TECHNICAL SEO AND WEB DEVELOPMENT

A UNIFORMED STRATEGY

When it comes to business, there is a constant need to evolve, this is due to ever-developing changes in consumer habits. More and more people are buying, browsing and shopping online and as such it is vital that businesses are making themselves seen, especially in the right places.

The best way to do this is to have a website, where all of the services, products and resources are visible and where the important information such as contact details are displayed. There are a number of ways to build a website and the plethora of designs and styles is limitless. So with so much to choose from it can be difficult to stand out.

Some businesses have big, flashy websites, the all singing, all dancing variety which lure customers in and use clever calls to actions (CTAs) to gain conversions. Some websites however simply display products, facts,news and other information in the simplest form with scant regard for the aesthetics of their competitors.

Whichever of these applies to your business, or indeed if you are yet to build a website, tickles your fancy, you could be forgiven for feeling the pressure of which to choose. Both styles have benefits and both have downfalls, but in truth both are equally effective so long as the technical work in the background is up to scratch.

As a business you need to make sure that you are getting the very best from your online presence and the best way to do this is to think of web design and technical SEO as a partnership.

The differences which well optimised, informative, relevant websites can make to your business is enormous and, as such it is one of the key areas to consider when thinking about your overall budget. There are businesses out there who have old websites that are constantly tinkering with the backend, in order to get the most out of something they've dedicated their time too. Then there are the new brands, those that are ready for launch and who need a platform to do so.

These new brands are usually those that want to tie in their social media and make sure that they have a full digital presence which will engage with the customers and potential customers at every possible touch point. Regardless of your current position in the market and wherever you stand, making sure that you have harmony between both web development and the technical elements of SEO is a must.

It has long been said that content is king. This harks back to a day where experts within the industry encouraged businesses to use content that best describes the products, services, resources and general business information. This content had to firstly be relevant, and secondly it had to give the reader and indeed the searcher the answers they needed quickly and efficiently.

The human need for information is the reason why search engines such as Google are such big business. Once you have your content it can be easy to fall into the trap and think that you are done, that the customers will find you, and that they will convert and buy your products and services. The truth however is that no matter the amount of content and if you think it's great and no matter the design of your website and how appealing on the eye it seems, if the website cannot be found on the search engine results pages (SERPs) then the whole task is rendered useless.

I spoke in an interview recently and one of the defining things that came from that was the idea that your website is like a bus, the passenger is the content, ever-changing, and which is adapting to the needs of a specific journey such as the one that the user goes on when they search. This bus (website) can complete the journey at any moment if found, but can lose out in a race with the competition by virtue not being optimised. The technical components of web developments are the things that drive the bus. They are the engine room where products and services are driven up the SERPs.

Here at Click Consult we have produced a wide range of resources on technical optimisation and the importance of it and believe that there are six core components when it comes to building a website.

The nature of this eBook means it covers many technical aspects, but just to give you a feel of the approach we take, and which we believe to be industry standard, it is important to highlight that the site must be first of all tailored to the needs of the clients (the owner of the website), and secondly to the user's experience (UX). This is a vital component when it comes to the build of a website as all brands must have customer at the front of mind and failing here is a surefire way to fail with your overall online strategy.

With these two elements in place there are a further four considerations firstly that the website is optimised for search marketing, then that the site is mobile friendly with a shift to the way consumers interact - they are more mobile centric nowadays. The content must be bespoke and the overall focus of the site must be commercial.

We have often said that communication is the cornerstone of a successful strategy and that is why websites must be managed at various stages by a team of experts. To get the very best from your strategy we recommend a project manager is put in place. This person looks after the relationship between the customers, the SEOs who are working on a site, the developers, designers and the writers. Web design is one of the services that needs constant management and fluid communication in order to guarantee performance.

Only when the content is produced and the images and design are placed upon the site is it that the real work begins and this is why it is vital to marry technical SEO into any web development projects.

Following on from an in-depth discovery phase where professionals get a full understanding of your business, it is vital that the specification is given for the site. This is formulated in such a way that it will contain elements such as:

- The platform on which the website will be housed

- The content management system (CMS) that is used to update the site.

- The structure of the site must be such that it is easy to navigate and that the risk of bounce rate increasing is minimised due to the fact that users find the functionality of a site easy to use.

- That templates are drawn up to allow for third-party integration and other pieces of external information which the site has to pull in.

- The content planning in line with the keyword research (as you will know from many of our other e-books is such an important part of all search marketing). You can have the best site in the world but if your users cannot find it because it is not keyword optimised then the risk of losing out to other businesses is greatly increased.

One of the best ways to ensure that you get the most from your web development project is to have wireframes built that include all of the site architecture and which have technical audits at the heart of their concept. This is the only true way to adhere to the best practice of the search engines and indeed web development as a whole.

You can then start thinking about visual designs and how the site will develop. It is this phase where you do your testing and where you get ready to launch or relaunch the site.

Once the site is live the final phase is post-launch where are you evaluate what is and isn't working and what is and isn't driving traffic or conversions to the site. This is the time to make tweaks and to amend the site to get the optimum performance.

TECHNICAL RANKING FACTORS TO CONSIDER TODAY

Technical optimisation allows consumers that reach for a specific brand's 'container' to see that:

- **It can be found:** Which means that the site must be correctly indexed. It is during a 'site search' that problems with site architecture can be discovered, revealing linking issues or Google penalties which cause a homepage to rank lower than expected comparative to other pages on the site.

- **It has the right labels:** When the brand name or branded goods or terms are searched for, the correct pages should always appear in an order a consumer would expect. If not, this can be another indication that there are penalties or indexing issues.

Though this process involves some relatively simple steps, it is fundamental to the SEO process. If the domain is not operating as it should, all other efforts may be ultimately rendered fruitless. Though this is how optimisation of a domain should begin, there are other steps which are necessary at this early stage to ensure the best results. You should ensure that:

- You are correctly managing content updates, redirects, and domain migrations
- You are using the correct redirects for the required purpose, and that 404 pages are relevant, unique and branded
- Your site is using the correct technologies, avoiding reliance on Flash and Javascript
- Your site's navigation is clear and hierarchical and that there is a well organised and exhaustive XML Sitemap, and inter-page linking.
- There are no or very few unnecessary links and duplicate pages

Once you have a site that can be found the next step is climbing SERPs. Herer there are a large number of ranking factors to consider, exactly how many are unknown – although many in the industry tend to take the benchmark of 200+.

With this in mind it can be difficult for businesses to develop a strategy that will encompass all of these factors and they will want to highlight what they deem to be the most important ones.

When Google makes an update to the core algorithm SEOs often spiral into a frenzied panic. Updates can tell us a lot about how Google are crawling pages and what they are looking for in order to provide the best (most relevant) pages to a search query.

With this in mind it is important for businesses to not only look at the main ranking factors such as content and backlinks but some of the more technical aspects too.

In order to get the most from your SEO strategy, then looking at technical fixes is a must. Of those that fit into this category this blog will look at, what many consider to be the most important technical points.
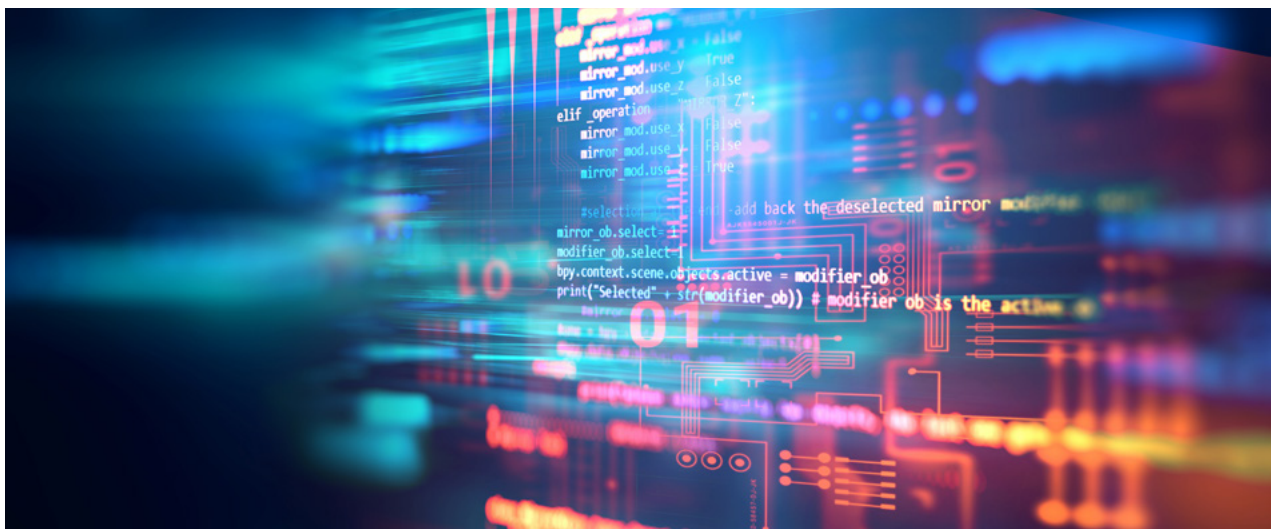
Presence of H1/H2

Recently the number of landing pages that are crawled and are ranking on Google which contain H1 and H2 heading has risen sharply. This is no coincidence. The only pages that tend not to see an increase in the number of H1 headers is in position 1; this is largely due to the fact that these positions are dominated by brands and brand terms. Searchmetrics call this phenomenon 'brand factor' but suggests that the general trend of there being more H2 headlines for those websites occupying positions 2-10 (first page).

HTTPS

Google have long been moving towards a more secure web, where the transfer of data is more secure and the risk associated with browsing are reduced. Page encryption using HTTPS is growing quickly. In 2015 only 12% of all pages on Google relied on data transfer via HTTP. As we stand now over 40% of all pages on Google are operating in this way, a figure that will continue to rise. The status of HTTPS as a ranking factor has been elevated further following the marking of all HTTP sites being marked as unsafe.

Over 50% of all webpages in the top 10 positions are using HTTPS encryption and businesses should take note of this when they are strategy planning.

TLD Rankings

Top-level domain (TLD) is the formal term for the suffix that appears at the end of a domain name. Some example of top-level domains include:

- .com

- .net

- .org

- .edu

There is strong evidence to suggest that those sites operating with a TLD rank higher and gain more from their status than those without. According to Moz when it comes to your domain name you need to make it memorable. They say:

"Strive for domain names that are short, easy to remember, easy to type, and easy to say.

"This is valuable for word-of-mouth advertising because those visitors will need to visit your domain directly, but it also matters for processing fluency. An implicit cognitive bias, processing fluency is the concept that we remember and have more positive associations with things that we can easily say and easily think about, and that includes pronounceability in our own minds.

"Also stay away from domain names that include numbers or other non-standard characters, use unusual spelling, or are longer than about 15 characters or so.
"If the .com TLD for a domain name you're looking to purchase isn't available, lean towards .net. , .co, or a known ccTLD as alternatives.

"Additionally, it is not recommended that SEO-conscious webmasters purchase low-quality TLDs such as .biz, .info, .ws, .name, etc. as a means of increasing traffic. Because they're less commonly known, these TLDs receive substantially less traffic than the more widely known domains and are more frequently associated with 'spammy' behaviour."

URLs

This is one of the areas that causes the most discussion but the general consensus is that using short, accurate URLs is the best practice. Shorter URLs tend to rank higher on page 1. During his time with Google, Matt Cutts said that there may be some value to adding a keyword into the URL and that they are readable by humans.

The key considerations when it comes to URLs are:

- Remove extra words

- Shorter is better

- One URL for your home page

- Easily readable

- Utilise hyphens and underscores

- Match URLs and titles

- Limit folders

- Restrict redirection

- Avoid keyword stuffing

- Using tracking parameters

- Paginated URLs

User focused content (UFC)

Although the term UFC is widely associated with the business of combat sports, in this instance it is the abbreviation for 'user focused content'. This UFC delivers the same knockout performance only this time on the internet and not in the octagon. UFC is a term given to posts and pieces of content that are tailored with the user or searcher in mind. They are well optimised and are keyword rich meaning that they are written to display certain sites for the exact terms that the user is searching for. These posts have become vital in the wake of Google's EAT update, which looks at the authenticity and relevance of a website. Trust is a huge factor in how sites are displayed in the SERPs as the search engines want to fulfil the needs of the user in the best possible way.

If content is poorly written or irrelevant then the bounce rate for you site if likely to rise. Customers will leave and then you will miss out to competitors.

Over the last few months this is something that we have been further developing and it is plain to see that the performance of clients improved greatly when content is bespoke and authoritative. The well researched nature of these types of post and the why both keyword research ands Schema markup are used means that this tactic is one of the true early adopters of the need to harness technical SEO when it comes to your content.

Site speed

Google announced that page/site speed would be a major ranking factor especially with the rise of Mobile-First. Google initially said that mobile page speed would not be a factor in the Mobile-First Index change, which means even sites that take 30 seconds to load would not be downranked in the search results despite serving a very poor experience to the searcher. But those who thought mobile page speed wouldn't matter at all need to rethink that position. This all changed when Gary Illyes, from Google announced the change at the SMX conference in March 2019.
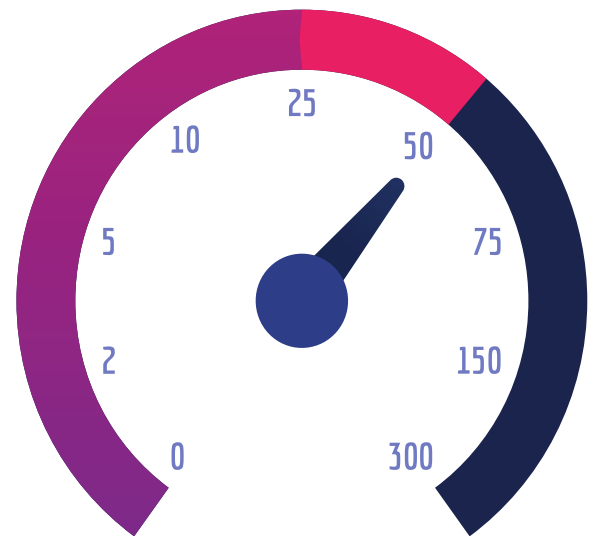
He said: "The way Google calculates page speed for desktop doesn't work for calculating it on mobile, so they need to launch a new one for mobile page speed. And using desktop page speed for a mobile index makes zero sense and would necessitate crawling the desktop version of the page to do so."

According to Google the average time it takes for a mobile landing page to load is now 22 seconds. Compare that with the three seconds visitors need to decide if they want to stay for your page to load and you will see a huge discrepancy.

SEOs should be interested in this as a ranking factor and businesses need to take it on board. Google's latest research shows that the chance of a bounce increases 32% when the page load time goes from 1s to 3s. 1s to 5s increases the chance to 90% and if your site takes up to 10s to load, the chance of a bounce increases to 123%.

For search engines, better results and performance is a sign of a healthy site that pleases customers and therefore should be rewarded with a higher ranking.

According to Yoast: "Keep in mind that your work is never done. Your mobile site is never too fast, and your customers will never come flocking to you when you shave off just a little of your loading time. Keep working on it. Now, tomorrow and next month. If possible, try to automate your PageSpeed Insights testing, so you get regular updates."

Mobile friendliness

Of the other considerations that businesses need to consider the most important is mobile friendliness. It is now widely acknowledged that Mobile-First is a vital; part of search and the shift from desktop to smartphone is there to see.

To this end businesses need to consider that all of the content must be optimised to suit the ways in which consumers search.

Essentially Mobile-First search is Google's nod to the fact that people using their service are far more transient and that the way in which the search is often done on a smartphones or tablets. With this in mind it has put a greater focus on ranking sites which are optimised for such devices.

Google now uses the mobile experience of a site to calculate its rankings, rather than the desktop version. As this Mobile-First indexing directly affects where your business appears in search results, the responsiveness of your website has never been more crucial.

Your site's mobile responsiveness has long impacted on your SEO performance in other ways:

- **Functionality –** websites that are difficult to operate on mobile devices have a higher bounce rate, driving frustrated users to competitor sites: another factor Google takes into account when determining rankings.

- **Page load speeds –** slow load times widely affect mobile users relying on 3G signals; the '3 seconds-or-less' rule means users will abandon sites that don't load quickly enough, which can again drive up your bounce rate.

The way people use the internet on mobile devices is different to desktop – and so is their purchasing behaviour. Mobile users expect that they can access information quickly and simply.

Google decided that the best way to take action would be to make incremental changes to their ranking algorithm and have published the following study –masterfulmobile.withgoogle.com/.

The study looked at how major brands are adopting mobile performance as metric, highlighting areas where they were missing out and learning for the changes that brands were making. This study was informative and as such we thought it best to look in depth at the changes that you could make.

Google assessed over 1,000 of the most visited sites across retail, finance and travel, for the following five usability areas:

- **'Findability'**
- **Product pages**
- **Registration and conversion**
- **Mobile design**

(These four were assessed by user experience specialists.)

- **Speed**

(This was measured through an automated process which was then reviewed and managed by web speed performance specialists.)

The criteria for these pages were as follows:

- **'Findability' –** Following a search, are users taken to the most appropriate page? Does the on-site search help them quickly find the right product or service?

- **Product pages –** Are the main product or service images and details presented clearly and consistently? Are there prominent next steps or calls to action?

- **Registration and conversion –** Are forms easy to complete? Are price breakdowns provided? Is the transaction process simple and safe for users?

- **Mobile design –** Are the site's pages mobile-friendly? Are they well laid out, with clear headings, well-labelled icons, and relevant content? Is branding consistent?

- **Speed –** Is the site's performance optimised for mobile? Do pages load fast enough to not disrupt the overall experience?

For the speed part of the study, Google's Lighthouse v2 browser automation tool was used to conduct synthetic (or simulated) testing of website speed on WiFi. The following metrics were measured:

- First meaningful paint (5)

- First CPU Idle (5)

- Time to Interactive (5)

- Speed Index (1)

- Estimated Input Latency (1)

The numbers in brackets relate to the weighting that Google gives each task in relation to speed. Whilst this isn't gospel, I feel that it gives businesses an indication of which parts of speed performance to target first when making changes. Of the overall score, 70% was based on vertical-specific usability best practices, and the other 30% on site speed. While the best practices were broken down for clarity into four usability areas, the score was based on the total result across all usability areas.

FINAL THOUGHTS

If you are able to look at all of the technical considerations listed here and use them in the strategy phase of a new website or in the existing phase of your current site then you are sure to reap the rewards. The partnership between web dev and technical SEO can't be ignored and if you wan't to appear in P1 then optimisation is a must.

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ABOUT US

Click Consult is a multi award-winning digital and search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, outreach, social media, conversion rate optimisation (CRO) and international/multilingual search marketing. We can also offer training and consultation to support your teams or existing strategy.

Click was named SEO Agency of the Year 2019, adding to our long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, a Bing Select Partner and feature in The Drum Recommends.

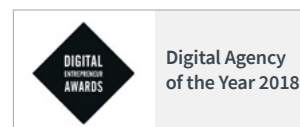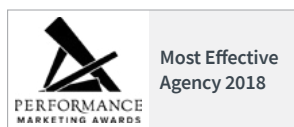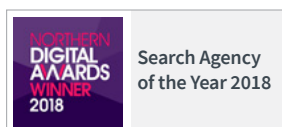## YOUR BESPOKE ORGANIC SEARCH (SEO) ANALYSIS AND REVIEW

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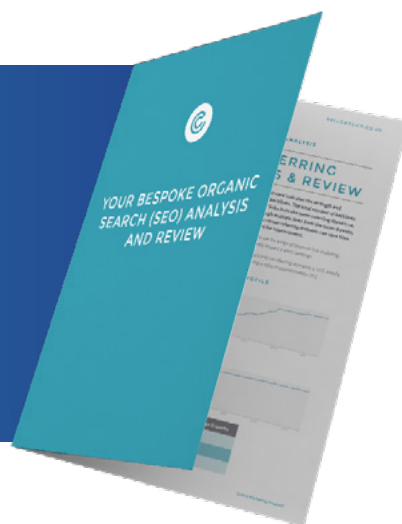
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OUR ACCREDITATIONS

OUR AWARDS

OUR TECHNOLOGIES