

SEO IN 2018:

How to Keep Pace With the SEO Curve



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INTRODUCTION

Google makes nearly 2,000 search engine changes each year and processes 63,000 search queries every second. Has your content marketing scaled accordingly?

Search engine optimization is the crux of your inbound strategy. Yet, if you're like most marketers, your editorial calendars and media campaigns are designed so far in advance that by the time you actually launch your prized assets, they could, quite literally, be six months or a year behind the SEO curve.

In addition to continuous strategy adjustments to nimbly capitalize on the latest search trends, you should also perform post-publish content optimization.

In 2018, marketing assets have longer life spans, which aligns with the consistent "quality over quantity" mantra we always hear.

There are a number of Google updates occurring at any given moment, some more powerful than others.

Here are the most important SEO changes you need to integrate into your 2018 content strategy.

RANKBRAIN:

Optimize for Maximum User Value

Google's machine-learning algorithm, RankBrain, is also its third most important ranking factor.

RankBrain uses artificial intelligence to process search queries, determine a page's value to searchers and inform Google's model of SERP indexing.

It does this by measuring, among others:



DWELL TIME: Time a user spends on a page before navigating back to SERPs to click on what he or she deems to be a better result.



CLICK-THROUGH RATE: Percentage of time a user clicks on a result.

Once your content is indexed in SERPs, RankBrain goes to work, assessing whether the initial position you rank for is truly the best possible position from a user's perspective. So, if dwell time and CTR are low, RankBrain will likely push your content further down in SERPs, as it clearly is not providing enough value or relevance to searchers.

This real-time experiment using machine learning and human input means your content must be top-notch every time. There's no real way to outsmart RankBrain.

Strong SERP presentation in the form of optimized title tags and meta descriptions increases CTR, while quality content promotes longer dwell times. That's your RankBrain ticket.



STAT TO TRACK:

RankBrain impacts **2 trillion** search queries each year (aka, all of them).

MOBILE-FIRST INDEXING: SERPs of the Future

Mobile-first indexing has been years in the making. Since running early experiments beginning in 2016, Google has slowly laid the foundation for a 100 percent mobile-first ranking system that most industry insiders believe will officially be announced in June 2018.

For content marketers, this means that responsive design is mandatory to appear in SERPs, as Google recognizes mobile versions of web pages to be superior to desktop versions.

It makes sense, mobile internet usage surpassed traditional desktop usage in 2014, so, if anything, mobile-first search ranking is overdue.

Whereas responsive design is a must, webmasters should also format their content in a way that supports seamless consumption of mobile content.

This entails structured data markup, shorter sentence lengths, greater utilization of visual imagery, clear header tags and CTAs that do not interrupt consumption.



STAT TO TRACK:

Mobile search penetration varies between **39-72 percent**. (Highest: Food and Bev; Lowest: Banking.)

VOICE SEARCH: A New Look at Queries

While still behind mobile search in terms of user adoption and search engine impact, voice search is the next foray in device-driven search changes.

Google Home, Amazon Echo and other voice-enabled devices are already used by **40 percent** of the adult population. By 2020, expect that number to reach **50 percent**.

Voice search serves as a unique case study into the minds of searchers and the phrasing they use. After all, search queries inputted via a virtual assistant are effectively long-tail keywords, often in the form of questions.

Known as “natural language phrases,” this model of search differs from desktop or mobile search insofar as users don’t type into a search bar misspelled, truncated or ungrammatical terms or sentences.

The rise of voice queries means content should be built around longer tail conversational keywords, location-specific searches and verbal cues.



STAT TO TRACK:

The average length of voice-search queries is **6-10 words**.

CONTENT DEPTH:

On-Page Optimization for SERP Superiority

Though not an inherently new concept in abstract, SEOs are gaining greater insight into what's becoming known as "content depth."

Depth refers to how comprehensive and purposeful a piece of content is relative to other pages already ranking for a given keyword.

SEO today is not about bloating content with keyword variations or optimizing a post to rank for a number of keywords; it's about optimizing a single post to rank for a single, specific keyword (aka, the entire page should be built around a singular idea, answering queries from every angle and in the most efficient format possible).

By creating content that is hyper-focused on one keyword, your chances of ranking on page one of SERPs increase.

This typically means producing longer, intent-driven content that capitalizes on competitors' content gaps.

Tools like **SEMrush** and **MarketMuse** provide competitive analyses to show you which parts of your pages can be improved upon and how much information you need to include.

STAT TO TRACK:

Google can re-index content within **20 minutes**, showing you whether added content depth correlates to higher search rankings.

TRUTHFULNESS:

The New Frontier of Search Quality

In a world of fake news, internet trolls and spambot content publishers, truth is more of a commodity than ever.

Since 2015, Google has experimented with a Knowledge-Based Trust system that categorizes content not just on link equity or Domain Authority but on factual accuracy as well. This model has grown smarter over time and is mutating into a certified fake news search algorithm that has not, as of yet, been officially rolled out across all sites but will certainly play a larger role in 2018.

Sites that publish blatantly false or defamatory information may be de-indexed by Google or demoted in SERPs.

Additionally, Google recently released “Fact check” tags which label Google News posts to connote whether the results users land on are fact or fiction.

SEO content in 2018 needs to be fact-based, user-targeted and compliant with Google’s truthfulness authority signals.



STAT TO TRACK:

15 percent of search queries each year have never been asked before, and Google is tasked with distinguishing between fact and fiction, not on historical context but on fact-checking and reputation.

UNLINKED BRAND AUTHORITY SIGNALS:

Link-Building Without Links

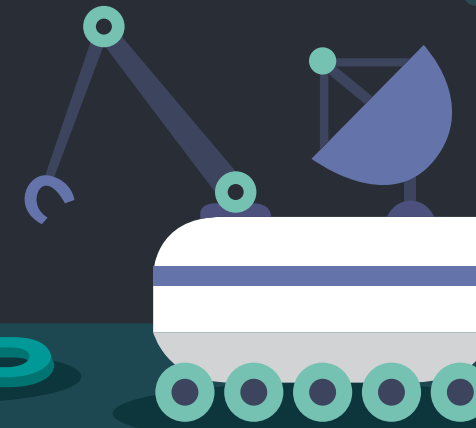
Links and content are the No. 1 and 2 most important ranking factors, according to Google. But what happens when sites mention your brand without providing a backlink?

Normally, you would miss out on link equity gained from a referring domain, and you might spend hours cold-emailing web managers, nudging them to provide a link back to your site.

Now, search engines are able to understand brand mentions (sans links) in a way that still sends authority signals to your site. So, traditional link-building is but one SEO tactic. Linkless link-building is another, and it's becoming more common.

Bing has already incorporated linkless authority signals into its ranking considerations, and it's believed that Google is using a similar model, albeit without an official announcement saying as much.

You still need great content to generate shares, user engagement and digital trust, but a backlink isn't the sole yardstick of victory anymore. Think of unlinked brand authority as a new facet to your link-building in 2018.



STAT TO TRACK:

72 percent of SEOs believe backlinks are a significant ranking factor, which is surprisingly low. That number will likely tick up as SEOs become more sophisticated in their strategies and Google continues to place so much emphasis on links.

LOCAL SEO:

Search Victories on Every Digital Corner

As the saying goes, all business is local.

This is despite the global reach of search engines and the planetary supply chain of the largest e-commerce brands.

Intent-driven search queries are often location-specific and transactional in nature. Users want information that allows them to purchase from a company that can quickly deliver merchandise or that is within a certain geographical radius.

All this is to say, Local SEO is a dominant force in today's search landscape.

Strong Google My Business hygiene, frequent updates to online business directories and a commitment to responding to users' comments, questions and concerns is Local SEO 101.

And remember, Google My Business listings appear on page one of SERPs and allow Google to pull pertinent information to be used in commercial-intent geo searches, displayed as Local 3-Packs and Google Maps.

That's a lot of SERP real estate to capitalize on, and too many businesses are still forgoing Local SEO to their own detriment. As marketing tactics go, it's an easy win.



STAT TO TRACK:

78 percent of local mobile searches result in an offline sale.



LINK-BUILDING: Still Too Important to Ignore

Even with the help of brand monitoring, influencer outreach and guest-posting tools, link-building campaigns are arduous and often aren't invested heavily in.

But links are still the No. 1 ranking factor in search.

A higher number of referring domains correlates strongly to higher organic positioning in SERPs. It's estimated that to rank first for a super competitive keyword, it could take anywhere from **200 to 800 backlinks** to your specific web page you've optimized for that search term.

Because links are the most direct, concrete method for Google to measure trust, authority and credibility, backlinks are a digital currency that algorithms understand well.

To produce high-quality content, you also need documented link-building strategies in place to amplify your content's reach and generate authority signals. Organic traffic based on content depth is great, but the nuts and bolts of gaining external links can be the difference between owning a search term or falling below the fold in SERPs.



STAT TO TRACK:

70 percent of SEOs state publishing data/research is their most efficient link-building tactic.



USER INTENT:

Satisfying the Needs of the Searcher

There's no "user intent" SEO hack. There's no "user intent" metric in your Google Analytics dashboard.

Even so, user intent has come to define SEO and content marketing as Google's algorithms continue to reward pages that most clearly satisfy searchers' needs. By this we mean, when users input text into a search bar (or verbally into a digital device), what are they intending to do once they're served with relevant results? What is the core meaning behind their searches?

Every marketing asset should map to a hyper-specific audience persona. Some site visitors are your target commercial audience, others are simply information-seekers and others still are wanting to navigate to other parts of your site. That is to say, **no two queries are 100 percent the same.**

Understanding semantic search and then building out content topic clusters around relevant, intent-driven keywords is exactly how you want to approach each line of copy.

Search queries are not random or arbitrary; they're deep caverns of data for you to mine and base content strategies on.



STAT TO TRACK:

63 percent of marketers use buyer personas to create content.

GOOGLE SERP FEATURES:

Position Zero Creates More Headaches (and Opportunities)

SERP features like Rich Snippets, Knowledge Graphs and Local 3-Packs are both a blessing and a curse. They serve user intent and provide information in ways that are easy to consume across any device without even having to click.

Yet, because most Google SERP features appear at the top of the page (along with paid ads), organic listings that once enjoyed prized page one rankings may not boast the same CTR they once did. Visually, you're likely never to see the results listed beyond position three (if a SERP feature is displayed).

So, it's not enough to rank on page one; you also need to rank in the top three of SERPs or, even better, win a SERP feature through structured schema markup and comprehensively yet concisely answering search queries better than any other page has.

SERPs in 2018 are more cutthroat than ever. There's enormous upside, but poorly designed web pages are practically guaranteed to fail, aka the bar is higher.



STAT TO TRACK:

~13 percent of search queries return a Featured Snippet.

CONCLUSION

Search engines are changing.

It's clear they can process massive amounts of real-time data and quickly serve relevant results.

But in the drive to more closely align search results to actual human experiences, desires and intentions, Google's engineers and algorithms are pivoting to search quality as the next great transformation in SEO.

And that means one thing: As search engines become more intelligent, so too must content be intelligently designed.

In 2018, it's quality or nothing.





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