LEARNING

SEO

From the Experts

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Updated/designed by: **Erik Devaney** | @BardOfBoston | Content Strategist, HubSpot

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INTRODUCTION

Search engines have become a core resource for individuals looking for a business, product, or service. Over the years, online search has reduced the need for traditional means of searching, such as yellow pages.

Your business needs to adapt to the changes of the new consumer searching landscape. In the words of HubSpot CTO Dharmesh Shah, **"Solve for the humans!"**

Businesses no longer need to spend thousands of dollars on advertising in directories and magazines. Every business with a website has the potential to get found by more customers online through search engine optimization (SEO) and inbound marketing.

Whether you have already invested in an SEO strategy or are just getting started, this ebook will help you gain a stronger understanding of all aspects in the SEO process. The ideas, best practices, and examples all come from top SEO experts.
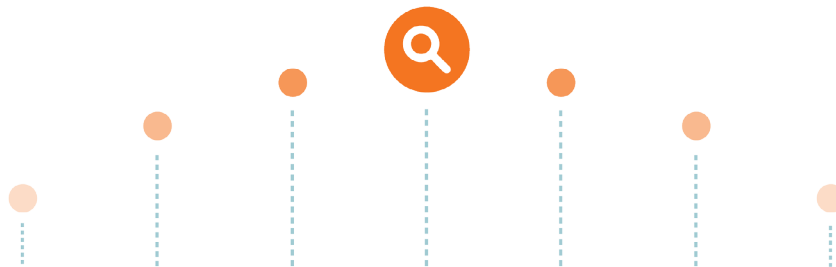
CHAPTER ONE

Mastering
On-Page SEO

Greg Shuey, Stryde

What is On-Page SEO?

In the history of search engine optimization, the rank of a piece of content in search engine results has typically come down to two key drivers: relevancy and authority built through content on your website. When optimizing your content, focus your copy on specific keywords that match what people are searching for online.

The first rule of on-page SEO is to think about what your target users might be searching for and make sure those keywords are on the page. This increases the likelihood of reaching those users as they go to Google, Bing or other search engines.

That being said, on-page SEO is basically about two things:

1. **Picking the best keywords around which to base each of your pages**

2. **Making it clear to search engines that your page revolves around those keywords**

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On-Page Optimization: The Old Way

Search engine algorithms rank web pages based on numerous factors.

The basic premise is that a page will show up in search engine results because the website has a page that mentions the searched for terms. Of course, many websites use the same keywords on the same page.

Hundreds of tools are littered across the web that allow you to measure the keyword density of a page. Some of them teach that more is better. As a result, webmasters would crank out keyword-stuffed text that was not interesting and/or provided a horrible user experience.

These keywords would be stuffed in various places, including:

- The URL
- The page title
- The meta description tag
- The on-page headings
- Aggressively throughout the page content

Such tactics even ended up stripping out important keyword variations -- so the page wouldn't rank as well, or at all, for the related keywords.

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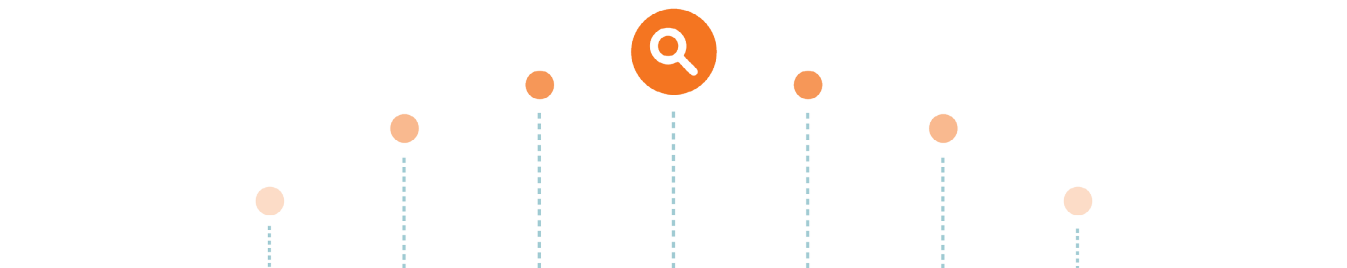
On-Page Optimization: The New Way

Marketers should still be using keywords.

But rather than littering them throughout every aspect of your page, think about the value you want each page to provide, and which keywords match that value.

And rather than repeating the same word over and over again, you should use a diverse set of related keywords to help you rank for a variety of long tail keywords.

For example:

- Link vs. Links
- Build vs. Building
- Strategy vs. Strategies

Also rank for a variety of lateral keywords:

- Lawyer vs. Attorney
- Dentist vs. Oral Surgery
- SEO vs. Search Engine Optimization

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The Core Components
of On-Page SEO

Meta Tags

Meta tags are the official data tags for each web page that are found in-between the open and closing head tags in the HTML code. The most popular Meta tags are the title tag, meta description, and keyword tag.

These tags alert search engines with relevant information describing the content of the page, which helps the search engines decide if your website is an appropriate listing in response to a particular search query.

Title Tags & Meta Descriptions

Title tags and Meta descriptions are two of the most important tags when it comes to SEO and enticing potential visitors to click through to your website.

A **title tag** is an HTML tag which contains a sentence of text describing the contents of its associated webpage. These tags are the first aspect of your page that a search engine "crawler" (what search engines use to analyze and index web pages) comes across when visiting your website, so it's important to make a good first impression by optimizing them with your keywords and brand. Titles generally run about 77 characters, so make sure to use each character wisely.

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The Core Components of On-Page SEO

Meta descriptions are what appear on SERPs describing the content of the page being linked to. While these descriptions are not used by the search engines to determine rank, they are used by your visitors to determine how relevant your website is based on their search query. Think about when you search: You almost always read (or at least skim) the description of each link before deciding to click, right? Make sure you include your keywords and the main call-to-action right in this description.

TIP: Meta descriptions generally run about 160 characters. Use those characters wisely, and stick to that limit so that when the description appears in Google it's not cut off with ellipses!

Content

On-page content is a critical component of on-page SEO. Content is what the search engine crawlers need to associate your page with a set of keywords and/or key phrases. Without it, crawlers are left in the dark as to what your page is about.

When building your content, it's important to remember to give the crawlers enough to bite into. A hundred words typically isn't enough copy for these crawlers to read and understand what the content is about. And this content shouldn't be stuffed with keywords either, as some search engines (as you'll learn in later sections) punish websites for keyword stuffing.

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The Core Components of On-Page SEO

Instead of writing on-page copy for the sole purpose of repeating a keyword multiple times, you should write about your product or service or idea naturally, and let your keyword variations naturally fall into place. If that doesn't happen, go back and spring in some variations into the content so that the same message gets across, just optimized!

Localization

Where appropriate, you should add localization. This is extremely important to businesses who offer products and services to a specific geographic region. If you are an attorney, for example, you'll want to have a page of content set up for each location you service. when building your content, you'll want to include localized keywords so that the search engines know you have offices and operate in certain locations.

Quick Action Items for Local Businesses

If you are a local business, be sure to optimize your location using the following tools:

• Google My Business   • Bing Places for Business   • Yahoo Local Listings

Streamline Your SEO Efforts

To help keep track your on-page optimization efforts, HubSpot built an easy-to-use template that you can download here. Use it to keep track of which web pages you need to create or update and optimize for the various keywords and phrases you're targeting.

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CHAPTER TWO

# Keywords: Understanding Fundamentals

Anum Hussain, HubSpot

SEO Basics:
Understanding Keywords

Once upon a time, marketers focused on strategizing which keywords to place across their web presence in order to increase their rankings in a search engine results page (SERP).

But the world of search engine optimization has been changing drastically -- particularly with the constant changes Google has been making to its search algorithm over the past year. And all that emphasis you put on keyword research and selection, in other words on-page SEO, is only worth 25% of what actually impacts your spot in SERPs.

The only problem is, you can't truly master the other 75% -- off-page SEO discussed later in this guide -- until you understand and master the basics.

25%

75%

On-Page SEO

Off-Page SEO

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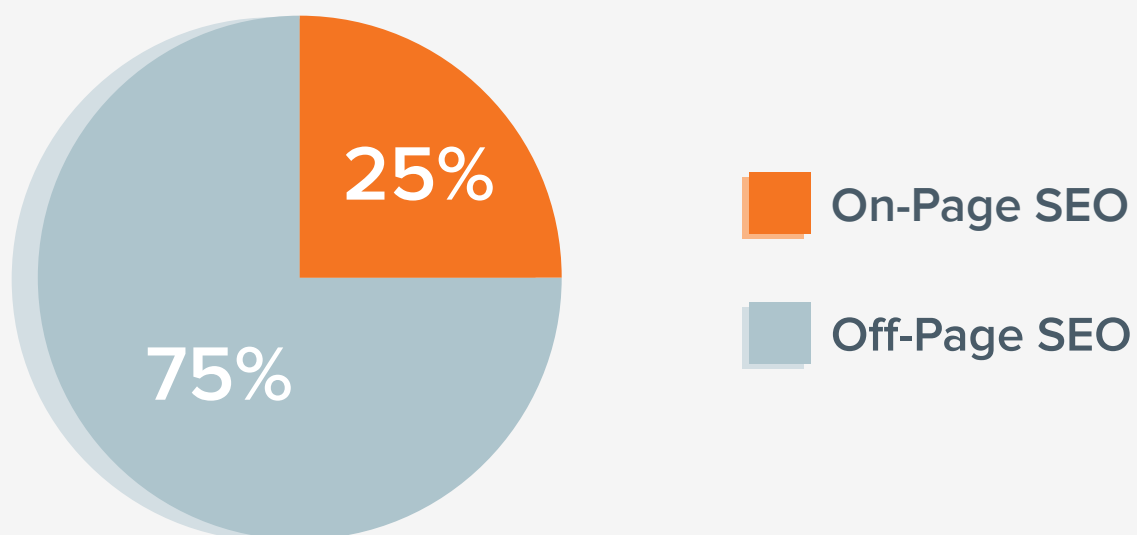
Why Do Keywords Matter?

Keywords or key phrases are simply the search terms someone types into a search engine, such as Google or Bing, when they are looking for certain information. People are constantly using keywords: whether they are in search for a specific product or just browsing to conduct personal research.

95% of the U.S. Internet browsing population accesses search engines each month. Furthermore, the U.S. online population makes an average of 37 search engine visits per person per month. (Source: Compete)

That's a whole lot of time spent searching various keyword and key phrase combinations!

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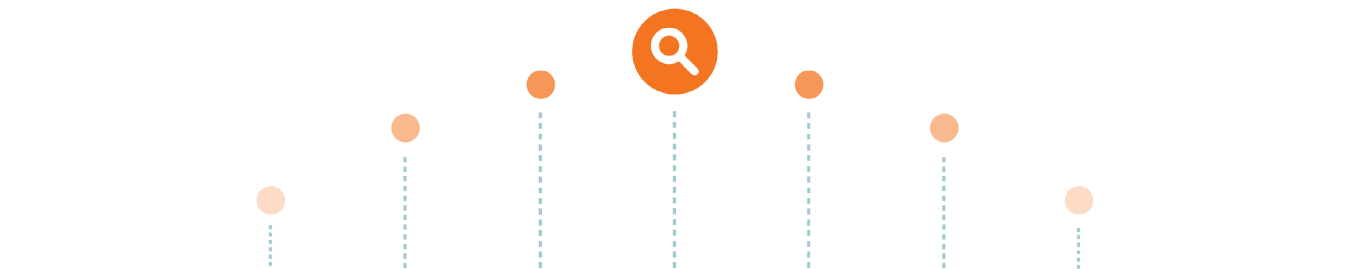
Determining Your Keywords

Keywords are at the heart of SEO, and selecting the right ones can make or break your SEO strategy. Compile a list of about ten keywords associated with your product or services. Plug these keywords into the Google Adwords Keyword Planner, and find variations that make sense for your business.
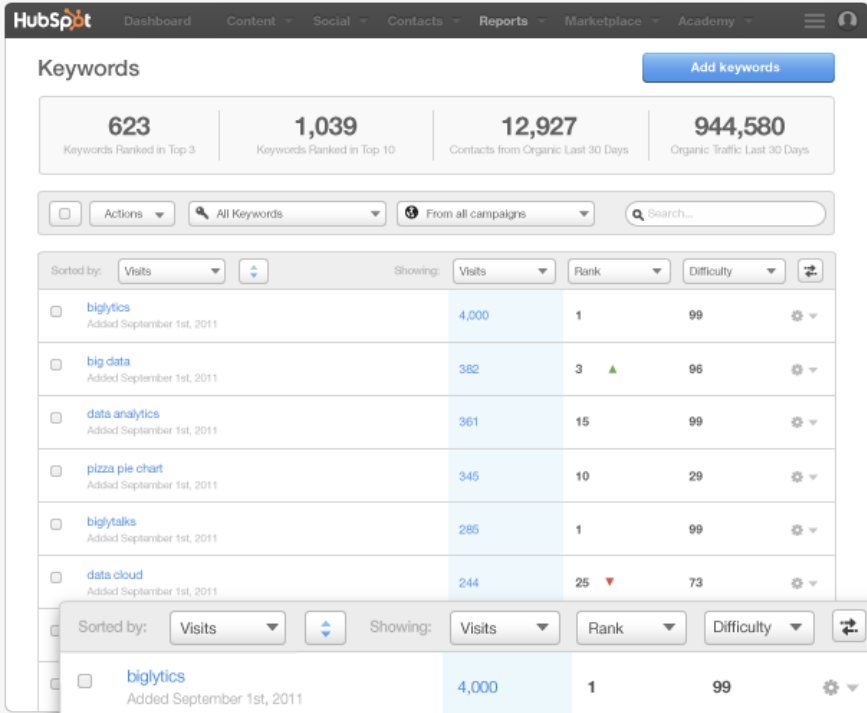
Use search volume and competition as a good measure for determing what you can easily attack. But never settle on a list of 10-15 keywords, as the old ways taught. Start with a small list, but continuously adapt and analyze your choices as your business grows and adapts.
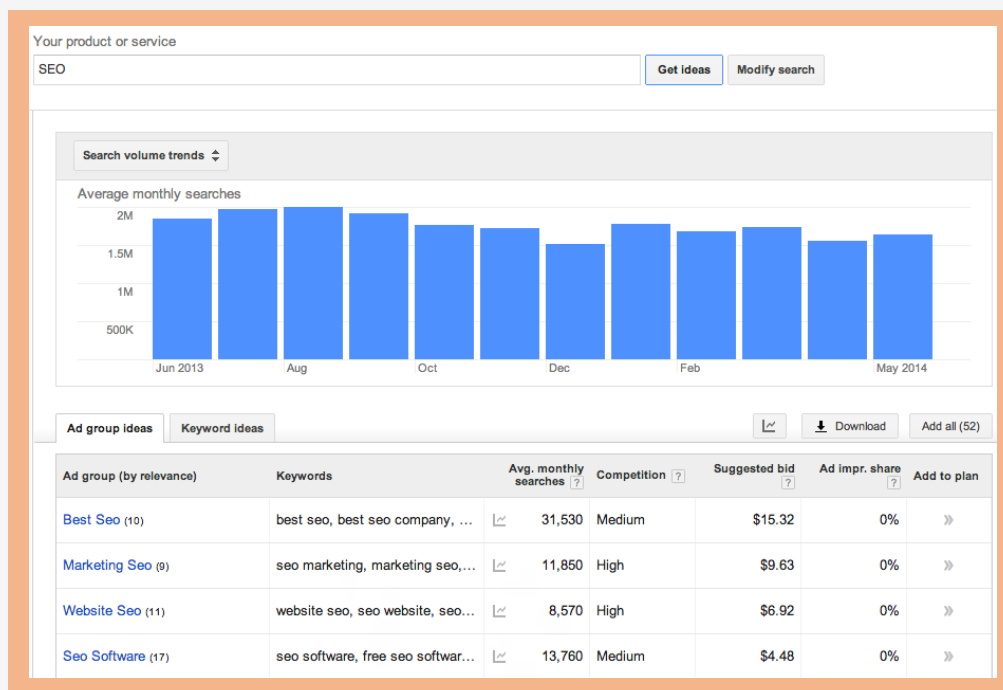
Tracking Your Keyword Success

Now that you know what keywords to implement in your marketing strategy, be sure to follow their progress and ensure they're returning the value you want from them.

Let's use HubSpot's keyword tool to demonstrate what this process might look like. The software continuously analyzes your keyword performance to show you what keywords you're ranking for, what the cost-per-click (CPC) for those keywords are -- so you know how much you're saving -- and how many visits each keyword is driving to your website.
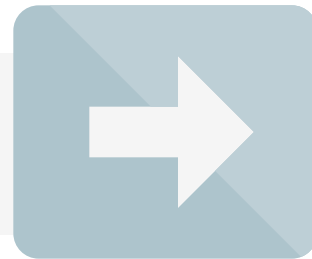
CHAPTER THREE

Understanding Off-Page SEO

Erik Devaney, HubSpot

What Is Off-Page SEO?

Marketers have traditionally distinguished between on-page and off-page SEO using the following rubric:

- **On-page SEO** = Keywords
- **Off-page SEO** = Links

For years, we've viewed off-page SEO as the process of getting more inbound links ... whether that be through link exchange deals, paid links, or other link-building schemes. What do all of these tactics have in common today? Google doesn't like them, and has been known to drop the proverbial hammer-of-SEO-doom on numerous occasions when companies get caught using them.

So with overt link-building off the table, we marketers turned to guest blogging. I mean, that's totally legit, right? If you're a marketing company, and I'm a marketing company, why don't we just write relevant, industry-specific marketing content for each other ... and send some links back our respective way while we're at it?

Hate to break it to you, but Google's Matt Cutts has warned us that guest blogging is getting spammier and spammier, and is no longer a viable off-page SEO tactic (more on that later).

So, if we can't buy these links, and we can't barter for these links, and we can't guest-blog our way to these links, how the heck do we get them?

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Off-Page SEO Evolved:
Why Quality Content Matters

The new key to off-page SEO? You need to create content that other people find valuable and want to share with their visitors.

That's it. That's the secret sauce. (And FYI, that's according to Google). Here's the full excerpt:

"Natural links to your site develop as part of the dynamic nature of the web when other sites find your content valuable and think it would be helpful for their visitors."

These natural links that you earn through creating valuable content have their (evil) counterparts in unnatural links, which are links that are put in place "specifically to make your site look more popular to search engines."

What it boils down to is that the exact strategy you're using for on-page SEO -- creating relevant, high-qulity content for a human audience -- should also help take care of your off-page SEO. It's the classic two birds/one stone scenario. You can increase your search rankings and earn natural inbound links by creating amazing content.

Need help creating that content? Here are some free resources:

- **34 Tips and Tricks for Planning and Creating Content**

- **The Marketer's Crash Course in Visual Content Creation**

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To Guest Blog or
Not to Guest Blog?

"If you're using guest blogging as a way to gain links ... you should probably stop. Why? Because over time it's become a more and more spammy practice, and if you're doing a lot of guest blogging then you're hanging out with really bad company."

-Matt Cutts, Google

So if guest blogging is now considered a spammy way to build inbound links, should we just quit guest blogging altogether? Not necessarily.

Guest posts can still be valuable from a PR/community-building perspective, but only if we approach those guest blogging opportunities with the right intentions.

The goal shouldn't be to generate links, it should be to generate buzz or discussion; to share knowledge or data or other insights that we know our audiences (and prospecive customers) will find valauble.

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To Guest Blog or Not to Guest Blog?

(continued)

Think of it as getting back to the golden days of guest blogging, when — according to Cutts — it was a "respectable thing, much like getting a coveted, respected author to write the introduction of your book."

Here are a few tips to make sure you're staying on track:

1. **Only write posts for — and accept posts from — established, reputable sites**

2. **Use no-follow links, so Google doesn't pass SEO authority between your sites**

3. **Original content only: Don't publish a post that's already published somewhere else (and don't send the same guest post to multiple publishers).**

4. **Don't send out mass unsolicited emails asking for guest blogging opportunities (Sound spammy? It is.)**

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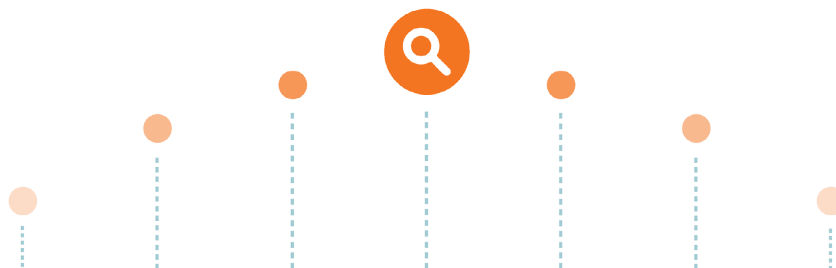
CHAPTER FOUR

The Right Way to Build Links

Stephanie Chang, Distilled

Why Search Engines Care About Links

Search engine algorithms rank web pages based on numerous factors.

The basic premise is that a page will show up in search engine results because the website had mentioned the terms that were being searched for on the website page. Of course, many websites use the same keywords on the same page. But in order for search engines to determine how these pages should be ranked, they take two major factiors into consideration:

1. **The quantity of links that point to that page and site.**

2. **The quality of links that point to that page and site.**

The more trustworthy your page appears to be, the higher your page will rank in search engine results.

(See Moz's search ranking factors for more details).

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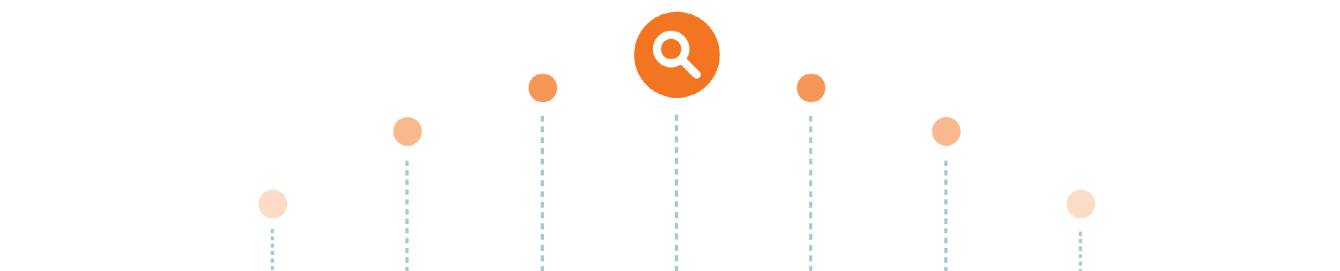
The Value of a Link

The value of a link serves two major benefits:

1. **Links increase the authority and trustworthiness of a page to search engines, which increases the overall authority of that website.**

2. **Links help search engines connect the relevancy of a page with specific keywords -- based on the keywords that are used in a link's anchor text.**
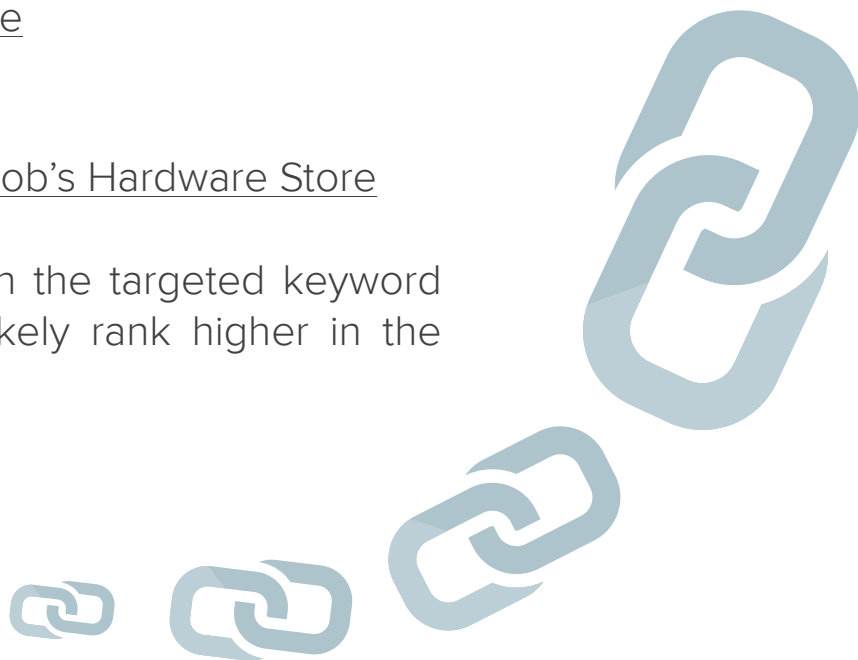
Anchor text is the clickable text on a hyperlink. for example, let's say hypothetically a page was linked to in one of the following ways:

Bob's Hardware Store

versus

Buy power tools at Bob's Hardware Store

The second link with the targeted keyword "power tools" will likely rank higher in the search engines.

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The Wrong Way
to Build Links

The initial purpose of search engines counting the quantity and quality of links linking back to any webpage was to ensure that only those pages providing valuable and trustworthy content to their users would be ranked higher than less credible resources in search results pages.

Unfortunately, this provided opportunities to game the system and find easier, quicker solutions to build massive quantities of links back to webpages in order to rank highly for different search results.

To better understand the true power of link-building, let's review the sneaky and quick link-building tactics some sites employed, and how search engines developed algorithmic changes to combat it.

1. Directories

The problem with directories: A good directory's intent is to categorize the internet into different categories/subcategories, while providing links to good websites in those categories. Although there are legitimate directory websites, many were built solely for the purpose of building links back to webpages without consideration of link quality. This is the wrong way to build links.

How the search engines fixed it: Several studies have shown that in the past year, search engines (especially Google) have started removing free directories from their index. This means that the links gained from those directories are no longer counted towards a website's overall link quality/ quantity count!

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The Wrong Way to Build Links

This also implies that relying on directories to build links to a website is a short-term strategy -- especially since Google has started taking action on both directories and the websites that have relied on this tactic to rank highly in the search engine results.

2. Paid Links

The problem with paid links: Paid links are links garnered in exchange for payment. They can come from a network of link buyers and sellers, and a network usually consists of a group of low-quality sites that collectively link to a specific website in an effort to increase it's authority in SERPs. Other times, there may be a reciprocal linking program, where a group of websites link to one another.

Paid links are like paying someone to be your wingman to impress a girl rather than having a genuine friend by your side who can vouch for how great you really are!

How the search engines fixed it: All the aforementioned methodologies go against search engine guidelines, specifically Google's Webmaster Guidelines, and can result in severe consequences. Search engines are able to spot these types of link building activities by detecting website registration connections or finding websites that follow specific linking patterns.

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The Wrong Way to Build Links

3. Article Marketing

The problem with article marketing: Article marketing involves writing one unique article, and then rearranging the words to transform that one article into multiple versions. This rearranged article will then be placed on different, usually low-quality article sites with highly optimized anchor text links.

This tactic helped a website from being penalized by search engines for duplicate content (the exact same content across lots of different sites), and boosted both page strength and relevance.

How the search engines fixed it: The search engines now identify low quality content through user engagement, and by correlating website features. Networks of sites where you can place this kind of content are even easier for them to identify. As a marketer, the primary warning sign should be sites where you can post your content with no editorial oversight from the website owner.
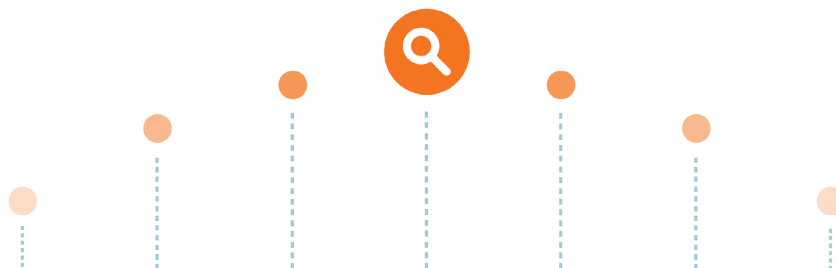
The Right Way to Build Links

Modern link building focuses on high-quality, original content that provides value to users and incorporates an involved audience.

Although this type of link building isn't easy or quick, it is the best safeguard against future search engine algorithms, as authoritative, well- managed websites are the type of sites that search engines want to see rank highly in their results.

High-quality, unique content on a website that builds links can come in many forms, such as:

- **Company Blogs:** Write appealing content that other people will want to link to.

- **Visual Content:** Powerful, unique, or even comical, images lead people to link to your website. This includes video content as well!

- **Product Launches:** Building anticipation around a product launch inspires people to talk about your business, which can lead to links to your site.

Link building can also come from building a targeted and involved community. The more regular visitors a site has, and the more passionate those fans are, the more likely webpages will be read, shared, and linked to. A perfect example is My Starbuck's Idea, where users can pitch ideas about the next Starbuck's offering.

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CHAPTER FIVE

How Social Media Influences SEO

Dharmesh Shah, HubSpot

How Social Media Influences SEO

As mentioned earlier in this guide, SEO has a lot to do with relevancy and authority. But recently, things have changed a bit.

More and more, search engines have begun to incorporate social context into their search results.

And it's high time we dived into what role social context is playing in SEO, and how marketers can adjust their strategies to match the changing character of search. So without further ado, let's get into the nitty gritty of what's being called "social search" and learn how it affects marketers.

What Is Social Search?

"Social search" is an evolving term for the way in which search engines factor a user's social network -- also referred to as social graph -- into how results are displayed after a search query.

In social search, content that has a social connection to you in some way is prioritized. A social connection could mean someone you are linked to via Facebook, Twitter, or any other major social network.

Alternately, some forms of social search prioritize content that has been shared by social media influencers, even if those experts aren't directly tied to you.

Social Search and Inbound Marketing

Even if the social search playing field hasn't been completely defined yet, one of the key takeaways from the early actions of Google, Bing, and Facebook is that as marketers, we need to start seeing our search engine optimization strategy and our social media strategy as utterly intertwined.

Here's how you can do just that.

Step 1: Make sure your social media tools are informed by your SEO tools.

The best way to come out on top of social search is to have a fully integrated marketing platform where social media and SEO are fully linked.

Ha, of course we'd say that -- we sell that platform.

Truly though, having a blog with built-in social sharing and as-you-type SEO recommendations definitely helps. With or without that kind of technology, however, there are some steps you can take to leverage the growing use of social search.

- **Audit Your Existing Strengths:** Take a look at your top ranking and most shared content. Is there overlap? If you've found a type of content that is simultaneously strong in search and frequently shared, it's worth optimizing that content even further.

- **Update Company Profiles:** If, as in the example above, I search Bing for "Inbound Marketing," a few things will happen ...

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Social Search and Inbound Marketing

1. Bing will give me traditional search results.

2. Bing will show me friends who have written or shared "inbound marketing" content.

3. Bing will bring in "people who know" who include the keyword "inbound marketing" in their profile or frequently shared content.

For the latter circumstance, it doesn't hurt to put your main keywords as part of your company's profile online. The combination of that profile and the strength of your content and shares will add up.

• **Make Your Top Keywords Social:** Make a list of the keywords for which you want to rank highly. Does the content you share on social media and your blog cover those keywords? Zero in on one or two of your most desirable keywords and find ways to make content under those keywords more shareable.

At a bare minimum, include social sharing buttons on your content. Beyond that you may want to experiment with encouraging social sharing through pay-by-tweet downloads or using easy share links throughout your posts, like in this example.

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Social Search and Inbound Marketing

Step 2: Find and encourage your social media influencers.

The reason social is such a natural extension of search is that it adds both relevancy and authority. Think about this: According to Nielsen research, 92% of consumers worldwide trust recommendations from friends and family more than any form of advertising. This is up from 74% in 2007.

As recommendations from peers become more prominent online, the influence they levy will weigh more heavily into activity on search and social sites combined. For this reason, it's wise to start thinking of your company or organization's fans as extensions of your inbound marketing team.

- **Find Your Influencers:** Spend some time to get to know the people who consistently share your content. Pull together a list of contacts with more than a thousand followers and a history of engagement in your content. Knowing your social media influencers will help you expand your reach online and ultimately increase the rate at which your content gets found online.

- **Nurture Your Influencers:** Once you've discovered your evangelists, think about ways to nurture and encourage them. At the simplest (and possibly most meaningful) level, find a way to thank them for spreading the word about your company.

  As a second step, consider inviting them to a special open-house or providing them sneak peeks of upcoming news or announcements.

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Social Search and Inbound Marketing (continued)

Note for HubSpot customers: our software allows you to easily compile a smart list of social media influencers in order to nurture through email communication. Just be careful when nurturing your influencers that you are not offering them benefits in exchange for talking about your company. That's not inboundy at all and really questionable, ethically. In fact, in some cases, it may even be illegal.

Step 3: Remember the Golen Rule.

Years ago, when HubSpot first started teaching people about search engine optimization, one rule was essential: Above all else, create good, useful content. The rest will follow. From Panda to Penguin, and everything else you've learned from the previous experts, search has changed quite a bit in the last few years, but that cardinal rule has held strong.

Even with the rapidly growing influence social sharing has on search results, the good news is if you're creating good content, you're already half-way there. Useful content is by nature more search-friendly than sales-oriented content. It is also more likely to be shared. The increasingly formal relationship between search and social is really just a natural extension to what has always been true: Content that is relevant and can be trusted as authoritative will continue to drive both your search and social media marketing.

CHAPTER SIX

The Search Ranking Myth

Rand Fishkin, Moz

The Search Ranking Myth

Historically, traffic from search engines has been about a very singular pursuit -- that of rankings.

While you want to land on the first page, there's much more to optimizing for SERP placement.

Higher rankings lead to more clicks and visits from interested searchers, and that search traffic is uniquely valuable because of its high relevancy and timeliness -- people search when they're interested or ready to perform an action.

However, in the last few years, the relentless focus on rankings alone has ignored the reality of change in the world of search results, and the value of clickthrough rate (CTR).

Today, queries don't just return a list of ten blue, ordered links. They return results with images, videos, profile pictures, and all manner of meta data that help searchers choose the best result.

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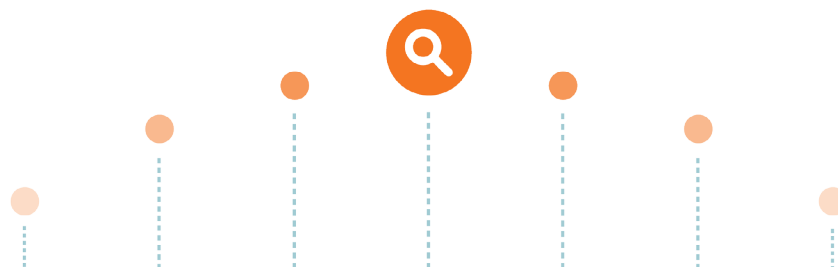
The Holistic View of Search Rankings

When optimizing for search traffic today, marketers can't think just about rankings. They need to be holistic in their approach to the visibility and appearance of listings.

Video XML Sitemaps can be used to show a video capture image. Rich snippets protocols can be applied to e-commerce listings for pricing, availability, quantity and other consumer-friendly details. And these are only the tip of the iceberg.

A marketer who dives deep on this topic can find dozens of opportunities to enhance their listing and earn more traffic. Because these days, it's not enough to rank.

Marketers need to earn their clicks.

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RESOURCES

Thanks for reading!

Want to learn more about SEO? Check out the resources below!

FREE GUIDE

10 SEO MISTAKES TO AVOID IN YOUR NEXT WEBSITE REDESIGN

Use this guide and checklist to avoid getting dinged in search engines during your next redesign.

DOWNLOAD GUIDE »

Free Guide: 17 SEO Myths to Leave Behind in 2014

Separate SEO fact from fiction & stop wasting your time on SEO strategies that don't work.

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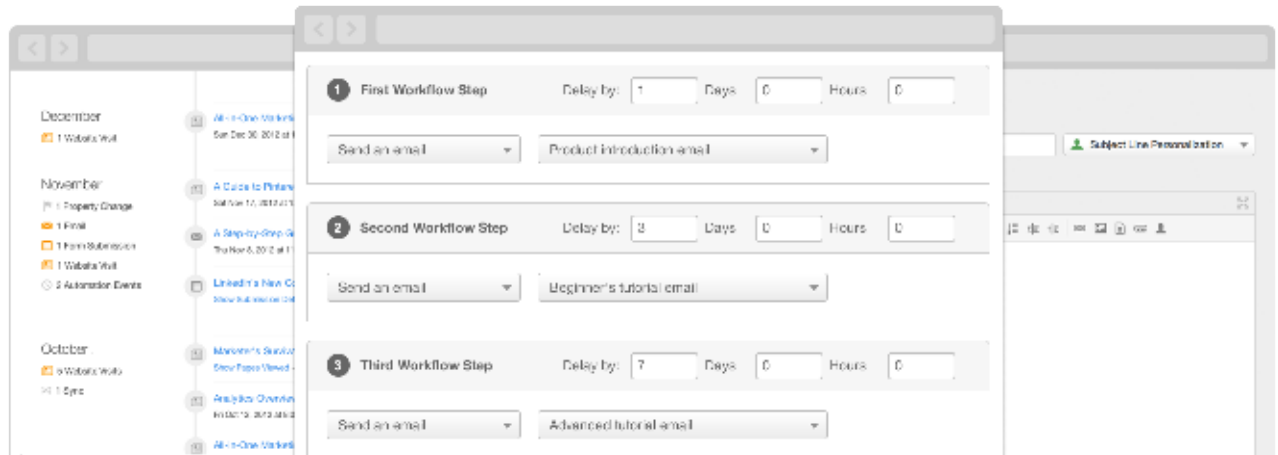
Landing Pages	Forms	Lead Management	Email	Marketing Automation	Analytics	Salesforce Sync	Social Inbox	Blogging

Learn more about inbound marketing

See the software

Talk to a specialist