Chapter One -
Search Engine Strategies - A Brief History

Everyone knows a Search Engine is the vehicle people use to find things on the Internet. But many are oblivious to the hyper-competitive behind-the-scene strategies used to secure the highly coveted top-ranking positions.

Back in 1996, when the first version of this book was originally written hundreds of updates ago, the leading search engines included the all-but-forgotten likes of WebCrawler, AltaVista, Infoseek, Excite, Open Text, Lycos, Inktomi, Ask Jeeves, and many, many more.

Those engines all responded to search queries with results based solely on matching keywords on webpages to keywords (aka, search words) being used in the search queries. The search engine strategy was very simple back then. The top search results consisted of whichever pages contained the most keywords that matched the search query.

Due to this fact, online marketers began "stuffing" extraordinary numbers of targeted keywords into webpages for the sole purpose of manipulating the search rankings. They went so far as to design entire webpages specifically to rank well for each of their targeted keywords. In many cases, this meant flooding the search engine indexes with hundreds, or even thousands, of superfluous webpages in order to dominate the rankings. And that is how the arms race to 'Winning The Search Engine Wars' began.

In those early days, whoever knew how to stuff the right mix of keywords into a webpage literally gained an unfair advantage! And, frankly, it was pretty easy to quickly score a whole bunch of top ranking pages on most any search engine under any topic.

Back then the search engine formulas, or algorithms, for responding to a search query were pretty basic. And the data compiler programs — aka, robots, bots, spiders, and crawlers — that "crawled" the web simply indexed whatever they saw wherever they found it. Neither the bots nor the algorithms passed judgments based on the "quality" of the site. Nor did they evaluate the trustworthiness of the brand, the credibility of the links, the quality or originality of the content, the popularity of the page, the reputation, or speed of the site. While it's true today that ALL of these elements and more are factored into the ranking algorithm, in the early days of the commercial web, all that mattered were keywords.

From 1995 through 1997, this so-called "keyword stuffing" was the number one strategy. But today, keyword stuffing is considered "spamming" the search engines — and it'll get your pages penalized in the rankings.

Over the years, search engine optimizers (SEOs) have come up with all kinds of strategies to "trick" the search engine algorithms. But none of them work anymore because the engines have learned how to counter the tricks. So, it's not only a waste of time to use them, it's counter-productive because your site will be penalized in the rankings when you get caught.
Regardless, to gain the insight necessary to build today's top-ranking websites, it helps considerably to know the basic history of the arms race for top-ranking pages.

**Spamming the Engines — a Moving Target**

To combat the strategy of *keyword stuffing*, the engines switched to an algorithm based on *keyword positioning* and *keyword density* (the number of *keywords* relative to the number of *total words* on a page).

When SEOs — aka, *online marketing experts* — got ahold of software to crack that formula, the engines countered by adding *link popularity* to the algorithm.

At this point the search engine ranking formula (algorithm) used a combination of *keyword placement* and *anchor text* *keywords in external* (off-site) *links* that were pointing to the page. Their thinking was that it would be difficult-to-impossible to manipulate the keywords in links (i.e., *anchor text*) that other sites used to point to a page.

But, no surprise, online marketers are creative and persistent. They quickly figured out all kinds of fabricated link systems designed to manipulate the search algorithms and score top rankings.

They created *link exchanges* and *links pages* — pages that were nothing more than a collection of links. And, for a while, these so-called "link farms" were tolerated by the engines until all of a sudden, they weren't.

Then the effort shifted to covertly *buying* links. Link brokers sprang up for a few years and were successful and even profitable for a while until the engines dropped the hammer by wiping the offending sites all-at-once from their index.

During these years, the engines began reclassifying mainstay and widely accepted search engine strategies like *reciprocal link exchanges* as *artificial link structures* and then later as *spam*. So, *reciprocal links, link exchanges, link farms, buying links, brokering links, and keyword-heavy anchor-text links* — *strategies that were at one time widely used and mostly acceptable* — all got tagged as "link schemes" and added to the list of forbidden strategies.

Today they're all considered to be search engine "spam" — also known as "black hat" strategies (as opposed to the Google endorsed "white hat" strategies).

It's important to note that, by this time (circa 2005), ALL of the original search engines (except Yahoo) had been rendered irrelevant by the overwhelming popularity of Google — which didn't exist back in 1996 when the search engine "wars" began heating up.

In fact, it wasn't until 1999 when the fledgling Google first appeared at the *Search Engine Strategies Conference* as an almost-unheard-of panelist in San Francisco, sharing the stage with all of the aforementioned "leading" search engines.

We were there when Google co-founder Sergey Brin proudly exclaimed to the attendees that...

"Google doesn't worry about spam, you can't spam Google. "

https://www.searchenginewords.com/se-news/searchenginebook
But SEOs and online marketers did indeed figure out ways to spam Google. And a few years later, once they had acquired the majority market share and crowded out all of their competition, they changed their minds. Now they say:

You had better not even think about spamming Google.

And they really, really mean it!

So now that Google is, effectively, the only search engine, they've become the tail that wags the dog. They dictate (via recommendations and guidelines) almost everything a website can and cannot do — all the way down to the design of the website itself.

Sure, there's Microsoft's Bing, and the privacy-focused DuckDuckGo is coming on strong. They matter, but not enough so that you can ignore the demanding website "quality" requirements of Google.

There's also the social media sites Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and review sites like Yelp and the encyclopedic Wikipedia that influence rankings. But none of them matter near as much as Google, although they DEFINITELY DO MATTER! ...but if you defy Google, you probably aren't going to do very well in any of these other important sources for search traffic.

That's why search strategies today are centered around strategic compliance with Google's terms of service and Webmaster 'best practices' guidelines — both of which are best understood by perusing Google's Quality Rater's Guidelines, which we'll talk about later.

To state it simply, today's search engine strategies focus on constantly adapting your site to comply with whatever Google currently thinks is a "great" website. In other words, if Google likes you, then all of the others are likely to like you too. Your online web presence will flourish.

But, if you fly outside of Google's "guidelines", then you probably won't be found in searches anywhere.

So pay close attention to the following chapters because your primary goal is to keep your website in Google's good graces! And remember, even the basics can be a constantly moving target as they frequently keep raising the bar by honing their requirements and refining their suggestions as they constantly update their algorithms.

Chapter Two
Organic Results & The Search Engine Order of Importance

Simply put, the only search engine that really matters today is Google. As the graph below shows, Google is the 800lb Gorilla that dominates all the other search engines combined — and this has been the case for a very long time.
Of course, we're talking about **which search engine you should optimize your pages for** — not necessarily who is the best search engine. Frankly, that's highly debatable, depending on your interests and criteria as a searcher.

From a searcher's perspective, **Bing** is a very good search engine. However, Microsoft (which owns Bing) hasn't been able to gain traction in Mobile search. Their share of the **Mobile** search market is a pitiful 1.3%. But on **desktop** search, Bing weighs in at a respectable 12.5% which isn't bad and possibly worth factoring into your SEO marketing efforts IF the majority of your target audience is accessing your website from desktop.

**Yahoo gets its search results from Bing.** So, if you target Bing with your search optimization efforts, then you are also targeting Yahoo. By combining the market share of both on desktop, Bing + Yahoo have about 17% — which is a fair slice of the desktop marketshare. However, on mobile the two combined have only about 3.5% which is meager at best.

Considering that 52% of searches in the U.S., and almost 60% globally, are done on Mobile, the tiny slice of traffic that Bing + Yahoo can send you is a drop in the bucket.

This is important because **Google's market share is so dominate in mobile that all of the other search engines combined, worldwide, make up LESS than 5%.**

Yes, you read that right...

**Google owns over 95% of the Global Market Share for Mobile Searches.**

In the U.S. they own over 93% of the Mobile search market

So, suffice it to say that Google has a monopoly on search. That's why, throughout this book, when we say "search engine" we're really only talking about Google unless we say otherwise.

But, in regards to GOOD search engines, from a user perspective, each of them have their merits depending on your priorities. **DuckDuckGo**, for instance, is privacy focused. They don't track their users' searches and they don't sell your data. They provide very good search results and, from a user's perspective, are much more data-friendly. They serve ads, but the ads aren't targeted specifically toward you and the ads don't follow you around the web.
If you haven't tried DuckDuckGo, you should — especially if privacy is a priority for you. However, focusing your optimization efforts on DuckDuckGo isn't worthwhile because the traffic they can send you is a tiny, tiny fraction of the traffic that Google can potentially send to your website.

**China's leading search engine, Baidu,** has a global market share of 1.23%. However in China, Baidu's market share is just under 85%. So, if your target audience lives in China, then Baidu is definitely the search engine you should be optimizing your webpages for. But since we're assuming you aren't in China, and your target audience isn't in China, we don't cover SEO strategies for Baidu in this book.

**Search Results — Organic vs. Paid**

Many people think the rankings in the search engine results are bought and paid for. In the beginning, that was completely **untrue**. Today however, it's partially true.

In the beginning, there was the organic results — search engine listings that were 100% based upon webpage merit – a meritocracy system, if you will. But today the results are mixed. As you probably know, Google makes its money selling ads in the search results. However those ads are limited to a relatively few listings when compared to the organic — the unpaid for — results.

The image below shows a side by side difference on a desktop search. The search on the left is showing results that are paid Ads, identified by the tiny **Ads** notation indicated by the RED pointer. The organic search results are identified by the green pointers. The search on the right is filtered using an Ad blocker so it shows ONLY the organic (unpaid for) search results.
As you can see, most of the search results are unpaid for — the **organic search results** (aka, listings). These pages are ranking well in organic search based on the strategies you will learn in this book.

Looking at the left side search, notice the red hand pointing at the button which enables you to scroll through the paid ads by swiping right or left in the carousel. The carousel is missing in the search on the right because our Ad blocker is blocking the paid Ads. Toggling your Ad blocker on and off can be useful for identifying which of the search results are paid and which are unpaid (i.e., organic).

In addition, because more and more people are using Ad blockers these days, businesses are finding that focusing on ranking high in the organic, unpaid-for search results is probably the most important part of their overall online marketing strategy.
Chapter Three
The Various Types of Search Results & Where They Come From

When generating search results, search engines make use of many sources of information which include, but are not limited to, webpages, images, shopping, news, maps, and videos. This is often referred to as Universal Search.

High ranking success is dependent on learning where the search results are coming from so you can position your content accordingly. Keep in mind there are many different paths to the top of the unpaid-for (organic) search results.

For instance, some search results are heavily influenced by Personalization. This means the results YOU see from your east coast city location might not be the same results that your friend in Seattle sees for the same search. That's because personalized search results can vary according to:

» Reported Location
» IP Location
» GPS Location (Mobile)
» Search History (signed-in / cookies)
» Social Networks (Likes / Friends / Circles)
» Device (Mobile / TV / Desktop)
» Language
» Previous Searches

Notice that the first three determinants on the list are location, location, and location. First and foremost, Google wants to know your location.

After that it's your recent search history followed by the rest of the factors on the list. You should expect each of the above personalized elements to significantly affect your search results.

Most search queries generate results from many different sources. Such Universal search results are pulled from website images, YouTube videos, recent news stories, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Wikipedia, and so forth.

In the screenshot below we see our search for BMW generated an AdWords (paid) result and a Knowledge Box on the right side panel. The Knowledge Box pulled general information from Wikipedia and BMW stock price info scraped from website sources like Morningstar, Refinitiv, and ICE Data Services. Below that the knowledge box provides links to more related Google search results.
As you may have already noticed, the "above-the-fold" (i.e., prior to scrolling) search results are where the paid Ads and information resources appear. Notice that the organic listing that appears below the Ad points to the same URL as the Ad seen above it. This is often the case for branded searches.

If we scroll down "below-the-fold" on that same results page, we get a map and local search results for the New York City area. These geolocation results are based on Google's detection of our IP address which indicates we are searching from a location in or near New Your City. These are unpaid-for (organic) local search results, not Ads, and the searcher can tap the View All button at the bottom for more results like this.
On the right side panel in the image above, where the red hand points to a pull-down toggle labeled Slogan, Google provides a snippet pulled from the website — hotcars.com — regarding "The Secret Origin Of BMW's 'Ultimate Driving Machine' Slogan". The searcher gains info on the topic without having to leave Google's site. A link is provided to the source if the searcher wants to learn more. Again, this is an organic result, not a paid Ad.

Lower down, the BMW car images are links that connect to more related searches. Continuing down the right side panel we find links to BMW's social media pages and then we find a People also searched for related Google searches – all of these related search links keep the searcher on Google's site and each of them leads to a search results page with at least one Ad at the top.

In the next image, as we scroll down the first page of the search results, we see two organic listings and then Top Stories. This is the latest news related to our search term – BMW — followed by another organic search result.
Remember, we are still scrolling down the first page of the search results for BMW. Next we see images that Google pulls from various sites online. Once again, these image results are organic, unpaid-for search results. Next we find results pulled from Twitter — in this case, from BMW's Twitter account.
And finally, as we finish scrolling down the first page of the search results, we see another organic search listing followed by BMW related videos pulled from YouTube.
Notice at the bottom of the page, the geolocation note saying: New York - Based on your past activity. Tap the tiny dot alongside the location, in this case New York, and you'll get a pop-up box that says...
Just to be clear, Google doesn't always tell the whole story in regards to how exactly they determine your location. Past activity is certainly a determinant, as is whatever they know about you if you are logged in.

However in the case of the BMW search result we've been using as an example, Google originally inferred our location based on the IP address they detected when we began searching from a New York City IP address location. Then after a few searches, our "past activity" became the location determinant.

However, the next morning when we switched our IP location to Seattle, and changed nothing else, the BMW search gave us results for Seattle as seen below in the split screen which also claims the search results were based on "past activity" ...
But, in fact the results were based solely on IP address location.

Then a few minutes later, after clearing our cache of Google's cookies, we logged into a Dallas IP location and Google gave us the following Dallas area results...
As you can see, this time Google tells us **the IP address was being used to determine our location.**

That's because they had no "past activity" to base our search on. Since we cleared all of Google's cookies from our cache, they had only the IP address available to use as the location determinant.

By the way, if Google asks for your location you don't have to choose between blocking it or allowing it. You can simply close the query box by tapping the X...

When doing our research for SEO purposes, we find it useful to research and compare the results for various locations. But in fact, all of the searches in this book are actually being done from a location in Hawaii. As you might guess, the clients we work with are rarely-if-ever in Hawaii — so using our actual location would provide non-relevant results for our clients' target markets.

As such, you too may also find it useful to research locations far and away from your *actual* location. So, knowing this "trick" can come in handy.
Most importantly, you need to know that Google's search results are HIGHLY geotargeted. Depending on your "location" the search results can vary dramatically from city to city, region to region, and country to country.

Beyond location,
» personalization,
» browser history,
» and search history,

...are what determine the search results that Google serves you and everyone else searching for anything anywhere in the world.

Therefore, we recommend that you...

**never do SEO research while logged into your personal Google account.**

Doing so will dramatically skew your results. That's because those results will be personalized only to you. That makes it unlikely that you're seeing the results as others are seeing them.

And, as you've seen, having the ability to change your IP location is also useful. For that we use a VPN — a virtual private network. Here's the one we use: Express VPN (https://www.expressrefer.com/refer-a-friend/limited-offer?
referrer_id=21085686&utm_campaign=202202_referrals_offer&utm_medium=email&utm_source=customer_email)
(if you join using that link we'll get a free month).

If you're looking for an ad blocker, we recommend uBlock Origin (https://ublockorigin.com/) — it's free and works incredibly well, especially if used simultaneously with Privacy Badger (https://privacybadger.org/) (also free) made available by the non-profit, privacy defending Electric Frontier Foundation (EFF).

All of these tools can be toggled on or off and configured to activate, or not, on a site by site basis. They are super-helpful in identifying what-are-Ads and what-are-not. And you'll be absolutely amazed to see what the web looks like when you're browsing Ad-free.

Once you start using them you'll wonder why everyone isn't using them. And, yes, Google is scared shirtless, that everyone WILL start using them! ...just another reason for us online marketers to focus on ranking high in the organic side of the search results.

**Moving on...**

Our BMW search example shows what you would typically expect to see in Google's search results when doing a "brand" related search. As expected, the search results narrowly focused on everything BMW – Ads, news, social, video, and organic — all focused on the brand of a single company known for that particular brand name.

Switching gears, you might remember back in Chapter Two we showed you a non-brand name search for best air conditioner which produced a carousel of paid ads served by AdWords at the top of the search results followed by the organic listings.

In the image below we did the same search twice — once logged into a Dallas - Ft Worth, TX and another while logged into a location near Seattle, WA.
As the image shows, we did these searches on March 20, 2022. Notice that the Dallas results show a carousel of paid Ads while the Seattle results show only organic search listings.

If you're wondering why no paid Ads for Seattle, **check the weather report superimposed top-center over the results page.**

If you guessed that **nobody in Seattle is buying air conditioners on a rainy 53/41 degree day in March,** you guessed right. So, what kind of fool would pay to advertise air conditioners to Seattleites at that time of the year?

**In Dallas however, clear and 83 degrees is a different story.** In fact the leading paid Ad in the carousel is for an A/C unit that retails for way-more than $10K! …the next one is over $9K …that's some serious air conditioning and it's apparent that the Dallas market is ready to **beat the heat** while the Seattle market is hoping it'll just stop raining.

The point is that, not only can search results vary due to inherent differences between locations, they can also vary between places due to a multitude of factors, not the least of which is **weather.**

It would be impossible to list all of the different scenarios and determinants that affect the search rankings from place to place and season to season but also in the minutia like **time of day** which can also **significantly** affect what you see in the search results.

In our example **above,** all of the **organic** listings are identical in both locations.
Scrolling down the results page, the image below shows the products carousel is next and it lists the same exact products in exactly the same order in both locations.

To reveal details about these product carousel results, we tap the three tiny dots indicated by the red arrow to get a pop-up information box About this result ...

According to About this result ...

This is info that Google gathered about products available to buy

This is a search result, not an ad. Only ads are paid, and they'll always be labeled with "Sponsored" or "Ad."

The listings in the product carousel are, as the info-box says, another form of unpaid-for search results. They include product names and part numbers and they are supplied to Google Shopping (https://shopping.google.com/) by advertisers via Google's Merchant Feed (https://support.google.com/merchants/answer/7439058?hl=en).

Next...

https://www.searchenginewnews.com/se-news/searchenginebook
So far, except for the Ads carousel displayed on the Dallas search results page, the Seattle and Dallas organic and product feed listings have been the same.

But, when we scroll down to the local search results, once again we see a difference based on local weather.

Notice that the Dallas local results are **Best Air Conditioners** whereas it's still winter in Seattle (and a wet 41-low is colder than phuck) so, instead, we see listings for **Hvac** (heating, ventilation, air conditioning) **Contractors** ...

Different needs for different places — and Google is ALL about serving the needs of their searchers — **locally** (for fun and profit!). Amen.

Speaking of differences, the **People Also Ask** (PAA) feature, while found on both results pages, are located in different positions.

The Dallas PAA is located near the top of the results, just under the fold so that it's the first thing you see when you begin to scroll down.

The Seattle PAA is located at the bottom of the results page, just above the **Related searches** feature.
People in Dallas are starting to think, "omg, summer is coming" so they're, you know, asking A/C questions.

In Seattle, A/C related PAA questions are relegated to the bottom of the results page because Seattleites are only asking, "omg, when will winter be over?" — nobody in Seattle is thinking about A/C in March.

The last scroll on the first page produces YouTube video results that are identical in both locations. At the bottom of the results page, Related searches are almost identical (9 out of 10). That rounds out the first page of the best air conditioner search results.

The take-away here is that local variables are an important factor to consider when building your webpages. It's important to know...

1. who's your target audience,
2. what they're thinking
3. and where they are located

...at the time that you are targeting them.

And remember, this is only one example. It's intended to help you identify the multiple opportunities for getting your pages, products, and services listed prominently in the various locations available in the unpaid-for (organic) search results.
**Moving on...**

Now that you've seen a branded search, and a product search, let's look at a non-commercially oriented type search.

These kinds of search results will differ yet again. Such categories can range all over the board with far, far, too many to list. But a few of them could be recipe searches, handicraft searches, fix-it searches, hobby searches — really, just about anything.

These searches might be academic, technical, medical, informational, etc., and usually non-commercial — at least on the surface. They might lead toward a later conversion or a membership or a subscription but they are mostly the kind of searches that return results which aren't usually accompanied by Ads.

With all that in mind, let's do a search for **How to wire a light switch** ...
11/2/23, 1:45 PM
UnFair Advantage Search Engine Book Winning the Search Engine Wars

This search produces no Ads, all of the results on this page are unpaid-for

Ad free is typical for these kinds of searches although there can definitely be exceptions

This top listed search result is a Featured Snippet pulled from YouTube. Title perfectly matches search query

These 3 top YouTube videos provide a 'key moments' menu which allows users to locate sections of most interest within the video

Tap the pull-down to open the key moments menu
Images for how to wire a light switch:

- Electrical
- Ceiling fan
- Junction box
- Red
- Ground

People also ask:

- How do you wire up a light switch?
- What happens if you wire a light switch wrong?
- How do you wire a 3 wire light switch?
- What does L1 and L2 mean on a light switch?

   - Oct 1, 2020 — A single-pole switch has two brass terminal screws on the side that receive the black (“hot”) wires of the circuit. One black wire comes from ...

   - Dec 31, 2019 — Wrap your black wire clockwise around one of the brass screws. By wrapping clockwise (the same direction the screw turns), you ensure the wire's ...

   - May 29, 2013 - 5 steps - Materials: 14-3 or 12-3 cable, Three-way switches (2), 4-in-1 ...
   - 1. To add the switch, you'll use one of two wiring a light switch diagrams (shown below), depend...
   - 2. This 3-way light switch wiring diagram shows how to do the light switch wiring and the light ...
   - 3. This 3 way switch wiring diagram shows how to wire the switches and the light when the po...

   - 47 answers
   - If the switch is controlling something like a light, then you wire the hot wire (black) and the ground wire (green or bare) to the switch and to the plug.

   - Nov 29, 2021 — How to Wire a 3-Way Light Switch: STEP 1: Disconnect the power source. · STEP 2: Remove the switch. · STEP 3: Identify the wires. · STEP 4: Label ...
As you can see, this "technical" search produces results that are focused on showing how to complete a DIY (do-it-yourself) task.

It's notable that YouTube video results appear first, above the organic results as a Featured Snippet. Also noteworthy is that every video includes a key moments timeline menu that enables viewers to go straight to the video segments that are of most interest.

If you are making videos to rank well in the search results, you would need to include this timeline menu feature to compete for top rankings.

Following the videos is an images carousel pulled from various websites with images that are relevant to this search.

The bottom section is the organic listings with descriptions and links to websites with content relevant to our search phrase (ie. keyword).
Between the image results and the organic search listings we see the **People Also Asked** (PAA) feature.

The image below shows what happens when we select the pull-down on PAA...

![PAA Image](https://www.searchenginenews.com/se-news/searchenginebook)

> "... There are different types of ceiling lights. And if yours has colored screws just connect the ground..."  
  
  Selecting a PAA pull-down opens up an info-box and references the source with a link...

When we open the first PAA on the list, the info-box displays a YouTube video which is cued up to begin at the precise location in the video timeline that answers that specific question being featured in PAA.

Each time you tap a pull-down, PAA adds two more questions — and will do so almost endlessly for as long as you keep tapping the pull-down arrows.

As we'll show you later in Chapter Six, PAA is one of the many good places to do your keyword research. You can also use it for brainstorming ideas to help get your own website's pages featured in PAA.

**In Summary**

Now you know the content, source, and mix of Universal Search Results varies greatly depending on circumstances such as **query, time, location, history, personalization**, and so forth.
Furthermore, content that is fresh or topical — i.e., content that is currently popular or making headline news — will often rise temporarily to the top of the rankings and beat out webpages that would otherwise be ranked at the top by way of trust and authority. Such bias is referred to as Query Deserves Freshness (QDF).

Plus, in general searches where the search term can mean many different things, the search results will show a diversified mix of content. This bias toward what's known as Query Deserves Diversity (QDD) explains why a page with far less authority can rank well when it's relevant for an alternative meaning in a search.

And, if a search term matches a Trending Topic that's generating a spike in traffic, most engines will favor recent content over otherwise superior ranking webpages. Generally speaking, this places News Stories at the top of the listings.

So, as you are seeing,

Universal Search Results will include all of the following types of search results:

- Organic Listings
- Local Search
- News & Realtime
- Shopping
- Featured Snippets
- Knowledge Box
- Social
- Query Deserves Freshness
- Query Deserves Diversity
- Trending Topic
- Brand and Product Name
- Pay-Per-Click (i.e., AdWords)

...each being pulled from their respective sources and positioned on the search results page in their order of relevance to the search, the location, and the searcher.

Now it's time to learn the secrets to ranking your videos, images, and webpages at the top of the search results!

## 4 Chapter Four

The Relative Importance of Ranking Signals

In Chapter One you learned the importance of keywords to top ranking pages in the early days of search engines. And today, keywords are still an essential ranking signal — but they are no longer the only essential ranking signal.

Today's search engines (think Google) factor so many other ranking signals into the algorithms that keywords found on a website are treated as on-page relevance indicators that are subordinated to a slew of off-site relevance indicators.

The thinking is that:

off-site relevance factors are difficult-to-impossible for a website owner to manipulate.
Picture the search engine algorithm as a mechanism with internal relevance dials. Each dial controls a ranking signal of the overall mechanism, aka, the *algorithm*.

One dial controls the *maximum* importance placed on *keywords found on a webpage*. Another dial controls the *maximum* importance placed on *keywords found in links pointing to a webpage* (aka, *anchor text*). Another dial might control the *maximum* importance of having the *keyword in the domain name*. And another dial controls the *maximum* importance placed on the *trust and authority* of the sites that link to a webpage.

Now, as you will see later, this is a major oversimplification of Google's actual algorithm. It does include these factors but there are many more that are entered into the actual mix. But, for example purposes, let's continue to see how this might work.

Dial One – *Keywords*. Since Google knows that anybody can put an unlimited number of keywords into any webpage that they control, then *keywords found on a webpage* might be dialed up to only two maximum on a ten-point relevance dial. They are given weight, but not so much that people can stuff a bunch of keywords into their webpage and score a top listing. In fact, Google may even penalize a page if its algorithm detects an artificial abundance of keywords or a disconnected relationship between the keywords and the rest of the page's body content. So, *keywords on a webpage*, if detected within a 'normal' range, might only be weighted as high as a two, at best, on the ten-point relevance dial.

In other words, no matter how efficient you are at placing keywords on your page in an optimized format, that element carries only limited weight in relation to other factors that make up the overall ranking algorithm. And, if Google detects an abnormality (like proportionately too many repeating keywords), that same dial might assign a negative number such as -3 on the ten-point relevance dial. This would have an adverse effect on the page's ranking ability. In search engine optimization (SEO) jargon, we call this a *penalty*.

Dial Two – *off-site anchor text* are the *keywords used in links pointing to your webpage*. This is theoretically harder to manipulate because you don't typically have control of the link-text that another webpage uses to link to you.

Of course, it could be done by arrangement, secret or not. But assuming that the link is "natural" (meaning it was done solely on the volition of the linking website and without any payment, arrangement or enticement), then Google views that link with a higher degree of trust. So, the relevance dial might be set to a higher maximum level, maybe a six on the ten-point dial.

However, if Google learns that your anchor text link(s) are contrived — i.e., purchased, negotiated, exchanged, or "unnatural" in any way — then you're in violation of their "best practices and guidelines." And, if so, then you can expect that dial to work against you in a big way. Maybe a -6 on the ten-point dial.

Dial Three — *keywords in your domain name*, were long considered to be set to 2 or 3 on the ten-point relevance dial. However today you shouldn't expect keywords in the domain name to provide any boost in ranking unless that keyword is a well known brand name — like GEICO or NIKE. In such cases the dial might
register some significance which illustrates one way in which there can be dials within dials baked into the search algorithms. Otherwise, keywords in domain names are no longer a ranking factor unless they correspond to a brand name.

Dial Four — **Google loves trust and authority.** There are certain websites on the Internet that are viewed as trustworthy. In essence, these sites are basically whitelisted. They can do no wrong. They have an impeccable reputation — which really means that Google trusts them not to spam their index.

One such site is Wikipedia. Google knows that Wikipedia does not spam Google. Nor does Wikipedia assist others in spamming Google. They diligently patrol their own site with an eye toward eradicating manipulative content and links.

Therefore, Google sees Wikipedia as both trustworthy AND authoritative. If your site has a link from Wikipedia, that's a great link. Why? ...because Google's trust and authority dial is likely to be maximized at around 9 or even 10 on the ten-point relevance dial.

Google views a link from Wikipedia as highly trustworthy (because they are hard to get and keep) and from an authoritative site because Wikipedia is a brand-name known for its content integrity. It's a whitelisted site which Google thinks can do no wrong in regards to search engine relevance factoring.

More examples of highly authoritative and trusted sites are mainstream news sites (CNN.com, NYTimes.com, NationalGeographic.com, etc.) and big-name brands (Geico, Nike, Yelp, Budweiser, Amazon, Coke, etc.).

Next-best would be sites that are linked-to by these brand name, whitelisted sites. If your site gets a link from these sites, that link would also be viewed as trusted and authoritative. That's because Google considers these kinds of links difficult-to-impossible to manipulate.

Furthermore, **Google parses authoritative sites into industry-specific categories.** That means that if you're in the children's clothing industry, then the best sites to be associated with are vastly different than if you're in the restaurant industry. And, to get even more defined, if you're in the restaurant industry in Dallas your most authoritative (trusted) sites will be different than if you're in the restaurant industry in Chicago.

**Robots, Crawlers, Spiders, and Bots**

You might be wondering how Google finds and indexes sites. The answer is **they have a variety of ways that we'll be explaining throughout this book.**

But what you need to know right now is their primary method for finding websites is called **crawling the web.**

To do this they use robots, crawlers, spiders, and bots — **four names for the same thing that we'll be using interchangeably throughout this book** — to follow the links they find on webpages to find more webpages.

According to Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_crawler),
A Web crawler, sometimes called a spider or spiderbot and often shortened to crawler, is an Internet bot that systematically browses the World Wide Web and that is typically operated by search engines for the purpose of Web indexing.

Web search engines and some other websites use Web crawling or spidering software to update their web content or indices of other sites' web content. Web crawlers copy pages for processing by a search engine, which indexes the downloaded pages so that users can search more efficiently.

Crawlers consume resources on visited systems and often visit sites unprompted. Issues of schedule, load, and "politeness" come into play when large collections of pages are accessed. Mechanisms exist for public sites not wishing to be crawled to make this known to the crawling agent. For example, including a robots.txt file can request bots to index only parts of a website, or nothing at all.

So now you know. Whenever we refer to a robot, crawler, spider, or bot, you'll know exactly what we're talking about, right?

Moving on...

So far, this has been an oversimplification...

What you've read so far is an oversimplification of Google's actual algorithms. But regardless, you can see that it's complicated even in our simplified examples. Google says their formula is set to provide a "good user experience" which is indeed partially true (nice spin anyway). But as you will later see, their algorithm is primarily set to (maximize profits and) reward brands and sites that have the right social signals — all the while dissuading search engine marketers (SEMs) from trying to manipulate Google's search rankings.

Great website vs. Good website - Design Elements that Affect Rankings

Google likes to promote the impression that...

> if you build a "great" website, everything will be wonderful. Google will rank you high, and people will visit and give you the money you deserve.

However, you must always remember that Google's concept of a "great" website is constantly evolving.

For instance, whatever the focus of your website, you probably believe you provide the best product, service, or facility as presented by your very "good" website.

However, if your site's webpages aren't mobile responsive, or your webpage load speed is "slow" or your site isn't HTTPS "secure" or you've linked out to a "bad" site or maybe exchanged links with "off-topic" websites — perhaps as a favor to a relative or friend (like your Real Estate Agent or your Webmaster), then Google may very well think your website is "good" but not "great" like those that outrank you.

This is especially true if you're competing with nationally known "trusted" brands for top rankings.

But just to be clear. Trusted in the eyes of Google doesn't necessarily mean trusted in the sense that you'd trust that a bank wouldn't ...

» open up millions of phony accounts for their real customers (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/all/wells-fargo-pay-3-billion-over-fake-account-scam-n1140541) ($3Bn PLUS $100M in fines),

» fraudulently overcharge customers who use foreign exchange services (https://www.forbes.com/sites/eriksherman/2021/09/28/wells-fargo-gets-into-trouble-yet-again-over-alleged-
fraud/?sh=38ace3a63572) ($72.6M fine),

» wrongfully force auto insurance on customers (https://www.housingwire.com/articles/40819-another-scandal-wells-fargo-may-have-wrongfully-forced-auto-insurance-on-570000-customers/) ($80M in Refunds)


» overcharge homeowners for appraisals (https://money.com/wells-fargo-racketeering-lawsuit-settlement/) ($50M racketeering settlement)

» place non-delinquent borrowers into mortgage forbearance programs without their knowledge or consent (https://www.mpamag.com/us/news/general/warren-demands-answers-over-latest-wells-fargo-scandal/229564) (Case Pending)

» mishandle customers' bankruptcy credit reporting (https://topclassactions.com/lawsuit-settlements/money/according-to-class-action-lawsuits-these-are-the-worst-banks-in-america/) ($3M fine)

...as did Wells Fargo Bank who, in spite of the above multiple violations of (actual) trust over the past 10 years, is still trusted enough by Google to score a #3 position for the search term banking services in the organic search results in spite of the scandals.
So obviously, in Google's eyes, trusted means 'big brand' trusted. So, if you're in the financial sector and can get a link from, say, Wells Fargo (or from a site that Wells Fargo links to), then that would be a very good link in spite of the fact that maybe Wells Fargo can't actually be, you know, trusted in the traditional sense of actually trusting a company with your money or your life savings.

We know, confusing, right?

But don't worry, we'll help you make sense of it all in the coming chapters and steer you clear of all the manageable pitfalls. Just bear in mind that, while it's true (as Google says) great content is the most important element of high ranking pages, so is format and function (aka, the user experience) and whether or not you can get the right links from the right "trusted" sources. Or, better yet, become a "trusted" big brand like Wells Fargo.
Chapter Five
The Two Most Important Algorithms That Power Google Search

According to Wikipedia,

An algorithm is a finite sequence of well-defined instructions, typically used to solve a class of specific problems or to perform a computation.

Within Google's proprietary black box are several algorithms that work together to produce the results you see in a Google search. In this chapter, we'll discuss Google's two most important algorithms — **PageRank** and **Page Experience** — and how to strategically use them to boost your page rankings.

1. The **PageRank** Algorithm

Google's original and best known search algorithm is **PageRank**. **PageRank indicates the relative importance of a page by assigning a number ranging from 1 to 10.**

For example, a page that is rated 7 on the PageRank scale (expressed as PR7) is considered to be an important page. Any webpage rated PR8 or higher is considered a very important page.

Loosely interpreted, the scale resembles the staircase in the image below. Notice that the associated PageRank of the well known brands range from *Important* to *Very Important*.

---

**PageRank Scale Ratings**

- **Very Weak**
  - PR0 (zero)
  - PRO (zero)
- **Weak**
  - PR1-2
- **Moderate**
  - PR3-4
- **Strong**
  - PR5-6
- **Important**
  - PR7
  - eBay.com
  - GEICO.com
  - Red Bull.com
  - Twitter.com
  - Taco Bell.com
- **Very Important**
  - PR8
  - eBay.com
  - Bing.com
  - Slate.com
  - NASA.gov
  - Weather.com
  - GE.com
  - Yellow Pages.com
  - The Onion.com
  - NFL.com
  - PGA.com
  - McDonald's.com

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Google tends to award well known brands with the highest PageRank.
According to Google:

"PageRank works by counting the number and quality of links to a page to determine a rough estimate of how important the website is. The underlying assumption is that more important websites are likely to receive more links from other websites."

To gain some visual insight into how this works, let's consider the hypothetical network of links in the graphic below.

At first this may seem complicated, but hang in there — it'll all make sense when we get to the end.

Notice first that all of the percentages add up to 100% (actually, 99.9%). That's the maximum available PageRank. And, since Page B has the most incoming links, it has 38.4% of the available PageRank making it the most important page in this network of linked sites.

Most importantly, you should notice that Page C is the second most important page based solely on the fact that the most important page (Page B) is linking out to Page C.

In fact, since Page B is passing along to Page C all of its available link juice (SEO jargon for passing along PageRank), it becomes the second most important page even though it only has ONE link!

If Page B were linking out to any additional pages, then Page C would not be getting as much link juice and therefore would be much less important in terms of PageRank.

Next, take a look at Page E. It is linked-to by Page F (which provides it with a fair amount of link juice) and also linked-to by 5 other not-so-important pages which all contribute a small amount of link juice. But it all adds up to give Page E a pretty good boost in PageRank totaling 8.1% of the available PageRank. And because Pages E and
$F$ are reciprocally linked, they are passing link juice to each other and thereby increasing each other’s PageRank.

Now take a look at Page $A$. Although it has only one link, it’s getting a fair share of link juice from Page $D$ because Page $D$ is linked-to by the fairly important Page $E$. In other words, Page $E$ is passing link juice to Page $A$ through Page $D$.

**Confused? ...don’t be.** Simplified, it works like this:

**Important pages are king makers!**

But, generally speaking, the more high-quality inbound links a page has, the more important Google thinks the page is. And, the more important a page is, the more link juice that page passes along to the pages it links to.

Such link juice can be diluted, however. For instance you might notice that Page $E$ is linking out to three pages; $D$, $F$, and $B$ — and therefore passing only a fraction of its available link juice to each page it links to. If it were linking only to Page $D$, for instance, then Page $D$ would be getting something like 7.2% of the link juice instead of only 3.9.

**What it all means...**

It means that links from important pages pass along significant amounts of link juice.

This helps your PageRank. And, the more outgoing links on a page, the more the link juice is diluted. Therefore, you should try to acquire links from important pages that do not link out to lots of other pages. The fewer outgoing links, the better.

**Save Link Juice by using the NOFOLLOW attribute.**

To avoid passing PageRank to a website, you can use nofollow when linking out. The nofollow attribute, often called a tag, looks like this in your source code:

```
<a href="domain.com/page" rel="nofollow">Bob's widgets</a>
```

The rel=nofollow tells Google not to pass PageRank to the site you're linking to. This helps you avoid wasting or diluting your link juice.

Nofollow should also be used in these circumstances:

- **Untrusted content:** Any time you're linking to low quality content such as untrusted user comments or guestbook entries, use nofollow. Doing so tells Google that you don't trust these links. It also discourages spammers from targeting your site to manipulate their own rankings — because they know the link won't pass PageRank if it's nofollowed, making it almost worthless.
Paid links: Google's guidelines require [https://developers.google.com/search/docs/advanced/guidelines/paid-links](https://developers.google.com/search/docs/advanced/guidelines/paid-links) that purchased links be identified using either rel="nofollow" or rel="sponsored" unless the link is redirected using an intermediate page that is blocked from search engines with a robots.txt file (which we'll explain later).

Crawl prioritization: You can use nofollow whenever it doesn't make sense for a search engine robot to follow a link. Examples would include your sign in or register links for member access on your site.

By understanding nofollow and the many reasons for using it, you can see that not all links are created equal. And, just like links,

Not all sites are created equal either.

It'a all about E.A.T.

Google rates sites (i.e., assigns PageRank) based on;

- Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness.

Although E.A.T. is not directly a ranking signal, it IS what Google uses to identify the "best" sites within the topical niches of the web. Furthermore, E.A.T. is based primarily on Google's Quality Rater Guidelines [https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/guidelines.raterhub.com/en//searchqualityevaluatorguidelines.pdf](https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/guidelines.raterhub.com/en//searchqualityevaluatorguidelines.pdf) (QRG).

These guidelines function as a kind of wish-list of site characteristics that Google correlates to websites they believe are high quality.

According to the QRG, quality raters are instructed to consider:

- The expertise of the creator of the main content of the webpage.
- The authoritativeness of the creator of the main content, the main content itself, and the overall authoritativeness of the entire website.
- The trustworthiness of the creator of the main content, the main content itself, and the trustworthiness of the website.

Therefore the best way to truly understand E.A.T. is to study the Quality Rater Guidelines. And, because E.A.T. is what drives PageRank, you'll hear people talking more about E.A.T. and less about PageRank these days. In fact, PageRank is rarely talked about and the "scores" are no longer made available by Google — but that doesn't mean they don't keep score, they just stopped revealing what the PageRank scores actually are.

Now remember, Google's definition of trustworthiness (i.e., trust) might not match what you think is actually "trust" (as illustrated by our Wells Fargo example in the previous chapter). When Google references "trust" they're referring to a combination of factors such as website quality, popularity, and incoming links from authoritative sites — combined with the likelihood of whether or not the site will spam Google's index.

And, it's been our experience that Google almost automatically "trusts" big brand sites with well-known names. Therefore getting links from such "Authority" sites like National Cancer Institute, Wikipedia.org, Electronic Frontier Foundation, National Geographic, PC Magazine, Wall Street Journal, and so forth will pass along "trust" to your site. But if you can't get a link from them, then getting links from sites that are linked-to from these Authority sites will also help Google "trust" your site.

Your PageRank and E.A.T Strategy Simplified
Google considers the sites with the highest levels of E.A.T. to be considered seed sites. So, your best strategy for boosting your webpage rankings is to get links from pages that are as close as possible to these high quality seed sites.

Because Google tends to parse the internet into topics/industries and recognizes websites with the highest E.A.T. as seeds, such high quality, spam-free sites are the gold standard and the very best places to get links from.

If site A is the seed site, and they link to site B, then getting a link from site B will significantly help your rankings. If you can't get a link from site B, then getting a link from site C, which is linked-to by site B, is the next best thing. Of course, if you can get a link from site A, you scored BIG-time!

The point is, your strategy should be to identify the top trusted sites in your niche – the seed sites. Then analyze their links. Once you've located who they are linking to, and who those pages are linking to, then it's easy to determine exactly who you should be getting links from in order to boost your rankings.

This is how a small site with fewer links can outrank large sites with lots of links. Smaller sites with links that are close to the authority sites within their niche can gain enough PageRank to outrank larger sites with more links.

2. The Page Experience Algorithm

Just as PageRank is the oldest Google algorithm on the block Page Experience is the newest. And, it's also very important!

In June 2021, the Page Experience algorithm went live after more than two years of preparation, testing, and tweaking. Among the internal ranking signals that make up Page Experience, the most important are known as the...

Core Web Vitals

Core Web Vitals are a set of three measurable metrics that Google uses to rank webpages. These so-called "vitals" correlate to a user's "page experience" when visiting your site. Simply put, bad vitals equal a poor user experience. Good vitals — Core web vitals that equal or surpass Google's guidelines — provide a good user experience in terms of webpage efficiency.

So, while it's true that good content (theoretically) trumps everything in terms of ranking pages in the search results, providing a good user experience based on your core web vitals can give your pages a significant boost in the rankings — a sort of tie-breaker, especially when all other things are equal.

Core Web Vitals – The Details

Loading Speed

Google considers "speed" to be vitally important. As such, it measures speed using the following three Core Web Vitals — First Contentful Paint (https://web.dev/fcp/) FCP, First Input Delay (https://web.dev/fid/) (FID), and Largest Contentful Paint (https://web.dev/lcp/) (LCP).

FCP measures the time from when the page starts loading to when any part of the page's content is rendered on the screen. For this metric, "content" refers to text, images (including background images), <svg> elements, or non-white <canvas> elements.
FID measures the time from when a user first interacts with a page — when they click on a link, tap on a button, or use a custom JavaScript powered control — to the time when the browser is actually able to begin processing the given handlers in response to that interaction.

LCP is a metric that reports the render time of the largest image or text block visible onscreen, relative to when the page first started loading.

User Annoyance measures Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS) — the sum total of all the individual layout shift scores. Every unexpected layout shift of a visible element that changes its position from one rendered frame to the next increases the CLS score and adds to a user's annoyance.

Ideally, the page will have few, if any, layout shifts. Layout shift can mostly be avoided by pre-defining the image dimensions within the source code of the page.
In addition to CLS, intrusive interstitials (https://developers.google.com/search/blog/2016/08/helping-users-easily-access-content-on#examples-of-interstitials-that-make-content-less-accessible) (i.e., pop-ups) are also factored into *user annoyance* to help determine page quality and user experience. The page experience algorithm attempts to detect the presence and use of interstitials that are user-hostile and, when detected, are interpreted as a negative ranking signal.

This is especially the case when pop-ups are used to trick users into doing something they probably don't want to do — like preventing them from reading or interacting with the page they've landed on when coming from Google Search.

However, Google acknowledges there are legitimate uses for interstitials, such as those required by law. Pop-ups that are required by the European Union's privacy regulations (GDPR (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Data_Protection_Regulation)) are one example of a legally required interstitial.

Another example of an acceptable pop-up might be when it shows updated business hours which might apply in an emergency situation. According to Google, such "great uses" are not affected by this otherwise negative ranking signal.

**Use PageSpeed Insights (https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/) to Gauge Your Metrics**

Google provides a free tool that enables you to measure the core web vitals of any page. The PageSpeed Insights tool tells you if you are passing the test, or not. It also provides other useful information and tips to improve your page efficiency.

Below we see the test results returned by PageSpeed Insights for *The New York Times* website, www.NYTimes.com
As you can see, **www.NYTimes.com passes the Core Web Vitals test** — all of the metrics are solidly in the green.

On the other hand, the image below shows that **www.CNN.com failed the Core Web Vitals test** as measured by PageSpeed Insights. Three out of four of the metrics landed in the red with only one landing in the green.
Worth noting is that WellFargo.com and Foxnews.com also failed on 3 out of 4 of the Core Web Vitals at the same time we used PageSpeed Insights to test our two examples used above.

The point is that **E.A.T.** and **having great and relevant content** are still the most important ranking factors followed by the Core Web Vitals — all of which work together to determine where your webpage lands in the search rankings.

So, be sure to work on your content first, getting links from sites with E.A.T., second. And then do whatever you can to optimize your Core Web Vitals — in that order!

Here's a link to the PageSpeed Insights Tool (https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/) which you can use to test the Core Web Vitals of any page online.

**Rounding out the rest of the Page Experience Algorithm are...**

**Security & Privacy**

The old internet used the unsecure HTTP protocol. But today, Google wants to ensure that a site’s pages are delivered using the HTTPS (secure) protocol. This enables users to confidently browse the internet without having to worry about man-in-the-middle attacks, improper impersonations, malware, unwanted software downloads or social engineering.

When Google detects that a user might be clicking a link to a potentially harmful site, the browser displays a warning.

**Accessibility**
Google has been increasingly factoring accessibility into its Page Experience algorithm. Mobile friendliness comprises the most essential element of the accessibility factor within the page experience algorithm. Simply put, Google wants you to optimize your website for mobile first, and desktop second. So, when building your pages, make sure they look good and load fast on a mobile device!

The following is a list of links to developer tools that'll help you optimize your webpages for best rankings.

- page speed insights (https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/)
- webpagetest.org (https://webpagetest.org)
- lighthouse (https://developers.google.com/web/tools/lighthouse/)
- Chrome DevTools (https://developer.chrome.com/docs/devtools/)
- Web Vitals Extension (https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/web-vitals/ahfhijdlegdabablpippeagghgimbma)

For more advanced insights into Page Experience, here's an article we published in SEN just prior to the algorithm going live in June 2021: 17 Pro-Tips You Need to Know About Core Web Vitals (https://www.searchenginenews.com/se-news/content/17-pro-tips-you-need-to-know-about-core-web-vitals-going-live#17ProTips)

**A Word About "Updates"

In the world of SEO, Google's algorithmic evolutions are frequently referred to as *Updates*. However, such "updates" are not algorithms in-and-of-themselves — they are simply adjustments in the algorithms.

Regardless, you are likely to hear (especially) old-school SEOs banter about legendary "Updates" with peculiar names like Hummingbird, Penguin, Phantom, Dewey, Buffy, Big Daddy, Jagger, Gilligan, Bourbon, Allegra, Brandy, Austin, Florida, Fritz, Dominic, Cassandra, Caffeine, Boston, Google Dance, Medic or BERT — as each of those "updates" are part of Google's history.

If you're new to SEO, feel free to smile politely and then roll your eyes when they aren't looking. For the most part, these major updates are now *ancient history* — meaningful in the yesteryear but irrelevant today.

Such major updates are much more unlikely to occur in the future because Google is now using A.I. (aka, machine learning, artificial intelligence) to fine-tune (update) its algorithms almost daily (to maximize profits without upsetting the SEO community too much).

BUT you'll still probably hear about "updates" on a regular basis because old habits die hard and salty old SEO's like to complain (a lot on Twitter and Reddit) about "updates" that wreck their rankings.

However, our experience tells us that, by focusing on great content, paying attention to our metrics, getting great links, and linking out to great sites, we just don't experience upsets in our rankings like those who regularly complain about mysterious "updates" that Google doesn't acknowledge or confirm.

We mention this here because it's a thing — mostly of the past. But, if you're to become a professional SEO Specialist, you need to know about something called "updates" so that when some salty ole SEO refers to one in a tweet, or some other form of communication, you'll know to smile politely. But don't weigh in on the conversation unless you actually like being sucked into the vortex.
Chapter Six
Keyword Research and The Buying Process

Keywords are the cornerstone of search engine optimization and Internet marketing. Keyword Research is arguably the most important activity you’ll engage in as you begin your search engine optimization and marketing (SEO/SEM) efforts. Simply put, Keywords are key to web marketing success and a profitable online business.

Your objective should be to find your most valuable keywords, the ones that actually make you money. So, the first rule of keyword research is...

never assume you know which keywords people are using to search for your products or service.

Assuming you already know is a fool's approach. Instead, you must ferret out the money keywords by following the buying process. By doing so you will learn that...

the only type of keyword that consistently converts to sales is the last one used before making a purchase.

The take-away point is that...

High traffic keywords do NOT typically generate high conversions or high profit!

Amateurs often attempt to rank high for broad, generic search terms that are relevant to their product or service. But, in reality, you won't make many (if any) sales even if you rank number one for a generic search term like cell phones.

Search engine marketing experts know that cell phone BUYERS only use generic terms when they are researching a potential purchase. But, when they are ready to buy, they will search for something very specific like Buy iPhone 13 Pro Max 512GB Sierra Blue best price no contract or Samsung Galaxy S22 Plus 256GB Sky Blue free shipping right before they actually make a purchase.

In other words, the keyword-based customer buying process always involves what we call a long tail keyword search. This is invariably a phrase with descriptive terms and perhaps a geographic location that accompanies a generic keyword like lawyer. For instance, personal injury lawyer in Tampa specializing in defective products would be the type of long-tailed keyword (actually a phrase) that a person would use just prior to making a action decision.

Let's look at a real example of how the keyword-based customer decision-making process actually works. A few years ago one of our tech-guys was in the market for a Bluetooth headset. He started by searching for bluetooth headset reviews to learn which units came with the best recommendations. In doing his research he learned about bluetooth multi-point and bluetooth 2.1.

That led to learning about and narrowing down his search to three possibilities: the Plantronics Voyager Pro, Motorola Command 1 and the Bose AE 2 bluetooth headsets. He decided on the Plantronics unit and his final search, the money search, was: Plantronics Voyager Pro Plus.
The graphic above shows that his product search began with a very generic search phrase (keyword), in this case, *bluetooth headsets*. As we would expect, there's lots and lots of traffic for that term but not a lot (if any) sales. And, although amateurs might be tempted to target that generic keyword, experts know it's the very specific *money* keyword (phrase) that will actually produce sales.

By the way...

**in the case of purchasing pay-per-click (aka, AdWords) traffic, this is critically important to know. The worst possible amateur mistake is paying for expensive high volume generic keyword traffic that does not convert to sales.**

Of course, this is an oversimplification of the process. There are often a variety of factors that increase or decrease the due diligence that consumers apply to the buying process. Generally speaking,

**the lower the price point, the less research a consumer will typically do. On a high-ticket item, however, you should expect the research prior to the buying process to be more extensive.**

For instance, a survey by *Polk and Auto Trader* found the average new car buyer spent 18-19 hours in research mode and searched for special offers, rebates and incentives 42% of the time.

As previously mentioned, the money "keywords" are actually a phrase. And, in SEO jargon, any keyword phrase of three or more keywords is called a **Long Tail Keyword**. Such keywords are very specific to whatever you are buying or selling. The good news is that *long tail keywords* are usually less competitive, making them easier to rank well for, and they're more likely to convert to sales.
The Keyword Discovery Process

The first step in your keyword discovery process is low tech. All you need to do is ask people how they would search for your product or service. If what you offer solves a problem, then ask them what they would search for to solve that problem. Ask your employees, your vendors, and your customers. Then start asking friends and associates. Heck, you can even ask the cab driver; you get the point. ASK!

While you're in the asking phase, be sure to look for slang, jargon, and dialect. Remember that different people oftentimes search for the same things using different words. For instance, some people use PLC to search for industrial computers. The search term murdered out is jargon for a flat black car with flat black wheels. People who live on the upper peninsula of Michigan are called Yoopers. If you're selling fire extinguishers to car enthusiasts, it's good to know that American drivers might store them in the trunk while British drivers might store them in the boot. And, did you know that re-pop is slang for reproduction? That's why it's critical to ask!

You should also mine your web server logs and/or Google Analytics for unique keywords you haven't yet discovered. Check your business email system, web site search engine data, and your support ticket system if you have one. Monitor relevant blogs, forums and competitors' webpages (it can't hurt to see what the other guy found). Use a thesaurus to find common synonyms. Alternate languages and spelling errors are frequently a good source. And remember to add location keywords such as your city and state whenever applicable.

The idea is to identify all of the keywords that people are associating with your product or service and the problem that it solves.

4 Free Keyword Discovery Tools

#1 Keyword Tool — Google Related Searches

One of the best (and fastest) sources for keyword research is Google's Related searches located at the bottom of each search results page.

For example, if you search the term smoothies and then scroll down to the bottom of the page, you'll see a list of Related searches — something like this:

```
Related searches — Google

- smoothies recipe
- smoothies recipes for weight loss
- easy smoothie recipe
- types of smoothies
- healthy smoothies recipes
- smoothies near me
- smoothies for weight loss
- breakfast smoothies
```

Here you'll see that Google helps refine the search for smoothies by showing what Related searches people are currently associating with the keyword smoothies:

Related searches — Google
smoothies recipe
→ smoothies recipes for weight loss
→ easy smoothie recipe
→ types of smoothies
→ healthy smoothies recipes
→ smoothies near me
→ smoothies for weight loss
→ breakfast smoothies

After you've finished mining Google for Related searches, head over to Bing (https://www.bing.com/search?q=smoothies&form=QBLH&sp=-1&pq=smoothies&sc=8-9&qs=n&sk=&cvid=69A5C753FBFA4779AF278BF7A44ACD2F) where you can do the same search and find something like this:

**Related searches for smoothies — Bing**

→ simple fruit smoothie recipes
→ how to make a fruit smoothie
→ healthiest smoothies recipes
→ easy smoothie recipes with yogurt
→ healthy fruit smoothie recipes
→ banana smoothie recipe
→ easy smoothie recipes for beginners
→ how do you make a smoothie

These Related searches are a goldmine of information. They reveal the most popular keyword phrases (i.e., long tail keywords) that people are using as they relate to your topic. Therefore, if you were creating an information page on smoothies to attract traffic to your recipe site, Related searches would be the place to begin your research.

**#2 Keyword Tool — Google's Autocomplete Feature**

Whenever you've started a search on Google you've probably noticed it provides a drop down list of suggestions to choose from. Below you see the suggestions Google offers when we enter our keyword smoothies.
This autocomplete feature is powered by the volume and breadth of searches done by Google users and influenced by the content of webpages in Google's index.

Google uses predictive analysis based on what other searchers looking for smoothies have used to add specificity to their search. This enables Google to understand intent — and therefore have a pretty good idea of what to suggest.

Autocomplete is another goldmine of information about the related keywords you should be focusing on when selling your products, offering your services, or assembling your content to post on your site in your efforts to drive traffic.

Comparing this list to our previous list assembled from Related searches, you'll not only get new ideas for content you may also start noticing patterns that emerge.

For instance, when looking at Related searches and comparing those suggestions to those offered by autocomplete, we see that smoothie recipes and weight loss appear in both. One might surmise that, based on this information, a blog post about weight loss smoothie recipes might help drive traffic to your recipe site.

As to patterns, it appears that users searching for smoothies are interested in location info — probably so they can go get a smoothie. That being the case, you might consider posting a directory of the 10 Best Smoothie Locations in selected regions around the country. Something like this might not only drive traffic, it could also garner you some great links to your site along the way.

**Be aware the autocomplete suggestions are fluid.** They can be greatly affected by location as well as the popular whims at whatever time you're doing your keyword research. For instance, here's a look at Google's autosuggestions for smoothies when logged into different locations...
Who knew that in Estonia searches for smoothies for hair loss would equate to smoothies for diabetics in New York as both were ranked the 7th most popular smoothie related search on that particular day in their respective locations.

And in London, smoothies for glowing skin just barely edged out smoothies with spinach in New York landing in the 7th and 8th positions respectively and being unique to those specific locations.

Suggestions for searches in Hawaii are heavily location-based — obviously looking for places to get a smoothie. The U.S. suggestions, overall, are similar to each other — looking for recipes and focused on weight issues. And while the U.S. looks for smoothies for weight loss, Italy is looking for smoothies slimming recipes which is basically the same search but using different keywords. The point is...

never think you know what keywords your target audience is searching for without doing your research.
And, bear in mind that autocomplete is based on what people are searching for at the moment and in their specific locations. Therefore, in order to grasp the depth and breath of your keyword possibilities, it's critical that you spread your research over time and check from a variety of locations (which can be done by using a VPN (https://www.tomsguide.com/best-picks/best-vpn) which is how we acquired the examples above).

And, know that the keywords you choose shouldn't be set in stone. It's a good idea to revisit this feature from time to time to see if the suggestions change.

Remember also that both Bing (https://bing.com) and DuckDuckGo (https://DuckDuckGo.com) use autocomplete too. So when you've finished mining Google's autocomplete feature, go mine their's too.

**#3 Keyword Tool — People Also Ask**

When searching almost any keyword, if you scroll down the search results page you'll find the People Also Ask (PAA) feature located just above the organic search results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People also ask</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are smoothies a good way to lose weight?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the best things to put in a smoothie?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should you not mix in a smoothie?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are smoothies good for you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are questions related to your search term that Google knows people are also asking. Once again, a goldmine of information.

Tapping the drop down arrows provides answers to the questions.
The answers are pulled from websites that are referenced in each drop down and every time you tap a drop down arrow, Google keeps adding more PAA questions.

When doing your keyword research using PAA, **the more you tap the drop down arrows the more insights you'll gain** into the myriad questions people are asking in regards to your topic.

Of course, when you’re mining Google’s PAA, you can repeat the process at Bing. And, while you may not find PAA for **smoothies** you **will** find it for other searches. For example doing a search for **how to wire a light switch** produces these PAAAs on Bing...

...and PAA on Bing works just like PAA on Google.
PAA can literally provide you with an endless *diamond mine* of valuable insights when doing your keyword research.

#4 Keyword Tool – Answer the Public

Another great tool for keyword research is Answer The Public (https://answerthepublic.com/). It's a bit different in that it shows all of the most popular *questions* people are asking based on the keyword you submit but it doesn't return search query results.

This tool is pretty amazing. It gives you a plethora of ideas for content based on related questions that people are actually asking. Each one of the lines seen in the wheel image below is another question, and each area of interest is broken down to the finest details.
To see the entire set of results, go here (https://answerthepublic.com/reports/63c205c4-6568-4eff-8e4b-301e92104b89).

Besides viewing the results in data format, you can also download the results into a CSV (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comma-separated_values) file for further processing.

One of the many features you'll want to check out is Related (https://answerthepublic.com/reports/63c205c4-6568-4eff-8e4b-301e92104b89#source_bad6050f-c665-4767-91ac-419dbd094b93) which gave us:

- smoothies recipes
- smoothies near me
- smoothies for weight loss
→ smoothies for kids
→ smoothies with spinach
→ smoothies for weight gain
→ smoothies for diabetics
→ smoothies for pregnancy

#5 Keyword Tool – Google Trends

Google provides a website that analyzes the popularity of top search queries in Google Search across various regions and languages. It's called Google Trends (https://trends.google.com/trends/) and it provides a variety of graphs you can use to compare the search volume of different queries over time.

It also enables you to compare the relative search volume of searches between two or more terms.

Staying with our smoothie example, we decided to compare the search trend of smoothies to the search trends for tequila, vodka, and beer. As you might expect, smoothies aren't nearly as popular. And also what you might expect, searches for tequila, vodka, and beer all spike during the holidays while smoothie searches do not.

Mildly surprising to us is the fact that tequila searches are more popular than vodka searches in the U.S. — except at the end of the graph. Notice that the green line (vodka) suddenly rises above the yellow line (tequila) between the dates of Feb 27-March 5, 2022. That's when vodka searches suddenly surpassed tequila searches by a significant amount.

Why? ...the spike in vodka searches coincided with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Motivated by the fact the U.S was halting vodka imports from Russia, searchers were probably checking to see if their favorite vodka brand was Russian.

We didn't expect to see that. And that's what makes Google Trends so interesting — discovering the unexpected.

Pro Tip: Since Google owns Google Trends, and because Google is in the business of collecting your data, every service they provide to you is designed to serve them too. Google Trends is no different. They want to know what you want to know, they want to know who you are, and they want permission to sell that personal data. When you log into your Google account, you are giving them permission to do all that.
We mention this because you might have trouble using Google Trends if you are using the Chrome browser without being logged in to your Google account.

There have been numerous reports, and we've experienced it ourselves, that if you do "too many searchers" (and one might be "too many") you will likely get the following error message:

![Google 429 Error](image)

Obviously you can log in and make Google happy while you search Trends. But if you don't want to log in, try using Firefox, Brave, or Safari — all of those browsers work fine with Google Trends. But Chrome? ...not so much — unless you are logged into your Google account.

Besides that one quirk, Google Trends is great. Give it a try and you'll be amazed at all of the comparison options available to you. Any search term, any region, any country, and much, much more — too much to explain here. So go see for yourself.

**Summary**

These five keyword research tools, combined, make up a very powerful suite of resources that are free to use and can help make the difference between success and failure once you know how to use them.

Remember that vague, general, and generic search terms are not your focus. It's the long tail search terms (keywords) that generate high quality traffic which converts to action and to sales. Always keep that in mind when doing your keyword research.

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**Chapter Seven**

On-page, Internal Ranking Signals

Back in Chapter Four you learned about some of the ranking signals. You may remember that we used hypothetical dials to illustrate their relative importance.
In some cases the dial-maximums were set high, in other cases the dial-maximums were set low. We even showed you dials that could register a negative ranking score. In this chapter you'll learn about all of the important internal (i.e., on-page) ranking signals and their relative importance on the current algorithm dial.

Let's start by defining Internal Ranking signals. These are variable page elements found within your site's webpages. You have total control over all of these elements since they exist completely within the realm of your website. The internal ranking signals covered in this chapter should be regarded as essential elements to your site's optimized web presence. Any internal factor NOT covered here should be considered not significantly important.

The Title Tag

The <Title Tag> has always been, and still is the #1 most important internal ranking signal. Within the source code of your webpage the title tag looks like this:

<title> Your title tag keywords go here </title>.

The title tag is intended to tell the search engine what the page is about. That's why you should put your most important keywords in the title tag. If your page topic is about steel rebar, then the keywords steel rebar should be included in the title tag.

Below is an example of the title tags used by a real-world company that managed to rank 5 of their webpages in the Top 10 search results for the keyword steel rebar:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title Tag</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;title&gt; Steel Rebar - Steel Reinforcing Bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;title&gt; Steel Rebar Sizes - Steel Rebar Stock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;title&gt; #4 Rebar - #4 Reinforcing Bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;title&gt; Steel Rebar Supplier - Steel Reinforcement Supplier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;title&gt; #6 Rebar - #6 Reinforcing Bar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that NONE of the title tags are identical. This is important. You should never have any duplicate title tags anywhere on your website! Duplicate title tags are confusing to search engines and viewed as an error which can negatively affect your search rankings.

Generally speaking you should limit your title tags to 65 characters. This is intended as a guideline. You might notice that the fourth title tag listed above exceeds the 65 character limit. But it should also be noted that the most important keywords are arranged toward the beginning of each title tag just as they should be.

Always remember the content within your title tag is frequently the text that appears as a link in the search results.

The following screenshot illustrates how Google pulls content from the title tag to provide your descriptive link.
If you compare these links to the title tags listed above, you'll see how Google adapts them in whatever manner they deem appropriate. In many cases they'll simply shorten them while in other cases they'll delete a portion. Sometimes they'll pull content from within your page that matches the search query and add it to the descriptive link. In this screenshot you may notice that Google truncated the link description in the second result because the title tag exceeded 65 characters.

Also good to know is that sometimes Google won't use any of your title tag. Instead they'll insert their own version of your link description to better match the content of the search query. However, they always use your actual title tag for ranking purposes even if they rewrite it in the link description.

This means that sometimes Google might add your company name or the keywords used in the search query or maybe pull content from a headline tag or an inbound link's anchor text if the page's title tag is lacking content that's relevant to the search query.

They are not messing with your source code and whatever they insert does not factor into the ranking algorithm. It's simply their way of making your descriptive link on the search engine results page (SERP) a closer match to whatever keywords the searcher is using.

So don't get upset if Google uses their own title to describe your link. Nothing is wrong, Google routinely makes these kinds of adjustments to "provide a good user experience" for its site visitors. Fortunately in most cases this works to your benefit because people are more likely to click links that match their search queries.

The Meta Description Tag

While not nearly as important to ranking as the Title tag, the Meta Description tag should never be overlooked. It's frequently the source from where Google pulls the text that's displayed directly below your descriptive link. Think of it as the enticement for clicking if the content of your descriptive link isn't already compelling enough. The Meta Description tag frequently provides that block of text.

Within the source code, it looks like this:

```
Steel Rebar - Steel Reinforcing Bar | Harris Supply Solutions
www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar.html
Steel Rebar. Reinforcing bar, or rebar, is a common steel bar and is used widely in the construction industry. Steel rebar is most commonly used as a tensioning...

Steel Rebar Sizes - Steel Rebar Stock | Harris Supply Solutions
www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar Sizes
Our company stocks a wide variety of steel rebar sizes and we have access to rebar across the US, and internationally if needed.

#4 Rebar - #4 Reinforcing Bar | Harris Supply Solutions
www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar #4 Rebar Sizes
Made from a sturdy composite of carbon steel, #4 rebar is a commonly used high-grade reinforcement product with widespread applications in the residential...

Steel Rebar Supplier - Harris Supply Solutions
www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar-supplier.html
Harris Supply Solutions is the largest supplier of rebar and steel remesh in the United States.

#6 Rebar - #6 Reinforcing Bar | Harris Supply Solutions
www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar #6 Rebar Sizes
Harris Supply is a leading supplier of #6 rebar, which is ideally used in concrete ... This commitment has helped us grow into the largest rebar and steel re-mesh...
```
Therefore, the Meta Description tag is important because it can affect click-through rates once your pages are actually found in the search engines. Remember, it doesn’t do any good to rank well if your links don’t get clicked.

Below we see the Meta Description tag was used fully or partially in three out of five page descriptions.

Take note that Google also pulled snippets of text from the body content. On two of the pages they pulled the snippets from text located at the beginning. Then, on one of the pages, they pulled the snippet from text located near the end of the page.

This tells us that a webpage’s opening and closing text content is important in regards to SERP (search engine results page) descriptions and can be used to entice clicks.

Be aware that...

**your keywords in the meta description tag are NOT a ranking signal. However, they ARE important in regards to getting click-throughs.**

You should also know that, if the keyword used in the search query is missing from the meta tag, Google will often grab a snippet of text from the webpage to better match the search query.
Keywords in the Domain Name as a Ranking Signal

The importance dial has been turned to almost zero in regards to generic keywords in the domain name. In other words, something like buycheapairlinetickets.com not only shouldn't be expected to provide any ranking advantage, it would actually look spammy to Google.

Instead, Google looks at the content quality of the webpage and the quality of the incoming links when evaluating the relevance of a webpage.

The exception is domain name keywords that match a unique brand name. For example, when searching for pepsi, having Pepsi.com as the domain name definitely helps their website rank at the top of the organic search results.

So, one of the best online marketing strategies is to figure out ways to get people to use your brand name to search for what you're selling.

Headline Tags

It's important to place your best keywords in your <H1> (headline) tag because Google looks for keywords in the <H1> tag and oftentimes pulls your snippet from this area of your page.

We recommend using the <H1> tag only once per page — and to place it somewhere near the beginning of the body text.

Conversely, you should avoid placing the <H1> in the left or right rail content where we often see the navigation portion of the page.

Ideally your keywords should appear early in the headline but keep in mind the headline must read well to site visitors or else it will hurt sales. So the rule is...

create your headline to attract attention to your product first — and to please Google's algorithm second.

By the way, as you probably know, an <H1> headline can appear on a page as disturbingly HUGE. In most cases, the font size is too large in terms of creating an aesthetically pleasing webpage design. The work-around involves CSS (cascading style sheets). By using CSS to adjust the font size of the headline to align with the design goals of the page, you can address both design and SEO concerns at the same time. And, in case you are wondering, using CSS to reduce your <H1> font size is perfectly ok with Google.
While the <H1> tag can help your ranking, <H2> and <H3> tags are less effective. Regardless, it's ok to use them, they might help a little and they certainly won't hurt. But you shouldn't expect a boost of any significance from keywords in headline tags other than the <H1>.

**On-page Anchor Text**

The keyword text within your on-page links — the anchor text — provides a bit of help, ranking-wise. But, since Google knows this is easily manipulated, they don't turn the dial up very high on the algorithm. Regardless, it will usually help and not hurt your ranking efforts provided that you do not abuse the strategy. If Google thinks your on-page anchor text is there to manipulate rankings, they can penalize you. Therefore, we recommend that you limit your keywords within your anchor text to only a few per page. Any more than that could be counterproductive.

**Keywords in Body Text**

As you might imagine, having your keywords in your body text (the page content) is also important. This is what Google indexes and uses to determine if a page is relevant to the search query. In regards to on-page ranking signals, the keywords found within page content are typically a medium to strong ranking signal on the algorithm dial.

However, it's a bad idea to stuff or repeat an excessive number of keywords. Doing so will get your webpage penalized. It's best to sprinkle in your keywords naturally in ways that sound comfortably conversational when you read it out loud. Otherwise your page's quality score will suffer and its ranking will be hurt.

It's best to place your keywords toward the beginning of the body copy. It can also be beneficial to place them toward the end of the text as well. If it seems natural to use them in other locations, then do so. Just be sure to avoid using them in the way that a used car salesman might overuse your name when trying to sell you something. If it sounds a little creepy when you read it out loud, then you've probably repeated your keywords too frequently.

**Images**

Images are an often overlooked ranking factor. While it's true that search engines can't "see" images, they can see the filenames and the Alt tag. Therefore you should name your image files by using applicable keywords like keyword.jpg.

Remember that some people use Image Search as their primary search vehicle. In such cases you'll want your images to rank well because top ranking images are another great way to drive traffic to your site. The Alt tag provides an opportunity to associate keywords with your images.

```html
<img src='/images/Z4M40i.jpg' Alt='BMW Z4 M40i'>
```

The image Alt tag (actually it's an attribute although most people call it a tag) is also an accessibility issue. In order to make your image Alt tags screen-reader friendly for users who are visually impaired, it's recommended that you describe what a sighted person would see when viewing the image. As such, the image Alt tag in our example above could be expanded to;

```html
<img src='/images/Z4M40i.jpg' Alt='White BMW Z4 M40i Roadster Convertible with 3.0-liter TwinPower Turbo inline 6-cylinder, Rear-Wheel Drive and black leather interior'>
```
As you can see, keywords in Alt text can be optimized to provide better accessibility while at the same time also chosen to help your images rank better in image search.

Take care not to repeat keywords within the Alt tag and try to use keywords that are different from the file name and the image captions so that screen readers aren’t repeating the same text over again — something that can be annoying to site visitors who are visually impaired.

In addition, you can help the search engines index your images more completely by using an **XML image site map**. For in-depth information on this topic, take a look at these articles (requires SEN Membership):

» The Webmaster's Guide to Advanced Image Optimization  
(https://www.searchenginenews.com/sample/content/webmasters-guide-to-advanced-image-optimization)

» The Ultimate Guide to XML Sitemaps (https://www.searchenginenews.com/sample/content/the-ultimate-guide-to-xml-sitemaps)

**Keyword Density**

Keyword Density is a ratio that is calculated by dividing *the number of times your target keyword appears on the page* by *the number of total words on the page*. For instance, if your keyword appears 10 times in a page with a total of 500 words, the keyword density is 2% (10/500=0.02).

Although a perfect keyword density ratio was, in the past, an important ranking factor, today that's not the case.

**Our best advice regarding the ideal keyword density is to simply make it higher than any other word that appears on your page.**

If you're selling *rebar*, then the keyword *rebar* should have the highest keyword density ratio. This ensures the search engines will accurately determine the topic of the webpage.

Remember to keep it natural. Your page content should make sense to humans when they read it. Avoid hammering any keyword too much and don't stress over trying to get the perfect keyword density ratio because there is no such thing as a perfect ratio anymore.

**URL Structure**

Using a simple URL that includes your targeted keywords will typically provide a *slight to medium* boost in ranking. Looking at our *rebar* example, we see the keyword is used in all five of the Harris Supply Solutions URLs in the top 10 as such:

» http://www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar.html  
» http://www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar-sizes-stock.html  
» http://www.harrissupplysolutions.com/4-rebar.html  
» http://www.harrissupplysolutions.com/steel-rebar-supplier.html  
» http://www.harrissupplysolutions.com/6-rebar.html

Don't get carried away trying to stuff too many keywords into the URL. Remember that when the URL becomes too long, it's difficult to direct someone over the phone where to go. In addition, long URLs can be difficult to use in an email because the link tends to break at the hyphen if it uses more than one line. So, with these considerations in mind, it's a good idea to include your keywords in the URL provided that you take the conservative approach.
Uniqueness of Content

Having unique content is critically important. That's because search engines tend to view duplicate content as a waste of their indexing resources and counter to what their searchers are looking for. They correctly reason that nobody wants to search for a red widget and find hundreds of red widget pages that are all alike. The search engines want to provide searchers with a variety of unique pages. This might include;

- red widget product,
- red widget specifications,
- red widget reviews,
- red widget discounts,
- red widget videos

...and so forth.

Of course if you're writing a blog and producing original content of your own, then uniqueness is easy. But if you're one of a thousand sites selling a name-brand product, then creating uniqueness is going to be more challenging.

In such cases, the key to overcoming the challenge is in the product descriptions. While it’s true that many websites have hundreds of merchants listing the same products in their shopping carts, you will find that...

only pages with unique product descriptions will typically rank well

...while those that use the brand-name-suggested descriptions are either filtered out or buried in the rankings. And, by the way, this applies to images as well.

So, if you are selling something that a lot of others are also selling then you must rewrite the product descriptions and rename the product image files so that your product pages and images are not filtered out of the search results as duplicate content.

In cases where it isn't allowed to change the product description, you can add content to make the page unique. For instance, some sites add user reviews and product demonstration videos. By enriching the manufacturers content you can make your page unique and more deserving of a good ranking.

True, this requires a bit more work. But if you don't do it, then you can't expect to rank well because you're probably competing with the likes of Amazon and perhaps also the name brand company that manufactures the product.

Mobile Compatibility

If there's one ranking dial that's turned all the way up, it's Mobile Compatibility.

Mobile "friendliness" is the most important 'on-page' dial of them all. It's critically important that your webpages display properly when viewed on ALL devices but especially on mobile devices.

Google has committed to providing searchers a quality experience when using their smartphones and tablets. This means your site design must be responsive to all devices if you want your webpages to rank well.

In addition, and as we explained in Chapter Four when we talked about the Page Experience algorithm, your webpages must load fast as measured by the PageSpeed Insights (https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/) tools. Page Speed is one of your site's core web vitals and considered an important element of Mobile compatibility.
It's always a good idea to check your site's functionality on as many devices as possible. That includes Android and iPhone as well as tablets of all sizes.

Using the Chrome browser you can do a quick check by right mouse clicking on a webpage and selecting **Activate the mobile view on this page** as seen in left panel of the image below...

Once activated, as seen in the right panel of the image above, you have a fully functioning mobile phone simulator which enables you to tap the links and see what you'd see if you were looking at the webpage with a mobile phone.

**Spelling, Grammar and Readability**

Spelling, grammar, and readability are quality signals factored into Google's ranking algorithm.

We already know that spelling and grammar checkers are very basic features of word processing. Considering that mathematical formulas like the Flesch-Kincaid test can analyze a document for readability, there's every reason to believe that Google calculates a readability score based on the average number of syllables used per word and the number of words used per sentence.
Couple all that with the fact that Google's Advanced Search (https://www.google.com/advanced_search?hl=en&fg=1) provides the option to filter search results by reading level, there's every reason to believe that Google can easily factor spelling, grammar, and readability into their algorithm. And then it stands to reason that, the higher the readability level, the higher the quality of the content — which leads to higher rankings.

**Page Freshness as a Ranking Factor**

Earlier we mentioned *Query Deserves Freshness* (QDF) search results and how that relates to hot topics. Since the search engines love new content, it only stands to reason that newer (i.e, fresh) content will have a ranking advantage over older "stale" content.

Therefore it's always to your advantage to update your best pages as often as is practical based on the type of content you're presenting. The more up-to-date your webpages, the better you can expect them to rank. On the flip side, the reverse is true. You should do everything in your power to avoid having stale, out-of-date content on your site because that will definitely hurt your rankings.

**Pay very close attention to dates.** Copyright, articles, reviews, and product pages that reference dates can be a problem if they indicate anything other than the current year or recent months. Your credibility and your rankings will suffer if you're touting *the best widget for 2021* if we're already in 2022. You get the idea.

**Geolocation Signals**

In most cases, especially for businesses that attract customers locally, it's important to include geolocation signals like your address and phone in addition to your company name. This is typically referred to as your NAP (name, address, phone).

Your NAP should be displayed in several locations on your site.

**Be sure to make it consistent!**

**The search engines do NOT like multiple phone numbers or locations.** It's confusing to their database and your rankings can suffer. If a location keyword is an element of your customers' searches, you should also include it in your title tags. And, if your geographic location has a nickname or slang term, be sure to work that into your content as well.

For instance, if you're a dentist in the upper peninsula of Michigan, then you know the term *Yooper* refers to residents of the local region. As such, a search for *Yooper dentist* produces the following top result:

```
The Team - Steven M. Dater, DDS  
smilorockford.com/team.htm  
Born a "Yooper", she enjoys spending time with her husband and two children ... 2012;  
Steven M. Dater, DDS; Heather J. Cadorette, DDS; 180 Marcell Drive NE, ...
```

Notice how they've worked the slang term for the geographic location neatly into their content.

**Spider Friendly Website Architecture**

Your site's layout, aka *architecture* is important. While it's obvious you should make it easy for site visitors to navigate, it's critical that you make it easy for search engine spiders to find all of your pages as they crawl and index your site.
Spiders/bots/crawlers can find, follow, and interpret text links best. These are links with normal anchor text.

You should avoid JavaScript and Flash Menus when possible. Although Search Engines have made great strides in finding links in JavaScript, it can still be problematic.

If you're using a JavaScript Menu, you should test it by turning off JavaScript (https://duckduckgo.com/?q=how+to+turn+off+javascript+in+chrome&ia=web) in your browser. If you can't see the links, then neither can the spiders.

CSS menus can often achieve the design goals that you're looking for without sacrificing crawlability. Drop down links, created using CSS, are easily found, followed and interpreted. If ever you're in doubt about this, simply disable CSS in your browser and take a look at the page. Below you see what the top of this book looks like with and without CSS turned on.

The image on the left conceals the links under the menu button on the navigation bar. The image on the right, with the CSS turned off, shows the links as a search engine spider would seen them — plain text links.

Here's the path for disabling CSS in Firefox. Select No Style.

Go here to learn how to disable CSS (https://duckduckgo.com/?q=how+to+turn+off+css+in+chrome&ia=web) in Chrome

Once you've disabled CSS, you should see the links as normal looking anchor text links when the page is viewed. If you can see them, then so can the search engine spiders and you're good to go.

Image-links are also easily found and followed. However, spiders can't always tell what the image-link is about unless there are clues like keyword.jpg type file names and a description added to the Alt image attribute.

You should always avoid using flash and flash movies for mobile compatible sites unless you're ONLY serving that content to compatible devices. And know that Google may penalize your site if you're attempting to use flash for devices that don't accept it.

Static Links vs. Dynamic links

A static link looks like this:

http://www.yoursite.com/directory/file.html
Of course the webpage in that link is: `file.html`. Static links offer many advantages over dynamic links. For starters, they make more sense to humans and therefore are more likely to get clicked. They help eliminate the problem of duplicate content, which is good because search engines hate duplicate content. Static links display better in print and other media advertising. And static links typically get broken less often than dynamic links because they are shorter and less likely to contain a lot of hyphens.

A dynamic link is generated on the fly by using a database to name the page on request and as needed. The link might look something like this:

```
```

The webpage in that link is: `183-1484986-3953124?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=keyword1%20keyword2`.

As you can see the link is much longer and it contains a lot of hyphens and other characters that are likely to break the link when spread across two lines. It's impossible to remember and difficult to convey over the phone.

It also wouldn't display well in print or any other form of advertising media and it could become duplicate content if the same search generated the same page but with a different assigned "dynamic" serial number. You get the idea.

But the worst disadvantage to dynamic links is when a spider gets caught in a loop. This happens when the spider finds a product link, indexes the dynamic URL, and then finds another link to the same product and indexes a different dynamic URL even though it's the same product page but with a different serial number.

And when this process happens again and again, the spider is said to be caught in a spider loop. This is bad in terms of getting your site properly indexed. Most spiders will leave your site to avoid such loops and therefore avoid indexing the rest of your site. Again, if your site isn't getting properly indexed then your webpages will NOT show up in the search results.

There are times, however, when dynamic links are desirable in terms of integrating product databases with webpage display. But the good news is there are workarounds. Many Content Management Systems (CMS) like Wordpress, for example, can be set up to display static looking URLs that are actually dynamic. If your system demands dynamic URLs, then we suggest you look into making them as simple, unique and people friendly as possible.

Your goal should be to design your site architecture so that spiders can find every page on your site by starting at the home page. That does not necessarily mean that your home page must link to all of your pages. It does mean that, by starting at the home page and following links to secondary pages, these secondary pages allow the spiders to eventually find all of your pages.

**XML sitemaps**

XML (Extensible Markup Language) is a type of markup language where tags are created to share information. **An XML Sitemap tells the search engines what content you want indexed.**

Theoretically the search engines should find all of your content by following links. But an XML sitemap can help speed up the process and reduce the chance of spiders missing some content that isn't easily indexed. This is especially true for getting content like images, videos, and product pages indexed.

Most experts agree that an XML Sitemap is essential for keeping the search engines up-to-date with your website changes. It helps to ensure that all of your important content is indexed and provides supplemental information (metadata) about your content.
By the way, you should not confuse a navigation site map with an XML Sitemap. The former is simply a page of links for your site visitors to use while navigating your site. The latter is a list-feed intended just for search engines and is not at all seen or used by site visitors.

Although XML sitemaps are not technically required, they are highly recommended. They provide useful metadata for the search engines and they're especially useful for content other than webpages. They're fairly easy to generate and there are plug-ins available for WordPress and other CMS systems to help you do this.

### XML Sitemap

Generated by Yoast's WordPress SEO plugin, this is an XML Sitemap, meant for consumption by search engines.
You can find more information about XML sitemaps on [sitemaps.org](https://www.sitemaps.org).
This XML Sitemap Index file contains 20 sitemaps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sitemap</th>
<th>Last Modified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/post-sitemap2.xml">http://yoast.com/post-sitemap2.xml</a></td>
<td>2011-04-04 14:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/yoast_plugins-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/yoast_plugins-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2013-03-19 09:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/plugins-page-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/plugins-page-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2012-06-20 06:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/wp_theme-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/wp_theme-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2012-06-20 09:19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/speaking_event-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/speaking_event-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2012-12-04 09:43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/yoast_plugin_category-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/yoast_plugin_category-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2013-03-19 00:14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/plugin_tag-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/plugin_tag-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2012-06-20 08:26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://yoast.com/event_topic-sitemap.xml">http://yoast.com/event_topic-sitemap.xml</a></td>
<td>2012-12-04 09:43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Suggested Reading**: This 2019 article-tutorial provides step-by-step directions that are still the same today. To learn how to create and feed your XML sitemaps, take a look at:

→ The Ultimate Guide to XML Sitemaps (https://www.searchenginenews.com/sample/content/the-ultimate-guide-to-xml-sitemaps)

### Robots.txt

One of the earliest names given to search engine spiders, crawlers, and bots was robots. Thus, the function of a robots.txt file is to tell spiders what to do in regards to crawling and indexing pages on your site.

You might picture your robots.txt file as the tour guide to your site for the search engines. It provides a map that tells search engines where to find the content you want indexed. It also tells them to skip the content you don't want indexed — like...
duplicate content or resource pages you're providing to site visitors in exchange for their email address.

By telling the search engine bots what to index, and what not to index, you'll get a faster and more efficient indexing of your site.

If you do not have a robots.txt file, then the spiders will index everything. But regardless of whether this is what you want, we recommend that you have a robots.txt file anyway because the search engine spiders are looking for it.

There is a lot you can do with a robots.txt file to improve the efficiency of getting your site indexed. We highly recommend that you study and bookmark the following tutorial so that when the time comes to implement the various functions of robots.txt you'll be able to easily create the perfect file that will give you the results you're looking for.

→ Robots.txt Primer: Get Your Pages Indexed Faster
  (https://www.searchenginenews.com/sample/content/robots.txt-get-your-web-pages-indexed-faster-and-control-googles-spider)

**URL Redirection**

Redirects, sometimes referred to as *URL forwarding*, make a webpage available under more than one URL address. When attempting to visit a URL that's been redirected, a page with a different URL opens up. For example, www.yourolddomain.com is redirected to www.yournewdomain.com.

Redirects can be used to forward incoming links to a correct new location whenever they're pointed to an outdated URL. Such links might be coming from external sites that are unaware of the URL change. They may also be coming from bookmarks that users have saved in their browsers. Sometimes they're used to tell search engines that a page has permanently moved.

There are two kinds of redirects that you need to know about.

1. Browser based redirects
2. Server side redirects

*Browser based redirects* have fallen out of favor with the search engines due to their frequent use in manipulating the search rankings. For that reason, they can often do more harm than good. That's why we recommend that, if you use them, you'd better know what you're doing. Otherwise, you should avoid browser based redirects if your site is dependent on good rankings.
Server side redirects are safer and necessary to use in specific instances, like when a URL has moved. The two most common redirects are the 301 redirect and the 302 redirect.

Both of these are highly useful. We recommend that you study the tutorial below in order to gain a full working knowledge of how these valuable web developer tools can be safely applied. Consider it essential reading.

→ How and When to Use 301 and 302 Redirects (https://www.searchenginenews.com/sample/content/how-to-use-a-301-redirects-updated)

**Duplicate Content**

As previously mentioned, search engines hate duplicate content. Their thinking is that it wastes their resources and provides a bad user experience. That's why they tend to filter out and sometimes penalize sites that clog their index with duplicate content.

The biggest offenders are product pages that all carry the same product description. Google doesn't care where you buy the product. They only care that you aren't served the same product page coming from multiple websites.

So they look for the content originator and tend to favor the name-brand company that produces the product. Or, they prominently rank a well-known large site like Amazon.com. The rest of the pages selling the same item tend to get filtered out of the rankings.

We also mentioned how duplicate content issues might arise whenever a site uses a dynamic database system to create product pages on the fly. This should be avoided as well.

And, of course, any other content that duplicates what is already on another site should also be avoided. The bottom line is that Google is looking for original content. Anything that isn't original reflects badly on the overall site quality. So, you should see to it that your site contains only original content and not something that can be found elsewhere.

**Canonical URL**

In the parlance of SEO, **Canonical** is a hard-to-pronounce fancy word which simply means *preferred*. Your **Canonical URL** is your preferred URL.

You might be surprised to learn that, even though both of these URL's...

» domain.com

» www.domain.com

...serve visitors your home page's content, Google sees them as two different URLs. That's why you must choose your preferred URL — your canonical URL.

As you can see, the first one does not include the **www**, the second one does. Each of them is a variation of your home page but Google needs to know which one you prefer. And unless you tell Google which one is the canonical, they'll guess at it — and they might not guess right.

If you neglect to choose a canonical, and other sites point their links to both versions, your **PageRank** will be diluted because it's divided instead of combined. This will hurt your rankings.

Furthermore, Google will see two different URLs with the same content. This creates a potential **duplicate content** problem. They won't know which URL you want indexed — and this puts your site at a disadvantage in the rankings.
The solution is to log into your Google Search Console (https://search.google.com/search-console/about) account and choose your Canonical URL — it doesn't matter which one you choose. Google doesn't care whether you use the www or not, but you must be consistent.

Then you simply redirect the traffic from the one you're not using to the one you've chosen to use. In addition, you must do your best to encourage sites to point their links at your canonical URL. That way you maximize your link juice (i.e, PageRank).

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Chapter Eight
Off-site, External Ranking Signals

In the last chapter we discussed internal, aka, on-site ranking signals where everything was all about you!

» Your Title
  » Your Meta Description
  » Your Keywords
  » Your Headlines
  » Your Anchor Text
  » Your Content
  » Your Images
  » Your URL Structure
  » Your Mobile Compatibility
  » Your Page Freshness
  » Your Geolocation Signals
  » Your Website Architecture
  » Your XML sitemaps
  » Your Robots.txt file
  » Your URL Redirection
  » Your Canonical URL

YOU have control of all of those elements because they exist on your site.

In this chapter we'll discuss all of the ranking signals that are NOT on your site — the external off-page elements that you typically do not have any direct control over.

These are important because Google tends to weight these off-site elements higher as ranking signals compared to the ranking signals they find on your site. That's because Google places more value on what others think about your site than what you think about it. The more Google likes what it hears and sees, the better they'll rank you in the search results.

So let's discuss your opportunities to rank higher by focusing on the following external ranking signals which, collectively, can have a huge impact on the success of your website.

✔ External Links
✔ Anchor Text in External Links
✔ Link Diversity
External Links

External links are the links coming from other websites that are presumably out of your direct control. Google places stronger relevance value on external links because they are hard to manipulate. They rightly figure that websites typically will only link out to other websites when their content is valuable, relevant and unique.

Therefore, your goal is to produce content that compels other sites to link to it.

As you’ve already learned, anchor text is simply the text found within a link. Search engines view anchor text as a strong relevance indicator.

They figure that, what others think your page is about — based on the anchor text — is more important than what your page actually says it’s about.

Therefore, external link anchor text is more important, ranking-wise, than any of your on-site ranking signals. After all, if an outgoing link on an external page says: Green Canyon Whitewater Rafting Adventures then Google can be pretty sure about the content of the page it’s pointing toward.

Take note that naturally occurring incoming links will typically contain one relevant keyword in the anchor text. That keyword could be your brand or company name, or it might be the URL to your website.

If your inbound links contain too many keywords, they’ll look unnatural and may trigger a penalty. A natural incoming link profile will look something like this:

» Green Canyon Whitewater Rafting Adventures
» Whitewater Rafting
» Rafting Adventures
» www.greencanyonrafting.com
» Green Canyon
» Green Canyon Adventures
» Green Canyon Rafting
» Rafting Green Canyon

Notice that none of the links are identical. This is what Google would expect from external links that occur naturally. That’s why they’re so much more likely to favor them with rank value.

It is ok, however, if some of the incoming links occasionally repeat from time to time, but if most or all of the links were: Green Canyon Whitewater Rafting Adventures then Google would believe the beneficiary site (i.e., Green Canyon) was in control of those links and would therefore discount them or even penalize the site for having an unnatural incoming link profile.
So, to maximize the value of links pointing at your site, the anchor text should be variable and NOT appear to be reciprocal or paid for. Working your best keywords into your domain name and company name, however, can be advantageous because Google attaches relevance to domain names and LOVES company names and brands. Such a strategy gives other sites a legitimate reason for using your targeted keywords in the anchor text of their outgoing links.

**Link Diversity**

The more diverse your incoming links, the better. To use a simple example, let's say that all of your links are coming from only a few sites and they're all pointed at your home page. Since there isn't much diversity, and because they aren't linking to your sub-pages, these links won't help your rankings much all on their own.

On the other hand, if your site has a *variety* of external sites all pointing at your site, with many of the links pointing at sub pages, then your rankings will be helped considerably based on your link diversity. The screenshots above and below illustrate a simplified representation of non-diversified vs. diversified incoming link profiles.

The more diversified your incoming links, the more Google is likely to trust your site. Therefore you should:
✔ acquire a diversified incoming link profile from a diversified variety of sites.

✔ make sure your links are coming from a diversified variety of locations.

✔ encourage those linking to you to vary (diversify) the anchor text whenever possible.

✔ attempt to diversify the sources and content of those who reference you — social media, news sites, reviews, directories, blog posts, trade articles, etc.,

✔ diversify the authors and publishers who link to you.

As you can see, the more diversity, the better. **Search engines really like diversified incoming link structure. It fosters trust and is therefore a very strong relevance indicator.**

## Domain Trust

Domain Trust is a very important element of the ranking algorithm. Your goal should be to acquire links from domains with a high **Trust-rank**. Conversely, you should avoid getting links from sites with a low Trust-rank.

Obviously, you need links, but even more important is getting links from the right places. For example, if your company sells nutritional supplements, having a link from **NASA.gov** (a site with a high Trust-rank) will help your rankings FAR more than having a link from a site like **cheap-acai-berry.com**. The **NASA.gov** link will add trust to your site while the **cheap-acai-berry.com** link may even subtract trust.

Earlier you learned about seed sets. These are starting places for search engine robots that crawl the web. The bots start there because seed-set sites are highly trusted. Therefore, a link from a trusted seed-set site is an excellent link.

But if you can't (yet) get a link from a seed-set site, then having a link from a site that has a link from a seed-set site is a very good link to get. It's not as great as a seed-set link, but it's a good link because it carries a fair amount of trust because it is linked-to by a seed-set site. Such a site will also pass along to you a fair amount of trust.

As you move farther away, link-wise, from a seed-set site, trust decreases because Google thinks **the likelihood of spam increases with each hop**.

Reverse Trust-rank is also a reality. That's because search engines measure how many links away from a bad site you are. The closer, in links, your site is to a bad site, the more trust your site loses.

Therefore, **you need to know that linking to bad sites can decrease your own site's trust**. So the take away message here is:

**Be careful who you link to!**

To a lesser degree other Trust-rank elements include:

- **Domain age; the older the better** - Search engines tend to trust established domains with a track record of playing by the rules.

- **Google Analytics** - Your website server stats give Google an abundance of information about your site that can indicate your trustworthiness.

- **Hosting Company** - Some website hosting companies have a reputation for sleaziness that will hurt your Trust-rank. You should avoid hosting with companies that host sites of questionable trust, just like you should avoid living in a bad neighborhood.
Postal Address - Search engines can easily determine a quality, upscale address from a skid row or drop-box address. It's better to use a good neighborhood's physical address than a post office box or demographically questionable address location in your company contact information.

Phone Numbers - Remember that phone numbers are unique identifiers. They are easily connected with everything they have ever been associated with. If a phone number is associated with business dealings of dubious endeavor, this can hurt your site's Trust-rank.

Interconnectivity - Always remember that search engines are in the business of connecting all of the data-dots. If your business is mentioned, cited, reviewed, associated, reprimanded, and so forth, the engines "see" this. The esteem, or lack thereof, associated with your website, regardless of where it occurs, does not go unnoticed. Who your website and company is associated with tells much about the trustworthiness of your website. All these interconnectivity signals can and will factor into your Trust-rank.

Domain Authority
Domain Authority is somewhat like PageRank, but on a domain-wide level. Signals that contribute to Domain Authority include:

» High Link Diversity
» Rate of Link Acquisition
» Lots of Deep Links to a variety of pages

A domain with high Authority can quickly get a new page highly ranked using only a few internal links. For example, CNN.com can rank a fresh page immediately based on their Trust and Authority.

Geo Targeting Signals
Geo Targeting is another element that is factored into the search engine algorithm for reasons that, in many cases, are simple to understand. For instance, someone in Seattle searching for a restaurant is probably looking for a local result. It's unlikely that a Boston restaurant would be relevant to this specific search for this specific person.

Therefore, as you might expect, the search engines look for geo-targeting signals that assist them in determining what's relevant for any particular search request. Such signals might include:

» Top Level Domain Name (.com, .de, .co.uk)
» Language
» Geolocation of incoming links
» Host / IP Address
» Webmaster Tools' Geo-Targeting Setting
» Domain Registration Postal Address
» Location of Visitors / Google Analytics and other sources.
» Images that are Geocoded
Traffic Factors and Quality Signals

Google and Bing are known to monitor the aggregate behavior of searchers after clicking a link in the search results. And there is every reason to believe they factor such behavior into their algorithm. Specifically, they utilize the tools at their disposal — Google Analytics, Google Toolbar, Bing Toolbar, Crome browser, etc. — to determine relevancy based on:

» **Time On Site** — The more time a visitor spends on a site, the more relevant that result is to the search that brought them to that page.

» **Bounce Rate** — If a searcher clicks a link in the search results but quickly returns from the site (bounces), then Google assumes the result was NOT relevant to the search. And, any site with a consistently high bounce rate is assumed to be an irrelevant site.

» **Click Through Rate (CTR)** — If a particular search result is frequently clicked, then it has a high *click through rate* (CTR) which adds relevance to that page.

» **Conversion Rates** — If visits to a page consistently lead to conversions (i.e., sales, sign-ups, registrations, etc. as measured by Google Analytics), then obviously the page is relevant to the search.

» **Return Visitors** — If a high percentage of visitors return to a page, then the page is considered relevant to the search that originally brought the visitor to that page.

Citations

Citations are external site references to your business, address, phone number or other unique identifiers. They aren't links. Instead they are *mentions* that can be distinctly tied to your website and/or company name and used to identify some aspect of quality or association related to your operation, service, product, or people.

In the screenshot below you see mentions about **Cicero’s Pizza** from Yelp, Tripadvisor, Grubhub, Urbanspoon, and Allmenus with the actual link to the Cicero's homepage listed at the bottom.
Citations are currently influencing the rankings in the Local Search results as much as Reviews and on-page content. That's makes them very much worth getting.

Use the following resource for guidance on the best way to go about building citations.

» Local SEO's Citation Builder's Checklist (https://www.searchenginenews.com/se-news/content/2017-local-citation-builders-checklist)

Social Signals

Social Media (i.e., Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) can be a very powerful traffic generator and brand building tool. Although Google has made it clear they don't use social signals within their algorithm, evidence shows that increased traffic to a page coming from social media sources does indeed boost a site's overall authority.

Chapter Nine

Negative Ranking Signals

As we've discussed throughout this book, there are situations, errors, elements, relationships, and strategies that can work against you, ranking-wise. Collectively, we call them Negative Ranking Signals.

The most common Negative Ranking Signals include:

- Broken Videos and Faulty Redirects
- Bad Spelling, Grammar, and Readability
- Hidden text and/or links
- Keyword Stuffing
- Cloaking
- Buying links from link networks/brokers
- Getting links from bad sites
- Linking to low quality or bad sites
- Over-optimized anchor text
- Low-quality content
- Redirecting the user with the intent to mislead
- Server down or connection problems with website

Broken Videos and Faulty Redirects

As the emphasis on Mobile, Google penalizes sites with page elements that do not display properly or break when viewed on a mobile or tablet device. Most commonly, we're talking about Flash videos and faulty redirects.
As you may already know, Flash does not work on smartphones or tablets and has been all but phased out, relegated to the dustbin of the internet's yesteryear.

For that reason, Google "suggests" that you avoid using Flash on your website. And, since websites and pages that are 100% smartphone and tablet compatible gain ranking favor over those that aren't, it means that incompatibility translates to a ranking penalty.

The same is true if your redirects are faulty or if your site returns .404 Page Not Found errors.

**Bad Spelling, Poor Grammar and Readability Issues**

Because spelling, grammar, and readability are quality signals factored into Google's ranking algorithm, you should know that **spelling errors, bad grammar, and poor readability will work against you.**

However, you don't have to worry about these issues when they appear in the *comments* that are posted on your webpage — the postings that people leave in your comments section are **not** factored into your webpage quality scores.

**Hidden Text and/or Links**

Remember, in Chapter One; we mentioned how webmasters used to stuff webpages with keywords in order to manipulate search rankings? Part of that strategy included hidden text and links that the *spiders* could see in the source code even though *people* could not. Well, *search engines do not* like content that only spiders can see. It's one of the surest ways to get penalized.

**Keyword Stuffing**

Be sure to avoid overusing your keywords in the body content, headline tags, title tags, meta tags and anchor text.

If Google thinks you're overusing your keywords, your rankings will suffer as they're likely to penalize your webpage. Furthermore, such a violation of their guidelines will probably affect your entire site's ability to rank well.

Read your content aloud; if it sounds a little weird like you are repeating any particular keyword(s) too often, then you probably are.

**Cloaking**

*Cloaking* refers to an old SEO strategy where the content that’s presented to spiders is different from the content a site visitor would see when visiting the same URL.

This is made possible when the website's server identifies a visiting spider by their known IP address. When that spider visits to crawl and index the page, a special page designed specifically for that spider is served instead of the page that a normal site visitor would see.

In such cases, the normal page is said to be *cloaked* since the spider cannot see it.

**We recommend that you avoid cloaking entirely.**
Buying links from link networks/brokers

Since much of Google's algorithm is based on naturally occurring incoming links, it stands to reason they would not like links that are presented as "natural" but, in fact, are paid links. Mind you, they don't care if you buy links, per se, but they strenuously object to any attempts to make those links look like they are naturally occurring, organic, and unpaid-for links.

So, I hear you asking: How can they tell the difference? Good question.

Here's how. For starters, Google is in the business of identifying networks and relationships. It's what they do, and they are VERY good at it! When someone is selling links (i.e., a link broker), Google quickly figures them out by seeing what looks like an unnatural network of link relationships. In addition, the anchor text will often be over-optimized with targeted keywords that make the links look contrived.

The bottom line is that you should avoid buying links UNLESS you can ensure that:

- The links are nofollowed, telling Google that you do NOT expect to receive any link juice (PageRank) from those links. This satisfies their terms of service (TOS), and in such cases, paid links are ok.
- Or, if there is no possible way that Google could learn, the links are paid (good luck with that, btw).

Remember that Google knows about ALL of the brokers, ALL of the networks, and ALL of the websites that sell links. It's their business to know. If it is mathematically logical for them to know it, they either know it already or else soon will know it. We have never found an exception to this rule.

Getting links from bad sites

Earlier, we talked about such algorithmic factors like PageRank, Trust, and Authority. You've learned that having links from pages with high PageRank and domains with high Trust and Authority can help your webpages rank well even if you have only a few such links.

And, you've learned that links from low PageRank, Trust, and Authority sites will not help you nearly as much ranking-wise.

In some cases you may find that a bunch of low quality sites are linking to you. In the past this was a serious problem. These days, however, Google tends to ignore links from bad sites. So, you should ignore them too.

Of course they won't help your rankings but Google says they won't likely hurt you either. The exception is when you've been notified within Google Search Console that you're subject to a "manual action" — aka, a penalty that temporarily excludes you from Google's index. In such a case you may need to use Google's disavow tool (https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/2648487) to disavow certain links to your site.

Linking to low-quality sites

More importantly though, you should be very careful who YOU link to. Not only are you passing PageRank, but you're also effectively recommending them. If Google sees you are linking to (i.e., recommending) sites that are in violation of Google's guidelines or TOS (terms of service), then Google will think you're endorsing dubious practices. This will hurt your rankings. So, be very careful who you link to.

Over-optimized Anchor Text

As previously mentioned, there can be too many targeted keywords in a link. Such links can work against your ranking efforts when Google detects them. That's why you should do your best to acquire a very natural looking incoming link profile that avoids stuffing all of your best keywords into all of your incoming links.
Low-Quality Content

It's better to have fewer pages of high-quality content than it is to have a lot of pages of low-quality content (duh!). Make sure you avoid anything that looks computer-generated or simply rehashes content found elsewhere on the web. Your goal should be high quality, unique, and compelling content that other sites will want to link to.

Redirecting the user with the intent to mislead

Google will seriously penalize (or ban) any site that misleads users. Therefore, it stands to reason that they don't like pages or sites that use redirection to trick visitors into landing on a different page than the one Google indexed. So, don't do that, ok?

Server down or connection problems with website

Google expects that your site will provide a high-quality user experience. Glitches and downtime are the antitheses of a good user experience. Therefore you must see to it that your web hosting service provider is reliable and that your pages are not broken, missing, or otherwise contrary to what Google expects them to be based upon what their spider has indexed.

Summary

Your first goal in SEO should be to avoid making any of these avoidable mistakes. If you fail to do so, it won't matter how good you are at any of the other strategies. So, priority-wise, you must:

» First, avoid the mistakes that can get your site penalized or banned.

» Second, get your on-site elements in place and optimized.

» Third, focus on continuously sharpening your off-site strategies.

And always remember, if you anger the beast (Google) by making these dumb mistakes, it may not matter for a very long time how good you are with the rest of your SEO efforts.

Chapter Ten

Link Building

Acquiring incoming links from external high-quality websites is of the utmost importance. It's also the most challenging aspect of search engine optimization (SEO).

From where you get them, and how many you need, depends entirely on what websites you're competing with for top rankings. You don't have to be perfect in every sense, just closer to perfect than whoever you're competing with. So, the answer is always relative and it's different in every case.

Although we expect that links will continue to be one of the most influential ranking signals for the foreseeable future, exactly how search engines value links will continue to evolve as developments in social media, profiles, and authorship also continue to evolve in regards to domain authority and domain trust as mentioned in earlier chapters.
Let's start with the basics. Below is an illustration of the simplest and most common link relationship, a *one-way link*.

![One Way Link from Site A to Site B](image)

The next illustration is a view of another common type of link relationship, the *reciprocal link*.

![Reciprocal Link](image)

Both the *one-way link* and the *reciprocal link* can pass added PageRank (link juice) to the site being linked to. Because Google and the other search engines base a large part of their ranking algorithms on these two types of link relationships, such links hold the potential to significantly boost your rankings.

Sometimes, however, there are link relationships that should be ignored by the search engines in order to avoid wasting PageRank or running contrary to Webmaster Guidelines or Terms of Service (TOS). In such cases the *nofollow* attribute or *robots.txt* file can be used to protect your site from diluting its link juice or violating the rules.
The illustration above describes a link relationship, which will be ignored by the search engines but without sacrificing the possibility of the link driving traffic to your site.

You already know that anchor text refers to the text found within a text link. There are several different ways that natural looking anchor text is typically displayed. Some are better than others as such:

» `<a href='http://domain.com/page.html'>Keyword</a>`

Using your keyword as anchor text is the most powerful type of link. However be careful to not overdo this. Too many keyword-optimized anchor text links can make your link profile look unnatural and thereby trigger a penalty. **We recommend that you limit this type of incoming link to 20% or LESS of your incoming link profile.**

» `<a href='http://domain.com/page.html'>Brand Keyword</a>`

Using a brand name with a keyword as your anchor text is powerful and also safer because Google LOVES brands.

» `<a href='http://domain.com/page.html'>www.domain.com/pages.html</a>`

Using the URL as your anchor text is less powerful but very safe. There should always be a few of these in your incoming link profile to make it look natural.

» `<a href='http://domain.com/page.html'><img src='http://domain.com/widget-keyword.jpg' alt='Keyword'></a>`

Using an image-link as your anchor text is also good as well as very safe — but not as powerful a relevancy factor as a text link. That's why you should always remember to use a relevant keyword as your file name as well as in your Alt tag.

» `<a href='http://domain.com/page.html' rel='nofollow'>Keyword</a>`

Using nofollow means the link will be ignored by search engines.

The general rule of thumb is, **if the link is visible it will be taken into account by the search engines unless it is excluded in robots.txt or assigned the nofollow attribute.**

Remember also that Google can read, index and will likely count links in all sorts of file types like: `.html`, `.swf`, `.pdf`, `.ps`, `.dwa`, `.bas`, `.c`, `.kml`, `.gpx`, `.hwp`, `.java`, `.xls`, `.ppt`, `.docx`, `.odp`, `.ods`, `.odt`, `.pl`, `.py`, `.rtf`, `.svg`, `.txt`, `.css`, `.ans`, `.wml`, `.wap`, `.xml`
As you're no doubt seeing, the key to having a natural-looking incoming link profile is to mix it up. You should avoid having a large percentage of exact match keyword anchor text. You should also avoid participating in link schemes. These include the so-called link wheels, link exchanges, text-link networks and anything that might be detected or interpreted as paid links (unless they are nofollowed). You should also avoid getting links from off-topic, irrelevant sites, especially in high numbers.

**Link locations matter as well.** The illustration below maps out the prime locations for your links.

![Visible Location Matters](image)

As the graphic shows, links found within the *Header* and the *Body Content* are assigned more importance than links found in sidebars and footers.

**The location of a link within the HTML code of a webpage matters.** Specifically, it is ONLY the first link to a site that passes PageRank. The rest of the page's links to the same site, whether they are in a list (as seen below) or scattered throughout the page, usually do not pass PageRank.

```html
</div>
</div>
</ul>

After the first link, multiple links to the same site are ignored unless the link includes a hashtag like page.html#name
```

As the screenshot above suggests, PageRank will pass to the page listed in the first link. All of the secondary links are ignored in terms of PageRank unless a hashtag (indicating a specific internal location within a page) is used.

This also means that if you have multiple links to the same page on your site, the first link (from top to bottom in the source code) is the link from which Google will use the anchor text to help determine relevancy when ranking your page.
Based on the various patents that Google and the other engines own, there is every reason to believe that the following list of factors either do or soon will influence the value of outgoing/incoming links in the eyes of the search engines. For instance:

- **Font Size** — Normal font size looks right while super-tiny font does not. If any link font-size is considerably smaller than the text surrounding it, that link will probably be discounted.

- **Location** — The page location of a link is important. As previously mentioned, links found in **headers** and **body content** are viewed with more importance than links found in sidebars and footers.

- **Position of Link (top/bottom) within a list (<li>)** — You should expect that links found at the top of a bullet list will be the most valuable. The rest may be ignored in terms of PageRank and anchor text.

- **Font Color as compared to background** — If the font color matches the background too closely the link will likely be discounted. This is because the link will be invisible to people and only seen by spiders — a strategy used in the past to spam the search engines.

- **The number of words in anchor text** — Stuffing too many words into your anchor text can make it look unnatural and will likely work against you.

- **Actual words in anchor text** — Over-optimizing with too many targeted keywords can also work against you.

- **How commercial the anchor text is** — Words like *Buy, Shop & Cheap* tell the search engines that your content is commercial rather than informational and may cause the link to be somewhat devalued.

- **Type of link** — Typically a text link will carry more value than an image link.

- **Aspect Ratio of image link** — If the aspect ratio (the size of the image) looks suspicious, then the value of the image link will be discounted. An example would include a 1 pixel square image that would effectively be invisible to people and seen only by spiders.

- **Nearby word content and topical cluster associated with the link** — The context and topic cluster of the text that the link is associated with can influence the weight given to the link. Topically associated text is good, topically unassociated text is not good.

- **The URL of the linking page** — Having the keyword in the URL of the page that is linking to you can boost the importance of that link.

- **Number of links on the page** — If a page links to you with their only link out, then your page will benefit from 100% of the available link juice (PageRank) being passed. However, if that page also links out to 10 other pages, then your page will receive only about 10% of the available PageRank. The fewer links on the pages that link to you, the better.

- **Content found in specific places on a page** — The content found in the **title** and **headline** tags, as well as the **body content in the upper portion of the document** (i.e., above the fold), helps determine how important an outgoing link will be viewed.

- **User Behavior (Toolbar Data)** — Behavior like bookmarking, revisiting, page sharing, etc. influences the importance assigned to a link. And whether or not people actually click the link, matters.

- **Language** — can also be a factor insomuch as outgoing/incoming links would be expected to match the language of the page they’re pointing toward.
» **Click Rate of Link** — As previously indicated, how often people click a specific link matters. The more the link is clicked, the more important the link.

» **Page Authorship & Social Authority** — Links coming from well known, registered, and socially networked authors are likely to be given more importance than links coming from unregistered, unknown and/or socially unconnected authors.

» **Link acquisition rate is also an important factor**. Google figures that natural link profiles are built gradually, over time.

If you suddenly acquire a disproportionate number of links, that raises red flags because it signals a possible link buy. As you know, Google frowns on purchased links unless they are *nofollowed*. Therefore, suddenly acquiring a lot of links can actually work against your ranking efforts.

» **Remember also that your incoming anchor text must vary** in ways that make your incoming link profile look natural.
Links that point deep into your site's subpages lend the appearance of quality content and help make your incoming link profile look natural.

» **Be sure to focus on Canonical URL consistency.** The graphic below illustrates how PageRank can be needlessly diluted when using more than one of the many different versions of your home page URL, **even though all of them will land a site visitor on what is apparently the same page.**

The graphic above shows **SEVEN URL variations of the same page** — all of which others could be using to link to you. The ONLY way to avoid such PageRank dilution is to choose one canonical (preferred) URL and see to it that you and others **consistently** link only to your canonical URL.

**Your BEST Link Building Strategies should include:**

- **Trust-rank and Authority.** Ideally, you want links coming directly from trusted domains. If that is not (yet) possible, then your goal should be to get your links from sites that have links from trusted domains. The closer a site is, link-wise, to a trusted domain, the better. The further away a site is, the less the link is worth.

- **Links from on-topic (semantically related) Authority sites are highly valuable.** If your site sells **sewing equipment** then you want links from popular sites whose topics include everything related to sewing – **sewing instruction, sewing patterns, garment material suppliers**, and so forth.

- **Links coming from so-called restricted top level domains (TLDs) tend to carry more trust.** These include educational institution (**.edu**), governmental institution (**.gov**), and military organization (**.mil**) domains.

- **Links coming from high PageRank pages will also help your rankings considerably.** Remember, however that PageRank is only one of many indicators of a page's importance, trust, and authority.

- **Unique Domains vs. Total Volume.** Google favors pages with a fair number of links coming from a wide variety of domains over pages that have lots of links but coming from only a few domains. The more domains that link to you, the higher your site's level of trust.

It's worth mentioning that Bing, however, is not nearly as advanced as Google. They tend to favor more links regardless of where they come from. So, one could say that **Google is more quality oriented** while **Bing seems more quantity oriented.** But since Google is the 800lb gorilla and Bing is the 90lb weakling, we recommend that you focus on creating a link profile that caters to Google over Bing.
Deep Link Ratio. As previously indicated, deep links can dramatically improve your site's ability to rank well. It can also help your site get completely indexed. These are links that are NOT to your home page, but rather to the various pages within your site. It's worth noting that highly successful shopping sites are running upwards of 80% deep link ratios. This means that 80% or more of their incoming links are pointed at subpages.

Hyperlocal Links. If your business depends on acquiring local customers within a geographic area, it can be highly beneficial to get links from sites that endorse local businesses. These would include sites like Chamber of Commerce, Better Business Bureau, Local Trade Associations, Local Directories, Schools, Hotels, Restaurants and Community Action Groups.

The Four Biggest Mistakes to Avoid in Your Link Building Efforts

1. Run-of-site links — Having your incoming link on every page of an external site is BAD! In the eyes of Google, it's a sure sign of a paid-for link. Such run-of-site (ROS) links should be carefully avoided.

2. Link Farms, Reciprocal Link Networks, Web Rings, Paid Link Networks, and Link Wheels — aka, Link Schemes should be avoided like a leaky boat in a swamp full of alligators.

3. Linking to low quality sites (aka, bad) sites — examples would include topical sites such as gambling, adult, pharmacy, loan, debt consolidation — any site that promotes controversial topics or products or which uses dubious SEO strategies.

4. Linking to off-topic sites — is a bad idea since going off-topic is the antithesis of relevancy. If your site is about sewing, you should only link out to sites that are related in some way to the endeavor of sewing. Clothing, garments, patterns, crafts, sewing equipment, sewing lessons, sewing tips and so forth.

But linking out to your webmaster's design company, your local real estate broker, your brother's vacation rental, or a political action site is a bad idea since all such sites would be considered off-topic in respects to sewing. But, if ever a situation compels you to link to an off-topic site, be sure to nofollow the link.

Summary

Boiled down to its essence,

link building is a popularity contest within a popularity contest.

The search engines want to rank the most popular sites at the top of the search results. They also reward the sites that are popular with the most popular sites.

Therefore you must do everything in your power to entice people to LOVE your pages because when they do they will:

- link to it from other webpages
- comment about it on blog posts and forums.
- write reviews, rate products and talk about the brand and product names.
- Like it, Tweet about it, and post Instagram and Pinterest photos and videos of your products or services.

...and the engines use all of these signals to determine the importance of your website and your pages. Therefore it is critical that you make it easy for search engines to "see" how popular your website's pages are.
Chapter Eleven
Keeping Up With The Changes for Less Than $1 a Day

You've made it this far, Congratulations! You've gained an excellent foundational understanding of SEO.

High Five!

As you can see, SEO is complicated. But if you think about it, that's kinda great because it works to your advantage. Here's why.

☑️ **If you're a business owner**, you now have an big advantage over your competitors. And whether you do the SEO yourself *(not recommended because you'll be taking away time from actually running your business)* or if you hire it done *(highly recommended)* you'll KNOW what to expect and you'll know when they're doing it right.

☑️ **If you're a current or soon-to-be professional SEO**, then you now have a foundational awareness of the fundamentals. This gives you an advantage over your competitors who are missing these critical insights and forms a solid foundation upon which you can build your expertise.

But regardless of whether you're doing SEO for your own business or doing it professionally for business clients, you should always be aware that...

the only constant in SEO is **change**.

Like it or not, Google changes something every month. If it isn't the guidelines, it's their terms-of-service. Or maybe it's something important within their "acceptable" strategies. Sometimes it's all three and many times it's something brand new! ...or it could be something they've just shut down.

Regardless, keeping up on these changes can be challenging!

**Honesty, if WE didn't have a network of pros who share their research and strategies with us, and quickly alert us to new problems and features, we'd be struggling to stay current with all of the changes too!**

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