



BEYOND THE BASICS: SEO STRATEGY IN 2021



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INTRODUCTION

As you will know we have produced a large number of eBooks, guides and other resources over the last few years, all with the sole purpose of highlighting the changes that the search marketing industry faces and the strategies you as a business need to adopt to stay ahead of the curve. Our main focus has often been organic search (SEO) and we have covered in great detail, a number of areas relating to this - most notably in our SEO Uncovered series.

This eBook will bring you right up to date and look at the topics that are popular right now in 2021 and take you 'beyond the basics'.

WHAT IS SEO?

Organic Search, referred to as Search Engine Optimisation or SEO, employs a combination of creative and technical skills to improve the visibility of websites for commercially important key terms. In doing so, the aim is to increase the number of consumers exposed to a brand at vital points in the consumer journey, to increase traffic to the website and, therefore, consumer awareness and commercial actions (purchase, download, contact form submissions etc).

WHY YOU NEED TO IMPLEMENT AN SEO STRATEGY

While it is clearly of vital importance for consumers to be able to find your website in SERPs, organic search (SEO) is about much more than just rankings. A high quality organic search (SEO) strategy can improve ROI through additional, highly relevant traffic which is targeted to specific landing pages via keyword targeting to generate conversions.



WHAT TO FOCUS ON IN 2021

CORE WEB VITALS (CWV)

Core web vitals are a series of user focused metrics which measure loading, interactivity, and visual stability.



Google defines these metrics as following:

- **Largest Contentful Paint (LCP):** Measures loading performance. To provide a good user experience, LCP should occur within 2.5 seconds of when the page first starts loading.
- **First Input Delay (FID):** Measures interactivity. To provide a good user experience, pages should have an FID of less than 100 milliseconds.
- **Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS):** Measures visual stability. To provide a good user experience, pages should maintain a CLS of less than 0.1.

WHY CWVS ARE IMPORTANT

Google announced they would be adding CWV to the ranking signals mid-June 2021.



Google Webmasters @googlewmc · 28m

We're announcing that page experience ranking signals for Google Search will launch in May 2021. This will combine Core Web Vitals and previous UX-related signals.

Learn more:

Timing for bringing page experience to Google Search
Official news on crawling and indexing sites for the Google index
webmasters.googleblog.com

While this has the potential to make a huge difference to the SERPs, in recent history Google has rolled out such changes relatively slowly (see the move to mobile and the addition of speed as a ranking factor) and then increase the weighting over time.

While there has been no information released on how many sites or the percentage of searches that they expect CWV to impact, there is little reason to believe that a huge initial shift in rankings is desirable to Google for updates of this nature.

While some updates – those tackling spam, dishonesty, manipulation or for EAT – have reason for the change to be immediate (sites falling foul of these updates are being ‘punished’), changes such as the Mobile Friendly update and Speed Update are Google’s attempts to shape the web – and for that reason it pays to roll out slowly, and provide ample chances for brands to fall into line.

It’s likely that all but the worst examples will see minimal ranking changes as a result of the rollout – though, as some of those with awful CLS tend to be ad-funded, that could cause problems for some news organisations and other sites which drop ads into the load after the content.

However, this will have significant ongoing impact – and brands that get on top of this early are going to be the ones that see the most benefit. If you’re competing for top ten positions for trophy keywords, or even particularly competitive high traffic terms, this kind of change could be the deciding factor in whether you outperform a competitor.

“While it may seem obvious, machine learning algorithms need to learn – and we need to teach them what great websites look like. Part of how we do that is with structured data.”

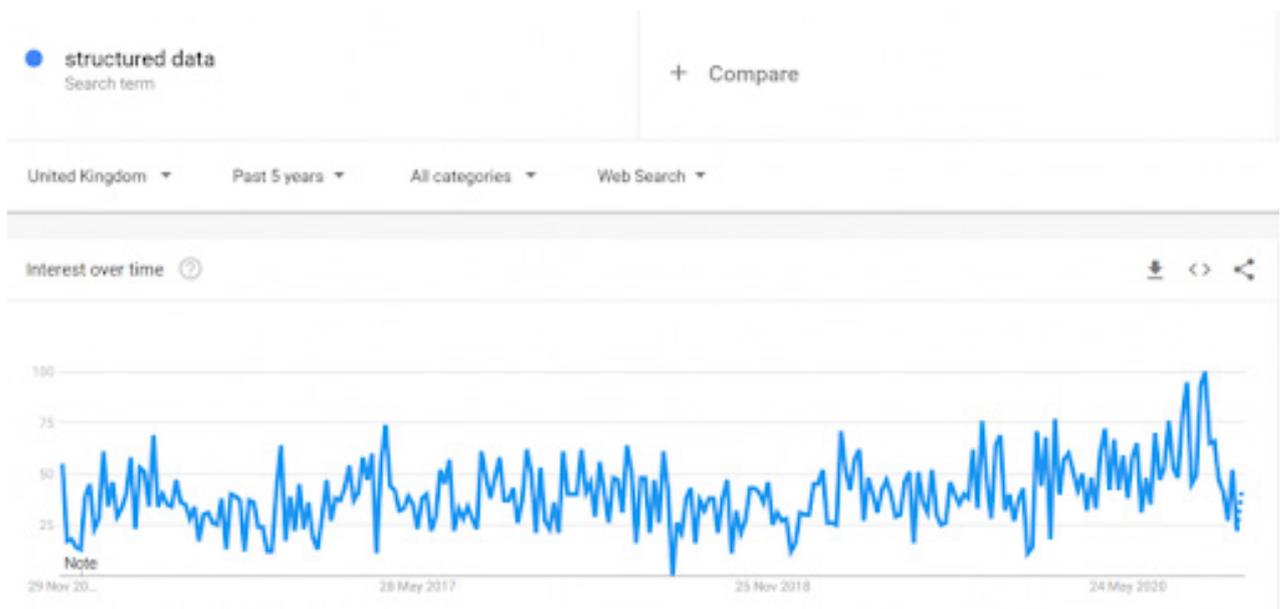
- **Charlotte Chapman, Head of Technical SEO**



SEMANTIC SEO & KNOWLEDGE GRAPHS

The more faith Google and other search engines place in machine learning, the more SEOs need to be able to satisfy what it's looking for. BERT – which is the particular NLP algorithm used by Google – is now a part of the process of returning virtually every search result, and Microsoft has exclusively licensed the even more powerful GPT-3 from OpenAI, but even with these tools, the search engines will require additional information layers for the time being (this has taken another turn since we made this prediction, with news of Google's SMITH – which is likely to be used in conjunction with BERT to improve performance over longer content).

This is where structured data and knowledge graphs come in – while we've been firm believers in the Schema.org project for some time, there seems to be a tipping point approaching both in general understanding and in ease of adoption. While the tools available are far from perfect, they are a good start – and if your competition isn't making that start, it might just be enough.



The NLP which search engines are using may help them to read the content on your site, but structured data will help them to understand it, and that is increasingly important as the technology matures.

The knowledge graph, therefore, becomes of paramount importance. The knowledge graph is how your information connects with the wider web, and it is this that you need to be thinking about. Adding structured data to your site needs to be part of the process, but it needs to be preceded by a strategy development process – you need to know how your data By now, you should have at least some schema on your site – most web-developers will throw in org schema and maybe website schema while building the site, but that is simply not enough. SEOs will need to begin planning their schema implementation rather than adding it ad hoc to websites when they get the chance.

The way search engines are developing is only going to speed up as we trust more of its refinement to machine learning – while we're some way of the point of the singularity, it is in accordance with the theory that machines will continually improve their own performance until the point at which we see what is commonly referred to as an 'intelligence explosion'.

While the various weightings and measurement of core ranking factors is likely to vary, maybe wildly, in the course of 2021, one thing will remain fairly stable – and that is the need for this second data layer to properly understand your content, and SEOs will need to take it a lot more seriously. relates to the web and plan how you can make the link to it.

APPLE SEARCH AND DIVERSIFICATION

Will Apple Search dethrone Google? No. Next section... Well, okay, it's not quite that simple. Google and Microsoft have been competing to be the default search engine for Apple devices for more than a decade – and both have held the position at one time or another, and Google has been paying a reported \$12 Bn a year for the privilege. There's a reason they do that – and it's not because they fear the ability of Apple to challenge them in search.

The 11.8% share of the global market for mobile devices (down from 20% pre-pandemic) represents a huge share of mobile search and with the launch of Apple Search likely to have been at least partially driven by the monopoly investigation in to Google, this is a bit of a chicken and egg situation – did they announce a search product because they were about to need one, or because they wanted one?

However, as the lawsuits begin to mount up and – as mentioned in the previous chapter – with there being a significant proportion of the Democratic party in the US seemingly convinced by arguments about the need to break up tech giants, there may well be a growing need to diversify our thought as an industry.

With a lot of search, understandably, focused on the search engine with a >90%, any significant change in the landscape will likely cause more of a change to search and digital marketing than the introduction of CWV as a ranking signal.

Whether this will have any major impact on 2021 remains to be seen – these things take time, but we should certainly see some indications throughout the year. While Asia and Eurasia have been regions with a strong local presence in search, Baidu and Yandex are still falling short of 2% globally – how will the possibility of Baidu and Yandex powered iPhones change that?

In addition, Microsoft has been making huge progress with the semantic web, visual and image search, and with natural language processing – some of the most important search trends for the mid-term. The ability for them to grow their userbase in the US and Europe, and consequently their profitability could potentially be massive.

Again, there's only a remote possibility that this will have a major impact on SEO in general, but it is a trend well worth SEOs keeping at the forefront of their minds. It may be that SEO can continue to deal primarily with strategies aimed at improving rankings and traffic from Google, but it is well worthwhile spending some time in 2021 familiarising ourselves with the workings of other search engines – as we could come to need them a lot more in coming years.

AUTOMATION

Automation is always trending upward – and the ability of less experienced SEOs to complete complex tasks grows along with it. It's for this reason that log file analysis isn't as common – although it can still offer insights that the tools which replaced it can miss. However, as search engines have advanced and the techniques that SEOs use have also developed, this automation has shifted focus.

The ever-growing use of Python and other languages, while sometimes dismissed by big names in the industry, is providing short-cuts for tasks that either took a long time, or were simply avoided. This is combined with the improving range of reports offered by tools such as SEMrush, Screaming Frog, Ahrefs and more, which are improving their ability to detect and diagnose schema issues and run content analysis all reduce the manual requirement of SEO and, therefore, offer opportunities to improve performance as well as efficiency.

While these improvements can lower the barriers to entry for junior team members – their main benefit will be in freeing up the time of your senior SEOs. What is vital, however, is not to simply increase their workload, but to allow them to join this revolution. Let your team invest the hours saved in learning. It has been this approach that has led to the improvements so far, but only your team knows the thing that will make the biggest difference to them – let them make it.



HOW USERS SEARCH

Just as the devices we're searching with have changed since the beginning of 2020, the way we search is also changing. Take the below, for example – 'near me' searches have risen consistently for five years, but obviously not this year. Delivery is something we've taken for granted with eCommerce in general, but we've searched far more for other delivery types (and even after the initial lockdown, this didn't return to pre-pandemic levels), while we've also been looking far more for things to do 'at home'.

This is just an indication, however – there have been similar switches and shifts across the majority of verticals and while we can perhaps breathe a sigh of relief that the vaccines will arrive within the timescale we've been predicting, we still have months ahead of partial and full lockdowns and the chance that we may see permanent shifts in expectations and search patterns.

Brands need to re-examine how users are looking for and finding their site. There will certainly be new key terms emerging that will deliver traffic and it will be important to get in at the ground floor to ensure they are not lost to the competition. For that reason, a full keyword review needs to be conducted and that it likely going to require a content project and maybe even a shift of targeting for page titles and meta descriptions for existing pages as well as tweaks to existing content. While there is an inertia that develops in big brands, and there seems to have been a hope that things will just return to normal once the vaccine is available to the general public, there is ample opportunity for agile brands to steal a step on their competition.

POSITION ZERO

Position zero or featured snippets can be seen in a form of a paragraph, list or a table and are important for two reasons. Search Engines use position zero for voice search results, which has become an important online strategy for local businesses and information websites that rely on conversational searches.

Featured Snippets can also give your website a lot of exposure and increase brand awareness when you are not ranking at the top of Google search, when the featured snippet is pulled from a lower ranking URL.

Even though there is no one correct way of achieving position zero, focusing on long tail keywords that have the potential to provide better conversions is a great place to start. According to a recent research by SEMRush, 41% of questions have a featured snippet with paragraph snippets being more popular than other types.

The study also shows that 70% of the featured content comes from websites that have adopted HTTPS and have an average Mobile-Friendly and Usability score of between 95 and 100. This shows that your overall website performance, including speed, user experience, and site security play a role when Google is choosing to select the content for the coveted position zero.



HIGH-QUALITY, TARGETED CONTENT

One of Google's latest updates is BERT, and I can already hear you, I too hope that the next big update will be called Ernie. The acronym stands for Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers and it is designed to better understand more conversational search queries and context.

BERT is being used globally, in all languages and it is also being applied to featured snippets. The algorithm affects 1 in 10 searches as it is considered to be one of the biggest changes in Search since the release of RankBrain. Even though it is said that companies cannot really optimise for BERT, targeted and user focused content needs to be part of your online strategy for the rest of 2021.

You will need to refine your content marketing strategy, as Google's algorithm develops to improve search results by understanding context. Start by getting to know your audience, will your customers be individuals or organisations, where are they based, do you know what they want to accomplish with the performed search?

Answering those questions will get you closer to defining your content strategy and answering users' queries better and more accurately than your competitors.

MOBILE UX, PAGE SPEED, AND PERSONALISATION

This year saw Google rolling out Mobile-first indexing, which means that Google looks at the mobile version of your content for indexing and ranking. Now, more than ever the performance and user experience of your mobile website matter for both your traffic and online rankings.

Page speed is another factor that can affect whether a user stays on your website or leaves to go to a competitor. Google Chrome recently announced a plan to introduce badges for slow and fast speed, aimed at rewarding sites that deliver fast experience.

Another big factor to keep in mind for 2020 is personalisation. Information sites can cover a lot of areas and in order to capitalise on the traffic they receive, they may offer a personalisation service, where users receive experiences, tailored to their needs and interests.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

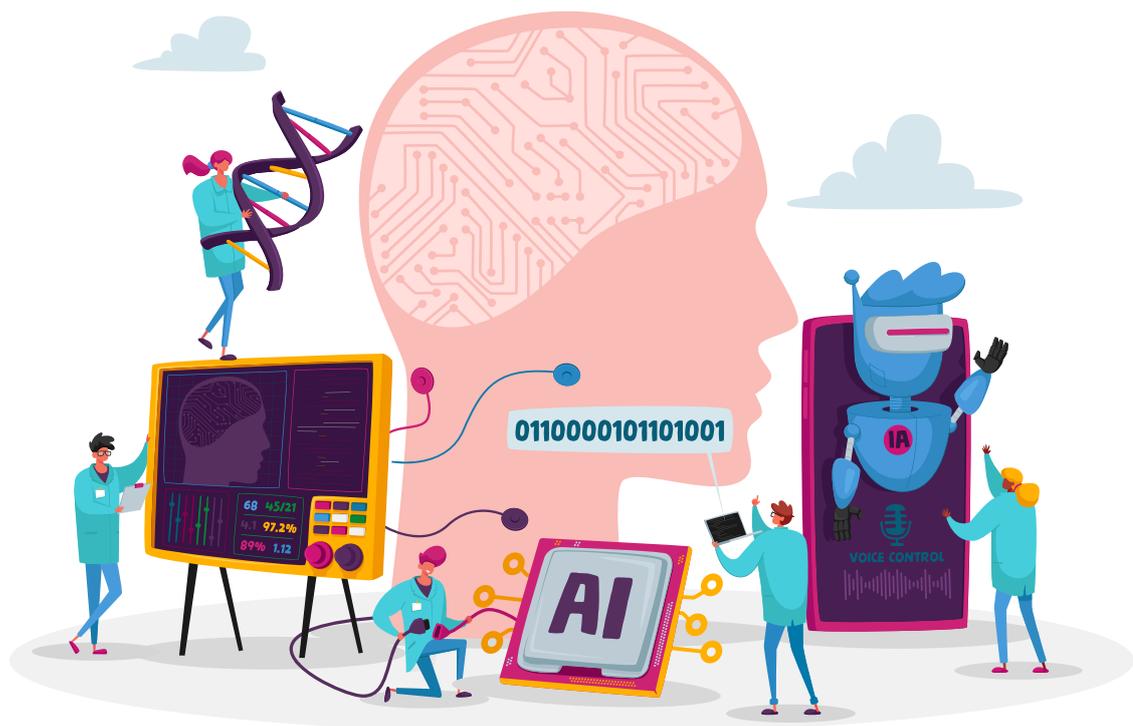
Artificial Intelligence is one of the biggest trends in Digital Marketing today and has become an important part of companies' online strategy.

Virtual and Home Assistants are now considered the norm and Visual Search is becoming stronger with each passing year. In the UK alone, 45% of retailers are using visual search, including ASOS, Boohoo, M&S, and Argos.

Visual Search is particularly advantageous for eCommerce companies that want to provide the best user experience (UX), whilst using the latest technologies. You can optimise for this by offering numerous and high-quality images of your products and also remembering to add relevant keywords to your filenames and alt tags.

What's more, earlier this year Google appeared to be testing Augmented Reality in the search results for generic queries and the technology is already available for Google Maps. These improvements are changing businesses today and users adapt to them quickly.

Your marketing strategy for the rest of 2021 will hugely depend on your goals and KPIs. The one thing that is clear is that you need to keep up with your target audience and meet their needs, whether is improving online experience by adding different features to your website or answering text search queries better than any of your competitors. No one can predict the future, but we can see that Google's latest updates are designed to improve the overall quality of search results and return more relevant to users.



GET IN TOUCH WITH US TODAY

ABOUT US

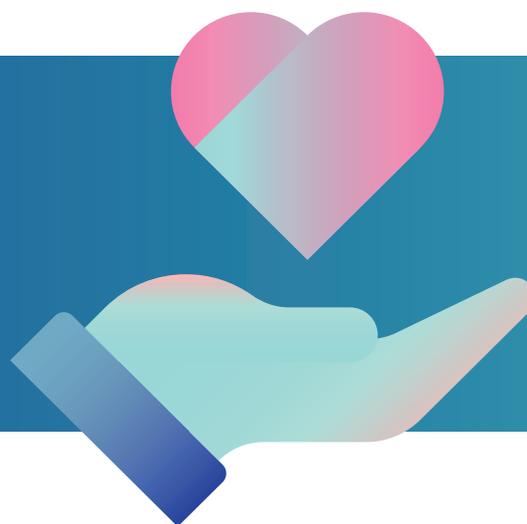
Click Consult is a multi award-winning search & digital marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, social media and analytics. 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.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

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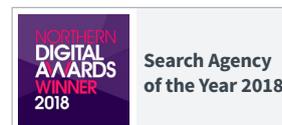
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