THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO COMPLETING AN SEO AUDIT IN 2021

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

As we often say here at Click Consult, the importance of a balanced, bespoke search marketing strategy is vital if you are to get the most out of your online performance. Businesses and brands across the country are looking for a competitive edge when it comes to improving both their search visibility on the search engine results pages (SERPs) and improving conversion and ROI.

In order to gain an advantage and stand out against the competition, it is therefore important that businesses continually test new marketing methods and tweak their approach to ensure optimum performance. One of the best things that you can do is to perform an SEO Audit, this will not only give you an accurate reflection on where you are presently operating online but what changes have worked and which areas still need technical improvements.

With all of that in mind we have decided to ask the experts that form our award winning SEO team of the year and put together a checklist of things to consider when putting together an SEO audit.

Let's begin…

WHAT IS AN SEO AUDIT?

The aim of a full technical website audit is to both assess current performance and highlight areas for future growth. A comprehensive technical audit seeks to find and highlight all issues affecting the implementation of technical on-page technologies, before providing guidance on how best to rectify the issue.

Some of the areas that it is vital to look at when conducting a technical SEO audit are as follows:

- domain and server profile

- canonicalisation

- indexing

- navigation and URL structure

- website/ webpage speed

In terms of how you are ranking in search results this depends largely on your link profile. I know as I write this that there are well over 200 ranking factors but conducting a link profile analysis as part of your audit is a good way to start. Businesses should look at the following areas when reviewing their link profile:

- link stats

- top authority links

- top authority domain

- anchor text

- link distribution

- link history

- link toxicity

- link geography and top level domains

- type of links

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDITING

Auditing your organic performance has always been important, but as Google updates are coming thick and fast, it's more important than ever.

Whether it's weekly, monthly or annually, brands need to know where their site is performing well and what needs to be improved. It's unlikely that there'll be concrete guidance on Google updates anymore, and how to adapt to them is left to us – so benchmarking where we are at any given point is an absolute must.

Not only can regularly auditing our organic performance help us to improve, it can also demystify changes in our organic rankings, traffic and performance.

OUR PREDICTIONS FOR SEO AUDITING IN 2021

SPEED AND USER EXPERIENCE

Today's consumers are not only savvy but they are time starved and as such, they want what they want instantly; this means that the need to fill this demand is huge. User experience (UX) is one of the areas that businesses are focusing on to ensure that they not only offer the products and services but that their customers stick around or return.

The relationship between SEO and UX has never been bigger, largely because it is the 'end point' of most consumer journeys. Good SEO, in terms of ranking highly (visibility) and ranking for the correct or relevant keywords (optimisation) means that you have the best chance of being chosen by the user. Once this user becomes a visitor to your site, it is the UX that bridges the gap between a visit and a conversion.

If you are offering the product or service that you say you are and it is easy to read more about it/ them, then you are increasingly likely to keep the interest of the visitor. Additional content that answers any questions that they may have or gives them the technical specifications of a product will help your business to sound more authoritative and knowledgeable. This in turn builds trust in the brand and can lead to a purchase or conversion.

According to the Digital Marketing Institute: "The ideal online customer journey is a user-friendly website that combines seamless navigation; a clean cut purchasing journey; dynamic and digestible content; top notch customer support and mobile device compatibility. By combining these elements a business can create an online environment that can make a brand."

A survey that followed this definition of a good UX website revealed that 79% of all customers admit to searching for another site if the one that they ended up on didn't live up to expectations.

When discussing the topic our Head of Technical SEO, Charlotte Chapman said:

> *For me the focus has to be on speed and user experience in 2021.*
>
> *With the page experience update due to roll out in May 2021, it has never been so important to ensure all key user experience metrics are optimised. These metrics include how quickly each URL loads, if the site is mobile friendly, has intrusive interstitials and is secure.*
>
> *We started to prepare clients for user experience becoming a racking factor in 2019/2020 but it's an on-going task that will continue into 2021.*

UX - THINK ABOUT THE JOURNEY

There are six distinctive stages to the consumer journey when it comes to the link between SEO performance and user experience (UX) and by following this route you will gain better traction, build brand image and ultimately realise your KPIs.

The first step is the user intent phase. This is where the potential customer asks a question of a search engine that they hope will take them to the appropriate results and which will ultimately begin them on the path to fulfilling a need.

Next is the ranking stage, this is where the SEOs optimise the content on a site to make sure that it is picked up and that it hits the top of the SERPs – the higher the rank the more positive the correlation between the number of sessions and level of traffic.

Up next is the qualifying stage where the SEOs use keywords and other tactics to qualify the traffic that has been received. They learn from this and alter strategies and approaches if there is such a need. Constant testing in the form of CRO with any SEO work is a must and can lead to a more polished, profitable performance.

Stage four is the digital interaction stage where both teams (SEO and those tasked with UX) work together to optimise performance and boost conversions.

Up next is the work on the website footprint. This is where the SEO team look at the data and give a larger viewpoint of the customer journey. Those working on the UX side of things continue to test.

The final stage is the review where teams build upon what they have learnt and update, the navigation of a site or things like meta data. This is also the stage where they refine the strategy for moving forward.
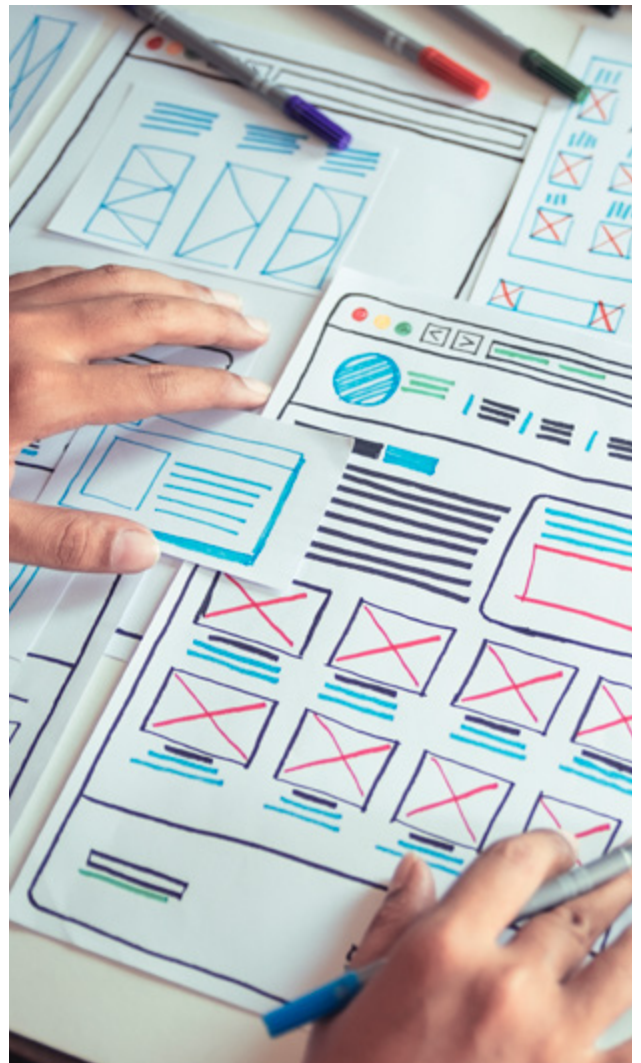
TOP TIPS FOR CREATING GREAT UX

When it comes to implementing changes in order to boost UX here are some of the things that you should be mindful of:

Branding – One of the first things that you should do is to make sure that your branding is attractive and memorable. Although this may be a task for a different team, in terms of SEO it is important that you are mentioning your brand alongside all of the relevant searches and in terms of UX there is a lot to be said for reinforcing the branding message across the site and keep it front of mind. This is especially important when it comes to gaining return visits.

Layout and consistency – Keep the navigation the same for your site and make all of the buttons easily recognisable. If you are able to do this people will know where they need to go in order to find the information that they need. It will also help them to navigate to the end of the buyer's funnel and conversions will therefore increase. You can also add in similar or partner products here to further boost revenue.

Functionality – Structure your content to fit the needs of your user and make sure that the design of the site is responsive. Speed is also important here especially in B2C sites, particularly those in retail, where a customer can be put off if images are slow to load. Always test and tweak your site speed where possible.

Mobile responsiveness – Talking of responsiveness, make sure that you are 'mobile ready' as an increasing number of transactions and searches are performed on mobile devices. If the appearance, speed or navigation of your site is poor on mobile then you could lose out to a rival.

Live chat – One thing that is often overlooked when it comes to UX is a live chat function. More and more websites are now using this in order to add an additional layer of customer support. If someone has a query once they reach you page or need help with the navigation then this can be a good area for them to have access to.

Data collection – What is the point in having visitors to your website if you aren't going to see what they are doing and look at ways in which you can improve. Look at things like heat maps to see where the users are on the site and also monitor things such as where they click and how much time they are spending on your page. A quick exit from the site could be indicative of a poor UX. Make changes and learn from the data that you have.

CONTENT GAPS AND INDUSTRY COMPETITIVENESS

A gap analysis is the method of assessing and understanding whether or not a business' objectives are being met and, if not, the tactics that will need to be employed to ensure that they are. The 'gap' is the space between where a business currently sits and where they want to be within a certain time-frame.

In some circles, a gap analysis may also be referred to as a 'needs analysis', 'needs assessment' or 'need-gap analysis'. For the purposes of SEO, however, a gap analysis looks at several things:

• Missing content

• Undiscovered topics

• Undiscovered keywords

• Content your competitors are targeting

• New industry developments

• New product information

With testing, and a trial and error approach, playing such a vital role in a gap analysis, you need to ensure that your planning is prepared properly and that you can adapt your strategy as and when you need to. The following Five tips will help your discovery phase and can lead you to a successful gap analysis.

Charlotte Chapman also said this was something to consider in the months ahead, adding:

> *Another idea could be how the digital landscape is going to be more competitive than ever with a rapidly changing marketplace for many businesses.*
>
> *With many on the high street in administration, and Covid 19 still around for at least Q1 plus considerations around a vaccine roll out and Brexit which may impact on stocks and the ability to trade for many in 2021, it is more important than ever to do informed keyword research, competitor analysis and content gap to ensure you stay ahead of competitors and take advantage of any gaps to be had.*

RICH RESOURCES

No doubt you've noticed that Google has jazzed up the way it displays results over the years. Whereas in the past you'd be faced with a list of links and plain text, you're now more likely to be presented with search engines results pages (SERPs) that includes additional information, such as images, videos, recipes, user ratings and other data, enriching your search experience by enabling you 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.

Claire Bowden, an SEO Executive here at Click Consult recommends adding rich resources to your content 'to-do' list. She said:

> *Make sure you include high quality photos, optimised video embeds, interactive tools, downloadable resources, and annotated diagrams so the user has all the information from you that they could possibly need to make an informed buying decision.*
>
> *This stops the page being one big block of content and massively improves the overall user experience - not everyone takes in information in the same way. Consider what would really be useful to your user and think outside the box - I've seen one site use sliding images for before and after pictures of all their industrial cleans which conveyed their message better than any written testimonial could have done, and another used an audio play button to show how quiet their boilers really are from certain distances around the home.*

PERSONALISATION

Businesses can now use personalised CRO to understand user behaviour, improve website performance and maximise the value of traffic. So why isn't everyone doing it?

Most marketing departments have been personalising campaigns in one form or another for some time. This includes segmenting mail drops or even regional television and radio adverts. It is only in recent years that technology has really exploded with conversion rate optimisation (CRO) and online advertising to drive home personalisation.

CRO is practised to improve the value of traffic; whether that is more leads, more transactions, more users moving to the next stage of the funnel, or simply learnings. The end goal should always be to improve conversion rate, whatever that may mean to the business.

Historically for CRO, something such as personalising tests based on device was considered ground-breaking. This has now evolved to looking at what keyword the visitor used to click through to the website, location, source/medium, new vs returning user etc.

If you could improve conversion rate by learning what really makes your users tick, then it absolutely makes sense to. If you could improve your website to better match the needs of your users, then it absolutely makes sense to.

Claire also touched on the fact that businesses should use personal experience anecdotes in their content. She said: "The May core algorithm update of this year showed that pages which included people's personal experiences ranked better than those that did not.

> *This is because it follows Google's EAT guidelines around expertise - who is a better expert on the real life trauma of alzeimers, for example, than a person living with the condition? So enable comments on your blog posts, and insert quotes, mini testimonials, case studies and videos which reference people's real experiences. Not only does this boost the EAT of your page, but it also helps in gaining your users' trust that your information, products or services are used by real people who are also looking to solve the same issue as them.*

SITE ACCESSIBILITY

With Covid-19 lockdowns more people than ever are being forced to research and shop online. Click Consult Director, Alan Reeves suggested that site accessibility needs to be part of your technical audit. He predicts Google will consider accessibility as a more important ranking signal during 2021, if they're not already.

Accessibility on various devices has already entered into the ranking signals for Google, but there is nothing similar for accessibility for the visually or hearing impaired – the SEO industry should take the lead on this important change

Action on hearing states that there are presently eleven million people in the UK living with some form of hearing loss, while the RNIB report that there were over two million people in the UK living with sight loss. That is up to thirteen million people in the UK who are not being adequately served by the internet in its present form.

Yet, in a survey of major UK brands by the Internet Society, advancing the accessibility to the internet for persons with disabilities was found to meet several key business goals:

•   Reach new markets

•   Maximise employee engagement and productivity

•   Provision high quality products and services

•   Improve supply chain management

•   Build partner and community relations

•   Minimise risk of legal action

Organic search agencies and departments are in a fantastic position to facilitate an internet that is both useable and useful for all. By setting a best practice in this area before it becomes an issue, the industry could buck the trend of reactive implementation of Google webmaster best practice.

KEEP AN EYE ON GOOGLE

Over the years, and indeed since Google began to run their algorithm as a way of providing the best possible search engine results based on the queries of their users there have been many changes. According to Moz:

> *Each year, Google changes its search algorithm around 500–600 times. While most of these changes are minor, Google occasionally rolls out a 'major' algorithmic update (such as Google Panda and Google Penguin) that affects search results in significant ways.*

The important things for business' is to be vigilant, stay ahead of the game and look at what the previous iterations of the algorithm were and look at how they have had an effect on the search results. One mistake that many companies make is that they forget about what has gone before. When building any SEO strategy look at the best practice and look into some of the errors that others have made. If you can get a solid footing and a plan that will not see you penalised from the outset that is half the battle.

From your initial start point the main message is to then follow the industry and become compliant with Google as they roll out algorithmic changes. Back in March 2018 Google confirmed that they ran an unnamed "broad core algorithm update" that impacted the appearance and rankings of some websites in the search results.

Google posted that they do these types of updates "several times per year" and there is nothing a site can do specifically to "fix" their ranking after the core update runs. "Some sites may note drops or gains."

They also said if a page drops, it doesn't necessarily mean there is something wrong with that page, it is just how Google changed their ranking models that now benefits "pages that were previously under-rewarded."

This is interesting as it puts businesses in limbo as they can't prepare for changes or get ahead of the curve. The message is simple, 'do SEO well and keep on rolling with it'. Of course with this strategy it is wise to read around the industry and utilise social media and official blogs to check for news as well over half of the Google updates aren't confirmed. When big sites or a large number of sites in a particular industry are hit and start to see their rankings drop speculation is rife and there are many who are quick to comment on why this may have happened. Without confirmation from Google thought little can be proved.

Stefan Mustieles, one of our Senior Organic SEO Strategists said:

> *In December we have just seen the latest Google Core algorithm update go live effecting a number of websites both positively and negatively. Google will continue to release core updates in 2021 which target quality and trust across the three core SEO principles, Technical, Content & Links.*
>
> *If you feel like your website is technically proficient, your content is up there with the best of them yet you're still not ranking well, then you may want to consider looking at your link profile. It can only take a few low-quality links, to lower trust in your entire link profile, negatively affecting your rankings.*
>
> *Utilising the disavow tool, following a thorough backlink audit, could help make you one of the winners come the next Google Core update.*

MATCH TARGET KEYWORDS WITH USER INTENT

One of the best ways to make sales online is to make sure that when a person visits your site that they are able to convert easily. It sounds simple but so many businesses spend too much time and effort earning visits and not conversions.

This of course, could be down to the way the site is set up and poor user experience (UX) but it is more common that it is because the search results have attracted a user with a low purchase intent.

One of the most difficult things about producing online content for a brand is determining its purpose. Content for content's sake can have detrimental impact if, for example, it dilutes the relevance signals the site provides the various algorithms that rank pages, while insufficient content can leave sites struggling to compete for relevant search terms. Search intent according to ahrefs, is the why behind a search query. In other words, why did the person make this search? Do they want to learn something? Are they looking to make a purchase? Or, are they looking for a particular website?

Users today want to get the answers to their queries quickly and easily. They also want to make sure that the results that are returned are relevant and that they are from a trusted or apparently trusted source, (this latter point is important as it goes without saying that customers want a trusted service, the problem is that if you are new to the space then you have to appear as professional, relevant and authentic as possible).

Customers and users tend to be looking for one of the following things:

- an accurate answer

- an item

- a specific set of details

- a date

- an image

- an address

- a service

- a definition

In an official definition, there are three broad categories that cover most web search queries: informational, navigational, and transactional. These are also called "do, know, go." The three areas are:

- **Informational queries** – Queries that cover a broad topic (eg Liverpool or New Cars) for which there may be thousands of relevant results.

- **Navigational queries** – Queries that seek a single website or web page of a single entity (eg YouTube or Facebook).

- **Transactional queries** – Queries that reflect the intent of the user to perform a particular action, like purchasing a car or downloading a screen saver.

There's no point, for example, targeting search terms with little to no commercial intent on pages that want users to make a purchase or complete a late stage CTA – even if it has good monthly search volumes and cpc.

The best way to get your site ranking for keywords in Google is to create content that aligns with intent. Avoid trying to rank your homepage for a keyword where users are looking for blog posts, and vice versa. Look at the types of content already ranking for each target keyword, and decide whether it's the right fit for your page, and what type of content you'll need.

DON'T OVERLOOK RELATED KEYWORDS & ASSOCIATED SEARCH PHRASES

Our final point and by no means of lesser importance comes from Lauren Fellows, a member of our award-winning organic search (SEO) team. She told us:

> *Most keyword tools show related search terms, and Google often suggests 'People also search for' on SERPs.*
>
> *These can be great resources when doing keyword research because they can uncover less competitive but just as relevant keywords that can be targeted for a quick win. Optimising related keywords and synonyms in content is a good way to demonstrate industry knowledge and expertise.*

FINAL THOUGHTS

As websites develop, there are elements that will require ongoing maintenance and other issues that will require their own endeavours from time to time. SEO is less a project than a process - and regular audits are how we keep the process on track.

GET IN TOUCH WITH US TODAY

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 both SEO Agency of the Year and Organic Search (SEO) Team of the Year 2020; ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, and a Microsoft Advertising Select Agency Partner.
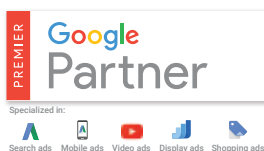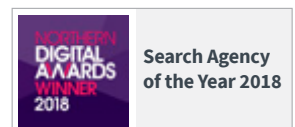
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