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STEP-BY-STEP SEO

FOUR STEPS TO OPTIMISING YOUR SITE FOR ORGANIC SEARCH (SEO) AND USER EXPERIENCE

CONTENTS

STEP 1: KEYWORD RESEARCH

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 research and create high quality content that meets your target customers' needs.

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

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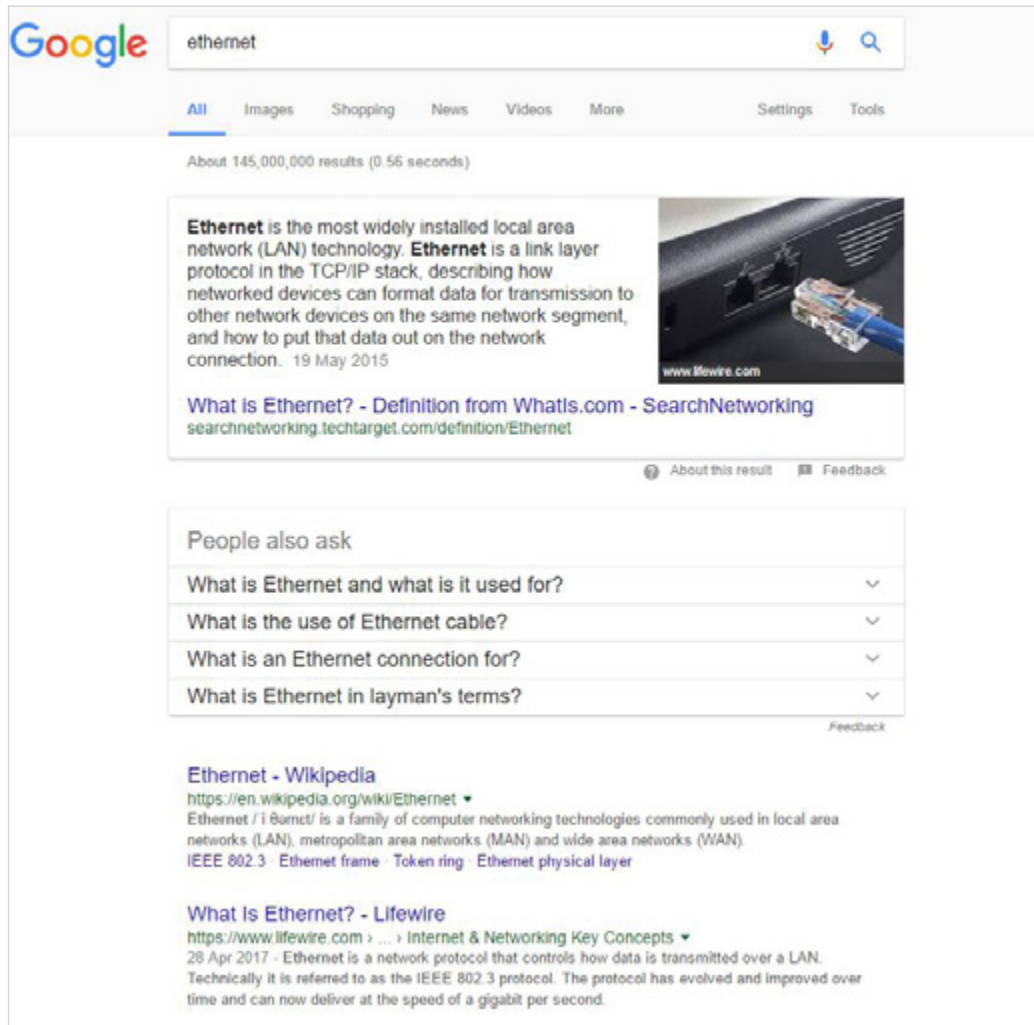
Targeting keywords with high search volumes won't help you increase your return on investment if the people using those search terms aren't looking for what you offer. The points below will help you to refine your SEO strategy by gaining an understanding of the context of your target audience's searches,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

- Google offers some great **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.

- **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. As well as your basic key terms, 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!

STEP 2: ON-SITE SEO BASICS

URL AND SITE STRUCTURE
Your top level domain URL needs to be descriptive, concise, memorable and easy to spell. Category pages should have the product or topic as close to your domain name as possible and describe what the page contains clearly and logically (both for search engine and user purposes).

For example:
www.example.com/products/electrical not

www.example.com/index.php?id_sezione=360&sid=4j3898enno0223bns983201djis03

Make sure your keywords are near the front of a URL and use hyphens to break up words.

NAVIGATION AND UX
It almost goes without saying that your site's functionality should be clear and easy to use. Your home page needs to clearly define what your business does. Also ensure you've thoroughly tested your site navigation to ensure all links are working correctly.

SPEED
It's not just humans that have no patience when a website takes ages to load. With site speed an important ranking factor, Google takes site page loading speed into consideration when it comes to search rankings.

Loading time is a major contributing factor to page abandonment – particularly on mobile. According to KissMetrics, half of consumers expect a web page to load in two seconds or less and 40% of people will abandon a website that takes more than three seconds to load.

Here are some tips to improve loading time

The magic number: ideally, each page should load in under a second.

- Type your URL into Google's <u>PageSpeed Insights</u> tool, which evaluates the speed of your site both for desktop and mobile and provides a list of issues and suggestions of how to fix them.
- **Keep images as small as possible,** as oversized images take longer to load.
- **Declutter.** Get rid of any non-essential bells-and-whistles that are bogging down your speed, such as flash graphics, and unnecessary plugins.
- Enable <u>compression,</u> which speeds up page load time by making your content less bulky, a bit like when you create a zip file for storing and sharing documents.

SITEMAP(S)

Sitemaps are vitally important to the optimisation of your site, not just because easy navigability makes for a smoother UX and customer journey (and, therefore, increases the chance of conversion), but also because it helps Google's web crawler (Googlebot) to find your site and navigate through your content more quickly.

There are two major types of sitemaps:

- An HTML sitemap is a standard web page that is public facing and intended to help real people.

- An XML sitemap is a file written in computer code (Extensible Markup Language) that's written only for search engines and is not public-facing. It isn't linked where people can find it and most people couldn't understand the code even if they found the file.

It's essential that your XML sitemap is logical and hierarchical, to ensure that all internal links and redirects work. Regular maintenance as and when new content is added to ensure that nothing is masked by redirects or in any other way hidden from site crawling and indexing. Best practice is to reference the sitemap in the robots.txt file - this will ensure the job of the Googlebot is as easy as possible, since the robots.txt file is the first place the crawler will look.

Your sitemap should be uploaded to <u>Google Search Console</u> and you should make sure that it automatically updates regularly using an XML sitemap generator such as <u>Google XML Sitemaps</u> (a plugin for WordPress).

You need to <u>**submit your XML sitemap**</u> to Google by adding it to your robots.txt file or directly submitting it to Search Console.

HTML

Meta tags

These are sections of HTML code in the header of a web page that are used by both search engines and users to determine whether a page will answer a particular search query. You can edit and optimise the text displayed within your meta tags.

Meta title – This is displayed on search engine results pages (SERPs) as the page link and used by Google to determine the relevance of a page to the search query.

Meta descriptions – A short summary of the page that often appears below the page link on SERPs and 155 character description of the on page content (with a minimum of 90 characters recommended). A good meta description can increase your click through rate. While Google will pull a description through, you want to ensure it's the right description to attract your consumers to click through to your site.
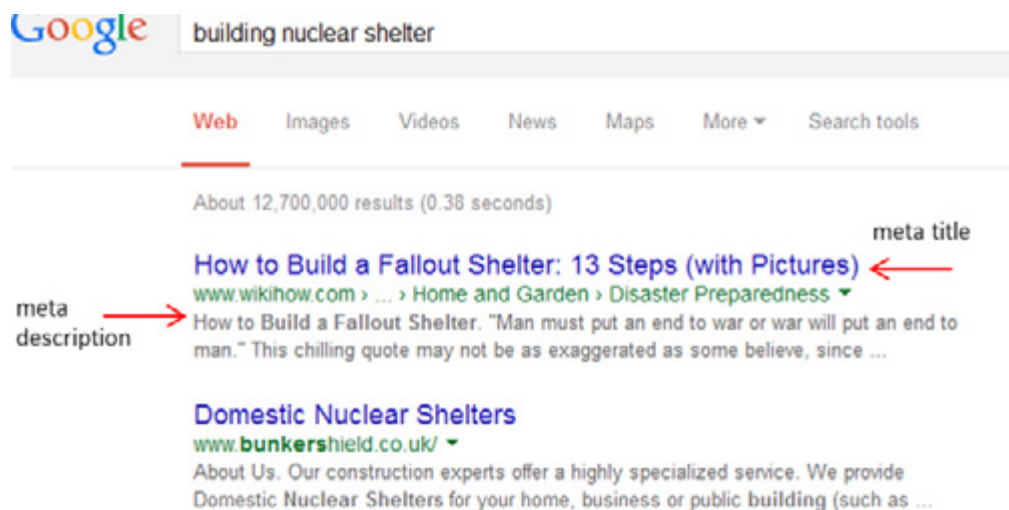
- Each page needs a unique page title and meta description. These should concisely describe what the content on the page is about.
- Keep them short. Search engines only display around 70 characters for a page title and 160 characters for a meta description. Any characters after the 70 and 160 aren't displayed in their search results.
- Strip out stop words from the title, like 'and' 'the' and 'of' (platforms such as WordPress will automatically do this for you). They waste valuable space.
- Include relevant keywords in your titles and descriptions, but in a natural, user friendly way – see point 2 about creating content aimed at humans.
- Imagine you're creating an advertisement when creating your meta title and meta description, after all, you want to tempt searchers to click on your listing in the search results. They should include the keywords you're targeting for that page, but in an appropriate descriptive and interesting manner.

Here's a good example of a well written title and description I found when I searched for 'homemade dog treats'. It provides a concise and enticing summary of what's on the page and how it's relevant to my search:

Top 10 Best Homemade Dog Treat Recipes | Fun Times ...
dogs.thefuntimesguide.com/2009/01/homemade_dog_treats.php ▾
These are the best homemade dog treats, and fun ideas for making dog recipes at home. These dog treat recipes are healthy AND tasty - dogs love 'em!

Header tags

Headlines help your audience understand what a page is about and quickly navigate to the sections that interest them. Search engines understand this and look at content with header tags <h1> to help understand what a page is about.

It's important to keep this text to headline length; if you have a paragraph of text in an <h1> tag, search engines will think it is spam. Try to limit your <h1> tags to 10 or fewer words (65 or fewer characters, including spaces).

Image tags

An <img> tag defines an image in an HTML page, and has two required attributes: the image source tag, which provides the source of the image inserted, and alt attribute, which describes the image. The latter is the text which will be voiced by screen readers, and also how Google attributes subject relevance to any image, so should accurately describe the image subject and context.

Hyperlinks

Too many links per page can dilute its Domain or Page Authority and appear unnatural to both search engines and human readers, so you should apply common sense to ensure a sensible link-to-content ratio.

Anchor text (text links)

Your anchor text is the clickable text in a hyperlink; it should be succinct and relevant to the content of the destination page.

Here's' an example:

According to a study by eConsultancy 74% of companies and 82% of agencies surveyed said that social media is either somewhat or highly integrated into their SEO approach.

SEMANTIC MARKUP

Semantic (or schema) markup allows you to use HTML tags to give Google a specific understanding of the content on a page, and the context, allowing your pages to be indexed faster and more accurately. It also allows Google to display this data as appropriate when people perform searches and include additional information, such as images, videos, recipes, user ratings and other data, enriching users' search experience by enabling them to decide which result best matches your query.

These are examples of Google using 'rich snippets' - snippets of content from web pages - to return what are known as rich results and the obvious benefit for businesses is that they stand out from simple text-only results.

Below are the results for the query 'vegetable lasagne recipe'. The top three listings contain some form of rich result; the fourth listing doesn't, which demonstrates the impact of rich results on a site's visibility and appeal. After all, which result would be most likely to click?

Download our beginner's guide to read more about Structured Data and Schema Markup.

CANONICAL TAGS

The canonical tag is a meta tag placed in the HTML header of a webpage. When you have the same or very similar content accessible on multiple URLs, using canonical tags allows you to identify the page that you want people to see, and directs search engines there.

For example:

- www.soapstars.com
- soapstars.com/
- www.soapstars.com/index.html
- soapstars.com/home.asp

These multiple pages are common on most sites, but can cause problems with organic visibility as the Page Authority of the content may be divided by search engines.
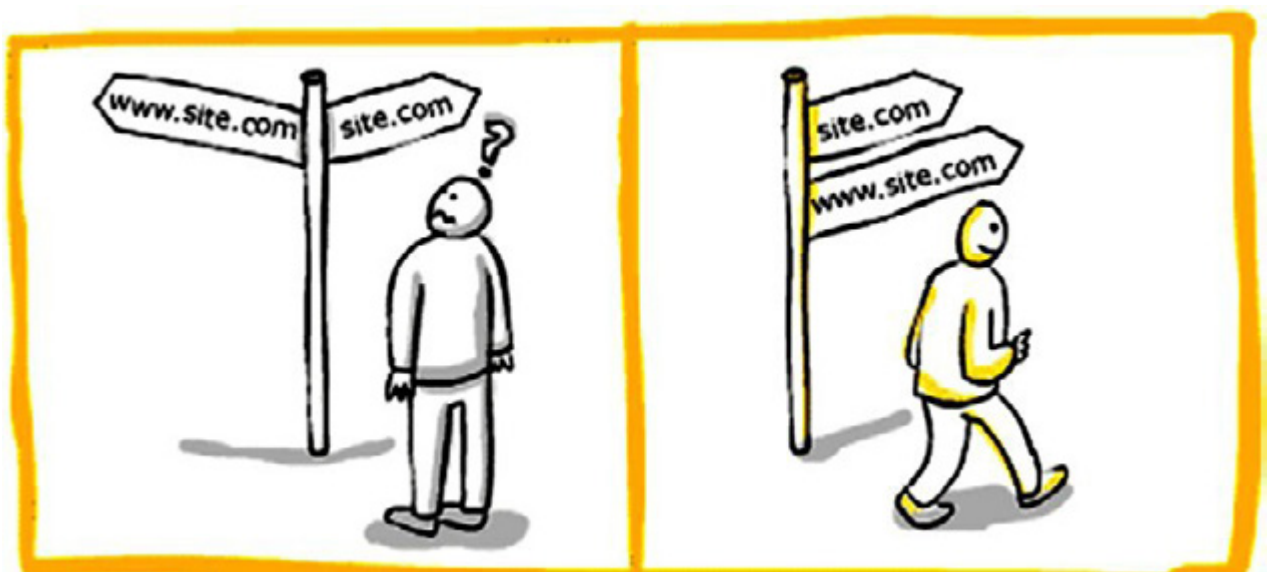
To make sure the search engines are indexing the correct page, you need to select which variation of the URL you want to set as a canonical URL or canonicalised URL.

This ensures your site visitors always access the most relevant content, while keeping duplicated content out of the search engine index and consolidating a site's authority and PageRank into one URL.

HTTP STATUS CODES

An HTTP status code is a server response to a browser's request. You can use some of these status codes to help search engines and people access your site.
Here are two of the most common, and when and how they should be used:

301 redirects
A 301 redirect is a command that redirects users and the search engines to a particular page. This can be used if the content of a page has been permanently moved or if you have created multiple versions of a homepage and only want the users and search engines to see one version.
This removes the possibility of the search engines interpreting several different URLs as having duplicate content.

The 301 redirect also allows you to more accurately monitor traffic to your homepage as everyone will be taken to one single URL address. Other reasons why you would use a 301 redirect is if you are moving your site from one domain to another, or if you want to direct users and search engines away from expired content on your site.

404 not found
The 404 is the most public status code, being the 'page not found' code. It is, therefore, often a nice touch for you to personalise your 404 pages – either with links to pertinent content or to the homepage. This gives the page a familiar branded feel, and can soften the blow of a broken link or page – as with the below offerings from Mashable and the BBC:
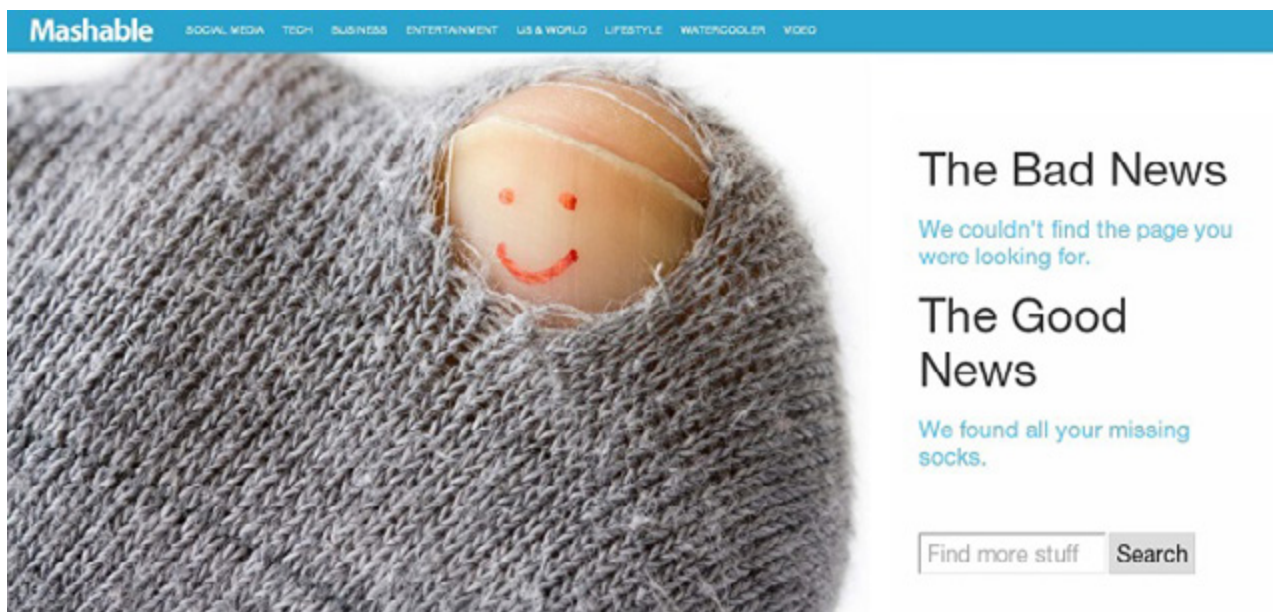
In this example from the BBC the use of navigation options on the 404 also offers visitors to the site an easy path to other areas of the site, improving the chances that the visit will not simply bounce.

BBC NEWS BBC SPORT

404 - Page Not Found

This might be because you typed the web address incorrectly. Please check the address and spelling ensuring that it does **not** contain capital letters or spaces.

It is possible that the page you were looking for may have been moved, updated or deleted.

Please click the back button to try another link.

Or
Visit the **BBC News Home Page**.
Visit the **BBC Sport Home Page**.
Explore our **full list of sites and services**.

For more detailed information on status codes, download our Technical On-Page SEO Cheat Sheet.

Click here for an advanced, in-depth guide to Technical SEO.

STEP 3: CONTENT

Why does Google care about the quality of your on-page 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.

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 is good practice that will improve UX and be recognised by Google.

- **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.

- 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 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.

STEP 4: OFF-PAGE SEO (LINK BUILDING)

Building legitimate inbound links, or backlinks, is an important strategy for marketing your website for two reasons:

- They can drive referral traffic to your site.
- They can help you rank higher in the SERPs (search engine results pages).

However, generating and maintaining a strong backlink profile for your website is hard work - and there are no shortcuts.

As well as improving your brand's exposure, links are still a vital signal to Google about the relevance and importance of a website. A good backlink comes from an authoritative website (one with a High Domain authority, or DA), using anchor text that appears natural in the context of the content on a page.

Outreach is a method that allows you to earn links faster while retaining a natural link profile which is capable of making real and immediate impact on a brand's online visibility.

An outreach strategy seeks to extend the reach of content to a broader audience, drive traffic to your site and hopefully earn valuable links. You do this by approaching online communities, social media networks, bloggers, the press and other industry relevant parties – or 'influencers'.

Otherwise known as 'influencer marketing', outreach has grown in importance as part of an ethical link building strategy, largely as a consequence of Google algorithm changes designed to clamp down on other, less reputable link, building techniques.

Influencer outreach is the process of identifying those with powerful following among your target audience, and offering them great content for them to publish or share with an inbound link to your site.

The follower demographic and the authority an influencer has are crucial. They can have the biggest audience out there, but if their audience doesn't match the one you're targeting, or the followers don't engage what they're saying then you're not going to get the results you're looking for. Sometimes a smaller, more engaged and loyal following is actually a lot more valuable.

HOW TO EARN GOOD BACKLINKS

The way to earn genuine, high quality backlinks is by sticking to the following rules - which are basic good practice for online marketing in general:

- Build a genuine community which interacts with your website, your social channels and one another.

- Develop and maintain authentic relationship with relevant influencers – websites and writers that operate in your niche.

- Identifying topics that will appeal to their readership and creating your unique, engaging, high quality content.

- Establishing yourself as an industry thought leader/authority and a source of great content.

Learn how to create and promote an effective, content-led outreach campaign with our **suite of resources.**

GET IN TOUCH WITH US TODAY

ABOUT US

Located in North West England, Click Consult is a multi award-winning search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC), with over 70 professionals employed and with a portfolio of over 60 clients from across the UK, Europe, Americas and Australia.

Click was named Search Agency of the Year 2018, adding to its long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within both RAR's and Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blog
Click Consult regularly posts actionable insights on its blog – dealing with all aspects of search marketing. From technical SEO to PPC, content marketing and Analytics advice, the Click Consult blog has something for everyone of any ability.

eBooks
Click Consult produces in depth eBooks on aspects of search marketing on a regular basis, dealing with the latest best practices, changes to standard practices, methods of improvement and more.
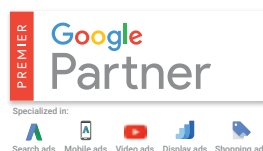
Infographics
Sometimes what you need is a quick point of reference about complex subjects. Thanks to its team of highly talented designers, Click Consult is also able to distil its vast experience into easy to understand visual content.

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OUR AWARDS

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