SEARCH EXPERIENCE OPTIMISATION: THE NEW SEO?

CONTENTS

UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT AND USER INTENT

USER EXPERIENCE AND SEO (SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION) ARE NO LONGER MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

The ability to determine user intent – a semantic understanding of what we as users are looking for when we conduct a search query - has been high on Google's agenda for a while now.

As Google has a greater insight than ever into intent and relevance, it means that when a website is optimised for visitors, the chances of it ranking well in search engine results (otherwise known as your organic search performance) are also improved.

Research by leading search and content performance platform, Searchmetrics, has confirmed that Google is delivering more relevant search results than ever before.

According to Searchmetric's Marcus Tober:

"Since Google is becoming much more sophisticated about how it interprets search intent and relevance, you also need to work harder and smarter at understanding and delivering on these areas in content you put on your websites."

"You need to use data-driven insights to analyse exactly what searchers are looking for when they type specific queries in the search box and make sure your content answers all their questions clearly and comprehensively in the most straightforward way – and you need to do it better than your competitors."

This means that search marketers need to optimise for user experience (UX) and the intention of that user. What does that user want to see when they search using a particular search term?

What information around that topic could help them? Do they want information?

Are they looking to convert (ie, follow your call-to-action, which will be specific to your business, and include anything from signing up to your newsletter to actually making a purchase)?

This optimisation boils down to the content on the page and whether it fulfils the user's need or if it is just trying to manipulate a search engine.

FOCUS ON WHY PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING RATHER THAN WHAT THEY ARE LOOKING FOR

As users, we've become much more savvy over the past decade or so in terms of how we search.

People have got so used to using search engines, they've learnt how to get what they want out of them.

Now, roughly 70% of searches use long tail, highly specific keywords/phrases with three to five words, rather than short, generic, popular keywords ('head terms').

Internet users access search engines for different types of searches that can be broken down into three categories:

• Transactional ('do') – Here the user wants to get to a website where there will be more interaction, eg, buying something, downloading something, signing up or registering etc. They show greater intent to convert.

• Informational ('know') – This is when the user is looking for a specific bit of information, possibly researching a future purchase. Where, how, when, etc.

• Navigational ('go') – The user is looking to reach a particular website. They've already identified the company or product they want and there's only one likely destination that they're looking to reach. Such keywords are usually helpful when the brand of the site is well-known and popular.

This type of categorisation allows marketers to better understand the user's intent for a query and to optimise the content on their website to provide what people are looking for.

Think about what people search for at different stages of the buying cycle. At the start of their searches, potential customers are likely to search for problem-based keywords (informational), eg: 'How do you dry out a smartphone?'.

Further into the buying cycle, they tend to type in solution-based keywords, eg 'buy waterproof smartphone case' (transactional). Branded keywords tend to be used at the decision stage (navigational): 'Samsung Smartphone preserver case review'.

WHAT IS NATURAL LANGUAGE SEARCH?

This is when someone performs a search using similar language and phrasing as they would in spoken language. Google is becoming increasingly adept at understanding meaning and consumer intent in queries – such as synonyms, colloquial phrases and the nature of complicated questions - and using this to retrieve and return specific, highly relevant results.

For example, for a question like: "Which cinema is showing The Secret Life of Pets in Wirral?", a conventional search may focus on the keywords 'cinema', 'pet' and 'Wirral', and miss the point that someone was probably looking for a local cinema showing a specific film.

A natural language search picks up on this nuance, returning results that answer the question very specifically:

Google has represented how natural language search works with the diagram below:
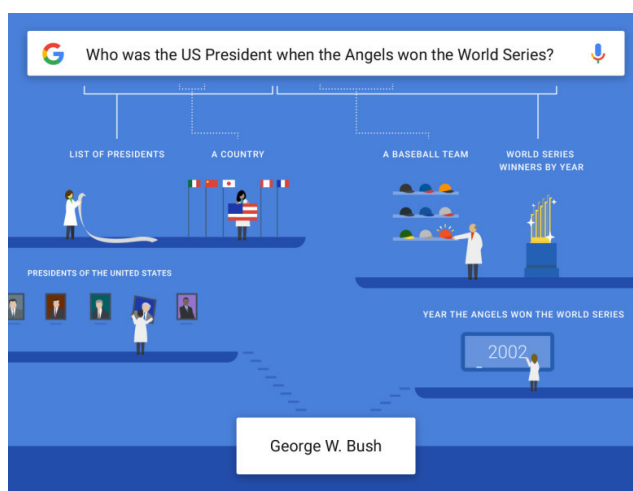
HOW DOES A SEARCH ENGINE DETERMINE THE CONTEXT OF THE SEARCH QUERY?

Search engines understand the relationship between words and have become accustomed to linking certain words from a search query with a perceived meaning of that query.

This process is known as latent semantic indexing (LSI). This allows a search engine to determine the relevancy of a page not only to the search query, but also to the context of the search query. In other words, LSI helps search engines to retrieve data based on the context of the search query.

For instance, search engines are capable of identifying that the English language terms 'laptop' and 'notebook computer' are conceptually similar. Think of LSI keywords as synonyms.

They take into consideration topic themes and associations, relating terms, phrase matches and co-occurring words all of which form a foundation for strong, effective contextual content.

Broadly speaking, this means that Google's understanding of general subject matter and themes has improved. It no longer relies solely on target keywords to assume meaning.

As a result, keywords and variations related to the subject matter of your page can now possibly rank even if they are not mentioned within the page.

However, in practical terms this only works when competitors have not created direct content using the variations and alternative phrases.

The image below shows LSI keywords appearing in Google's search results: the top in Autocomplete in the search box itself; the image below as 'related searches' which appear at the bottom of results pages.

WHAT IS HUMMINGBIRD?

Hummingbird is an update to Google's search algorithm that has increased Google's understanding of natural language – so-named for the fast and precise results it's intended to deliver.

Its main objective is to create a more organised system for the indexing of information. In line with other Google updates, Hummingbird aims at improving the quality of content seen in search results. The main focus is on the context of content and the meaning of entire sentences and conversations, rather than analysis of single words or phrases.

Some top ranking sites experienced a revision of PageRank based on the flow of natural content on their websites. Hence, those with content that was organised on the basis of 'who', 'why', 'where', and 'how' were the ones to benefit from this change, and relevant use of synonyms also helped in improving the SEO of these sites.

For example, if you search for 'cafés', you might get some results that include the synonym 'coffee shops'. Similarly, 'St Paddy's Day' will return results for 'St Patrick's Day'.

Hummingbird helps Google better understand the language inputs from the user to convey the value of the output even if the word isn't an exact match keyword.

WHAT IS RANKBRAIN?

RankBrain is a machine-learning artificial intelligence (AI) system developed by Google to help it interpret queries and process its search results. More specifically, it's used to interpret the meaning and intent of content compared to the query, 'learning' from previous data to inform current decisions and work out the intent of queries it's never seen before to Google displays relevant answers.

For example, if a user is searching for 'best cereal bar brands', RankBrain knows that the user is looking for particular types of information. The user may want a list of multiple cereal bar brands, not just one, and is possibly looking for some sort of evaluation criteria such as reviews on a particular cereal bar brand or product. RankBrain is also able to interpret that the user is looking for brand names and not necessarily cereal bar recipes – this type of query interpretation is something that Google, in particular, is very adept at determining.

This also applies to sentence meaning. For example, in the past, if a user was looking for 'best sugar-free cereal bar brands', Google may have focused on the word 'sugar' and returned results containing a lot mentions of 'sugar' within the content, and a few mentions of 'sugar-free' – hence the results would be less likely to satisfy the user's search query.

WHAT IS THE PHANTOM UPDATE?

Phantom is a change in Google's core algorithm which has been steadily released as a series of updates, and has led to some major changes in many websites' search engine rankings.

The updates have been described as 'Quality Updates' which focus on online content and a website's ability to answer the user intent behind search queries that are delivering traffic in key commercial areas. In particular, this has been evidenced for head term keywords – short, generic, popular keywords with high search volume - and brand queries.

For example, some websites have found that they no longer rank as well for traffic-driving head terms because these search terms have been identified by Google as being informational. When viewed in informational search term results, the websites in question have lower Quality Scores as their content is deemed to poorly address this user intent and therefore they are outranked by websites which the search engine feels more effectively answer the query.

Because these generic keywords have high volume everyone wants to rank for them, making them highly competitive and harder to rank for. The other problem with this keyword type is that, because they are so generic, they tend to lead to lower conversion rates because the full user intent behind the keyword isn't clear, and the chances of the user being in 'purchasing mode' are lower.

Long tail keywords, on the other hand, give you that information, meaning you can cater more specifically on the user intent and deliver what the user is looking for.

User engagement metrics are likely also being fed into the process - such as click through and bounce rates - so it is of key importance to identify the key traffic-driving terms for each page on your website. Make sure that the page content addresses the meaning and user intent behind these search terms and topics.

In addition, Google has a huge team of human contractors checking key websites for a massive number of queries in competitive marketplaces as part of its Rater Guidelines process. This makes it crucial to ensure that the perceived quality of your website is as high as possible.
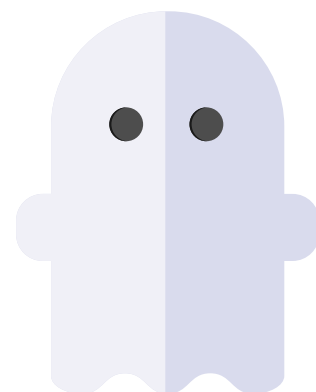
KEYWORD RESEARCH – OPTIMISE FOR USER INTENT, NOT SIMPLY THE WORDS THEY TYPE INTO GOOGLE

Keyword research is one of the most worthwhile exercises in search marketing – and marketing in general.

While keyword-stuffing has long been frowned-upon by search engines, keyword research is vital to inform your content strategy. It's still important to include relevant keywords - and synonyms - in your content as long as it appears naturally.

It's not enough to take a website and add a sprinkling of keyword-packed content in the hope that it will appear higher in Google searches for those keywords. You need to take the learnings from your keyword research and create high quality content that meets your target customers' needs.

As well as helping your site to rank, thorough keyword research will give you a much greater insight into what your customers want.

BE CLEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE

Determine the type of keywords that are the most suitable for your business and for which you want to be found. This will depend on the overall objectives of your business and your website. What do you want people to do when they get to your website? Do you want visitors to sign up for a newsletter, or download an app? Are you selling a product or service?

Targeting keywords with high search volumes won't help you increase your ROI if the people using those search terms aren't looking for what you offer.
The points below will help you to refine your SEO strategy by gaining an understanding of the context of your target audience's searches, and feed into a content strategy that's relevant to their needs.

- Google offers some terrific **free tools for keyword research** which generate variations of keyword phrase, as well as quantifying search volume. The most commonly used are Google AdWords Keyword Planner Tool and Google Trends. There are also paid tools, such as SEMrush and Searchmetrics that offer insights.
- **Focus on long tail keywords.** Making sure you have content which satisfies your target audience's queries as closely as possible will put you in a good position when it comes to answering the user intent behind them, as well as increasing the likelihood of ranking well.

  The more specific you can be with your long tail keywords, the less competition is likely.
  A simple way to discover common long tail searches is to use Google Autocomplete – the suggestions that appear in the drop-down menu when you start to type in your search. Google bases these predictions on how often others have searched for a term (although it can also be influenced by your own search history) and they can also provide you with a hint of the motivations behind them.

[Answer the Public](#) provides visualisations of popular long tail queries that relate to your keyword or topic, using the same autosuggestions as Google Autocomplete. For example, having searched for 'make slime':
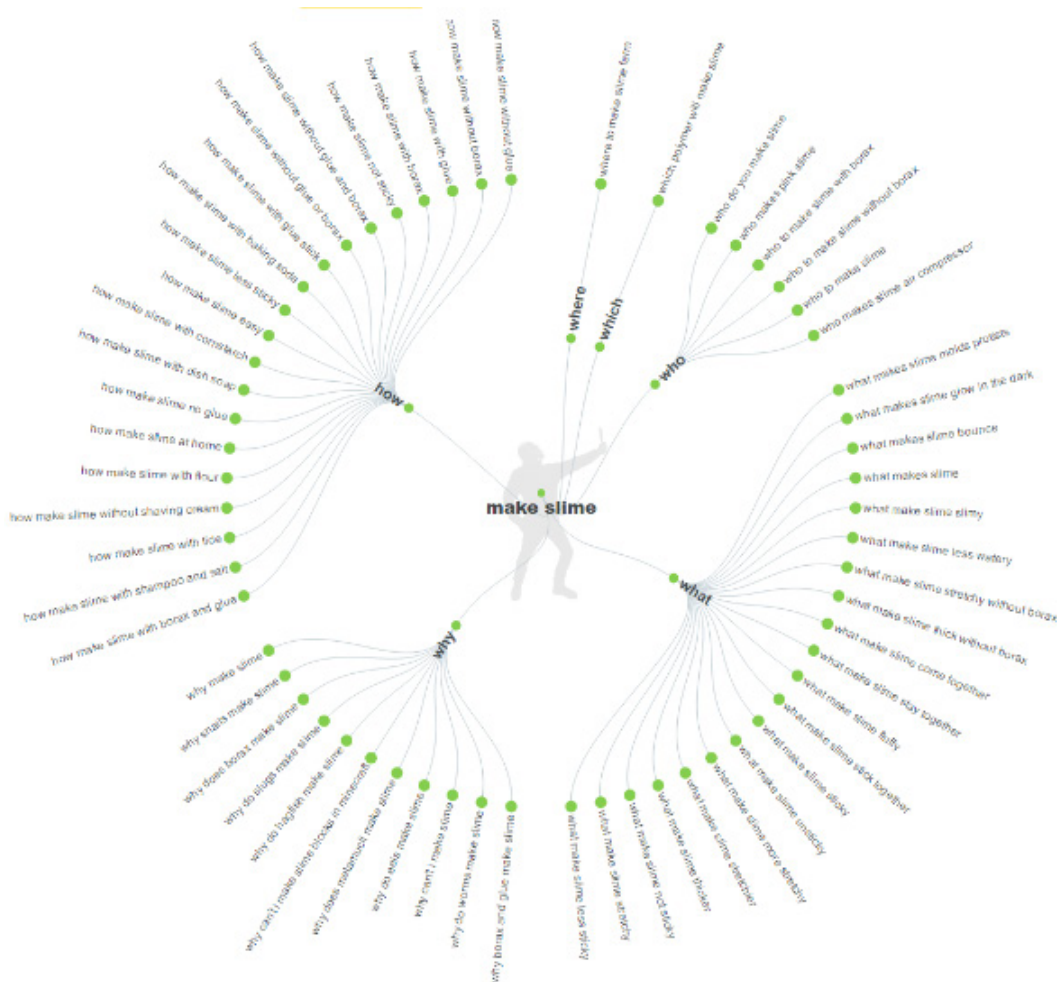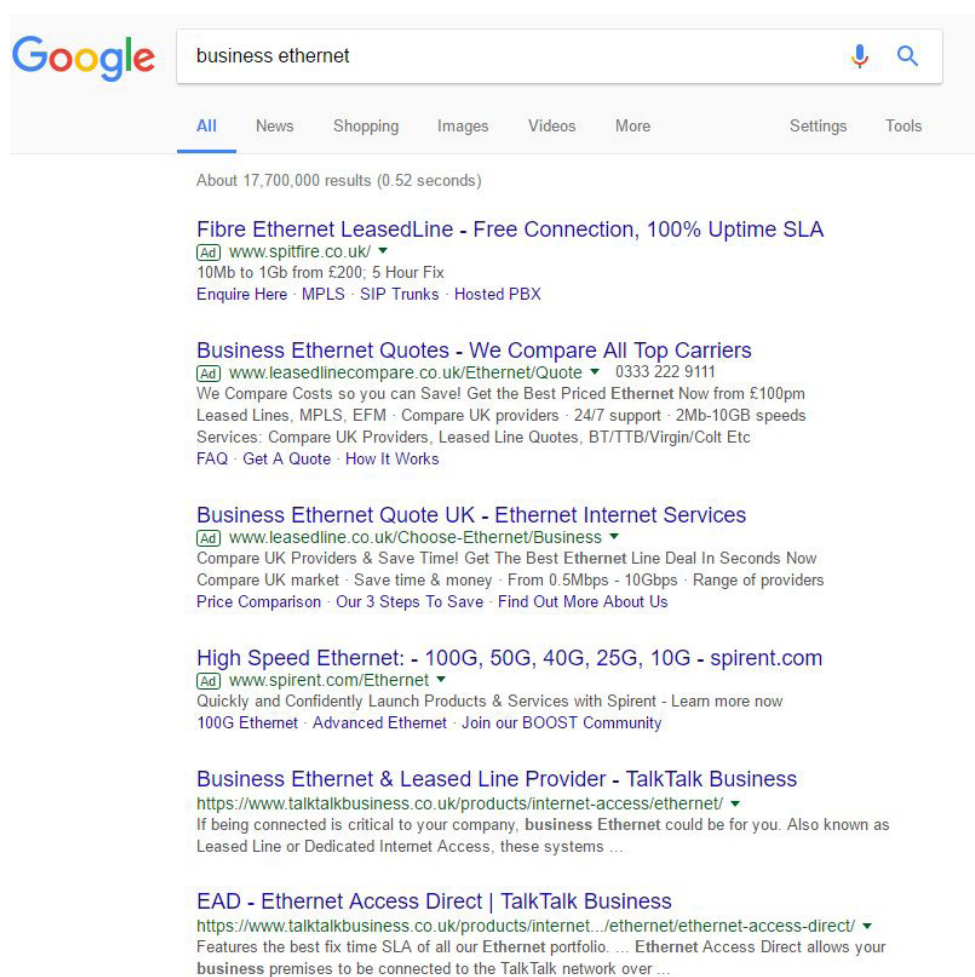

It's important to note that the long tail queries suggested in this tool do not always have search volume when checked using Google Keyword Planner. However, it's an invaluable tool when combined with Keyword Planner as it can then be used to determine what questions are being asked, giving you a starting point for insightful, quality content.

- **Put yourself in a searcher's shoes.** Don't assume your audience will search for the same terms or jargon you use to refer to your product or services internally. For example, you may refer to your business offering as 'bespoke HR solutions', whereas as someone who needs your service might be more likely to type 'reducing employee absence rate' into a search engine. Get into the mindset of a customer, who is more likely to use natural, casual language than industry jargon or the terms you use to refer to your business.

- **Find out what's already ranking** for the keywords you've chosen; in other words, check out your competitors and learn from them. The reason that they're ranking strongly suggests they are satisfying user intent as Google is viewing them as highly relevant and authoritative. What are the pages that rank offering customers? How are they satisfying the query? If your site aims to sell and the high ranking results for your term are offering information, this could be a sign you're targeting the wrong terms and may need to refine your keyword choices.

  For example, a company selling business ethernet solutions may assume that focusing on the head word 'ethernet' will help their website to rank well. However, a quick search of this term shows that Google interprets it term as informational. In other word, it returns results relevant to those looking to find a definition for 'ethernet', rather than those looking to actually purchase:
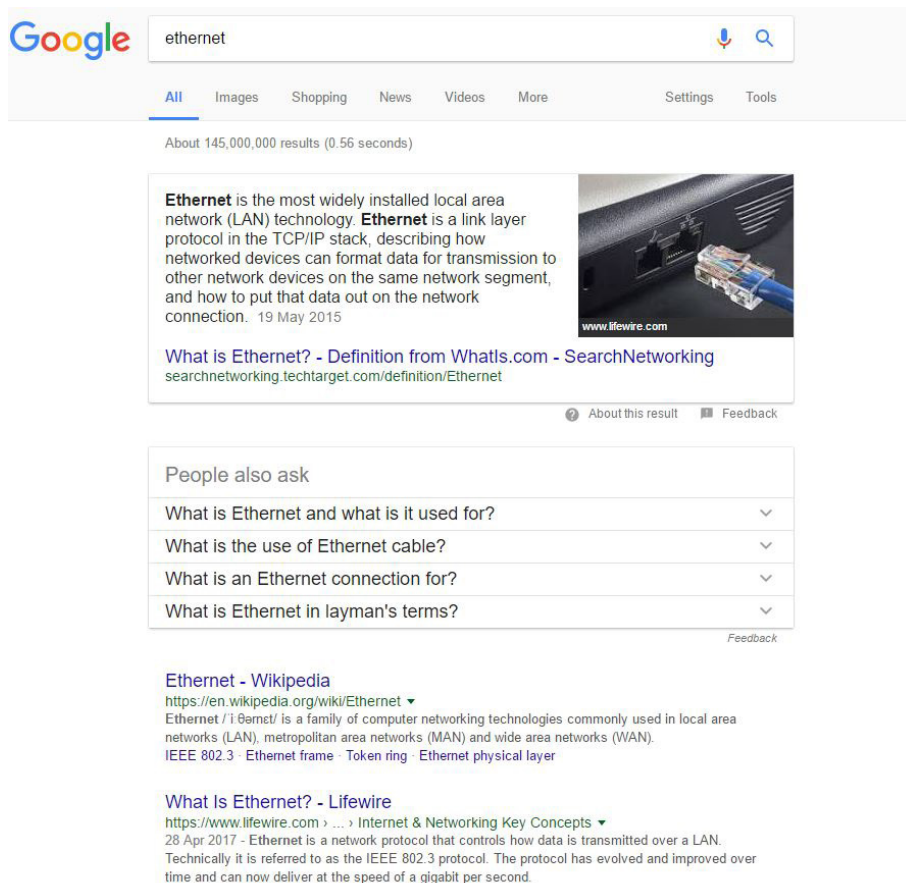
A keyword better suited to this business' objective – to sell – would be to go for the more specific 'business ethernet', which returns transactional results:


- **Look for terms with enough volume** to justify ranking for. However, be wary of terms with very high volume unless you think your site has a realistic chance of ranking for them (taking into the competitiveness of your industry/sector and market position). It might be better to go after terms that that have less volume, but may bring more targeted visitors to your site: the focus should be on quality as well as quantity: not 'how many?', but 'how many of the right kind?'.

- **Ask client-facing employees**, such as Account Managers and Business Development Managers, the queries that customers (or potential customers) ask most often and what language they use.

For example, a search for 'cake' returns 500,000,000 results on Google, whereas the long tail search 'buy birthday cake online delivery' only returns 4,060,000 results – and shows a much greater intent to buy!
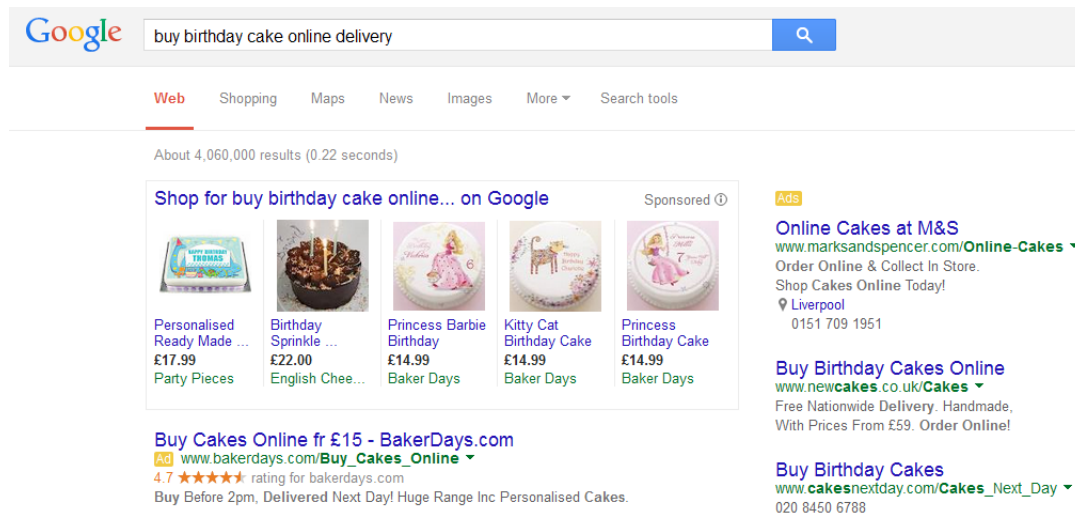
- **Find out what people are searching for on your site.** You're getting visitors to your site - but what are they doing when they get there? As well as using Google Analytics (GA) to track which pages people visit on your site, you can also look at the terms they're searching for, giving you a detailed insight into their intent, in their own words.

  To monitor what visitors are typing into the search box on your website, set up site search in GA. Here's how to set it up

  1.   Go to standard reports in GA
  2.   Click the 'Admin' button (top right)
  3.   Click on 'Profile Settings'
  4.   Navigate to the bottom and find 'Site Search Settings'
  5.   Select 'Do Track Site Search'
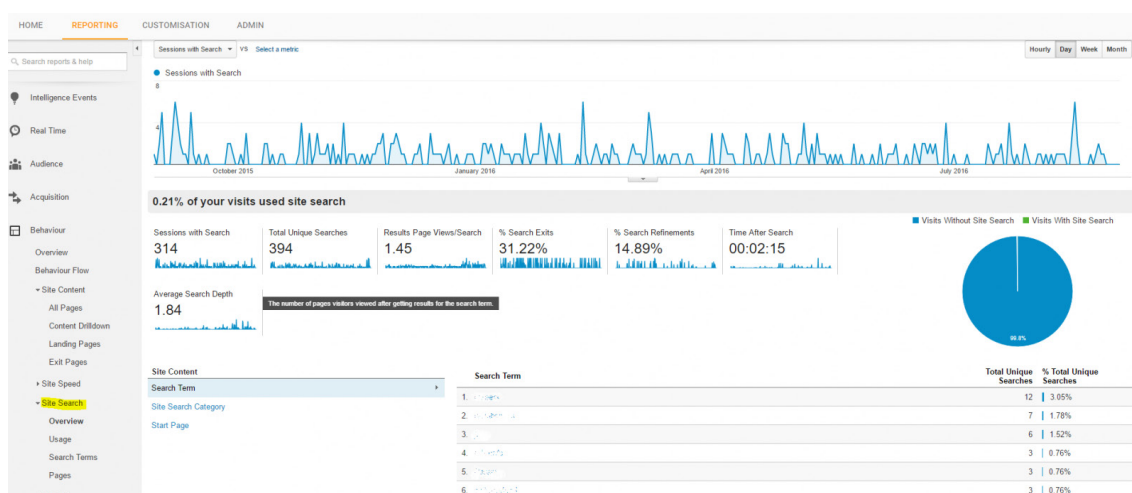
CONTENT STRATEGY - PROVIDE THE RIGHT CONTENT AT THE RIGHT TIME

Why does Google care about the quality of your content? Because it aims to return the most relevant and useful results to answer users' queries and it's clever enough to know the difference between content that's been created for search engines and content written with humans in mind.

And, as Google gets slicker at handling very specific queries, websites that regularly update their websites with useful and detailed content will see an even greater return on their investment.

On-page content will need to address the search intention of the user, eg, FAQ pages which answer the plethora of questions surrounding a key topic/user intention. Landing pages that directly address what the user wants as opposed to just attempting to be optimised for the search engine.

THINK OF SEO AS SEARCH EXPERIENCE OPTIMISATION INSTEAD OF SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION

If you want to rank well in search engines, your content strategy should be designed to provide users with the best experience possible. Satisfy their needs, don't just provide them with facts.

A common mistake is to concentrate all your content efforts on your website's homepage, neglecting other areas of the site. While the homepage is important, it's not necessarily your site's main entry point any more - think about how often you access a site via a search engine or by clicking on a link in another source.

Use internal linking where it will help the user, ie, by offering further explanation on a topic, or directing them to a page that will better meet their needs. This good practice that will improve UX and be recognised by Google.

Here are some best practice tips to maximise the value of your on-page content:

- **Length is strength.** Write thorough articles instead of short blog posts – a widely cited study by SERPIQ.com found that longer content ranks significantly higher on Google. Aim for 600+ words.

- Make every page **compelling, with unique, relevant content.** Google can spot duplicate content (whether from within your site or elsewhere) and not only frowns upon it, but actively penalise sites for it, potentially causing a significant drop in your search ranking.

- A page title should give the user and the search engine a **quick understanding of the context** of a webpage. For example, if your page title is 'healthy snacks for rabbits', the content on that page should be about healthy snacks for rabbits.

- If you outsource your content, choose a **quality source** (we offer this as part of our content, outreach and social engagement service, in case you were wondering).

- Include **clear calls to action**, such as 'download this guide now', 'sign up for our newsletter' or prominent social share buttons. This helps to boost click-through rates (CTR) which is great on its own, but also an SEO ranking signal as it indicates to search engines that the webpage is useful to users.

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When you are delivering content as pai strategy it is important to consider wha are. Producing content which meets th the best way to capture their attention high search volumes won't help you in using those search terms aren't lookin;

WHY CONTEXT COUNTS

Imagine this scenario…

Tom uses a search engine to find a new car. He enters the make and model of a car and clicks search.

Tom's intention is to find information about the cars available to him, find the best price and, ultimately, buy himself a new car. He might not be ready to purchase yet, but he does want to purchase when he's done some research.

Dick also searches for the same make and model of car as Tom. However, Dick is a fleet manager at a large business with a £10million turnover. He wants to source up to 30 cars to use as lease cars for his business' fleet. He wants to know leasing costs, depreciation figures and running costs for that car.

Harry is another searcher. He types the make and model of the car in because he wants to read reviews, see the latest news and maybe even watch some videos featuring that car.

He already owns one and is part of a community based around that car – he certainly is not interested in buying another, but finding information about servicing, modifications, meet-ups and social sharing would be ideal.

That's just three people, all searching using the same keywords but with entirely different requirements.

That's why, when you are creating on-page content, you need to keep the intentions of your users front-of-mind. Not only does your website have to shout about what it provides, it has to be informative to secure the right types of visitor and convert that traffic into sales.

TEST AND REFINE

People can often forget that a content strategy is a process that needs ongoing refinement and not simply an activity. You need to track your site's progress and tweak your approach as necessary.

By using Google Analytics (GA) to track the user journey throughout your content, you can start to plug the gaps in the information your website provides.

Landing page stats in GA allows you to learn a lot about the progress of your strategy, including:

• How your content is developing your traffic (New Users/New Sessions).

• Whether people leave the site on a certain page more often than any other? If so, that page needs better, more interesting content to match that user's specific needs (analyse bounce rates).

• How well your content is performing against specific goals (Goal Conversions/Goal Conversion Rate).

• How your content is performing across various platforms (Attribution Modelling).
• Whether you're successfully reaching your target market (Demographics tracking allows you to see a breakdown of visitors to your site by gender, age group and interest categories).

For more info, see the blog Analytics and content marketing – what to look for and where.

CONCLUSION

We've seen search marketing evolve to shift away from an emphasis on keywords, towards semantic relevancy, quality content, and overall user experience as Google continues to refine its techniques for providing ever more useful results.

Google now has the ability to understand user intent and context through the search phrase, and even how different searches could have the same intentions or vice versa (where the same search can have differing intentions based on other factors such as the device or location of the search). This makes it imperative for marketers to understand and cater for their audience's search objectives at each step of the customer journey.

Key takeaways:

- Clarify your objectives
- Consider what people search for at different stages of the buying cycle
- Provide the right content at the right time
- Optimise for user intent, not just keywords
- Focus on topics and adding value
- Test and refine your approach

A Google search is now more personalised than ever – especially post-Hummingbird. Simplistic techniques to manipulate search engines and artificially inflate your rankings – like collecting backlinks and keyword-stuffing – are no longer effective.

If you're not providing the content – or the experience - that your visitors want, you will never convert the majority of your traffic into sales.

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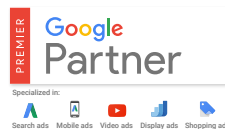
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