UNDERSTANDING SEMANTIC SEO

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SEMANTIC SEO

When it comes to search marketing we all know just how important it is to adhere to ethical strategies and that failure to work with search engines and comply with their rules can result in huge drops – both in terms of performance and visibility. Sticking to what the industry deems as 'white hat' SEO and to the best practices they recommend is vital if you are to succeed.

Another factor that plays an important role in the success of any search marketing strategy is to evolve with the industry. Google, for example, is constantly changing the way it operates and the way in which it boosts or penalises websites. It is regularly making updates to its algorithm and for this reason it is imperative that businesses keep up to date with not only enhancements in technology but with trends within the industry.

With this in mind we have put together this eBook to look at one of the most important topics in search marketing and one of the factors that could increase performance in a rapidly evolving marketplace – semantic SEO.

What is semantic SEO?

Semantic SEO relates to the method of returning search queries that are highly relevant to the user regardless of whether or not the actual search terms are obvious. In essence it returns the best answers to queries when the user might not know the exact term they are looking for.

The practice of semantic SEO means that the search algorithm is smart enough to interpret a searcher's intent (and potentially also the context of their search) to deliver an answer. It is an important concept especially if you're creating a long-term strategy because, as we see every day, artificial intelligence and machine learning in search is evolving beyond just keywords.

Websites that have semantic mark-up and which are fully optimised have a far better chance of ranking higher in the search engine results pages (SERPs). But what is semantic markup? In essence it is the structured data or code which helps search engines to understand specific types of information on a web page. Some examples where semantic markup may be important include:

- contact details
- product information
- videos
- blog posts
- reviews
- events
- special offers

Your pages not only need to be SEO friendly, but be able to rank based on their content and now more than ever they need to incorporate latent semantic indexing (LSI) so that they can be found and given as results by the search engines. So just what is LSI?

According to research undertaken by Stanford University they deem LSI as follows: "Latent Semantic Analysis." As the name suggests is the analysis of latent ie hidden semantics in a piece of text.

"A collection of documents can be represented as a huge term-document matrix and various things such as how close two documents are, how close a document is to a user issued query, etc can be inferred by cosine similarity. However such models suffer from two phenomena quite common in written and spoken language: polysemy (a word having different meaning in different contexts) and synonymy (a concept having multiple forms of representation ie two or more words denoting the same concept).

"LSI transforms the original data in a different space so that two documents/words about the same concept are mapped close (so that they have higher cosine similarity). LSI achieves this by Singular Value Decomposition (SVD) of term-document matrix."

Whilst this is a top level definition of the term the concept is simple – offer all of the results that best fit the query and add in some others that you may think fit. By doing this the search engines are increasing their chance of seeing a click through and they are also more likely to offer a better user experience (UX).

We'll now break the process down in simpler terms. For the purposes of this resource we'll use Google as the primary focus of our research. We're not doing this solely because they are the largest search engine in terms of market share but because the truth is that Google is the best example of a truly semantic search engine. On the face of it Google is that white, blank page with a doodle in the form of a logo and a place to type your query, but behind the scenes is where the magic happens.

Google is returning what it feels are the best possible pages that can deal with your query, based on the content within the websites webpages. If we were to conduct a simple search for something like 'concert tickets UK' we can expect to see the results in the image below.
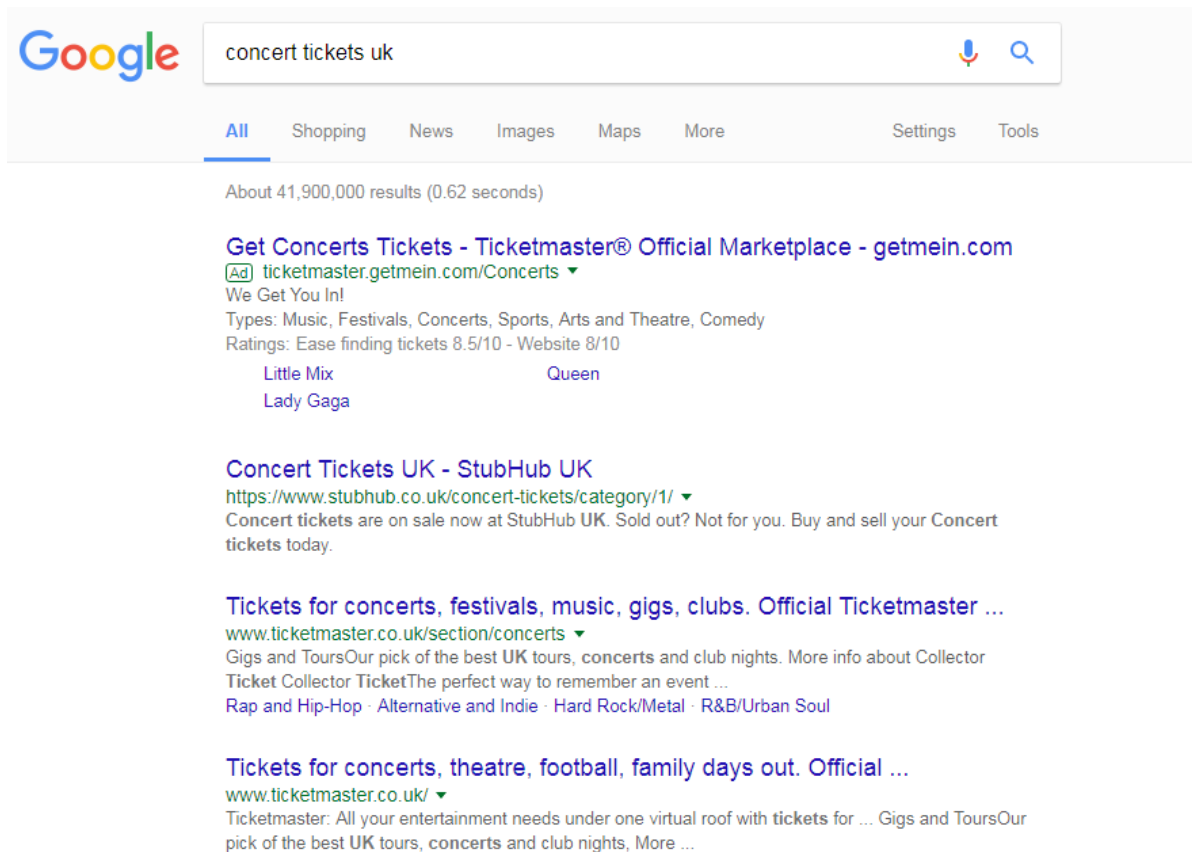
This image shows us where we searched for our query, above the various sub menus such as 'Shopping', 'News', 'Images' and 'Maps'. We then see the total amount of pages that Google thinks will be suitable to deal with our search. Its bots crawl the billions of pages available across the internet and give us the results that best fit the query. In this case they offer 41,900,000 results.

The top result you can see is a paid ad; this takes priority due to the pay per click (PPC) feature that is set up to promote the post for certain keywords. The top organic result is an exact match of the query and the subsequent results contain all or some of the keywords in the query, although the order might not be exactly the same. If as a user you were greeted with these results it is fairly safe to say that you would be pleased with them. The search engine has completed its job and the results should be enough to help with your query.

So where does the semantic part of the search come in?

Scroll to the bottom of the page and in the footer you will see the following links (see image below). These links represent the semantic part of the query and are in effect a list of alternate links that do not match the search but which Google thinks might hold the solution. They have successfully, through machine learning and AI linked words like 'gigs', 'tours', 'music' and 'rock', words that all have different meanings and can be used in a variety of contexts, to the word concert. With the query also including the term UK, the search engine has also offered up results for London. This is something that we are going to see more and more of, especially with the rise of mobile search and the fact that users are now allowing the search engines to know their location.

Searches related to concert tickets uk

concert tickets **london**	**concerts 2017** uk
concert tickets **2017**	**music tours 2017** uk
concert tickets **2017** uk	**gigs and tours** uk
music concert tickets	**rock concerts 2017** uk

The next question here to ask is why do they offer such results when we can see that there are over 40 million possible results pages? Well the answer to this is simple. Despite Google and other search engines holding all of the data and finding all of the answers, they still put their trust in the user.

They first of all believe that the user knows what they are looking for hence the first results. They do however trust that had the user known the perfect website for their solution they would have gone there direct.

To this end they then offer the semantic results on the basis that the user may be genuinely lost for answers. They believe, through machine learning, that the information that they are presenting may offer the alternative answer that the user requires.

So is keyword research dead, or do SEOs have to get smarter?

Since the launch of Google's Hummingbird algorithm update in late 2013, the change in the way content is produced and keyword research is conducted is noticeable and this is largely down to two factors.

1. Improvements in technology mean that there is a rise in mobile and voice search and that we are now using more autofill or recommended search queries.

2. We are becoming more adept at searching how we feel the search engine wants us too. We are removing all of the stop words and our queries have adapted from things like: 'Photos of Buckingham Palace', to simply 'Buckingham Palace'.

We use the latter option not out of laziness but because we know that the search engines have evolved and that Google will show us pictures automatically at the top of search results and that there is also an 'Images' tab where the query will be fulfilled.

When Amit Singhal, Google's search chief, spoke about the update he said that Hummingbird represents the first time since 2001 that a Google algorithm has been so dramatically rewritten.

He stated that: "With more complex queries, the algorithm can better understand concepts vs. words as well as relationships between concepts.

"What is different about Hummingbird is that it places more emphasis on intent than on keyword matches."

Users now write their search queries in a less conversational manner and as such skip many words out of their search. This presents two different requirements of those working in SEO. Firstly they have to decide if they are going to plan and write the content for a site with the main keywords in mind or if they are going to plan and write for a long-tail approach. Getting the balance right is critical and it is for this reason that the more content you can create the better chance you have of ranking for your key terms.

How will a page's keywords be interpreted when Google crawls your site?

By taking a holistic approach and breaking your keywords into three tiers, a well-rounded list that accounts for variations in user intent can be presented to the search engines.

Level 1 – Core Keywords: This list is comprised of keywords closely related to your initial target keywords. They should be variations of your targets close enough in meaning so Google can consider your site if any one of the core keywords are searched.

Level 2 – Thematic Keywords: Whereas the keywords in List 1 are somewhat synonymous with one another, thematic keywords are further removed from your initial targets, yet are conceptually related. If your target keyword for a page is 'London property', a list of thematic terms like 'London flats' can help you potentially rank for the query, 'low rent London flats'.

Level 3 – Stem Keywords: Your third level should include keywords that answer users' questions. These keywords anticipate the information users need after they have found your page, and should be integrated into the content to naturally provide answers. Once a user has found your page by searching 'low rent flat London', it is likely they are seeking information on 'finding flat which are low to rent in London' or 'renting affordable flats in London.' Your Level 3 Keywords may be some variation of 'rent London flats' or 'London flat finder'.

When it comes to the idea that keyword strategy is dead or that it is a lesser focus there are many that have had their say on the matter. The latest report from Search Engine Journal, says: "RankBrain forever changed the way businesses optimise their website's content for search engines.

"Ideally, they will need to learn how to read their targeted audience's minds. But in real life, they will also need to optimise their website for latent semantic indexing. LSI keywords and contextual clues are vital instead of standalone keywords.

"The more their search results are clicked through, the more chances search engines will count it as the most relevant for searchers. In this case, understanding their structured data is the surefire path to driving more potential readers."

So how do you do semantic SEO and how can businesses make sure that they are prepared for future challenges?

The first thing to do when it comes to formulating a semantic strategy is to target more than just phrases. You want to give your website the best possible chance to rank in SERPs and for the largest number of search terms. There is a fine balance to this as you don't want to appear too 'spammy' through keyword stuffing and if you don't meet the search criteria of Google you won't rank at all. Users are looking for relevance after all.

Know your audience and products

The first step of the strategy, as always is to understand your business and you customers. You need to know about the products that you are going to sell and the audience that you are looking to sell to. This will put you in the best possible position to create your content strategy and include the information that bridges you and the customer.

Optimise your content

When it comes to the content that you produce it is more important than ever that your content team is thinking outside the box; they need to be able to second guess what the next query might be, the associated language that is being used and the next trends that the market might have. Moz founder Rand Fishkin used the following slide to emphasise this point:

Now it would of course be impossible to cover all of the above terms in a single post about a hammock but this only reiterates the need to be clever with your content. You could add some of the terms on a product description and the rest you could add to dedicated blogs with links back to the product.

Optimise for social media

Google can now provide more refined, intuitive results pulling from personal data in users' social media profiles. Search Engine Land stated that this suggests that paying attention to social search is becoming more and more critical, and that social media is playing a larger role in search results, sending strong signals to the search engines.

Leveraging (and discovering) your target audience's interest graph is key to producing content that will bring them to your website.

Essentially, fully integrating social media into your marketing strategy creating content that reflects your audience's social interests and sharing that content on your networks is a large part of optimising for semantic search.

Look at navigation

One of the most import ant things that you can do at the start of your semantic project is to build your website with the site navigation in mind. Some in the industry refer to this process as the breadcrumb trail and it is the process of guiding your customers across your site. Regardless of the size of a website, the navigation will allow users to familiarise themselves with the site's hierarchy.

While they increase the chances of clickthroughs, their code is not always executed in the right manner, so be sure to use the breadcrumb markup process and cross check the code in Google's Structured Data Testing tool to see whether you need to change things further.

The below image shows how the code would appear on a retail site with a listing for dresses. The search would show 'dresses' but with the additional data you can rank for the information in your submenus like 'real dresses' and 'green dresses'.

```
The following HTML code describes a breadcrumb trail for a product page on a women's
clothing site.

  <a href="http://www.example.com/dresses">Dresses</a>  >
  <a href="http://www.example.com/dresses/real">Real Dresses</a>
>
  <a href="http://www.example.com/dresses/real/green">Real Green
Dresses</a>
```

User test and conduct TF-IDF analysis

User testing is a great way to get to know your brand and to understand your marketplace. It gives you a chance to highlight any gaps in the market and get to know that the language and key terms your customers use to find certain products.

Use TF-IDF analysis to analyse the top 10 pages for the main search term. One very important concept in information retrieval theory is Term Frequency and Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF for short). Essentially, what this does is measure two things:

- What terms and phrases your page emphasises
- Which of those terms define your page's unique aspects

With this information you can see what your main competitors are ranking for. If the websites on the first page of Google are ranking for a specific term then it's pretty safe to say that you should be doing the same. Think of a unique way to cover certain topics and keywords and mine the top 10 results for your main products for content idea. Again you can identify and exploit gaps in the content for certain product and keywords.

Structure your data

Semantic search depends on structured data. Information on your website needs to be properly tagged, marked up, and organised in order for search engines to crawl your page. Those working in SEO must be well versed with the back end technical details of a website that search engines recognise as indicators of a page's relevancy. Working closely with webmasters, or familiarising yourself with the HTML and markup of a site will ensure that it is easily 'crawlable'. Schema.org provides a collection of templates and markups that Google, Bing, Yahoo!, and Yandex rely on and is a must for those wanting to succeed.

So what is schema markup?

Schema markup, according to one definition by the Content Marketing Institute (CMI), is "code that you put on your website to help the search engines return more informative results for users." 'Schema' refers to a particular standardised set of content types: news articles, videos, books, and so on; 'markup' refers to the standardised code – meta data – that has been defined for those content types.

Schema markup helps machines understand what kind of thing a piece of content is. In other words, schema markup gives a piece of content a way to tell search engines, 'I am a book' or 'I am a video' – and then to identify its elements: 'This is my title and author,' and so on.

When it comes to implementing Schema, generally, the coding is best left to developers. For example, here's what the schema markup code looks like for a news article:

```
<script type="application/ld+json">
{
  "@context": "http://schema.org",
  "@type": "NewsArticle",
  "mainEntityOfPage": {
    "@type": "WebPage",
    "@id": "https://google.com/article"
  },
  "headline": "Article headline",
  "image": {
    "@type": "ImageObject",
    "url": "https://google.com/thumbnail1.jpg",
    "height": 800,
    "width": 800
  },
  "datePublished": "2015-02-05T08:00:00+08:00",
  "dateModified": "2015-02-05T09:20:00+08:00",
  "author": {
    "@type": "Person",
    "name": "John Doe"
  },
  "publisher": {
    "@type": "Organization",
    "name": "Google",
    "logo": {
      "@type": "ImageObject",
      "url": "https://google.com/logo.jpg",
      "width": 600,
      "height": 60
    }
  },
  "description": "A most wonderful article"
}
</script>
```

Developers may be able to set up your system so that marking up relevant content is as simple as filling in a few fields. In this case, content creators may be able to take on the task. If you have a WordPress site, you can download a schema plugin to do the job of providing those fields.

Summary

Overall semantic SEO and a strategy that conforms to this type of search marketing could well be one of the most important considerations for a business looking to get more visibility.
If you are not formulating a content plan that is mobile-friendly, takes into account voice search and natural language and which doesn't include the correct markup you may find that your partnership with Google becomes strained and your targeted customers are not finding you as easily as perhaps they should.

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ABOUT US

At Click Consult, we understand how integral your social media strategy is to the success of your overall search marketing strategy. Why not take the first step to discovering what we could offer your brand with a free, no obligation social media audit?

Our website features a comprehensive resource page, full of useful eBooks and actionable insights. We also write a blog, where you can find an abundance of search marketing tips.

If you're feeling social, get in touch on Google+, Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn.
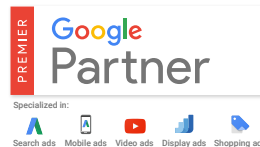
WHAT OUR CLIENTS SAY

"From the outset of the project, Click Consult clearly understood our business objectives and formulated a search strategy that would help to deliver commercial results across key product areas. They have been professional in their approach, shown great attention to detail and the results achieved to date have been thoroughly impressive. We are looking forward to a successful future partnership."
LloydsPharmacy Online Doctor

"Click have really stepped up to the plate when it comes to performance marketing, their tenacity and desire to help us as a company improve is second to none. They're always offering up the best in cost per lead performance, which is seeing our ROI on digital marketing grow exponentially as our relationship goes on. Brilliant project planners, superb project delivery and results to boot, what more could you ask for?"
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