
THE GUIDE TO SEO FOR CMOS



KEY
STRATEGIES
FOR 2021



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2021: A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR SEO

From handling market uncertainty to improving the customer experience while grappling with budgeting for the right channels, CMOs have a big job day in and day out.

Search engine optimization can support nearly every key business goal. Yet in 2019, Gartner data shows that only about 7% of the marketing budget was allocated to it.

The tide is turning, however, as current events make it even more critical to ensure that your brand succeeds in the most important arena in 2021: the search results.

Today, CMOs are pivoting their strategies and looking at which marketing channels will help them survive and thrive. SEO helps brands future-proof their offerings. An investment in SEO helps to ensure you are visible for what your target audience is looking for now and in the future.

This guide has three parts:

- **Section 1:** We'll cover why SEO needs to be viewed as a strategic initiative company wide to get the best results.
- **Section 2:** We'll bust some common SEO myths that CMOs often grapple with to show how SEO is critical to your marketing.
- **Section 3:** We'll highlight five SEO strategies that need to be on your radar for 2021, so your brand can effectively compete in the search results.

[Bruce Clay](#)

President of Bruce Clay Inc. and “Father of SEO”

1 | SEO IS A STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

Too often, SEO exists in a silo within the organization. Separated from other key business units, the SEO team or professional is disconnected from business decisions that impact the website, and that the website can contribute to. When SEO exists in a silo, it does not thrive. SEO can, in fact, support most business decisions. In this section, we'll explain how and why SEO creates business success.

“THINK SEO” OR WORK SOMEWHERE ELSE

It was some years back when the team at Bruce Clay Inc. delivered a 100+ page SEO audit to one of the largest research and review sites in the automotive sector.

We proposed a number of improvements including radical siloing of their massive website contents. We said that if they implemented every recommendation in our strategy, it would generate a significant increase in traffic. So much so that they'd need to upgrade their servers to handle the load.



It was quite a risk for the client to take, but they got behind it.

Every SEO recommendation, no matter how large or small, would be implemented. They knew in order to pull it off that everybody — from the executives to the marketing and IT teams — would need to be a part of it.

The chairman of the board called a company meeting. He announced that search engine optimization was a key strategic initiative for the company. Everybody needed to be on board ... or, essentially, they could find another place to work.

After implementing the SEO program, then came the results: a 900 percent increase in traffic within the first week. And the site's prominence continues to this day.

SEO TAKES COMMITMENT

Commitments cannot be half-hearted and succeed. With SEO, you're either all in, or you're out. CMOs and other top decision makers must understand that SEO is a key strategic initiative for any company today.

Unfortunately, a [2019 Gartner study](#) found that in North America and the UK, less than 7 percent of the marketing budget is allocated to SEO. Yet the biggest slice of the budget goes to the website. Notice a gap in thinking?

Figure 7. North American and U.K. Investment Across Marketing Channels

Percentage of Marketing Budget
Mean Summary

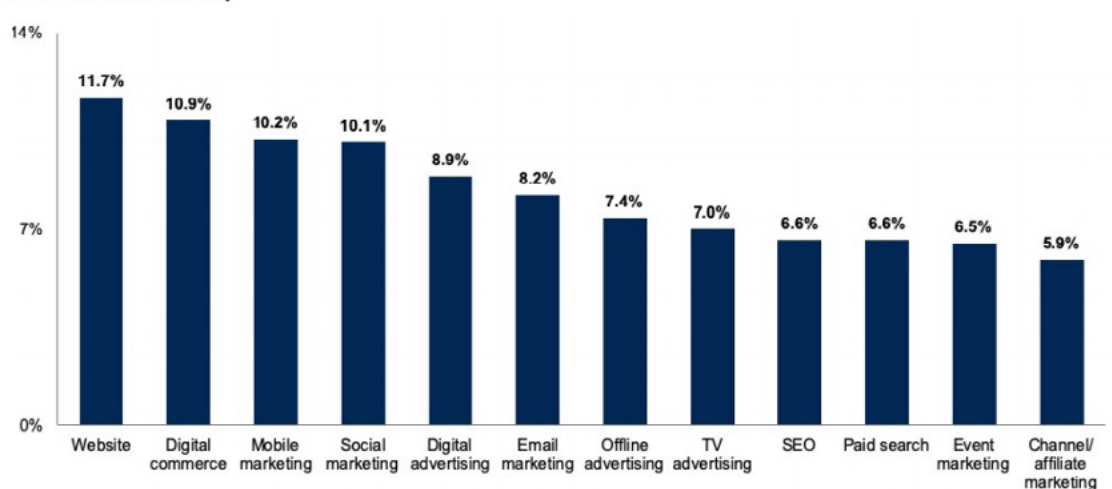


Image Source: "The Annual CMO Spend Survey 2019–2020," Gartner

In fact, Gartner reports that “nearly half of brands lack a discernible search strategy; only 10 percent are maximizing the opportunity search offers.”

This is a problem when organic traffic drives more than half of the traffic to a website and up to 60 percent of the revenue versus other channels (per [BrightEdge research in 2019](#)).

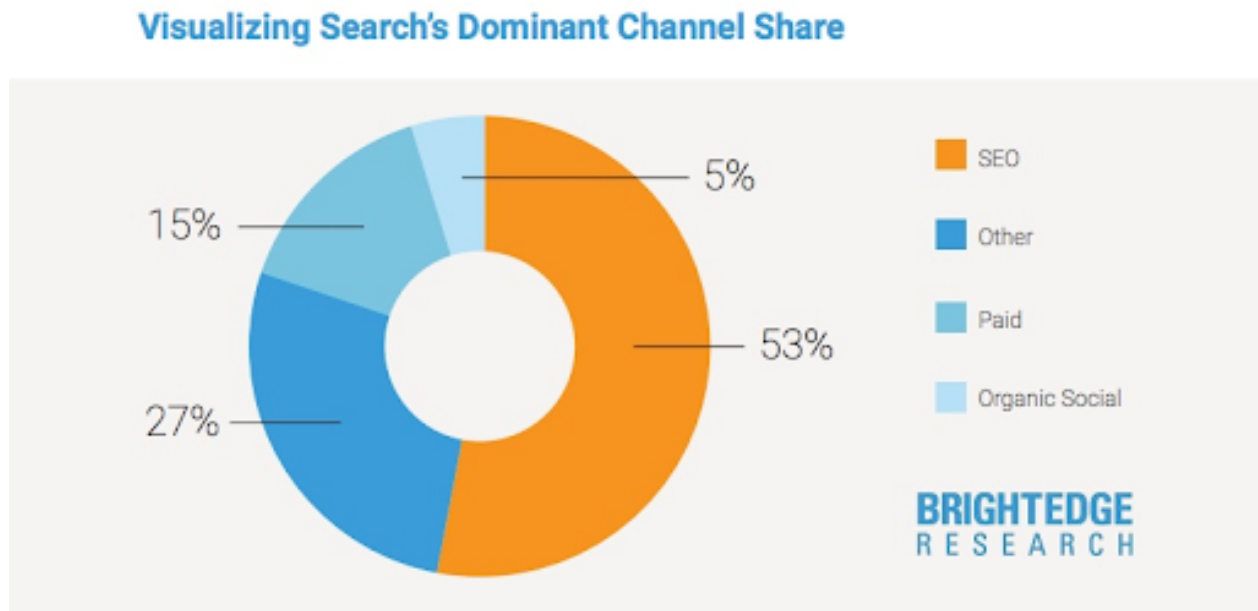


Image source: “Organic Search Improves Ability to Map to Consumer Intent: Organic Search,” BrightEdge

OBSTACLES TO THINKING SEO

One issue that many forget is that SEO is a long-term strategy. So they invest in other channels that offer quicker gratification.

Balancing different marketing strategies is a CMO’s job. But it’s imperative to not sacrifice long-term sustained search traffic by focusing too much on alternatives.

Another issue: siloed thinking. While silos in SEO are a good thing, they’re not so great when it comes to organizational success. [McKinsey reported](#) that cultural and behavioral challenges, which include functional or departmental silos, have the most impact on the ability to meet digital priorities.

Culture is the most significant self-reported barrier to digital effectiveness.

Which are the most significant challenges to meeting digital priorities?
% of respondents

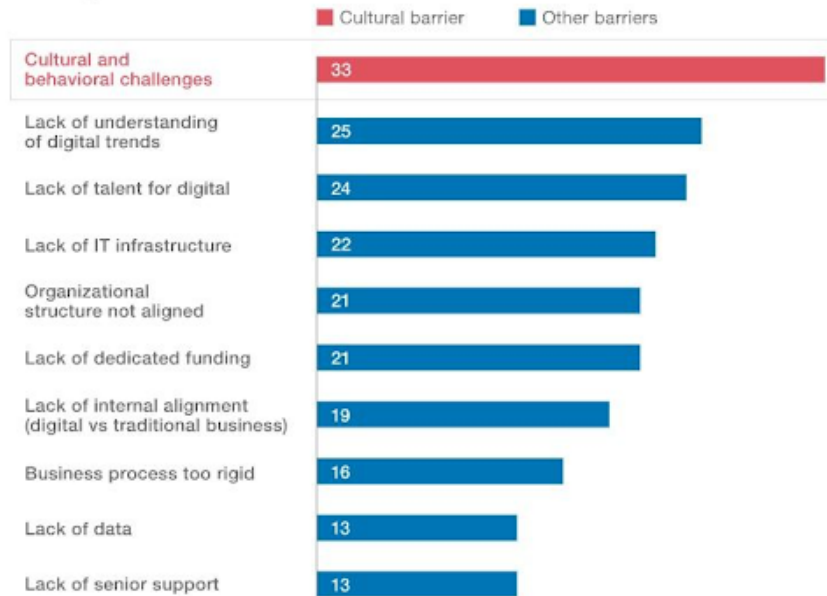


Image source: "Culture for a digital age," McKinsey

In fact, in its research with executives, McKinsey found "siloeed thinking and behavior number one among obstacles to a healthy digital culture." And, as shown in the chart below, it can have a negative impact on the economic growth of a company.

Cultural obstacles correlate clearly with negative economic performance.

Negative correlation with economic performance
(correlation coefficient)

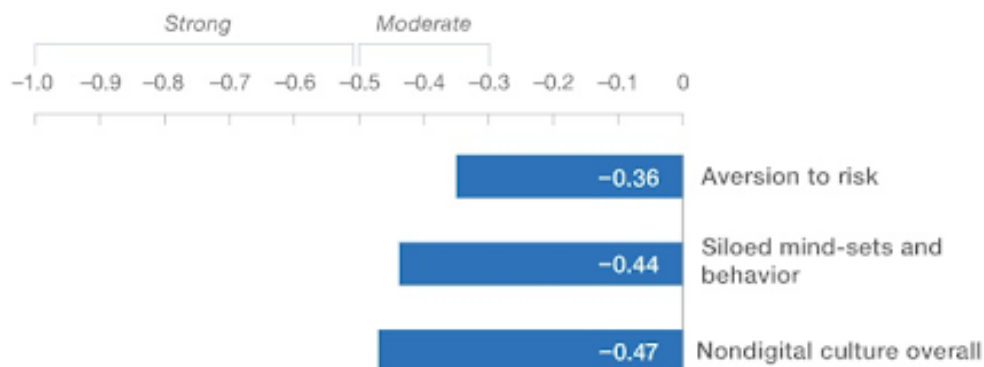


Image source: "Culture for a digital age," McKinsey

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

The key to breaking down silos, according to McKinsey, is education and accountability. When staff understands the impact of an SEO initiative and is held accountable for their decisions (it's not just "someone else's job"), you can begin to make great progress. This, by the way, is why we enroll clients in our [SEO training course](#) at the start of their project.

At the end of the day, an SEO strategy is not really just about "doing SEO." It's about driving growth and remaining competitive. And above all, it's about putting the user first. These are the ideas that need to be communicated and bought into for SEO to succeed.

“

At its best, customer-centricity extends far beyond marketing and product design to become a unifying cultural element that drives all core decisions across all areas of the business.”

—McKinsey & Company, “Culture for a Digital Age” report

Companies that make big bets on their digital strategies know what their competition is up to. As McKinsey points out, “Goals should reflect the pace of disruption in a company's industry.”

This includes Nordstrom, which in the face of Amazon, “committed more than \$1.4 billion in technology capital investments to enable rich cross-channel experiences,” McKinsey reported. And this is exactly what our client did when they bought into SEO as a key strategic initiative for their company.



If you're doing search engine optimization, with every decision you need to ponder: How will this decision impact SEO's ability to put the user first and drive results?

- Redesigning the website? Ask how SEO needs to be involved.
- Writing content? Consider how it can be optimized to fit the SEO strategy.
- Launching a new product? Involve SEO sooner in the planning.

SEO needs to be a natural process throughout our businesses, not a seldom-remembered "nice to have." One voice is not enough within the company.

The CMO or the SEO cannot always be in the room, so in order to support SEO as the key strategic initiative that it is, we need others in the company to live and breathe SEO.

United is how we win, so others in the company should get on the bandwagon ... or get off.



2 | MYTH-BUSTING SEO

SEO is unreliable. You can't measure it. It's something you can invest in sometimes and still see results. These are all myths that CMOs either hear about SEO or tell themselves. The truth is, there's a lot of myths around what SEO is and how it can contribute to growing a business. This section myth-busts popular SEO fables with cold, hard facts.

MYTH NO. 1: SEO IS TOO UNRELIABLE

I'm sure you've heard the [horror stories](#) of losing rankings and traffic overnight due to a [Google algorithm update](#).

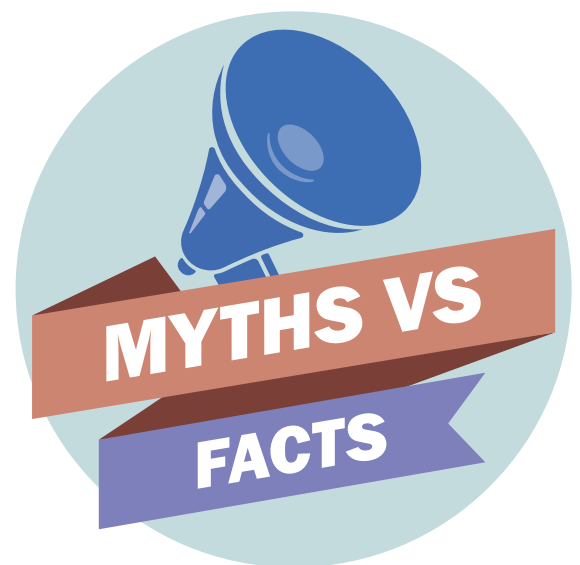
It's true that an algorithm update has the ability to do this to a website. But even if an update has impacted a site in this way, there's always an SEO solution that can help.

Unfortunately, when people don't understand how to compete in the search results, they may blame SEO as ineffective and [divert more budget to other channels](#). But SEO continues to prove its worth as a channel that [drives the most traffic and most revenue](#) to a website.

The truth is ... it's a myth that SEO is unreliable.

SEO is built on principles that align with Google's guidelines. The "right" side of the SEO industry is well-versed on these principles. We know what it takes to make a website relevant enough to rank in the search results. And to stay relevant even with algorithmic changes.

Let's myth-bust the concept of SEO as an unreliable marketing channel with some facts.



Myth: Google Doesn't Tell Us Enough to Help Us Succeed

Fact: Google is tight-lipped about some things, big on sharing others

While Google will never divulge the inner workings of its algorithm to the public, they share plenty.

Here's a sampling of where we can get guidance from Google on our SEO programs:

- The [SEO Starter Guide](#) outlines the foundations of how to create a site that works well for search engines and users.
- The [Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#) gives us a deep dive into what Google thinks is a quality site that deserves rankings.
- Social media accounts like [Google Search Liaison on Twitter](#) and [Google Webmasters on YouTube](#) give us timely updates about algorithm changes and our websites. It also allows marketers to interact with and learn directly from Google on specific issues. (Not to mention, you can follow specific Googlers like John Mueller and Gary Illyes on their social media accounts. They are known to be communicative.)
- SEO and marketing events host Google representatives who give presentations. Take [this presentation](#) at SMX West 2016, for example, where Google ranking engineer Paul Haahr gave specific details on what matters most to Google.

Myth: It's Too Hard to Figure Out Google's Secrets

Fact: SEOs can figure a lot of things out

It's a simple equation:

Google's search engine guidelines + experience + research + implementation + tangible results = more SEO and Google insights.

Professionals in the SEO industry could, quite frankly, quit their day jobs and become detectives if they wanted. We are in the business of figuring things out.

Take, for example, the Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines I shared earlier. From that, we can distill the concepts of [expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness](#) and how they apply to a website's SEO.

Or look at the [SEO Starter Guide](#) shared earlier, which expands on one simple thought about an organized website:

“

Make it as easy as possible for users to go from general content to the more specific content they want on your site. Add navigation pages when it makes sense and effectively work these into your internal link structure. Make sure all of the pages on your site are reachable through links, and that they don't require an internal "search" functionality to be found. Link to related pages, where appropriate, to allow users to discover similar content.

... and correlate that to the [SEO strategy of siloing a website](#).

Not to mention, there are plenty out there who use their tools and research skills to reverse engineer the algorithm. Take, for instance:

- [SEMrush Sensor](#) (SEMrush)
- [MozCast](#) (Moz)
- [SERP Features Monitor](#) (Searchmetrics)
- [Google patent analysis](#) (Bill Slawski)

Bottom line is, we're on it — as an industry and as SEO professionals. It's our job to figure these things out. And we have a pretty good handle on what is needed to create a quality website that offers a good user experience.



Myth: Google Changes Things Without Any Warning

Fact: For the big changes, we often get a heads up

OK, this is not true for every single change. With multiple changes happening in search each day, sometimes a fluctuation hits sites unannounced. However, it goes without saying that Google has already given fair warning around anything that has to do with its [Webmaster Guidelines](#).

In other words: don't spam and do your best to create a quality website. Any updates related to those are fair game.

That said, when big changes are on the horizon, Google often gives direction and time to prepare.

“Mobilegeddon” is a perfect example. In February of 2015, [Google announced](#) that it would be putting mobile-friendly sites front and center in April. In March 2016, Google [announced](#) it would increase the mobile-friendliness signal in May of that year. Both gave three months' lead time.

This is in addition to all the other times and places that Google talked about mobile readiness leading up to the launch date.

Another example is the page experience update. [Google announced it in May 2020](#), but it didn't go live until the summer of 2021.

SEO professionals are well-versed in Googlespeak, too. That means that even if Google doesn't come right out and say that websites need to be focusing on something ahead of an update, they often hint at it.

Now let's take the website that has been harmed by an unforeseen Google algorithm update or change. In those cases, we are able to use our collective tools, research, experience and knowledge to better understand why, and then make improvements to that site.

Even for troubling trends like search results yielding zero clicks, [there is a solution](#).

Because SEO is a long-term strategy, ups and downs are inevitable. But staying in it for the long haul will pay dividends. In all cases, there are ways to make a website stay relevant in the face of algorithm updates.

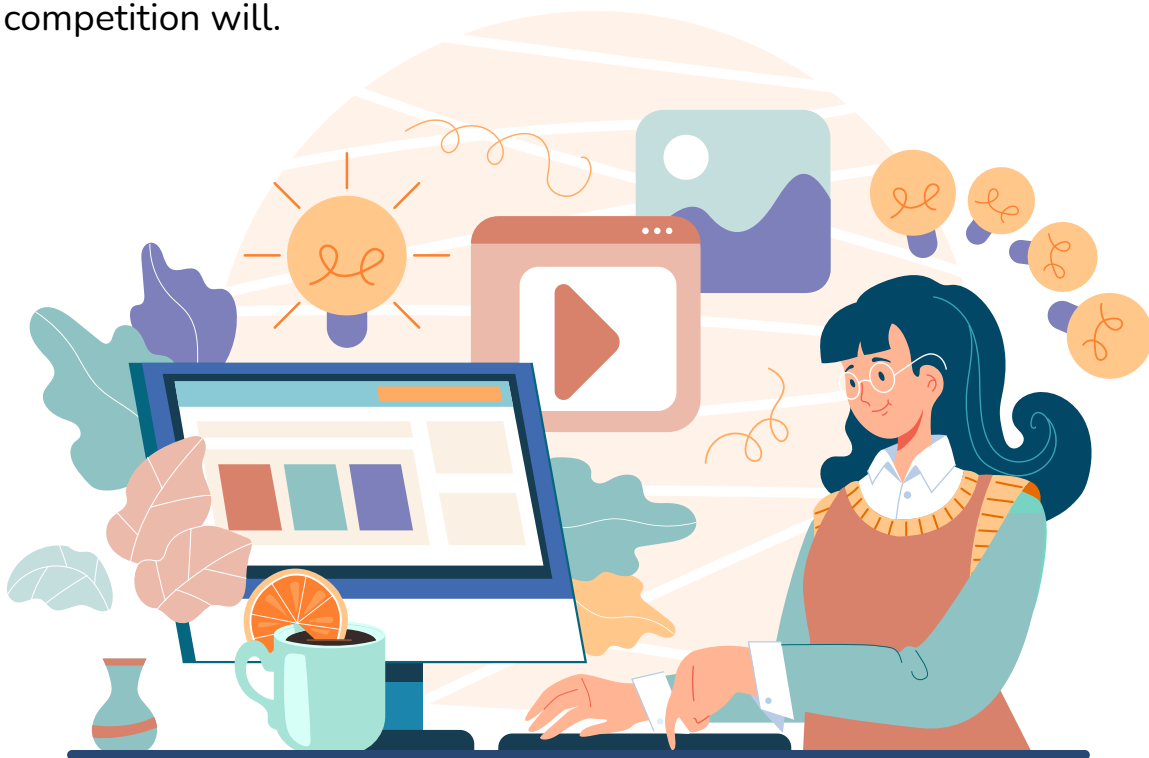
One final thing to remember: [SEO is not meant to beat the algorithm](#). What we are focused on is creating quality websites and beating the competition instead.

Fact: Google Is Not Perfect. Neither Is SEO, But It Is Effective

We are playing in Google's sandbox. Rather than throwing up our hands and admitting defeat, we can reap the rewards of more traffic and revenue if we play the game.

Of course, there will always be unforeseen circumstances that impact traffic. The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example. Sometimes algorithm changes hit us unaware, too. In some instances, you have to pivot your marketing mix to address these events.

But in all cases, you should continue the path of SEO — making your website easy to crawl and index, and providing a great experience for your users. If not, your competition will.



MYTH NO. 2: YOU CAN'T MEASURE SEO

“You can’t track SEO like you can track advertising.” This is a common mindset as brands explore SEO programs. But it’s the wrong way of thinking.

Yes, Google is not allowing organic attribution to the keyword. And yes, that is not fair since they show PPC data. But even with data missing, you can figure it out.

Even if it is true that you can’t track organic SEO to the keyword, that’s not taking into account the big picture.

Let’s myth-bust SEO measurement and look at the bigger picture that every brand should consider as they explore SEO.



Fact: You Can Track SEO and Here’s What You Should Be Analyzing

Let’s explore some questions that help reframe the mindset when investing in and measuring SEO.

1. Does your target audience use a search engine?

The vast majority of people today use search engines as their primary access point to the web. Google Search processes more than 3.5 billion searches per day.

So it’s not really a question of whether your target audience is online — of course they are. This question is moot, replaced by more important ones like: What are people looking for? Is it something you provide?

2. Does your competition have a strong website?

The next question to explore is whether your market competition has a strong website. Do you think they are investing in optimization?

If they are, it's not so good for you if your brand is not. If they aren't doing SEO, it's potentially a big opportunity for your brand. How fast could you stake your claim on that market online if you were optimizing your website?

The second thought is who is your actual competition in the search results. Which websites are showing up for the information, products and services that you offer? Would you like to have a chance to show up, too?

There are [approximately 1.3 billion websites](#) out there. How many of them do you think are investing in SEO seriously? And out of those billions of websites, we need to compete to be on Page 1. You simply can't do that without a quality SEO strategy.

3. What would happen if you stopped advertising today?

With search engine marketing (SEM) — pay per click ads, for example — you put a dollar in and you [may get a couple of dollars back](#). Brands that invest in online advertising are used to the instant gratification of immediate results that are easily tracked.

But what would happen if you stopped your SEM advertising today? Stop putting those dollars in, and you'll disappear from the search results entirely.

Let's not sugarcoat it: SEO is a long-term investment. But once you invest in it, it's yours. And sometimes the largest investments are upfront. Of course, you do need ongoing maintenance.

But the work you put in can continue to get rankings and traffic long after you do it.

You should do SEM. And you should do SEO, too. They each serve different purposes, and you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket.

“But SEO takes too long to see results.”

It can be true that it can take up to six months to get things humming after starting your SEO program. And, yes, impossible words just take longer. But it really depends on the niche and what shape the website is in to begin with.

Regardless, SEO is a long-term strategy, which is exactly why you should do it in conjunction with other digital marketing.

You must plan on investing in SEO for the life of your website. And [don't be surprised by the traffic you didn't get for the SEO work you didn't do](#).

OK, so how much should we spend on SEO and what results will we see?

Well, how long are you willing to wait until you beat your competition? This determines your budget. In general, businesses should allocate 5% to 10% of their revenue to SEO as a cost of advertising.

To me, a bigger question is: If I put in \$1, do I get back \$10? If yes, then I want a stack of ones. Of course, there are all sorts of complex calculations you can do to figure out the ROI of SEO. Just see [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#).

Traffic is one of the main things you want to track. SEO is designed to drive traffic. And one of the ways it does that is by creating a quality site that has a good user experience that Google wants to rank.

“

If I put in \$1, do I get back \$10? If yes, then I want a stack of ones.

Converting that traffic is your responsibility as a brand. But you'll also be able to track conversions coming from the organic traffic channel, as well as their revenue.

Of course, we know the results that SEO can bring. You can look at our [case studies](#) to find out for yourself the types of results businesses see. But those are the types of businesses that are really committed to SEO. Your brand must commit in order to see those types of results.

How to Evaluate SEO's Worth

The bottom line is often not what you should be tracking when it comes to SEO, but what you are missing by not doing it.

It's not really a question of if you should be on a platform used by almost the entire population of the U.S.

Rather, do you want to beat your competition online? Do you want to be a useful brand to the people who are searching for what you have? Do you even want to be in the game? Or out of business in five years?

MYTH NO. 3: SEO IS A ONE-TIME OR SOMETIME INITIATIVE

Owning a website is a bit like owning a house. You need to invest in it to keep it working well and looking good. You wouldn't invest in real estate never to touch the house again. And you shouldn't do that with a website, either.

Fact: SEO Is a Long-Term Strategy

[SEO is done](#) when Google stops changing things and all your competition dies.

Google is [continuously updating its search engine](#). In 2020, Google ran more than 17,500 experiments that resulted in more than 3,600 improvements to search. That means potential new ways to compete in the search results.



Plus, Google's ranking algorithm has countless signals. Your target keywords or queries each carry a different intent. And guess what? That keyword intent biases the algorithm.

So if every keyword has its own intent and own algorithm, there are as many algorithms as there are keywords. Then factor in [RankBrain's](#) impact on the search results, and there are endless variables to ranking.

This is why casual SEO will never last.

Former Googler turned SEO Kaspar Szymanski [echoes this thought](#) and explains why once-and-done SEO is a myth:

“

SEO needs to be considered an ongoing effort with planned, periodic spurts of increased activity scheduled ahead of time.

At industry conferences, attendees hear people say that it is important to “get it right” to rank. This is true, yet not entirely accurate. Like any other company investment in assets, over time that very same investment will inevitably wear off.

Best practices of the past become outdated or downright obsolete. To keep up with the competition, especially in the more lucrative niches, SEO needs to be considered an ongoing effort with planned, periodic spurts of increased activity scheduled ahead of time.

Some factors such as snippet representation, directly impacting user experience and signals must be continuously monitored and improved. The same applies to page performance, which again is directly responsible for how users experience the website.

Other factors, such as managing backlink liabilities, may only require spot checks and be part of an annual on- and off-page SEO audit.

(I talk more about one of those SEO tactics that needs maintenance — schema markup — in my article on [surprising on-page SEO techniques](#).)

Besides staying on top of changes to search, you sometimes have monumental events that nobody sees coming. Things that only a skilled SEO would know how to handle.

The fallout of COVID-19 is one example. In these times, you need know-how to [stay relevant online](#), and casually doing SEO is not going to cut it.

Sure, if you're launching a new website or revamping an old one, an SEO checklist is going to be your best friend. You want to make sure that you build proven best practices into the website from the ground up to have a chance in the search results. But that should be only the beginning.

How to Use SEO as an Ongoing Strategy

Even if you are 100% dedicated to SEO, the typical time to see results is up to six months depending on your website and niche. So it's easy to see why this is something that needs a lot of momentum to get off the ground.

But once it does, it pays. [Research shows](#) that organic traffic drives more than 50% of traffic to websites. And in some industries, it's responsible for almost 60% of revenue.

Here's how you can use SEO as a long-term strategy year after year ...

[SEO checklists](#) are going to be useful as a spot check quarterly to make sure you're staying on top of best practices. They're also useful for site launches and site redesigns.



[SEO tools](#) are going to give you an edge that transcends best practices and offers custom data on your website and SEO. Use daily to stay on target.

[SEO audits](#) are a good investment once per year to uncover big issues that may be hindering your organic search traffic. There is usually plenty of work following a proper audit.

[SEO consulting](#) or services are a good way to have [a team of experts](#) on call so you can solve tough SEO problems.

[SEO training](#) is a great way to sync knowledge across your teams so that everyone stays up to date on changes. Because SEO learning events are undergoing [a major shift](#) from face-to-face to online, it will be important to vet the curriculum and format to ensure it's the best fit. For in-house teams, it's suggested that you offer SEO training at least once per year.

And if you're having a hard time getting the SEO changes you need done, see [this article for tips](#).



3 | 5 SEO STRATEGIES TO KNOW

With all the noise out there, how do you know which SEO strategies to follow? First and foremost, you need an SEO strategy that helps you take advantage of where search is headed. That requires knowing that the way people search is changing. It also requires knowing where to put your resources so you can gain more visibility in the search results — not just within the “10 blue links.” This section will highlight five key areas that — along with your baseline SEO strategy — you need to watch.

STRATEGY 1. OPTIMIZING FOR VOICE SEARCH

Voice search presents a massive and often untapped opportunity for brands to add more value and gain more visibility. Here’s what you need to know about this growing trend.

Key Definitions and Facts

Voice search is a voice-enabled way to search or complete a task on the web or an app. A person speaks their query into a microphone (on their phone or a home assistant device). The queries are usually in the form of a question (such as “What is ...”) or a command (“Do this ...”).

Voice assistants are the programs on digital devices that facilitate the queries. Examples of voice assistants include Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa. Voice assistants can be found on many devices. For example, Google Assistant is on smartphones and a ton of [other devices](#) for the home.



Smart speakers are devices like home assistants that are powered by voice assistants. Think Google Home (powered by Google Assistant) or Amazon Echo (powered by Amazon Alexa).

Actions (Google) or **Skills** (Alexa) are the terms used for voice-enabled capabilities on your voice-assisted device, which are akin to apps on a smartphone. They allow the user to do something. These capabilities can be developed by Amazon itself, for example, or by third-party developers. For example, Actions on Google might help you with food delivery: “OK Google, order Chinese food.”

Voice assistants work by selecting what they believe is the best answer to a searcher’s voice query through features on the search engine results page, for example.

Or they can help a searcher facilitate a task on a voice assisted-device through a Skill or Action. In both cases, the interaction between the voice assistant and the user is conversational.

It’s also important to understand that different search engines power different voice assistants. For example, Google, of course, powers Google Assistant and all its enabled devices. But Bing powers Amazon Alexa and devices like Echo (when something is not covered by a Skill).



Key Trends and Stats

Back in 2016, Google stated that [20% of searches](#) (one in five) on Google's mobile app and Android devices were voice queries. Newer [data from Adobe](#) shows that 48% of consumers are using voice assistants for general web search.

eMarketer predicts that by 2021, U.S. voice assistant users will reach about [123 million](#), and the number is growing each year.

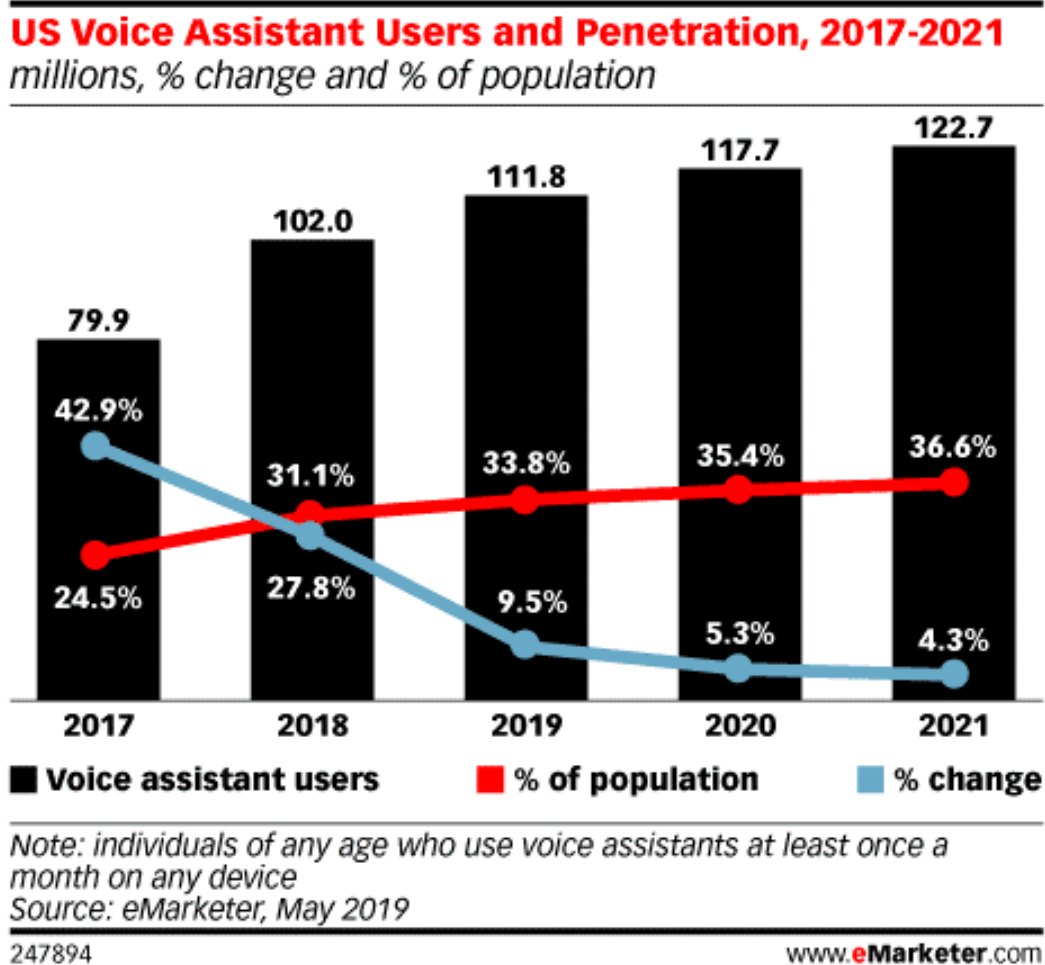


Image source: "Voice Assistant Use Reaches Critical Mass," eMarketer

Amazon Alexa is a leader. It's supported by the highest number of devices ([an estimated 60,000](#) according to Statista), including Echo, with a rapidly growing set of Skills.

Optimizing for Voice Search

For many brands, optimizing for voice search is uncharted territory. I'm here to give you a high-level overview of what to consider and how to get it done. Start competing for your share of visibility in the growing trend that is voice search. In this article:

- [How does voice impact search?](#)
- [What are voice search ranking factors?](#)
- [How do you optimize for voice search?](#)

(If you're new to voice search, it will be useful to review the [CMO guide to voice search](#), which includes key definitions and trends. But if you're ready to learn the next step about how SEO and voice search work together, you're in the right place.)

How Does Voice Impact Search?

Google [once said](#) that voice search represented 20% of queries on its app and Android devices. That was 2016. Since then, research suggests that [the percentage has grown much higher](#). It's obvious that this is an area that Google will continue to invest in.

Let's look at a couple of ways voice is impacting how the search engine works ...

In 2015, Google launched RankBrain, an artificial intelligence system applied to the search results that better understands the meaning of a searcher's words.

Mobile usage and voice search were primary drivers of this, as voice queries are typically more conversational than typed queries. RankBrain deals well with those longer, unique queries (often three or more words).

The second concept to know is that voice assistants like Google Assistant make decisions for searchers on which result is the most relevant to answer a question. This is unlike the traditional way of letting the searcher choose a result from the search results page.

Voice search could mean more complexity for brands with local brick-and-mortar locations, too. For example, someone who has a broken water pipe might simply tell their Google Home device “my plumbing is broken” versus a more traditional voice search like “show me plumbers near me” or “who are the best plumbers in my area?”

What Are Voice Search Ranking Factors?

There are different ways a voice assistant retrieves answers. For example, if it’s on a smart speaker like Google Home, the assistant relies on apps built for the device (via Google Actions) or uses the web.

SEMrush [conducted a study](#) that looked at the ranking factors for a voice search. Their goals:

1. To understand the parameters that Google Assistant uses to select answers to voice search queries.
2. To compare and understand differences in answers obtained from different devices.



Out of the many data points from that study, here are a few to highlight:

- About 80 percent of the answers Google Assistant chose were from the top three organic results across all devices (Google Home, Google Home Mini and Android phone).
- Sixty percent of all answers returned from a voice search were from featured snippets.
- Seventy percent of all answers occupied one of the features in the search engine results page (SERP) ... for more on SERP features, see [this](#).
- Page speed was an important factor across all devices.

From our own experience, it is worth mentioning that the expertise, authority and trust of the site that the answer is coming from (and the content itself) are vital. Google cannot afford to give the wrong answer to queries as that undermines its reputation and can potentially mislead the user.

How Do You Optimize for Voice Search?

Strategically, here are a few things to keep in mind when adapting your SEO strategy to voice search.

Know Your Audience

Research how someone would search using voice for your brand, product or service. Remember that voice queries generally take one of two formats:

- Conversational and question-based, starting with who, what, when, why and how
- Declarative statements, such as the “my plumbing is broken” example earlier

Create a list of voice searches you believe your audience might use. As a starting point, look at the queries in your Google Search Console for real examples — chances are good that the longer, more conversational queries came from voice searches.



It can be useful to map these questions to your audience’s journey as they engage with you on different levels. For example, what do people search for during the awareness stage, the consideration stage, and the buying stage?

SEO VOICE SEARCH STRATEGY

Search for your brand, products and services using voice search to find out if and how they show up in the results. If your website isn't showing up, your webpages aren't doing a good job of satisfying the ranking factors for voice search.

Know the Results

With your newfound keyword research, try the queries yourself. Search for your brand, products and services using voice search to find out if and how they show up in the results. If your website isn't showing up, your webpages aren't doing a good job of satisfying the ranking factors for voice search.

You can study things like the ranking factors from the SEMrush study and optimize for them. Check out our [SEO checklist](#) for a primer on how to optimize for many of those areas.

Know Your Competition

First, find out which websites are showing up on Page 1 for the voice search queries you want to be found for.

Then analyze the top pages to better understand the logistics of the top-ranking results. You can use software like our [SEOToolSet®](#) to help you figure this out. And then to help you create content that is on par with the competition, the [Bruce Clay SEO WP plugin](#) can do competitive research on the fly.

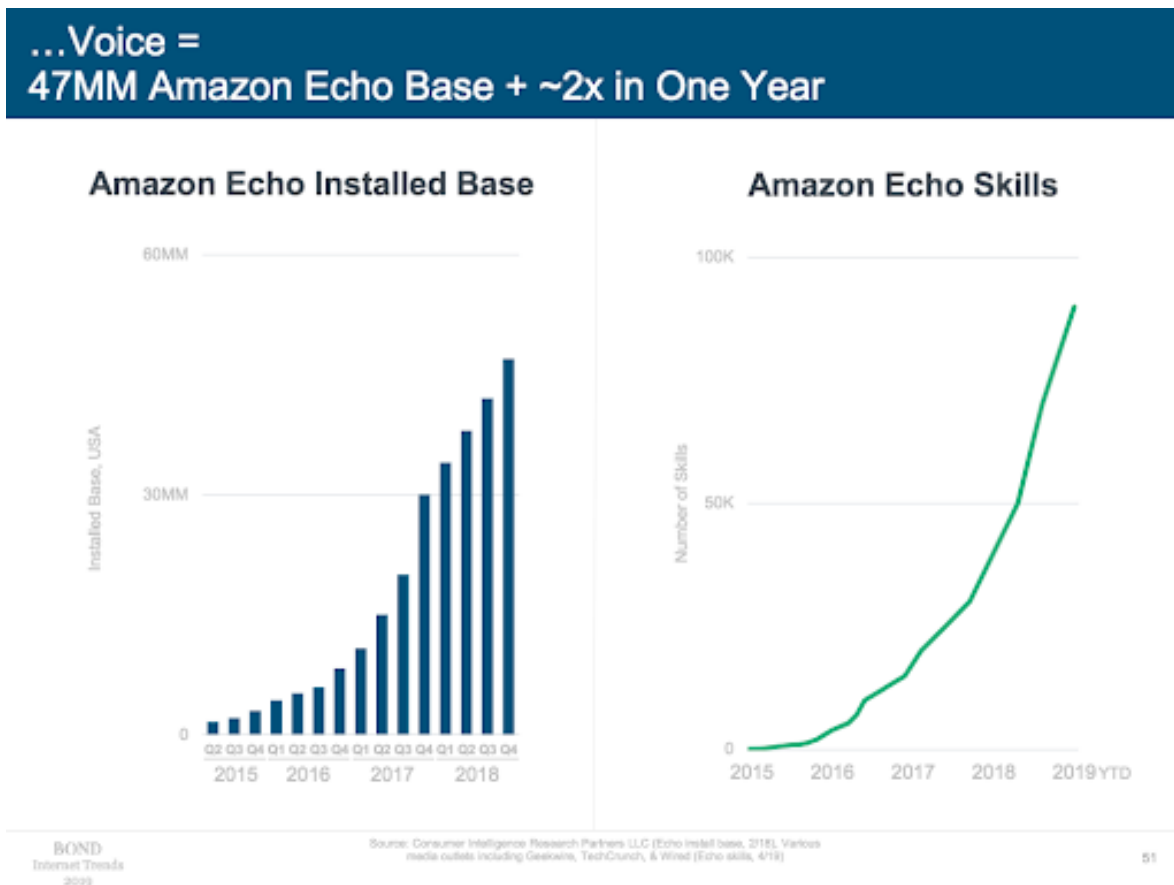
Be Everywhere

Consider building [Actions on Google](#) or [Amazon Skills](#) to insert your brand into more things that your audience is trying to do on their smart speaker. For many brands, this is a newer concept. But marketers are beginning to think about how they can adopt this into their programs.

Be Trusted

The [expertise, authority and trust](#) of your site and its content are vital. Start working to improve E-A-T now, or your site will never come up as a voice answer.

In summary, optimizing for voice search is just another way that you can be sure your brand, its products and its services are there when your audience searches for them. As a growing trend, it's something to understand and adopt ahead of your competition.



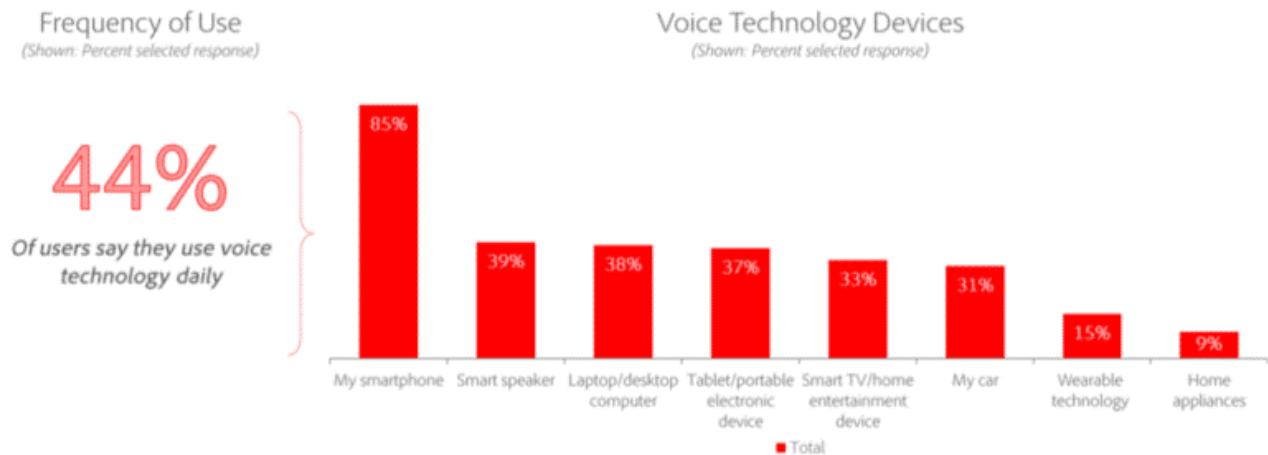
[Internet Trends 2019](#), Bond Capital

But Google Assistant is also widely used, [as outlined here](#).

Voice Search Benefits & Concerns

So what is the force behind the trend — why do people use voice search? Voice search is about convenience. People say voice assistants improve their quality of life and save them time (according to Adobe data linked to earlier).

This happens whether they are using voice assistants on their smartphones (85% of the time) or in their car (31% of the time).



Adobe research via [Search Engine Land](#)

But privacy concerns could potentially hinder the adoption of voice technology. The Adobe data supports that as well as research from NPR and Microsoft.

- Eighty-one percent said their issue with voice technology was privacy concerns. (Adobe)
- Sixty-six percent say they don't own a smart speaker because it's always listening. ([NPR](#))
- Forty-one percent of users reported concerns around trust, privacy and passive listening. ([Microsoft](#))

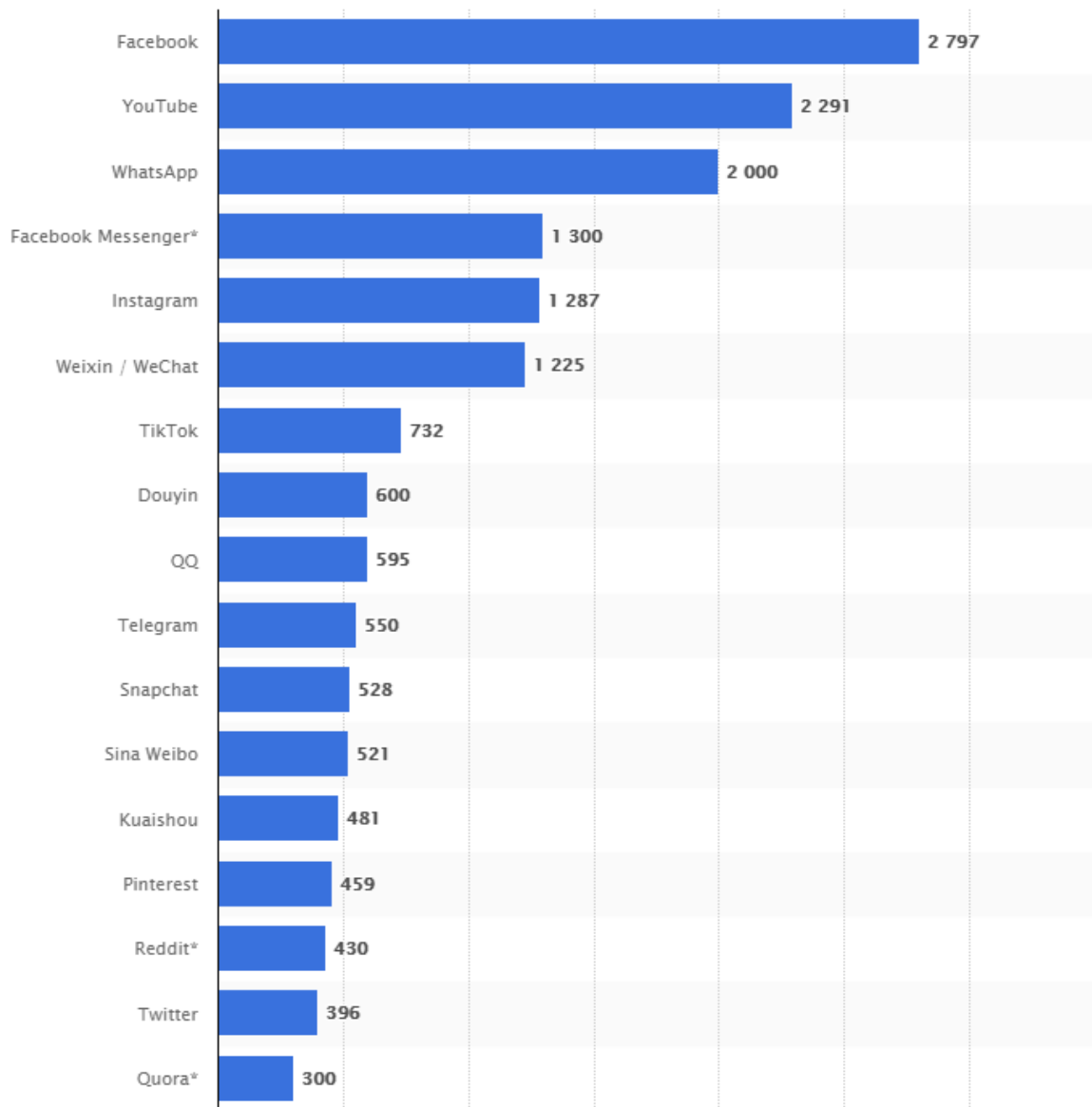
Even with concerns about privacy, adoption is not expected to slow. Especially as the newer generations use technology on their terms.

Brands can position themselves to be more useful in a voice-search world by optimizing for voice queries.

As a CMO, if you are not discussing voice search in meetings, you are already behind.

STRATEGY 2: YOUTUBE SEO

YouTube is [the second-most visited website](#) according to Alexa. With [2 billion](#) active users, the platform uploads [more than 500 hours](#) of video content per minute.



Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2021, per [Statista](#)

It's safe to say that YouTube is a marketing channel worth exploring, but for more reasons than just being found on YouTube.

YouTube + Organic Search Results Trends

Google also integrates YouTube videos into its search results. Quite often, actually. As you can see with this snapshot of the [SERP Features Monitor](#), videos show up more than most other features on the search results page:

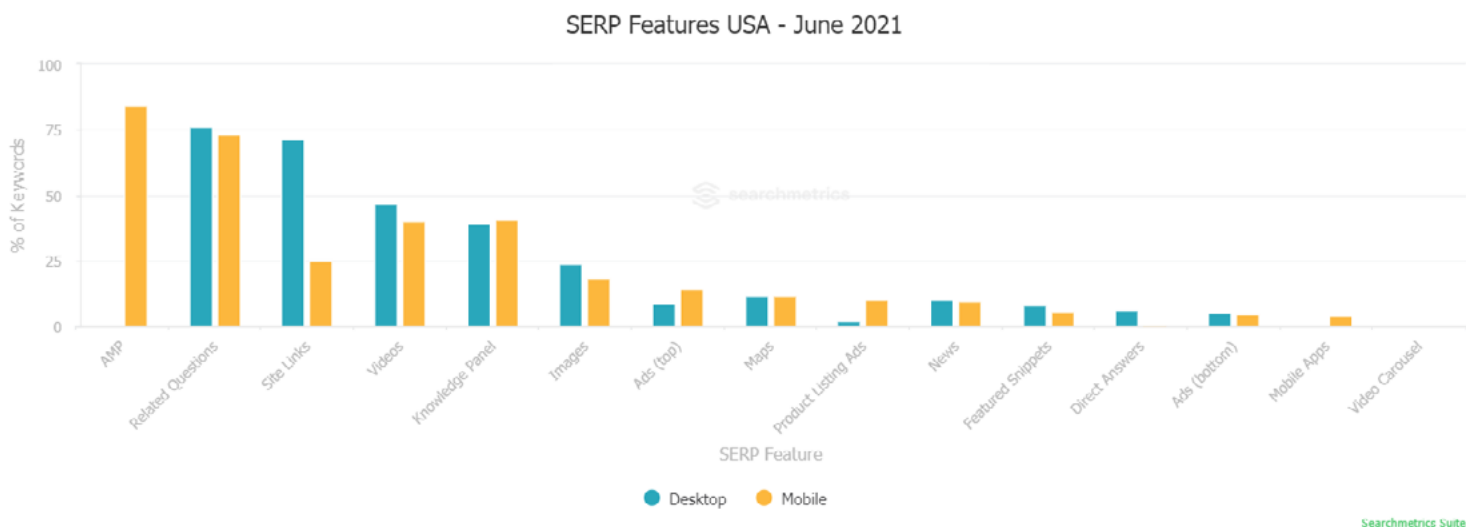
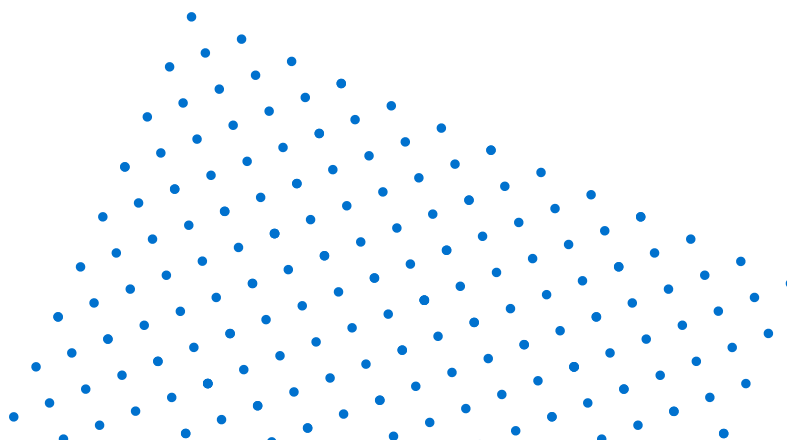


Image source: SERP Features Monitor, Searchmetrics, June, 2021

And you can bet that those videos will be YouTube videos. Google owns YouTube, and videos from the platform tend to find favor in the search results.

[This data](#) is five years old now but shows that even back then, YouTube videos accounted for more than 80% of videos displayed in the search results.

Of course, videos show up more for some queries than others. Searches for how-to instructions, tutorials and reviews can often trigger videos as part of the search results. If your website contains this type of content, then YouTube SEO is especially important.



In some cases, these videos will claim a featured snippet at the top of the page, aka “Position 0” — like this one on how to tie a shoe:

The screenshot shows a Google search for "how to tie a shoe". The search bar contains the query, and the results show "About 641,000,000 results (0.58 seconds)". The featured snippet is a video from YouTube titled "How to Tie Your Shoes - YouTube" with a duration of 1:06. Below the video is a "Suggested clip - 50 seconds" and a link to "www.youtube.com › watch". There are also buttons for "Hand", "Cloud", and "Fun". Below the featured snippet are three video results:

- Tie a Shoelace in 2 Seconds** by Handimania, YouTube - Nov 4, 2014. Duration: 0:44.
- How to Tie a Shoe Step by Step** by Jennifer Hughes, YouTube - Oct 11, 2015. Duration: 2:38.
- How to Tie Shoe Laces - Teach Children** by DaveHax, YouTube - Aug 28, 2015. Duration: 2:03.

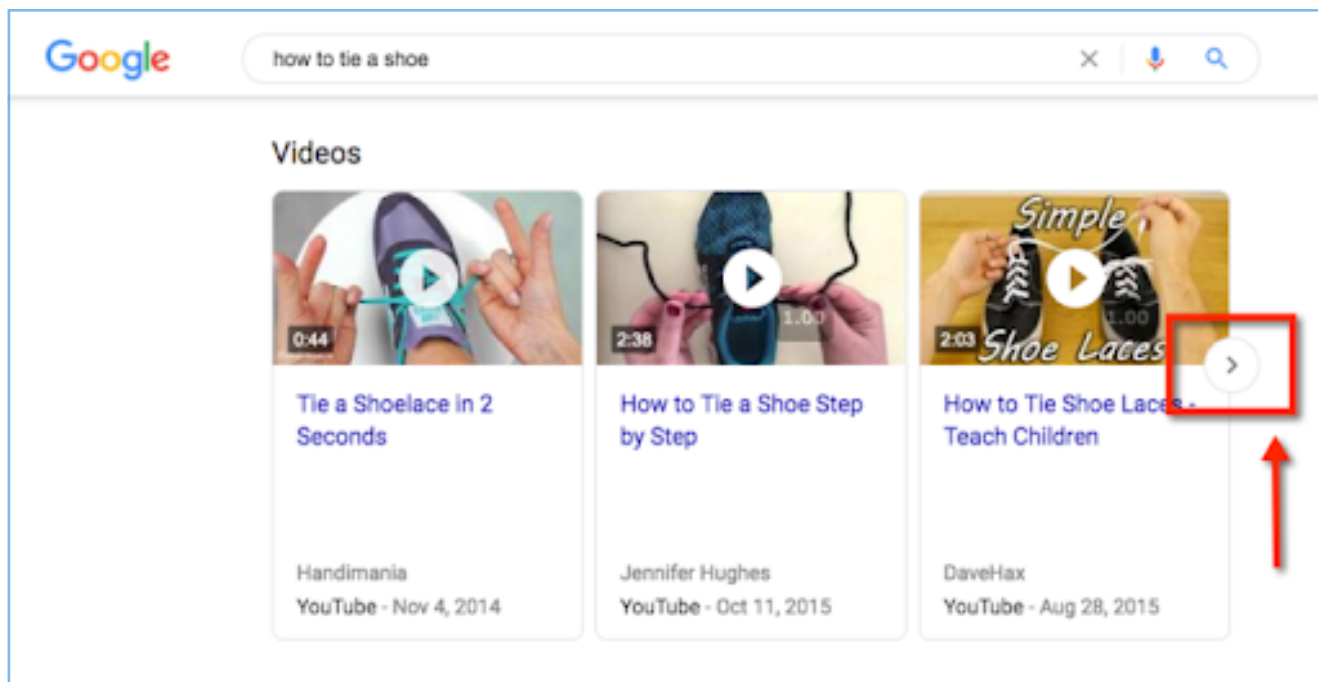
Below the video results are two text-based snippets:

- 4 Ways to Tie Your Shoes - wikiHow**, Method 1 of 4: Tying a Basic Knot. Source: www.wikihow.com › ... › Knot Tying › Tying Shoelaces.
- How to Tie Your Shoe : 7 Steps - Instructables**, Then your gonna wanna cross the two shoe laces over so it looks like an x. Tip Question Comment. Step 3: Step 3. Source: www.instructables.com › Living › Kids.

Screenshot of the search engine results for the query, “how to tie a shoe”

In 2018, Google began showing [video carousels](#) for desktop searches. With a video carousel, searchers are presented with a video box that prompts them to scroll horizontally in order to view all the results.

You'll first see the top three video results without having to scroll. This is like the top three organic blue links on a page — the coveted positions.



Screenshot of an excerpt of the search engine results for the query, "how to tie a shoe"

YouTube SEO in a Nutshell

You may think that ranking well within the YouTube platform means that you will automatically rank well in the Google search results for the same query. Not so. In fact, there has been a lot of research on this, which you can view [here](#) and [here](#).

So how do you increase the chances of your YouTube videos showing up for a Google search? It starts with understanding that you should research and optimize a YouTube video as well as you would a webpage. Here are some basic steps:

1. Target the queries that most often show video results and then make videos for them.

The success of your video marketing first relies on your targeted keywords. In [a conversation](#) a few years back at PubCon, Google's Gary Illyes suggested that if you see video results for a target query, you should consider making your own video for it. Do thorough research to identify keywords and trends.

2. Use optimization techniques that signal to the search engine that the video is relevant to the search.

YouTube SEO includes things like:

- Using your targeted keyword(s) in your video file name
- Optimizing the video's title with targeted keywords
- Creating a detailed video description and optimizing it with targeted keywords
- Using the "tags" feature in YouTube to categorize the video with targeted keywords in it

If you're not making videos for YouTube as part of your marketing strategy, you're certainly missing out on the chance to be found on YouTube. But perhaps more importantly, you're missing out on another chance to rank in the Google search results.

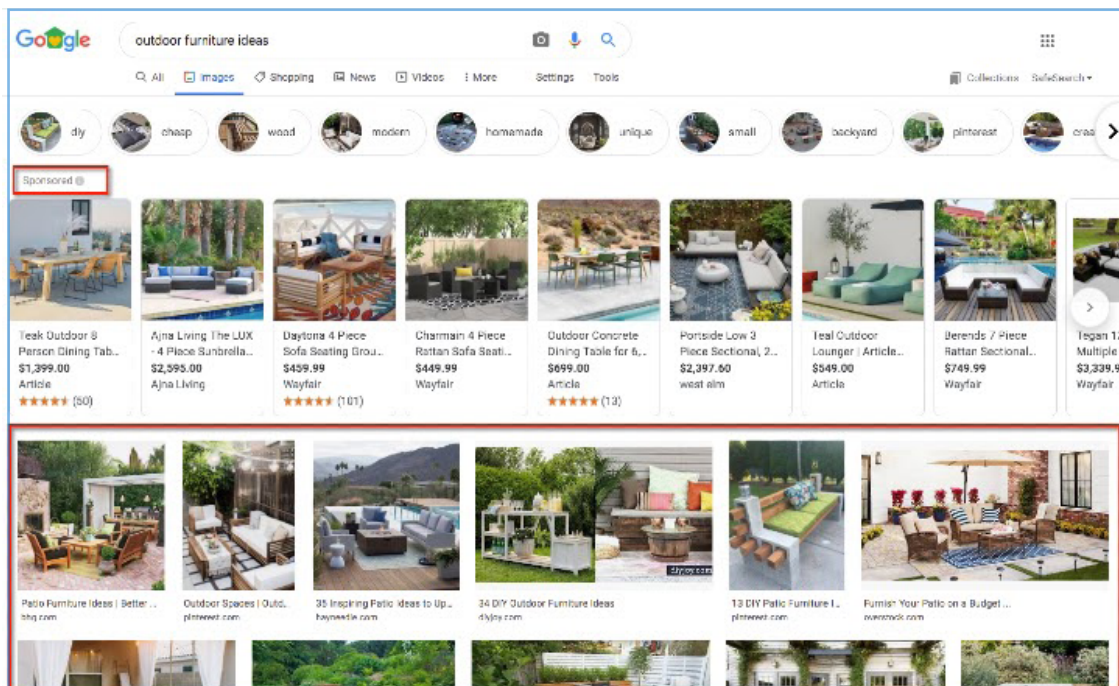


STRATEGY 3: OPTIMIZING FOR GOOGLE IMAGE SEARCH

If you want another way to maximize your brand’s visibility online, Google Images is it. With Google investing more and more into image search, now is the time to learn and seize the opportunity.

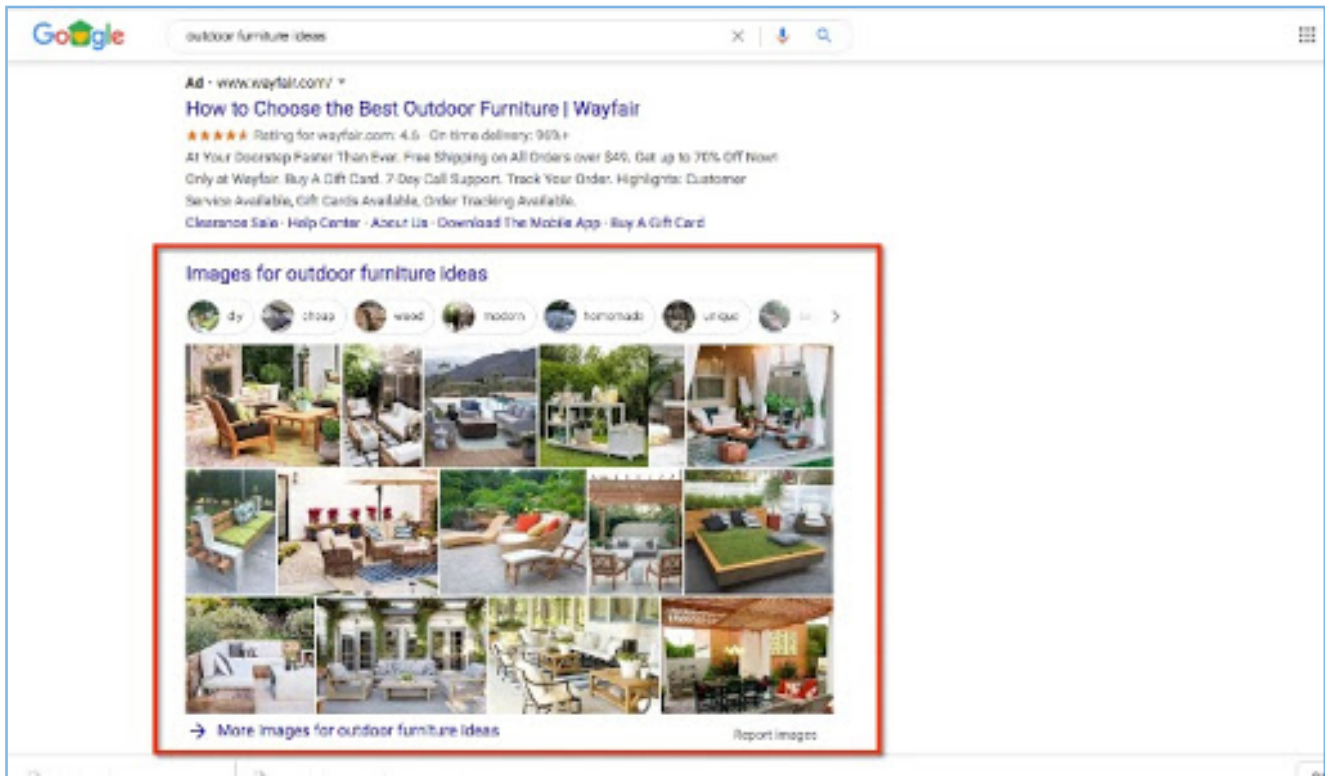
What Is Google Images?

Google Images is a search vertical that allows users to search the web for image content. And searches within Google Images accounted for [about 23 percent](#) of all searches in 2018. People can search within Google Images and see both sponsored and organic image results:



Results within Google Images for the query: “outdoor furniture ideas”

Image results can also show up in Google’s main search. For example, here’s a block of images embedded in the Web search results for the same query:



Results showing within Google's search results pages for the query: "outdoor furniture ideas"



Image credit: Jennifer Lopez, 2000, [New York Post](#)

Did you know that Google Images was [created in response to a now-iconic dress](#) that Jennifer Lopez wore in 2000? Back then, the search results page was still just 10 blue links. After J.Lo's Grammy appearance, searchers flooded the web to find pictures of her wearing [the dress](#). Google noticed.

So in 2001, Google Images was born. Since then, it has undergone drastic changes. Now, Google is making images a cornerstone for search, and that means more opportunities for brands.

Why Should CMOs Care About Google Images?

Google Images represents a growing opportunity for brands to be found online. Google has made significant investments in improving its image search engine over the past couple of years. In September 2018, [Google announced](#) a major rehaul of Google Images.

The next month, Google [announced](#) that its AI-powered Google Lens would integrate with Images search. This meant being able to conduct more complicated image searches.

At the 2019 Google I/O developer conference, images were once again the focal point. Google announced new functionality that would marry the physical world with the World Wide Web through imagery:

“

... with Lens, we're indexing the physical world, billions of places and products and so on, much like search indexes.

[Reports came out](#) in 2019 of images increasing in the search results. Data showed that images were not only showing up more but showing up in the top three positions for queries.



Image source: "Research Study: Significant Increase in Google Images Within SERPs," seoClarity

All this is to say that Google sees a future where images are a central part of how people find things. It's up to your brand to decide if you are going to be a part of that.



... sometimes, what's most helpful in understanding the world is being able to see it visually.

–Sundar Pichai, Google CEO

How to Optimize for Google Image Search

In short: Brands need to optimize their website images and the webpages they are on. When Google overhauled Images in 2018, the following ranking signals became more important:

- Satisfying the intent of the searcher. Google used an example of an image search for “DIY shelving,” where results should return images within sites related to do-it-yourself projects.
- The authority of the webpage that the image is featured on.
- The freshness of the content of the site (or more likely, the individual webpage the image is on).
- The position of the image on the page. Top-ranked images will likely be central to the webpage they're a part of.

Optimizing for Image Search

To optimize for image search, first look to the principles found in Google's [Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#). You want to ensure that webpages are up to par with Google's definition of quality and that they create a good user experience.

With AI resulting in image search content more and more, we need to understand how that will impact our SEO efforts now and in the future. For example, AI technology encourages more image-based relationships and increases the frequency of images in the search results.

To explain that concept further, when the search engine determines that showing pictures would be useful to the searcher, the system is automatically making the decision to show them more often.

And, as AI progresses, Google is able to understand what an image represents and associate that image with a query. Relevance will improve, and the frequency of images in the search results will increase. But there is much you can do to make sure the search engines understand your images properly.

For more technical details on how to optimize for Google Images, read:

- [How to Improve Google Image Search Ranking](#)
- [Complete Guide to the Fundamentals of Google's E-A-T](#)
(to better understand Google's view of quality results)

STRATEGY NO. 4: LINK EARNING

Even though the Google ranking algorithm has significantly progressed over the years, links still matter for a website to rank. But the way Google looks at links has changed. And the way businesses should approach link building must also change. We are in the era of link earning, not link building. Here's what you need to know about protecting your website from links that could harm your ability to rank and go after the links that matter.

Links: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Link popularity is not a numbers game anymore. More important than the quantity of your backlinks are the quality and relevance of the links and the sites where those links are coming from.



Google's John Mueller [confirmed](#) this:



We try to understand what is relevant for a website, how much should we weigh these individual links, and the total number of links doesn't matter at all. Because you could go off and create millions of links across millions of websites if you wanted to, and we could just ignore them all.

If relevant, quality sites with favorable comments link to you, then your site becomes a more trusted authority by association. So you want the best sites, not the most, linking back to you.

Before you engage in any link building program, be sure you know what types of links to look for and which to avoid:

- **Good backlinks:** Links from authority websites in your field, experts who write about your topic, or non-spammy sites that have content related to your website's theme or webpage's subject.
- **Bad backlinks:** Links from unrelated websites (for instance, a dog information website linking to an insurance site) don't do you any good and could look unnatural.
- **Ugly backlinks:** Links coming from link farms, spam sites, sites known to sell links, guest posts or low-quality content (such as pages with lists of random links and no text).

Backlink Strategies to Avoid

As the CMO, you probably get tons of emails offering you links for a price. Steer clear of those! Unnatural linking schemes can only hurt your brand and your website rankings. So avoid the following tactics for obtaining backlinks:

- Sending mass email requests
- Participating in link farms

- Purchasing links
- Getting links by [guest posting](#) in most cases
- Getting site-wide links (such as from a footer link on an external website)
- Having links from irrelevant or disreputable websites

Note: Paid links identified clearly as ads and nofollowed are fine. They don't pass link value, but advertising and promotions have value for other reasons.

How to Start a Link-Earning Program

Today, the right way to obtain backlinks is by earning them naturally. Here are three steps to get started with a [link earning](#) program:

1. Benchmark your website's link profile.
2. Build the link-earning program.
3. Monitor backlinks and prune as needed.

1. Benchmark the Link Profile

Begin with a benchmark of how your website is currently doing. I suggest you use two or more tools to gather your backlink data into a spreadsheet you can then look at. You can use tools like Google Search Console, Bing Webmaster Tools, Majestic Site Explorer, Moz's Link Explorer, Ahrefs and/or [SEOToolSet](#). You'll know what you are currently dealing with and if you need to prune any links (see Step 3).



2. Build the Link Earning Program

A link-earning strategy should involve several tasks. At a high level, these include:

- Analyzing links
- Finalizing keywords
- Creating content
- Making search engines aware
- Publicizing and sharing content
- Using link attributes properly
- Attracting links

Creating quality content is arguably the most important step in this process, followed by getting that content in front of the right audience. This is something we go into more detail on in the e-book linked above and below.

3. Monitor Backlinks and Prune as Needed

Once you've started earning links, you'll want to maintain your link profile. The general process for this includes:

1. Monitor backlinks to your site – Who's linking to me?
2. Evaluate your link profile – What makes a bad backlink?
3. Remove unwanted backlinks by “link pruning” – How do I get rid of bad links?
4. Use Google's Disavow tool – What's my last resort if they won't cooperate?

How to Create Content That Gets Relevant Links

As a rule, you want to create quality, valuable content for users. This type of link-worthy content fuels your link earning program.

Keep in mind that expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness (E-A-T) are three principles upon which quality content is created, according to Google.

E-A-T is important for most websites, but for “Your Money or Your Life” topics (those that Google says “could potentially impact a person's future happiness, health, financial stability, or safety”), it is critical. You can learn more about that here: [Complete Guide to the Fundamentals of Google's E-A-T](#)

When you have great content people want to share, earning links comes more easily. Of course, there are a lot of ways you can get that content in front of the right audience. And you can explore more in our ebook: “The New Link Building Manifesto: How to Earn Links That Count,” which you can download through the button below.



STRATEGY 5: OPTIMIZING FOR GOOGLE'S PAGE EXPERIENCE ALGORITHM UPDATE

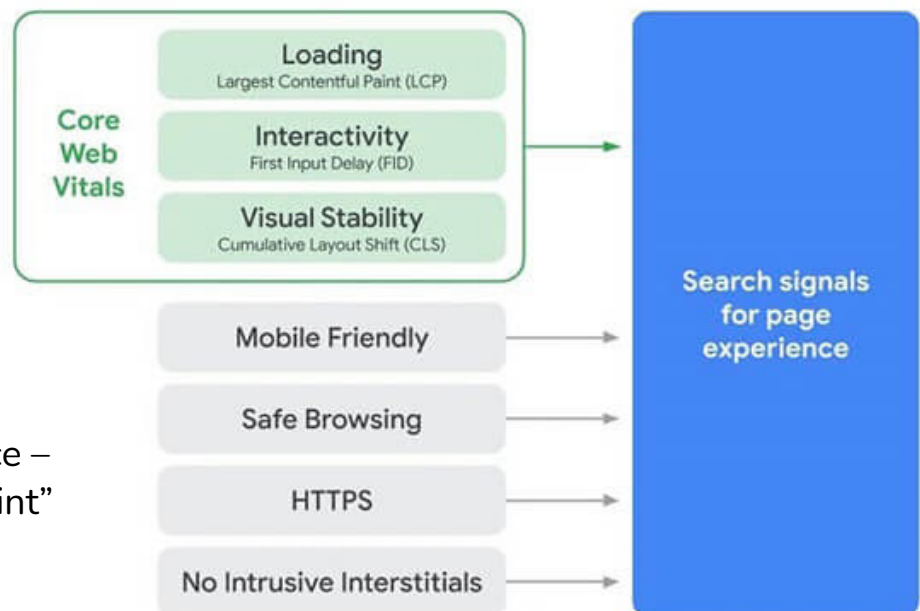
The page experience algorithm update is new in 2021. Here's a high-level overview of what CMOs need to know so they can prepare their team and their website.

7 Page Experience Ranking Factors

Google will combine some of the algorithmic signals you may already be optimizing for with a new set of signals to create the page experience update.

This new update will combine these ranking criteria you may already know:

- Mobile-friendliness
- Safe browsing
- HTTPS
- No intrusive interstitials



With a new set of criteria called “core web vitals”:

- Page load performance – “largest contentful paint”
- Responsiveness – “first input delay”
- Visual stability – “cumulative layout shift”

Image source: “[Evaluating page experience for a better web.](#)” Google Webmaster Central Blog

1. Largest Contentful Paint (LCP)

LCP measures webpage load performance. More specifically, LCP measures how fast the largest image or text block renders on the webpage. You want to optimize for this core web vital by analyzing the things that negatively impact it, including:

- Server and/or software response times
- Webpage resources and bandwidth
- Browser software and plugins
- Site JavaScript and CSS code



2. First Input Delay (FID)

FID measures load responsiveness, which is how quickly a webpage loads and executes so that the user can interact with the page. For this, the primary cause of a bad FID score is heavy JavaScript execution. So you want to optimize how JavaScript parses, compiles and executes on your webpage.

3. Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS)

CLS measures the formatting changes to a webpage after the initial rendering in a browser. In other words, it's about the stability of a webpage. Think: a link or button moving on the page, causing a person to click something unexpected. To improve CLS:

1. Use size attributes for images, videos and other embedded items or iframes.
2. Never insert content dynamically above existing content.
3. If using CSS to animate elements, prefer “transform” animations.

4. Mobile-Friendliness

Creating mobile-friendliness means having a website that offers a good experience for visitors using a smartphone or tablet. Just some of the things to consider:

- Ensure the webpage fits different screen sizes.
- Configure the size of the text for mobile viewing.
- Make sure that it's easy for mobile users to click buttons and links.
- Have fast-loading webpages.
- Use mobile-compatible plugins.

5. Safe Browsing

Hacked websites often go undetected or unmaintained. Keeping your website secure is an important job. Here, you want to be sure to:

- Monitor your website regularly.
- Stay up-to-date with the latest security measures.
- Clean up any breaches right away once you are aware of them.

6. HTTPS

HTTPS, or hypertext transfer protocol secure, secures the data that's exchanged between a web browser and a web server. It helps to protect your website and its visitors from potential bad actors. For any site that is not secure in this way, the next step is to migrate the site from HTTP to HTTPS.

7. Intrusive Interstitials

Intrusive interstitials are webpage pop-ups that make it hard for a mobile user to access the content they want. These create a bad user experience for mobile users. There are several steps you can take to avoid intrusive interstitials, including:

- Use pop-up banners that don't take a lot of space.
- Make sure users can easily dismiss the pop-up.
- Apply a delay before the pop-up renders.
- Segment your pop-ups by audience to make the message more relevant to them.
- If a user closes a pop-up once, make sure that it doesn't continue to display or follow them around the website.
- Make sure your pop-up doesn't slow your page load time.



Google [clarified](#) that you don't need all core web vitals scores to be "good" in order to get some page experience ranking boost.

However, out of a million websites competing for your keywords, 10 competitors will have done the work to be considered "good" across the board. If you do not, you may lose page one rankings to them.

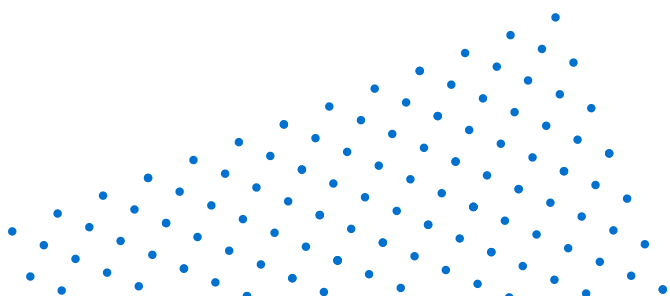
For a deep dive into the Page Experience update, download our ebook: "Google's Page Experience Update: A Complete Guide" below.



NEXT STEPS: CHEAT SHEET FOR THE CMO

As you think about your investment in SEO this year, the strategies outlined in this guide are just the beginning. In addition, you'll want to:

1. **Make sure that you have an agency of experts.** Expertise is what sets agencies apart. Anyone can hire an agency filled with junior-level associates to do the work. But do you really want to run into the problem of training them on how to do it properly? Or worse, not knowing the potential harm they are doing to your strategy, website and business?
2. **Audit everything.** To make a positive change, you need to benchmark. Audit your strategies, audit your website. You cannot get a roadmap to success unless you first know where you are on the map.
3. **Get the whole company thinking about SEO and traffic.** As outlined earlier, SEO is a tool to reach the business goals that many different teams care about. This needs to be communicated, and everyone needs to be on the same page. Any changes to a website potentially impact traffic and revenue. Any business priorities can have a subsequent SEO strategy.
4. **Get rid of the pig.** An unmaintained site is a doomed site when it comes to search engine rankings. You can't put lipstick on a pig and call it something else. A good SEO strategy ensures a site is primed and ready to be crawled and indexed. For more, see: [It's Not the Job of SEO to Make a Pig Fly](#)
5. **Loop.** SEO is not a set-it-and-forget-it strategy. You must continuously revisit your strategies to ensure you are staying on top of any changes to the landscape, especially if your site loses rankings. For more, see: [5 Things to Know When Your Site Loses Rankings](#)



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About Bruce Clay Inc.

Since January 1996, Bruce Clay Inc. (BCI) has been helping websites rank in search engines. Founder and president, Bruce Clay, is known as the “Father of SEO” and credited with coining the term “search engine optimization.”

Today, Bruce Clay Inc. is a leading search marketing company providing SEO services and consulting, pay-per-click (PPC) advertising management, content development and social media marketing services. The BruceClay.com website and blog have become trusted sources for how-to information and insights about search marketing.

More than 5,000 marketers worldwide have learned SEO from Bruce Clay’s acclaimed SEO training courses, offered online, in live classroom settings and at major search conferences. Headquartered in Southern California, BCI also has offices serving markets around the world.



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