you can't immediately attend to all of the speed issues on your site, prioritize improving "above-the-fold content" so the top of the page loads fastest, making visitors less likely to jump off even if the rest of the page takes more time to load.

WHAT ABOUT PAID SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING?

Paid search engine marketing (SEM) can also be part of your SEO strategy. With SEM, you pay search engines to drive traffic to your website. In search results, SEM entries are usually right at the top. It's easy to get started with SEM, and easy to track ROI, but every click comes with a cost. SEM typically involves purchasing ads as well as keywords, which you often bid on. Many systems work through pay-per-click (PPC).⁴

But if you have a limited budget and need to drive traffic to your site, don't just invest in SEM, but invest in content too. Here's why.

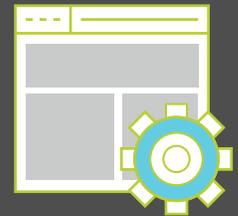
SEO and SEM Can Work Together

Search engines want to make sure your content is relevant, so users actually get what they came for. When it doesn't take them closer to what they want, users "bounce"—they shrug and head back to Google to find something more useful.

SEM AND SEO HAVE DIFFERENT STRENGTHS



SEM provides a quick boost to traffic and revenue, but it grinds to a halt the second you stop shelling out cold hard cash.



SEO that includes creating compelling content is great for brand building and long-term awareness. You can pay a writer to create content for you or do it yourself for free.

Based in part on your bounce rate, search engines assign your page a Quality Score. The lower the score, the lower you rank and the more you pay for keywords.

How do you reduce your bounce rate? By using smart SEO tactics that end up powering your SEM, such as:

- Providing relevant content and simple navigation
- Adding branding elements such as contact info and a company bio
- Structuring your HTML the way search engines like it
- Building inbound links from social media and reputable sites

SEARCH ON MOBILE DEVICES

Because your potential customers are increasingly likely to view your website on a smartphone, creating a search strategy that revolves around mobile is one of the best ways to reach people wherever they are and whenever they're looking for something. The first step is to optimize your website for mobile with responsive design that lets visitors easily navigate it on any device—if they need to pinch and pull to read content on your site, they're much more likely to leave.



And these days, not using responsive design can cost you in terms of your search rankings. While Google has long encouraged web developers to optimize websites for viewing on mobile devices, in April 2016 the company officially incorporated that site characteristic into its search-results ranking algorithm.⁵

OPTIMIZE EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE, ON YOUR CUSTOMER'S JOURNEY

Your keywords are the words your consumers use to connect to you, and you need to use them in all your promotional efforts, from ads to content to every other element of your messaging.

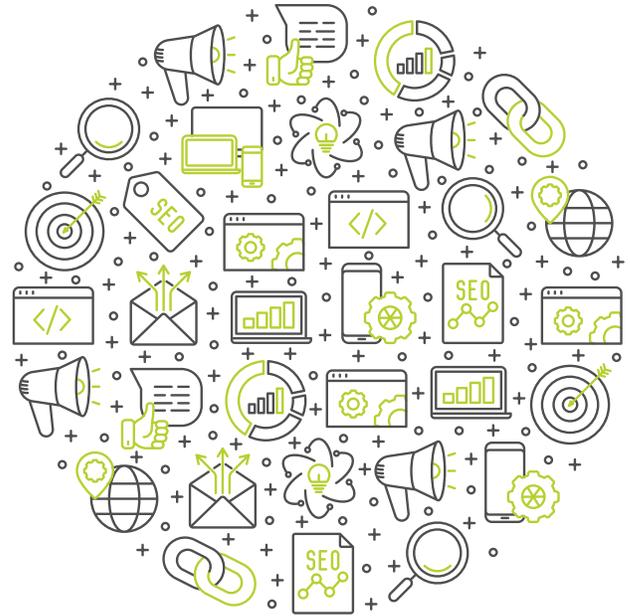
Creating that kind of sustained presence means your content marketing and keyword strategy will be there throughout your customers' journeys—including during the “micromoments” when they are on the verge of making a purchase and looking for information about what to buy or where to buy it. Micromoments may include:

- *Want-to-know*: Searching to find the best U.S. vacation spot, for example
- *Want-to-go*: Downloading the mobile app for an airline and researching the lowest ticket prices
- *Want-to-do*: Looking for the most popular attractions at a particular vacation spot and the best restaurants in the area
- *Want-to-buy*: Finding the right vacation package for a family and choosing it because of cost, convenience, location, attractions, or all of the above

MOVING AHEAD WITH SEO

An in-depth SEO campaign involves regularly monitoring keywords and developing new content. As search engine algorithms continue to change, a good SEO program can help your business keep up with these shifts—and with your competitors.

To succeed at SEO, you need to understand how people search for products and services, then position your site with the right words and content to deliver something useful. In the end, it's the value you provide that will turn search visitors into satisfied customers.



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