SEO revisited: How to improve SEO rankings

Time to revisit a topic; it’s an oldie but goodie, and it’s search engine optimization, or SEO. In brief, effective SEO makes sure users find your content when they use a search engine. SEO may target different kinds of search, including image search, local search, video search, academic search, news search and industry-specific vertical search engines. Search engines use complex algorithms to determine and rank a website’s visibility. With good SEO, you get more visitors to your site, more traffic, and ultimately, more business.

But why, exactly, does it matter? Research shows that the first 10 results, or page one, receives approximately 90 percent of all click-through traffic. This means that if you are not on the first page of search results, you are competing for a measly 10 percent of Web traffic.1 This is one of many reasons why you need to implement SEO best practices to drive website traffic.

In 2008, we published a guide on SEO, but a lot has changed since then. SEO is an ever-changing landscape and as search engines evolve, greater emphasis is placed on the quality of content, versus the quantity of keywords. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to SEO success, there are things you can do to improve SEO immediately and get more visitors to your site. What does it take to be effective with SEO in 2014? This paper answers that question by reviewing what is new to SEO and summarizes action items that can boost your rankings.

SEO basics (a.k.a. You’re late to the party)

If SEO is a new concept, you need to get up to speed quickly. You can start by reviewing our SEO Blue Paper from 2008, but you’ll need to consult other sources as well. Do some homework using the vast amount of resources available. For example, the website SEO News has a lot of information that is helpful to SEO beginners. In addition, Mashable® has extensive SEO resources for beginner, intermediate or advanced SEO students. The Moz® website also has a list of 100 free SEO tools and resources and KISSmetrics has a listing of free SEO resources that can help beginners better understand SEO concepts and tools.

There’s also a great video on SEO for Dummies available on YouTube®. Likewise, Amazon.com® has a number of books on the subject for everyone from beginners to advanced SEO enthusiasts. Two to consider are Search Engine Optimization for Dummies by Peter Kent or if you’re a bit more advanced check out Google

Semantic Search by David Amerland. There are a lot of options, and almost any can help you get up to speed quickly. Find resources that appeal to your business or customer base and you can’t go wrong. The idea is to just do it, and do it quickly. SEO is no longer just a hot topic; it’s the most important topic when it comes to driving website traffic.

Search algorithms explained (a.k.a. Still shrouded in mystery, but here’s our best guess)

Ever wonder what factors will boost your search ranking? Every two years, the SEO consulting company Moz® conducts a correlation study to better understand search engine algorithms. By surveying over 120 leading search marketers, Moz came up with over 80 ranking factors that can impact website rankings. The 80 ranking factors list is published online and serves as a great starting point to emphasize what’s new and important in SEO today. Figure 1. illustrates the search ranking factors according to Moz.

Figure 1. Search ranking factors from Moz

![Figure 1. Search ranking factors from Moz](http://searchenginewatch.com/article/2281153/2013-Search-Ranking-Factors-Survey-Results-From-Moz)

What does this mean, exactly? With respect to on-page keywords (keywords included within the body of the page), the survey showed that including keywords in both titles and on-page are important. It also looked at on-page keywords and found a high correlation between keywords in the body text, title, meta-description and header tags.

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The survey also shows that rankings of exact match domains (EMD) have declined over the past year, although the correlation is still high. EMDs are domains that use the exact keyword phrase that you are targeting. So if you were targeting “chocolate ice cream” then the exact match domain would be www.chocolateicecream.com. While having the keywords in the domain name was extremely important many years ago, search engines have definitely moved away from exact-match keywords in favor of partial-match domains or branded URLs.

Interestingly, despite the fact that over optimization of keyword anchor text can be problematic and a sign of spamming, the survey found that the correlations for exact match and partial match were fairly high. To clarify, keyword anchor text is the clickable text in a hyperlink that is relevant to the page you are linking to, rather than generic text. Most keyword anchor text is underlined and in blue, so users know they can click on it to find out more. For instance, Wordstream® provides a detailed explanation of keyword anchor text. However, the study also found that search engines favor diversity in anchor text, including both branded and nonbranded terms, over the number of links.

They survey examined social signals and the correlation with ranking factors as well. Social signals are things that show a strong social presence to your site, like Facebook likes, comments and tweets. The more social signals you have, the better. Google® +1’s came out ahead of Facebook® shares and tweets for correlated factors, although the surveyed SEOs did not believe that social signals were very important to Google’s search algorithm.

Some of the additional factors that weigh more heavily include:

- Unique cblocks Linking to the Page
- Unique IPs Linking to the Page
- Root Domains Linking to the Page
- Root Domains Linking to Page w/ Partial Match Anchor Text
- Subdomains Linking to the Page
- Root Domains Linking to Page w/ Exact Match Anchor Text
- Unique cblocks w/ Followed Links to the Page
- Unique IPs with Followed Links to the Page
- Unique Domains w/ Followed Links to a Page
- External Links to the Page
- Unique Domains w/ Followed Links to the Subdomain

You might not be familiar with some of these factors. To learn more, you can download the survey descriptions or the Beginners Guide to SEO from Moz.com. An IP, for example, is an Internet Protocol number, and it is essentially a unique
identifier to send data to specific computers on a network. Every website has an IP address; you can check yours by going to WhatisMyIPaddress.com.

“Cblocks” refer to a specific part of a website’s IP address. Every IP address follows the same format: AA.BB.CC.DD. The “CC” part of the IP address is referred to as the cblock, or the C-class block of IPs. For example, if your IP address is 72.133.56.24, the cblock would be 56. In reality, cblocks are the Web equivalent of a neighborhood. Most websites use shared hosting because it’s cheaper and usually doesn’t result in any speed or performance issues. You can see which other websites are on your same C-Block at sites like WebsiteNeighbors.com.

Domain names are the human-readable Internet addresses of websites. Root domains, which are identified by their domain names, have extensions such as .com, .org, .net, etc. Subdomains are a lower-level component of a root domain and precede the domain name.

The takeaway is that links are still believed to be the most important part of the algorithm (about 40 percent).³ Keyword usage on-page is still important, and accordingly, it remains one of the most important factors.

Google Hummingbird (a.k.a. The über algorithm that does stuff only Google knows about)

Ah hummingbirds ... if you’ve ever seen one in action, you probably marveled at their speed and precision. And, as of September 2013, there’s a new species in town; it’s called Google Hummingbird. It’s the “updated” search algorithm that was introduced last fall and it affects more than 90 percent of searches.⁴

Think of a search algorithm as a recipe that is used to cull through billions of Web pages in order to produce search results. Google started using Hummingbird in September 2013, and, like its namesake, it uses precision and speed to find the best search results. There are over 200 major “ingredients” that go into the recipe, which is a mix of old and new search criteria that, as Google said “is organized in a way to especially serve the search demands of today, rather than the one created for the needs of ten years ago.”⁵

So what's new in Hummingbird? Some say not much. Although it's a totally new algorithm, it takes a lot of formulas and reorganizes them to produce more refined search results. Some experts say that Google simply reorganized and combined formulas to optimize and organize a clear path for future improvements but the impact was minimal to SEO. In fact, Hummingbird was in use for more than a month before Google made an announcement, and no one noticed. Many questioned the fact that Hummingbird affected 90 percent of queries for the simple reason they didn't notice any change in traffic and rankings.

However, there were some minor changes that helped refine searches, according to Google. The biggest change happened to be long-tail queries. Long-tail searches refer to search terms that contain three or more words. These search terms are very targeted, and are quickly becoming the norm when people are searching for information online. Hummingbird takes a search engine query using long-tailed keywords and tries to decipher the context of the question rather than match the specific keywords within the question. The goal is to provide results that actually answer the question rather than focusing on keywords.

Also, Hummingbird now includes a “conversational search” that responds to questions when users click on the small microphone icon in the right hand corner of Google’s search box. Users of Google Chrome® are probably more familiar with this feature; if the user clicks on the microphone (and has configured their computer properly) they ask the question that is normally typed into the search box. Google displays the facts and sites you may want to visit to answer your question. Google even speaks the answer back to the user, and the more conversational the query, the more information you receive.

According to Google, there's nothing new or different SEOs or publishers should change as a result of Hummingbird. Asher Elran, a blogger for KISSmetrics, agrees, and said that SEO strategies are not impacted by Hummingbird. Elran claims that: “The fact is that nothing is really going to change in the way that we pursue the almighty ranking, with the possible exception of the resurgence of the long-tail keyword, which was working its way back into our hearts anyway. Everything that worked before Hummingbird's release will still work moving forward.”

Semantic search (a.k.a. Scarier and smarter than ever)

Semantic search isn’t exactly a new concept. As early as 2008, search engines were focused on natural language over keywords. But thanks to the introduction of tools like Siri® and Google Assistant, it’s become more mainstream. So what is it?

Semantic search seeks to improve search accuracy by understanding searcher intent and the contextual meaning of terms to generate more relevant results. In plain terms, semantic search uses artificial intelligence to understand the searcher’s intent and the meaning of the query rather than scanning through keywords like a dictionary. Semantic search systems consider various points including context of search, location, intent, variation of words, synonyms, generalized and specialized queries, concept matching and natural language queries to provide relevant search results.

The support system for semantic search is Google’s Knowledge Graph, a conglomerate of information designed to answer any number of queries that people may search. Not only will Google understand what is being searched, but Knowledge Graph gives users more contextual information that might help the user, which goes beyond simply giving a list of 10 other websites that could answer that question.

Phew, that’s a lot to take in, and you might be wondering what it has to do with SEO. According to Google, users are searching with more semantic queries. In response, Google’s Hummingbird update incorporates semantic search to provide users with the most relevant data. For the most part, it doesn’t impact content strategy. Experts say it’s still important to focus on quality over quantity, and to write content that is helpful for the intended audience. This means incorporating targeted keywords and adhering to the overall best practices of content management.

Semantic search can be tricky. It’s not just about finding the right keywords, it’s about creating content that has the keywords in the right places. It’s also about using keywords in the right combination so it has a better chance of showing up in semantic search.

Some experts say semantic search will have a profound impact on SEO. David Amerland from Social Media Today® recently echoed this sentiment when he said: “In the digital marketing world the words ‘game changer’ rank right alongside...

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“awesome” in terms of overuse. Yet, when it comes to semantic search nothing less can adequately prepare the marketer for the seismic change that’s coming.” 11

According to Amerland and others, if your online strategy is based on the creation of content that is stuffed with keywords and relies solely on links to help search engines find your content, you will not be successful with semantic search. It’s important to pay attention to the following pillars in order to be successful in semantic search:

- sentiment mining (what is being said about you),
- engagement (how your content is received),
- citation (where your website and brand are mentioned) and
- interaction (how your website is linked to). 12

According to Amerland, addressing these pillars means creating a digital presence that delivers real value to the online visitor. It also needs to be engaging and communicate the character and identity of your business. Companies still need to engage with Facebook, Twitter® and Google+ and a socially-enabled rich media account like YouTube or Instagram®. But when it comes to content, it needs to help create a distinct voice for your business and foster engagement with a target audience.

Keywords (a.k.a. The bait that draws you in)

Semantic search is not the death of a keyword-based SEO strategy. It does, however, add a new search dynamic and places greater emphasis on the context of keywords. It’s now important to research not only what keywords consumers are using but how they are using them. Companies should focus on how people ask for information on products and services, not necessarily what they would type in a search engine.

What is the best way to find keywords? There are plenty of resources that can help you find the best keywords. Jonathon Dane, a blogger for the Internet marketing giant WordStream® posted a list of the top best keyword research tools in the market. 13 Some of these include the YouTube® Keyword Tool, Soovle, Ubersuggest, NerdyData and WordStream’s Keyword Tool. Another popular tool is WordPress® SEO by Yoast®. Most of these are available for free or a minimal fee.


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One of the most popular free keyword search tools is Google’s Keyword Planner. In order to use it, you have to create an account but it’s an easy process, especially if you follow WordStream’s step by step guide on how to create an AdWords® account. Google’s Keyword Planning shows interesting stats on keywords you search, like average monthly searches, competition level (high, medium, or low) the average cost per click, and more. It doesn’t provide exact keyword suggestions like Ubersuggest or FreshKey®, but it actually takes it a step further and suggests more synonyms and variations than many other tools available.

Content marketing (a.k.a. The king and queen of the Internet)

Right now, content marketing is the bee’s knees, and experts predict it will continue to be key in 2014. According to Jayson DeMers from Search Engine Watch, from an SEO perspective, “Google will be looking at companies that have robust content marketing efforts as a sign that they’re the kind of business Google wants to support.”

This makes sense when you consider the benefits of a robust content marketing strategy. The same principles that drive content management are helpful to improve content for SEO. As noted by Search Engine Watch, a good content strategy does the following:

• Produces regular, helpful content targeted at your audience.
• Sends social signals from regular sharing and engagement.
• Delivers freshness or signs that your site is alive and growing.
• Delivers content that shows authority and connectivity.

Content marketing is really about providing robust content. You can’t go wrong with fresh, quality content, and experts converge on one basic point: Good content is critical to SEO. Think back to President Clinton’s campaign message in 1992 when he proclaimed “It’s the economy, stupid.” Similarly, when it comes to SEO, one could simply say: “It’s the content, stupid.”

Writing SEO-friendly content for marketing strategies is not difficult, but it does take some practice. There are a few guidelines that all content should follow in order to be found by search engines. One of the most helpful lists on
creating user content can be found on the Social Media Today® website. It’s also accompanied by a helpful infographic to illustrate the most effective ways to improve your content.

When writing for SEO and a content marketing strategy, the important thing to remember is you are writing for people, not robots or search engines. Natural content (as opposed to content designed for SEO) is far more effective. Content should also be relevant, interesting, unique and happening at the moment in order to attract audiences from every corner of the Internet to your site. If there is nothing unique about your website and you offer the same content as other websites, you will not be able to generate significant traffic.

Keep in mind that quality content extends far beyond just good spelling and grammar; it means content that is as informative to the visitor as possible. The basic rule about writing high quality content is to stay focused and to make sure you are providing users with details that are relevant and timely. Ask yourself if the content is what a typical user would expect to find on your website, and whether or not it provides the answers to common questions visitors may have. When writing, ask yourself if you would bookmark the page and whether or not it contained what you were hoping to find.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because many of these same principles apply to a sound SEO content strategy. If your company is still mulling over a content marketing strategy, it’s time to get started. If you already have a content marketing strategy in place, it might be time to diversify. Remember, content marketing will help drive content, and quality content improves SEO. It’s that simple.

Page authority (a.k.a. What others think about you)

Page authority is something you need to pay attention to when it comes to SEO. Page authority is a term used to describe the probability that a specific page from your site will be found on a search engine. Page authority is based on a logarithmic scale from 0 to 100 and deals with the relevance of information and links within site pages to one another. A higher ranking means there is a greater chance of your page showing up on search engines, and that your page will be placed closer to the top of the search results. It is important to note that page authority is related to the pages within sites, not the site itself.

If you haven’t measured page authority, now’s a really good time. There are plenty of ways to accomplish this, and most require nothing but the click of a
mouse. You can measure page authority using Open Site Explorer or the MozBar, Moz’s free SEO toolbar. Moz incorporates authority metrics into all Moz Analytics campaigns, as well as the Mozscape API.

Once you receive a ranking, you might wonder what can be done to improve your ranking. In reality, page authority is difficult to influence directly. It is made up of an aggregate of metrics that have an impact on the score. Experts say the best way to influence this metric is to improve your overall SEO. Particularly, it is recommended that you focus on the link profile because getting more links from other well-linked-to pages is likely to improve your score.  

Social media (a.k.a. The 800lb gorilla in the room)

Social media plays an increasingly visible role in the digital landscape and it’s ever changing. The last several years have witnessed an explosion of content sharing networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest®, Instagram and more. So it’s probably no surprise that a best practice is to make sure your content is linked to other social media sites in order to boost SEO.

According to Fast Company®, cruising through social media sites is the number one activity on the Web and the most common thing we do. Social sharing gets you links and traffic, and the more “shares” your content gets the more relevant and popular it will seem to Google. Make sure content is shared via relevant forums, blogs, newsletters and more. At a minimum, include the most popular sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn® and Google+®. By actively using these sites, not only will you be generating more traffic to your site through your online presence, you will also achieve better SEO results when it comes to the social signals.

The Content Marketing Institute specified that it’s no longer enough to be active on a single network and that successful companies diversify among social media sites. In fact, the most successful business-to-business marketers are active on roughly seven networks or more. According to Search Engine Watch, when it comes to social media, companies and SEO professionals should be asking the following:

• Are we taking our social media seriously?
• Are we employing the pillars of strong profiles, good content, reciprocity and engagement?
• Is easy, social sharing enabled for all of our content?
• Does our content strategy include a dissemination phase that includes maximizing its potential for distribution through social networks?
• Are we active on the social networks that matter in our industry?
• Are we active on the social networks that matter to our customers?
• Are we active on the social networks that matter to the search engines?
• Does our social media marketing strategy stimulate the level of social signals required to achieve our goals?  

Social media sites provide social signals and act as human pointers to good content. For this reason, make sure content is linked to relevant sites in order to drive SEO. And remember, it’s not just enough to make sure you’re linked into social media. Offer something unique so that visitors return. The idea is to make sure you are providing good quality content that is also embedded with other interesting tidbits like videos, blogs, a forum, competitions, surveys, or basically anything that they would find interesting, informative or entertaining.

Google Plus (Google+)
(a.k.a. Google’s bestie)

Experts claim that in addition to strengthening your overall social media marketing position, it’s critical that you are investing in a Google+ presence. People tend to think of Google+ as just another social network, but in reality, its SEO capabilities make Google+ much more than just a social networking platform. True, Google+ is a social networking platform, but its relationship with search engine results pages (SERPs) is much more intricate than other social media sites.

The biggest difference between Google+ and every other social network, in terms of SEO value, is found in the way that user-created content is searched. Public posts on Google+ are indexed for search, which is not the case on Facebook and Twitter. What does this mean? It means every time that your content gets shared by someone else you gain “link equity” as their posts are indexed.

For this reason, experts say there are SEO benefits to using Google Plus. First, posts get crawled and indexed to enhance real-time search. Secondly, Google Plus

is used to optimize search results with rich snippets, including the popular Google Authorship feature that allows the author’s picture and information to appear in search results.

Moz printed a list of 10 simple tips to take advantage of Google+ for SEO. It’s a good idea to check out the article in full, but a summary of action steps is listed below:

- **Follow your profile links.** Raise visibility by getting more people to engage with you, share your posts, or link directly to your profile.
- **Embed post links.** Google+ also allows users to insert followed links directly into posts. Simply insert the full URL and Google will automatically format it as a link. The value of these links increases the number of times the post is shared, linked to and +1’ed. If a post goes viral or is reshared by high-authority profiles, the value of those links increases.
- **Optimize your G+ title tags.** The first sentence of your Google+ post becomes part of the title tag, which is correlated with rankings and influences click-through rates. Choose keywords carefully. A widely shared post with a good title has an excellent chance of ranking for its given keywords.
- **Take advantage of unlimited editing power.** Google+ allows users to fully edit posts at any time. You can also update the title tag and any attached media as well.
- **Index new content lightning fast.** If you share new content on Google+, chances are that Google will index the page very quickly. Share your new content on Google+, as well as your other social networks, for quick indexation.
- **Connect with influencers.** Google+ lists 17 different notification triggers that can help users connect with influencers. You can mention them in a post, share a post with them directly, comment on a post they created, add them to a circle, suggest new people to add to their circles, tag them in a photo, and so on.
- **Optimize your author pic for more traffic.** Implement the author tag with an eye-catching photo to grab free traffic away from competitors.
- **Implement a G+ social media dashboard.** It’s a good idea to track social media activity. With the right tools you can view essential metrics from Google+ traffic and all other social networks.
- **Check your CircleRank.** Use CircleRank to chart daily follower growth, the virility of posts, and see your “CircleRank” score compared against all other Google+ profiles.
- **Be an awesome (late) early adopter.** Although Google+ is growing, only 1 in 4 people use Google+ once a month. Early adopters will win the day.21

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Tools and analytics (a.k.a. The Swiss Army® knife of the Internet)

Ultimately, you will want to know how your site is performing in search results. This is where you need to install tools like Google Analytics to see exactly how you are doing. Of course, there are many other analytic tools that you can use to assess SEO performance. Web Gnomes™ provides a list of the top 10 SEO analysis tools companies should consider, including HubSpot’s Marketing Grader, WooRank, SEOWorkers and more. Some advocate using more than one tool at a time to get a holistic view of how your website is performing.

Regardless of the tool you choose, it’s important to use some method to assess how your site is performing. Below is a sample list of some of the things an analytics tool can tell you about your site:

- **Priorities:** What are the most important action items for your site?
- **Visitors:** What are your site’s traffic numbers and audience demographics?
- **Social Monitoring:** Quantify your site’s popularity on social networks and how it reproduces social information (e.g., latest tweets on Twitter, LinkedIn profile information, etc.).
- **Mobile:** Data on the number of mobile versions of your site including the site’s adherence to mobile optimization best practices.
- **SEO Basics:** Provides data on if your site is following basic SEO best practices.
- **SEO Content:** Evaluate the most important on-page SEO elements (e.g., title, meta description, etc.) of your site.
- **SEO Keywords:** Data to show the site’s most important keywords (and corresponding competitors).
- **SEO Backlinks:** Obtain data on the site’s backlink count is displayed.
- **Usability:** Identify usability factors (e.g., the 404 error page, the page’s size and load time, etc.).
- **Security:** Look at various security-related metrics (e.g., spam blacklists, Google’s safe browsing API, etc.).

Get started (a.k.a. The train is leaving the station)

Now that you’re up to speed on what’s new with SEO, it’s time to get started and improve your ranking. Remember, SEO is really about making high quality content easier to find on search engines. For this reason, the most important take away
is that quality content remains important to SEO. However, it’s equally important to stay on top of the latest trends and opportunities that are available to improve SEO. Armed with SEO knowledge, you’ll be more prepared to take action.