

The beginner's guide to SEO: How to be a search success

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While Google itself provides a pretty comprehensive [starter guide to search engine optimisation](#), it's useful to complement this technical advice about how best to structure your website, optimise content and so on, with some more practical advice.

For that reason, we've pulled together some tips and recommendations that can be used as broad pointers to guide your SEO efforts. And with SEO such a fast-moving and nuanced area of digital marketing, the value of this kind of advice shouldn't be under-estimated.

"You know you're desperate for an answer when you look at the second page of Google results. That's why digital marketers will do almost anything to get themselves onto page one," says Tom Salmon, group marketing director at [Epiphany](#). "Indeed, many marketers have been tempted by SEO consultants and agencies who promise them they can get quick results, guaranteeing first-page rankings and overnight wealth.

"In my experience, people making those kinds of promises are more likely to get your website penalised by Google (making it almost invisible in search results pages) than they are to give your brand the influence it needs to succeed online."

So with the price of failure ranging from a low search ranking to a penalisation from Google, let's explore what we can learn from those businesses that are having search success.



What are the search success stories doing right?

“Every Google algorithm update over the last few years has rewarded brands that understand how they can help their customers at specific times in their decision-making process by providing high quality, user-friendly content and a good user experience on a range of different desktop, tablet and mobile devices,” notes Salmon.

So what do you need to do to stand out from your competition? Salmon says that brands that regularly appear in high positions in search results have three main things in common.

1. They understand their customers

“Online success hinges on the ability to influence and persuade customers to trust your brand over your competitors by taking a series of small steps, from discovering that you can help them all the way through to completing a sale and becoming a lifelong advocate,” says Salmon. “Knowing what they are searching for, why they are motivated to click and what their choices are means that you can create useful content both on and off your website.”

Such content on your site sends a clear message to people and search engines about what your business is there to do for them (and also supports conversion rate optimisation). Useful, timely, relevant content off your website sends the same message but also communicates the level of your influence.

An example, according to Salmon, is if you get coverage on relevant sections of the BBC or the Guardian’s website, you’ll be perceived by your customers (and search engines) as more of an authority on your subject than your competitor getting coverage on low-quality alternatives.

“Authority and influence, often expressed as a link from one trusted website to another, are key reasons that Google ranks some websites ahead of others,” he explains.

2. They understand technological factors

“Influence and authority are necessary - but not sufficient - factors for SEO success,” Salmon explains. “Your website also needs to be performing from a technical perspective; a robust SEO strategy also considers which parts of your website are underperforming and why. There are an almost unlimited number of reasons why you could be limiting your own success, such as URL structures that present difficulty for visitors and search engines to understand what a page is about, duplicated and badly-organised content or page load time. A review covering at least those areas will help to establish the priorities, and easy wins, for your SEO campaign.

“A technical review should also consider whether previous SEO activity has resulted in a loss of visibility caused by algorithm updates or penalties from search engines, and whether it carries risk for the future.”

A penalty can mean that your brand becomes invisible in search results and can be caused by a range of things, including previous efforts to manipulate your rankings by paying for links from other websites, cloaking, malware and keyword stuffing, among others. Salmon recommends checking [Google’s Webmaster Guidelines](#) regularly for information on best practice.



“Visibility and traffic can also be lost as a result of an algorithm change, such as those presented in Google’s Panda, Penguin and Hummingbird updates,” he continues. “Every algorithm shift is designed to provide a better experience for Google’s visitors, giving them the best and most relevant results possible. It’s no accident that we put customers before technology in this list of three general principles!”

3. They have a long-term strategy

The first two points demonstrate the convergence of creative marketing and technical skills in SEO. They also show that there are no shortcuts to manipulate your way into artificially high rankings.

“High visibility in search results is an outcome of good marketing and brand positioning alongside technical expertise,” says Salmon. “Put together, these two things improve the usability of a site, create remarkable relevant content, make sites faster and provide a focus for your digital PR to secure coverage about your brand with influential and relevant digital publishers. They create influence, trust, authority, and make your brand more engaging.”

Your long-term SEO strategy should bring together a blend of people and skills. Technical experts, web developers, campaign planners, PRs, creatives, writers, data analysts, researchers and designers all have a place at the table in this new view of search engine optimisation. You should also consider bringing in your PPC experts to share data on conversion funnels and attribution models to inform your content strategy.

Salmon recommends that this team should start with basic questions, including "how does SEO dovetail with the rest of the marketing mix?", "do we know what our customers want, how they search and what their choices are?" and "how do we work together to get better visibility for our brand online?"

He notes: “It takes time to create relationships with influential publishers, as well as understanding what kind of content works for your customers. It is often as much a cultural challenge as much as a marketing one, as organisations must bring together a range of different people and skills that are needed for success. Nonetheless, the long-term results are absolutely worth it.”

A new content plan for your website

Google’s recent algorithm changes were designed to limit the effectiveness of ‘black hat’ SEO techniques like keyword stuffing and excessive back-linking, and they have increased the importance of applying the good old-fashioned disciplines of effective communication.

For this reason, Miles Clayton, MD of [Agility PR](#), advises that brands should double-check that they are communicating using the right language and messaging for their target audiences - as well as ensuring that these communications are easily discoverable by audiences and indexable by Google. If they can’t find it, Google might struggle to crawl it.

Here are his tips for refreshing or overhauling the content plan for your website to help SEO.

1. What information will your key audiences be searching for?

Start by remembering who your key audiences are and what sort of content they are likely to be interested in. Are you keeping your audiences fully informed on recent developments within your



company – new services you are offering, new product versions and latest thinking about developments in the market?

Think about all the areas of your site which might draw different audiences in and develop a plan for filling in any gaps whether they are news bulletins, blog posts or downloads. The advantage of all this hard work is that it pays off rapidly in terms of Google ranking if the content is well sign posted and relevant to your domain.

Focus on writing content for your website which your key audiences are likely to be looking for online.

2. Put that information in a range of formats

Once you have established what you are trying to impart to gain mind-share the next task is to write resulting content in different formats to meet the needs of different type of visitors to your site.

A news story placed within your News Bulletin section of your website, if written compellingly, will help you attract new visitors attracted by the headline. They may read the story but it is unlikely to engage the visitor at a deeper level. And a Frequently Asked Questions section will be more effective at retaining traffic and will get visitors coming back if they see this as a useful reference document.

Better still, embed links in FAQs which take visitors to your written and video case study testimonials – retaining that visitor and offering opportunities for deeper engagement. A video tutorial (embedded onto your website and hosted on YouTube) will add to visitor retention. This may in turn lead the visitor to download a Business Guide or sign up for a future web conference that you've offered them at point of sign up.

Ensure that you develop different formats of content on your websites. Organise your content with a view to enabling visitors to seamlessly move to deeper content.

3. Avoid excessive keyword usage

Google algorithms are getting more sophisticated all the time. They increasingly understand intent. They sniff out nonsense content which has an over emphasis on key word inclusion and will mark your website down for using it. This is complicated stuff. If you would like to speak to someone hereabout writing for keyword ranking please make contact.

Write your content naturally in the first instance avoiding keyword stuffing.

4. Content authority equals domain authority

Assuming that you now publish a regular blog on your website – after all everyone should these days – make sure you by-line each post and link it to the relevant Google+ profile. This will help you build the authority for your blogs and therefore your website. It will definitely improve Google ranking and will help you serve your content automatically to relevant people you've connected with in your Google Circles once this work is done.

By-line your blogs using Google+ and get versions of these placed in relevant online magazines to increase Domain Authority.

5. Organise content so it is logical



One of the things that many firms have done to stay ahead through the recession is diversify into new products and services. Some of these services do not sit naturally on the website alongside each other. A good number of websites' front pages are, as a result, confusing to the viewer and by extension Google. Confusion and the perception of carrying non-relevant content on your site will lead to it being ranked poorly by Google.

Avoid this by clearly signposting what part of the website serves which audience. Think about the visitor's journey through the site and study Google Analytics to make sure there are no dead ends or misplaced pieces of content which are stimulating them to move away from the site. Thankfully, you do not have to create separate sites for each offering but you definitely have to organise your products and services sections in such a way as prospects for X service do not end up in Y area of the site.

Organise your website so it is easy to navigate to relevant content. Try to eliminate clutter.

Getting your keywords right

It's vitally important to get your keywords right because, alongside inbound links, keywords are one of the most influential factors in ensuring you rank well for search terms. However, with over four billion web pages, most searches can turn up vast numbers of results.

Tim Pritchard, an SEO specialist at [SellerDeck](#), provides the following tips to help you create a great low competition keyword campaign.

1) Understand and segment. Before you start trying to create appropriate keywords, segment your products, your industry and your competitors. Are you creating an overall campaign, or are you concentrating on one particular product or group of products? The more research you can do at this stage, the better.

2) Invest in a good keyword tool. To work on your keywords, you will need a good tool. There are some decent free keyword tools available like Google's Adwords. However, investing in a specialist tool like [Wordtracker](#) or [Jaaxy](#) will help to identify true competitive ratings and the power of each keyword. A good tool will also make suggestions for alternatives to the words and phrases you search for. Look out for those that have lower levels of competition, but a decent amount of monthly searches.

3) Use Google Instant. Google Instant is what happens when you start typing something into the Google search bar, and it suggests things to search for. This is incredibly handy, as it gives a brilliant insight into what others are searching for, which helps with the 'long tail' keywords. You can then combine using a keyword tool and Google Instant to come up with new and fresh ideas for keywords to optimise for.

4) Do your competitor research. When you have come across a keyword (short or long tail) that you like, search for it within speech quote marks (e.g. "low energy lighting"). This will only return results for that exact phrase. You can see the exact level of competition you're up against, and even have a look at how some of your competitors' sites are set up. Try installing some SEO keyword toolbars (such as the [Moz Toolbar](#) for Chrome), that will help you to identify which keywords your closest competitors are optimising for.

5) Avoid keyword cannibalisation. This comes down to good segmentation and research at step one. You should always try to avoid over-optimising for one term, thus creating competition



between your pages. Contrary to popular belief, having your 'overall' keywords strewn throughout your entire site will not actually help you. What will actually happen is that rather than Google knowing the exact page to return, based on a query, it will have to choose between a number of pages and may not actually return the best page. This can then be detrimental to your click through rates and if people aren't clicking the link, it will suffer.

6) Get your 'Title Tags' right. The Title Tag is considered one of the most important aspects of SEO and tells Google what you're all about. Your Title Tags should all be unique, accurate to the page and set up right. Title Tags need to be under 70 characters (any longer will be wasted/unseen text) and contain your primary keyword, your secondary keyword and company name, in that order. Of course, this all has to be written as a sentence that makes sense to a human whilst being well optimised for robots; no one said this was easy!

7) Don't forget your images. Content isn't just your text; it's the images as well. Make sure your photographs are sensibly named and you make good use of Image Alt attributes to describe the picture and use the relevant keywords.

8) Make small changes. Don't feel that because someone on the internet told you that keyword campaigns were important, you need to go changing your entire site. Google loves fresh content, but change can be detrimental in the short term. Instead, try making small changes, work on one section or page of your site at a time.

9) Don't forget analytics. Following on from making small changes, keep an eye on your analytics to see if these tweaks have worked, and make adjustments if things aren't going well. Allow some time for changes to truly make a difference, but we wary of getting caught on downward slide. Don't be afraid to really get stuck into your analytics and go beyond just visitor numbers and basic data. Analyse the keywords being used, traffic funnels, entrances and exits to get a good picture of visitor behaviour on your site.

10) React to the world around you. This process doesn't stop! You will always have new products, but it goes beyond that. Keep an eye on world events, industry trends and TV programmes in order to add relevant content (e.g. blogs, how to videos, useful links) as quickly as possible so you benefit from searches for topical keywords.

"You've probably guessed by now that there are no shortcuts to achieve a high position in search results," Salmon concludes. "You can't fake it until you make it, so make sure that you find yourself a team that you trust and can work with on a long-term, multi-disciplinary digital marketing strategy to create a brand that both people and search engines trust."

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