

Hi! I'm Matthew Howells-Barby, HubSpot's Director of Acquisition.

Video 1: How Does HubSpot Use Blogging to Rank #1 on Google?

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Here at HubSpot, blogging is our primary source of traffic. In fact, a SIGNIFICANT percentage of HubSpot customers first stumbled upon our brand and our website through our blog – usually by searching for something on Google and clicking on one of our blog posts.

Why is this true? After ALL these years, how can our BLOG still be a top source of business? And how can YOU use blogging to increase YOUR traffic, leads, and customers, too?

To understand how HubSpot uses blogging to rank in search, we have to first understand how blogging helps ANYONE rank in search. Here's the gist of it: Blogging on topics that are relevant to your business will do two things: It will help you build RELEVANCE, helping you rank for MORE search queries.. And, it will help you build AUTHORITY on those topics, helping you rank HIGHER in search engines.

Think about it this way: Every time you publish a new blog post, you're adding ONE MORE indexed page to your website. This translates to one more opportunity to show up in search engines and drive organic traffic to your website. It's also one more cue to Google and other search engines that your website is active – and that they should be checking in frequently to see what new content to surface.

Blogging ALSO works well with social media to improve your SEO. Every time you write a blog post, you're creating content that people naturally want to share on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, which can then boost your SEO ranking – not to mention helps expose your business to a new audience that may not know you yet.

Our blogging team at HubSpot does a whole lot of work behind the scenes to help improve our blog posts' chances of ranking high in search. But there are three MAJOR things we do that have led to our biggest SEO improvements that we want to share with you. These three things are: building topical relevance; optimizing existing blog posts using a process called "historical optimization"; and optimizing featured snippets.

Let's talk through how our team at HubSpot uses these three tactics to improve our search ranking, and how YOU can use them to improve your own search ranking – no matter how many – or how few – blog posts you've published.

Video 2: Building Topical Relevance

One of the most important evolutions in search in the last few years has been the shift from keywords to topics.

Years ago, people used to enter pretty fragmented keyword queries into search engines when they wanted answers to their questions. But times have changed. Nowadays, most people are comfortable posing complex questions to search engines – and they still expect the search engine to return an accurate result.

Thankfully, search engine algorithms have evolved WITH the searchers – and now, they're smart enough to recognize the CONNECTIONS across different queries. They understand the TOPICAL CONTEXT behind the searchers' intent, and they can tie it back to similar searches they've encountered in the past to give us an accurate set of results. If you've ever tried to search something like "movie with the golden snitch" on Google, then you know what I mean ;).

Building topical relevance means creating content across TOPICS, instead of specific keywords. What's the difference between a topic and a keyword? A KEYWORD is one word or phrase that someone uses to describe what they need in search. A TOPIC is just a group of keywords. Examples of keywords would be things like "writing skills," "blog post topics," "content creation tools," and "brainstorming techniques." A TOPIC that would cover all those keywords might be "content marketing."

To build topical relevance, the first thing you need to do is figure out what topics you want to be known for. If your business sells pet food, for example, then one topic you might want to be known for is "dog food."

Next, you'll want to publish lots of blog posts that answer EVERY question about those topics. Going back to the dog food example, what would your target customers want to learn about that's related to dog food? Maybe they want to know about proper nutrition for their dogs, how to take care of their dogs – maybe even what to do if their dog eats chocolate. (Thousands of people actually search that question every month.)

By writing about your target topics regularly on your blog, you'll bring in more relevant traffic. Combining content creation with building links to your content from websites that are relevant to the same topics can also make a positive impact on your search rankings.

As you create blog posts on your target topics, link them to one another to make it easier for search engines to understand how your posts fit together around that topic. This can help grow your authority on that topic, which can help you rank higher in search for related queries.

Video 3: How HubSpot Builds Topical Relevance

In the last few years at HubSpot, we've evolved our approach to content creation on the HubSpot Blog along with the evolution in search. We used to create content only around specific keywords; but now, we create it around BROAD TOPICS to build topical relevance. In fact, in several cases, we've built topical relevance around topics we didn't have a product for yet – but knew we would in the future. That's the story on topical relevance I'll share with you today.

More than a year before HubSpot ever had a customer service product, we started building topical relevance around the topic of customer service. We weren't ranking for ANYTHING related to customer service at the time, but we knew we'd eventually want to be known for that topic, and that it would take time to build relevance.

When we started, we were ranking lower than position #500 for ALL our target topics. It took several months for us to move the needle on our search ranking, but by using BLOGGING to BUILD TOPICAL RELEVANCE, we were able to capture a spot on the first page of Google for five of our ten target topics! We also saw a massive spike in beta requests for our customer service software as a result.

Here's an overview of what we did to make this happen. Our very first step was to identify which topics we wanted to be known for that we weren't known for already. To find these topics, we started by identifying topics that were closest to the bottom of the funnel and moved our way up. Bottom-of-the-funnel topics for US were things like "customer feedback software" and "help desk software" – topics that had high purchase intent.

We started here because, at the end of the day, we wanted to center our strategy around getting people to sign up for our software product. From there, we expanded with more middle- and top-of-the-funnel topics, like "customer feedback," "customer satisfaction surveys," and "NPS."

Once we had a list of topics, we prioritized which of these topics we wanted to rank for, where we wanted to rank, and by when. Like I said, when we started, we weren't ranking for anything – not even in the top 500.

Let's take the topic "customer feedback software" as an example. This was one of the BOTTOM-of-the-funnel topics we wanted to rank for. The first thing we did was build a product page for our upcoming customer service software – which we said was "Coming Soon," and provided an email field where someone could sign up to be notified when the product was ready. That way, by the time the product launched, the sign-up page would already have gained search authority.

Next, we wrote a long, canonical piece of content – which we call a "pillar page" – on the related topic "customer feedback." We hosted this on a site page titled, "Customer Feedback Strategy: The Only Guide You'll Ever Need," and linked it to our product page to give it some SEO juice.

Our next step was to break down the topic of "customer feedback" into questions that our target customers might ask about that topic. Here are a few questions we came up with: "How should I go about asking for feedback from customers?"; "How can I improve my customer feedback survey?"; "How do I measure customer satisfaction?"; and "What should I do with the customer feedback I get on social media?"

Then, we turned EVERY ONE of these questions into blog posts. We prioritized which ones to write first according to search volume, and we linked every one of these blog posts back to that pillar page to help build topical relevance and boost that page's search authority – AND our product page's search authority.

To make our blog posts more attractive for OTHERS to link to, we added what we call "linkable hooks" to these posts. "Linkable hooks" are things like original charts and images, unique data and research, quotes from industry experts, and pros-and-cons tables, which we find people like to link to.

Next, we prepared an outreach strategy to help build links to these posts. We identified blogs and communities relevant to our topic, and reached out to them using link building tactics like offering to write a guest post on their blog. When it came to actually DOING the outreach, we found it was easier to get backlinks from companies that were tangentially related to our target topic – like survey tool companies, for example – rather than businesses that were borderline competitors.

After just a few months, our product page was ranking in the #3 spot on page 1 of Google for our target topic, "customer feedback software" – before the product had even come out yet. Our pillar page on "customer feedback" was also ranking in the #2 spot for "customer feedback".

So there you have it. This process is effective, straightforward, and most importantly, repeatable. We've done it for other products and tools and have seen great results, too. The key to success with this approach is the move past short-term thinking and put a lot of work into building a thoughtful strategy, building key relationships that will help you build links, and create great content with linkable hooks.

Video 4: Optimizing Featured Snippets

As Google gets better and better at understanding search intent, it wants to give searchers an IMMEDIATE answer to their questions – an answer so immediate, searchers won't even have to browse through the search results to get it. That answer comes in the form of a featured snippet.

What IS a featured snippet? Let's ask Google ...

Google says, “A featured snippet is a summary of an answer to a user's query, which is displayed on top of Google search results. It's extracted from a webpage and includes the page's title and URL.”

Wait a minute ... featured snippets show up ABOVE the #1-ranked spot? As if it wasn't hard enough to rank #1! :)

But it's a bit more complicated than that. Google pulls featured snippet answers from one of the pages that ranks on page one of search results, but the page that wins the featured snippet ISN'T NECESSARILY the #1 result. This leaves the door wide open for content that ISN'T in the #1 spot to actually appear ABOVE the #1 spot.

That means it pays to know how to optimize your content not only for search, but for the newer organic search features like featured snippets.

There are three reasons you should care about featured snippets. For one, featured snippets show up for a lot of the terms your target customers are searching for. Google tends to serve up featured snippets for “Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How” queries, which are the types of queries your online content tries to answer. They also tend to show up for high-traffic terms and overarching topics.

For two, featured snippets often show up first for voice search results. In fact, 71% of search queries that triggered featured snippets on desktop led to the featured snippet result showing up first in voice search results. This is important because voice searches could become 50% of all mobile searches by 2020, a prediction reported by both Google and Bing.

Three: If you don't have an effective strategy for capturing how customers are changing the way they search, you will fail to attract them. Search is evolving, and the featured snippet feature is now taking significant organic search traffic on desktop, mobile, and voice search. As your customer adapts, so should you.

So – how can YOU optimize your own blog content for Google's featured snippet?

Your best chance at capturing the featured snippet is by optimizing blog posts that already rank in the top five positions in search results. Google tends to pick content from those spots over other spots further down on the page, making these the lowest hanging fruit.

So the first thing you'll want to do is to use Google Search Console to figure out whether any of your current blog posts rank in positions one through five for any significant keywords. Make a list of these high-ranking posts along with the keywords they rank for.

Next, open up a new incognito window in your browser and search for that keyword to see if Google serves up a featured snippet in search results. You want to prioritize the posts that are ranking for keywords that serve featured snippets, so put a checkmark next to the ones that do. But even if there ISN'T a featured snippet showing up for that query, keep in mind that Google is adding new snippets all the time, so you may want to check back in the future.

Next, optimize these posts for the featured snippet. Google favors content that best answers the search query in a simple, concise format. In fact, FORMAT is the most important factor here. Google uses an algorithm to extract content for snippets, so if the text isn't formatted cleanly, it won't understand what's going on and will skip that result.

If the keyword your post is ranking for is serving up a featured snippet in a LIST-BASED format, make sure your content includes a list that is clearly labeled with headers. You might even add a short list version of your larger blog post at the top of the page to make it even easier for Google to identify it for a snippet. List seven steps or fewer if you can – Google will cut you off at eight steps in the snippet anyway.

You can do the same for a featured snippet in a PARAGRAPH format: Write a short answer to your target query and put it in a module above the rest of your post. Google tends to prefer when featured snippets are fewer than about 50 words. As for what to write in there, take note of the content that's winning the snippet right now to get an IDEA of what the search engine is looking for – but don't copy it word-for-word. Instead, try and IMPROVE on what's already in there.

Once you've made these changes, submit the URLs to Google to be re-crawled. Measure the results by the number of clicks from the results page, the change in click-through rate, and the impact on the blog post's organic traffic. Keep in mind that because snippets are an algorithmic feature by Google, results will vary from day to day. We recommend you track your new snippets every day for around four weeks to account for appearances, disappearances, and content switching.

Video 5: How HubSpot Optimizes for Featured Snippets

At one point in time, the blogging team noticed that the organic traffic to HubSpot's blog had stalled, and in some cases decreased, without us changing anything about our strategy. What was causing such a negative impact?

It turns out that one of the culprits was featured snippets. More specifically, it was the rapidly increasing number of featured snippets that were showing up in Google search results and taking clicks away from other results on page one. We found that featured snippets show up more than TWICE as often now as they did several years ago.

The first thing we did was dig in to the data. I gathered almost 5,000 different search queries where hubspot.com ranked between #1 and #5 on page one of Google search results. All these queries contained either "how to," "what is," "how do," or "how does" so that I'd only get question-based queries where it was much more likely that a featured snippet would be present.

Then, I scraped the results pages for each of those queries to see if there actually WAS a featured snippet present. Of the queries I was looking at, 29% of them had a featured snippet present, and the remaining 71% either didn't have a featured snippet, or they did – but it was an unlinked "definition" box.

Once I had the sample of queries that displayed featured snippets, I scraped the search engine results pages AGAIN to see which websites owned the featured snippets, what the content of the featured snippet was, and what the URL of the featured page was. Of the pages where HubSpot ranked between #1 and #5 on page one of Google, we only appeared in the featured snippet 33% of the time. For us, that meant a lot of opportunity to optimize.

Next, we ran a few experiments that uncovered some key findings. The most relevant experiment answered this question: Does the clean formatting of the headers (h2s and h3s) in a post cause us to win list-based featured snippets?

In short, yes. Let me explain why, and what you can do about it.

Google is able to pull list snippets from headers on a webpage for their featured snippets. Typically, it pulls h2s as the snippet title, and h3s as the list items in the snippet. This was great news for us, since our blog has a lot of list blog posts – but sadly, Google STILL wasn't picking up our list posts as Featured Snippets. Why?

What we found is that FORMAT MATTERS – a LOT. Since Google uses an algorithm to extract content for the snippets, if something isn't formatted cleanly, it won't understand what's going on. For the lists that we were winning featured snippets for, the formatting of the featured snippet looked as if Google wasn't able to identify NUMBERS in a header as

a list item. Take a look at a current snippet we own. Even though we own this one, Google is clearly confused about the numbers, the header content, and the information hierarchy.

So, we set out to test whether the FORMATTING of the headers in our list posts impacted the amount that is pulled into snippets. To do this experiment, we identified 62 high-traffic blog posts that were ~~NOT~~ ranking in positions one through six – for a search query that HAS a list featured snippet in the current results, which we did not own. We randomly split these blog post URLs into two equal groups. We didn't change the control group at all so we could use them as a baseline.

For the experiment group, we cleaned up the header format and the code. To do this, we made sure the post's hierarchy had the h1 as the overall page title, the h2 as the sub-header, and the h3 as the list items. Many of these posts didn't have an h2, so we added one in. We also changed our header list format from 1) (one-parenthesis) to 1. (one-dot). Finally, we cleaned up the code by removing any extraneous or unnecessary tags from the headers, like span tags. Keep in mind: We did NOT ADD ANY CONTENT to this post – all we did was change the numbering of headers and the HTML tags.

After submitting the experiment group URLs to Google for re-crawling and measuring the results daily for ten days, we found that we won ten to fifteen percent of the featured snippets for posts where we changed the formatting, compared to the normal win rate of 0-5% for the control group. These results were significant – we actually saw a net increase of traffic for posts where we moved into the featured snippet.

Try this yourself for posts that are ranking in the top 5 spots in search results to see if cleaning up the formatting gives you a boost.

Video 6: Why is Historical Optimization a Key SEO Play?

What if I told you that making a few key changes to blog posts you've ALREADY WRITTEN could dramatically improve your rank in search results?

I know – we were excited, too. Optimizing old blog posts for search engines is among the most efficient ways for blogs that have been around for a few years to grow their organic traffic.

One quick disclaimer here is that historical optimization works best for blogs that have already been around for several years. It's meant for blogs that have tackled all the basic blog growth tactics, are generating a significant amount of organic search traffic, and have a solid subscriber base. If your blog has only been around for a year or two, I'd recommend prioritizing the basic blog growth tactics first, and THEN trying historical optimization.

Alright, back to the topic at hand. What exactly IS historical optimization, and why is it such a key play for improving your SEO, and how can you implement it yourself?

Historical optimization means optimizing your old blog posts so that they're fresh, up-to-date, and can rank higher in search results – thereby generating more organic traffic than they already do. By "old posts," I just mean posts that already exist on your blog – usually ones that are at least six to twelve months old.

The goal of historical optimization is to improve the search rankings for posts that have "page one potential." That means posts that rank on page two or three of search results already and could be pushed to page one with an update. Page one on Google gets 71% of all clicks, while page two and three only get 5.59% of clicks – so boosting a post to page one can significantly impact your organic traffic.

You might be wondering, Why does updating and republishing old blog content lead to better search rankings? There are three main reasons.

One, Google rewards freshness – and so do searchers. Google introduced a freshness factor into its ranking algorithm in 2011. Google wants to surface high-quality, valuable content that's fresh and up-to-date for searchers.

Two, you're building off the existing search authority that the post has already accumulated. In other words, you're starting with a post that already has some degree of page authority instead of starting completely from scratch.

Three, the surge of new visits you get from re-promoting your updated post to your blog subscribers and social media followers will naturally lead to new inbound links and social shares, which are both important ranking factors.

Remember: Historical optimization should be a piece of your overall blogging strategy, not the WHOLE strategy. The old content you're optimizing now was once brand new – so make sure you continue publishing new content that could one day be another SEO success story.

Video 7: How to Get Started With Historical Optimization

Want to take advantage of the many benefits of historical optimization? Here's an overview of how to get started.

First, you'll want to identify the blog posts that are worth updating. These will be posts that are outdated or can be improved in some way. They're also posts that have the potential to rank higher for topics and keywords with high search volume.

The easiest way to identify these posts is to export a list of all your existing blog posts and sort them by organic traffic, with the highest organic traffic posts at the top. Then, use Google Search Console to see where the posts at the TOP of that list rank right now. Pick out the posts that currently rank on page two or three of search results, because it's THOSE posts that have "page one potential" if you make a few key optimizations.

When you're figuring out which posts to start with, you'll also want to think about the monthly search volume of the topics those blog posts are about. Look up the monthly search volume of the topics your posts with "page one potential" are about using your favorite keyword tool, and prioritize the posts about topics that have at least 1,000 monthly searches. You'll also want to prioritize posts that are at least six to twelve months old as a benchmark.

Now it's time to update the CONTENT of the post with the hopes of achieving three goals: accuracy, freshness, and comprehensiveness. In general, you should try to make enough NOTICEABLE improvements to a post that it's worth it to republish it as new. Improvements can be things like adding new sections to the post to make it more comprehensive, adding list items to a list post, adding detail to different sections, and updating outdated information, like statistics and examples.

Next, optimize the post for your target topic using on-page SEO tactics like including your target keyword in the post title, including that keyword again in the headers in the post itself, and adding internal links with keyword-based anchor text to improve the keyword rankings of other posts you're trying to boost.

Before you publish, consider adding an editor's note to the bottom of the post, like this one. This makes sense especially for posts with old comments that might cause confusion.

Finally, you're ready to publish your updated post as new. Make sure you change the publish date so it's featured as a brand new post on your blog. Then, promote it like you would any brand new post – email it to your blog subscribers, promote it on social media, and leverage any other promotional channels that work for promoting your content.

Video 8: How We Do Historical Optimization on the HubSpot Blog

If you're not sure whether historical optimization has a place in your blogging strategy, let me tell you a story about how our focus on historical optimization came to be, and why we realized it was such a game-changing tactic.

Here at HubSpot, our blogging team has been using historical optimization for several years now to generate MORE traffic and leads from our existing blog content. We've seen huge results from historical optimization and have been able to get way more value from content we've published in the past.

In the first nine months of implementing historical optimization on our blog, we more than DOUBLED the number of monthly leads generated by the old posts we optimized. We also increased the number of monthly organic search views of old posts we optimized by an average of 106%.

It all started when one member of our team ran an attribution analysis on our blog posts to see which ones were the most influential. She found that 76% of our monthly blog views came from “old” posts.

The approach we found worked best was to focus on the specific keywords people were using to find those high-traffic blog posts. First, we pulled our top blog posts for organic traffic. Then, we used keyword research to make an educated guess on which keywords they were ranking for.

We started by updating and republishing a few posts per week. Our blogging team was happy because the updated post took the place of a net new post on our editorial calendar and was often less work than writing a whole new post.

To measure the success of the updates, we used organic search traffic as our primary KPI. That's because if the keyword ranking for these posts improved as a result of the update, it would manifest as an increase in organic search views, which is easier to measure.

This chart shows a sampling of six blog posts we've updated and republished. We waited for 30 days in between the “before” and “after” time frames to give Google some time to improve the ranking of the post based on the update. You'll see that in every case, we improved the number of monthly views these posts generated from organic search. In each of these posts, we can also dig into the individual keywords they're ranking for and see how these rankings have improved as a result of the post update.

Based on this initial success, post updates became a regular part of our blogging editorial strategy – and have been for years now. We've incorporated two or three post updates per week since we started scaling this project – which have REPLACED new posts, instead of being added as a new workload.

In addition to this more formal updating and republishing process, we've also scaled our historical search engine optimization even further by doing some on-page SEO for some of our old posts without completely updating and republishing them as new or doing any promotion. We've found this is a great approach for posts that are too recent to update and re-publish but that you think have an opportunity to rank better for certain keywords. We've noticed some nice lifts in organic search traffic from posts we've on-page optimized, even without the additional promotion.

Try historical optimization for your own blog for posts that are ranking on pages two or three of search results to see if it gives you a boost.